

WAIT - WE ARE ALL IN SALES



Why learning to sell should also teach us how not to be sold

If we think of sales as the act of selling something, and marketing as the promotion of products or services available for sale, then my first real experience of both came when I was about 23.

At least, that is what I once believed.

With more experience, I have come to realise that most of us begin selling long before we enter a shop, start a business or receive our first pay cheque.

We are all in sales.

I know that may sound deliberately provocative. For some people, selling remains a slightly dishonourable profession. They imagine pressure, manipulation, exaggerated promises and somebody trying to convince them to buy something they neither want nor need.

Bad selling can include all of those things.

Good selling does not.

Selling, in its broadest sense, is about influence. It is about helping another person see the value of an idea, an action, a relationship, a product or a service. Money does not always need to be involved.

A baby quickly learns that certain actions produce certain responses. Cry loudly enough and somebody may provide food, attention, comfort or a clean nappy.

The baby is not consciously studying negotiation. There is no formal sales strategy. Yet a simple exchange is taking place.

Give me what I need, and you may have a few moments of peace.

I am relearning this lesson with my grandson.

As children grow, the process becomes more sophisticated. At school, we enter a new community and begin showing others who we are, what we can do and what we might contribute.

A good runner may find a place among other athletes. Someone who understands computers may gravitate towards people with similar interests. The person who can make others laugh may discover that humour provides a way into a group.

This may not feel like selling, but we are presenting ourselves to the world.

This is who I am.

This is what I value.

This is what I might bring.

We also sell ideas to one another.

Young people persuade their friends to join clubs, support teams, listen to particular music, wear certain clothes and spend time with certain groups.

Sometimes that influence is positive.

Sometimes it is not.

A young person may be sold on trying something risky, not through a formal advertisement, but through the approval, encouragement or example of their peers.

The person doing the selling may not recognise it as selling. The person being persuaded may not understand that they are being sold to.

That is one reason why learning about sales matters.

We should not only teach young people how to present themselves, communicate clearly and persuade others. We should also teach them how persuasion works.

They should understand peer pressure, social proof, urgency, fear of missing out and the desire to belong. They should learn that popularity does not make an idea correct, and confidence does not make a person trustworthy.

Most importantly, they should be taught to stop and think.

Selling ourselves

Romantic relationships provide another example.

I did not stand outside Sue's house with a placard advertising a special promotion. However, I almost certainly presented myself in the best way I could.

I polished my shoes. We wore shoes rather than trainers in those days. I put on my best shirt and trousers, made sure that I was cleanly shaven and probably even looked in the mirror before leaving home.

Sue will have made her own choices about how she wanted to present herself.

We were both showing what we believed to be the best versions of ourselves.

That is a form of marketing.

The important point is that the presentation was authentic. Neither of us was pretending to be an entirely different person.

More than 40 years later, we are still married. Sue remains the person with whom I first want to share the good moments and the difficult ones.

During that time, we have influenced one another.

We do not think in exactly the same way, and we do not always want the same things. However, our underlying values are similar.

That may be one of the differences between good selling and bad selling.

Good selling makes genuine value easier to see.

Bad selling creates an impression that cannot survive closer inspection. Never mind 40 years.

I was already selling

Until I was about 23, I had mainly earned my living through professional sport.

Had you asked me at the time, I might have said that I did not really sell anything.

Looking back, that was clearly wrong.

I tried to attract sponsors. I encouraged tournament organisers to invite me to their events. I approached companies about providing equipment and, in some cases, hoped they might pay me to use their products and represent their brand.

I was selling myself, my potential, my results and the attention I might attract.

It was the marketing side that understood slightly better.

Even in the late 1970s, I realised that greater public visibility might make me a more attractive proposition to sponsors, tournament organisers and equipment companies.

I approached local newspapers and magazines and found out who edited their sports pages. I offered to write golf instruction articles.

A few hundred words and several photographs could reduce the editor's workload while providing useful material for readers.

If the sports editor did not play golf, I sometimes offered to teach them. We could turn the process into a series.

Six weeks to learn golf became a popular feature with more than one journalist.

The journalist received useful content, photographs, an opportunity to learn a sport and a regular feature that required relatively little work.

I received exposure and developed a relationship with the publication. When I later produced a good result, there was somewhere that might be interested in reporting it.

Everybody gained something.

At the time, I probably thought that I was being smart. Perhaps I was, what I was really doing was making myself useful.

I did not begin by asking what the newspaper could do for me. I began by considering what I could do for the newspaper.

That remains one of the most important lessons I have learned about selling and marketing.

Helping people get what they want

Many years ago, I listened to an audio recording by the American salesman and speaker Zig Ziglar.

He repeatedly returned to a simple idea.

Help enough other people get what they want, and you may eventually get what you want.

The wording may sound like a formula for personal gain, but the underlying principle is about service.

Find out what another person needs.

Understand the problem they are trying to solve.

Decide whether you can genuinely help.

Then make the value of your solution clear.

In principle, selling should be straightforward.

One person has a problem, need or desire. Another person has a credible solution. Bring them together and both parties may benefit.

Of course, life is rarely quite so simple.

A person may recognise the problem but not trust the proposed solution. The timing may be wrong. The price may be too high. The risk may feel too great. There may be a better alternative.

Selling is therefore not simply about presenting a product and asking for money. It involves understanding people, timing, trust, risk and value.

Marketing is also much more than promotion.

Promotion attracts attention.

Marketing should begin earlier. It should help identify what people need, understand how they make decisions, shape a suitable offer and communicate that offer honestly.

The methods of marketing have changed dramatically since I was 23.

The principle has changed much less.

Make something useful.

Find the people for whom it is useful.

Help them understand why it may improve their situation.

The other side of the transaction

Most sales and marketing education concentrates on the seller.

How to present an idea.

How to understand a customer.

How to overcome objections.

How to communicate value.

How to close an agreement.

Far less attention is given to the person on the other side of the transaction.

That seems a significant omission.

We are not only sellers.

We are also being sold to almost constantly.

As I write this, I am sitting in a coffee shop. With a simple turn of my head, I can see several advertisements for food and drink inside the shop.

Outside, there is a moving billboard. Buses and taxis pass with products, services and events displayed across them.

People enter carrying branded bags and wearing clothes that make the manufacturer or retailer immediately visible.

Not all of this is a direct invitation to buy.

Much of it is creating familiarity.

See a supermarket name often enough and it may come to mind when you next need milk.
See a clothing brand frequently enough and it may feel reassuringly familiar when you want a new shirt.

We absorb far more commercial information than we consciously notice.

Advertising is only one part of it.

Friends recommend restaurants.

Colleagues praise software.

People show us their cars, clothes, holidays and homes.

Those around us communicate what is fashionable, desirable, normal or successful.

We are continuously being shown versions of what life might look like if we made a particular choice.

That is not automatically harmful.

It does mean that we should understand what is happening.

Things I did not know I needed

During the past year, I have bought several things that I did not know I needed until the need was pointed out to me.

Perhaps I should blame subliminal advertising.

That would at least make me feel better.

The truth is probably less dramatic.

I saw something.

It appealed to me.

I created a reason to justify it.

There was a shirt that I could have managed perfectly well without. There was also a tie.

For many years after leaving school, I rarely wore ties. There was little need for one as a professional sportsman.

Later, as my career changed, a tie became part of the expected business uniform.

Eventually, I stopped wearing them again. They felt too stuffy and, by then, I had enough confidence not to dress in a particular way simply because other people expected it.

Yet I recently bought another tie.

It is a very nice tie.

At the time, I probably thought it said something about me.

Perhaps it did.

The question is whether I understood what I was really buying.

I was not buying something necessary to keep my shirt together. I may have been buying an image, a feeling or a temporary connection.

I also paid for extended Dropbox services that I have barely used.

At the time, it seemed sensible.

More space.

Greater flexibility.

One less possible problem in the future.

More than a month later, the additional capacity remains largely untouched.

I have bought books that I have not yet read and exercise equipment that looked useful in the shop but seemed much less important once they reached home.

These are not financial disasters.

They are mostly harmless and relatively trivial purchases. Some have given me pleasure. Some may eventually prove useful.

Others probably represent little more than a brief moment when desire was stronger than judgement.

The purpose of recognising this is not to remove every indulgence from life.

A purchase does not have to be essential to be worthwhile.

Pleasure has value.

Beauty has value.

Convenience, identity and enjoyment have value.

The important thing is to understand what we are buying and why.

Creating a problem

Marketing sometimes draws attention to a genuine problem.

You may not have realised that your computer storage was nearly full until a message warned you.

You may not have considered the effect of inactivity on your health until someone explained it clearly.

You may not have known that a safer, easier or less expensive solution existed.

In those cases, marketing can be useful. It helps us recognise a need and discover a possible solution.

Marketing can also activate or reshape an existing desire.

You may already want reliable transport, but marketing persuades you that reliability requires a large and expensive vehicle.

You may want to feel healthier, but marketing convinces you that health can only be achieved through a particular product, body shape or programme.

You may want acceptance, confidence or status, and a company presents its product as the route to obtaining it.

The greatest concern is not that marketing creates every need from nothing.

Most marketing begins with something that already exists.

Hunger.

Fear.

Hope.

Insecurity.

Convenience.

Ambition.

Belonging.

Pleasure.

Status.

The danger arises when those feelings are exaggerated or exploited.

There is a significant difference between helping someone solve a problem and teaching them to feel inadequate so that they will buy the solution.

“You are not enough without this” is a powerful message.

It is also one that should make us pause.

Not all marketing is bad

Marketing has helped me find many things that improve my life.

The place where I live.

The car I drive.

The computer on which I am writing.

The camera I use to capture the world around me.

Each of these was marketed and eventually sold to me. Each solves a genuine problem or adds something that I value.

Had I not chosen these particular products, I would probably have chosen alternatives.

I still needed somewhere to live.

I still required transport.

I needed something on which to work and write.

I wanted a camera through which I could record the people, places and moments that matter to me.

I am grateful for those purchases. They make parts of my life easier and more enjoyable.

My concern is not with marketing that helps people understand a useful offer.

It is with our lack of awareness when we receive those messages.

I have chosen not to engage personally with social media. That is partly because I have little interest in promoting myself or building a public profile.

My professional work still involves communication, mentoring, writing, and speaking engagements. B-Real itself is a form of publishing.

The difference is that I prefer to decide where I place my attention rather than continuously receiving messages selected for me.

My diary has little spare capacity. I choose projects that interest me and try not to fill the remaining space with information about products I do not need, arguments I cannot influence and problems that are unlikely to affect my life.

That does not make me immune from persuasion.

Teaching people to think

I do not remember being taught about sales and marketing at school.

I do not remember a lesson explaining how persuasion works, why people follow groups or how emotion influences decisions.

I was not taught how businesses create familiarity, how scarcity increases urgency or why recommendations from people we trust can feel more convincing than formal advertising.

I was not shown how to distinguish between a real need, an existing desire and an insecurity that somebody else might profit from.

I later took a deep interest in the subject because it became important in my professional life.

Most people will never study it formally.

They will still spend their entire lives selling and being sold to.

Teachers sell young people on the value of education.

Doctors sell patients on the importance of a treatment or change in behaviour.

Parents sell children on rules, habits and values.

Employees sell their ideas to colleagues.

Leaders sell a direction to organisations.

Friends sell recommendations and opinions to each other.

None of this is necessarily dishonest. It is part of how people influence one another and organise life.

That is precisely why a basic understanding of sales, marketing and persuasion should be more widely taught.

However, teaching children the mechanics of selling is not enough.

We should teach them to think critically.

To question the source.

To examine the evidence.

To ask who benefits from the message.

To notice when fear, urgency, popularity or insecurity is being used to shorten the distance between impulse and action.

Critical thinking does not mean distrusting everything.

It means giving ourselves enough space to decide what deserves our trust.

A confident friend can be wrong.

A popular opinion can be foolish.

A limited-time offer may return next week.

A product described as essential may turn out to be almost useless.

A decision presented as urgent may not be urgent at all.

The world will usually wait.

Wait a bit

The act of delayed gratification was more common when I was growing up.

The phrase sounds slightly formal, but the lesson is simple.

Wait a bit.

The world will carry on.

Life will continue.

The shop will still be there tomorrow.

The website may still be there next week.

Even when a particular offer disappears, another will probably follow.

A few extra hours, days or months will often make little difference in the grand scheme of things.

Sometimes waiting for years may be the right decision.

That does not mean every choice should be delayed indefinitely. A cup of coffee does not require a committee meeting. Some decisions genuinely are urgent.

Most are not.

When we believe we need something, it may help to stop and ask what problem we expect it to solve.

Is the problem real?

Is it as significant as it currently feels?

Will the product actually solve it?

Can we comfortably afford it?

Is there a simpler alternative?

Are we buying because the item is useful, or because it promises to make us feel more successful, secure or accepted?

Then wait a bit.

The pause does not have to remove the desire.

It simply gives judgement the chance to catch up.

Sometimes, after waiting, we will still decide to buy.

That is fine.

Sometimes we will conclude that the purchase is unnecessary, but that it will bring enough pleasure to make it worthwhile.

That is also fine.

The difference is that we have made a conscious decision rather than simply reacting to the message placed in front of us.

Sometimes the pause will protect us from something more serious than an unread book, unused computer storage or a tie that spends most of its life in a wardrobe.

It may help a young person resist pressure from friends.

It may prevent someone from joining an investment they do not understand.

It may stop a person signing an agreement because they have been told the opportunity will disappear before morning.

Critical thinking creates distance.

Distance creates perspective.

Perspective often changes the decision.

Learning both sides

Selling is not inherently dishonourable.

At its best, it is the process of understanding another person and helping them recognise something of genuine value.

Marketing is not inherently manipulative.

At its best, it connects people with products, services and ideas that may improve their lives.

The problem is not that we sell.

The problem is that many of us do not recognise when selling is taking place.

We should learn how to communicate genuine value. We should understand how to listen, present ideas and help other people make good decisions.

We should also learn how to guard our attention, question the messages placed before us and understand the reasons behind our own decisions.

We are all in sales.

We are also all customers.

Perhaps schools should help young people understand both roles.

Teach them how influence works.

Teach them how to communicate clearly.

Teach them how to recognise manipulation.

Teach them to ask better questions.

Then teach them that, most of the time, the world will wait.

Wait a little.

Think it through.

Then decide.

Tony Bennett

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