

Salesmanship
is dead.

Long live the art
of conversation.

(How to sell and stay human)

by Chris Allen

Whatever job we do or title we have, sooner or later we have to sell something to someone, even if it is just an idea.

Despite frequent stories of sales people making fortunes most of us prefer safer occupations. But nowadays we all need to do business.

We've been hoodwinked into thinking that selling is a black art that only a few can master. My experience has been just the opposite. I believe anyone can sell when they want to.

Here's how I came to that conclusion.



I didn't want to be a salesman but...

For seven years I'd been a production supervisor for a large manufacturing company. It was good but frustrating. No-one took notice of my great ideas to improve productivity. I wanted to stay in manufacturing, but I realised I would have to learn how to 'sell' my ideas if I was to make it to the top. I didn't want to be in sales but I told myself that the means justified the end. The end result was a high powered respectable job in manufacturing.

I joined a company selling stock control systems. A great outfit. I was trained how to structure sales meetings and deal with different types of people. I realised that these techniques would not only form the foundation of a successful selling career but would impact my entire life. All I had to do was put them into practice.



I was afraid of the phone

I arrived at a small, posh office in Victoria, feeling a mixture of optimism and fear, but mostly fear. After a welcoming coffee session with my sales manager and a tour of the kitchen I was directed to a bare desk, a phone and a large book, entitled "Key British Enterprises". This was to be the source from which I would do my prospecting. My bible. It was now up to me to sell, sell, sell.

Book. Phone. Do it.

I came up with a better idea. "Get another coffee". My God. I was afraid of the phone. This was crazy. I'd happily phone my mates and family, but in the office cold calling was a monster waiting to expose my very soul. I had to do something fast to overcome my fear. I decided to play a game to distract myself. The goal was to make a mess of every fifth call. I made loads of calls.



I was going to have to come to terms with my fear

The nicest thing about being a salesman was the sense of freedom. I had a small company car and a large patch. No-one cared about what I did as long as I delivered the business. Ah. There was the rub. I still hadn't made a sale. I was making the telephone calls and getting a few appointments but my prospects always wanted to think about it.

The clock was ticking. When was I going to close a deal? My life was dominated by one thing - stress. To survive this game I was going to have to come to terms with my fear:

I did a personal development course and uncovered some surprising things about my motivation. I also discovered everyone else is just as afraid. Knowing that I found it easier to say what I had to say and to hear what others had to say.

I got my first deal a week later.



The acknowledgement freed me from some sort of shame

I reckoned I was an average sales guy because the other salesmen were always talking about closing huge deals. All mine seemed pretty middle-of-the-road by comparison, but they came in regularly.

One day the Sales Director called me into his office and said that I was to be promoted to Sales Manager, responsible for the Automotive sector and have three sales people reporting to me. It seemed that doing the job steadily brought its rewards.

Here's the amazing thing; after I became the Sales Manager I suddenly felt proud to be a salesperson. The acknowledgement freed me from some sort of shame (its the only word I can think of). I began to enjoy selling and to notice that my prospects were becoming more human.



I had conversations and people started to buy stuff

I was on a roll. I was to go to Sweden to start up the sales operation for the Nordic Area. How would the Scandinavians and Finns take to being sold to by a Brit? I'd heard that the Finns were a subdued bunch and my selling style was definitely high energy, enthusiastic and bouncy. Hmm.

Arrived in Gothenburg. Got a desk. Telephone time. Damn, I thought I'd finished with all that. Welcome back, tele-terror. Still, I got on the phone and met people. Did I sell loads? Not initially, but I'd been there before and survived.

The Scandinavians taught me to relax and enjoy doing business. I got interested in their families, holidays and even their weather. Business started to take-off.

I noticed something. When I stopped being anxious to sell, was myself and just had conversations, people bought stuff from me.



Often it's the other person who brings the subject up

I run my own business now. I've got a fancy title (choose one: MD, CEO, COO, EVP. Any will do). I still do the same thing. Sell. It just doesn't feel like selling anymore. I just chat to people and at some point in the conversation we talk about doing business. Often it's the other person (I used to call them prospects) who brings the subject up. If they don't, that's OK.

Recently, I had to make a cold call. Surprise, surprise, I found myself making a coffee before picking up the phone. Just when you think it's safe to get back on the phone, tele-terror returns. But, like the fitness videos, I felt the fear and did it anyway. After all, it was just a conversation and I'm still alive, being myself and having a great life. Am I a natural salesman? No. It's just that I have realised that the training I had all those years ago was simply how to have a conversation.

If you and your staff want to be great at selling but can't wait the years to gain the experience, contact me.

I've been in high-value sales and marketing for over 20 years experiencing the highs and lows of selling for large American and European corporations as well as small partnerships.

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