

a tale of two sales

“It was the best of times; it was the worst of times.”

Charles Dickens’ immortal words capture an afternoon of mine a few months ago. I had one of those experiences that is indelibly etched in my mind and is so indicative of what is both right and wrong about sales today.

I was wandering around the mall, aimlessly killing time. For no specific reason, I ended up in a shoe store that shall remain nameless, just looking around. As I saw the clerk approach, I braced my defenses for the inevitable “Can I help you with something?” line.

Before I could launch the counteroffensive, though, the young, completely inexperienced salesman said something that caught me completely off guard. It was something like, “I’m really sorry to bother you, but...” He then proceeded to completely screw up the line that he obviously had been rehearsing for awhile. Instead of getting embarrassed or fleeing he simply said, “I’m really new at this, whatever I can do to help.”

The sales clerk’s blunt honesty threw me. Without knowing it, the clerk had mastered one of the basic premises of communication: It’s not *what* you say, but *how* you say it.

As we discussed in a previous Sales Quest article, there was a significant study done in 1969 by the famous Dr. Moravian from Stanford University that proved that communication was 93% non-verbal (voice tone and body language) and only 7% the actual words you use. Even though the sales clerk completely botched his 7% verbal, his 93% non-verbal was completely congruent and engaging. I liked this guy, and I wasn’t sure why. How

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many times have you run across people that you automatically like, even though you can’t pinpoint why? It’s usually because they have mastered their non-verbal skills, either consciously or subconsciously.

This is a particular lesson for sales professionals. All too often, sales reps place such an emphasis on the message that they completely



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ignore how that message is being delivered. So while the words may follow the pre-written script to the letter, the individual delivering those words utterly lacks credibility because of his or her delivery – that non-verbal part of communication.

Needless to say, I engaged in a conversation with the sales clerk and ended up buying a pair of shoes that I really didn’t need because I wanted to help this new guy out. I came to find out that this was his first foray into sales and he’d been on the job all of two days. But even though he lacked experience, he was one of the most engaging sales reps I’ve run across. And because he was engaging, he got the sale.

Contrast that to my experience at lunch the next day. I was in a hurry to an appointment and had a couple of minutes to spare for lunch. As I ran into a certain, well-known fast food outlet, I was greeted by the most dispassionate and rude, “Welcome to (name of store)” followed by an equally obnoxious, “What can I get you?”

Now I know that somewhere in the annals of this chain’s training manual, those words were carved in stone as “company protocol.”

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The way in which they were delivered, however, was so off-putting that I found myself deciding to forgo lunch completely (and anyone who knows me knows that skipping lunch is not a decision I take lightly). I know that losing my business won’t do much to impact the fast food chain or even that particular outlet, but the imbedded lesson is pertinent.

In the first example, I ended up making a buying decision when I had no intention to do so because the non-verbal communication skills of a completely “green” salesperson were so engaging. Conversely, I decided not to purchase something that I had already made a decision to buy because the non-verbal communication of the salesperson was so offensive.

Non-verbal communication transcends all aspects of our lives. So whether you’re in sales or simply interacting with individuals as part of your daily business routine, you need to be cognizant of your non-verbal communication in every interaction.

Think about your posture – do your words say, “I want your business,” while your posture says, “I couldn’t care less?” Do you gesture effectively and naturally to emphasize certain points, or do you look like you’re frozen in place? Do you make eye-contact with the individuals to whom you’re talking, or do your eyes gaze at the floor or dart around the room? Most importantly, do you sound normal and natural? It was entirely natural for my shoe salesman friend to be nervous – it was his second day on the job. Yet somehow, he made that work for him. He came off as a natural and that resulted in him making the sale.

While the message is always important, don’t spend too much time worrying about finding the “perfect” thing to say. Just be genuine and in the everlasting words of Charlie “Bird” Parker, “Let it wait.”

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