

by Cheryl Crumb

Sales Success:

Lessons from “The Wizard of Oz”

For me, 2005 was a year of business travel and reading the world. From the beaches of Thailand to the mountains of China, to the jungles of Brazil, throughout the historical panorama of Europe, I was an experienced customer. I bought everything. In countries where the vendor and I did not share a common alphabet, the selling tool was the calculator. I would pick up an object and raise my eyebrows enquiringly. She would plug some numbers into the calculator and hand it to me. I would look, laugh, shake my head, plug my own numbers in and toss it back. She would snort, huff, and throw it down on the table... pick it up a nano-second later, pop in some new numbers and flip it back. In countries where the currency was unclear, I'd point to my maple leaf lapel pin, she'd enter in a formula and voila, the Canadian dollar amount would magically appear. This continued until I either pulled my reis/euros/koronas/yuan/whatever out of my wallet or was dismissed as the vendor turned to a more propitious possibility. The barter-on-the-beach approach offers insights along with bargains.

What are the lessons from these experiences? Number one, commerce makes the world go around. Number two, anybody can sell anything to anyone...you just have to find a way to connect. And number three, you can't not communicate.

Back on North American soil, here's how I'm incorporating the lessons into business learning. There's a world of people out there who want to buy things...they just don't want to be “sold”, with the traditional baggage of what “being sold” entails. The fact that people will buy in spite of “being sold”, means that there is a hunger in the population to get what they want. The modern professional salesperson needs to make it easy, painless and fulfilling both in tangible and intangible aspects of the sale. The tangible aspects are the most visible: quoting, products, pricing, policies. The intangible aspects of the experience are more visceral and intuitive: service, attitudes, impressions, perceptions.

What's the difference between buying and “being sold”? Buying means that I, as a customer, have a need, a problem, a want, something that is missing in my life, and I want to fill that void. “Buying” is the internal and external process I go through: (1) verifying that my need is real; (2) gaining awareness that filling that particular need is more important to me than filling other needs; (3) searching for alternative solution possibilities; (4) learning about the pros and cons of each possibility; (5) challenging myself and others on objectionable portions of each solution; (6) deciding the solution I want; (7) committing to myself that I want this solution now rather than waiting until later; and (8) working out the minor logistical details to get the solution. Buying produces joy and a sense of accomplishment. It is a logical and emotionally positive finale.

“Being sold” is the opposite. It's the feeling you have when the phone rings at 9 p.m. and a telemarketer destroys your coziness and hawks unasked for newspapers/vacation plans/credit card protection/etc. It's like a harpoon coming at you and you're dodging to deflect the arrow pierce. “Being sold” is someone reciting the features of a product while you were only strolling through the store to keep out of the rain. “Being sold” is someone telling you that you're wrong, and that this product is really faster-smarter-taller-bigger-wider than anything else on the market. “Being sold” is a fight where you're always defending yourself...matter of fact, you don't even want to be in the ring in the first place. “Being sold” produces exhaustion, anger and guilt. Even a self-congratulatory “I told them” is soon replaced by weariness.

The job of an effective salesperson is to help you through your own buying process. Repeat, it is not to “sell you something”.

Left to our own devices, most of us mistakenly try to sell.

How do you construct a professional salesperson? History often provides answers, even entertainment history. Consider L. Frank Baum's classic, “The Wizard of Oz” and

examine what the team of protagonists were in search of: a brain, a heart and courage, all essential ingredients for a 21st century sales professional. The Scarecrow's quest for a brain symbolizes knowledge, knowing your own products and services, and knowing what the problems are that the customer is trying to solve. Building the brain is studying and asking questions. The Tin Man's search for a heart represents a pervasive attitude of concern for the customer. Out of “heartness” comes compassion, understanding, empathy and listening. The Cowardly Lion's pursuit of courage conveys the message that a sales professional must possess a high level of self-esteem and self-assurance to do the right thing. Courage means challenging customers (with “heart” rather than muscle) if they're unknowingly asking for something that's not in their best interests. Courage means proactively offering unasked for possibilities.

Our Oz-like salesperson is more than a calculator plugger and tosser. Unlike the third-world purchase experiences where vendor and customer remain strangers throughout the sale, our Wizardly salesperson becomes a consultant whom you learn to trust and whom you would return to.

So, when the boss cries out to you, “Go and Sell It”, remember that it starts with the customer, not with the product. And it ends with the customer's sense of pleasure, not with your sense of conquering.

The start of any year is usually tarnished with corpses of rash resolutions, those promises we make, fail to keep and guilt over. So rather than taking on another wonder diet or joining your 99th fitness club, be your own Wizard and resolve to design a Professional You.

