



# Selecting And Training A Vendor

**You will serve your organization best if you plan realistically, evaluate thoughtfully, test carefully and buy cautiously. You achieve these things most easily by working with the right vendor.**

**Here are six aspects of successfully selecting and training that vendor.**

**BOTTOM LINE** –Wise nonprofit marketers know that once a product with their organization's logo is out in the hands of end-users, it is forever beyond their control. Yet it will affect their brand equity in ways that are helpful or harmful as long as it survives. Or as long as it is remembered.

**Select a conservative vendor.** A conservative vendor helps you define the results you want to achieve and then helps you select products that will do the trick. This kind of vendor doesn't need to reduce product quality or cut client service to meet payroll or to carry receivables or to service debt. So you won't be pressed to place an order right away. Or urged to increase the size of your order. Or be manipulated by slippery pricing.

**Collaborate.** Build. Think long-term. A good vendor seeks solid, sustainable relationships based on creative synergy and trust. A hustler seeks to earn a commission.

**Teach your vendor.** Make sure he or she understands how your organization works. Review your event calendar and fundraising schedule with the vendor. Instruct the vendor in the demographics and needs of the constituency you serve. Inform the vendor about the affinity group that supports your work. Explain your administrative realities and funding mechanism. Emphasize that in your world public goodwill and contributor affinity are not public relations abstractions – they are fundamental to mission fulfillment and organization survival.

**Learn from the vendor.** Ask him or her to teach you how different products are imprinted. Seek to understand product quality and perceived value, and how products generate impressions for your organization. Acquire knowledge that will help you be the effective customer who knows how to buy smart.

**Do not require complicity.** A good vendor will be able to explain why a product may be inappropriate for your market or for your intended use, or too expensive for its purpose or a reflection of your personal taste rather than the taste of your market. When his or her experience dictates, a good vendor will urge you to reduce the size of an order or tell you to select a different product or insist you step down to a less expensive imprint.

Being committed to the relationship instead of the commission, a good vendor applauds an appropriate product choice, urges caution about a doubtful one and gladly gives up sales to help clients avoid costly mistakes.

**Respect business realities.** In a collaborative partnership, each party also looks out for the other guy's welfare. Accept your share of that responsibility. Be respectful of matters like factory production schedules, vendor credit policy, invoice due-dates, the cost of samples and services, the amount of time your vendor spends on tasks like product research for you, etc. Respect your vendor's business reality. That will earn reciprocity and more.

**ANECDOTE:** VisABILITY is not always successful in urging clients to buy cautiously. One national client ignored our advice for months. Based on his understanding of the way his membership drive was working, he kept buying a few hundred sweatshirts every couple weeks. We insisted he was overdoing it and urged him to get a better handle on his needs. Finally we told him we would not accept any more reorders until he visited his fulfillment house and took a hand-count to validate the stock reports he was receiving.

Somewhat irritated, he agreed. Then he drove to the fulfillment house (about 50 miles away) to count his organization's inventory. A block from his destination he encountered a couple of guys at a sidewalk kiosk. They were selling his organization's sweatshirts! It turned out they had been stealing inventory from the fulfillment house for months and selling it on the street. We subsequently figured that 350 to 400 sweats had been stolen over a three-month period. (Thereafter, as you may expect, he no longer resented the advice we gave him and was a sincere convert to our code of cautious ordering and reordering.)



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