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Visual Media Alliance is non-profit trade association serving Northern California printers and design agency small business owners. By providing events, education, discounts, advocacy, industry promotion and insurance programs, we help our 500 member firms become more successful and profitable.

ON THE COVER

Odell Printing promotional brochure with saddle-stitching, die-cut, and foiling.

LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

Dear Valued Members,

What a difference a year makes. At the start of 2021 we were still in the grip of COVID and the challenging effect it was having on our industry and our lives. Vaccines were just starting to roll out and no one knew what to expect next.

Fast forward a year, and at the time of this writing, COVID feels a bit more under control, although it looks like we will need to learn to live with it for the foreseeable future. Businesses are getting back up to normal with pent-up demand for consumer goods driving inflation up and overheating the economy. Most of our members are looking to hire new staff while scrambling to secure paper and battling other supply chain issues.

The new year means new opportunities. In this issue of *Connected* magazine, we look at how differentiating your business can create a long-term competitive advantage in the marketplace. One of the highlighted members, Odell Printing, has differentiated themselves by carefully listening to their customers in order to provide the right blend of traditional and modern print techniques for their unique market with excellent results.

VMA has resources to help differentiate and grow your business. One of these resources, our 2022 *Visual Media Guide*, will be published soon. The VM Guide and the web version of the printed guide, VMAccess.org, help connect you to new customers. Another great resource, Sales Vault can help with all aspects of the sales process, from planning and prospecting to live webinars and sales coaching. Lastly, don't forget our Job Center. We have recently added terrific resumes from students and other job seekers.

Looking forward to connecting in person with your colleagues? VMA is planning more live events in 2022 including ConnectUp meetings and our signature CrabFest that will be held on Friday, March 25 at Riggers Loft. On the national front, Dscoop Edge Rockies (dscoop.swoogo.com/EdgeRockies) will be held in Denver on March 6-9. VMA is also partnering with many other industry associations in the brand-new Americas Print Show 22 (americasprintshow22.com) held August 17-19 in Columbus, Ohio.

I hope to see as many of you as possible in the new year! Please reach out to me anytime at ian@vma.bz.



Sincerely,

Ian Flynn
President, Visual Media Alliance

9 Ways to Create a Competitive Advantage & Stand Out!

1. Personalize your customer interactions.
2. Have strong values that shine through in every interaction.
3. Deliver an exceptional high-quality product or service.
4. Provide extraordinary customer service.
5. Address customer pain points.
6. Focus on a narrow niche.
7. Create a powerful offer or guarantee.
8. Become a social business.
9. Surprise and delight your customers.



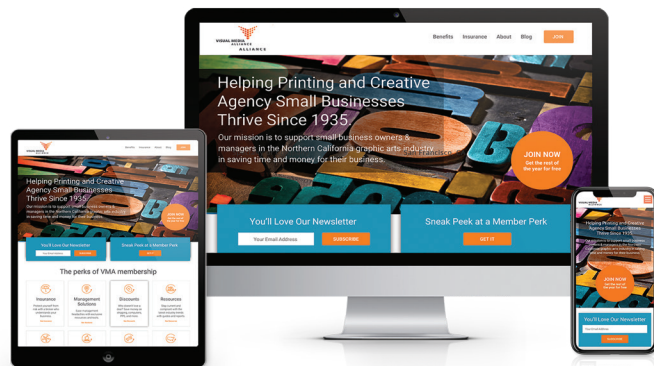
VMA's New Website

This year VMA will be launching a new website and URL. Our objectives in the redesign included creating a site with stronger SEO, to be in line with our beautiful new branding, and speak to our audience better.

VMA sent out an RFP and talked to several firms. We eventually chose member firm Adduci Studios (adducistudios.com), who normally specializes in biotech, but is known for building beautiful websites, is experienced in brand strategy, and as a VMA member knows VMA's mission extremely well.

VMA's marketing team fortunately had the expertise to handle the branding, architecture, and page templates in-house, and the Adduci team brought the branding alive with a gorgeous and unique look that speaks to the middle ground between print and design. Thank you Adduci for this amazing work!

The 80-page new site will launch by in early 2022. This is an exciting achievement for the association, as well as for the industry, as VMA represents the graphic arts industry for all our members. We know that our website is one of the first visual representations of our mission, and we're so pleased with the update.



Exclusive Kodak Discount

Fantastic news for the new year. VMA has partnered with Kodak to bring print members a special program to save money while optimizing operations with industry-leading printing solutions.

Kodak's exclusive new rebate program allows printers to strengthen offset solutions or build out a digital offering. Amazing rebates are available on a number of Kodak products including offset printers, on demand software solutions, digital presses, inkjet presses, and more. See more at main.vma.bz/discounts/kodak and contact Ian Flynn at ian@vma.bz for more information.

PAST EVENTS

ConnectUp Networking Events

In October, VMA held the first ConnectUp meeting, a Halloween Spooktacular networking event. 76 people registered and 45 people attended! The event was at JP Graphics (jp-graphics.com) in Santa Clara and owner Joan Escover hosted this wonderful Halloween-themed event complete with decorations and goodie bags. Sponsors, Ray Morgan (raymorgan.com) also brought Halloween treats and GPA (gpaglobal.net) made Halloween cupcakes.



Informative Collective Conversation Events

In October, VMA hosted our last Collective Conversations of the year on the topic of "2022 Health Insurance Updates and Q&A." Jennifer Lisanti, director of sales at Beere&Purves, shared important news and information helpful to small businesses as they made their open enrollment decisions. 33 people registered and 20 attended. Since 1936, VMA has brokered health and commercial insurance for our association members. Contact David Katz for more info at david@vma.bz.



Holiday SalesCircle Event

In December, VMA hosted an online holiday networking and sales referral event. We had holiday games and prizes, discussed sales ideas for the new year, and had fun, and good cheer! The SalesCircle networking and sales group is held monthly online. Visit vma.bz/salescircle or contact shannon@vma.bz.



View photos at vma.bz/photos.

UPCOMING EVENTS

View all of our upcoming events at main.vma.bz/networking-events. Register today and make new connections!



CrabFest 2022

Friday, March 25 • 5PM-11PM • Riggers Loft • Richmond, CA

Feast on all-you-can-eat Dungeness crab over a delicious three-course meal with winetasting! Enjoy a fun night out socializing with old friends and meeting new ones. Bring your family, friends, and clients. Per Person Cost: VMA Member: \$79, Group +10: \$70.

Details + Register at vma.bz/crabfest



Collective Conversations

Bi-Monthly • Online

We continue with the popular Collective Conversations **virtual** round table series with VMA members featuring different topics. We launched in April 2020 at the start of COVID-19 and it has been well attended. We've had events focused on small business recovery, health insurance Q&As, HR legal issues, managing your workforce, sales technology, cybersecurity, marketing tips, and more.

Details + Register at vma.bz/cc



ConnectUp

Dates & Location Details Coming Soon

ConnectUp is our newest networking event series primarily held **in-person** at printer member locations around the California region. We'll meet to network, discuss sales and referrals, while building new or forming stronger connections.

Details + Register at vma.bz/connectup



SalesCircle

Monthly • Online

Join your colleagues and fellow VMA members at a **virtual** industry referral networking group. We'll discuss sales and referrals tips and ideas. Our second event had 17 attendees with lots of enthusiasm, connections, and referrals. We hope you come join us!

Details + Register at vma.bz/salescircle or contact shannon@vma.bz



Americas Print Show APS22

August 17-19 • 3 Days • Columbus, OH

Americas Print Show is an exciting three-day industry event, focused on building connections and growth in the print and graphics community. APS22 will bring together regional and national associations representing more than 5,000 companies, along with commercial printers, screen and garment producers, large format and sign printers, binderies and graphic finishers, along with industry suppliers.

Details + Register at americasprintshow22.com

Fun Redesign of Carmel Valley Ranch by Square Peg Design



Square Peg Design's (sqpeg.com) favorite project in their 25 years was the Carmel Valley Ranch signage redesign. In 2011, Geolo Capital had Square Peg develop the wayfinding and signage for the major renovation of this gem of a resort, located on 500 acres

of sprawling land and vineyards in the foothills of the Santa Lucia Mountains. The fun signage design stayed true to the landscape and architecture, capturing the reimaged resort as a California ranch-themed summer camp for adults!

Pitney Bowes Gears Up with Automation & Expanded Workforce



Pitney Bowes (pitneybowes.com) has expanded capacity to meet ecommerce holiday demand. The company made a series of strategic network enhancements including new ecommerce hubs across the nation, new automation solutions for parcel sorting, increased use of machine

learning and data science to project estimated delivery dates more accurately, and has hired more full-time employees for package handling roles as well as drivers.

Pitney Bowes has expanded its Global Ecommerce business significantly in recent years, growing it from a single service and a single client in 2012 to providing fulfillment, delivery, returns, and cross-border services to hundreds of retail and marketplace clients today.

BR Printers Acquires Book and Catalog Printer

BR Printers (brprinters.com) acquires the historic C.J. Krehbiel Company (dba CJK Print Possibilities) (cjksa.com) in Cincinnati, Ohio, to expand their capabilities. Established in 1872, the fifth-generation business owned by the Krehbiel family has a long history of providing a personal touch to the printing, binding, and mailing of four-color bound documents such as books, catalogs, manuals, weeklies, and magazines.



Adam DeMaestri,
President and CEO of
BR Printers

"CJK's print and finishing capabilities extend and complement BR's digitally enabled book manufacturing platform," says Adam DeMaestri, President and CEO of BR Printers. "We look forward to collaborating with CJK leadership and employees."

The combined companies provide a valuable and strategic resource for publishers.

Konica Minolta Donates Equipment to Cal Poly



KONICA MINOLTA

Konica Minolta (konicaminolta.us) has donated an AccurioPress C12000 digital color press, including comprehensive finishing equipment, to the California Polytechnic State University Graphic Communication Department.

"We are thrilled to be able to maintain this partnership with Konica Minolta, which allows our students to have access to the latest and greatest production print equipment," said Colleen Larkin Twomey, Associate Professor and Department Chair, Graphic Communication Department, Cal Poly State University. "Konica Minolta truly understands the importance of hands-on learning in this industry."

Multi-Color Corporation (MCC) Wins Award for Environmental Leadership

This award is earned by companies that are leading the industry on multiple aspects of sustainability. MCC (mcclabel.com) was recognized for demonstrating its positive impact in multiple categories, including energy use, waste reduction, recycling and education.

TLMI (tlmi.com) is the leading association for the narrow web tag, label, and packaging industries in North America. They are dedicated to helping their members succeed in the label and package printing industry.



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NEW MEMBERS



Melrose Nameplate

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David Fabris
510-732-3111
dfabris@melrose-nl.com
melrose-nl.com



Uptown Studios

Uptown Studios has been a creative source in Sacramento since 1992. They specialize in marketing campaigns, graphic design, website design, video production, social media management, and greener printing.

Kristen Stauss
916-446-1082
kristen@uptownstudios.net
uptownstudios.net



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Wrap Sciences is a premier graphics installer, marketing, and branding specialist providing vehicle graphics and wraps, custom interior and exterior signs, imprinted promotional products, graphics design, digital printing and more.

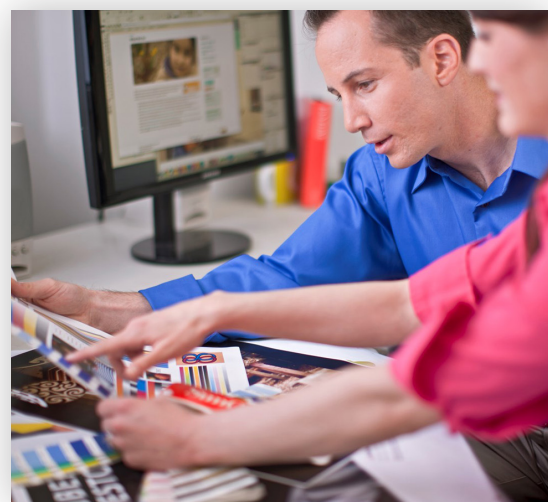
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Creating a Competitive Advantage to Take on 2022

BY REVA HARRIS



What are your goals for this year? The last couple of years have been a roller coaster ride, but there's good reason to be optimistic. Yes, we're still dealing with many of the challenges caused by the pandemic. But there are also new opportunities. You can take the new capabilities you've gained and turn them into a competitive advantage for your business.

Did you pivot your service offering? Try new ways to recruit employees? Incorporate new sales tactics? Those new strategies, and the skills you've acquired along the way, can help set your business up for success this year. Here's what you can do to give yourself an advantage for 2022.

Keep service levels high

If you've read previous issues of *Connected*, you know how important it is for creative agencies and printers to maintain strong relationships with their clients. We've highlighted how many small businesses were able to survive the pandemic by asking their clients what they need help with, instead of traditional sales tactics. As things return to (somewhat) normal, it may be tempting to let this approach go. But that can cause some of the goodwill you've built with your customers to erode.

Even if you're doing great work for your clients, it's important to maintain that personal touch. Continue to nurture the personal bonds that you've built. Not only will it strengthen customer loyalty, but it will also help you stay engaged with your clients' evolving needs.

Embrace sustainability

Sustainability has long been a top priority for businesses, and that won't be changing anytime soon. In fact, consumers, partners, and investors are more interested in sustainability than ever. And it's not just about using green printing materials and packaging (although those are very important). Sustainability includes how you operate your business, as well. Are you making strides to reduce energy consumption in your office? Reducing trips in company vehicles to cut fuel consumption? Seeking out partners who follow eco-friendly practices?

Incorporating sustainable practices into your business — and communicating them to prospects — can set your business apart. And as an added benefit, many of these sustainable practices can also reduce costs.



Be more resilient and flexible

From labor challenges, to supply chain issues, to extreme weather events, there are a lot of external forces that can throw your business off course. Being resilient to these changes is all about being flexible. While the past couple of years may have forced you to adapt, think of ways to embed that adaptability into the way you operate going forward. Being more flexible allows you to be more dependable, and your clients will appreciate having a partner who can ride the waves of change. Consider these strategies:

- **Cross-train employees.** Cross-training prevents work disruptions when employees take time off. And it gives employees a chance to try new things and break up the monotony of repetitive tasks.
- **Practice consistent, clear communication.** Change is inevitable, whether it's caused by external factors or internal decisions. Establishing practices that allow you to proactively communicate to clients and employees can make navigating that change less challenging.
- **Protect your business from risk.** In the event of a crisis, commercial insurance can not only provide financial compensation, it can help you get back to business more quickly.

Innovate

Challenging the status quo is risky, but so is doing things the way they've always been done. Your clients' needs are changing rapidly, and they're looking to you to help them keep up. Innovation is essential. That doesn't necessarily mean buying new gadgets or software. When an employee comes up with their own time-saving process, that's innovation. When you figure out a way to combine your team's unique skill sets to offer new services, that's innovation. When you help clients solve "impossible" problems by implementing new ideas, that's innovation.

Whether you realize it or not, you've probably been innovating over the last two years. Even if every new idea didn't pan out, it helped you learn something about your business or your clients. Use those lessons to shape how you plan for future innovations. There's nothing wrong with setting guardrails for new ideas, as long as you remain open to them.

“Innovation is anything, but business as usual.”

— Anonymous

Promote your differentiators

It can be hard to avoid competing on price, especially when your clients have tight budgets. But it's important to bring your differentiators to the forefront as well. What do clients come to you for? What inspires them to refer you to colleagues? Keep those elements at the forefront of your messaging. Your differentiators, such as reliability, innovation, and sustainability, help you build connections with your prospects. And once you convert them to clients, your differentiators inspire them to stay. Don't be shy about playing them up.

Stay the course

Creating a competitive advantage is a constant journey. But it doesn't have to be overwhelming. Start by focusing on what makes your business unique and maximizing those traits. Next, identify ways to proactively address persistent challenges like sustainability and resilience. And finally, keep innovating so you'll continue to stay relevant. More than likely, you've already laid much of the groundwork to accomplish these objectives. And that means you're well-positioned to meet your goals in 2022.

Standing Out With Storytelling

How Odell Printing Separates Itself From the Pack

BY REVA HARRIS

Everyone loves a good story, and for Sonoma County-based Odell Printing, storytelling is at the heart of what makes them different. Discerning clients, many of them wineries, rely on Odell for “multi-pass” specialty projects that involve elements like foil embossing, die cutting, and specialty papers. “Our ideal client is someone that has a premium product that wants to also communicate the story of their brand,” says owner Nicholas Ammar. “And we decided that we also should be doing that ourselves.”

Stories connect us

Although Odell is a family business, Ammar hasn’t always worked in printing. Before committing to take over his parents’ print shop, he studied communications and cultural anthropology at the undergraduate and graduate level. Those classes sparked an interest in human behavior. “When you see a huge billboard for Apple, and it’s a picture of a dog or a sunset, why would they spend \$2 million on that? Unless they know something that most of us don’t know, which is that we connect to that type of brand story.”



Custom Box



Odell Printing Website homepage at odellprinting.com

At its core, that’s what branding is. And that insight and curiosity about what connects us fuels Odell’s marketing strategy. Their messaging revolves around who they are, not just what they offer. “We aren’t telling people that we’re 15% off. We aren’t telling people that we have the best customer service. We’re attempting to bring people into our story about who we are and what we do,” Ammar says.

What is that story? Well, it starts with Ammar’s parents, who started the business (under the name Ajalon Printing) in 1953. Ammar started out cleaning the bathrooms and presses and later graduated to bindery and prepress work. After exploring other career paths, he decided to buy the business from his parents, who were planning to retire. And when the owners of Odell Printing decided to retire in early 2018, Ajalon bought them out and began operating under the name of the larger, more well-known brand.

With decades of experience under their belt, Odell's team of expert print professionals is known for working hand-in-hand with clients to bring their creative vision to life. Brands turn to them to push the limits of traditional printing projects and create custom collateral, packaging, and more.

If you don't tell your story, who will?

Of course, it's not enough to just have a good story, you also need to make sure it's being heard. "I think that the story was helpful, but even more so what differentiated us was actually committing to our story," Ammar says. "If we don't tell it, no one's telling it." Following that line of thinking, he decided to invest more in sales and marketing during the pandemic, instead of cutting the budget or simply maintaining the status quo.

For the company's website, he wanted to include as many people as possible on the About Us page. They performed internal interviews and wrote most of the employee bios on Odell Printing's website, including both their professional skills and personal tidbits in each write-up. For him, it's important to pull back the curtain and talk about the people behind the company and how they approach their work. "What differentiates all the biggest brands is the story that we tell ourselves about the brand. And the reason we tell ourselves the story about the brands is because they've told us their story."



Nicholas Ammar, Owner of Odell Printing

"The best marketing is telling stories."

That means not just telling people what they can do, but showing them as well. And for a printer, what better way to show your skills than with your own collateral? It's something that many print shops don't do, preferring to focus more on their client projects than their own. But Ammar sees things a little differently: "The question that everyone has to decide based on their brand and the story they're trying to communicate is, is it worth it? And in our case, it definitely is." He and the team created innovative, high-end collateral, such as their 8-pass business cards, that went above and beyond anything they'd seen other printers do.

Shake things up to stand out

With the combination of a proactive sales team, high-end collateral, and strong messaging, Odell Printing has broken away from the pack. Prospects say their marketing is bold and different. In a world where messaging centers on fastest turnaround, best service, and lowest price, Ammar and his team stand out in people's minds because of their story.

It's something he believes more small businesses can do. By letting go of old ways of thinking and breathing new life into their brands, printers and creative agencies can connect with potential clients in new ways. "The best marketing is telling stories. But a lot of print shops are really afraid to tell anyone about any of their clients or take photos in the back shop because they're afraid that they're going to lose the account," Ammar says. But that restricts your messaging.

Shaking things up can yield surprising results, and from Ammar's point of view, you just have to get started. "There's a tendency to stick to the default, which is to just let it be. I think you should do anything other than let it be. Take some action."



Odell Printing 8-pass business card and sticker



How to Design a Powerhouse Team

ADAPTED WITH PERMISSION FROM AN ARTICLE WRITTEN BY MINERAL

One of the ways to make your print or agency business successful is making sure you have a fantastic powerhouse team. Powerhouse teams have great energy, strength, and potential for success.

Successful teams are clear about the value they provide because their functions, roles, and processes are all designed to provide that value. Let's look more closely at their design and what it can teach us.

Clarifying value

Before you determine or reconsider team functions, processes, and roles, clarify the value your team is meant to deliver. That value, remember, isn't a product or a service or an internal "deliverable." It's the need or want satisfied by whatever your team provides, whether it is fantastic on-brand design or high-quality printed material. It's the why behind what your team does.

If you're not sure what value your team is meant to have, ask yourself:

- What does success look like?
- What are the one, two, or three big signs that your team is or would be doing a good job? What makes relevant parties happy when your team has done its job well?

Those should clue you in to your team's specific value.

Considering functions

The functions of a team are those things that need to happen for the value to be delivered. When you're considering what functions your team performs or will perform, don't think about roles just yet. Think first about what value your team is expected to deliver and what functions make that happen. Write down all of the work that gets done or needs to get done. Account for every task. Next, ask yourself how each function contributes to the value that your team provides. Consider also whether that work actually needs to happen.

Assigning roles

Don't confuse functions and roles. Conflating the two risks locking people into roles that don't develop (or don't enable them to develop). Aligning roles with functions too rigidly can also isolate your people, limiting the number of people with whom they interact and the places where they can add value. But dividing up functions more liberally can bring more variety to each role and expand the areas where people in those roles are able to collaborate with others on their team. For example, can your designer also do print production work?

Implementing processes

Having clear processes can make your business more efficient and effective and it can make it easier for employees to carry out their roles, be successful, and make the business more successful. For an implementation process to be successful, many tasks between different departments need to be accomplished in sequence.

Clear communication is essential for processes. As you introduce new processes, explain why the change was necessary, what goals you hope to achieve with these changes, and what benefits these new processes will have for employees. And when you're figuring out how your team should communicate and collaborate, let the value your team provides be your guide, and make sure every member of your team is guided by the same value.

Deciding who decides

Deciding who makes decisions and in what circumstances can be daunting for managers. A lot can go wrong. Some people enjoy having autonomy and authority over their work, and they would choose other employment if they had no say over their work and how it gets done. Others don't want the stress of making decisions that could help or harm the company. More people making decisions invites more bad decisions and workplace drama, but fewer decision-makers can restrict a team's ability to be creative and innovative.

If you're not sure what value your team is meant to have, ask yourself what would success look like?

Top 8 Qualities of a Successful Team

1. They communicate well with each other.
2. They focus on goals and results.
3. Everyone contributes their fair share.
4. They offer each other support.
5. Team members are diverse.
6. Good leadership.
7. They're organized.
8. They have fun.

Source: The Undercover Recruiter



Whatever you decide about your team's decision-making authority, make sure it aligns with and supports the value your team delivers, especially long term. Next, explain to your team how decision-making on the team works. No one should be uncertain about who makes decisions and when.

Finally, hold people accountable to their decisions. Reward decisions that add value, and address issues with decisions that detract from it. That also means holding yourself accountable for how decision-making is done in your organization.

Developing the team

You may have noticed that we haven't covered the essential step of hiring and retaining the right people for the roles you need. That was deliberate. The steps above — clarifying value, considering functions, assigning roles, implementing processes, and deciding who decides — form the design of your team. Think of this design as the team architecture that your team members operate in, whoever they may be.

That said, don't be afraid to allow your particular employees to help shape the overarching team design. For a team to be effective, it must be a source of value to the people on it. People don't stay engaged with a team or remain on it when that team doesn't meet their own wants and needs. Team input can make a good team design even better.



RETHINK YOUR SALES CALL

BILL FARQUHARSON, SALES COACH, AUTHOR, AND PRESENTER

What's the biggest challenge for most businesses? Many would say sales. Increasing sales volume is not only about making more calls, but making better calls. This is achieved through a feedback process of thinking about your sales calls and taking notes on what could have been improved right after they end, and practicing making changes each time you make a call.

I take this to heart. As a sales coach for the graphic arts industry, I offer a resource for salespeople and selling owners called the Sales Vault. What I've learned while creating quality content for The Vault provides insight for growing sales. Allow me to explain...

Back in August of last year, I wrote and delivered a Zoom presentation entitled "What Makes the Best of the Best, The Best of the Best." It went well. However, as is my custom, I took some notes after it was over so that the next time the presentation would be better. That "next time" would be a few months later and when it is over, I knew I would once again make edits and additions, all with the same goal of improvement in mind.

It's the same with your sales calls. For example, if you ever go on a four-legged sales call with a well-established, legacy salesperson, you will notice how smooth and relaxed he or she is. Their delivery, questions, pace, and mannerisms have been repeated hundreds of times and seem second nature by now. That's because they are. They've practiced, rehearsed, and made improvements to make it picture perfect.

Ask yourself: Have you ever thought of the perfect thing to say in a conversation or an argument two or three days after it happened? Have you ever left a sales call, thought back on it, and said yourself, "UGH, what I should've said was..."

Only a select few might be perfect on their toes all the time, but that's a tall order and for most of us, the best way around it is to learn from our actions and make improvements towards perfection. Even the best of the best will tell you no sales call is 100% perfect. However, you can always improve and, thanks to the repetitive nature of sales, there is always another chance to do so.

Whether it be in person or via Zoom, make certain to rethink your sales calls and take notes on what you should have or could have done differently. Another opportunity is coming up. Everything that happens in sales will happen again. By getting just a little better each time, you, too, can make that smooth and relaxed sales call and stand out to your prospects.

Bill Farquharson is a sales trainer and presenter for the print, signage, label, and packaging industries. He runs the Sales Vault, offering online live sales workshops, template and script downloads, sales challenge discussion groups, and archived content. VMA members get the first month free and then a discounted rate thereafter! Learn more at salesvaultinsider.com or billfarquharson.com, or 781-934-7036.



IT'S ALL ABOUT THE PERSONAL CONNECTION

SHANNON WOLFORD, SALES AND MARKETING PROFESSIONAL

As tough as it's been, one thing the pandemic showed us was the importance of relationships and personal connections. We got to choose our most favorite people to be in our bubble and who we spent our time with. Professionally, we did our best to connect emotionally and intellectually with the person across from us on the screen. And in some ways, we connected on a deeper level as we learned more about business' personal lives.

Now that the world is opening up a little bit, it's a good time to reinforce those personal connections. VMA's president, Ian Flynn, and I have been fortunate to visit many of our members' shops over the past six months. The difference between connecting over the phone, email, or Zoom and being in person is like night and day. Not to mention, it's a lot more fun to meet in person — we've met your kids, your office dogs, we've heard about your son's blooming basketball career, and enjoyed meals together.

Spending a little bit more time getting to know your customers will pay off in spades in the long run. You are creating an even deeper emotional connection which is rewarding to both parties and helps differentiate you against the competition.

Here are some tips on how to enhance those personal connections:

- Be safe, but go to events — Whether it be our VMA ConnectUp events, your local chamber of commerce events, or larger industry events. Seize those opportunities to personally meet

new people. Put out the effort and you will learn something from someone that will help your business.

- Handwritten thank you notes — I know it makes my day when I get a handwritten note in the mail. We all love paper, printing, and creativity, so spend the few extra minutes writing a note. It will help you stand out a lot more than simply sending a thank you email.
- Gifts — A small, personal thank you gift can go a long way in reinforcing the personal connection. Your customer will know you thought about them and spent the time to send something. It doesn't have to be expensive, as it truly is the thought that matters.
- Listen — People love to talk about themselves; let them.

According to the Harvard Business Review, "On a lifetime value basis, emotionally connected customers are more than twice as valuable as highly satisfied customers." Emotionally connected customers will find a sense of belonging in your organization — and that will help you stand out amongst your peers.

Shannon has been the Director of Membership and Sales at VMA for 10 years and has been with the association for 19 years. Prior to working at VMA she worked for many dot-com businesses in internet-based software sales. She has a BA in psychology from UCLA. shannon@vma.bz or 415-710-0568.

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