

How to sell anything

by Dougald Hine

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It sounds like the summer job from hell: flogging books door-to-door, 100% on commission, 80 hours a week for twelve weeks. Some people said it was a cult. But this was my second year at uni, I was feeling skint and unemployable. And the people who came recruiting for it impressed me.

These days I'm more interested in changing the world than selling it, but I still keep coming back to things I learnt in those three summers.

1. Always be asking questions

To my relief, I discovered early on that there was an art to selling - a blend of improv and applied psychology which, if you were sharp enough, meant you never needed foot-in-the-door tactics or arm-twisting "closes".

The trick was to ask dozens of little questions as you went along, so that you never had to ask a big question without knowing the answer already. And if the little questions were telling you someone wasn't interested, to save both your time and go look for someone else who would be.

2. You can't force someone to buy something they don't want

That said, none of us are as rational as we like to believe. We hate salespeople not just because the lousy ones are annoying as hell, but because the occasional good one might do voodoo on us - and this reminds us of the limits of our rationality, something we hate to be reminded of.

It's not exactly voodoo. Everyone is a bundle of conflicting desires. What salespeople do - what every advert and every politician does, for that matter - is try to focus your attention on the element in that

conflicted bundle which coincides with what they want you to do. If some part of you does want to buy, a smart salesman will feed that part and make sure it gets listened to.

3. Most people will let you in their houses

When you knock on someone's door, you have twenty seconds to distinguish yourself from everyone who's called there before. If you do it right, two out of three people will happily let you inside within a minute of meeting you. (I didn't believe this until it happened to me.)

Just because you get inside someone's house doesn't mean they're going to buy from you - all it means is they're going to spare you ten minutes to have a look. You make sure they understand this or they probably won't let you in - and it's true, because if they're not buyers, you should figure this out quickly and get out of their hair.

"Sorry if I seem like I'm in a bit of a rush, but everyone's just been taking a few minutes to have a look..."

4. If you feel like you belong somewhere, people respond to it

If you've been in the neighbourhood more than a couple of hours, you'll be able to drop the names of people you've already spoken to. Often friends of theirs who already bought and recommended you call round. Soon you start to sound like you belong round here.

When you feel like you belong, you do belong - and it's this that means people will invite you into their homes.

5. Learn to care and not to care

If you care too much about whether or not a particular family buys, you'll start treating people badly.

To make sure you treat people well, you have to trust in the law of averages: it doesn't matter whether this house buys or not, because every one that doesn't brings you closer to the next one that does.

It's a bit like hitch-hiking - there's no point getting cross about the cars that don't stop for you, because once you start scowling, no one will want to give you a lift.

6. Americans are different to us

For two summers, I worked in the UK. My third year I transferred to the States. It wasn't a success, but it did teach me something about the difference between Britain and America.

Americans tend to buy stuff when it makes them feel warm inside.

Brits tend to buy stuff when it makes us feel smart.

I reckon this is why we find George Bush so mystifying.

7. Work is the new religion

Three weeks into my fourth summer, I quit and walked away from the whole thing. I hitched back to Sheffield, kipped on a friend's floor, kept my phone switched off for two days to avoid the calls from my sales manager.

One of the things I had enjoyed about the job was the autonomy – out there on your own, managing yourself, responsible for your own actions and results. But in the end, I didn't feel autonomous at all - to do the job well you had to believe in it and I got tired of investing all that belief in something that was, in the end, just a job.

Belief is expensive - when I quit, it messed me up like the end of a relationship.

That's what disturbs me most about my time as a salesman. Not the thought that some of the kids whose parents bought the books probably never used them. It's what that kind of work culture extracts from people, the way it asks you to live and breathe the values of the organisation.

But this isn't a cult, peculiar to one eccentric book-selling company - it's a major world religion. Every corporation wants its employees to buy into its brand, to adopt a collective mind-set. Once, it was enough to put your back into a job, but these days you have to put your heart into it.

Selling books was a good - if extreme - way to learn how this stuff works. I still think about it all the time. And when people knock at my door, I'm always friendly - even though most of them couldn't sell me a bucket of water if my house was on fire.