

## Let's Get Positive

Fans of *The Apprentice* (shown on BBC2 earlier this year) who are professionally involved in sales will have been struck by how much emphasis was made on sales ability throughout the different tasks which were set. For those who missed this entertaining and compelling series, each week 14 business wannabes were put through various team tests which ranged from selling bunches of flowers for a profit to designing a children's toy. Unlike other reality TV shows, the voting-out was not left to viewers but to Sir Alan Sugar who would make careful observations before barking the now famous words "You're fired." An additional edge to the suspense was when individuals were asked to identify the weakest link in their team.

With not so much as a word being mentioned at the start about previous experience of closing a deal or selling hard, that is exactly what the majority of the tasks involved. From the very first programme - when the candidates had to buy flowers wholesale before selling the stock on the streets - good old fashioned selling skills such as identifying need, engaging customers and strong closing proved to be essential. Furthermore, considering the amount of time which had to be dedicated to purchasing it's no coincidence that the most able sales person in the group – runner up Saira – who also proved to be the most successful negotiator on the buying side of the fence.

The art of selling is undoubtedly a special and valuable skill: the ability to listen and present well, commercial awareness, enthusiasm and oodles of charm are needed, to say nothing of product knowledge and understanding. As we all know, these are just a handful of tools in the salesman's armoury, yet why is it that after the last call of the day has been made, many of us in our personal and social lives are ashamed to own up to how we earn our living? I still cringe when I remember how mortified I felt when, years ago the chairman of the company (not the one I was working for) whose gala event I'd been invited to asked me what I did. "Ha, ha – but I tell my mother I work in a night club." I added weakly after I'd said I was a sales executive; trying to imply that this was more respectable in comparison. My excuse is I was only weeks into my first sales job then, but the remark is telling: given that no one in the history of paper could have loved selling advertising any more than me, I'd still been affected by something very negative about my role.

Over the years many salespeople have admitted to me that it's easier to keep quiet at parties and social gatherings because the response is all too often a rant against call centres, door to door salesmen or a pitiful look as new acquaintances try and imagine a suited figure charging up and down the country in a 'rep's car' (whatever they think that is). And the shame and embarrassment doesn't stop here. Many

## Let's Get Positive

companies describe sales vacancies as 'Account Management' or 'Business Development' in order to avoid frightening the horses. Keen to recruit good graduates, and prepared to offer full training they turn backward somersaults to avoid including the word 'Sales' in the job title.

It doesn't have to be this way - through a small but collective effort we can help sales shed its negative image. Here are some suggestions:

1. Some work on improving our own self image would be a start: this could either be by gently reminding our non-sales friends and family that it's our successes which help to keep all other staff employed in the organisation. Or, through a genuine charm offensive on non-sales colleagues at work we can make a greater effort to handle them and show some appreciation. This shouldn't be underestimated: in their pride at being 'sales-led', many organisations unwittingly forget that their non-sales departments are staffed by people who need recognition just as much. As a result large sections of a company are often left feeling their role is no more than to prop up the glamour boys and girls in sales.
2. If you're college or university educated consider going back to explain to final year students about the exciting aspects of your career choice (as I've done). I'm pretty sure that when organising careers evenings tutors are always looking for something different to the local bobby coming in yet again to discuss joining the police force. Failing that, why not offer to write a short piece in the student newsletter describing your typical day: 200-300 words should be enough.
3. What can recruiters – typically HR and Sales Managers – do to improve the perception? Perhaps the most important consideration here is for trainee vacancies which are probably telesales based. Such recruiting managers should be realistic from the start about the job, taking care to explain the hard work and persistence involved as well as highlighting the benefits and rewards on offer.
4. Speak positively about your job to any younger people you know with that selling 'spark' who are about to make career choices. If you think they would fit in, and your company has a trainee programme - offer to pass information on.

## Let's Get Positive

5. Finally, never forget that your efforts not only make a real contribution to the company you sell for, but also to the nation's economy as a whole. Making a sale – however small – is the catalyst for wider growth and prosperity. Why should we care if others choose to feel threatened by this skill? I don't remember IT geeks ever minding all those jokes about them, so why should sales people be ashamed? Selling is a profession in its own right: let's be proud we are a part of it.

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