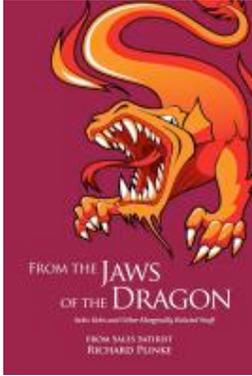




FROM THE JAWS
OF THE DRAGON

Sales Tales and Other Marginally Related Stuff

FROM SALES SATIRIST
RICHARD PLINKE



From slices of water pie to being passed off as a cast member from the 1970s Broadway show Hair, Richard Plinke takes the reader on a magical carpet ride through his humorous, fractured view of the world of selling. From The Jaws Of The Dragon is a collection of columns and essays from Plinke's fertile and unique perspective on the art of sales, all tied together in a neatly disguised package of valuable life lessons.

From the Jaws of the Dragon

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Prologue

So you want to be a sales puke.

Me? I never wanted to be in sales and only ended up here by dumb luck. The thought of all those hucksters and liars as depicted in the media and entertainment was enough to scare me away. But apparently providence is stronger than the discord, disillusionment and lack of ethics portrayed by characters like Willie Loman from *Death of a Salesman* or Professor Harold Hill in *The Music Man*, and finally, after being baited, switched and hooked (like in any good con game), I jumped at the chance to sell my soul to the devil. And 35-plus years later, here I am, still prepping and schlepping and still chasing those elusive sales.

Ah, those elusive sales, the stuff of imagination that spawned the modern marketing industry, wherein the art of selling safely resides and flourishes under the simple belief that is predicated on the principle that no truth is sacred and any idea or notion can be spun into any other idea or notion with the right positioning. No, not lies—

From The Jaws Of The Dragon

positioning—a euphemism of sometimes hilarious proportion that has given us delightfully original misuse of language, all in the good name of moving product.

Like a local bank in my hometown. They ran an ad warning customers to be wary of other banks, with the line "Did your bank sell you down the river?" In the printed ad there was a depiction of a frightened man in a wooden rowboat about to go over a large waterfall. Printed on the side of the boat was the name "S.S. Hugo First." The copy read, "Want this to be the last time a local bank sells out and leaves you in uncharted waters?" In these times of large banks gobbling up smaller banks as quickly as they can until they are no longer profitable and are forced to sell out to even bigger banks on their way to unprofitability, it was a likable ad with a valuable message and I imagine it worked well for them.

The only problem is that it was sophistry of the highest order. You see, many of the folks involved in that bank were involved in another local bank a few years ago that did exactly what they were warning against: they sold out to a bigger bank, leaving their former customers in extremely turbulent waters. I know; I was one of those customers who got caught plunging down a raging river with no paddle. In spite of that, I have to admit it takes real *chutzpah* to roll out an advertising campaign that warns people about somebody else doing something painful to them that you've already done to them (and may very well

Richard Plinke

do to them again in the future). Although the ad may be disingenuous to an extent, the bottom line is that it's smart marketing.

Almost as smart as a candy bar company that wanted to introduce a new size for their popular candy bars a few decades ago when marketing was just starting to catch on to its real power of persuasion. The candy bars in question had been around a very long time and had been the same size since the inception of the company, way back when people went into business because they wanted to produce a quality product. However, as profitability replaced product as the main impetus for showing up in the morning to grind cocoa beans and mix the brown, powdered gold with overly processed sugar, some bean-counter (literally) decided the company was being way too generous with their delightful concoctions and reduced the size of the candy bars.

Which brought up an interesting sales dilemma: How do you sell a smaller candy bar to the chocolate-consuming public for the same price without harming the brand? Out of the swirling vortex of creation came inspiration from a crackerjack marketer who had a brilliant idea—they would package the candy bars in new, brightly colored wrappers and in big, bold print, they would add the words "New Size!"

As absurd as it sounds, it worked. Sales actually increased with the introduction of the new merchandizing scheme for the smaller candy bars at the same price, which says a lot about us and helps

From The Jaws Of The Dragon

explain how a few shifty but well-packaged rascals have been elected to positions of authority. As the candy bar company learned, sales really is all about the use of language in positioning a product, a lesson a canning company once used to solve an inventory problem that threatened to send it into bankruptcy.

This story was around before my introduction to the world of business, and has been retold in so many variations and attributed to so many different sources that it's become a kind of mythic fable. I heard it my first week in training, and over the years I've researched it but could never find any substantial information on its origin, only a lot of misinformation and misdirection. It's my favorite sales story, although you could argue it's a marketing story. To me, sales and marketing are pretty much one and the same, the most notable difference being that the salesperson is out on the cold, hard street every day with her smiling face in front of prospects, and, more often than not, leaves with her still-smiling head on a not-so-shiny, rather tarnished and dinged-up, silver-plated platter. Meanwhile, the marketing nerds are back in their safe, warm offices thinking up new ways to get our heads handed to us. It's a swell relationship, but in essence, the same discipline.

It seems that this canning company had purchased a great deal of Russian salmon, but when the fish was canned and distributed, it just sat on the grocery store shelves and didn't sell. It didn't sell because it was white-meat salmon, whereas salmon was by and large pink.

Richard Plinke

Accordingly, people were put off by the idea of white salmon and afraid to take a risk on something new and different, sadly but usually the case with new and different things. The company had invested a lot of money in the Russian shipment, and as a result, found itself in a precarious cash flow situation. They had to find a way to sell the salmon or risk financial peril.

Finally, some brighter-than-the-average-bear advertising deckhand came up with an idea. They recalled all the salmon, relabeled the cans and shipped them back out. As the story goes, within a few days the entire shipment sold out. What did the new label say that caused the salmon to become so popular? It was a simple but brilliant message that read: "Will not turn pink in the can."

Although the new message on the labels fit the definition of sophistry to a T (cleverly deceptive reasoning), it wasn't a lie; that salmon wouldn't turn pink in a million years, but the implication was that all salmon started out white and turned pink while sitting on the grocer's shelves, and that sounded just a bit too icky for most folks.

Positioning. You can sell almost anything with the right positioning, as these companies found out. And you can position a product to your potential customer much more easily once you've learned how to read and interpret his behavior. Studying human behavior is one of the most enjoyable parts of sales for me. Everybody is unique in one way or another, and trying to figure out what pushes their buttons can be challenging and fun. There are plenty of courses,

From The Jaws Of The Dragon

books and tapes out there that can teach you how to pigeonhole prospects into neatly defined categories, and they're fine, to a point. The problem is that like snowflakes, no two human beings are the same. They can be similar, but never exact copies of each other, so if you want to become good at selling to people, you'd better first learn how to read and understand people.

My entire career has been spent watching and studying human behavior, and it's always fascinating. I've come to realize that people behave in certain ways because they get caught up in who they think they are and who they want to be, and in doing so, lose sight of what it is they're supposed to be accomplishing.

I was at a luncheon recently that was sponsored by a large health insurance company. On the agenda was a workshop on health care in today's business world, with an emphasis on the cost of health insurance. This insurance company insures millions and millions of people, and their business is the business of people's health, or at least it should be.

The affair was a first-rate operation and the room was appointed beautifully with fresh flowers and colorful linen tablecloths. The buffet table was long and elegant, full of food and beverages. There were a few salads and some kind of tuna mix, but the main attraction was roast beef sandwiches on white flour rolls with mayonnaise and other condiments available on the side. They had what looked like homemade potato chips, brownies, chocolate chip cookies, sweetened

Richard Plinke

ice tea and assorted soft drinks. And lots of coffee to wash it all down and give you a little afternoon pick-me-up.

So what's wrong with this picture? The only thing missing on the serving table were shots of whiskey and a few tobacco products. It was the perfect menu for high cholesterol, high blood pressure and high blood sugar; a myriad of heart disease, neurologic disorders and type 2 diabetes accelerators.

I couldn't believe it. What were they thinking? Whose brainchild was the menu and did that person have any clue what the theme of the afternoon was? More fascinating, when I mentioned my observation to the person seated next to me, he looked at me like I had three heads.

I assume I wasn't the only one there who saw the hypocrisy and conflicting messages they were sending with their food choices, but it certainly gave me pause to think about why we're in the midst of a healthcare crisis.

Human behavior can be a powerful elixir of the bizarre and the strange. I was at an airport several years ago, sitting in a hallway next to a bank of pay phones. (Pay phones are old-fashioned cell phones, only they were attached to walls or poles, and you had to put money into a slot to make them work. You couldn't access the Internet with them, but hanging next to the phones on a metal cord was a printed version of the Internet we called the Yellow Pages. Pay phones never lost power and never dropped calls because of a weak signal. Consequently, they were much more reliable and user friendly. And

From The Jaws Of The Dragon

because people used to go out of their houses back then and often traveled to places where there were no pay phones, you sometimes had to actually speak face to face to a fellow human being, using real spoken language. OMG, CYI?)

I was sitting there waiting for my flight to be called and reading a newspaper. A man in a suit and tie and carrying a briefcase was standing next to the phones with a young girl who looked about 4 years old, and who I assumed was his daughter. He was bending over to look her in the eyes and speaking in a tone and vernacular appropriate for a 4-year-old, not baby talk but in clear and animated language that was a bit sing-songy. He was extremely attentive and he appeared to cherish her dearly. He made me feel less than adequate as a father, and I remember experiencing some discomfort; I was threatened by the overt and demonstrative show of affection.

Then the phone rang and he hurried over to pick it up, leaving his daughter looking confused and a bit lost. He immediately launched into a heated discussion with someone who appeared to be his superior about an order that had either been lost or misfiled. As he engaged in the conversation and lost touch with everything else around him, his daughter walked the couple of steps over to him and tugged on his coat.

"Daddy," she said. "I have to go to the bathroom."

He quickly and distractedly looked down and patted her on the head. "Not now, sweetie," he replied.

Richard Plinke

But she persisted in tugging on his coat and beseeching him to take her to the bathroom, and he continued to be totally preoccupied with his call and pretty much ignored her, occasionally giving her a quick, insincere smile, trying to placate her long enough to take care of the real business at hand. This continued for a while, and eventually she started crying and peed her pants, making a puddle on the floor around her and her daddy's shoes.

What a scene. Here was a guy who appeared to be one thing but turned out to be something completely different, a guy I had admired at first blush, before he exposed his badly misplaced priorities. This guy would tell you and show you he was a great dad, at least when it was convenient. He also didn't listen to what was being said to him, and he didn't process information effectively, a common and debilitating trait in most salespeople. When I played football, we called guys like that "all show and no go."

Studying human behavior is like sailing a boat. You always have to be aware of which way the wind is blowing and always be alert for it to change without warning. And then you have to be able to react quickly and decisively in order to keep sailing ahead smoothly. However, I remember one time being so flummoxed by the behavior of one particular human being that there was no way to react in any constructive manner other than to learn a valuable lesson: Don't believe everything you hear, especially if it's coming from the mouth of another person.

From The Jaws Of The Dragon

I've spent my career selling advertising, and I was at an advertising convention in Florida where the keynote speaker was a buyer from a large New York advertising agency. This buyer handled a few big accounts and he was responsible for spending *mucho dinero* in media, so I was anxious to hear him speak and hopefully pick up a few valuable tips.

As it turned out, he was mesmerizing. He was witty and charming and a terrific speaker with plenty of interesting anecdotes and funny stories. Since this convention was for media sales reps, the general theme of his presentation was aimed at how to sell advertising to buyers from large New York advertising agencies. He told tale after tale of his encounters with hapless media reps, most of those encounters being of the less-than-successful variety, and he interjected a great deal of advice on how to secure appointments with buyers from large New York advertising agencies. He went on and on about how he wanted fresh, new minds coming to him with fresh, new ideas, and how he wanted them very badly and how he wanted all of us fresh, new reps to keep that in mind as we met with buyers from large New York advertising agencies.

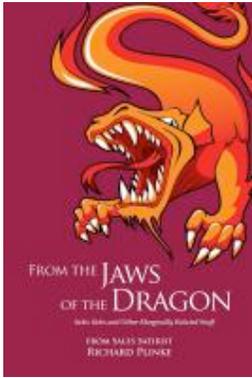
He got me pumped. I couldn't wait to get home and start calling buyers from large New York advertising agencies with all my fresh, new ideas, and I was going to call him first. Well, I made that call, and then a week later I made that call again, and then again, and then again, and on it went until finally after a few months of frustration, I

Richard Plinke

wrote him a letter thanking him for the great advice he'd given me at the convention, and asking him if he ever removed his head from up his ass long enough to take a breath, would he please return my phone call.

So you want to be a sales puke.

Well, strap yourself in tight because it's going to be one hell of a ride.



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