

NYU Taught me to Sell Cars and Selling Cars Taught me how to work

When I graduated from college I had high hopes of starting my own business. When I realized I wasn't going to find funding for the dream I scrambled to find something to do so I could start paying back the school loans. I was looking for a CEO position and found a job as a car salesman.

At the beginning I was extremely disappointed. Now, looking back at the 16 months I sold cars, I can appreciate the position as one of the best learning experiences I could have had. At the dealership we constantly reminded each other that, "If you can sell cars you can do anything". When I started I was skeptical of such a claim, but when I left I was convinced by its truth.

NYU did an incredible job of helping me think deeply, analyze everything, and become an intelligent citizen, but my days at the dealership are what taught me to survive in the workplace.

Strategy- "Work smart not hard"

I started the job in June in the Texas heat. We were to be sales professionals and as sales professionals we were expected to dress accordingly. We wore long sleeve shirts, ties, and slacks in June in Texas in the heat. If you didn't work smart you exhausted yourself to the point of not being able to take ups and then losing money. *(It's called it an up because you are "up" to go try and make a sale).*

I carefully scrutinized every action. If I was going to the back of the lot to pick up a car I drove there in a car that needed to be washed instead of walking. If I had to be on the phones to follow up with customers I made sure to schedule my calls in the middle of the day to avoid the sun. I brought two shirts for each shift, because no one wants to buy a car from someone that sweats all over the paperwork. Necessity truly is the mother of innovation.

Working smart versus working hard became my mantra. This sentiment was at the core of every other lesson I learned. It is so easy to get caught in busy-work traps. You convince yourself you must be working hard because of the effort you are expending, but keep in mind good ol' Drucker- don't confuse effort with results. Work strategically.

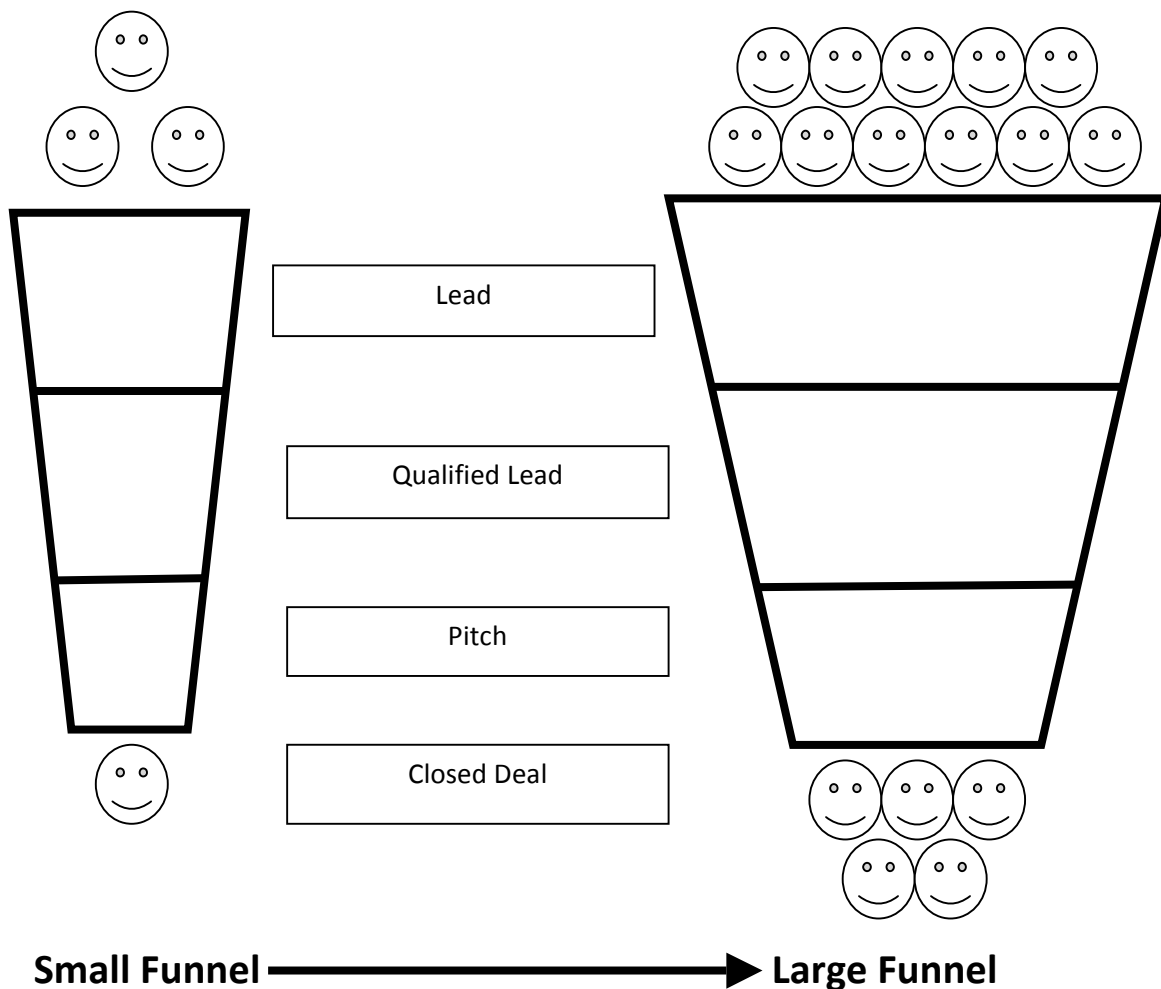
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Brand Management-

The dealership didn't pay me a dime unless I sold a car. Therefore I only "ate what I killed". This forced me to become my own brand manager. I worked hard to market myself to friends and family so that I could sell the most cars I possibly could.

You are a marketer. Your most important client is you. You are the only person responsible for managing your brand. It is up to you to maximize your brand's impact. Your brand must be unique, must be noteworthy, and you have to live your brand. You might get a job because of who you know, but you keep it because of who you are.

The fruit of effective brand management is **Sales Funnel Maximization:**



Everyone you talk to starts out as a lead. These leads either travel all the way down your funnel and turn into a deal or they get stuck in the process. Sales is a numbers game. The more people you talk to the more people you will sell to.

The life lesson is simple: if you can attract enough of the right leads (which can also be defined as relationships, opportunities and experiences) you maximize success. Certain brands attract certain people. Brand management is about tweaking your funnel to attract the people, opportunities and situations needed to reach your version of success.

Sell- “You couldn’t close a door.”

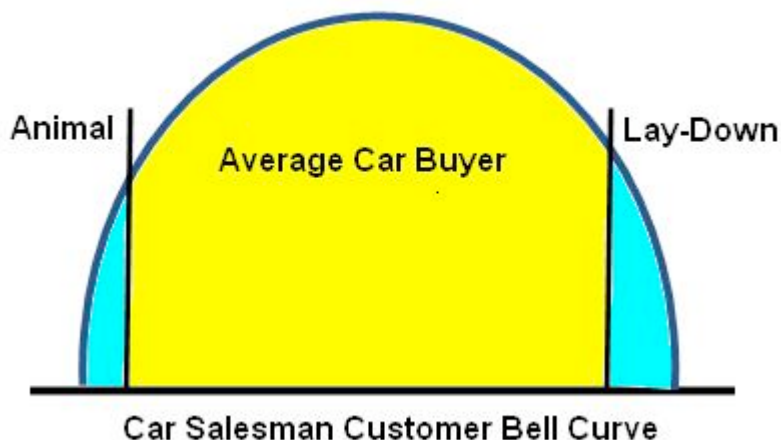
It doesn’t matter what profession you chose, you cannot escape sales. If you can’t sell yourself in an interview how are you going to get a job? For me, it took redefining what it meant to be a salesperson, to not only accept my new position, but to prepare myself for the post-college working world.

The sales process is simple. You sell yourself, you sell your company, and then you receive the **permission** (read Seth Godin) to sell your product. Each of these three things is critical to building an honest relationship which will help convince someone they are safe enough to do business with you.

All salespeople are out for their own self interest which is a bad thing...right? Believe it or not customers are out for their own interest too. What I learned was this: being an effective salesperson means working with a customer as a team rather than making a customer an adversary. In the 16 months I sold cars I was never once asked to do anything close to dishonest or withhold information from a potential customer. Sales don’t make people feel icky, salespeople do.

When I overcame the mental block of being a salesperson I was free to have fun, talk people up, and realize they weren’t just buying a car they were buying me. If you aren’t confident enough in what you are doing or who you are then do something else. Sells is one of the last positions that requires a creativity and person to person relationship which cannot be outsourced.

Maximize Opportunity- “Customers are animals”



The customer bell curve was the training I received on what to expect from customers.

Animals make up 10% of the population. There is nothing you can do for this customer that can make them happy. You can fight and argue all day and they are never going to buy a car. The hard part about this group is the time they take from you with no real intention of being a customer. Animals might seem a harsh moniker but it is the only way to describe someone who has no intention of respecting you or the time you commit to help them look at a car they already know they are buying from a cousin in Oklahoma.

Lay-Downs make up 10% of the population. A lay-down can be at two ends of the spectrum. One end is someone who would fall for a spam email scam, or someone of means who didn't want to spend all day buying a car. Lay-downs aren't bad. In fact if you talk to most people that consider themselves real sales professionals they are easily enticed by a killer pitch.

Average car buyers make up 80% of the population. These are good people who have an idea of what they want but are not sold. They come in looking for something they need and they need someone to just show them the way. You don't have to argue with them over \$100 and they didn't have everything already decided before they even came. These are always the most satisfying customers because you feel like you helped them pick something they really like.

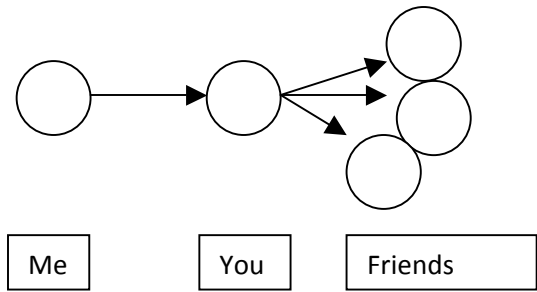
The problem with car sales, and life, is that you never know who is in what category. Some people are animals, some are normal customers and some are lay downs. You never know who is what. As soon as you think of yourself as an expert judge of who will or will not buy a car, buy your idea, or buy anything else you are selling you miss out on big opportunities. You have to train yourself to be open to talk to anyone who walks onto the lot and give them your best.

The lesson for a car salesman is easy: Don't judge an up. Every up is an opportunity for a sale, for food on the table, for money to pay the bills. You have to really think before you turn away an opportunity. There was nothing more disheartening at the car dealership than passing on an up only for someone else to make a huge sale. To capitalize on an opportunity you have to be vigilant and ready to jump and risk on a moment's notice.

Network- "Boys, get the phone book, it's time to make some cold calls"

You can't understand networking until you pass up an opportunity. Missed opportunities always come back to bite you. If you work for six months and you sell ten cars per month you have a client list of 60 people. Those 60 people know more people than you could ever sell cars to. Networking is not hard. Keeping up with the relationships can be a nightmare.

You maintain relationships with your network by giving people the tools necessary to not only remember you but also refer you. Everyone you know is a potential client. It is imperative to keep in constant contact with everyone you know. This might seem daunting, but with the technology available there is no reason you cannot write one email a month.



Remember, you are only six steps away from Kevin Bacon. It is amazing people don't utilize networking to its full potential. Networking isn't a mystic exercise it's simple relationship building.

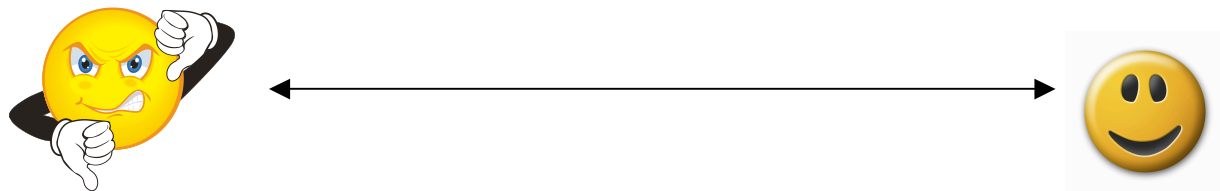
Management

The best managers I have had have always wanted something bigger for me. They took the time to prepare me for my next career step. If you are fortunate enough to find someone like this hold on tight and listen to everything they have to teach you. These managers aren't insecure and they are excited to find employees who can creatively solve problems and manage their own activities. They aren't worried about being upstaged because they have their own set of skills which you are lucky to see modeled every day.

Then, there is the opposite end of the spectrum. Some managers have ascended to a place of authority despite their massive insecurities or incompetence. It will make you mad because your ideas become their ideas and your unique abilities are seen as a threat to their position. This is when you really learn life isn't fair and companies aren't the meritocracy from the capitalist dreams we were given in high school. This is when you get to shine because you suck it up and work on building your personal brand.

Everyone has had the negative manager. For some people it sucks the life and ambition out of them and they change forever their dreams and ambitions. This happens because they had an idealized view of what a company should be and when their view is shattered so too is their spirit. Companies are run by people and people are flawed. You can learn just as much by what not to do than you can from best practices.

The management Spectrum:



Deputy Doofus the manager

Magnificent the Manager

Deputy Doofus: Insecure, Angry, beaten down by work and unrealized dreams. (These aren't bad people, they are people who have had heart ache in multiple forms and use their employees to take out

their aggression. When you realize what deeper things are going on you change your attitude towards them from anger to pity.)

Manager the Great: Caring, Coach, Counselor, opportunity for employee to maximize potential

Friendships

Car sales aren't something you can do from home. I was at the dealership ten to twelve hours a day six days a week. There was a lot of time to talk to the other salespeople. The relationships I built on the job were a cure for the negativity that becomes pervasive during the slow months.

Inevitably, there is going to be someone at the dealership that is having a tough time, because they are having a rough time selling cars they become negative. Their negativity has a real possibility of rubbing off on you unless you surround yourself with people that stay positive and can encourage you through the down times. Staying positive is an important element of overcoming obstacles. Negativity is a growing avalanche which can bulldoze your professional and personal life which will take serious time to build back.

Stay positive and keep positive people around you. It is easy to get so sucked in by ambition that you become singularly focused on a task. If you don't have someone you can go to for advice you are just going to make mistakes that could have been avoided.

And the moral of the story is....

When I arrived at the car dealership there were so many things I had to learn about the working world. After selling cars for 6 months I had enough. I wanted something different from my career. I found a dream job. I am at an amazing startup company where I get to learn from people who have been in the entrepreneurial world their entire career. What I am experiencing now far outweighs the benefit of a traditional MBA.

What I have found is the basics of a job are always the same. I still have to sell, I still have to manage clients, and I still have to work long hours. The only thing that will set me apart, that will hinder my being outsourced, is the creativity I can bring to the job.

We are entering the workforce during a unique time. We aren't going to be able to work for some company for twenty years- the economy moves too fast. We aren't going to be able to slowly work ourselves up some corporate ladder- how fun does that sound? Our success will be directly correlated to our individual creativity and ability to innovate. Companies don't need any more knowledge workers, they need innovators. We are going to have to adapt to our place in history. My friends, there are new rules for our generation. We are in the midst of the Entrepreneurial Age. We have to become entrepreneurs, not because of vanity because of necessity.



Benjamin Roberts is focused on experiencing and sharing everything he can with his fellow generation entering the Entrepreneurial Age. His entrepreneurial adventures started when he was 5 as a door to door salesman. He gathered all the newspapers delivered on Saturday morning in his neighborhood and then attempted to sell them back one by one for \$10 each until his mother shut him down. He has started multiple businesses since then. He lives on the internet at www.benjaminproberts.wordpress.com. Contact him at benjaminproberts@gmail.com. He consults, speaks, and juggles.