**The ‘S’ Word**

**By Ellen Rohr**

“We aren’t using the ‘S’ word at our company anymore,” my friend announced, in response to my “How’s biz?” greeting.

“Really? Why not?” I asked.

“My service plumbers are offended by the ‘S’ word. I wouldn’t use the ‘S’ word even if I stepped right in it.

“How do you pull that off?” I pressed. “What do you call it?”

“Service! Education! Communication! Anything but….*SALES.”*

He continued, “You see, the SALES word drives my plumbers crazy. They can’t stand to think of themselves as salesmen. The word SALES reminds them of Snake Oil, Sleaze Ball, and that *other* ‘S’ word.”

Can you relate to my friend? Do you like the idea of calling it something else? Do you HATE asking your plumbers to – gulp – make a SALE? Are you thinking, “Yeah, if we didn’t have to do the SALES part, I would really enjoy business!”?

Yes?

Well, get over it.

Sales Phobia: 1. A compulsive and persistent dread of or aversion to sales. 2. Any strong aversion or dislike of sales.

Sales *is* the name of the game. And by calling it something else you are just showing your Sales Phobia. Sales Phobia is a fatal disease. It will absolutely kill your business. Luckily, the condition isn’t incurable. This column will take a look at the causes of Sales Phobia. Then, I’ll show you how to get over it!

I am a recovering Sales Phobic. I exposed my resistance to sales at a planning meeting for Nexstar, a cool association of service contractors. I was helping the group develop a curriculum for their service managers’ training camp. I wanted to make sure that the curriculum covered all the roles a service manager assumes…technical trainer, inventory manager, fleet manager, customer service manager, scheduling manager, etc. The service manager, often also the owner in a small company, has a huge responsibility load.

One of the other members of the committee said, “The service manager has only one responsibility: sales. The service manager needs to look at every situation he encounters and ask, ‘Is this helping, or hindering, sales?’”

I was shocked. Certainly, the technical aspects of the job were as important as sales? What about making sure the trucks were in top shape? What about safety issues?

I argued, “Money isn’t the only thing, you know. There’s more to a business than making sales.”

His head whipped around. He fixed his eyes on mine. He took a deep breath and replied, “Unless a sale happens, none of those other things will happen. Sales have to be the top priority. Ellen, what is your problem with sales? I’m not talking about selling people things they don’t need. I am talking about solving problems, and charging a reasonable price. That’s all there is to sales. You’ve got an issue with sales. And you need to get over it.” There was disappointment in his voice.

I was stunned. I was working as a *saleperson* for the group at the time! And I was clearly avoiding the ‘S’ word.

He was right. Sales is name of the game. That confrontation knocked some sense into me. I wondered at the reasons for my Sales Phobia. Certainly, I am not the only one eligible for a Twelve-Step program for recovering Sales Phobics. (“Hi, my name is Ellen R. and I am afraid of SALES!”) In his fabulous book, *How To Sell At Prices Higher Than Your Competitors,* Lawrence Steinmetz makes this observation…

“Many sales reps really don’t like selling. In fact, a lot of sales people think selling is just a notch above ambulance chasing. The truth is, more than 40 percent of the sales reps I’ve tested fundamentally don’t approve of selling – and my educated guess is that about 90 percent of our total population doesn’t approve of selling.”

Sheesh. If *salespeople* don’t approve of selling, and if 90% of *all* people don’t like it…is it any wonder that you and your plumbers would rather find another word for sales?

**Why you are wimp about sales.**

All phobias have a link to the truth. We dislike sales because we’ve had bad sales experiences. Remember the Alfred Hitchcock movie, *Marnie*? Tippi Hedren played Marnie, a neurotic woman with an unreasonable fear of the color red. Naturally, the dramatic conclusion of the movie reveals a horrible incident from her past: a blood soaked murder. Hence, the fear of RED! Basic psychology.

Our aversion to sales is linked to our past experiences with bad sales attempts. Once, I had to forcibly push an over-zealous window salesman out the door. He had been at my house for three hours before he announced he wasn’t leaving without a signed contract. Yikes! Certainly, you’ve been hounded by the car salesman who wouldn’t stop asking, “What will it take to earn your business today?” Have you ever been violated with a spray of cologne while walking through a department store?

As a result, we learn to hate sales and cringe at the thought of being a salesperson. But there is a paradox here. The things we hate about sales are things that don’t work in sales. We hate pushy salespeople. You know what? Pushy salespeople don’t make many sales. We hate it when salespeople lie. Well, liars don’t make a second sale, which shortens their career in sales. In other words, our fears about sales are founded in behaviors that don’t create sales!

You gotta get over it.

Regardless of its cause, Sales Phobia is a terminal disease. Since I’ve confronted the hypocrisy of Sales Phobia and overcome my own issues with sales, I am intolerant of Sales Phobia in others. I won’t stand for it. (Have you noticed how vehemently a used-to-smoke-non-smoker spouts off on the dangers of tobacco?) So, here are some ways to get over it….

1. **Recall the purchases you’ve made that made you happy.** Think about just today. You’ve bought power, water, sewer, internet service, phone service, fuel…without even thinking about it. Because it’s so convenient, you agree to have these basic goods and services constantly delivered. Think about your ongoing purchases. Over time, with financing, you’re buying your car and your house. During a month’s time you’ve bought food, clothes, entertainment, education, haircuts, vitamins, school yearbooks, family outings. Fun stuff! Wonderful purchases. Without sales you would spend all day every day gathering food and water and assembling rudimentary clothing and shelter. How does that sound to you?
2. **Understand the connection between sales and world peace.** Good sales are good trading practices. Good sales allow you to focus your energies on your skills and talents, and offer them to the world in exchange for money. Then, you can offer that money to others to secure their livelihood, while benefiting from their skills and talents. Good sales hold the promise of solid communities, and our best chance at world peace. Certainly governmental distribution of goods and services is a poor substitute for free market trade. Have you ever thought about sales that way?
3. **Remember that without sales, you are out of business.** It’s easy to go out of business. It’s easy to lose money in business. Either way, you do a disservice to yourself, your employees and your customers. As a profitable business owner, you are a pillar of society. As a losing business owner, you are a burden to society.
4. **If plumbing services sold themselves, you wouldn’t need to sell them.** Notice, there are no salespeople at Home Depot. Sure, there are a few ‘associates’ running about stocking shelves and directing you to the restrooms. But, the prices at Home Depot sell the products without much help. If you are going to compete with Home Depot it won’t be on price. YOU CAN’T POSSIBLY WIN THE LOW PRICE GAME. You can’t buy like they can. Instead, you will have to charge a fair price for your superior services. You and your plumbers will have to learn how to sell your services. It takes education, communication and good service. But it’s called SALES.
5. **Become a fanatic about the numbers.** You can rant and rave. You can get philosophical. But the numbers tell the score. Track your costs of doing business. Create a budget. Be sure to include generous compensation and benefits for you and your team. Apply a responsible profit. Establish a selling price that covers all costs and profit. Then, track your actual performance. Use the financial statements – the balance sheet and the income statement – to keep score in your business. If you don’t like the score, make some changes. Most of your financial problems will disappear once you handle the top line of the income statement: sales. How can you increase sales? Raise your prices, improve your average sale per customer, and sell more add-on accessories and upgrades. A great manager once told me, “If the top line is right, managing your business is easy. If the top-line is too low, everything is a struggle.”
6. **Promise never to sell anything your customers don’t need or want.** How about that? Does that make you breathe easier? Nobody wants you to shove anything anywhere. Good sales and good customer service go hand in hand. Just offer your best to your customers, and ask them if they would like to buy it. Good sales feel good to everyone involved. Slimy tactics don’t work to make sales. You offer wonderful services…quiet, clean, efficient plumbing and heating systems. Your customers wouldn’t call you if they didn’t have a problem. Aren’t your customers better off if they BUY? Make lots of good sales!
7. **Create a formal sales training program at your company.** You can learn how to make sales more easily and efficiently. Where do you learn sales skills? Unfortunately, not in school. (Why is it that the really important life skills – communication, finance, sales – aren’t part of the standard curriculum?) But the information is out there. Go to Barnes and Noble and find a sales book that appeals to you. Snoop around on the internet. Find out what sales training programs are available from your trade associations. Hold regular sales classes for your company. Work with your wholesaler to bring in sales experts for seminars. Sales training is a life-long process.

But it isn’t enough to offer sales training to your plumbers. You MUST…

1. **Hold your plumbers accountable for sales.** Establish minimum sales levels and post the benchmarks. Communicate that you will teach your technicians sales skills, and you’ll do everything in your power to help them reach those sales levels. However, let it be know that, ultimately, they will be fired for not making those levels. And they will be compensated generously when they do. Let your plumbers know that you understand the aversion to the ‘S’ word. Tell your story, of how you personally overcame Sales Phobia. Promise to help them get over theirs. Typically a plumber’s self esteem is based on his technical skills. But he can use his technical skills only after he gets the sale! When your plumbers learn how to sell, and are held accountable for making sales, your company will be unstoppable.
2. **Learn to use the word *sales*.** Don’t call it anything but what it is. Don’t hide behind euphemisms. Avoiding the word *sales* discredits you and your company. Learn to ask, “What were your sales today?” without stuttering. For practice, say, “SALES” one hundred times in a day. It’s a good way to desensitize yourself to the word.
3. **Realize that Home Depot has no problem with sales.** HD loves sales! Sales pushed them to the top of the heap in our industry. The two fellows who founded Home Depot wrote a best-selling business book explaining how they created billions and billions of sales worldwide. They have no problem with the ‘S’ word.

The game is SALES. It is an honorable game. You offer top-draw products and services. Present them truthfully and professionally to your chosen customers. Ask questions. Listen for opportunities to present solutions. State the price. Answer questions. Make the SALE. Everyone wins.

Use the ‘S’ word. Proudly.

Xo$, Ellen

**Ellen Rohr**

**“Plumber’s wife to Business Builder – The Bare Bones Biz Basics work…from Main Street to Wall Street.”**

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