

Focus Group Breathes New Life into Biz on the Brink

The team from Franklin's in Columbia, South Carolina: pictured are (from left to right) Kathi Griffin-operations manager/press operator, Murphy Peebles-printing and copy production, Jessica Smith-press operator trainee, Janet Hair-graphic artist, Linda Cox-co-owner and center manager, Chuck Cox-owner, and (front) Jaquelyn Cox-CSR/software tech (and Linda's and Chuck's daughter)



“Three years ago we lost six major clients in four months,” said Chuck Cox, owner with his wife Linda, of Franklin’s Printing in Columbia, South Carolina. With the business on the brink of collapse, Chuck decided he was going to get his “feet on the street” for starters, and began listening to the voices beckoning him to join an ICED Focus Group.

Alan Anderson (owner of Franklin’s in Augusta, Georgia) began encouraging Chuck to join a focus group in 2002. “He said it helped him a bunch,” said Chuck, “but I didn’t think I needed it at the time.” Just a couple of days after Chuck and Linda thought they might lose it all, Leah White, the financial analyst at ICED, called Chuck to say a new focus group was beginning and asked him to consider joining. “I tossed around the idea with Linda but still wasn’t convinced it would really help,” he said. “I fell asleep on the Friday night after Leah’s call and woke up within a couple of hours thinking, ‘Shoot! I should do it.’ I called Leah the following week and said ‘Sign me up! I don’t need to walk a mine field alone.’”

Chuck began the ICED Focus Group in 2006 and went home from the first session determined to begin holding team meetings with his staff and to continue his quest for customers by hitting the streets. Chuck began the sales blitz by contacting his existing customer base, those he hadn’t done business with in a while. When he quizzed them about the long absence without an order, their answer gave him a wake up call. “It was like a dagger in the heart,” he said. “They told me I hadn’t been by to see them.”

Chuck began re-evaluating his customers and categorized them into three groups: lovable puppies, meat and potatoes and big fish. He was determined to keep a better balance of his

customers in an active data base. He learned a valuable lesson – not to focus only on the big fish. “I decided that I needed to touch base with my lovable puppies from time to time,” he said.

Sales began to improve, and Chuck grew to appreciate the differences in skill levels of the various members of the focus group. “I come from a background in information systems, accounting and manufacturing,” he said. “I didn’t really even know the difference between sales and marketing.”

Three years ago a direct flight from Charlotte to Houston became available, making training at Northwest Forest more accessible to Chuck. He recently attended Bill Farquharson’s “From Surviving to Thriving” seminar in mid-November and is also a big fan of Dave Fellman. “While my ‘feet-on-the-street’ approach is working, I learned from Farquharson that I can reach a higher level customer by using certain marketing methods.”

Continuing to learn is important to Chuck, and being part of a second focus group was one of the prerequisites he had in renewing his franchise agreement after celebrating the center’s 15th anniversary in the system this year. Access to the focus group, succession planning and ongoing training opportunities were on the top of the list in Chuck’s and Linda’s decision to renew.

Chuck credits his participation in the ICED Focus Group as a major factor in coming back from the brink of losing the business. And according to Chuck, learning more about marketing and VDP selling is in his future; but in the meantime, he and Linda are moving forward and enjoying the process. “We’re not a big shop,” said Chuck, “but we’re a happy shop!” ♦