

Always Be Closing

By Jason Powell

September 6, 2018

When I joined this esteemed group of men, I will have to admit that I was a little intimidated. As I looked around the room as the role was called, I thought to myself, why am I here, I am not sure that I belong. I learned the other day that this is now called the “Imposter Syndrome”. This is the feeling that we all get from time to time, where we don’t feel like we have earned or that we deserve to be in the position or situation that we are currently in. I was introduced to this concept by my daughter, who has just started her career and she mentioned that she talked to her manager about her dealing with this syndrome. I then received a notification from YouTube about a Ted talk on the very same subject. Then it dawned on me, that when I attend these meetings, certainly when I am preparing to give a paper, I am suffer from imposter syndrome.

Now that I have that off of my chest, let’s get to my paper, and as I learned from the Ted talk on the Imposter syndrome, I just have to give myself a break and ask you all for a little grace as I deal with this new condition that I didn’t know I always had.

So, why do I feel this way? Well, let’s take a look around at this amazing group, and bear with me over the next 20 minutes or so. As I looked at the current roster, I also noticed why I my feel a little apprehension. I took some time to evaluate what everyone does or did to make a living. We have: 10 Entrepreneurs or business owners, 5 educators, a few doctors, a handful of

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So, why do I feel this way? Well, let’s take a look around at this amazing group, and bear with me over the next 20 minutes or so. As I looked at the current roster, I also noticed why I my feel a little apprehension. I took some time to evaluate what everyone does or did to make a living. We have: 10 Entrepreneurs or business owners, 5 educators, a few doctors, a handful of

lawyers, a couple of judges, a financial advisor, a few philanthropists or professional volunteers for very worthy causes, a writer, a couple politicians and a few accountants, all very good professions and very admirable. Oh, I forgot, we have only one salesman: and that would be me.

Some sources say that the word salesman, which obviously means, a man who sells something, was first used in the early 20th century. I am not sure who got it all started, but in 1907, a janitor in Canton, Ohio, Murray Spangler invented the electric suction sweeper. A year later, he would sell his rights and patent to his cousin's husband, H.W. 'Boss' Hoover. He and his son, would rename this new cleaning apparatus and begin selling the, Hoover Suction Sweeper.

Boss Hoover put an ad in the Saturday Evening Post, and offered 10-day free trials, where he would utilize his extensive distribution network to stock the new home equipment, which is now a standard. He would eventually establish a network of 5,000 stores across the United States. He hired salesmen that were based out of one of these stores, and would go out into the neighborhoods and sell this new invention door-to-door, demonstrating their use.

During this time, there was a young aspiring man, born in Newport News, VA in 1903. Only making it through grade school, William Wallace 'Wally' Powell, would start his career selling the Hoover Suction Sweeper for a local dealer. Despite his meager upbringing, Wally would be described as a dapper dan, he loved stylish clothes and was very proud of his black and white wing-tipped shoes. He quickly became a successful salesman, and developed a good friendship with Boss Hoover. Wally would be promoted to the Director of Merchandising in his late twenties. He would move to the company headquarters in Canton, OH as a

bachelor, and begin to turn the office on its ear. He was urged to try to fit in a little better, even encouraged to get married and settle down. I guess what made him a good salesman, wasn't appreciated in the home office. He would marry his secretary Irene, who incidentally was the daughter of a yeast salesman, would start a family. My grandfather would continue to work for Boss Hoover and they would continue to utilize door-to-door salesmen.

The sales profession was basically in its infancy, and so there was a need to start to developing networks and associations for sales professionals. The Hoover Company had set the standard for selling, and training was a big part of its success. With any new and growing profession, there is a need for education, and training on best practices. A new up and coming sales trainer, Dale Carnegie, would often correspond with Wally and share ideas. In fact, Dale used a saying that Wally loved to use from Will Rogers, in his massively popular book, "How to Win Friends and Influence Others". He starts one of the Chapters with the saying that he gives credit to Wally, "You never get a second chance to make a first impression".

As World War II was ending, the government had a challenge of what to do with all of the returning veterans that would be coming home. I am not sure if this was part of the Serviceman Readjustment Act of 1943-1944, but The Hoover Company sent Wally at no charge to Washington D.C. to establish a program to train over hundreds of thousands G.I.'s. After he completed his commission, Wally would leave the Hoover Company for the Time Life Company in New York. It was probably good timing since the door-to-door sales strategy that Hoover had used to build their business, was becoming obsolete due to the reduction of

housewives, as women were entering the workforce, as well as the establishment of shopping centers.

Wally would adjust to the changing market and would go on to establish some of the first call centers for the Time Life Company. He set up call centers throughout the country, where he hired women to call customers of the Time Life Company, to get them to renew their subscriptions. He would then leave New York for Minneapolis to work as the National Sales Manager for the Global Glove Company. He would later leave the profession and eventually succumb to complications to what was then called dementia, which could have been related to his hard lifestyle and would now be called Alzheimer's disease. A tragic ending to a grand career, very similar to the character in "The Death of a Salesman".

My father, William 'Bill' Wallace Powell Jr, would follow his father's footsteps, literally. Bill would visit his dad in New York one summer between semesters in college, where he would introduce my dad to a colleague that was in charge of a marketing program where Time Life would offer their advertisers an opportunity to showcase their products on end of aisle displays in grocery stores, showing their ad along with the product. He would call on the grocery store chains and sell them on setting up these displays. He would later go to sell meat trays, and this would lead to a 30 year career with the DuPont Company in sales, selling everything from cut to size sheets of cellophane for meat packing, and other packaging materials, like helping to a medical instrument company utilize Tyvek in the use of packaging and sterilizing surgical instruments, to a more sporty product of Stren Fishing Line.

Both my brothers and I have continued the legacy, and my oldest brother is selling countertops for commercial building in the Wilmington, NC area, and my other brother is a Director of Marketing for a beverage distribution company in Reading, PA. My first experience selling and which probably led to my calling, where I sold all of my Christmas bows for my Cub Scout Pack fundraiser in one day. I would later go on to lead my Boy Scout Troop in our fundraiser of selling light bulbs the three years I was there. While in college, I even went door-to-door so to speak and I sold Cutco knives, which by the way are still being sold in households today. I knew that I wanted to go into the profession of sales, to be a salesman. I would enter the University of Delaware, College of Agriculture, where I would earn a degree in Agricultural Business Management and Food Marketing. I knew I wanted to sell, and I figured everyone had to eat, so I would be able to find a job sell something in the food industry. After graduation and a short stint as a copier salesman, I would follow my fathers' footsteps. I got a job selling the same packaging film that my father had sold when he had started his career with DuPont. I would later leave DuPont and continue working as a salesman or sales manager over the last 30 years.

So, let's be honest, what image comes to your mind when I say the word salesman? It is probably similar to when you hear the word lawyer, but probably a little worse. I can even sense the tension in the air, or hear your elevated heart beats and adrenaline flowing as your body prepares to negotiate. I will have to admit, when my phone rings at night, or when someone comes knocking on my door, I too feel the same way. Except, I am a bit more gracious than most in these situations, since after all, it is a fellow salesperson and I don't want to bring on any bad Karma onto myself, and I know that they are going through, so I could at

least hear them out. What are some of the adjectives that come to mind when thinking about dealing with a salesman or salesperson? I can think of a few, how about: Pushy, slimy, sleazy, dishonest, manipulative, aggressive, and annoying. I bet you could add to the list and you think back at all of the horrible experiences you have had with my vocational brothers and sisters.

I am not here to defend the profession or the people that are responsible for these adjectives. One of the best movies that portrays why sales people act the way they do is "Glengarry Glen Ross". To summarize the movie, it is a depiction of how a hard driving manager, played by Alec Baldwin, is berating his salespeople telling them that if they cannot meet their sales goals, then they are failures and that they are not worthy to be called men. He says that the salesman who finishes first gets a new Cadillac, the one who finishes second a set of knives, and the one who finishes third, is out of a job. He used the acronym to help them remember how to succeed in selling, and it was A B C, Always Be Closing. This is the hard charging, aggressive, do whatever it takes type of selling. This pressure to sell at all costs, is an "old school" approach to selling but is still being used today.

I find it interesting that until recently, there wasn't a way to get a traditional education in selling. If you want to become an accountant, engineer, medical doctor, phd, nurse, you name just about every occupation, there is a degree that you can earn from just about every college in America and probably every country as well. Now one might argue that a degree in business administration would cover the sales profession, but it really doesn't. Most of the classes offered, at least until recently, are focused around business acumen and

not the actual art of selling. This created a huge industry of sales training classes or books on sales. I have a collection of the many books and courses that I have taken over the last 30 years. There are so many to choose from. I had mentioned Dale Carnegie and his famous book, "how to win friends and influence others". And others from the likes of: Zig Ziglar, Og Mandino, Brian Tracy, to name a few. There are a lot of different sales processes, or techniques that have been published, like "The Challenger Sale", or "The Trust Triangle", and even Spencer Johnson's "The One Minute Sales Person". Then there are the selling systems or programs, like: Dale's training classes, or Xerox's Professional Selling Skills System, Sandler Sales Training, SPIN Selling, and many more. Each touting that their system is the one to follow, the one that enable you to succeed in the art of selling; which is a title of another book on sales.

There is a relatively new book on selling written by Daniel Pink titled, "To Sell is Human, the Surprising Truth about Moving Others". He mentions, that back in 2011, that about 1 of every 9 people would call themselves a salesperson and that it was one of the fastest growing occupations at that time. As I looked at our society, that ratio would be 1 out of 40.

There aren't many door-to-door salesman out there, other than the AT&T or the doorbell security system salesman that have been loitering around the streets of Hopkinsville, and there are many businesses that still use some form of house party, like Tupperware, or Silpada jewelry, or Matilda Jane clothes. But Daniel Pink points out that most of us are in sales, a large majority are selling. Maybe not directly selling a product to someone, but non-sales selling; the ability to move others. He mentions the explosion of entrepreneurs, medical and

education occupations, where they are spending a great deal of their time moving others. He lists four questions to find out if you are involved in direct selling or non-selling sales activities. If you can answer yes to any of these questions, then please raise your hand.

1. Do you earn a living trying to convince others to purchase goods or services? If you answered yes, then you are in sales like me.

2. Do you work for yourself or run your own operation, even on the side? If yes, then you are probably a mix of traditional and non-sales selling.

3. Does your work require elastic skills- the ability to cross boundaries and functions, to work outside of your specialty, and to do a variety of different things throughout the day? This is a pretty broad question, but think about where or how you interact with others, either at work, on committees, and you have to present something to someone to get them to move in a certain direction.

4. Lastly, do you work in education or health care? If yes, you are certainly in sales, moving others, maybe not to purchase something, but to move them towards something.

So now that most of you have raised your hands, or should have, did you get that same creepy feeling when I was describing the old school type of salesperson? Now before you run home and get in the shower, to clean the slime off of you. Let me leave you with some sound advice, some of which comes from Dan's book. Instead of remembering the old school way of selling where Alec Baldwin's character drives the ABC's of selling as Always Be Closing, you can use Daniel Pink's acronym which is: Attunement, Buoyancy and Clarity.

He describes Attunement as the ability to put things into perspective, to increase your power by reducing it, to become more empathetic and work to strategically mimic your prospect. This involves, as David Sandler would say, “being okay with being not okay”. His sales training is a little unique, he suggests that you take on the role of a Broadway Psychologist, and that you act like you don’t need the sale, and you focus on the emotions of your prospect. Gone are the days of dragging in a big brief case full of product or a prospectus. He would say to go into your first meeting unarmed, completely unarmed, not even with a pen. The idea behind this is to force the sales person to focus on the prospect and their situation, and not push their product. If your prospect isn’t listening, then they are going to buy or be moved. Attunement is the ability to give in a little, to utilize your emotional intelligence and to mimic your prospect in order to build trust.

The ability to be buoyant, is to step outside of yourself and not take things so personally. Do you ever wonder how a salesperson can keep going, day in and day out, selling his or her wares over and over again? It isn’t much different from other professions, where you do the same thing over and over again, day in and day out. Whether it is crunching numbers, performing surgery, or teaching a classroom full of Millennials. There are days when it is a grind, and it is hard to always be on top of your game. But buoyancy is the ability to separate your emotional state from your professional state. David Sandler called this separating the “I” from the “R”, to not take things personally. To step away from your emotions and look at what you are doing from an objective view. If you don’t do something well, it doesn’t mean that you are a bad person, it is just mean you didn’t perform well in the your role. It is to keep your head up and look at from a

performance perspective not an emotional view. It is asking yourself, what is the one thing that I could have done better, what could I have done differently, what should I work on to be more successful in my role as a salesperson, accountant, teacher, business owner?

Lastly, we get to “C”, which stands for clarity. This one is where we separate the men from the boys so to speak. It is the ability to know your prospects’ situation, to be able to find their pain. They are more likely to move if they feel like you are really talking to them and bringing them a solution. The Xerox sales process included what they call probing questions, and if you could get your prospect to play along, then this would work. Back then, information wasn’t as readily available as it is today and so the sales person was the keeper of the information, they held the cards, and the prospect needed that information, so they would engage in this game of give and take.

Well, things have changed, and we don’t need a sales person to tell me what I can find out by surfing the internet, even from their company’s web site. I can create my own market basket and do my own shopping, and I don’t really need someone to walk me through that process. But, what Daniel Pink is suggesting is that we bring clarity to the situation or instead of being a problem solver, like the Xerox salesman, it is to be a problem finder. The ability to know your prospect, what issues they are dealing with, and solving a problem that they might not even know they are having. It is the ability to build trust, and then ask great questions, that quantify the importance or relevancy. It isn’t telling your prospect what they need, it is helping them clarify the situation and then moving them toward a solution.

The secret to success in using this new mantra of: Attunement, Buoyancy, and Clarity, it is to modify your pitch, make it relevant and paint a picture. As my grandfather use to say, “don’t sell the steak, sell the sizzle.” The other secret is to improvise, to get out of your comfort zone, walk a mile in your prospect’s shoes, learn to be a great listener and be able to quantify everything. And then lastly, it is to serve. Zig Ziglar used to spell sales, h-e-l-p. He would say, “if you help enough people get what they want, you will get what you want”. Og Mandino suggested that you need to understand your purpose, and he would say, “Always render more and better service than is expected of you, no matter what your task may be.”

So, now that we are all salespeople, let me with this thought from Seth Godin’s blog, “There’s no such thing as a born salesperson. What there are... are people with empathy and learned charisma who choose to work hard. If you show up and show up and show up, and care enough to learn to connect, you will have a skill for life.” And remember, ABC!