

Publishing Executive

Honor thy CSR

By Steven W. Frye

April, 2004 Issue

Publication-printing companies have slowly changed from a commodity vendor (supplying printing) to a service vendor (fulfilling the publisher's objectives). Successful printers realize that selling services gets and keeps customers. Customers become dependent on a vendor who helps them to be more efficient and profitable. And it is the customer service representative (CSR) who is the link to that relationship.

It's the CSR's job to work directly with the publishers and gather all the needed instructions to produce their magazines. The CSR also enters that data into company management systems, tracks its progression and, in some cases, helps prepare invoices. CSRs put out 'fires' and resolve problems. They work for the printer and get paid by the printer, but they are so much more than that to the publisher.

Everything a publisher does funnels through that one person. Publishers depend on their CSRs to understand their goals and expectations, make sure a quality product is delivered and suggest improvements and cost-savings.

Getting to Know You

All publishers have unique goals and objectives, and therefore, different demands of their printers. TV Guide and Newsweek are particularly time-sensitive and require schedule commitments; Architectural Digest and Communication Arts are 'coffee-table' magazines demanding the highest quality; Elle, Cosmopolitan and People require newsstand distribution; Modern Maturity and Boy's Life need efficient mailing operations, while most controlled-circulation titles look for quality at the lowest possible cost.

The majority of publishers rely on CSRs to inform them of options that can help better achieve their goals.

This is particularly true with small publishers, like Snowboard magazine in Hailey, Idaho. Publisher Mark Sullivan points out, "As a small publisher with limited staff, we rely heavily on our printer to keep us informed of options that we otherwise might be unaware of."

But that reliance is not just limited to the small guys. "We would love to have ideas come out of the plant." says Lori Kyle, production director, People magazine, New York. "New concepts that we could bring to our advertising customers are great."

Publishers today also expect their CSR to intimately know their company. "I would change my CSR if they did not bring new ideas to the table," says Bob Shenberger, director of global production, RCI's Endless Vacation, Indianapolis, Ind.

However, Shenberger understands that he, too, needs to be proactive with his expectations. "I have the CSR spend time at my company and even interact with my product," he says.

"They're part of the family," Kyle agrees. "We occasionally bring CSRs into New York to train during [publication] closes so they can see what happens at our end of the cycle."

For years, printers have sent CSRs to customers' offices to become more familiar with the customers' company, staff and products. "The better the relationship, the better the CSR knows the likes and dislikes, enabling them to pass this information on to the other people in the plant," says Joy Krull, account manager, Banta/Kansas City.

Alex King, an account manager at Quebecor World/Midland, agrees, "CSRs are in the position to suggest improvements, value-added products and services, cost savings and also assist with decision-making." He adds, "Publishers might be surprised how the quality of their decisions can improve by contacting the CSRs early in the information-gathering process and getting their input."

An Evolution

In the past, the industry considered the CSR position as an order-entry position. But as printers evolved—into full-service shops offering everything from color separations to co-mailing—, so did the duties of the CSR.

"Today's CSR needs to be very savvy. They not only need to understand the business of printing, but also the business of publishing and distribution," states Justine Meyer, customer and premedia services department manager, Brown Printing Co., Waseca, Minn. "They need to understand and keep up with the changing technology."

Meyer says, "The job has become more stressful and demanding, and the CSRs are being asked to do more with less. [Also,] due to downsizing and lack of experience on the publisher's side, the CSR is being held responsible for things that they never needed to worry about. They have ... become an extension of the publisher without even knowing it."

In fact, most CSRs don't realize how vital they are. They feel overworked, underappreciated and underpaid. Many publishers think of their CSRs as their own, dedicated employees, which of course, they are not. Most CSRs handle anywhere from three to 12 accounts.

Making Your CSR Happy So how do you ensure your CSR understands you and is encouraged to be proactive? Acknowledge. Respect. Reward.

Acknowledge your CSRs for their hard work and results. Ask what you can do to make their job easier. Invite them to visit your office to meet the entire staff and make them a part of it.

Respect them by understanding their job and treating them as partners rather than servants. Ask your CSRs for help. Involve them in the creative processes, tapping into their expertise. Recognize CSRs as the resource they really are.

Reward them for their work. All of the publishers interviewed for this article acknowledge that they occasionally reward their CSRs. Laura Coniglio, associate publisher, Detroit Metro Convention & Visitors Bureau, affirms, "Absolutely, especially if they have done something above and beyond basic customer service. Sometimes it's just a quick e-mail, or a hand-written note, or even a little gift with our logo ..."

Publishing is unique because we literally sign our name to our work (the masthead). We take ownership and have great pride in it. Yet, the CSR, who likely works as hard as some of your own staff, doesn't get to share in that glory.

Because of that, it is important to find other ways to let your CSRs know they're an integral part of your magazine's success.

Be a Squeaky Wheel

Sometimes older, non-complaining customers inherit CSRs from the lower-end of the talent pool. Newer or high-maintenance customers, the "squeaky wheels," get "oiled" with better CSRs.

If you feel your CSR is not servicing your account properly, talk to your sales representative. Many publishers don't realize they can request a change. All the publishers interviewed for this article stated that at one time or another they have requested a different CSR. The printing company would rather change CSRs than lose a customer. One of the most damning accusations a printer can face is that they have poor customer service.

I know some publishers who remained at the "wrong" printer because of a great CSR and others who have left the "right" printer because of bad CSR.

A good CSR can keep a customer for a long time, and a bad one can lose one overnight. "A CSR forgot to schedule my publication," recalls Coniglio. "So, very late in the production schedule, the paper had to be shipped to another plant in another state so our magazine could get printed. Then, if that wasn't enough, there was a problem finding trucks to ship the magazine back. I attribute a few gray hairs to this experience." (She's no longer at that printer either.)

Keep Talking "The relationship between the publisher and CSR is like a marriage," adds Coniglio. "Communication is key, and it must flow both ways easily. I expect that the CSR will help provide a list of options when things don't go as planned, so we can get the job back on track." Kyle agrees, "One of the biggest no-no's a CSR could do was not communicate or update us on any production problems affecting our magazines."

Randy Weber, publisher, Consumers Digest, Chicago, says, "Somewhere along the line, some forget what the 'S' stands for in CSR. After recently requesting a switch in reps, I called the department head to compliment the new account rep. They were pleasantly surprised because most calls they receive are complaints."

What else can you do to make your CSR's life easier? According to Meyer, "Understand that we are only as good as the information provided. Publishers need to provide clear and

accurate information that is on time."

King and Krull both note: Maintain production schedules.

For publishers to expect their printer to perform flawlessly, they, too, need to submit finished materials on time. CSRs now, in many cases, have to work with more than one person at a publishing company. Structure your company so that as few people as possible communicate with the printer. This will help eliminate not only confusion, but having the CSR spend time resolving contradicting instructions.

Today's CSRs need to be detail-oriented, excellent communicators, able to multitask, confident and empowered to act on their customer's behalf.

They also need "patience, patience, patience ... and a psychology degree," jokes Frances Harkness, customer service manager, C&C Offset Printing Co., China.

Dave Russo, Midwest sales manager for Publishers Press, Louisville, Ky., says his company assigns a technical representative who takes over as a senior service manager. "They are there to approve press sheets, bound books and proofs when the customer cannot," says Russo. "Their job is to know all there is to know about our company's capabilities and assist our customers whenever they need help. They help our customers pre-plan special projects; assist in money-saving ideas, budgeting, postal regulations, etc. If they don't have an answer, they know where to get one."

Good Help Is Not Negotiable

No matter the team structure, what is ultimately important to the publisher is that they have a CSR who knows and understands them, that is sharp, confident and detail-oriented. Like the old cliché, "Good help is hard to find," so are good CSRs. Do not take them for granted.

Many overlook the CSR in the printer selection process. "Service has also become somewhat of a commodity these days," says Meyer. "What was the glue that held long-term relationships together in the past is being overshadowed by price and technology." That would be a shame, as price is negotiable, but good service is not.

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