

The Weekly Sales Beast

The samples provided are intended to give a representation of the style and presentation of the learning points that comprise The Weekly Sales Beast Program. Their use is for the determination of the potential effectiveness

Selling Refrigerators to Eskimos.

When I was first starting out, pounding the pavement in a variety of sales jobs, I had the same idealist notions I have today; sell customers what they want and need at a fair price. Experience has taught me that not all customers know what they need and therefore have no idea they want it. The phrase “selling refrigerators to Eskimos” was an aphorism for a slick sales guy who used his power of influence to sell people things they didn’t need. That phrase and others like it, triggered an internal rage, as I certainly shined to be a professional salesperson - not a fast-talking hustler. Not until I met the man who actually did sell refrigerators to Eskimos.

At a sales convention dinner featuring the guest speaker “The Man Who Really Did Sell Refrigerators To Eskimos,” the anticipation was thick in the air. I, of course, saw this as an opportunity to express my disdain over this type of selling and how disparaging it was to the thousands of professional salespeople the world over who would never undertake to do such a thing. Naturally, I shared this opinion with the grey haired lady sitting next to me. I eagerly waited for his arrival, knowing he would be tall with broad shoulders and an enormously insincere smile - likely wearing a checkered jacket. What appeared was a guy about 5’ 2” in a grey dowdy suit, unkempt hair and...well, frankly...just a sweet old man. His wife of 45 years sat next to me.

However, it was his speech that really did me in. I can’t possibly recall all of his words and emotions, but the essence and lessons went something like this:

“To some of you, I don’t fit the image you expected of the person who would sell refrigerators to Eskimos, and to others well... listen before you judge.”

“I remember like it was yesterday, confidently strutting into the Walla Walla refrigerator company and presenting myself as someone who could sell. It was a big- ticket item back then — 44 years ago. Refrigerators were revolutionizing home appliances, and brother, I wanted a slice of the pie. Confidence, not intelligence, got me a territory, and so with the enthusiasm that just naturally comes to young people, I headed out the door to make my fortune.”

“Like everyone here, I studied my catalogue sheets until I knew them backwards. I knew every feature of every model and every customer benefit there was to be had. We were competitively priced, had a solid product, delivered it on time, and I failed miserably.”

“We had a lot of competition and they all had seasoned salespeople. Besides, even though I knew refrigerators were the way of the future, most customers didn’t share that vision yet. And frankly, rather than confront my obstacles like I should have, I ran.”

“My idea was, in order to outsell my competition I had to go where they weren’t. Because my territory went North and not South, which would have been more prosperous, I’m sure, I began travelling to more and more remote areas — the logic of which was questioned by everyone in the company, including the accountant who promptly cut off my travel allowance.”

“When asked of my current whereabouts, I believe our sales manager first coined that now-familiar phrase, ‘He’s selling refrigerators to Eskimos.’ Everyone laughed. I too, had a hard time believing what I was doing - or more accurately, trying to do.”

“But what changed comedy to the distorted legend stems from a mistake I think many salespeople make... including most of you in this room. I was so North at this point, permafrost was two days backward and the logic of sitting with an Inuit chief talking about a box that keeps food cold seemed to me to reach a new height of ridiculousness.

I have to tell you though, I continued through my pitch because the chief just kept getting more excited.”

“It was during this conversation that the chief said something that would change my life forever. Barely containing his excitement, he suddenly became very serious and asked me straight out, ‘Are you sure your box will keep our food warm?’ I was stunned. My product was invented to keep food cold, not warm. Every brochure talked about keeping your perishables cool. In a single moment, I realized I had assumed the benefit for the customer. I didn’t anticipate that their needs would be any different than what our brochures outlined. Of course these people don’t need to keep their food cold - they need to keep it warm. And a fridge can do just that. Its basic purpose is to keep a constant temperature.

“How often do we assume things about our customers? How often do we decide what they need before we find out from them? How often do we only look at only one dimension?”

“My first sale was in the toughest territory in the world and over a hundred thousand would follow. Each sale was made to a customer who would greatly benefit from the purchase, and each sale was made in the absence of competitors. So the legend was built on the same principal of salesmanship we all should strive for, not on the common misconception.”

“I lived with the ridicule or envy for 44 years and this is the first time I have told this story. Had it been told earlier, everyone would have flocked north. Ladies and gentleman, I’m retired now, and I will share with you this — go find your own Eskimos, and you will prosper.”