



The Number One Skill You Need

Selling may be a dirty word for some, but it's an absolutely critical skill in our personal and professional lives.

Some 28 years ago, on a hot August day, I found myself on the streets of Brussels with a backpack full of small plush dogs to sell. I scanned the crowd, looking for my ideal customer. Suddenly I spotted her. A woman in her sixties, pulling a cart of groceries.

I pounced. "Excuse me, madam, do you like animals?" I asked. She did. I went on to explain how thousands of pets – like the ones on a brochure I now showed her – were abandoned every summer by their owners gone on holiday.

"That's horrible," she exclaimed. I agreed and quickly asked if she had any pets herself. Indeed, she had a six-year-old dog named Bruno. I said that my family's sheepdog recently had to be put to sleep due to arthritis. She sympathised with me and we swapped dog stories for a little while.

"Madam, I don't want to take up more of your time in this heat. I'm sure you'd rather be inside with Bruno and a cool glass of lemonade," I said. "How would you like to help some of these poor abandoned dogs?" I added, going into pitch mode.

The woman started uttering some excuse. I pulled out a plush dog from my backpack and said that purchasing it for around €5 "could make a meaningful difference to dogs like Bruno".

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I explained that I didn't want to put her on the spot, but that the nonprofit I worked for depended on kind people like her. Or she could purchase a simple brochure for about €2. "Over the course of a week, it's less than 30 cents per day. It would really help us."

"OK then. You seem like a decent young man and what those people are doing to those pets is awful." With a beaming smile, I thanked her for her generosity.

Selling is a key life skill

This encounter probably lasted seven minutes and added to the equivalent of about US\$1400 that I made over roughly four weeks roaming the streets of Brussels. This direct selling was one of the toughest experiences in my life, but it has proved invaluable.

Even if you've studied at the best business schools, it's likely that your curriculum underemphasised one of the most important skills you'll ever need: sales.

If you think about it, we sell every single day. When we ask our boss to approve a budget, we're selling. When we negotiate bedtime hours with our kids, we're selling. When we negotiate alimony, we're

selling. When we ask a flight attendant to change our seat, we're selling.

Anytime we ask someone to do something for us which is in our best interest but not obviously in theirs, we're selling. And yet most of us, despite our fancy degrees, have no idea how to go out and get people to buy something from us.

So what have I learned selling plush dogs, brochures, cans of soda, video games, rave parties, mobile games and app stores over the past 25 years? Here are my ten golden rules for becoming a sales ninja.

The ten golden rules of masterful selling

1. Solve a real problem.

To sell anything to anyone, you need to solve a need – either real or imaginary. In the example above, the woman's need was to feel like she was helping other dogs like her pet.

2. Ask questions.

Most sales people get you on the phone (or send you an email) and go directly into pitch mode. Wrong! To understand what individual clients need, you must ask them questions.

3. Get people talking.

Most of us love to talk about one thing: ourselves. Ask simple, powerful questions and keep people talking. The more they talk, the more likely you are to understand their needs and serve them. Avoid giving advice, telling your own story or talking too much.

4. Look to serve, not sell.

If you think along the lines of "how can I help my clients; how can I serve them?" you open up a world of possibilities.

I met a potential client several times over six months, but she never engaged me as a coach. However, she eventually sent me her husband and I helped him land a dream job in a tech firm. Two months later, she also became a client and now works at a top tech company. I first served her by helping her husband.

5. Never follow up!

How do you feel about those emails, phone calls and voicemails that start with "I'm just checking in" or "Do you have any more questions for me?" If you're like most people, you either delete them, mark them as spam or soon forget about them.

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All emails I send contain something of value for my potential clients, such as a link to an interesting article or an inspiring video, or even an intro to someone who can help them in an area I can't.

Why? Because I'm focused on serving, not selling. I'm there to help. So the recipients of my emails know there's always something smart, valuable and useful inside. I'm not chasing dollars.

6. Don't be needy.

It's sad to say, but neediness either turns people off or scares them. This is particularly true in the service industry. Never be needy, whether it's in love or business.

7. Offer a limited set of options.

When was the last time you changed toothpaste? Let me guess: never. Research shows that when clients have too many options, analysis paralysis sets in. However, when they have too few, buying becomes a simple "yes or no" decision, which isn't ideal from a seller's perspective.

As a rule of thumb, provide clients with three options: a high-end, a mid-level and a low-end one. Psychology tells us that most people gravitate towards the middle. They usually can't afford or are loath to pay the highest price, but they don't want to look stingy either. Thus they opt for the intermediate solution.

8. Create clients.

Whether you're selling subscription-based software, aircraft engines or cars, try to build relationships with your clients. Take your time to get to know them. Ask questions and gather information. The more time you spend with them, the more you will understand their needs and the less needy you will appear.

9. Make the "ask".

Once a client has clearly spelt out what she needs or has asked a question indicating that she's ready to buy, don't be afraid to make the ask.

A great way to do this is to help clients imagine how they would feel if their problem were solved. For example, a divorce lawyer might ask a prospective client what her life would look like if this ugly divorce were behind her. Suppose the client mentions she looks forward to reconnecting with family. The lawyer could then offer to put extra people on her case so to speed things up and allow her to get on with her plans quickly.

10. Smile and laugh.

People like to buy from people they like and trust. There's an entire body of **research** on the benefits of smiling. It makes us feel better and it's contagious. When you smile at someone, it's very hard for the person not to smile back.

If you can make someone laugh, you not only break the ice, but you make a lasting, emotional connection. People want to be around others who make them feel good. Laughter helps release endorphins, the neurochemicals of happiness.

The next time you dread making a sale, keep this mind: Life is always about selling, but you don't need to think about it as such. Think about selling as serving, as well as the opportunity to really get to know a fellow human and build a lasting connection.

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