

heartfelt sales

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Required Reading for Growing Companies

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My route to the CEO position was unconventional. It wound through labor relations, personnel, administration, acquisitions and operations. Sales were always the source of revenue that allowed the interesting things to happen. And it always seemed in the final analysis, sales were at best a head game, and at worst, toughly competitive, manipulative or self-serving. It's only relatively recently I've realized how, properly viewed, sales is a matter of the heart.

COMMODITY SALES

My first corporate exposure was Interstate Bakeries, which was at that time the third largest wholesale baker in the U.S. Interstate supported its regional bread and national cake brands through media advertising. Bread was often a loss leader in the grocery stores. Shelf space was important and we fought for every inch.

Our brand loyalty was built on little if any true product differentiation, so it always seemed to me that we were selling to our consumers through smoke and mirrors.

GOVERNMENT BID BUSINESS

I found a process much more directly manipulative at Krause Milling Company.

Krause sold high protein blended fortified foods to the U.S. Department of Agriculture for distribution by the U.S. Agency for International Development in the Food for Peace program. While the relationship with the customer was based initially upon Krause's research into and development of these products, the government chose to purchase them through monthly bids between two competitors. Thus, Krause and its competitor could underbid each other and shut down each other's operations in alternate months. To counter the potentially devastating effects of this program, Krause chose to fix market share with its competitor for three years in one product line and eight years in another.

Krause's indictment and subsequent conviction for antitrust violations ultimately resulted in Krause's sale to one of its co-conspirators.

DIFFERENTIABLE PRODUCT

At Universal Foods, our research area developed Quick-Rise Red Star Yeast, which

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halved the rising time for bread baked with our product. Within one year of product introduction, we secured 15 percent of national consumer yeast sales. Our marketing support was media advertising, primarily focused on TV soap operas. Unlike my experience at Interstate, we had a truly differentiable product, and sales soared. It was an exciting time in what had been a sleepy market.

However, our advantage was short-lived as our main competitor introduced a comparable product and quickly eroded our market share.

CONSUMER RETAIL SALES

Taco Bueno (my first CEO position) was an equal competitor with Taco Bell in the Dallas-Fort Worth market. Our interface was directly with the consumer through our 50 fast food locations and our saturation TV advertising in the market. We also had a first rate training program for the thousands of teenagers and others we employed, a purchasing program which guaranteed freshness and tastiness, and appealing exteriors and interiors to our restaurants. The TV ads and the convenient locations may have gotten the customers into our units, but the food, the service and the ambience kept them coming back. We always sought, and largely achieved, to more than fulfill the expecta-



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tions of first-time customers.

However, even here, Taco Bell's pricing strategies and deep pockets enabled it to better withstand the Texas recession of the late 80s and it emerged as the market leader.

SELLING, CARING AND LEARNING

Mulberry Child Care Centers in the Boston area was a start-up with an experienced leadership and staff from a prior concept that had been sold to Kindercare. We knew that our staff's care and concern for learning would sell itself if we could get potential customers into our environment. So in our initial year we used advertisements in local weekly newspapers, handbills to mothers' groups, visible locations and public appearances by our leadership and staff to spur interest in our centers. While the start-up was rough (we opened with only one half of the 22 budgeted centers) Mulberry ultimately (long after my departure) grew to 78 units before it, too, was sold to Kindercare. Interestingly, Kindercare kept it as a separate unit because of its reputation on the Atlantic and Pacific coasts for high quality child care.

Here the choice of Mulberry by our cus-

tomers was based upon both head and heart, and the personal equation became much more important.

MONEY FOR SALE

It was a big contrast to move to sales in the commercial factoring business at Business Funding Group (and later at Baltimore's Reservoir Capital). We purchased accounts receivable from non-bankable companies. We (and our competitors) were often the only source of funding for a market where many customers, desperate for money, might do desperate things. In this atmosphere, sales, underwriting and account management worked very closely, and not always happily, together. The sales process was a head game, the object of which was to generate revenue that would not later disappear as a result of customer fraud.

SELLING A VERY PERSONAL SERVICE

When I became an executive coach, I tried a number of sales and marketing channels. It became apparent that people had to get a sense of who I am to be comfortable with me as their coach. So I concentrated on networking, not in large gatherings but where I'd have an opportunity for one-on-one conversations. Successful networking events were not those where I shook the maximum number of hands, but where I had two or three in-depth conversations. An elevator speech wasn't as important as identifying and expressing my passion for the profession.

After passion, a second part of this process was identifying, a la Jim Collins' *Good to Great*, my unique combination of talents and not claiming any more or any different talents than I had. This resulted in a more collaborative approach in referring business to other coaches.

The third part of Collins' process, identifying the economic driver of the business, came into sharp relief with my reading of *Attracting Perfect Customers* by Stacey Holland and Jan Brogniez. The authors outline a "strategic attraction plan" based upon the characteristics of and appropriate service to a perfect customer. They advocate setting an intention to attract such customers. Once you set this intention, you can relax, since

"You are more attractive when you understand that customers are seeking you," and you can "Learn to pause...or nothing worthwhile will catch up to you."

This is a true heartfelt approach which I've found works wonders.

Your response? Perhaps it's, "Right, Caskey. Maybe it works for you as a coach but in my business?"

Well, let's go back to Jim Collins. If you have chosen to do what you are passionate about, if you have identified what is truly unique about your business, and you are deeply centered in each of these realizations, why shouldn't perfect customers be drawn to you? After all, you've joined the passionate "who" to the distinguishing "what." Who wouldn't be irresistibly drawn to that?

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