

Selling the sizzle by Roger Collis

Some years ago, I was having a drink with the chairman – I'll call him Gerald – of a famous London advertising agency. Gerald had picked up a chunk of new business and brought his wife along to celebrate.

'Gerald, you're the best salesman I ever met.' I meant it as a compliment (after all it was his treat!). But his wife rounded on me. 'Gerald is not a salesman: he is an advertising man,' she snarled.

Sorry I spoke. But in business, or indeed, life, we are all salesmen in one way or another. We sell products, services, sentiments, ideas – or simply ourselves. Every successful executive knows, whatever his or her job title, that selling is an integral part of their personality, their management style.

The first step towards salesmanship is selling yourself on yourself. If you don't believe in yourself, you'll never be able to sell to others. That's the key: the 'product' is you. Selling is nothing more than a transfer of enthusiasm. Not that I've found myself to be a pushover on those recurring days when my level of self-esteem would make Kafka come on like an optimist.

Still, optimism – a vital precursor to self-confidence – can be acquired in several spurious ways – which doesn't necessarily make it less authentic. There's nothing to match the euphoria of going into a budget meeting with a job offer in your pocket. Even an exploratory call from a headhunter can inspire you to put across the Big Idea to the board.

Sometimes there can be merit in being passive. 'You'd better go and see Tom. He's sure to have an idea for us.' This may involve selling Tom your need for an idea. The selling process can thus be turned upside down, to your advantage. It can also be a subtle way of getting your idea adopted.

Talking of adoption; the best ideas have many parents; bad ideas are orphans. Throwing ideas around is like musical chairs: make sure you are not left holding the dummy when the music stops.

On the other hand, a great idea can all too easily be appropriated by someone else. Of course, this may be what you want. But how many times have you made a suggestion only to have it taken up, and refined, by your best enemy? Whatever the circumstances, it usually pays to keep residual rights of authorship for eventual glory. This can be done by 'banking' your idea with the boss's boss – or one of his peers.

You may also want to protect the provenance of an idea that you have sold to a subordinate – an insurance in case he or she sells it to your boss; at its most dangerous on your open flank in a group discussion. (This is the flip-side of Management by Persuasion, called Management by Pre-Emption.)

Lateral selling – to peer groups in other departments and subsidiaries – is even more tricky. You obviously want to stay on good terms (you may become a victim of a ‘lateral arabesque’ to the Zambian subsidiary in a future reorganization). But in selling an idea you’re sure to come across the Not Invented Here syndrome. So here again, you have to make them believe that it’s their own idea. This is crucial when selling a bad idea, or an Idea Whose Time Has Not Yet Come. Don’t miss the ‘sell-by’ date.

Every good salesman knows that you don’t sell a product, or a service, you sell its benefits. Sell the sizzle, not the steak; an old adage, but a good one. It’s the sizzle that makes people’s mouths water, makes them suddenly, excruciatingly conscious of their needs, desires, aspirations... You have to think about the ‘what’s in it for me’ syndrome. Your boss has to see an inside track for his or herself in your new plan for decentralization; if you are selling software, talk in terms of functionality and better service to customers; if you are selling the idea of maintaining advertising in the recession, point out how crucial it is to keep market share, even at the expense of third-quarter earnings, and how to sell this eventuality to the shareholders. And so it goes.

How, where and when to sell ideas depends on circumstance. You may find the right time to strike is just before the chairman goes on holiday so that he has plenty of time to assimilate the idea and make it his own. Or, just before the shareholders’ meeting when he’s wound up (Management by Terror, or Management by Grasping at Straws).

These days, I am usually selling the idea of taking up someone else’s time; not always to their advantage. (As Joan Didion once said: ‘Writers are always selling somebody out.’) One advantage of selling on the phone is that you don’t have to buy lunch (not that day anyway). Another is that you can usually keep the chat short, if not sweet.

This brings me to the last maxim in the salesman’s lexicon: You run the risk of losing a sale if you keep on talking after a commitment has been made. Once you’ve sold, shut up.

I’m sure you’ll buy that.

Roger Collis *1995 Business Life*