

*Essentially Human: On Sales and Salespeople reveals the critical traits and behaviors of salespeople using practical experience, storytelling, and research on the psychology of influence and human behavior, and its implications in sales.*

## **Essentially Human: On Sales and Salespeople**

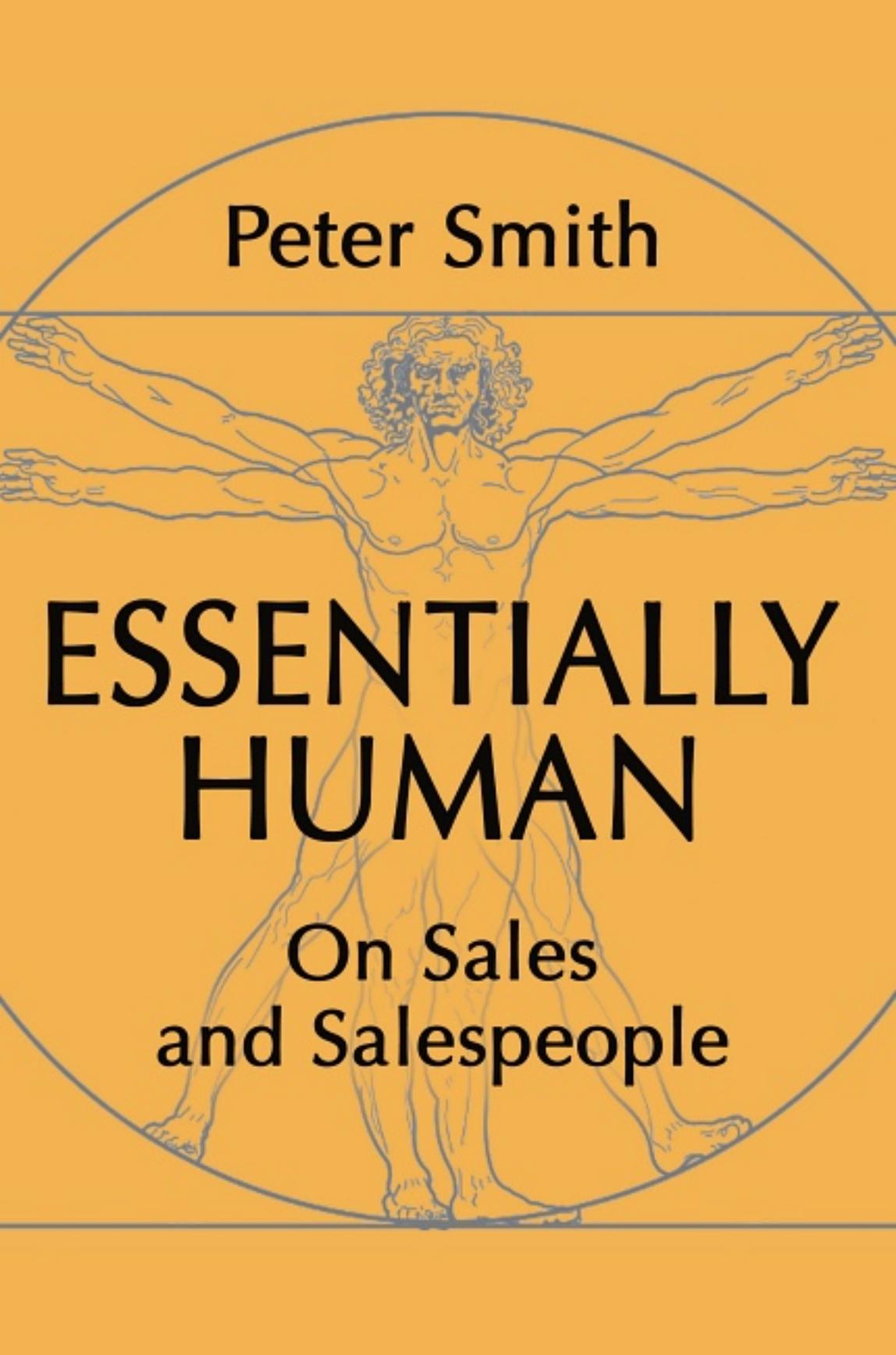
By Peter Smith

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**Peter Smith**



**ESSENTIALLY  
HUMAN**

**On Sales  
and Salespeople**

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# Introduction

Once upon a time, I was a singer in a band. We weren't a garage band, as such, but more of a kitchen band, as that was the room in James's house (I kid you not) where we wrote and played our music, with drums, guitars, keyboards, and amplifiers all crammed into a tiny space with us playing rock 'n' roll and living our best lives.

When we first started, we played all cover songs, doing credible versions of bands of the day, such as R.E.M. and the Cure, but it wasn't long before we began writing and performing our own songs and taking them into the local bars and colleges.

Despite having no formal training and no ability to read music or play an instrument, I became a prolific writer of songs. Not just the lyrics, but melodies too. For those few years, I would see and hear song titles, lyrics, and melodies everywhere I looked. It could be an old man crossing a street, an advertisement on the side of a bus, or, especially, the snippets of stories and conversations I'd encounter in the course of my day.

Not being able to write music, I'd get an idea, play with it for a bit, and then bring it to the band and sing it. They'd look at each other with those knowing smiles that said, "Here he goes again," and then quickly pick out the necessary chords and notes to determine what I was singing. In minutes, we'd be rocking a new song and adding it to our next playlist.

What amazed me then, and now, was how ubiquitous the song triggers were. I got ideas as quickly as I could write them down, and I

saw signs of music and lyrics everywhere. In fact, music and lyrics seemed to find me, I didn't even have to look.

In many respects, I see the influence of the behavioral sciences in much the same way today as I did music back in my band days. It's in the airports, the grocery stores, our online experiences, and the advertising that subliminally assaults our senses and subconscious throughout the day. It's in the movies, the music, and the way we get billed and pitched, sold and cajoled.

The behavioral sciences seem to be everywhere. As I once saw lyrics or melodies, today I see anchoring, pricing psychology, the effects of priming, or the paradox of choice. When someone shares a story with me about a colleague, employee, or friend, I find myself thinking about their resilience, or empathy, or optimism, about whether they are a good fit for their job or whatever relationship they might be in. I start internally debating what parts are nature and what parts are nurture.

I won't suggest that behavioral science giants like Daniel Kahneman, Robert Cialdini, and Dan Ariely, or their contemporary compatriots, such as Richard Shotton, Scott Barry Kaufman, or Lisa Feldman Barrett, have taken the place of R.E.M. or the Cure, but the influence of the behavioral sciences on people, work, and our decision-making cannot be denied. The topic has fascinated me ever since I first read *How to Hire & Develop Your Next Top Performer* by Herb Greenberg, Harold Weinstein, and Patrick Sweeney more than twenty years ago. That book struck a chord with me that has resonated since and, as with most good books, set me on a path to hundreds more books on the topic and a catalog of related and equally wonderful podcasts such as Scott Barry Kaufman's *The*

*Psychology Podcast, Kim Mills's Speaking of Psychology, Phil Agnew's Nudge, and Richard Shotton and MichaelAaron Flicker's Behavioral Science for Brands.*

Discovering how psychology informs the behavior of salespeople and customers has been a revelation for me. It has impacted my understanding of why one person might be a great hire and another, seemingly well-qualified and with a winning personality, just might not. It has shaped my ability to predict whether a customer might buy or not buy and whether they might pay twice as much as they said they would. And why showing customers too many options will virtually guarantee that their brains will metaphorically step in and remove them from the conversation altogether.

I have spent more than four decades in sales. I have hired and managed more teams than I can count, and I have been a keen observer of the behavior of salespeople and customers as both practitioner and student.

I am pleased to share this book with you and sincerely hope it will help further your own journey on the art and science of sales, salespeople, and customer behavior.

Peter Smith  
Boston, MA

# Chapter 1

## Just Be

Titling the first chapter with a quote from Barbra Streisand might seem like an odd place to begin a book about sales and salespeople. The fact that I'm even reading Ms. Streisand's 992-page tome, *My Name Is Barbra*, is a bit of a mystery in and of itself, but that's another story for another day.

The quote was from Ms. Streisand, to her costar and at least at that time, novice actor but accomplished singer/songwriter, Kris Kristofferson. They were recording their very first song together for a pivotal scene in their version of *A Star Is Born*. Strange as it may sound today, Mr. Kristofferson had stepped back from the microphone a time or two as he struggled to overcome his sense of insecurity in that moment.

Ms. Streisand, at one point, turned to her costar and said, "Don't worry about acting. Just be."

The essence of Streisand's advice resonated with me as I had hit a trough in writing this book, putting it down for weeks, even months on end, intending to finish it, but not quite willing myself back into the process and the good habits that had guided me through three previous books and hundreds of columns.

More interesting still, Streisand's simple words of encouragement to her costar also served as a reminder for me that salespeople too could learn much from not thinking too deeply about the process of being a salesperson or the machinations of the sales process, but,

instead, just being in the moment and doing so with authenticity. Of course, salespeople, as would have been the case with Kris Kristofferson, can only arrive at that place if they have the requisite mindset and wiring and a real commitment to being good enough, accomplished enough, to “just be.”

There’s also a certain paradox at play in as much as being able to “just be” requires a huge amount of work. We can’t “just be” unless we’ve gone through a rigorous process of trying and failing, of winning and losing, of wanting and repelling. We can debate the number of years it takes to reach the pinnacle of just being, but there can be little argument that we need to live through all kinds of experiences before we can shed the cloak of expectations, of conventions, of cultural norms, of dysfunctions, and all of the experiences that steel us to finally let go and “just be.”

Salespeople are, in many respects, like actors, singers, and performers themselves. There’s no one prototype or model for what a successful salesperson ought to look like, and in stating the obvious, they take many different routes to the sales profession.

In *To Sell Is Human*, Daniel Pink wrote about the reality of nonsales selling. He posits that we spend about 40 percent of our time at work selling. That could be sharing ideas, suggested solutions to problems, alternate plans, budgets, strategies, and so on, and this can be done by doctors, attorneys, teachers, architects, and all manner of professions not classified as professional sales. Yet selling is exactly what they are doing as they seek to influence their clients and colleagues to see things a certain way.

In a 1997 interview with NPR’s Terry Gross, the legendary singer-songwriter Johnny Cash spoke about his challenges of trying to make

a living when he first moved to Memphis. Needing to pay his bills while he pursued his dream of becoming a professional musician, Cash got a job as a salesman at a retail store called Home Equipment Company. “I couldn’t sell anything, and I didn’t really want to,” the singer confided in Gross. He then went on to explain how during that period, he relentlessly pursued the owner of Sun Records, Sam Phillips, to listen to his music.

“I was fully confident I was going to see Sam Phillips and record for him,” Cash told his interviewer. He called Phillips again and again, but he was turned down every time. Nonetheless, he refused to let the constant rejections dissuade him from his mission. “One day, I just decided that I’m ready to go. I went down (to Sun Records) with my guitar and sat on the front steps of his recording studio and met him (Sam Phillips) when he came in. I said, ‘I’m Johnny Cash. I’m the one that’s been calling and if you’d listen to me, I believe you’ll be glad you did.’”

The rest is history. I don’t know if Daniel Pink ever met Johnny Cash, but the singer’s story certainly validates Pink’s thesis. Cash was not a salesman in the traditional sense—he said as much himself—and yet he demonstrated resilience and grit in staying the course to make his case and sell his story to Sam Phillips at Sun Records.

## **Takeaways – Chapter 1**

**Just Be:** Streisand advised Kristofferson to “Just be,” believing that would alleviate the self-imposed pressure and enable him to lean into his own authenticity.

**Self-Efficacy:** We saw high self-efficacy from Johnny Cash in his belief that he would be a success at Sun Records. We saw low self-efficacy from Kris Kristofferson when he stepped back from the microphone a couple of times.

**Reframing:** Daniel Pink posits that we are all in sales. Even in nonselling professions such as academia, medicine, law, accounting, and most others, ideas, solutions, strategies, budgets, and more need to be sold to someone, requiring some sales acumen.

**Mastery over Outcome:** Both Cash and Kristofferson had demonstrated mastery, but while Cash never lost sight of that reality, Streisand needed to remind Kristofferson by imploring him to “Just be,” knowing, as she did, that he had earned his stripes and would be okay.

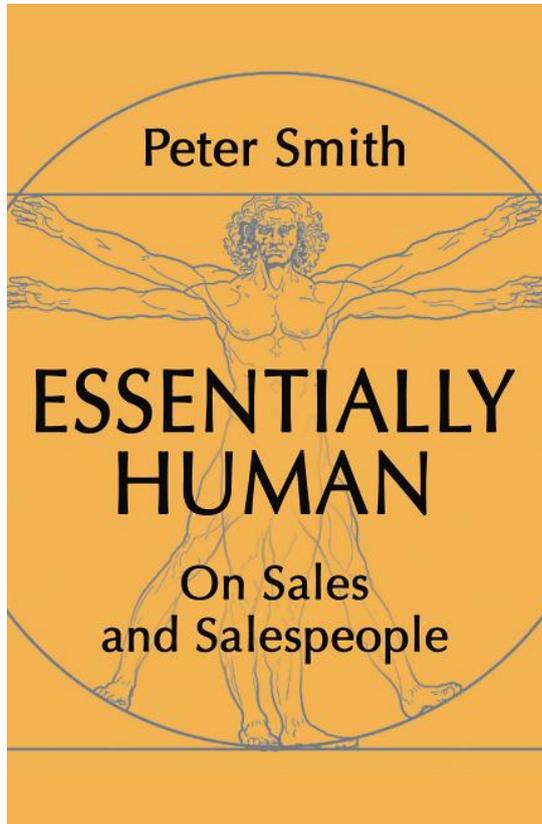
## About the Author



Peter Smith is a principal owner of The Retail Smiths, a consulting company providing transformational strategies to retailers and vendors in the jewelry space. He is also a Sales Behavior Coach, and a Keynote and Breakout Speaker. Smith was an executive leader in luxury sales for more than four decades, leading the transformation of multiple brands. *Essentially Human; On Sales and Salespeople*, is Smith's fourth book. He previously authored *Hiring Squirrels: 12 Essential Questions to Uncover Great Retail Sales Talent*, *Sell Something: Principles and Perspectives for Engaged Retail Salespeople*, and *The Sales Minute: 101 Tips for Retail Salespeople*. Smith is a contributing columnist for *National Jeweler*, *The Jewelry Book*, and *INSTORE Magazine*.

He can be reached at [TheRetailSmiths@gmail.com](mailto:TheRetailSmiths@gmail.com) or at [TheRetailSmiths.com](http://TheRetailSmiths.com). or on LinkedIn.

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