

Corporate Survivors

Corporate Performance through Individual Achievement

Helping companies achieve business goals by ensuring:
the leaders communicate a measurable vision;
the sales team delivers the business;
and the organisation is aligned to the common purpose.

The Customer Coach™ “Super Salesman in The 21st Century”

Year end is looming up fast. All around the world sales managers and their teams are frantically revising forecasts and gently sweating over year end results. Managers tear their hair in the frustration of predicting the coming year. HR departments are cursing over the budgeting process for next year for next year’s training plan. In offices everywhere corporate crystal balls are clouded by perspiration dripping from the hands of fevered executives as the works of Hans Christian Anderson (generally acknowledged as the finest creator of fairy tales the world has ever seen) pale into insignificance against the works of fiction dreamt up by pressured sales teams.

Why is this so? Why does the nightmare scenario of business and sales forecasting repeat this cycle of uncertainty?

We have all heard many versions of the story. Recognise any of these?

“If you keep on doing what you have always done, you will keep on getting what you have always got.”

“Doing the same thing the same way produces the same results.”

“Keep doing the same thing the same way but expect a different result. Now *that* is the definition of stupidity.”

The original version of this, like so many things in life, is in science. Sir Isaac Newton, to be precise. For a guy who lived a long time ago, Isaac knew a thing or two about Learning, Selling and Change. His First Law of Motion, put in somewhat easier to understand language, basically said “Things keep on doing what they are doing; until an unbalanced force acts upon them.”

In other words, if you want a different result, do something differently.

The question is; What?

Let’s start with the sales team. Why after so many years of research and so many theories and methodologies being available in the market, do sales people struggle? If we look at other areas of human endeavour, we seem to learn from the past, apply new discoveries and by doing things differently, get different, and usually better, results. So what is going wrong with sales people?

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We need to look at the past. Remember the time (usually around the age of eight) when doting parents first start to make observations about how their little darling has a wonderful future? While the rest of us are thoroughly irritated by the argumentative brat, the parents smile indulgently and proudly announce “So clever. He will make a great lawyer.” Remember the incessant chatterbox? “What a great talker” they say, “He will be a super salesman.”

There, my friends, lies the root of the problem. The Ancient as Time perception that non stop talking is the key to selling. Once upon a time, this was actually true. Back in the middle ages, when there was maybe one scholar in the village who could read or write, the only way knowledge could be transferred was by word of mouth. All writing was done by monks. Definitely people to be trusted, surely. If a person was believed to be able to read, they must be reading the word of the monks, therefore what they said must, logically, be above doubt.

The purveyors of snake oil and magic potions played upon this. Most selling was done in the market place by travelling vendors going from one village fair to the next. For working people, the only day’s holiday they got was on the big festivals and the market days. This was their only buying opportunity. Tomorrow the vendors are off to the next town! Talking to the crowd in the market place, giving reference to a piece of parchment with some scribbles on it was the key to credibility. In the heaving mass and noise of the market place you had to shout to be heard.

So, there you have it. Hundreds of years of conditioning that to get people to buy things you have to shout loud and talk non stop!

And we are still trying to do it that way.

The centuries came and went. Mankind learned about science, engineering, medicine. In all fields improvements were made; but the salesmen kept on talking! The 1960s came. We retired the ox carts and sent men to the moon; and the salesmen kept on talking!

But slowly, very slowly, things began to change. Like the coming of a new dawn after the long arctic winter, Light began to creep over the horizon.

With apologies right now to my colleagues out there who will question this precise timeline, I have simplified the decades for ease of use.

The chronology of sale techniques looks approximately like this:

Pre 1960s: Talk Long and Loud (They will buy before sunset, for tomorrow we are gone)
1960s: Feature Based Selling (Let me tell you about this great product)
1970s: Features and Benefits (And here is what this will do for you)
1980s: Features, Advantages, Benefits (And here is what this will do for you. Version2)
1990s: Solution Based Selling (focus on customer needs and ask questions)

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Let's examine these a little more:

1960s: Feature Based Selling (Let me tell you about this great product)

Interestingly, the majority of sales people I meet and work with, are still operating in 1960s mode. Why? I think there are several reasons. Some just don't know any better. Some know the theory of how to do it better, but under the competitive stresses of cold calling (oh, how we salesmen love doing that!), trying to find prospects, trying to get appointments, it all falls apart.

The most common complaint I get from sales people is, "Tony, how do we get them to listen to us?" BINGO! So, you are tending to have difficulty in getting people to listen? Clue number one. Maybe we are not in the marketplace at the village fair anymore. Maybe people can read for themselves. If they don't want to listen to you, maybe you should stop talking! Maybe they want something else. Maybe *they* want to talk!

Some try to implement 1970s style of "Features and Benefits". Most are aware of it. Indeed much company literature makes great play of listing features and benefits of their products. So what goes wrong with these efforts? Sometimes just the sheer excitement of actually getting an appointment with a possible prospect (though at this stage I prefer the term "Suspect". Much more accurate.) leads us to rush in, and not wanting to waste a valuable and rare opportunity we say "Let me tell you about our great product!". Sometimes we don't. Sometimes we remember to take it easy. We start the conversation with a few carefully chosen pleasantries about the weather, the state of the roads, maybe football. Then . . . the chit chat fades. An awkward silence descends on the room. Finally the Suspect glances at his watch and starts to fidget. Desperately trying to remember how to proceed from here and clinging to the dimly remembered lessons from the last sales training course, we grope forward with "So, er, what exactly do you want then?" (there, that is focussing on finding their needs isn't it?) Suspect scratches his head and responds "Well, what have you got? Tell me something about your products".

Oh thank you, thank you. Now we can get back into the groove we are really comfortable with. Brain shuts down. Mouth kicks into gear "Oh Yes, we have some great products, let me tell you about . . ."

1970s: Features and Benefits Selling (And here is what this will do for you)

This one is very straightforward. And wrong. The reason most sales people struggle with this concept can be found right outside your house. If we take examples of products and look at how many features they have, cars are a great one for complexity. Hundreds of features. Go outside now and have a good look around your car. Count the features, sports rims, airbags, cup holders, the list goes on. Now take an even closer look at your car. Check under the seats, look in the glove-box, look behind the sun-visor. See if you can find the benefits. Try to pick them up in your hand. No? Well, hardly surprising. Benefits are not physical things. And let me state definitively, Products *do not have* benefits. No co-incidence then, that sales people have such a difficult time with them. How do *you* know what your product will do for any particular person. Get out that product literature that lists features and benefits, tear it up and mail it right back to the marketing department!

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What are you left with? Good old features. OK! Let me tell you about . . . !

1980s: Features, Advantages, Benefits (And here is what this will do for you. Version2)
This was definitely a step in the right direction. Finally a recognition that products do *not* have benefits! Our great product may be able to do a number of things for you. Advantages are the potential of the product. And benefit is what you will get if you buy and use it. So let me list the feature and advantages and tell you what benefits you will get . . . Ooops!

This is about as accurate an approach to selling as Zen Archery (You know. The one where the martial arts master blindfolds himself, turns to face the target about a mile away, notches an arrow, draws the bowstring back and hits a bulls-eye).

Note this. Only Zen Masters can do Zen Archery. If *you* can, don't spend your life selling, There are bigger things waiting out there for you!

1990s: Solution Based Selling (ask questions and focus on customer needs)
A great leap forward for the customer. Finally a recognition that we just might not always know what is best for them. There are several tremendous sales methodologies out there based on this principle. In fact if anyone tries to get you to indulge in any form of sales training that does not embrace this principle at it's core. . . Run!

Let's ask some questions and find out what they need. Let's try to solve their problems. Fantastic. At Last!

So why are sales people having trouble putting this stuff into practice? You can go to Amazon and buy huge books, hundreds of pages long that take you into all the detail and theory of these approaches. Everything you need to know. And there lies problem number one. Too much detail. They tell you exactly WHAT to do, but you are left with the problem of trying to figure out HOW to do it. Sometimes we don't even get to the end of the book. The reviewers of a number of these tomes at Amazon's website praise the content to the skies. And then conclude "Reads like a dictionary." If you are already an expert sales person, you *will* understand this stuff. You will drain every last drop of knowledge from the authors. I own most of these, love them and reread them again and again. But then maybe if you are at that level of sales skill you are already, or want to be soon, promoted to Sales Manager.

For the less experienced sales person the book often remains unfinished. Or gathers dust on the shelf as you struggle with how to put the theory into practice. Eventually, under the pressure of meeting targets, you put it aside with a sincere promise to yourself that you will "get around to it next week".

Which brings us to the next problem. Sales people like things that are Quick, Simple, Easy; and Work!

Complex methodology and theory usually involves huge amounts of paperwork. Records to be kept, call plans, call reports, strategy plans, account reviews. The list goes on. (For our non-sales readers, please note that we sales people consider anything above one sheet of A4 to be a huge amount of paperwork! We joined sales because Mummy said we were good talkers. If we liked paperwork we would have

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become Librarians). So we don't do it. If management insist, under threat of dire consequences, then we sit down at our computers on Sunday night just before the Monday Sales Meeting and produce works of fiction that would make dear old Hans Christian proud.

And so to the next problem with this approach. The one to many relationship of Features to Needs. It *is* recognised that product features could deliver a number of advantages. True. It *is* recognised that there may be a considerable number of different reasons why any particular person might need any one of those advantages at any given time. True. And it is recognised, as the heart of this approach, that you have to ask a question if you want to find out whether a particular need exists. True.

Take a very simple example. Ignore the car with it's hundreds of features. A company has just two products. Each product has only five features. Each feature could potentially deliver five advantages. There could very easily be thirty reasons why any one person might need each of them at any given time. And we need to ask a question to establish if the need exists. Result? *One thousand, five hundred questions!*

Ask yourself, when was the last time a suspect/prospect/customer was willing to sit down and answer that many questions. So even if you know what all those questions are (and I am willing to bet you don't) your chances of finding the four or five actual needs they have are, what? . . . oh never mind, you do the maths. It's what our gambling friends call "A Pretty Slim Chance".

So there you have it. The complex theory remains a theory. A few months of struggle after the training course and we fall back into our comfort zone of old habits. The 1980s style is wildly inaccurate and produces no better result. The 1970s style doesn't work. So we find ourselves back in the 1960s doing all the talking about the fantastic Features of our Great Product!

Oh yes, just a couple more points for you on this. You have probably heard the line from this era "A man does not buy a drill. He buys the hole." Sorry folks. Not true. He does not buy the hole. He buys the emotional satisfaction and good feeling that he gets from snuggling up on the sofa next to his wife or girlfriend while watching Manchester United weave their magic, and dreaming fondly about how the rest of the evening might unfold; instead of the irritating hassle and nagging (not to mention the pain as the hammer crushes his thumb because he was distractedly fretting over the score-line) about how he has still not put up that picture even though we moved in here three months ago! Good heavens, how many times do I have to ask, I don't ask much and I wouldn't have to nag you if you did what I asked straight away!

The Super Salesman of the 21st Century

The bad news? This is the 21st Century. Not the middle ages.

The good news? There is a way. As we discovered earlier, customers don't really like listening to you. They can read. And they would rather like to be doing the talking. As we approach the festive party season, go and test this for yourself. The definition of a great conversationalist is the person who spent the whole evening at the party listening to you. We all love to talk about ourselves. Our company, our products, our cars, our family, and especially our kids!

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If you have any doubts go to the school car park and listen to the parents. What are they doing? They ask a polite question about your kid (generally in regard to exam results at this end of the year), they don't give you their full attention because they are not really interested. They are waiting for the inevitable moment when you fade out (it is impossible to keep talking when you can tell someone is not listening), and then the socially necessary moment when you are obliged to ask the question back about their kids. Ah, at last. Now we have dispensed with your boring kid, I can spend as long as I like going on about my favourite subject. My little darling!

The Super Salesman of the 21st Century recognises this. And learns how to engage the customer in a conversation. Remember, the great conversationalist is the one who lets you do the talking and listens to you.

The Super Salesman of the 21st Century becomes a **Customer Coach™**. They understand how an appropriate sales methodology can help them to sell. They practice and absorb it as a behavioural pattern. They acquire the competencies of selling that enable them to discover HOW to put a methodology into practice. They learn how to build the patterns of features, advantages, needs and questions in their brain. They learn how to develop and ask very few, but extremely powerful questions so that their customers will tell them exactly what they want and what will motivate them to buy it. They discover that the conscious mind (the things you are currently aware of) can only handle approximately seven things at once. Knowing this they can learn how to develop the amazing power of their subconscious (the big data storage and processing power commonly known as the human brain) to do all the hard work of processing and pattern matching the mass off data that emerges.

While they keep their conscious awareness clear and focussed and just truly Listen.

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