

WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO BECOME A GREAT SALESPERSON

By John Costigan

What one quality would make the difference between an average and a superior salesperson? There has been much debate over this fact with no clear answer to date. This article is an attempt to provide some rationale and reasoning behind why honesty or telling the truth leads to superior selling. The article concludes with several examples of how to put this principle into action.

The most important attribute for salespeople

Peering out the window of seat 3A at 35,000 feet, I stopped reading for a moment and sat back and just stared at the ocean. Here I was, heading eastbound on another transatlantic flight anticipating training another sales force in the UK, and I was looking at an email that was sent to me by a young sales person who had just graduated college. They had just read a book which I was fortunate enough to read as well called, "Wisdom for a Young CEO" by Douglas Barry. At the age of 14, Douglas wrote to some very successful people and asked them a great question: "What does it take to become a CEO?" Interestingly enough, most of these incredibly powerful people wrote him back--CEO's of companies such as General Electric, American Express, GAP, Motorola, a virtual who's who of corporate America. He compiled all of the responses which amassed over 150 pages of notes and responses and posted the actual letters in his book. The summaries of information included topics about their people, integrity, service, the customer, passion, respect, vision, humanity, curiosity, even pragmatism.

As I read Douglas' book and absorbed its content, I asked myself what kind of knowledge could be obtained if we used the same concept and sent hundreds of letters to successful sales people and asked, "What does it take to become an Outstanding Sales Person?"

Selling Power Magazine wrote the number one skill a great sales person needs is charm. I found

that surprising. Another article spoke of being extremely quick on your feet and dynamic. What about integrity, skills, attitude, intelligence, professionalism, and confidence? These qualities are all very important and have their place in line as being key ingredients that separate you from the rest of the pack. But which one is *"the"* most important.

As I took out a pen and began to write all of my ideas on the napkin sitting on my tray table, the passenger in seat 3B spoke up and boldly asked what I was writing. He appeared to be a wise man, much wiser than I. It wasn't long before I opened up to him. "I am in my early 40's and have seemed to always be in a rush to gain wisdom, just as this book I read by Douglas Barry. I have learned that wisdom comes to you in its own time, not your time. And that usually means it comes with age, and you can't rush it." As we continued to speak, he said, "We do become much wiser as we get older, and obviously, we continue to make mistakes, but I believe part of gaining wisdom is having the ability to pick ourselves up much quicker than we did when we were young. Too many times we let the mistakes keep us down, and we fall backwards instead of falling forward and learning from them." Enjoying this conversation, I replied back and said, "So, do you believe that's it? Wisdom is the key ingredient to being a great sales person?" His response was simple, "What do you think?"

As I began to continue to write my thoughts on the small square napkin glancing out at the

horizon, we began to speak more and more. I then shared with him a wonderful quote that I had heard that represents wisdom to me. “When you are 18 years old, all you think about is what other people think about you. When you turn 40, you don’t care about what other people think about you, and when you reach 60, you realize no one ever thought about you anyway.” He laughed heartily and agreed. But I knew there was a single element that rose above all of the rest. One thing, I believe, we must embrace and I think it took me this long to realize this was the ingredient: Trust.

Trust is everything. If the customer doesn’t trust you, it doesn’t matter how wonderful the company and the product are, they won’t buy. Oh sure, when we talk “retail”, we can drive to most franchise fast food restaurants where you “trust” that the burger, the fries, and the soft drink will taste the same, no matter who is serving it. It doesn’t take a sales person to help you decide on a Number 3 with a Diet Coke. Or, if you want to buy a particular brand of car, regardless of how scared we might be walking on the lot or how we will be approached by the sales person, if we want it, we’ll buy it. The days of having that “strong” long term relationship with a sales person at a dealership are fleeting. From McDonalds to Mercedes, these companies spend millions of dollars on building customer confidence, loyalty and yes, trust.

What I am talking about is the true face to face discussions of business done B2B. (Business-to-Business). True sales people discussing issues with customers while establishing trust along the way.

Not that long ago, in the 1960’s and 1970’s, and even before then, a hand shake and “your word” was everything. It meant more than the contract. My father once told me, “Johnny, if you ever have to get out the contract, you both lose. Any issue you have with a customer should be negotiated with a handshake and your word.” Even though my father told me that in the 70’s, it still holds true today. I believe a hand shake

and your word have become a “lost art” if you will. The world has changed dramatically, and trust is becoming harder to find.

So what happened? What happened in the last twenty to thirty years that resulted in our cultures’ inability to trust and promote skepticism at such high levels?

I believe there are a variety of reasons. The internet is one. It provides us with immediate results to any inquiry we desire, and at the speed of light, allowing our customers to seek out more information, more vendors, more pricing, and more options than ever before. This results in more information, more time to deliberate and more time to question and “stall” their decisions to move forward. When a customer knows more about other options, it results in longer sales cycles and questions themselves in “trusting” they have made the right decision.

Look at the policies and procedures our own government has begun to put in place to prevent another Enron. Was that simply due to greed; or was the pressure to perform so great that those high level executives tumbled due to fraud, leading to investors and employees paying dearly? Hence, we again reduce our level of “trust”.

The examples I can mention that have contributed to our cultures inability to “trust” are endless. We live in a time where we get fired much quicker than we did 25 or 30 years ago. Our children are being raised in a culture where patience may not be considered the virtue it once was. So we have been swayed to say or do things quickly and where trust isn’t the key ingredient, results are!

How can you begin to earn trust?

So the real question is how can you begin to earn trust, in a world where we all constantly have our guards up?

Now the positive part of the equation; It’s easier than you think. It’s no coincidence that trust and truth are very similar in their spelling, just a two

letter difference. Josh Billings once wrote, “As scarce as the truth is, the supply has always been in excess of the demand.” I love this quote because it leads us to question if we really want to know the truth or simply continue to listen with “happy ears.”

I always ask my students, “What percentage of customers lie to you?” and consistently the answer barked out in unison, as I speak to audiences around the world is, “100 Percent!” And, of course, everyone laughs, but when you think about it, that answer might be right on. We run into so many customers who will tell us, “Just looking for pricing,” or “Send me some information, and we’ll get back to you.” or “Things look really good, I just need to see more information.” only to realize they were using our information to get a better deal from the incumbent. The real reason customers may have a tendency to lie to us is simple: US! We forced them to lie. Think about it. When a customer finally decides to tell us “Thanks again, but we have chosen another vendor.” What is our first response? We say, “Why? What happened?” When you say that, how do you think that makes the customer feel? You guessed it....defensive. When was the last time you sold a defensive customer? Their defense mechanism is on high alert, and anything you have to say at this point will bounce right back off their shields because they know you will make them feel bad about telling the truth. Did you really expect them to say “Why? Ummmm....We don’t know why. Heck, sorry. Let’s just do it with you.” Of course not.

So they lie to us. It’s easier for them to say “Not sure, we’ll get back to you.” And then they send an email saying you lost so they don’t have to talk to you in person. **This is our fault.**

How do we change this? Simply do the opposite. When a customer says, “Looks like we are going to chose someone else.” Simply say with passion and positive attitude, “Great. Good for you guys. I’m glad you found the right vendor. Now that I know you are not moving

forward with us, do you mind if I ask you if there was one thing you thought we needed to do a better job at, what would have it been?” See, when you respond positively like you really don’t care that you lost, they will let down their guard and tell you the real reason. When they tell you the real reason, you can now say, “Boy, that’s amazing..... that’s the one thing that kept you guys from choosing to move forward with us. Do you mind if I ask you a question? If I was able to fix that one thing, or make that problem go away, do you want to keep talking?” It’s amazing how many times you will hear the customer ask you, “Well, can you?” Now you are back in the game. I have numerous customers that had told me “No fit” and when I said “Great. Thanks for your honesty.” I was able to get their guard down, find out the real reason, and turn them around. Obviously, if they already signed the deal, then the discussion was over. But if they hadn’t signed and hadn’t contacted the other vendor yet, it’s still open for discussion.

The question I posed above is about getting results in a world that may force us to “bend the rules”, and continue to be 100 percent truthful. Remember Harry Truman? He was our 33rd President. He was labeled “Give’m Hell Harry” due to his directness. In his reply to this label that the media tagged him with, he said, “I never gave anybody hell, I just told them the truth, they thought it was hell.” I can’t recall a quote as powerful.

From personal experience I can say that my company has grown beyond all expectations due to this simple philosophy. We tell the truth. When customers ask us, “Are you more expensive than the competition?” Our answer is, “Absolutely. Do you mind if I ask you why you asked?” Or if the customer asks us, “Can you come down on price?” Our answer is “You know, I lose no matter how I answer that question. If I say “No”, that could end this discussion. If I say “Yes”, then it gives the appearance that we were trying to take advantage of you with our original offer. So, there must be

a reason you asked?”

All sales people will always have these concerns; Are we too expensive? Where do we stand? Is this the right fit? When are they going to make a decision? Am I just here because I am one of the people in the bid process? Why do they really want to do business with us? etc...

Be Harry Truman. Cut to the chase and don't waste time. Example: Mr. Customer, I love telling the story of Harry Truman, our 33rd President known as "Give'm Hell Harry. He was famous for saying "I never gave anybody hell. I just told them the truth, they thought it was hell. I want to ask you a question. My biggest fear is you are already happy where you are at, and the reason for my involvement is simply to give you a gut check on making sure you have the best deal from the incumbent. Can you help me with that?"

This is incredibly powerful! WHY? Because it's the truth!!! We were just too afraid to speak it. We would go back to our office and sit there and wonder where we are on the deal, fill out a forecast that we know in our heart isn't 100 percent accurate, and "hope" we get the deal. According to Rick Page's book, "Hope is not a Strategy." I agree!

You will face this over and over and over again. For example: A deal is stalled. Call your customer right now and say "Mrs. Customer. My biggest concern is that as much as I would love to win this business, it's becoming obvious that I want to win this deal more than you actually want to move forward and get your issues resolved. So for that, I apologize. I feel like I am a doctor begging you to go into surgery when you're the one with the problem."

When you speak the truth, you gain respect from the customer, and more importantly, from yourself. And what happens is that you take people by surprise because THEY ARE NOT USED TO IT!!!

So, if and when a letter lands on my desk asking

me "Mr. Costigan, what does it take to become a great sales person." I will tell them to tell the truth, at all costs and you should too. Why? Number one, you will feel good about it. Number two, when you begin to lie, your customer will see right through it. Number three, you will gain instant credibility. No one has the "perfect" solution. And number four, you will win WAY more business because we live in a society where the truth can be so hard to come by, you will stand out among the rest.

Wheels down...Time to go be Harry Truman.

John Costigan is the President and Founder of John Costigan Companies. Prior to founding his own company, John was a top sales representative and account executive for leading software and Internet companies. He created a unique sales training program in which he demonstrates the effectiveness of his proven techniques by making impromptu calls to prospects that are provided to him by the client. John holds a Bachelor of Science Degree in Education from Northern Illinois University. For more information, please visit www.JohnCostiganCompanies.com