It’s Never Too Early to Start Building a Career in Sales

In order to succeed in the managed print services space, companies need to be dedicated to customer satisfaction and must have a strong staff of consultative professionals on board: especially on their sales teams. That’s what Rob Farrell, VP of sales and marketing for SmartPrint, has focused on for almost 20 years. What started out as summer job in high school turned into a highly successful sales career in the managed print services field. He offers details of that journey in this month’s CompTIA Spotlight on Success.

CompTIA: What does SmartPrint do?

Rob: We’re an independent managed print services firm that focuses on professional services businesses such as legal, financial and insurance, as well as healthcare and manufacturing and distribution companies. We typically target mid-market organizations, from 100 to 1,000 employees and above, and many of them have multiple offices. We simplify managed print services processes and solutions around document workflow for our customers and provide coverage coast to coast.

CompTIA: When you were a kid, what career did you envision yourself pursuing?

Rob: When I was in high school, I really didn’t know what I wanted to do for a career. After eleventh grade, I started a driveway sealing business with a friend and we went door-to-door selling our services to make money. For two summers we made great money and had fun, though we spent a lot of our profits on camping and having a good time. Closing business and collecting the checks was great, but we also had to seal the driveways, which was hard work. But I thought going door-to-door was interesting and thought it would be great to sell something of higher value. So I decided to focus on business and marketing in school to move myself in that direction. That’s how I landed in sales.

CompTIA: What was your first technology job?

Rob: I worked for LaserNetworks, an HP dealer that sold printers, service contracts and supplies back in the mid-1990s. That’s where I started learning about technology and I’ve been around managed print services ever since.

CompTIA: What industry changes have you noticed over the past twenty years?

Rob: When I started working in the technology field, it was more about selling products. There were few real solutions or services available at that time. Early in my career, in that job, as a matter of fact, we started to sell what was known back then as cost-per-page. That was really the early managed print services plan. As we began selling that conceptual solution, it really started to take off. I was fortunate to have been at the front-end of that change, seeing the technology business evolve from selling products to services – particularly managed services.
services. The concept evolved over the past 20 years or so to the point everything seems to be offered as-a-service today.

**CompTIA:** What other positions have you held?

**Rob:** I worked in financial services briefly and spent time on Bay Street helping companies that wanted to go public. I was employed by two dot-com startups in the late '90s and early 2000's and later on I worked with another tech company that developed Internet security software. With everything so connected today, I think that mix of experience gave me a great perspective of the IT industry.

I spent four years working at Xerox in a senior management role to gain the experience I needed to start a consulting firm. I wanted to help organizations build their go-to-market plans and sales programs, processes and strategy. Working at a tier-one global business like Xerox gave me the experience I needed to go off on my own. The consulting business developed fairly quickly and before long I was helping drive sales processes for a number of managed IT services companies.

SmartPrint was actually one of my clients. I was helping position the managed print services business for growth by building out their sales organization. Frankly, it was going so well they propositioned me to come on full-time as a partner in the business. I didn't plan for it to happen. I was enjoying my consulting business, but it kind of fell into place and presented me with a tremendous opportunity to get in and build something I knew would succeed. With previous experience building a business like this, it was fun to do it again.

**CompTIA:** How has your sales approach worked at SmartPrint?

**Rob:** I've been on board almost four years now and we've tripled the size of the company in that time. We were a fairly small organization, but our growth has been quite strong.

**CompTIA:** To what do you attribute that rapid expansion?

**Rob:** We revised our go-to-market strategy and made a number of changes with our solutions, and we invested in great people. Not just employees who could help us sell software solutions that integrate to manage print services, but those who can stand them up and manage them for our clients. We really built out our deliverables in the managed print services space, and that is a differentiator for us.

Our success is all about making it simple for our customers. We bring their costs down and make their organizations more efficient. We've got the expertise to consult and to show them how to do it and to actually implement software solutions and manage it.

**CompTIA:** Does selling managed print services differ from selling other technology services?

**Rob:** Not really. It's a different service, but the process of selling it, consulting to understand the client's environment and positioning the proper solution is basically the same. You invest time to develop your people so they can be the advisors your clients need. In the sales organization, we look for smart people who can help our clients solve complex print and workflow problems. It's really about finding people who can be consultative and can ask the right questions, and who can think and learn in the field.
CompTIA: What one thing has helped you be successful in your tech career?

Rob: I think it’s really knowing what we are here for and who we are here for. It’s about delivering solutions to our clients. I think about our employees, our technology partners and our clients. One of the things that’s helped me be successful is wanting to do my best for all of them. We want to make a profit. We want our business partners to make a profit, and we want our clients to get value from our services. And, whenever we’re working deals, we want to do the right thing. I recognized that early in my career and it helped put things in the proper perspective. Whether we’re making business plans, or developing a strategy for an account, or working tactically with one of our clients to help them solve a problem, it’s about the people, not the really cool software or hardware.

CompTIA: How did you get involved with CompTIA?

Rob: From my time in the industry, I’ve had a fair amount of experience with the association’s certifications and training programs. Then I was asked to join the Canadian IT Business Community Executive Board (CEB) and had the opportunity to work with the Ontario chapter for three years. The group has monthly conference calls to discuss direction and meets face-to-face quarterly to drive initiatives, network and support other organizational objectives.

To me, it was a great way to give back and use some of my knowledge. I was also able to share some of SmartPrint’s best practices and market information. CompTIA is also a great place to network. I’ve met many great people through my work with the association, including partners, competitors and those I wouldn’t have met elsewhere. It’s good to stretch your network.

CompTIA: Any advice for those looking at careers in the technology field?

Rob: There are a couple of things I believe are really important. First, think about what interests you. Consider which area of technology really appeals to you and focus on the companies that play there. Second, the people you work with are probably one of the most important factors to your happiness and success. If you are not comfortable with those who work in the organization, keep looking. You have to ask yourself, “What interests me and will keep me engaged?” Do you see yourself in this environment long-term?

CompTIA: Any particular advice for IT sales professionals?

Rob: Look for an organization with a plan. You can find that through questioning and interviews. A lot of companies think sales people should just pick up the phone and go and in the technology space that will not bring success. Organizations need a well-thought-out and managed sales process and a real plan to be successful. Without that, it’s probably going to be a really stressful environment for a sales professional.