

# SELLING – A BALLET IN THREE ACTS

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I used to think that selling was not my style, that it required bulldog determination combined with a thick skin. As a sensitive soul who hates rejection, selling is something I prefer to leave to those besuited folk who barge into boardrooms, dine with divas and dangle on phones. I naturally pride myself on the meticulousness of the methodology that I apply to my core activity, but the idea of being systematic about selling is just too outré for words. But I have been getting it all wrong, as I discovered thanks to CoF member Mike McDonald during his presentation, *Selling Specialised Services*. Mike teaches sales people how to sell and rose up through the ranks of companies like IBM. He has distilled his 20 years experience and expertise into a systematic approach that reflects his own scientific background. Mike is also a showman with an inexhaustible supply of sales sagas – we were certainly all sold on him. I had believed that selling a specialised service such as creativity or consultancy had to be different from selling things such as mobile homes or mobile phones. Things don't count, you can make up stories about things. Who cares if you stretch the truth a bit? CoF members are selling expertise, knowledge and business enhancing methodologies. We are selling us, that's different, it's personal.

## Lesson One - Selling is always personal

The mobile phone sales person is selling his or herself just as much as the expert in dynamic leadership. There are no shades of selling; consciously or unconsciously, planned or serendipitously, if you have succeeded in selling a thing or a service, you have essentially sold yourself. So how do you find someone to sell to?

### Cold Calling Is Out

"Never do cold calling; you hate it, they hate it," says Mike. That was the best news we heard all night. And I think we can put direct mail shots in the same bin – whoopee! The aim is to identify those companies that you want to become your customers and systematically go about winning their business. The right approach is called Warm Calling, where you create some sort of referral, even if your only claim is to have walked the dog of the CEO's maiden aunt – it's a referral and it's ten times more likely to get you an appointment than a cold call. I am sure you all know that the whole point of calling is to buy time – you are not calling to sell things or services but to win some time in front of a potential buyer. First make an appointment, then you start to sell. For this you will also need to know how to navigate a switchboard and be happy to use a little subterfuge. "But don't work your way up from the bottom of an organisation, where everyone will tell you lies: start with the chairman's secretary and work your way down." And when you get that person on the phone you need to deliver a well rehearsed 30 second grabber. Here's one I dreamed up. "Do you know which single item on your communication spend can add the greatest value?" Answers on a postcard please.

## Lesson Two – Understand buyer psychology

To sell successfully you need to think at least as much about the process of buying as the process of selling. Everything you do, your successes and your failures, will be related to the accuracy with which you read the buyer's psychology. From your first encounter to the moment the deal is struck, an intricate ballet will have been performed. The customer takes the leading role, you play the love interest.

## A Ballet in Three Acts

Like a ballet, selling has three main acts. If the lead and the love interest are to be entwined in the final scene, each must play their part and above all, there can be no short cuts and or excuses – no sprained ankles or torn tutus – you must go through the whole performance. Take the contrasting approach of the telesales people we loathe so much. In a single bound, they want you to leap from the opening curtain to the final bouquet - no early supper, no interval champagne – it's straight to the sell. No wonder that so many of their performances end up in the pit. So how is this ballet choreographed?

**Act One** of Selling is titled *Qualification*. This is where we introduce the main characters and establish the potential love interest. The seller does some fact-finding and qualifies the prospect (i.e. are they worth going for?). The buyer meanwhile looks at the viability of what you have to offer and whether it can be justified internally.

**Act Two** is called *Selection* where the buyer compares your offer with that of your competitors'. A few surprises could be lurking in the wings, a competitive gremlin could appear in a puff of smoke and turn your pitch to stone. However, the seller uses subtle manoeuvres to uncover the weaknesses in the competitor's strengths (often with the help of the buyer) and sells against them, meanwhile defending his own weaknesses.

**Act Three**, the final act, is *Closure* which Mike described as a process of creeping commitments. This is where the buyer is gradually drawn into a commitment because the seller is now working not on the need that the service will meet, but on the *implications* for the buyer if he does not buy.

## Lesson Three – Focus on implications not needs

Implications are everything. For me this was the key discovery of the evening, "People do not buy because of needs, they buy because of implications." You may not 'need' antiviral software to enhance your quality of life, but the implications of not having it are fairly disastrous. Managers may not wake up with an urgent 'need' for coaching in environmental sustainability but the implications of violating EU regulations will make your fee seem like peanuts. So do you know what the implications are for your clients from NOT buying your service? I don't!

Be prepared for black holes and pits of despond. At the end of Act One, you will go through what Mike calls the *Valley of Despair*. This is where the client says, "*Could you leave it with us, we'll get back to you if we have any questions.*" This is where the buyer is in serious danger of losing the plot. The second low comes at the end of Act Two and is called the *Valley of Death*. You suddenly discover that the person you thought was the buyer turns out to lack the necessary signing power and you have to start the whole process all over again with someone else. But do not give up, it's all in the script and, as it says in the I Ching, perseverance furthers.

## What Price Success?

Mike prides himself on being the most expensive sales trainer in the business (a bonus for CoF members who got him for free). One client complained about his rates and managed to beat him down. Mike was so incensed that when he got home he rang to say that he couldn't do the work for that price after all. But he wasn't fired, he got the business at the price he had originally quoted. Customers always talk about

price, but they very rarely buy on price alone. Perhaps its simply easier to talk about price than value. But a perceived high price may not be all bad, it makes an important statement about the value of what you have to offer. We also learned that it's possible to have too many customers. "If you have customers who don't make you enough money, sack them and concentrate on the more profitable ones." The thought of actually sacking clients in these straightened times was particularly appealing. Thinks! If I get really good at selling I will be able to enjoy the luxury of telling a client or three to \*\*\*\* off.

I can't do justice to Mike's presentation, but here are few quotes to give a flavour:

- You are not looking for people to sell to, but people who you can help to buy.
- Get everyone to agree on a date, they won't buy unless there's a date.
- If you are not busy, give a present of some free time to a client. It costs you nothing and will generate a warm lead.
- If you want to get into a company, identify the person who is most likely to see you. That may not necessarily be the one who you need to see – but once you are on the 16<sup>th</sup> floor the rest will be history.
- You have to sell on both sides of the pain threshold. The person you are selling to is being paid to suffer the pain that your product can relieve, but his boss is paying him to take that pain. So you have to sell to both of them.
- If they know what you are selling and you know what they are buying, it's all down to credentials and competition.
- If they know what they are buying, but you don't know what you are selling (i.e. you were invited to solve a particular problem), then it's all down to personal relationships.
- If they don't know what you are selling, but you do – then it's a value proposition and finally...
- If you don't know what you are selling and they don't know what they are buying you are in a black hole and the only way out is a very expensive feasibility study.

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