



CHAPTER 2

Lessons from the Worst Salesman in the World

Or: An at-leaster learns some basics

There are two motivations for any sales dialogue with a prospect: the salesperson's reason to sell and the prospect's reason to buy. The two are not to be confused. I was lucky enough to learn this tough lesson early in my career, but not without a little pain on my side.

According to those who don't know any better, the responsibility of a salesperson is to persuade people to buy whatever he happens to be selling. "He could sell ice to an Eskimo" is supposedly the highest compliment to a salesperson—the idea being that a great sale meets the needs of the salesperson regardless of whether the customer actually needs it.

The reality is that the only sale that really sticks is the one that is driven by the needs of the customer.

Here's another reality: the best way to find out what that customer needs is to go straight to the horse's mouth and ask.

Effective salespeople learn this lesson. Others don't, and continue to underachieve. If you are lucky, you learn the lesson early in your career. If you are unlucky, you never learn it at all. Apparently, there is a fair number of unlucky salespeople out there.

For all too many salespeople, the motto seems to be, "Keep pitching until they surrender." You meet a lot of salespeople who live by this motto, even though they have ample personal experience demonstrating the mediocrity of the results this approach generates. Many "senior" salespeople seem to have 20 or so years of experience, when in fact they have had one year's experience 20 or so times.

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Since the focus of this book is to learn from the mistakes of others, it seems only fair that I jump in first with a disaster story of my own.

ON THE ROAD

My own first sales job was working for a book wholesaler. We didn't publish anything; we bought books in bulk at the end of their normal print runs and discounted them to retailers at bargain prices. Our titles tended to be at the popular end of the market, mostly large format books on popular subjects with a lot of illustrations.

After I spent a week or two learning the ropes in the warehouse and the invoicing department, my boss Trevor took me out on the

road to meet a real live customer for the first time. Trevor had seen and done pretty much everything in the book industry and was a hard guy to impress. I was determined to blow his socks off with my natural sales ability.

In order to get one step ahead of Trevor, I went to the warehouse manager and asked him for a list of the top-selling books we stocked. I made sure those sure-fire winners were right on top of the enormous sample bag I had to carry.

Our first call was in a small town near our office, with a buyer who had been a customer for years. The store sold toys, some kids' clothes, and some books, most of which came from us.

Trevor checked me out before we left. "Do you have a catalogue, a pen, and an order pad?" he asked. I did. That was it. I was good to go.

The shop owner was a very nice lady who offered salespeople a cup of coffee and liked to chat for a while before getting down to business. Being the total hot shot I was, I decided to leave the time-wasting chit-chat to Trevor. The idea of investing time and effort into creating a bond with the client and creating good rapport was totally alien to me. As the gossip portion of the meeting seemed to be winding down, I decided that it was time to launch my killer moves.

My first shot at a benefit sale was going nowhere.

THE KILLER PITCH

"Let me show you what is really selling right now," I said enthusiastically, pulling out the best-selling book we had in the whole warehouse, *Hitler's Panzer Armies of World War II*. "This is a great seller, everyone else is buying tons of this title. You could move a

lot of copies of this. You should order now before we sell out.”

The lady smiled, “Well, Bill, this is a children’s store. We sell to kids and their parents. So we only stock children’s books.”

I was stumped.

Before starting the job, I had bought a book on sales. I had learned all about selling through pitching features, advantages, and benefits, but my first shot at a benefit sale was going nowhere. “OK, how about this?” I said. “Our warehouse manager tells me that this is almost flying out the door. It’s a real money maker.” I showed her my sample of yet another book targeted at the adult market, *Horrible Murders of Old London Town*.

She was polite enough to pretend to look at the blood-spattered cover of the book for a second before handing it back to me.

“Hmm,” she said. “Mainly we just sell picture books, puzzle books, that sort of thing, and we’re just interested in children’s books. You see, if we sell books, then parents might come in to pick up a book and end up buying something else—toys or whatever.”

CRASHING AND BURNING

My first customer ever was simply refusing to work with me. I jammed the sample back into my bag, reaching for the next sure-fire winner. By this time, Trevor was staring at me with a mixture of amazement and curiosity. He had actually moved around to the customer’s side of the counter to get a spectator’s perspective on my catastrophic performance.

I reached into my bag and pulled out number three on our top-seller list. Surely she could not possibly turn me down on *The History of Torture*—a real winner if there ever was one.

Trevor saw what I was reaching for and put his hand on my arm to stop me. “Bill, why don’t you wait for me in the car?”

Many people have been thrown out of a sales meeting by a client, but I think I have the unique distinction of being thrown out

of my very first sales call by my own boss. I sat in the car for half an hour while Trevor calmed the client down and then took a reasonable order for kids' books.

FIRST LESSON

Eventually, Trevor joined me in the car. He patiently asked, "Bill, how do you find out what a customer wants to buy?"

I thought I had learned my lesson. "You look to see what kind of things they already stock?"

"Nope."

"You check to see what they have bought before?"

"Nope."

"You look at what other shops like theirs have bought and sell those?"

"Nope."

After a long silence I suspected that my sales career was over. It was 10:30 in the morning on my first day on the road. "I give up," I said.

"Well," Trevor said, "you ask them, you idiot."

This felt too easy. I objected, "Isn't that cheating?"

Trevor looked into the distance and wondered what he had done to deserve a salesman this dumb. "No, Bill. Selling people things they want to buy is not cheating. It's called *selling*. Have you ever heard about walking a mile in someone else's shoes?"

*"Selling people things that they
want to buy is not cheating."*

Believe it or not, I had never heard that phrase. And the idea of trying to see the world from the side of the customer had never entered my mind.

LESSON LEARNED

Trevor was nice enough not to fire me, but it was some time before I was allowed to fly solo. Eventually, I was allowed out on my own. Trevor's checklist had expanded from the original, "Do you have a catalogue, a pen, and an order pad?" to include this final item: "What is the first question you are going to ask the customer?"

I learned the right answer. "I am going to ask what kind of books he wants to buy." Trevor would nod, but it took him a while before his confidence in me returned.

One of the great truths of selling is that telling isn't selling. Like most novice salespeople, I had assumed that my mission was to convince people to do what I wanted. I would tell them what made sense and convince them to follow my stunning plan. Unfortunately, many, many salespeople spend years in their role without progressing past this novice stage.

The salesperson's job is not to get meetings.

Customers all over the world are trapped every day in endless presentations about products and services they don't need with salespeople from whom they never plan to buy. Why? Because the salesperson fails to qualify what is on the customer's "must do" list. Millions are spent on travel every year by sales teams jetting across the world to pitch great ideas that will never get off the ground, simply because they remain clueless about the customer's true agenda.

The salesperson's job is not to get meetings, not to organize presentations or site visits, and not to write killer sales proposals. It is to find out what the customer needs and to identify those customers who have a need that fits the salesperson's offer.

It is easy to forget that the simplest and fastest opportunity to

sell comes when you are selling something the customer already wants to buy. The one best place to start the discovery process is asking the customer what that is.

IN THE ZONE

For weeks, my sales calls were pretty much identical. “Hello. I am Bill from the book company. What sort of books do you think you might want to buy?” The customer who had a pretty good idea about what made his business tick would say something like: “We like books about cooking and so forth.” I would dive into my sample bag and say: “Here you are, this one is all about cooking. Is it something you would want to stock?” Very often the customer would. In fact I became good at selling books, so I was pretty cocky when Trevor said he would come out on the road with me for a day.

Our first call that day was at a classic car museum. “Hi! I’m Bill from the book company. What kinds of books are selling well for you right now?”

“Oh, you know, books about old cars mainly,” said the museum manager wondering why someone was asking such a stupid question.

“Great!” I said. “We have some of those. Do you think you might want to buy some?”

After showing him our books about classic cars and getting the order, I threw in my killer punch. “Do people ever come in here who are not very interested in old cars, children being pulled along by their parents for example? You could sell some kids’ books.”

The manager thought for a second and then said, “Why not? We can give it a try.”

THE GREATEST SALESMAN IN THE WORLD

So we sold the car museum some children’s books and I crowned myself the Greatest Salesman in the World. Back in the car with

Trevor I could not contain myself with triumph, “Did you see that, Trevor? I got him there. He had never thought of selling kids’ books. I sure showed him.”

Trevor looked at me with genuine sympathy. “Bill, you need to understand something very important—we are on the same side as our customers. We are not out to beat them.”

This was nothing short of a revelation to me—wasn’t selling all about winning, being one step ahead of the customers? They had a big bag of money and we had a warehouse full of product. The objective was to manipulate them into giving us the money in exchange for the product. It was a war, or so I had thought.

By this time, I think Trevor had begun to see me as an interesting challenge, a bit like a one-person remedial sales class.

*“We are on the same side as our customers.
We are not out to beat them.”*

“Bill,” he said, “what we want is for our customers to be successful. We like it if they think we might be just a little bit responsible for their success.”

This made sense. “So we have to pretend to care about their business?” I said.

Trevor knew how to accept small victories. “That will be a start, Bill. Let’s work with that for now.”

WHO WINS?

There are two ways to look at sales: one is to see selling as a conflict where one side wins and the other loses, and the other is to recognize that the sales job is to support customers in making the right decisions *for them*. Ideally, that decision will include buying

from you because you have qualified the customer correctly in the first place. If it turns out that you can't help the customer, and if you (not the customer) say so first, you will probably have made the best investment in your sales career by telling the truth under pressure.

Trevor stuck with me, which was remarkable in itself. After about six months, I hit my stride. I now had what I thought were two of the most devastating weapons in the history of sales. First, I would ask people questions about what they wanted to buy from me instead of talking about my product. Second, I would show some concern about their business. I had even grown to the point that the concern was genuine.

Armed with these two principles, I became a slightly better salesperson, and sold some books.

My guess is that the lion's share of all salespeople around the world have still not learned those two principles. They are flying around desperately, pitching products to clients without asking about what might be on their agenda and not showing the slightest interest in the success of their business.

SANDLER TAKEAWAYS FOR BOOTSTRAPPERS

- 1. People buy from people they like, and they like people who are a little bit like themselves.** Failing to invest in creating a bond and establishing a rapport with clients is one of the biggest sales killers in the world. Your products and services are simply the means by which your clients resolve the pains they are experiencing. You need to put yourself in the shoes of your prospects to understand the value you can create for them.
- 2. Sell what customers want to buy, not what you want to sell.** People love to buy, but they hate being "sold." In practice, this might sound confusing, but here's an example. Let's say you're

selling into retail. You may think you are selling your great product, your fantastic pricing strategy, your creative brand, and your tip-top customer service. In fact what a retailer buys is probably more along the lines of the most profitable way to use shelf space.

3. **Telling isn't selling.** Being able to point out the great advantages of whatever you are selling is great. Having a super snappy presentation created by your friends in the marketing department is terrific. Yet telling people what you want to sell them is much, much less than half the battle. As generations of teachers and grandparents have advised: "You have two ears and one mouth, so use them in that proportion and in that order."
4. **You and the prospect are on the same side.** This is controversial. A lot of salespeople see themselves as hunters, as rock-star rainmakers who "win" every time they deal with customers. Financial traders think like this. They sell breathtakingly complex derivatives and bonds that literally cannot be explained and that often have a disturbing tendency to become close to worthless shortly after they are sold. I don't care how much money there is to be made—I won't sell like that, and you shouldn't either. Sooner or later, it backfires. If you see selling as a game where one side wins at the expense of the other, you are riding for a fall—and are probably in the wrong job.