

Selling is a Bad Idea

By Charles E. Smith

An IT salesman-saleswoman complaint:

“Why doesn’t the CEO. CXO. COO want to talk to me? I have so much to offer them if only they would see me.”

Here’s the answer.

Selling is a bad idea, and everybody is selling. It’s hard to avoid. From television advertising to intrusive telemarketing to sophisticated technical salesmen “diagnosing your needs,” they are in it for themselves. The business about being in it for others is at best equivocal and at worst a lie. Distrust of selling is endemic. We live in a sea of this distrust. At the same time, more and more money and effort goes into “client centered” sales; automobile dealers call me a guest; healers are selling their own herbal remedies. If someone is selling something, I’m sure I have to take what they say with a grain of salt or a spoonful of sugar. It would seem that selling is effective because people keep doing it. Still, given the distrust of selling that prevails it takes more and more energy to sustain if not increase business. Selling is a bad idea and appears to be the only one in town.

People buy what they want. They don’t buy what you want them to buy. If they do buy, you will pay later in resistance to you and your sales process. If it’s true that people buy what they want then there should be no need to sell them anything. It also suggests that all you have to do is be good at having people get clear about what they want, unless they are already clear. Of course, to do this you need to care about what they want, as opposed to what you want to sell This is pretty rare. I went to a car dealer who talked me out of the hybrid vehicle I wanted by saying that he had other, options that would be less expensive over the long run, even given the high price of gasoline.

He lied. The actual mileage was far less than claimed. When we complained he had absolutely nothing to say. He was selling what he had been told to sell. And that's the problem. Is the salesman or saleswoman ultimately here for you or for themselves? Companies are really good at training people to pretend that they are here for you. Most of us know when it is not true. The world of sales is usually standing on its head. Almost everything is backwards in an "Alice in Wonderland" looking glass. That the customer comes first is generally a lie.

Force causes resistance. Everything you resist persists. The more you resist somebody the more they resist you, no matter how polite they may be. It is a law of nature ignored in acts of selling everywhere. Every time I see a commercial that intrudes on my privacy, my sense of decorum and good taste, or my actual desires at the moment, I am offended. Much sales behavior is based on getting people to do something they would not otherwise do. I exclude here masters such as Nordstroms, Lexus and the Ritz Carleton where they genuinely try to please and so not doing everything they can to sell their goods while appearing to want to please you.

If there is any forcefulness in your sales behavior any manipulation, or any attempt to change people's minds, you are doing violence to the relationship. They will resist you sooner or latter, which means you will have to use more force and more transparent, clever approaches to get your way. What would sales be without force? How many commercials would disappear? How many car and insurance salespeople would not survive? We live in a sales happy society. You can't really trust anybody who is trying to sell you something. The attempt to convince taints the relationship. Using "relationship based "selling" as a cover story won't solve it. People trust their experience and in that regard, all you have is your own authenticity. The more you try to get somebody to do something, the more they will resist you. Smooth talk and clever interest based pitches make little difference. Each of us is radar sensitive to force and domination. The sales game is bankrupt and companies keep playing.

Linearity causes resistance. Power Point presentations are deadening. Line after line of information makes people feel smaller and smaller and the speaker increasingly boring in a hypnotic way. Typically, no one leaves out of politeness, embarrassment or fear of offending. Less obvious is that bombarding people with lines of information doesn't work in conversation

either. Linearity does not exist in nature. The idea that you can convince through the force of linear convergent logic seems built into the nature of the human mind and reinforced by school systems and bureaucracies. Does anyone buy? Often, they do, but linearity is a forceful act, force causes resistance, and soon they wish you would go away.

Manipulation causes resistance. What happens in television commercials and sales pitches rarely happens in daily life. Nobody really loves their detergent. You will not really win the girl of your dreams by driving the right car. In business, most complex IT installations face painful bumps in the road and sometimes insoluble problems. Telling an executive who has their wits about them that you have an answer to their problems is a manipulative act. They know it is not true. You know it is not true. The truth is usually measured and problematic. Most people don't trust salespeople because they tell half truths and are not authentic about what actually is apt to happen. Manipulation causes resistance and distrust. Why won't the top person talk to you? Maybe, because they know you will manipulate them.

However, In selling in today's growth driven economy, dramatizing reality, repeating benefits different ways, bombing with evidence, scaring the audience, being inauthentic, and being indirect are a devil's brew. People are logically driven to these by sales quotas, bonuses, the need to look good to one's boss, and a company's need to profit.

Sales, of course, won't go away. But all of this counter argument suggests a counter intuitive approach . This is a new paradigm that will make you special in their eyes and paradoxically, get you more business than you can imagine.

Six Steps to Authentic Sales

Be honest with yourself about your own in-authenticity and manipulative behavior.

From now on, only ask questions about what people need and care about. Ask real questions, not questions, designed to get the answer you want so you can sell your product or service.

Never present anything other than a possibility.

Stop selling. Trust that people will buy what they want.

Take all of the force out of your customer relationships. Stop manipulating completely.

Trust your customer. Trust that they will buy if they want something.