

“A mighty flame followeth a tiny spark.” — Dante

THE SEVENTH PRACTICE: Open Doors The Easy Way

The Business Of Selling

Knocking on doors is the best selling method. I knocked on at least forty doors before I walked into the office of Ralph Fiore at his Oldsmobile dealership in Enfield. His daughter, who had been cleaning their facilities, was now off to her first year of college.

Ralph asked, “How much will you charge to clean my showroom and offices, three times a week?”

I wandered around with a clipboard and pad of paper, pretending I knew how to price the job. I visualized each step of cleaning the showroom, offices and bathrooms and came up with an estimated time to do the job. Then, I multiplied the time by \$13.00 per hour and sat down in front of Ralph’s big mahogany desk. His brother, Chick, stood by his side looking down at me as I nervously gave them a price.

Ralph, looked up at Chick and said, “Can you start this afternoon?”

“Sure,” I replied, hiding my surprise.

Without a sale there is no business. Our capability to sell our product or service is what will make or break us. Even if we do have a sales department, the company creator must always be its top promoter. It is very strange that business schools teach the principles of marketing, management, leadership, accounting, and every other facet of business development, but not the art of selling.

The sales and marketing courses taught in business schools are generally focused on the marketing end, which is vastly different from selling. Marketing is sales theory,

management, and strategy. To me, making a sale requires face-to-face, eye-to-eye contact with customers for the purpose of establishing a relationship and getting an order for your product or service. The first and last step in getting the sale is to establish a trust or common bond with your customers.

Selling From The Heart

Some sales strategists call this relationship selling. What are relationships except intrinsic, heartfelt connections between people? Sounds a bit like a form of love doesn't it? Competitive price is very important, but cost alone often is not the foundation on which a purchase decision is made.

People like to buy from someone they like, trust, and can depend upon to maintain high values and standards. They look forward to dealing with pleasant, genuine people who leave them looking forward to the next visit.

Buyers also prefer to purchase from a person who walks through the door intent upon finding ways to meet their needs. This often means saving them money, even at the risk of recommending a competitive product or procedure. Creating a sales focus based on "How can I help?" rather than "What can I sell?" will build long-term customer relations. An attitude dedicated to helping others will bring in piles of sales and happy customers. This is a very selfless way of selling and very different from the hard sell or selling with the "close" as the goal.

This strategy is just the opposite of what your ego and the sales world would command. You are establishing a bond with your customer, a friendship that is based upon performance, value, price, quality, and trust. This method may take longer to accomplish, but you will gain a customer for life.

Old Tapes

I confess to having never sold anything of significance until I started our business. In high school we had magazine drives to help raise funds for school programs. The students would meet in the auditorium and listen to our Principal, Mr. Javits, introduce the marketing representative for the magazine distributing company. Mr. Javits was of Greek descent with a round, pudgy face and black hair. He always wore a white shirt and conservative tie, and drove a beige Volkswagen Beetle that my gang of friends would take pleasure in lifting up and depositing on his front lawn.

Wonderful prizes were awarded for selling lots of magazines, such as 45 RPM record players, radios, cameras, shiny, new bicycles, and even trips to Disneyland. Most of my classmates seemed to have a lot of relatives who would buy from them, or just a knack for sales. They would come to class every day and show off their long list of customers, and their prizes would grow.

When I went through the neighborhood to sell, I would get one rejection after another: “Oh, I buy from my granddaughter.” “The boy next door takes my subscription.” “I don’t have time to read magazines.” Usually my mother and the next door neighbors ended up being my only customers. I felt defeated.

Recording Over Old Tapes

Initial failures such as this, whether in sales, sports, or the creative arts, can severely damage our confidence before we even have a chance to experience our real potential. After that first experience, I avoided sales. Then, in my twenties, I joined the Jaycees in Clinton, Connecticut. With much fear and apprehension I went from door-to-door with my fellow Jaycees, selling packages of heavy-duty paper plates and bowls.

Somehow, a shift occurred when I took a different approach to selling. I did not knock on the door and announce I had plates and bowls to sell for the Clinton Jaycees. I knocked on the door, introduced myself, and got to know my neighbor and customer. Before I knew it, they were pointing down to the package of plates and bowls enshrined in a clear plastic bag dangling from my right-hand saying, “What do you have there?” “Oh, we’re selling these paper plates and bowls to help raise money to build a gazebo in the Town Park. It’s really a great buy...would you like to see them?” A relationship was established and a sale made. But, first, I had to have the courage to knock on their door. Yes, courage, because rejection always loomed on the other side.

Knocking On Doors

I would like to define exactly what I mean by “knocking on doors.” I had a very detailed concept of our company in place by spring of 1981. One of the first steps in starting the company was to have a business card designed and printed. Then I started to write letters of introduction to some of the major companies in our area. Following is the very first sales letter I wrote. In hindsight, it seems naïve and quite unprofessional with its mis-spelling, doesn’t it? However, the letter came from my heart, and, despite being hand-written, it did the trick—it opened the door for a meeting with the purchasing manager. Seven years later, we got the job!

July 1, 1981

*Manger Purchasing and Office Services
Lego Corp.*

Dear Miss Matteson,

When I spoke to you last Thursday, I was just waking up to get ready to leave for a week’s vacation at the Cape. That is where I am writing this letter from,

and I hope you can appreciate its informality. I thought I knew where Lego was located, but I was wrong and ended up in East Longmeadow. When I did arrive at Lego, you were tied up in a meeting. I will call Monday, July 6th and make an appointment to see you.

I have been very active in community affairs for the last five years, often spending 30 to 40 hours a week with the Enfield Jaycees as President of Friendship House and active at Asnuntuck Community College. Many of my friends have been equally active, and although we plan to continue our support in the community, we want to make some money for ourselves. These are housewives who do not want to work nine to five and other hard working, reliable men and women who want to beat inflation and get ahead financially. Right now I have eight good people who are ready to go to work.

I decided to start Sandra Lee Cleaning Service because of the flexibility of the hours, the obvious need for such services and frankly because I like to clean and I am very good at it.

We are prepared to handle any challenging job. The equipment and hard working people are available, and I hope you will give us the opportunity to serve you.

Sincerely,

John A. Adams

Although our cleaning service was ready to be launched in the spring, I did not really get it started until after I was fired from the FAA in August. The reason I did not get started was simple. I failed to face my fear of rejection, to knock on that door to ask for the job. The Air Traffic Controller's strike was the impetus that started my take-off roll. The company actually took flight when I got my first real customer. I walked from door to door, through industrial parks and business centers, handing out my business card and stammering through an introduction of my no-customer enterprise. It was as yet an idea—a seed waiting to germinate.

When my first real proposal (not counting the spider web-cleaning job) was accepted, our company was born. All I needed to do was simply show up and ask for the business.

By landing that first job, we became legitimate. Although I had never really sold anything meaningful before, and approached selling with the same fear that I now often feel about speaking engagements and sharing my writing, I sold many millions of dollars in cleaning services. When I left Adams and Adams almost fifteen years later, my original price to clean Fiore Oldsmobile had remained unchanged. It had been a fair price and I wanted to do everything I could to keep our first customer.

Toppling Giants

Often we landed a job by competing with international firms that relied on their vast, professional sales departments. We started with a job worth several hundred dollars a month and, eventually, sold contracts that paid more in one month than I made in a whole year as an air traffic controller. The last contract I negotiated for the company was as exciting as the first; it grossed over half a million dollars a year.

I obtained the majority of these jobs by walking from one business to another, entering the office, introducing myself to the receptionist at the front desk, often with a flower in hand or some other small gift, and making that initial contact. The follow-up process often went on for years, but persistence paid off. For some of my largest customers, it took six years or more from my first contact until we got the job. However, we would never have landed the contract if I had not made that initial physical contact and maintained a regular system of follow-up. Determination and persistence pays off.

The Romance Of Sales

To me, a sale was like courting a beautiful, desirable princess who, initially, wanted nothing to do with me. I made a game of it, loving the way it went, from rejection to a spark

of interest and then a first kiss, which was an invitation to submit a proposal for cleaning. Often, after many rejections, we would get the job and make love. It was like a fantastic sexual encounter, simply orgasmic. After that, came the honeymoon, and then, a time for deepening our relationship, going through the ups, downs, and challenges—always being there to meet the needs of my princess. I knew that if I did not take good care of her, she would cast me out, turn me back into a frog, and find another prince.

To this day, I still feel that knocking on doors is the best way to build a business—whether that means literally going from door-to-door in industrial parks, or meeting customers at the Rotary Club, Chamber of Commerce, or Lion’s Club. There is something about showing up at a potential customer’s place of business that often elevates you to the top of their priority list. Voice mail messages, letters of introduction, brochures, and other methods of getting a customer’s attention are never as effective as showing up on their doorstep. But never arrive empty-handed. Always take a gift along. More about that later.

Sales By Wandering Around

We might coin this method, “sales by wandering around,” because not only do you introduce your product to potential customers, but also you see what is going on out there in the field and at their business. When you walk through a new customer’s door, you immediately feel the karma, spirit, intensity, or apathy of that business. You also get to see, first-hand, the potential of your relationship and whether this feels like a good match.

As our company grew, we hired a communications specialist, who also handled the task of telephone sales and marketing. He would take a sales list, developed by others and myself, and send out letters of introduction. Then he would make follow-up telephone calls. More often than not, his calls would not be accepted and he would have to leave a voice mail

message. Although this method of selling is very passive, it often enabled us to get our foot in the door, such as that last big contract we sold while I was at Adams and Adams.

Often it was not enough. In one example, a business on our list of top 100 potential customers located in the Glastonbury Industrial Park, never responded to our calls or mailings. According to the specifications we had on paper, the large building looked like it had great potential, so I decided to stop by to check that business. Dozens of calls and mailings, which all cost money, had gone out to this contact. When I drove up to the location, I immediately discovered why our calls had never been returned. Three lonely cars were parked on the huge, cracked and crumbling asphalt parking lot of this large factory and office complex. I drove away, realizing that the first step in developing a sales list of any value is to go to the location and knock on the door. That is when I started to develop a master marketing plan which is a systematic program of identifying each location in an industrial park or business area and determining which businesses had the greatest possibilities as future customers.

The Gift Behind Each Door

It is not easy taking on the corporate world “cold turkey,” especially when you have no track record. But, believe me, you will eventually succeed if you bang on enough doors, with the right intention in mind: “How can our product or service help this business grow and prosper? What can we do together that will bring about a better world?” Remember, every time there is a NO behind that closed door, it just means you are one step closer to a YES!

Your Gift

What makes a customer happy to see us coming?

As I was making sales by wandering around and knocking on doors, I often found the door blocked because I could not get past the receptionist or “gatekeeper” at the front desk. When I did get my business card to the business owner or the right decision-maker, they were often too busy to see yet another salesperson. As our business grew, I began to understand why they did not want to be bothered. They never had enough time for everyday operational and administrative tasks and interruptions by unexpected vendors were not always welcome. That is, unless that interruption came with a gift.

That gift does not have to be big or expensive; it only needs to be meaningful and useful. I would start with a present for the most important first contact I encountered in that new company, the one at the front desk. Often, I would stop at a florist or the local Super Stop & Shop and pick up several dozen carnations or roses, some baby’s breath or fern, and a case of little bud vases. The vases cost about fifty cents wholesale and with a flower and decoration each gift totaled about seventy-five cents to a dollar. When I walked through the door, I held a lovely arrangement in one hand and my brochure in the other. With few exceptions, the door leading to the inner office, or at least to the information I needed, was flung wide open to me.

The Reaction

The most common response I received to my gift was a wide-eyed, happy smile from a receptionist who had not received flowers or recognition in ages. Many sales people would come through the door, but I was remembered for the little flower bouquet that sat on her desk all week. I got all the information I needed on the company, including who I should contact regarding janitorial services, whether they currently have in-house or contracted services, who was currently doing their cleaning, and anything else I need to know. I would

also put the receptionist or secretary's name in my electronic database so that I could remember her name when I call again to fill her new flower vase.

Instead of the flower arrangement, I often gave a little Oberlite® squeeze-on flashlight to “light up your life,” or at Christmas, a tiny stocking filled with goodies—my favorite oatmeal or chocolate-chip cookies from the local deli—or any variety of little gifts. My gift said that, “You are the most important person in this company and I honor you and your position, and bring this offering so I might ask you some questions in the hope of someday serving you and your company.”

The Sales Approach

Once I got an audience with the decision-maker, I used this approach: “How can I help you with your cleaning needs? What can I do to make your job easier, to save you time, to make you shine in the eyes of your superiors or company members? This is my gift to you and there is more. Show me some cleaning problems that have been haunting you and I will do my best to solve them. I am not a time waster; I am a problem solver here to serve you. How may I help?” In other words, I showed my deep interest in them, their concerns and what is most important to them.

The Follow-Up

Any subsequent sales contact I make with that potential customer also comes with a gift, something I can offer them to make their job easier or their life more fulfilled. Possibly an introduction to a process, procedure, or person who can assist them, a story that I have written to help them do their job better or relieve that ever-present corporate stress. Sometimes, I connect them to a network of other people who hold a similar position.

As I do all this, I am aware of the personality type of the individual I am dealing with and respond to them with that in mind. If they are a “Let’s get to the bottom line” type, I get right to the point and get on my way. If they want someone to listen to them, I patiently listen. And if it is a detail-oriented customer, I outline every aspect of our proposal and embellish it with charts, graphs, and facts and figures. During our entire meeting I maintain eye contact and breathe with them. Soon, we begin to connect like old friends. I do not do this in a manipulative or patronizing way, but rather with a genuinely focused regard for my customer and their needs.

Expectations

If you try this, your contact expects a pleasant experience—*you*—with each of your meetings or calls. Doors will open and your business will grow because you have thought about your client rather than yourself. This is not like baiting customers and then reeling them in. The buyer gets wise to that method very quickly and remembers the violation of their trust. You are there to build trust, not destroy it. If you steal a kiss from an unsuspecting maiden, you will get rejected with a slap across the face. If you treat her with respect and genuine loving kindness, you will get another date. Then, one day, you will have the opportunity to make beautiful love together.

One of our first good-sized jobs and one that grew larger and larger was a hand tool production company. I would stop in regularly to say “hello” to Don, my contact there. He was in charge of human resources and building maintenance. Before they built him an office, Don worked out of the conference room, making one end of the long, mahogany conference table his chamber. As I recall, he knew little about cleaning, but he had been designated “janitorial master” as part of his associated duties. Each time I visited him, I found another cleaning problem to help him solve. Don was such a good man, reserved, kind, a good

listener and a formidable negotiator when it came to pricing. He was more than that; he became a friend, as many of my customers did.

The café and restrooms were disgracefully dirty. A cutback resulted in layoffs and a senior production line member had “bumped” the janitor into unemployment rather than himself. This little old fellow knew nothing about cleaning and was just biding his time until retirement. All day long, he nursed a bottle of blackberry brandy that was hidden in the janitor’s closet. Finally, we got the job of stripping out the cafeteria floors. Everyone thought they were black tiles. However, when our crew started scrubbing with our new Advance floor machine, they exposed bright white tiles. That success led to us being awarded the cleaning of the cafeteria, restrooms and front offices. The cafeteria had to be finished before the first staff member arrived at seven in the morning. At first, my mom helped me clean there as we arrived before the sun came up. The toilets in the bathroom were also black. Mom and I cleaned them up with bleach and an SOS pad.

That turned out to be one of our most profitable accounts and one that resulted from courteous persistence and gifts that helped this manager do his job.

Some of the major contracts we eventually won took ages to acquire. I stopped at Women’s Specialty Retail in Enfield for years, wrote to the CEO regularly, and sent our newsletter *Notes and Quotes*. In seven years of correspondence, I did not receive one reply nor was I granted an audience with a decision-maker. Then they broke ground for a three-story corporate headquarters building—one of the largest in the area. We were on the top of their list of cleaning contractors considered for the new building. We did the construction clean up and got the job, which led to cleaning the warehouse offices too. Even though it seemed they were not receiving the gifts I had sent—gifts of cleaning knowledge—they, apparently, had been paying attention and that opened the door.

Always remember to bring gifts and you will be forever welcome. You won't have to beat the door down if you practice how to open doors the easy way.

The gifts that we share with others are a reflection of our good sense to nurture that relationship. All of our senses are important in growing a Business from the Soul Up. That is the subject of our next chapter.

“Follow your heart and doors will open where there were no doors before.”
— Joseph Campbell

***“The most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen
or touched. They must be felt.”***

— Helen Keller