

**SOFT
SELLING**
IN A
**HARD
WORLD**

PLAIN TALK ON THE
ART OF PERSUASION

BY JERRY VASS

VASS®

SAINT AUGUSTINE • TORONTO

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People waste their lives trying to sell. They get confused between persuasion as a belief system (“You have to believe in what you sell.”) and persuasion as a natural talent (“You can’t teach anyone how to sell.”). *SOFT SELLING IN A HARD WORLD™* is designed to clear up that confusion.

If you aren’t selling up to your potential, you probably don’t understand that selling is a game. Most people don’t. Those who *do* make 85% of the money, become executives, or run their own successful businesses. This book is about that game—how to play it, when to play it, where to play it, and with whom.

This book is about fulfilling your potential without resorting to “motivational” and “inspirational” beliefs. As in sports, you’ll find that certain mechanical moves need to be mastered before your inspiration or genius can shine. A dog can become inspired to chase a car but doesn’t know what to do with the car once it’s caught it. This knowledge is about what you do when you catch the car, that thin slice of face-to-face time with the Buyer when persuasion actually occurs.

This is a handbook. There is very little theory—it is nearly all mechanics. While there is a certain primitive logic in the way this story is told, you can begin to read on any page and profit.

This is a perfect book for the bathroom. Studied and practiced in small bites over time, the culturally awkward acts required to persuade others will become automatic. The selling trade takes practice. Everything worthwhile does. Sex and selling are the only endeavors that the human being is expected to perform perfectly the first time without practice. By now, you know the fallacy of the first illusion. The second illusion is even more embarrassing.

Read gently. Enjoy your profession, for the selling profession is really about making more trusting friends than you ever thought possible.

THANKS

A heartfelt thanks to my loyal clients. They paid me well and kept me alive long enough to learn the stuff I pass on to you. Their high expectations and uncompromising performance standards made me good.

And thanks to the brightest people in the country, those super-salespeople, the front-line street-soldiers who were my students through the years. This book is for them. They taught me how to sell. They made me laugh.

J.V.

Part I

**How We Got
This Way**

HOW TO GET RICH QUICK!

It's just around the corner . . .

There are few legal ways to get rich quick. Your chance of finding one is approximately one in 2 million . . . or about twice the odds of getting hurt in a commercial plane crash. Now, the bright side. Getting rich slowly is fun, too, yielding thousands of little adventures along the way. Hot pursuit of the almighty buck is the American way. Yet, when the pursuit is over, it's hard to remember exactly how you made the big money or where it went. But you'll always remember your great selling presentations.

There are only three ways to make exceptional money:

- To work in a place nobody wants to be
- To perform work nobody else wants to do
- To perform work nobody else can do

It's the last two conditions for making extraordinary money that we will explore here.

Learning to sell softly isn't only about money—it's about enjoying life's working trip. This little manual is about reality. It's a survival guide for the strange, hilly country of persuasion. It shows you how to work less,

enjoy more, and have a great journey. Its goal: to destroy selling illusions and replace them with selling tools that work.

Unless carefully trained, ordinary salespeople use their egos to sell; their egos appear at the wrong time, at the wrong place, and for the wrong reason. That's why ordinary salespeople don't make much money, and Buyers shut them down without mercy.

SOFT SELLING IN A HARD WORLD™ is about redesigning how we sell. This redesign has proven to be exceedingly effective for salespeople of every experience level—from high school kids selling magazine subscriptions to chairmen of the board selling mergers and acquisitions.

This book is about mechanics. It is designed from the street up—tactics, not strategy. You won't find magic here; there is none. Nor will you need a Kierkegaardian leap of faith. There is no underlying motivation or belief system. It isn't about something larger than yourself. You don't have to believe in it to make it pay. You don't even have to believe in yourself. You just have to use the mechanics.

You *will* find SOFT SELLING IN A HARD WORLD™ exciting because nothing motivates like unbridled success—the success of persuading people to do what you would like them to do.

HOW SELLING GOT TACKY

It's a dirty game . . .

Selling is the highest paid profession in the world. Our leaders in business, politics, research, and the arts are all great salespeople or they have great salespeople on their payrolls. In our culture, skillful persuasion is an integral part of any successful endeavor. At some critical point in their careers these leaders needed to sell their ideas. Doing so turned the corner for them and carried them above their competitors.

Even if you have a world class idea and want to give it away for the good of humanity, you will have to sell the concept. If you can't sell it, you'll be stuck with your idea, poorer for your brilliance and generosity. It seems unfair but even freebies must be delivered with a certain salesmanship or the receiver does not perceive the true value of the gift.

Everything has to be sold. Yet so few people sell well that 15% of them make 85% of the available money. At your next sales meeting with 20 people, three will take home the money of 17 others. What is it that allows these three people to have all that money flow their way? Is it luck, hard work, and a good attitude? Or is it persuasive skill—understanding the transactional dynamics of the

selling process? After teaching sales for 20 years, I have found that the people who succeed consistently are skillful in verbal communication and understand the game dynamics of the transaction.

As a child, you are taught a popular illusion by anxious parents and tenured professors—if you learn a profession well and work hard, your future is secure and you will inevitably rise to the top, drive a fast car, and find beautiful people of the opposite sex pursuing you relentlessly. Like so many romantic promises, this is only an illusion. What parents and professors don't tell you is that the closer you get to the top, the better you must know how to sell because everyone at the top sells better. If you are going to the top of your profession, you must sell well, too.

I have a friend who is the president and chairman of the board of a large banking institution in the Northeast. Historically, bankers are the third worst salespeople in the world. (MBAs are first and engineers are second.) One evening over beers, I asked him how he perceived his job. "I am a salesman," he said. "I have to sell policy changes and new ideas. I sell the board of directors, the stockholders, the branch managers, the tellers, the cleaning crew, and the customers all at the same time." Incidentally, this salesman's salary is well over a million a year. Does he know something about banking? "Yes,"

he says with a big grin, “. . . but there are many people who know more about banking.”

So you need two professions: the one you have studied all this time, and your “other profession”—the profession of persuasion that allows you to make good use of all those years of education, practice, and dues-paying.

Obviously, it is important to learn and refine the skills of your chosen profession. Unfortunately, many of these skills will go wasted if you cannot get others to see and use the benefits of your knowledge.

Certain perverse people believe selling should be fun. I am one of them. Inside most firms and institutions selling is looked upon as a dirty but necessary business, tainting all those designated by bad luck or low station to pursue it; a demeaning job to be handed off to someone else as soon as you are kicked upstairs.

Horror stories of the unwilling and unprepared salesperson who is trapped in a presentation and must perform or lose the farm is grist for the humor writer’s mill. Since sales is a game like any other sport, these poor folks lose at a game they do not realize is being played.

Life is not designed to be a miserable existence; it is designed to be enjoyed. The enjoyment includes work

and especially persuasion. Selling is fun when you learn the game. Persuading other people to do what you want is a terrific sport. You don't believe it? The folks who sell well are having a wonderful time. Whether they were good at sales first or had fun first is unclear. But the message is clear—selling well means laughing a lot.

The seriousness with which management, sales managers, and motivational speakers address this most joyful of trades is depressing. The promise of a good time after becoming successful is not nearly as much fun as having a good time while getting there. Like life, it isn't the destination, it's the journey that counts.

In our culture, salespeople have a dubious image—lazy, disorganized, uncontrollable, unaccountable, unable to hold a regular job. If you can't do anything else, you can always be a salesperson.

Just the opposite is true. The best salespeople are so good (and often so far up the ladder) they don't appear to sell.

The selling profession has at least a five-year apprenticeship under good management. The best salespeople are trustworthy to a fault, conscientious, and hardworking. They make money the old-fashioned way: they earn it.

Ordinary people sell poorly because they don't understand that sales is a technical transaction. Good talkers often choose to become sales professionals. Unfortunately, they confuse talk with persuasion; they don't understand that selling well means listening well. Selling is problem solving, not hustling. Aggressiveness propels you into the mean streets but ruins sales.

Most salespeople won't stop talking long enough to let the Buyer make a decision. They fear the silence required for the Buyer to think. They guess at the Buyer's needs, and guess and guess and guess. And they are nearly always wrong. They work as if the Buyer cared about establishing a long term relationship with the Seller. To compound the error, they attempt to direct the Buyer into a decision using cheap semantic tricks taught to them by pots-and-pans salesmen.

Because Sellers are so often rebuffed or ignored by Buyers, the salesperson feels that selling is warfare: the Buyer is the enemy and words are ammunition. The Buyer knows the selling tricks and feels he is simply a mark for the Seller's commission check. The Buyer's defenses go on full alert. The Seller's advances are turned aside because they are so predictable, amateurish, and easily deflected.

Since the Buyer has so much more resistance than the Seller has stamina, the Seller runs out of courage, becomes listless and loses more often. And then the downward spiral begins. It's burnout time. A job change is in the wind. Again. Salespeople are cannon-fodder for the capitalistic warfare between Buyer and Seller.

The single reason for a salesperson's existence is to get the Buyer's commitment. Just how poor are salespeople at their jobs? In a study of professional salespeople (those who sell full time), 50% failed to ask for the Buyer's commitment to buy. This low level of performance is a waste of their company's money and a waste of everyone's time.

Our culture has repressed our listening skills. The media background noise, movies, TV, radio and print advertising all cater to that passive part of our mind that slows down for entertainment. In the ceaseless search for entertainment, we have lost the skills to listen critically to our conversational partner. We no longer actively listen to stories as we did before electronics. We passively watch them artificially reproduced as abstractly polished images moving in the two dimensions of the projection screen rather than the three dimensions of our minds. Whole lives are portrayed in two fast-paced, glitzy hours. We don't listen to what people say even when our

livelihood depends on it. We have become a nation of 260-million talking heads.

Studies show that the higher in business people get, the more information they obtain by listening. In tests at the boardroom level, executives retained 90% of the information delivered in a 45-minute presentation. Assembly line workers retained 25%. Which came first: listening skills or promotion? Who knows? For the average person, improving listening skills is a reasonable ambition. You may never make the boardroom, but it may get you off the assembly line.

Since birth we have been told the cultural fairy tale about the “born salesman.” Many people who say “I can’t sell a thing” compare themselves with these few shining lights. There are exactly as many born salespeople as there are born neurosurgeons, about 2% of the total. The rest of us must learn the selling profession.

Formal schooling doesn’t offer degrees in sales. There are degrees in marketing but none in persuasion. Usually persuasion is learned on the street or from veterans who took their hits on the sidewalks. Be at ease, my selling friend; good salespeople got good by getting killed, learning why they died, and then vowing never to die exactly the same way ever again.

3.

WHY THE SOFT SELL WORKS

Living well is the best revenge . . .

The “hard sell” approach has developed as a natural outgrowth of the American culture. It sounds normal to us as Buyers because our defensive agents are calloused to the constant attack of hard-sell messages. While defending ourselves against attack and sorting the puffery from representation, we make mincemeat of the salesperson. The hard sell doesn’t work well anymore. Buyers are hardened to attacks on their common sense.

Even though Buyers may not like the hard sell, they accept or reject it with a certain practiced comfort. They have heard it all before and their minds are prepared to deal with it. They listen and look for anything that triggers their defensive mechanisms—wrong tone of voice, negative body language, doubtful words—any attack, direct or implied. When their defensive agents spot something aggressive, Buyers reflexively erect armor against the Seller.

However, when the mechanics of the sales presentation are changed to deliver messages to the Buyer that bypass the usual attack routes, they flank the defensive armor. It is possible to have Buyers commit to a purchase rather painlessly, sometimes without even knowing it. Even when Buyers realize they are being persuaded, they still

enjoy it. Their “soldiers” are not prepared to mount a defense to say no—they just stand around and watch.

When you learn to sell softly, you retrain the old hard-sell habits you’ve built up over years of living in our culture. In learning the *Soft Sell*, first you learn new moves, how they are constructed and when to use them based on the Buyer’s usual hard-sell responses. Then, you practice to get your new habits in place. Once in place, your new habits do the selling work for you almost effortlessly.

It is much easier to teach soft selling techniques to new salespeople than to experienced, “high-mileage” salespeople. The new kids don’t have all those hard-sell habits getting in their way. High-mileage salespeople are a seething mass of illusion, bad information, enculturation, poor role models, flaky images, and hardened habits. They confuse motivation with sales training. They feel that they are so good and so experienced they don’t need to practice. Their hard-sell agents tell them that really good salespeople don’t need to study the profession of persuasion, which is like saying the quarterback for the Super Bowl team doesn’t need to practice and should only play during the game itself.

WHAT IS A SALESPERSON?

If you can't get a regular job . . .

My young daughter asked me for career advice. I told her, "Go into sales. Pick a profession that feels that selling is a sleazy activity, below its professional standards. Study that profession with the idea that you'll make your money selling. There will be little competition and your colleagues will be delighted to pay you handsomely, even more than they earn themselves."

When asked what they really do, most top executives admit, "I sell." During selling courses, they often make the most convincing presentations. Of course, occasionally, they make the worst presentations.

Sales is a profession identified with the worst of its practitioners, not the best. Because they sell so well, the public doesn't identify those at the top of the cultural heap—the politicians, movie stars, talk-show hosts, televangelists, and business leaders—as salespeople. As outstanding salespeople, they are rarely caught practicing the selling trade.

The best of them are so good that people simply like their "personalities." People easily confuse skill with personality. When you study the best, you find they

You need two professions: Your profession and the "other profession," the profession of persuasion.

make many mechanical selling moves exactly right. Is this due to practice or coincidence? Natural talent or learned response? Only they know for sure how much is talent and how much is learned. The results are the same. They convince, move ideas, create change, and solve problems. We love them for it and reward them with the best our culture offers: fame, fortune, cool clothes, and big houses.

THE CULTURAL CONTRACT

Made to be broken . . .

Except for some cultural snobs, every home has at least one television and several radios. Cable and satellite TV engulf us. Billboards, newspapers, magazines, internet, direct mail, even clothes attack us.

The advertising industry reports that the city person is bombarded by 61,000 advertising messages every day. We consumers handle the overload by not handling it at all. Targeted by this media assault, they tune out civilization. They refuse to carry the load because they can't carry it and stay sane. Besides, who cares about all that drivel?

The industrial revolution and mass production brought mass selling. Until then, selling was personal: foodstuffs, handicrafts, tradesmen's services, livestock, etc. Goods and services were sold by the producer directly to the user. When mass production grew it predictably overloaded inventories and someone was hired to sell the overstock. Voila!—a new profession was born.

That new pox upon the land, mass merchandising, erupted with newspapers and radio. The television huckster—strident, price-conscious, aggressive, and

abrasive—embodied the new image of the salesperson and replaced the wagon-bed snake-oil salesman and the side show barker.

As children, the cultural stereotype of the American salesperson became part of our lives. We watched continuous commercials interrupted every few minutes by Road Runner and Bugs Bunny. Even the pre-TV Bugs adopted his unique brand of urbane shyster slickness from real hustlers. Later, he was perfectly copied by real-life TV hucksters, completing the circle. The selling stereotype became ingrained in us.

When we find ourselves selling, the image of the TV pitchman is our subconscious role model. As the stereotype, we envision ourselves pitching to a willing, watching audience, mesmerizing them with the power of our golden words—like a rock star.

As Buyers, we endure pitching; we ignore unprovable claims; we suffer abrasiveness. We know it's just the selling game, but we distrust salespeople who work like this. They don't get to us very often. When they do, it's usually an unhappy experience, leaving us with the vague feeling that somehow we lost and they won. A classic zero-sum game—the Seller wins, the Buyer loses.

The best salespeople are so good, they don't appear to be selling.

We are so convinced that sales is pitching, we accept low levels of sales success and think nothing of it. Put on your selling hat and your personality changes. Suddenly you are the goal-striver, the attacker, the shuck-and-jive pitchman of your business. Glossy words and a forceful stance in thought and deed become your stock-in-trade. The exhortations of the sales manager, the motivational speaker, or your own rampant ambition must be heeded. Still, you hate the feeling. Even winning doesn't feel as rewarding as it should. Why do you feel like you are losing? Is it a double bind—the Buyer and the Seller both lose? Is it selling warfare?

Those reactions are cultural. In our cultural agreement, “The Seller attacks—the Buyer defends.” As Buyers, our emotions are armor-plated just like a medieval knight. We see and hear little. We are totally self-involved. The defending armor is built to protect against unskilled, aggressive salespeople hammering at us . . . beating us until we are numb. The Buyer's armor is a mind-callous developed from rough handling. For salespeople, that's bad news.

But there is good news: the armor covers only the front of the Buyer. Behind, their unprotected bums flap in the open breeze, willing and waiting to be seen by anyone

who shows enough sense and technical selling skill to get behind their frontal armor. Why no armor-plate back there? Because salespeople skillful enough to get behind the Buyers' armor treat them gently, tactfully, and respectfully so there is no ugly armor buildup. The Buyers find no need to defend themselves. This technique of flanking the Buyer's armor is called the *SoftSell*.

WHAT DO YOU SELL FIRST?

Illusion to the death . . .

About the only thing ordinary salespeople agree upon is the idea that you must sell yourself first. This notion seems to have universal acceptance.

Here is a short drill. Do this drill. Don't skip over it searching for some career-altering magic bullet later on in the book. It is a short and relatively painless exercise.

Here's the scene: You just received a call from a lawyer representing your Uncle Willy. Your uncle became estranged from the family when you were a child, moved to the West, and got rich in the junk business. He's just passed on to the great junkyard in the sky. Since he smelled bad, never got on well with the ladies, and never produced heirs, you are named in his will.

His lawyer tells you that you have been left a legacy. ("Oh, boy," you think, "here's the new BMW I've been lusting after.") The lawyer goes on: Uncle Willy knew you were in sales and, in the spirit of America, left you the greatest gift he knew—the gift of opportunity.

So instead of leaving you a pile of cash, Uncle Willy bought you a 60-second TV commercial on the most popular late night talk show. You don't get any money

but you do get the opportunity to stand up and sell yourself to thirty million people watching you between their toes.

Write a one-minute television spot selling yourself. It should run about 120 words long—about one page of double-spaced typewritten copy. (This is perhaps the most valuable lesson in this book so don't turn to the next page until this assignment is done. Remember, trustworthiness is a trait of the superior salesperson. Also, don't cop out. Don't let a little thing like having to write one page of copy delay your success.

Write your 60-second commercial here (or use a separate sheet of paper):

Now look critically at what you have written. Answer the following questions:

1. Taking the global view, that is, compared to other people in the world, would you buy from this person?
2. Since the only reason for being a salesperson is to get a commitment from the Buyer, did you ask for a commitment? Circle your closing statement or question asking for the Buyer's commitment.
3. What was the most used word in the commercial? Circle every "I" in the script.

Here are the typical responses from students in VASS EXECUTIVE SALES TRAINING® workshops:

1. Without any warning, I ask students to give their presentations verbally; most are poorly thought out. You would think that after two or three weak commercials, everyone else would frantically prepare. They don't. They wait for the train to run over them. It seems a simple exercise. It isn't. While salespeople agree that they must sell themselves first, it is an unusual case, even remarkable, when they actually know how to do so.
 2. Getting the order is the *raison d'être* for the salesperson. Out of a hundred students, only four or
-

five will ask the Buyer to take any action toward commitment, even to calling an imaginary toll-free telephone number.

3. The most used word: "I."

The obvious question arising from this exercise: If you believe you sell yourself first, why aren't you better prepared to do so?

You have believed this illusion without questioning the validity of the idea. Tell a lie often enough and everyone will believe it. You've heard that before. Here it is in living color. To most of us, "selling yourself" means being friendly or professional or technically competent or having a dynamic personality. Maybe a great smile or dressing correctly or marrying the boss's favorite offspring helps.

The reality is that selling yourself is a technical exercise requiring transactional mechanics. Properly done, your personality, smile, connections, and technical knowledge become secondary issues.

If half of the professional salespeople in America never ask for the order, the remaining half usually ask for the order crudely and abrasively, attacking the Buyer at the pivotal moment of seduction. In spite of this childlike

awkwardness, those who ask for the order most often close the most sales.

A sale is closed the moment the Buyer's mind agrees with your presentation. What you, the Seller, are looking for is Buyer commitment. If you aren't looking for the Buyer's commitment, then you are a professional guest, a hanger-on in the business world, a nonproductive sycophant searching perpetually for the free gift of business from a merciful Buyer. Good luck! You'll need it.

About the word "I." If you learn nothing else from this little book, learn this well: When you are selling, nobody cares whether you live or die as long as you don't die on their property. The Buyer prefers that you die on government property where someone will take care of your untidy remains.

Let's examine this for a moment. Who is the Buyer worried about most? Who concerns the Buyer day and night? Whose pocketbook and prestige are at stake? Whose career is most important? Who is the Buyer thinking about while talking to you?

The Buyer's single, ongoing, residual concern in the entire world is that individual's own interest. Just like you. Buyers aren't "them." Buyers are "us."

The Buyer has three questions: “So what?”, “What’s in it for me?”, and “Can you prove it?”

As Buyers, we don’t give a skinny rat’s behind about salespeople, only about the benefits they offer “us.” So here is the rule: The word “I” has no place in a sales presentation.

At best, “selling yourself first” is a shaky idea on which to base a profession: it is a myth. You do not sell yourself first. In real life, you sell Buyers the benefits of your solution to their business and personal problems.

So, on the premise that Buyers are us, let’s discuss how we got to be the way we are.

And about your commercial—even great execution cannot save a poor concept. Even when attempting to sell yourself, you must put your ego away and sell the benefits you bring to the Buyer.

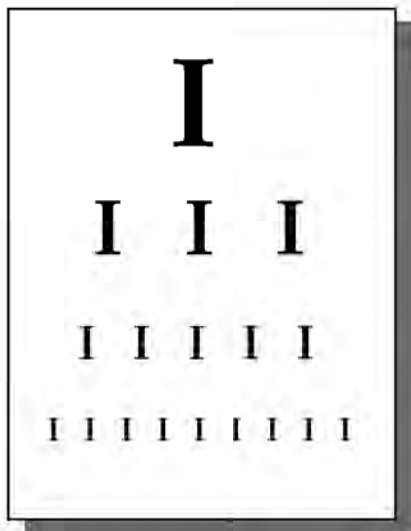
Return to your 60-second commercial and underline the Benefits you wrote for the Buyer.

7.

THE “I” CHART

Stealing back the spotlight . . .

The ordinary presentation includes innumerable references back to the salesperson. Usually “I” is used. We more sensitive types substitute “we.”



The Salesperson's I Chart

Stay off the I Chart. Eliminating I from your selling presentation increases your sales.

Sprinkling “I” throughout the presentation like raisins in oatmeal constantly shifts the emphasis away from the Buyer back toward the Seller. The phrase, “I think . . .” is most common.

Here are three reasons not to use “I think . . .”:

1. Redundancy. If you say it, you must think it.
2. Professionals don’t think; professionals know.
3. Pulls the center of attention toward you rather than the Buyer.

Since the Buyer’s whole being is self-seeking, stating what you think weakens your presentation and easily raises arguments in the Buyer’s mind. Even when the Buyer asks, “What do you think?” they really mean, “What do you know?”

“I think . . .” is deeply buried in our everyday usage. It’s a habit you probably own and just never noticed. Start noticing it now. During my selling courses, each time someone uses that self-serving qualifier, everyone in class snaps their fingers. Within two hours all students begin to alter their behavior away from themselves and closer to the Buyer’s point-of-view, putting their own opinions aside in an attempt to find the Buyer’s.

When you’re selling, nobody cares what you think.

Twelve Most Persuasive Words

According to a Yale University study, the twelve most persuasive words in the language are:

- you
- money
- save
- new
- results
- easy
- health
- safety
- love
- discovery
- proven
- guarantee

Proctor and Gamble, that spends billions on advertising added “free” and “sex” to the list.

You will notice the word “I” appears neither in this list nor will it appear in a list a hundred times as long.

PUFFERY AND REPRESENTATION

The expensive warm wind . . .

Puffery is hot air. Webster's Dictionary defines it as, "Flattering publicity, exaggerated commendation especially for promotional purposes." In selling, it is claims that are unproven as stated. Some typical puffery words and phrases:

- "We're Number One . . ."
- "We're the best in our business (city / region / nation / galaxy) . . ."
- . . . save big money
- . . . a lot
- . . . high profits
- . . . the fastest, etc.

While these examples of puffery are stock-in-trade for the advertising business, as a Buyer you don't take them seriously. No one else does either. As Sellers, we want to be taken seriously by everyone we meet. We have tons of money involved, oft times survival itself. The fastest way to break trust with your Buyer is to waggle your verbal finger high in the air and claim that you or your company is "Number One."

Representation, on the other hand, is provable, defensible, and believable. Webster's defines it as, "Statement of fact."

Representations are facts proven as stated—figures, testimonials, expert opinions, published articles, or any other hard information about the product or service from a reputable source.

Some typical representational statements:

- Increase profits by 8%
- Cut labor costs by 4%
- Save 45 minutes per day
- In the same location since 1970

In sales, puffery is a way of life. The Buyer's armor-plated defenses expect puffery. The Buyer is rarely disappointed. The Buyer also expects to distrust you or what you say. (You know how salespeople lie.) With much justification, the Buyer shrugs you off. This is a significant reason salespeople are perceived as bothersome clones. Most of us make the same mistakes and use the same words; we sound interchangeable. We sound like a poorly conceived TV commercial.

Puff statements:

"Because we have been in business for so long, you can rely on us to be there when you need us."

"As you may know, we are Number One in the market."

There are other puff words that, like a black hole in the universe, absorb more energy than they transmit. Like any new trend, these energy absorbers develop currency and become fashionable. People use them to make themselves sound important as full service, proactive, professional marketing folks trying to be creative in the way they change the paradigm and add value to customer relations and increase total quality through a partnership with their clients. For example:

| | | |
|--------------------|----------------|----------------|
| full service | total quality | family values |
| proactive | re-engineering | luxury |
| professional | consultant | all natural |
| creative | relationship | on sale |
| paradigm | rightsizing | sales training |
| value added | win-win | high-tech |
| customer relations | recycleable | partnership |

There is a whole long list of others you can build once you understand the problem from the Buyer's point of view.

Because of their indefinite or complicated meanings, these words often leave larger implications of what isn't, rather than what is.

For instance, the word “creative” can raise serious doubts in a Buyer. As we used to say in the design business, “People who use the word ‘creative,’ ain’t.” Those who easily use the word (usually about themselves) are often the least creative. People who create for a living struggle with the word because it implies giving a star performance on demand under impossible conditions. Genuinely creative people know how hard it is to make rain on request.

You’ll notice that professionals, consultants, politicians, motivational speakers, and advertising agencies love black-hole words; they think these words can’t come back and bite them. Not true. Scary lawsuits with fangs spring from puffery.

Avoid black-hole words. From the Buyer’s point of view they are heavy with baggage.

Representational statements:

“In the 15 years we have been in business, we have developed a response team that responds to our customers’ calls within two hours.”

“In a study of our industry, Metropolitan Business News found that we were first in sales in our market.”

Puffery makes you look weak and not very bright. Representation makes you look strong and smart.

If you want to be believed, obey this law of the street:

LAW OF CREDIBILITY

Don't say anything you can't prove.

Be able to prove everything you say.

Every game needs some ground rules. Before building a presentation, we'll start out by telling the truth—Representation—and selling the right stuff—Benefits. We'll develop some elements that make you look honest and competent—Proof Statements. And we'll discuss how your business can be made unique and different from the competition.

FEATURES AND BENEFITS

Sell the right thing . . .

In any business, the only benefits that sell are **power**, **profit**, **prestige** and **pleasure**, or some permutation of these four basic human needs. Salespeople are mediocre at translating the Features of their product or service into Benefits for the Buyer—they end up trying to sell Features. By converting your business Features to Buyer Benefits, you can reposition your business to differentiate you from your competitors.

Features and Benefits are used throughout the selling presentation. In this Buyer-response form of selling, you'll use Benefits far more often than Features. The rules are:

- Features and Benefits always go together . . . like Mom and Dad or ham and eggs
- You may sell Benefits alone
- *Never* sell Features alone
- The more Benefits you sell, the more likely you are to close

Learn to sell Benefits to the Buyer, and you'll earn Benefits for yourself.

The Features are about your stuff, your products' or services' physical attributes—color, size, frequency, cost, activity, etc.

The Benefits are about the Buyers' stuff—what your products or services do for Buyers. Do the Benefits make them feel better about life—give them power; make them sexier, prettier, richer, more comfortable or secure, smarter, more competitive? Do they save time, money, fear or hassle?

Benefits move the dialog to the highest level of verbal communication—persuasion. Generally, Buyers are more interested in the Benefits of your product or service (in terms of power, profit, prestige, or pleasure) than in the Features of the product or service itself.

Any discussion of Features and Benefits can easily become an argument because they are really two different points of view. Simplify the discussion by asking the question, “Is what we are discussing for the Seller or the Buyer?” If for the Seller, it's a Feature; if for the Buyer, a Benefit.

Example of Features and Benefits

PanDowdy Computers:

Feature:

Model # 2100 SuperSpeed Computer Intuitive Interface

Benefits:

- Reduce training time per program by 30% (profit)
- Decrease downtime by 50% (profit, power)
- Reduce operator stress levels by half (profit, pleasure)

Feature:

Model #2100 compatible with both PanDowdy and IBM programs

Benefits:

- Choice of best software yields increased productivity (power, profit)
- Maximum flexibility in business (power)
- Saves 25% of the investment in programs (profit)

You can tell the class of the salesperson by the Buyer Benefits used in the presentation.

Rocksolid Malpractice Insurance:

Feature:

24-hour approval for new-hire physicians

Benefit:

- Puts your new doctors in the treatment room six weeks sooner, creating up to \$45,000 in practice revenue per new physician (profit)

Feature:

Aggressive claims management policy

Benefit:

- Settles 95% of all claims without an indemnity payment (profit, power, prestige)
- Eliminates four to five claims per year and subsequent complaints to the National Physicians Data Bank which can cost a doctor as much as \$350,000 over five years (profit, prestige, pleasure)

Great Benefits = Great Salesperson.

Zoom Ball Bearing Company:

Feature:

Zoom TefSlick hardened surgical steel balls

Benefit:

- Lasts 10% longer and reduces bearing failure by 65% (profit, pleasure)

Feature:

Just-in-Time Inventory program

Benefit:

- Reduces paperwork, shipping, and warehousing costs by 10% or more (profit, pleasure)

Pinstripe Management Consulting:

Feature:

76 Years in Business

Benefit:

- Experience shortens the time needed to complete mergers and acquisitions by 43% (profit, pleasure, power, prestige)

Except for the Benefits you sell, nobody cares about your message.

Feature:

International operation

Benefit:

- Provides the same array of services to global companies and makes it easier for your offices to communicate with each other, saving time (profit, power, prestige)
- Helps avoid expensive delays and missteps that can add one to three years to the acquisition process (profit, pleasure)

To be heard and remembered by the Buyer, often Benefits must be quantified, that is, expressed in numbers, ratios, percentages, and dollars and cents.

Examples from other businesses:

Feature:

Home near public school

Benefits:

- Property maintains value
 - Value increases 3% per year (profit, prestige)
 - Convenience (pleasure)
 - Safety for children (pleasure)
 - Family neighborhood (profit, pleasure)
-

Feature:

The Uptown Fitness Club

Benefits:

- Save time: only 10 minutes away (profit, pleasure)
- Many exercise options (pleasure)
- Pleasant surroundings (pleasure)
- Member-oriented facility (pleasure, power)
- Prestige of upscale club (pleasure, power)
- Quality membership (pleasure, power, profit)
- Business opportunities with other members (profit, pleasure)
- Wide choice of equipment and courts (pleasure, prestige)

Feature:

“Cash Track Program”: a business-loan plan for small businesses

Benefits:

- Increases efficiency by 6% (profit, pleasure)
 - Speeds cash flow by 15% (profit)
 - Offers quick answers that ease management worries (pleasure, power)
 - Enhances competitiveness (power, pleasure)
-

We see many businesses caught up in the breathless race to create new features for their products and services. This continuous upgrade path winds through our economy because your Buyer demands it. Surprisingly, there is little long term selling advantage created by new features because they are usually matched by competitors within six months; sometimes within days.

Hot new features by themselves offer an unreliable short-term advantage; perhaps even a disadvantage if not sold well. Selling your new unique Features can cost you money over the long run. However, these same new Features, combined with refined and persuasive Benefits, can create a reliable competitive edge. The Buyer is not persuaded until you translate your hot new Features into hot new Benefits.

When you become expert at this you may choose to use *only* Benefits quantified in dollars, percentages, or ratios. It's faster and easier for everyone; Buyers love to see and hear quantified Benefits because your presentation sounds so intelligent.

THE PROOF STATEMENT

Looking good, sounding honest . . .

Use a Proof Statement whenever the Buyer expresses *doubt* about your product or service.

A Proof Statement is a statement containing facts, figures, testimonials, parallel circumstances, and anything else that is tangible, quantifiable, or real. It is good to use expert opinions from someone who does not have direct involvement in your transaction. A Proof Statement is a material representation and the opposite of puffery.

When the Buyer expresses doubt about your presentation, program, benefits, company or math, you are compelled to use facts. The Buyer is directing you to deliver a Proof Statement. It can be used as part of your answer to a Buyer's objection to prove the Benefit you are selling.

The Proof Statement is constructed in the following fashion. First, *state* the Benefit (not the Feature) you are about to prove. Then *prove* that Benefit using facts, figures, opinion of experts in the field, testimonials of others in the industry, or other tangible information that is quantifiable and real. Using those facts, *apply* the Benefit to the Buyer (personally, if possible).

Say only what you can prove. Be ready to prove everything you say.

Proof Statement components:

- *State* the Benefit you are going to prove.
- *Prove* the Benefit for the Buyer.
- *Apply* the Benefit to the Buyer.

A Proof Statement example:

“PanDowdy Computer can save you 65% of your computer support costs (State the Benefit) according to an Iris & Company survey of 62 user firms (Prove the Benefit). In your firm, that can mean a time savings of 1,160 man-hours every year or about \$45,000.” (Apply the Benefit to the Buyer.)

Using the Proof Statement helps you persuade in several ways. It makes you look honest. It also makes you look prepared and competent. Honesty, preparation, and competence—these traits take salespeople to the top. There is no way to stop them. On this level of sales, there is little competition.

The Proof Statement is such an obvious selling move one would think that most folks have their Proof Statements together. And of course they don't. Their Proof Statements are in the file cabinet back at the office hiding under last week's moldy lunch bag in a ragged envelope labeled “Industry Stuff.”

Proof Statements make you sound honest and competent as few other things can.

Salespeople sound remarkably incompetent when they sell in the accepted “shuck-and-jive” style. The verbal dancing—all those wonderful little tricks of syntax that sales managers devise—can be easily dropped with the development of some reasonable and logical Proof Statements. Puffery, that sudden burst of warm wind blowing unprovable claims, is the standard currency of ordinary salespeople. Puffery is the stuff sold to a suspicious public.

You’ve seen puffery in action. You are the Buyer. Flashing a big smile, the Seller says to you,

“You’re making a terrific buy here and I think you are going to make a ton of money with this service. That’s the reason we are Number One in the business.”

You look back at all those shiny teeth and shake your head slowly, hoping your real feelings don’t show. You don’t believe anything. You understand it’s only a salesperson trying to make a buck.

Same scene but this time the Seller says,

“This service has proven to work 84% of the time. A study published by the National Professional Services magazine indicates that most services have only a 61% efficiency. That 23% difference will allow you to look at more year-end profits.”

As a Buyer, the Proof Statement responds directly to your doubt; it relates directly to your condition and shows how the product or service can solve your problem or answer a need.

Well-constructed Proof Statements dispense with puffery; they make the Seller credible. A study conducted in the Northeast found 75% of first-time Buyers bought because they believed the Seller was honest. Proof Statements make you look honest. But, if you want to be a crook, well-prepared Proof Statements can help you there, too.

Major companies with high-profile names still sell with shuck-and-jive. Imagine what they could achieve if they were prepared to prove everything they said. Unfortunately, today’s Buyers expect you to puff them. They are rarely disappointed. There is no faster way to break trust

with the Buyer than to say that you or your company is “Number One” or “the best.” This is such a phony ploy that inside, your Buyer is laughing at you. Occasionally the Buyer is even less subtle. Sometimes they will laugh right in your face.

Don't puff. Relying on puffery is a dangerous and expensive game. Misrepresentation (that can develop into lawsuit) is easy when you are puffing. Develop a Proof Statement that goes with the answer to each Buyer's objection. You should also have one for every representation you make about the Benefits of your product or service.

Proof Statement examples:

The Buyer says:

“I'm not sure your product is as good as you say.”

You say:

“The Acme Autoslotter can save you time and money (The Benefit you are going to prove). World Hardware Magazine said the Acme is 22% more efficient to operate (Proved the benefit quoting an accepted source). That saves you time that you can use to increase profits in other areas.” (Applied the Benefit to the Buyer.)

Rocksolid Malpractice Insurance:

The Buyer says:

"How do we profit from your insurance coverage?"

You say:

"Rocksolid's services increase profits for medical groups and hospitals (Benefit you are going to prove). Mercy Hospital in Berry, Rhode Island saved \$27,000 in direct costs of risk management while increasing managed care services by 8% (Proved the Benefit quoting an accepted source). This range of services can increase profits 20% to 30% for medical groups like yours while helping you practice better medicine." (Applied the Benefit to the Buyer.)

Zoom Roller Bearing:

"Zoom TefSlick bearings can reduce your assembly line downtime. (Benefit you are going to prove) Metallurgical Testing Magazine showed that surgical steel balls gave 10% longer wear than competitive brands. (Proved the Benefit quoting an accepted source.) That 10% longer wear means about a 2% gain in total assembly line production for your company." (Applied Benefit to the Buyer.)

Often, the Buyer is shopping for a salesperson, not a specific company or a product.

Pinstripe Management Consulting:

“Pinstripe can help you shorten your merger time (Benefit you are going to prove). With our last three Fortune 500 clients, we were able to shorten their merger time by an average of 43% (Proved the Benefit). That means you can get your company productive after merger and save nearly four months of downtime that usually occurs while people figure out their new job.” (Applied the Benefit to the Buyer.)

A final note: It might seem there are few Proof Statements you can use when selling ideas.

“But *ideas* don’t have solid proofs available,” you say.

Of course they do. They have renderings, projections, market studies, other related ideas, case histories, pro formas, and opinions from disinterested experts. Selling ideas is the most fun. If properly prepared and presented, an idea is the most exciting product in our culture. Ideas fire the imagination and allow Buyers to become involved with their own concept of how the idea might apply. Just because an idea doesn’t exist on the physical plane doesn’t mean it need be vaguely presented.

Three Underlying Assumptions

To build a powerful, honest presentation suitable to any profession, whether you are a bricklayer or an actuary, design your presentation around the following underlying assumptions.

Use:

- “You” not “I”
(Focus on your Buyer.)
- Representation, with proof, not Puffery
(Don't tell lies.)
- Benefits not Features
(Sell the right thing.)

MARKET DIFFERENTIATION

Sounding like the Joneses . . .

Market differentiation allows you to position your selling effort so that your product, service, or company shows up as a separate entity from all your competitors.

Let's complete another short exercise. In 40 words or less, and without puffing, write a statement explaining how your product, service, or company is provably different from your competitors:

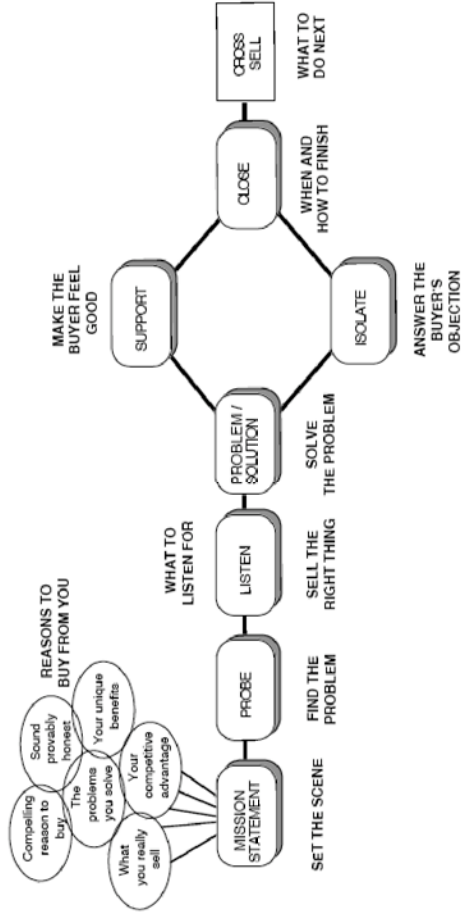
In your Marketing Statement . . .

- Did you use puff words like "the best . . .," "Number One . . .," "only . . .," "honest . . .," etc., that aren't provable?
- Did you quantify and prove everything in your statement?
- Does it contain a compelling Benefit for the Buyer?

If your business is similar to your competitor's, don't be discouraged. Ultimately, the Buyer's perception of differences between one business and another hinges on how well they are treated by the salespeople. Buyers shop for salespeople more than anything else.

Part II

**Building
Your Presentation**



The Selling Game

The *Soft Sell* in a nutshell:

DON'T TALK - Listen

DON'T TELL - Ask

DON'T SELL - Solve

DON'T PITCH - Probe

DON'T LEAVE - Close

While this concept is simple enough, you cannot rely upon your good intentions and intuition to pull it off; it is counter-intuitive and demands well-constructed tactics to work.

THE SEVEN SELLING MOVES

The basic structure of the Soft Sell . . .

Just as a carpenter has tools to work his chosen profession, a salesperson has tools to work the trade of persuasion. Salespeople confuse their great ambition, perfect attitude and working knowledge of a product or service with the basic tools of the profession. It's like the carpenter mistaking the desire to build a house for the implements required for its construction. Once these tools are mastered the carpenter may build an outhouse or a castle, depending on skill, talent, vision, attention, and luck.

The Seller has similar tools that encourage the Buyer to author the sale, to feel important and yes, even to like the Seller while doing so. These seven moves—Mission Statement, Probe, Listen, Problem/Solution, Isolate, Support, Close—are hammer and saw for the persuader. Now that you've learned the difference between Puffery and Representation, Features and Benefits, and Proof Statements to differentiate your product or service from your competitors, you can use these tools to position your *SoftSell* presentation.

The first duty of the salesperson is to survive the presentation, that is, keep the meeting alive long enough to find a Buyer's problem to solve. The second duty is to solve the problem and close the sale as painlessly as possible for both Buyer and Seller. To perform these two difficult duties, the Seller's tactics need to be designed in advance. This section shows why and how to prepare the basic technical moves required in the *SoftSell*.

We will use examples of fictional companies throughout to give you a sense of how the tactics are built for different products and services. Our examples are for ball bearings (usually considered to be a commodity), medical liability insurance, personal computers, and professional consulting services. We've also included some random examples. Note that the illustrations are generic and simplified to reveal the structure of each tactic so you may apply the mechanics to your own stuff.

Selling Move #1

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement introduces you to the Buyer.

As modern business moves faster, there is less time to schmooze the Buyers. They are rushed. Their attention is short. Until you have established trust and a working relationship, the personal side of the sales call suffers. A sale can happen in 90 seconds. Sometimes it takes years to make a trusting friend.

A Mission Statement is a snapshot of your business; it sets the scene for a cold call, a first meeting, or the meeting agenda. It's your story in 40 words or less that explains why you are taking up the Buyer's valuable time. It often explains your real business—the *Benefits* you sell in the marketplace. It's also used to introduce yourself on a cold call, any time you are asked about your business, or as an opening line in requesting an appointment by telephone.

The Mission Statement covers the following:

- Your name and/or company name
- Your business objectives, i.e. why you are taking up the Buyer's time
- What kinds of problems you solve
- The benefits of your solution

It is easier to make a sale than a friend.

A Mission Statement example:

“My name is Nigel Furn from HighNoon Refoliators. We help home owners reduce water usage for lawn care and save them up to 50% in irrigation costs.”

A Mission Statement isn't particularly easy to write. Sometimes it takes a year or more. Most of us are so involved with our product or service we don't stop to decide exactly what we do from the Buyer's point-of-view. There's the rub. Our interest lies in our own products and services. Conversely, Buyers are only interested in what's in it for them.

As the tempo of business quickens each year, you have a painfully short time to make the kazanga-leap from being “just another salesperson” to being a trusted problem-solver for the Buyer. About four minutes. Every word you say must pay off in trust and professionalism. You buy your way in with Benefits to capture the Buyer's attention. Opening with a Mission Statement sets the scene for the conversation to come. As long as you are talking about Benefits for the Buyer (you'll notice I didn't use the “F” word—“Features”), you have the Buyer's full attention from the first word. When you come through the door offering Benefits rather than some lame attempt to make small talk on the Buyer's busy time, you look and sound more professional. While

we salespeople are wonderful, warm, sensitive, and caring human beings, these days we only get to show that by talking about the Buyer's Benefits. You can always make friends and talk about the Buyer's kids, kitty, and sailboat later. After the sale is made.

Of the Mission Statement elements, your name and company are the least important. For the purposes of brevity you can leave them out if you like. Your Buyer doesn't care who you are or where you're from until you have established that you carry important problem-solving solutions. The Buyer will then ask your name and hear it, even scribble it down on a scrap of paper. Yeah!

Some Mission Statement examples:

"PanDowdy builds computers designed to help you increase your company's productive computer time by as much as 23%."

"Acme Insurance provides protection for medical groups that can increase annual revenues \$12,000 to \$20,000 per physician."

“Zoom Ball Bearing makes TefSlick bearings that help manufacturers keep their assembly lines moving by as much as 200 additional hours a year.”

“Pinstripe Management Consulting helps growing companies reduce the time required to make new corporate acquisitions profitable by 43%.”

You will notice that the common elements of Mission Statements are that they are short, to the point, use or allude to numbers, and create a clear snapshot of your business.

To help your Buyer understand what you do, obey this street law:

LAW OF CLARITY

If you can't explain what you sell to a ten-year-old child then you don't know what you sell.

Selling Move #2

Probes

Our culture is an impolite one and questions normally asked the Buyer are frontal, i.e., tactless, adversarial and accusative. Common questions usually start with some form of the verb “to be”:

*“Will you . . . Have you . . . Can you . . . Won’t you . . .
. Are you . . . Is this . . . Were they . . . Should you . . .
Would you . . . Could you . . . etc.”*

The Seller usually charges directly at the point with the subtlety of a troop of Boy Scouts. While these questions sound culturally acceptable, they aren’t persuasion. Until trained to question well, ordinary salespeople attack the Buyer with Frontal probes. (Yes, dear reader, I am talking about you.)

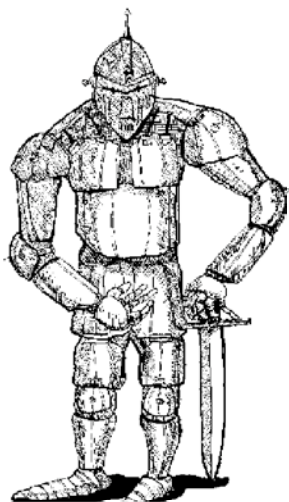
Sometimes they attempt to set clumsy traps using contractions to lead the Buyer into a favorable answer: *“Wouldn’t you like to be the first person in your industry to use this ground-breaking technology?”*

There is plenty of room for subtlety in selling. A key component of the *Soft Sell* is asking questions that require the Buyer to think and reach inside for the answer so as to reveal needs the Seller can fulfill with a product or service.

There are two types of probes:

- **Frontal probes** fly directly into the Buyer’s armor—
“Mr. Rogers, are you the decision-maker for the company?”
- **Flanking probes** get behind the Buyer’s armor—
“Mr. Rogers, how are decisions like this made inside your firm?”

When we play our Buyer’s role, each of us is armor-plated.



Buyer—front view



Buyer—side view

Frontal probes are questions that can be answered with a single word. These probes are generally used when the Seller attacks the Buyer. (Not on purpose, of course. Ordinary salespeople protest with unarguable certainty that they are “only requesting specific information!”) The problem arises because the Buyer’s defensive agents are perfectly prepared to resist the Seller—to give a negative answer if possible. Frontal probes are tactless.

They sound like attacks, or at least challenges. It's difficult not to sound adversarial using Frontal probes. It's how the Buyer's armor got built.

Ordinary salespeople are poor information gatherers. They believe they ask questions that gain information about the Buyer except that they nearly always use Frontal probes that force the Buyer into areas of the Seller's interest. Forcing the Buyer into those restricted areas seriously limits the Seller's opportunity to uncover Buyer information upon which an agreement can be struck. Frontal probes restrict both the area of conversation and the range of the Buyer's imagination. Since the questions usually call for a one-word answer (usually yes or no), the Seller must be very precise about the information that is needed. The Seller must carry the conversational burden since a one-word answer relieves the Buyer of having to think much. Frontal probes make the Seller work like crazy. And the more the Seller works, the harder it is to close softly.

The Buyer is used to yes-or-no questions not only from salespeople but from everyone. With Frontal probes, the Buyer has a ready answer even before the question is fully asked. The answer comes from outside the Buyer. It's quick and automatic and unhelpful in building a sales presentation because every salesperson asks it.

Flanking probes are used whenever the Seller wants to discover what the Buyer needs or wants; uncover the Buyer's dissatisfaction with current products or services; allow the Buyer to express opinions about anything; and encourage the Buyer to discuss problems or needs without threat. In the *Soft Sell*, Flanking probes allow the Buyer and Seller to be non-adversarial.

Flanking probes work because the Buyer isn't used to being asked non-manipulative questions. The Buyer relaxes because the probe doesn't contain implications that the Buyer made poor decisions in the past or will in the future. The Buyer becomes non-defensive in giving information especially when you make the Buyer feel good, that is, support at every opportunity. By answering openly, the Buyer carries the burden of the presentation. The Seller has plenty of time to listen and think.

A Flanking probe requires the Buyer to search for the answer, make decisions, and create an opinion. It takes the Buyer off "automatic" and onto "think." The Buyer must go inside to develop a reasonable and well-thought answer. Usually that mind search takes some time. So, if the Buyer answers quickly, the probe is probably a Frontal probe.

Obviously, getting behind the Buyer's armor with Flanking probes is more effective. It makes the Seller look

smart, gets the Buyer to speak easily, and gives the Seller the information needed without threatening the Buyer. It is the non-adversarial way of asking questions.

Another expensive habit of ordinary salespeople is to ask several questions in a row, without letting the Buyer answer, and then guess at the answer (or add other questions as an afterthought) which limits the Buyer's response—a "run-on question."

A "Run-on question" example:

"Ms. Wilson, has that category been selling well for you? . . . have you been happy with it? . . . or not? . . . is it the right model for your customers? . . . or do they ask for something else? . . . another brand perhaps?"

If salespeople don't probe well for background information, they don't know how to launch the presentation. When salespeople don't know what to do, they talk. The ordinary salesperson vomits the presentation onto the Buyer's desk top. Only rarely will a salesperson ask a question that allows the Buyer to get involved, make decisions, or help author the sale.

Proper preparation of carefully constructed probes converts a mundane, lusterless presentation into one where Buyers carry the burden and feel good about themselves, the Seller and the decision that has been made, and give

the Seller more information than is needed to close.

Flanking probes start with one of these words: *who, how, what, why, when, where*. For instance, you sell software and you ask:

“Ms. Quigley, how’s the new computer system impacting your business?”

Ms. Quigley now has the opportunity to vent her spleen about the new system. Because Flanking probes are not specific, she will talk about the parts of the system that are important to her—what it does right and what it does wrong. Like most of us, she is rarely asked her opinion by anyone, so her answers will be honest. Now, sit back and listen for opportunities to give Supporting Statements. Ms. Quigley feels good about giving her opinions and you continue to make her feel good as you introduce Benefits of your product or service.

Flanking probes encourage self-expression on the Buyer’s part. They keep the Seller from playing fortune teller: “Let me gaze deeply into my crystal ball and tell you what your future holds. Ahhhh, it holds exactly what I am selling. Isn’t that amazing?”

Ordinary salespeople endlessly play a game called “Let Me Guess.” Instead of probing to determine the Buyer’s attitudes and opinions, problems and needs, the Seller

guesses at them and designs solutions using guesswork as gospel. (A method called “Ready, Fire! Aim.”) More often than not, the Seller guesses wrong—trying to fill a need that doesn’t exist, or hasn’t been created, in the Buyer’s mind. Don’t guess at the Buyer’s need—ask Flanking probes.

Buyer’s defensive agents aren’t equipped to defend against intelligent questions requesting an opinion. For most of their lives, Buyers have been asked stupid questions requiring simple yes-or-no answers. They are experts in giving stupid Sellers “no” answers. Sellers must ask questions that make the Buyer go inside for the answer.

You, the Seller, are looking for silence from the Buyer, some quiet time in which they generate well considered answers. Fast answers from the Buyer work against your interest and are a symptom that you asked a Frontal question.

Ask the Buyer a yes-or-no question and you deserve the no you get.

Four Probes to Prepare

While developing Flanking probes isn't rocket science, they do need to be prepared word for word. There are four types of probes for the Seller to prepare.

- **Standard Probes:**
Questions asked initially of all new Buyers.
- **Best of All Possible Worlds Probes:**
Questions that allow the Buyer to dream.
- **Emergency Probes:**
Questions asked when the Seller is pressed, stressed, lost or confused.
- **Status Quo Probes:**
Questions that uncover areas of dissatisfaction with what the Buyer is doing now.

Standard Probes

Standard probes are questions asked during each meeting with a new Buyer. They can be used to establish rapport, gain basic information, qualify the Buyer and set up Supporting Statements that make the Buyer feel important.

Use Standard probes during the first few minutes of a sales appointment. Then sprinkle them throughout the meeting whenever they are needed to gain valuable information.

A Standard probe that flanks the Buyer's armor is difficult for the Buyer to defend against. The Buyer isn't used to hearing intelligent questions, thus has few defensive agents trained to protect against them.

The **Standard probe (Flanking)** begins with *who, how, what, when, why, or where* and asks the Buyer to stop, think, quantify, and make decisions. The probe is tactful, non-adversarial, and does not imply that the Buyer has made poor decisions in the past, is currently wrong, or has a disastrous future if the Buyer continues on the present course.

Standard Flanking probe examples (with Frontal examples in parentheses):

PanDowdy Computer:

"How are you using personal computers to enhance your business?" ("Do you use personal computers in your company?")

Rocksolid Malpractice Insurance:

*"How is managed care impacting practice revenues?"
("Are you paying too much in premiums?")*

Zoom Ball Bearing:

"How has your company maintained its market share with all the turmoil in Asia?" ("Are you losing business in Asia?")

Pinstripe Management Consulting:

"In your department, what is the toughest part in acquiring a new company?" ("Is buying a new company difficult for you?")

Standard Flanking probe examples from other businesses:

"How does your business compare with your projections from a year ago?" ("Is business good?")

"What factors do you feel help your company remain successful?" ("Are you staying competitive?")

"Who will be the person in charge of this program?" ("Are you in charge here?")

"Ideally, what would you like the real estate to do for you?" ("What type of house are you looking for?")

“What categories are best sellers in that department?” (“Are you doing well in that category?”)

“When do you feel would be the best time to get started?” (“Do you want to start now?”)

“What kind of marketing program do you prefer?” (“Is your advertising working?”)

“How are buying decisions made inside your firm?” (“Are you the decision-maker in the company?”)

Flanking probes turn an ordinary sales call into an easy exchange of information, build trust, and quickly bond the Seller to the Buyer.

Best of All Possible Worlds Probe

The Best of All Possible Worlds question allows the Buyer to dream, that is, it gives the Buyer the opportunity to design or imagine the perfect transaction.

Sellers use this probe whenever they need the Buyer to imagine the ideal situation; to bring the transaction to a quick and satisfactory conclusion; to build a checklist of the Buyer’s requirements; or to build trust with the Buyer.

Ordinary salespeople are afraid to use the Best of All Possible Worlds probe because they are sure the Buyer will ask for things the Seller is unable to deliver. In our

Ask a Best of All Possible Worlds probe well and the result is a flattered Buyer.

culture, ordinary salespeople don't allow Buyers to wander off into their own areas of interest. Salespeople vomit their presentation rather than allow Buyers to become involved. While the Best of All Possible Worlds probe looks obvious, it is rarely used. Often, it is the first time a Buyer's opinion has ever been asked for.

Best of All Possible World examples for:

PanDowdy Computer:

"What would you like the perfect computer system to do for your company?"

Rocksolid Malpractice Insurance Company:

"If it was within your power, how would you go about protecting your physicians against lawsuits?"

Zoom Ball Bearing Company:

"Assuming you could do anything you wanted, what would be your best-of-all-possible-worlds scenario for this transaction?"

Pinstripe Management Consulting:

"From your point of view, what would the perfect business acquisition look like?"

Other businesses:

“Ms. Buyer, if you could design this transaction any way you would like it, how would it look?”

“In the best of all possible worlds, if you could build the perfect situation without constraints of time or money, what would it look like?”

The Best of All Possible Worlds probe is most likely the best probe with which to make things happen. It is a deal-making probe.

Emergency Probes

When in trouble, the natural response for salespeople is to talk. The Emergency probe reverses the compulsion to babble to an unwilling Buyer. It poses an intelligent question that disturbs the pace of the Buyer’s attack or adversarial train of thought.

The Emergency probe is used whenever the Seller is pressed, stressed, lost or confused, such as when you . . .

- Lose your place in the presentation
- Can’t remember what to do next
- Are under attack by the Buyer
- Find the presentation is moving too fast and you need time to gather your thoughts

If you ask questions the same old way, the Buyers become defensive in spite of themselves.

It is a question that . . .

- Flanks the Buyer's armor
- Is complex
- Calls for a well-considered answer
- Begins with who, how, what, when, or where
- Places the burden of the meeting back on the Buyer
- Makes the Buyer stop, think and quantify an answer
- Is designed to buy you time

Emergency probe examples:

"Ms. Jones, exactly what will it take to make you happy in this case?"

"In the best of all possible worlds, if you could structure this transaction any way you would like, how would you design it?"

"Allow me to ask you, exactly where did I go wrong?"

"I seem to have gotten off track. Help me get back to what is most important to you."

Some humility can go a long way to ease the tension when the Seller is in difficulty with a Buyer.

Status Quo Probes

Status Quo probes are used whenever Buyers are happy with what they are doing now (which is much of the time). These probes are designed to uncover the Buyer's dissatisfaction with a current product or service. Once you have discovered those hidden dissatisfactions or needs, then, obviously, sell into those needs.

The Seller uses Status Quo probes whenever the Buyer responds in the following way:

"I'm happy with what I am doing now."

"I have no need for your product or service."

"I don't have the time to talk to you."

"Call me later."

"Don't call me ever again."

The Status Quo probe works because when facing rejection, most salespeople aren't prepared to ask the Buyer questions but to simply accept, at face value, whatever the Buyer says. The cultural response is to spew out the sales presentation in the hopes that the Buyer will discover something of interest.

For instance, commercial real estate brokers often hear *"I already have a broker"* from their prospects, yet studies show that this is a stalling tactic 75%-90% of the time—

what the prospect says isn't true. It is customary in that business to turn and walk as soon as you hear this from a prospect rather than ask Status Quo probes to develop some interest.

The Buyer has few defenses against intelligent and tactful Status Quo probes.

The Status Quo probe is used . . .

- To uncover needs that may be unknown to the Buyer
- To gain the Buyer's attention when time is precious
- To detect weaknesses in the competitor's products or services
- To set up a Close

Status Quo probe examples:

PanDowdy Computer:

"How does computer downtime impact your peoples' stress levels?"

"How do you use personal computers to sharpen your competitive edge?"

Rocksolid Malpractice Insurance:

"How are you managing liability risk to increase patient satisfaction and practice revenues?"

Zoom Ball Bearing:

“How are you taking advantage of foreign market turmoil to increase revenues?”

“What strategy have you implemented to prevent erosion of your market share?”

Pinstripe Management Consulting:

“How are you minimizing key employee turnover during this merger?”

Other Businesses:

“How has your job been affected by your physical condition?”

“How long since you’ve had the natural high from exercising?”

“What arrangements do you make to show your property while you are away?”

“How has your life-style been affected by changes in the neighborhood?”

“How do you keep your competition from setting your price?”

“Generally speaking, how close have you come to the profit goals you set for your firm?”

"How do you ensure a zero defect rate in your sales presentations?"

When making cold calls, Status Quo probes are the Seller's source of new Buyers and new income.

Which Probe to Use When?

As a probing plan, probe for what the Buyer is doing now (Standard and Status Quo) then probe on what the Buyer would like to be doing in the future (Best of All Possible Worlds). Finally, determine the barrier that keeps the Buyer from achieving their best of all possible worlds. The barrier that keeps the Buyer from reaching his or her goal is the focal point of the sale.

A Frontal probe is the tool of last resort when Flanking probes are failing to give you open responses. If Flanking probes are not working, use Frontal probes. As a probing tactic, if you do not get usable responses after two or three Flanking probes, change to Frontal probes; then shift back to Flanking probes as soon as the Buyer's responses and attitude allow it.

A sale often turns on a single, well-developed Flanking probe. The Seller who asks thought-provoking, intelligent questions and then listens to the answers has the power, the time, and the control in the meeting.
