

Bank on 'em (really, you should)

Five predictions printers and marketing service providers can embrace

say with confidence that the 2019 predictions I'm about to lay in front of you will come true. How confident am I? About 40 percent, because as I read in a recent *Wall Street Journal* article, pundits say it's the magic number for never having to say you were wrong. My advice is to choose 40 percent of what I write and take it to the bank. To make it easy for you, I have five 2019 predictions, so pick two.

- Artificial Intelligence (AI) and the Internet of Things (IoT) will create immediate new opportunities.
- Low unemployment will force you to develop talent via modern apprenticeships.
- Your next best sales professionals will come from content experts learning sales skills versus sales professionals learning content.
- Printers and marketing service providers will absorb clients' key marketing functions.
- Customer service managers will turn away from tech companies for inspiration, going back to consumer giants like Disney, Four Seasons and Starbucks.

If you're looking to make a leap in 2019, start with a clear vision of the future and your place in it. Technology will continue making our jobs easier, but it will also put pressure on us to upgrade our skills.



1. AI and IoT starts to pay off

When I think of AI and IoT advances, this past summer's viral hit featuring two dog-like robots comes to mind. The video shows one creature confused by a closed door until a second one arrives, grabs the door handle with a metal arm, and opens the door. It lets the first creature through, then exits itself.

I'm not predicting robot dogs will be in your facility next year, but I will say when making a list of activities happening between a client's request for printing and the final product, most can be done by smart machines. This will provide companies with a short-term advantage because there will be a knowledge gap. This gap gives clever organizations the opportunity to capture value before the market catches up.

In 2019, the gap will show up anywhere technology makes you more efficient without changing retail pricing. It won't last forever, but use it in the short term to re-approach business you've lost, win businesses from a competitor, or take on outsourced projects profitably.

2. The new apprenticeships

Technology will also produce changes in employment. We've experienced labor market pressure for a few years now, and clients are dedicating resources to recruiting. The headlines scream, "No qualified workers for open positions," but forward-thinking companies are plowing ahead by creating their own qualified workers.

While it's tempting to imagine the return of guild era apprenticeships, the new labor force isn't interested in long-term employment commitments. What's left is a new apprenticeship model, and the advantage I see is the way it forces my clients to get very specific about skills and techniques, especially in companies under 500 employees who have been hiring for expertise.

When they're forced to develop their own experts, time spent defining their best way of working is providing more value to the organization than any experienced hire can be reasonably expected to provide.

3. The geniuses learn to sell

A variation of training trends is teaching content experts how to sell versus hiring experienced industry sales people. This mind shift occurs because the internet has flipped the flow of information from sellers to buyers. Where buyers used to rely on sales people for information, today's buyer assumes they have access to all the information needed to make a decision.

That means today's seller must be expert in working with a hyper-informed buyer and guiding them through piles of information to arrive at a decision. Guiding is easier when the seller is a content expert. It's like going to the doctor. There's a good chance today's patient has used Dr. Google for research and it's up to the real doctor to sort through the clutter and help the patient make sense of everything. The push in med school is to improve doctor's communication skills, and we'll see that same

approach drifting into the business world as buyers rely more on self-guided research.

4. Rent out your CMO

Hidden in my comments about buyers relying more on self-guided research is the fact that organizations are thinning out their ranks. This flattening of the organization, combined with investing in smarter machines, will push marketing functions further toward printers and marketing service providers.

Printers want savvier customers and customers want the printers to do more of the work. While smarter machines will help, the trend in 2019 is that companies will force their providers to take on more responsibility for what the company's marketing department used to do.

As a provider, it's time to add partial Chief Marketing Officer (CMO) services to clients. In 2019 it makes sense for you to spread a single CMO function across multiple clients because clients will reward you for it.

5. Human first customer service

Finally, in the coming year we're going to shift from looking to tech companies for customer service examples back to our biggest and best consumer brands. Disney, Four Seasons, Southwest and Starbucks are built on human-first customer service concepts that are easier for us to emulate than the practices from tech-laden companies like Amazon, Netflix and Apple.

The good news for most of us is gains in customer service are only a phone call or handwritten note away. Persona-driven automated drip campaigns are impressive but managing our people's reluctance to pick up the phone or handwrite a note of thanks pays greater dividends. Those two activities combined with a Disneyesque attention to delighting the customer will pay off faster than ever, because while your competitor is designing the world's best email drip campaign, you'll be on the phone with their customers. A little more human-to-human interaction makes you stand out in 2019.

What has happened, will happen

Let me leave you with this thought. Your 2019 gains will come from regular incremental improvements on what you're doing right now. Your fourth-grade school desk was only slightly larger than your second-grade one, but over time these changes added up to the point where you marvel at how small your kid's classroom looks.

If you're looking to make a leap in 2019, start with a clear vision of the future and your place in it. Technology will continue making our jobs easier, but it will also put pressure on us to upgrade our skills. Imagine the market you're selling into in 2025 and imagine how your company will provide value. In 2019, take the first steps toward that vision.

My guess is those first steps will include 40 percent of my predictions. ■



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