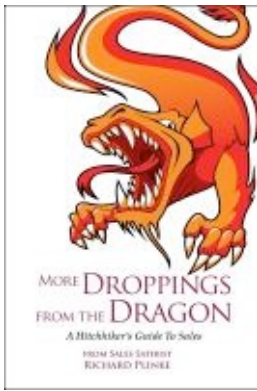




MORE DROPPINGS
FROM THE DRAGON

A Hitchhiker's Guide To Sales

FROM SALES SATIRIST
RICHARD PLINKE



If you're looking for a more interesting, entertaining and relevant approach to the ancient and noble art of sales, then Richard Plinke's latest book is for you. Chock-full of really cool pop references, disrespect and impertinence, sort of like a slaughterhouse for sacred cows, this new edition in the Dragon series will not only provide you with unique insights and opinions, it will also keep you laughing out loud from cover to cover.

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Prologue

Failure is not an option.

It's a prerequisite for success.

Just ask a few twentieth-century tycoons who experienced failure on their way to establishing eponymous American icons: Walt Disney, Henry Ford, Milton Hershey, H.J. Heinz and P.T. Barnum. They all filed for bankruptcy protection at least once before they found the keys to the Magic Kingdom, to the Model T, to the chocolate tooth decay accelerator, to the ubiquitous tomato/sugar/salt-based condiment, and to the tiny car that regurgitates clown after clown to the terror of small children everywhere.

Then, of course, there's the most famous (and most factually debated) failure of all time: Abraham Lincoln. I'm sure you've seen the list of his setbacks:

Failed in business.

Defeated in a legislative race.

Failed in business, again.

Suffered the death of his girlfriend.

Had a nervous breakdown.

Lost a congressional race.

Lost a congressional race, again.

Lost a senatorial race.

Failed in a bid to be nominated vice president.

Lost a senatorial race, again.

And finally, elected president of the United States and saved the Union.

All these men were successful because they weren't afraid of failure; they knew that losing was not fatal or enduring, that it was merely another step toward fulfilling their goals. Thomas Edison, the brilliant inventor of the incandescent light bulb and many more modern marvels, said, "I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work."

What these men had in common was an indomitable spirit; they all kept pushing ahead and refused to be defeated by momentary setbacks, in spite of the temporary pain and frustration those setbacks caused. Successful people fight through pain because they know the alternative is worse. As William Faulkner wrote in *The Wild Palms*: "Given the choice between the experience of pain and nothing, I would choose pain."

All of us face that choice in life more than once, often on a small scale and once in a while on a much larger scale, and how we decide to deal with those choices determines whether we will be successful and happy or frustrated and miserable. Opportunities to be a winner or a

loser are all around us, all the time, and, like everybody else, I've had my share.

Sometimes I won.

Way back in the days of big hair and fading disco balls, I saw a story on the front page of *Advertising Age*. *Ad Age* is a printed magazine that you can hold in your hands and take with you anywhere you wanted to go, even if there's no electric outlet or Wi-Fi, and it was the bible of the advertising industry as far as I was concerned in those bygone days of introspection and reflection.

The article was about a big advertising budget that Amtrak, the National Railroad Passenger Corporation, was devoting to the promotion of its Metroliner service. The Metroliners were high-speed express trains that ran between New York City and Washington, D.C., with a stop in Philadelphia.

And there I was sitting in Philadelphia one morning, drinking a cup of coffee and reading the article. At the time, I was working for a large billboard company in the Philadelphia metro market, and I was perusing the magazine, as I did religiously every week, looking for leads.

"Click" went the Edison light bulb over my head.

I'm selling advertising in Philadelphia.

Amtrak wants to advertise their service that goes through Philadelphia.

Why don't I put those two concepts together?

Brilliant!

Unfortunately, I was the only one who thought so.

Except for one other guy.

I went into my sales manager's office with the magazine tucked under my arm. He was talking to the company's national sales rep who worked out of New York City but was visiting for the day. I told them about my idea and don't remember if they actually laughed, but the reception was less than enthusiastic. The national rep told me that if it's in *Ad Age*, it's yesterday's news and that that budget is already committed to other media. No way could I get any of that money at this point in the process. He went on to say that he had called on the advertising agency that handled Amtrak several times, and they had absolutely no interest in using billboards.

As a matter of fact, he added, he was in just last week to talk about their current campaign and had gotten nowhere. I was skeptical of that last bit of info since he hadn't brought it up at the sales meeting. It sounded to me like pure CYA.

As I walked back to my desk, I passed another sales rep who had been with the company for years and had much more experience than I did, and asked her what she thought. She said somebody like me could never get anywhere with a big New York City agency working on a large advertising buy like that. I wasn't exactly sure what she meant by "somebody like me," but I was certain it wasn't a compliment.

I sat at my desk, staring through the Plexiglas partition that divided my small office space and contemplated my options. I decided to call a guy I knew in New York who worked for one of the biggest out-of-home advertising companies in the world. I told him my idea, and he, too, told me to forget it. He said they had tried for years to get Amtrak to use billboards and they wouldn't bite—it would be a complete waste of my time.

Everybody said it was a bad idea. Everybody said it couldn't be done. Everybody implied that a nobody like me wouldn't have a snowball's chance in hell of pulling it off. I couldn't think of one good reason to move forward; it was obviously something nobody could accomplish.

And that settled it.

I was in, hook, line and sinker, with no life preserver in sight.

I asked one of our artists to mock up a few treatments of Amtrak's ad campaign into billboard dimensions, and I placed a call to the advertising agency in New York City. It took another two weeks and five more calls until I finally secured an appointment with the media buyer for the Amtrak account.

A week later, I was sitting in front of two guys who were very polite and patronizing. One of their jobs was to meet with hayseeds-not-from-NYC like me, so they had the routine down flat. I showed them the renditions of the ads our artist had prepared, and told them all about the great demographics, geographics and psychographics they

could get by using billboards in Philadelphia to promote the use of Metroliner.

When I was finished with my presentation, they thanked me and said that Amtrak traditionally did not use billboards, but they would pass on my ideas to the client. I asked them to be sure to send the drawing, too. They promised they would and showed me out.

End of story?

I don't suppose I'd be going through this if it were, now would I?

On the way back to Philly on the Metroliner, I hatched a plan. When I got back to the office, I went straight to where we kept the Red Books. The Red Books were printed volumes that listed all the advertising agencies in one book, and all the national and regional advertisers in another. That was before you could access information instantly on your nifty electronic cordless umbilical cord, and those Red Books were torn and dog-eared from all the use they got. I grabbed the one for advertisers and looked up Amtrak. I found the name of a man who was listed as VP of Marketing, and sent him a set of the drawing and a letter. The letter recapped my presentation in New York and added that although I was sure the agency had sent him the drawing, I was concerned they would be black and white copies (since this was in the days before color copiers), and I wanted him to see them in color.

I met with my sales manager and gave him a synopsis of what I had done so far. He congratulated me on a great effort and said I'd

never hear back from Amtrak; it was over. Good job. Now move on to more promising prospects.

End of story?

Wouldn't be much of an ending, eh?

Time passes. (I don't remember how long. It was more than a week but less than a month.)

I'm out in the field one day and call in to the office for messages (because this was before cell phones, when communications had to be more disciplined and proactive). I have a message from someone I don't know with a Washington, D.C., area code. I call the number and it turns out to be the assistant to the VP of Marketing for Amtrak. He tells me that the VP has received my letter and would like me to come down to Washington for lunch the next week.

The plot thickens!

So we're at lunch and I'm telling him all about how great it would be for Amtrak to advertise on billboards in Philadelphia. Finally, the VP smiles and says, "You know why I asked you here today? Because I've wanted to use billboards for a long time, but our advertising agency keeps telling me they won't work. You're the first billboard salesman who ever contacted me directly, and I think we're going to do some business together."

Cue the marching band and confetti.

End of story?

Not quite.

Amtrak would spend millions of dollars in advertising on billboards in Philadelphia over the next few years, and I went on to bigger and better things, thanks to that sale. I was at an industry meeting some time after my trip to Washington, when a senior VP from that big out-of-home advertising company my friend worked for in New York introduced himself and said, "You're the guy who sold Amtrak, aren't you?" And the rest is history.

You may have heard that failure is an orphan while success has many fathers. After the sale went through, our national rep, at the next sales meeting, congratulated me and went on to talk about how he had been working Amtrak for years and had laid all the groundwork, that we're a team, and we succeed or fail together. The other rep in our company I had talked to echoed that sentiment. She said she knew I could do it and was happy she was able to add to the team's success.

All these years later, I'm still smiling over that sale. I don't know what drove me to keep going when everybody and everything kept telling me to stop. I just had a feeling, a feeling that turned out not to be inherently ingrained in my DNA.

Sometimes I lost.

A few years later, I was introduced to a man named Jack Seidman. Jack had recently patented a product called Noz-L-Ad, and he was looking for help in selling the new medium to national advertisers.

Noz-L-Ad was a type of plastic harness that wrapped around the handle of a gas pump, and had a flat placard on the top that held an

advertisement that faced the person pumping gas. Self-service gas stations were still a relatively new convenience, although by the mid-1980s, 80 percent of all the gasoline being sold at gas stations in the United States was from self-service pumps. Accordingly, the potential market for an advertiser was huge.

Jack and I introduced Noz-L-Ad at an out-of-home advertising convention in Orlando, Florida. I had a replica of a gas pump built out of plywood that we placed in a rented suite, and provided light snacks and drinks for two days and nights. We had a great many people come through that suite, and I was able to start making appointments with some of the biggest buyers in the industry.

We spent the next several months crisscrossing the country, meeting with advertisers and trying to convince them to take the first bite of the apple. We visited Anheuser-Busch and Miller Brewing, and although they both loved the concept, they were afraid of the connection between drinking and driving. We went to see the folks at R.J. Reynolds and Philip Morris tobacco companies, and they loved the idea. Every gas station in the country sold cigarettes, so our product was a natural. But we couldn't get them to commit.

We went to General Mills, Procter and Gamble, the Hershey Company and M&M Mars, just to name a few, but nobody was jumping on the bandwagon. It was a frustrating, demoralizing period of my life. We weren't getting a lot of nos, but we weren't getting any

yeses, either. I began to question the viability of the product and started to lose faith in its marketability.

I was in New York one day and ran into a friend who had been at the convention in Florida and had visited the suite. He asked how Noz-L-Ad was doing, and I told him we couldn't get it off the ground. He leaned into me in a confidential manner and said, almost in a whisper, "I thought it was a pretty weak concept and was embarrassed for you at the convention."

That was the final straw. I gave up on the project, and a few months later, Jack died unexpectedly. Eventually, the patents expired and ads on gas pump handles started popping up all over the country. Their success spawned a whole revolution in gas pump advertising with tank toppers and video monitors. They're even wrapping entire gas pumps now with advertisements, and the gas pump advertising industry is producing hundreds of million of dollars in annual revenue.

It was a great idea whose time was yet to come, and had I the conviction of my original belief in the product, I'd probably be living on a Caribbean island, eating fresh seafood every day and drinking exotic concoctions.

You never know.

And sometimes it was a draw.

So here we are back in Philadelphia, fresh off my Amtrak triumph, full of evacuated liquid waste and vinegar.

I'm ready to take on anybody, anytime, anywhere, so I set my sights on Campbell Soup, another national advertiser with great potential for utilizing more aggressive billboard ad campaigns.

Campbell Soup is located in Camden, New Jersey, the city where I went to college and right across the Delaware River from Philadelphia. Two bridges connect Philadelphia to Camden: the Walt Whitman and the Benjamin Franklin, and Campbell Soup had a billboard advertisement on each bridge—neither one of them on my company's signs.

Like many large food and consumer-product conglomerates, Campbell Soup's many different products were handled by individual product groups. I spent months visiting all the different groups with no tangible results. Finally, after countless hours of climbing the corporate beanstalk, I met with a senior VP of marketing.

I made my presentation, which consisted of a spiffy slide show and colorful posters, and when I finished, the senior VP complimented me on a great job. Then he let me in on the secret: Campbell Soup's research indicated that it would be prohibitively expensive and impossible to manage billboards all over the country in order to reach the targeted demographics.

"But you have billboards on the Walt Whitman and the Ben Franklin bridges," I protested.

"That's true," he admitted. "You see, our CEO crosses the Walt Whitman Bridge on his way to work, and our president crosses the Ben

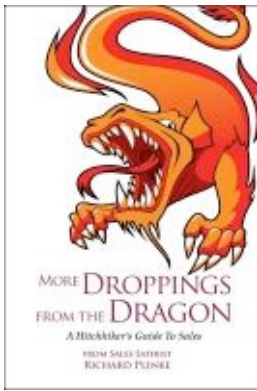
Franklin. They like to see those big, beautiful ads in the morning—it starts their day off with a smile."

Some marketing plan!

And that's the way it goes in the pursuit of success. In the words of Mary Chapin Carpenter: *Sometimes you're the windshield, sometimes you're the bug.*

If you want to be in sales, I have some bad news for you: you're going to be the bug more than you're going to be the windshield. But buck up, boogaloo. Every time you're the smashee, you're one step closer to being the smasher.

As long as you keep focused on your goals and dreams and don't let a little thing like failure stand in your way, you're going to end up having a smashing good time.



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