



RULE 1

Zig When Others Zag

Murray, the cab driver, scowled a little when Alan read out the address Harvey had scrawled on a slip of Acme note paper. When Alan repeated himself, the cabbie shook his head, punched the number into the GPS, and started driving. Alan didn't like taxis, and these days he didn't like spending money on cab fare—he could barely afford his golf game—but his wife Kathy needed their only car on weekends to run errands.

“Rural neighborhood,” the cab driver said. He muttered something unintelligible as he guided the yellow Crown

Victoria onto the freeway on-ramp leading out of town.

What Alan had expected to see was a shiny, modern office building. Yet when they finally arrived at their destination—ten minutes before Alan’s appointed starting time—the spot didn’t look at all like what Alan was expecting.

This was no office building. The place where the cab stopped didn’t look like the lavish comfortable home of a successful salesperson, either, which was the second thing Alan had expected. After that long ride, which had culminated in a bumpy, bone-jarringly unpaved road lined with tall trees, the place where they finally stopped was a small, dilapidated trailer.

This trailer had been left, for reasons only it knew, in a small clearing in the middle of a dense stretch of woods serviced by one uncertain road. A mailbox, suspended uneasily upon a two-by-four someone had jammed into the soil, proclaimed, in white paint, the same address written on that slip of Acme stationery.

This was a weather-beaten, distinctly lonely-looking trailer. It had been out on its own for a long time. And it had seen better days.

Alan thought to himself: *I missed my tee time for this?*

“You sure this is where you’re supposed to have your meeting?” Murray asked.

Murray was gruff and bearded, and his tone of voice suggested that he was wary of the surroundings. The place didn't look all that inviting to Alan, either. Three scruffy crows landed on the roof of the little trailer. They glared at Alan.

Should he stay or should he go?

Alan pulled out his phone and dialed Harvey's home number.

"What is it, Alan?" said Harvey, groggy, but apparently still able to make out the Caller ID readout. "I was hoping to sleep in today."

"Sorry," Alan said, "it's just that I think I must have written down the wrong address. The place the cab driver took me to is, um..."

"A ratty-looking old trailer?"

Alan was speechless.

"Yep," Harvey said. "That's his office. Trust me, where he actually lives is much, much nicer. I guess I should have expected your call. Carl Contrario does all of his consulting in that little trailer. It's part of the training. Wait. What time is it? 7:53 A.M. OK. Good. You're not late yet. Whatever you do, Alan, pay the cab driver and go knock on that door before it's eight o'clock. You do not want to be late with this guy. Good luck."

And Harvey hung up.

Obediently, Alan paid his fare and stepped out of the cab.

It pulled away in a yellow blur, picked up speed, and disappeared. Alone on the dirt road, Alan stared at the little trailer, then checked his watch.

7:55 A.M.

Quickly, he made his way to the door and knocked three times.

“Come in,” said a man’s voice within. He sounded relaxed. Alan opened the flimsy-looking door.

contrarian (adjective) Opposing or rejecting popular opinion; going against current practice.

To Alan’s surprise, the interior of the trailer was—or at least appeared—sturdy, spacious, luxurious, tastefully lit, and quite well appointed. Some kind of optical illusion must have made the room look like that.

Half a dozen important pieces of pop art—seemingly genuine, although that hardly seemed possible—lined the walls. Alan thought he recognized, on the furthest wall, an Andy Warhol painting he had studied in his college art history class, *Dollar Sign*.

Beneath that spectacular image, behind a sleek mahogany desk, sat a thin man with a thin face in a dark business suit,

middle-aged, with immaculately coiffed salt-and-pepper hair. He wore round John Lennon glasses and a white tie.

“Congratulations, Alan,” the man said, gesturing toward a plush, leather-upholstered armchair positioned directly in front of his desk. “You’ve made it past the first level. Most people walk away before they’ve even said a word to me. You didn’t make that mistake. But I suspect you called your boss to confirm you were in the right place. Didn’t you? Hmm?”

The clear eyes behind those Lennon specs stared at Alan without blinking.

Alan took his seat, then nodded.

“No matter,” the man said. “You’re here. Once you knock on the door and step in here before eight, all is well. But if you’d been late, oh, this would not have gone well at all. You’d have failed before we even spoke a word to each other! And you’d have lost your job—for *failing to be coachable*! By the way, one of the first things you will learn here is that the very best salespeople are the most coachable ones. They’re coachable because they’re always growing.”

He laughed abruptly, stopped laughing just as abruptly, stood, reached over the table, grabbed Alan’s hand, and shook it vigorously. “I’m Carl Contrario, Alan. Glad to meet you. You are coachable, aren’t you?”

“I hope so.”

Carl released Alan's hand and resumed his seat behind the desk.

"Can I ask you a question, Carl?"

"Sure!" Carl beamed. Behind the round lenses, his eyes radiated with what appeared to be genuine joy at having begun in earnest. "Sure! Ask away! Ask as many questions as you like! I love questions!"

He seemed to mean it.

"Well," Alan said, "I'm not sure how to put this, but—there's something about this room that feels odd to me. Maybe it's my imagination. Is this place bigger on the inside than on the outside?"

"Oh, it's not—not really," Carl said. "It couldn't be, could it? Don't worry about that, Alan."

Carl Contrario winked.

"I happen to have a great interior decorator," Carl continued. "She's marvelous. I think she must have meant for me to use the interior space here as some kind of metaphor."

"What metaphor would that be?"

"You tell me."

There was a silence. Alan thought for a moment. Then he said, "More than meets the eye?"

Carl clapped his hands.

"Marvelous!" he shouted. "Marvelous! Harvey finally sent

me a bright one! Someone who can actually think on his feet! Yes, indeed, Alan. There is more to you than meets the eye. Well done.”

Alan, who couldn’t remember saying anything about himself, took a deep breath. Things were getting stranger by the minute.

Fortunately, that deep breath calmed him down. Alan looked at Carl, who was once again smiling without a word for no apparent reason, and then he looked around the room, taking in all the rich details. His eye kept returning to that Andy Warhol painting: *Dollar Sign*.

“Can I ask another question?” Alan said.

“Sure!” Behind the steel-rimmed circles of glass, Carl’s blue eyes looked like a happy child’s. “You bet!”

“It’s obvious you could afford a real office if you wanted to. Why the heck do you work in a trailer?”

“To keep people like you on your toes,” Carl said. “To be unlike what you expect. Be honest. When your cab pulled up, you took one look at my little trailer, and you thought you were in the wrong place. In fact, you were certain you were in the wrong place. Why? Because you’d never, ever expect a sales mentor who is any good to deliver personal sales coaching in a dingy little broken-down trailer. Am I right?”

“Right,” Alan agreed. “Is that what we’re doing now? Personal sales coaching?”

Carl nodded, excited, and flashed another big grin. “Yep. That’s what we’re doing. In an environment you didn’t expect. Truly effective selling is all about not doing what’s expected. Now, before we get started, Alan, I want to set some ground rules that will help us work together.”

“Sure—what are they?”

“If we’re going to accomplish anything worthwhile, it’s important that you be totally committed to making changes and to taking my coaching.”

“That’s why I’m here!”

“Yes. But everyone says they’re committed, right up until the moment I ask them to change their habits. I guess I want to make sure you’re prepared to make some big changes.”

Alan nodded. “Yes. I am.”

“Another thing: we’re going to have a series of coaching sessions. I need to make sure you’re agreeing to show up for all of them.”

“Hmm,” said Alan, pondering his weekly 8 A.M. tee time once again. “I thought maybe we’d meet a couple of times, get a whole lot done, and then, who knows, find a way to cover everything in a few weeks.”

Carl shook his head slowly. “I can tell already,” he said, “that we’ve got a lot of work ahead of us.”

“Well,” said Alan, “Can’t blame a guy for trying. I’ll be here. I’m ready to get to work.”

“Are you sure you’re OK with all of this? Because if you’re not, that’s fine. We don’t have to do this.”

“I’m sure. I definitely want to do this. I’m ready to roll.”

“Let’s get started, then. There are eight big principles I’m going to be sharing with you during our meetings. I call them Contrarian Selling Rules.”

“Contrarian?” asked Alan. “What do you mean by that?”

Carl handed Alan a card, which Alan, eager to show how coachable he was, read out loud. Here is what the card said:

Zig when other people zag.

“The first Contrarian Selling Rule,” Carl said, “is: ‘Zig when other people zag.’ Tell me, Alan: *Why* does a Contrarian Salesperson zig?”

Alan only had to think for the briefest instant. “Because everyone else is zagging?”

“Are you asking me, or telling me?”

“Telling you. They zig because everyone else is zagging.”

“Yes!” Carl shouted, pumping both fists in the air. “You’re going to get this rule down in record time, Alan. I just know it. By the way, that’s how Warren Buffett became a billionaire. Zigging when everyone else was zagging. Warren Buffett figured out something important, something all Contrarian

Salespeople know: The fact that a belief or practice is popular or repeated frequently does not make it true, valid, or useful. You have to be willing to look at things differently.

“Think about what happens when a salesperson calls someone new on the phone to pressure that person to set up a meeting. The moment the prospect senses that pressure and realizes that a salesperson is on the phone, what does he do? He goes on the defensive. He shuts down. He withholds information. That pattern establishes itself predictably. If we’re not going to fall into that pattern, we need to do something different than what the prospect expects.

“Think different.”

—STEVE JOBS

“We are Contrarians, Alan. We are all about doing the opposite of what other salespeople do. Now why do you think that is?”

“Because...if you act like every other salesperson, you’re going to be treated like every other salesperson?”

“Marvelous! We don’t deserve to be treated that way, do we?”

“No,” Alan said. “We don’t.”

“Glad to hear it.”

Carl pulled out, from the top drawer of his desk, a pad of paper and a ball-point pen. He held them up for Alan’s examination.

“To get our heads around the first rule,” Carl announced, “we’re going to start a game called Word Association. You’ll be using these two simple tools to play. There have been a lot of game shows built on this over the years. You’ve probably seen some of those shows on TV. The host reads a certain word aloud, and the contestants say the first word that comes into their head. You know how that kind of game works, Alan?”

“Sure.”

“All right,” Carl said, handing over the pad and the pen to Alan. “But this version of Word Association has a twist. When I say the word, I want you to write down only what parents, relatives, prospects, and other authority figures, including TV producers and moviemakers, had to say about this word while you were growing up. Ready?”

Alan clicked the ball-point pen and positioned it over the paper. “Ready,” he said.

“The word,” said Carl, “is *salesperson*. You have two minutes. Start writing.”

Eager to fulfill his coach’s instruction, Alan set pen to

paper and began jotting down words. They came much easier than he imagined they would. At the end of the allotted time, he had written down a lot.

“Read to me what you’ve got,” Carl said.

So that’s what Alan did. Here’s what his sheet said:

- Fast-talking
- Slimy
- Sleazy
- Dishonest
- Liar
- Insincere
- Snake oil
- Shady
- Slick
- Phony
- Two-faced
- Tricky
- Fake
- Self-serving
- Manipulative
- Misleading
- Shifty
- Slippery
- Out to make a quick buck
- Scumbag

Carl looked at Alan, smiled, and said, “With a reputation like that waiting for us before we even sell anything, do you ever stop and wonder why we went into this line of work?”

Alan smiled, too, but he said nothing.

“Believe it or not, those are pretty typical responses,” Carl said. “There’s a reason they’re out there. Salespeople perpetuate these stereotypes. They’ve been doing it for years. Many

don't level with people. They are perceived as untrustworthy, as emotional fakes. But that's not how I see myself. Is that how you want everyone to see you?"

"No," said Alan, without hesitation. (And it wasn't, either.)

"Good," Carl said. "Now the question is, what are you supposed to do when you deal with prospects or customers who do see you that way? We have to assume they got the same programming you did when you were growing up. How are you going to handle them, Alan?"

"I have absolutely no idea."

"You agree they do have preconceptions about you before you even reach out to them?"

"Sure," Alan said. "You can tell when people you meet are on their guard. You can tell when they don't want to be pushed around by a salesperson, and I don't blame them. I don't want to be treated that way, either, when I go shopping for something."

"Well put."

"So what's the answer?"

"Don't act like a typical salesperson," Carl said. "Ever. That's the ultimate expression of Rule Number One. If you notice the competition doing something, I want you to stop doing it. Right away. If you notice yourself sounding or acting like a typical salesperson, I want you to do something else."

“Wow.” Alan frowned. This sounded suspiciously like unlearning everything he’d ever picked up about how to sell. “Do I have to do that?”

“Yep,” Carl said. “It’s the price of admission. If you see everybody else is zagging, you’re going to have to learn to start zigging. If there’s something you’re comfortable doing but it’s not working because everyone else in the marketplace is doing it, you’re going to have to walk away from it. If you’re not willing to commit to that much, we don’t have a lot to talk about. That’s why you’re here today, Alan. To promise me you’ll walk away from a habit when I say it’s time to walk away. No matter how familiar that habit may feel to you.”

Carl raised his eyebrows expectantly. This was, apparently, the moment of truth. Alan took a deep breath.

“OK,” Alan said. “When you say it’s time to walk away, I’ll walk away.”

“Now then, here’s the biggest question of the day. Are you sure you want to become a Contrarian Salesperson? There’s still time to back out. It’s OK to say this isn’t what you want to do. I don’t want to put any pressure on you. I’m OK if we’re done. I take rejection well. Are you positive you’re ready for this?”

“Yes,” Alan said quickly, imagining that Carl would call Harvey and report some serious uncoachability if he said anything else.

“Marvelous,” Carl said. “Marvelous.”

Everything in Carl’s world, apparently, was marvelous.

“Now that you’re a Contrarian Salesperson in training,” Carl said, “you can expect to find your whole orientation toward prospects to change. You’ll find it easier to say what you feel. Things that used to bother you will stop bothering you so much. Yes, prospects lie to us. Yes, they try to steal our expertise, pick our brains, pilfer our ideas. Contrarian Salespeople accept all that as part of the job. And why do we do that? What’s the alternative? Resenting it? Doing what everyone else does, fighting prospects tooth and nail?”

“I guess you’re right,” Alan said, after a moment’s thought. “That wouldn’t make a lot of sense.”

“Marvelous. You’ve done a great job so far, Alan.” Carl pulled out his phone and texted a cab, requesting an early pickup. “I’ve taken the liberty of calling a cab for you. We’re done for today. We’ll cover Rule Two next Saturday.”

“OK,” Alan said, pondering his lost tee time. “I guess I was hoping we’d have gotten a little further today.”

“You remember how, when we got started, I warned you that we wouldn’t be able to do all of this quickly? Contrarian Salespeople zig when others zag in terms of their own professional development, too. That means we don’t try to cover everything in one day or one weekend.”

Alan nodded.

“You know how a lot of people go to a day-long seminar and think that one day is going to be the answer? They walk out all pumped up, but nothing really changes. By the next week, they are back to their old habits and behaviors. It’s like trying to learn a foreign language in a one-day seminar. That’s not how people change.”

“Or learn how to golf,” Alan added.

“Exactly. You’re going to see that I’m all about the spaced repetition of learning, Alan. We learn something, we try it, we come back next week and talk about what we did. Then we try something new. Once we’ve mastered the skill, we pass it along to someone else. By the way, that’s what you’re promising to do by coming to these sessions every week. Master a skill and then pass it along to someone else. Deal?”

“Deal,” said Alan.

SUMMARY

Carl Contrario's Wisdom in a Nutshell

- A Contrarian Salesperson zigs because everyone else zags.
- The fact that a belief or practice is popular or repeated frequently does not make it true, valid, or useful.
- In sales, as in other aspects of life, you have to be willing to look at things differently in order to produce a different and better result.

The Traditional Salesperson:

1. Acts like every other salesperson.
2. Gets treated like every other salesperson, and not in a good way.
3. Is inauthentic.

The Contrarian Salesperson:

1. Acts the opposite of every other salesperson.
2. Gets treated differently than other salespeople.
3. Says what he feels.

Carl's Question for You

- What changes do you need to make so that you are not perceived as the stereotypical salesperson?