

Listen First–Sell Later

**A Sales and Marketing Guide for
Everyone!**

Bob Poole

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To

*Mom and Dad
who started me
down the path*

*Joann,
who will always be*

and

*Mindy and Ryan
who inspire me every
day*

Listen First–Sell Later

Introduction

This is a book for people who sell (whether they know it or not).

It's for people who own their own business and people who are just starting out. It's a book about communication and relationships, which means that you can use it to connect with your customers, bosses, employees, children, and parents, too. If you volunteer for a cause you're passionate about, or if you've got a great idea but you don't know how to start marketing it, this book will help you.

This book is for entrepreneurs, politicians, venture capitalists, students, job-seekers, and retirees looking for a new beginning.

In short, it's a sales and marketing book for everyone—because every one of us is selling and marketing all the time. Any time you try to persuade someone else to your point of view, you are selling something. Any time you need to get your message across to others, you're a marketer.

Even if you aren't a professional salesperson, your livelihood, even your quality of life, may depend on how well you sell. And it will almost certainly depend on the substance and quality of your interactions and relationships with other people—your ability to listen.

That's why this book is for you.

Listen First—Sell Later

In 1971, after working as a photojournalist, I decided to open a studio based photography business. I was very young and was under the impression that if I built a really great studio along with creating and presenting great work, the public would be knocking down my door. It didn't work like that.

I quickly realized that people were not ready to listen to what I had to say about my photography. It was only after I realized I had to get their attention first that I began to experience success.

As I got more experience in marketing and sales, this is what I learned: In order to get people to listen to what I had to say and buy what I had to sell, **I had to listen to them first**. I learned the value of asking questions and listening before trying to sell or market. I realized that attempting to sell something without listening to my customers first would be the same thing as a physician prescribing a drug without ever talking to the patient. I would be guilty of malpractice.

Many people today are starting their own small businesses for a number of reasons. Some do so because they're tired of the corporate grind. Others want to be their own boss, either as a second career or a precaution against downsizing. But unless they have a good background in sales and marketing, many of them will fail because they don't know how to get people's attention. They don't know that they need to listen first and sell later.

This book contains over 35 years of sales and marketing experience for people just like them—especially those just starting out or struggling. That's another thing I learned the

hard way over many years: It's far easier to learn from other people's mistakes than your own. This way, you can learn from mine.

Listen with Your Eyes and Heart

Let's say you're at a party and it's a good networking opportunity. How long do you think the average person takes to make a decision about someone they've just met? How long does it take for your gut to say, "I like this person?" or "Wow, get me out of here!" If you're like most people you'll have that gut feeling within the first few minutes—sometimes less.

How do you come to a decision about someone else? Is it their dress, the tone or volume of their voice, the words they use, mannerisms, their smile, eye contact (or lack thereof)? Do they look around the room as you're being introduced, or do they make you feel like they're truly interested in you?

All of these things are part of the way we make a first impression. There are several ways you can take advantage of this. For one thing, learn how to match someone's tone and pace of speech. If you are caffeine-fueled, bouncing on the balls of your feet and speaking at warp speed, you're not going to connect with a calm, contemplative person who really thinks about each sentence. (In fact, they may well hate you.) Learn to use positive psychological reciprocity: Respond to another's positive action with one of your own. If your new acquaintance smiles, smile back. Watch them to keep it going.

These are ways to engender good will and trust. People do business with others they like and trust. Nurture a relationship with a client or potential client just like you would with someone you want to date.

Listen to them with your eyes and with your heart.

You Don't Understand Me

It's a teenager's favorite accusation when talking to their parents: "You don't understand me." What happens when we "grow up" and become adults? Do we sometimes still feel like people don't understand us? And whose fault is it?

If you're the speaker in a conversation, it's your responsibility to make sure the listener understands. On the other hand, if you are the listener, the responsibility falls upon you. It's actually a fifty-fifty process but the irony is that 100% of the responsibility is on both people.

Let's talk about listeners. Listening is an art. The first thing you need to do is to tune the world out. Don't let your mind wander. Don't start thinking about your response until you know that you fully understand what the speaker is saying.

Make eye contact. And remember—you can only really look into one eye at a time. (I know that everyone talks about looking into a person's eyes, but if you try to look into both eyes at once, you'll give them a cross-eyed stare and probably get dizzy. Focus on one eye.)

Be aware of your body language. Don't crowd someone or get too casual, but try not to be too stiff or formal. Relax and smile and let them talk.

Give positive feedback if you understand what they're saying. Nod your head. Respond verbally with phrases like, "I see," "I understand," "I understand how you must feel." Feedback goes a long way toward meeting your 100%

responsibility. Stop and ask for clarification if you don't understand.

If you give these a try, you'll find that speakers will respond much better to you—especially when you change roles, and you are the speaker.

Understand?

We're Talking but Not Listening

The entire process of communicating—talking, listening, understanding—is the foundation for all marketing and sales.

Without successful two-way communication, your marketing and sales efforts will be totally ineffective.

My friend Dennis once told me he was having a problem with a long-time client. They'd had a difference of opinion, and had eventually stopped talking. The client was still doing business with the firm, but Dennis and he still weren't talking.

Then one day Dennis told me they had started talking again. "We had a meeting earlier this week," he said.

"So, you resolved your problem?" I asked.

"No," Dennis said. "We're just ignoring it. But we are talking."

I agree with Dennis, they are talking—but they aren't communicating. Communicating requires both parties to listen and understand what the other person is saying. In this instance, talking but not listening to how both people feel about the original problem is likely to lead to further dissonance.

If establishing a business relationship is like dating, then maintaining a positive relationship is similar to maintaining a healthy marriage. All relationships experience conflict. How we deal with that conflict will determine the viability of our relationships—business and personal.

Communication requires good transmission skills. Too often we believe that we're making our point, and all the while our listener is hearing something totally different. Frustration escalates on everyone's part when the listener responds to what they thought they heard (or interpreted).

As the listener, it's your job to be absolutely certain that you understand what the speaker is saying. You need to communicate that understanding back to the speaker. Then, change roles.

If you still feel like you're not being understood, or that you don't understand what you've heard, you may need a third party to help. Better to engage a coach or consultant to assist you than to allow a good relationship to deteriorate.

Better Than Being Scratched By a Cat

When it comes to house pets, it seems like most people claim either to be cat people or dog people. Some, like me, are both.

It wasn't always that way. Once, I would have said I was a dog person. But a few years ago I was adopted by an older male cat that someone had "dumped" in the woods near a walking path I follow. I named him Walker and he quickly decided that I was his best friend. When Walker unexpectedly died 2 years ago, my wife and I rescued three other cats to join our two dog family.

Even at that point, I still wouldn't have called myself a cat person. I liked them, but I was a little afraid of them. They had all those claws and sharp teeth, and they knew how to use them! I'd give them some pats on the head and a few rubs but I was very careful to stay out of reach of those claws.

I'm telling you this today because all that has changed. As I sat down to write just now, two of the cats climbed up on me and my keyboard. This happens all the time. I rub them all over and they in turn roll over on their backs to have their stomachs rubbed. Quite frankly, there's a mutual love-in every morning at my desk!

What's changed? The answer is a single word: TRUST.

I trust them and they trust me. I have earned their trust, and they have earned mine.

Trust isn't something you can buy. It's not easy to earn, and it is easy to lose. In a world where buyers have an abundance of companies, products, and services to choose from, trust is scarce and valuable. More than that, trust increases in value as you nurture it—and as others throw theirs away. (Think of Wall Street, George W. Bush, the U.S. Department of Treasury... You get the idea.)

One way you can build trust is by listening. You can't sell to someone without listening first. People won't trust you if they feel like you don't listen to them. Your employees won't trust you if they see that you're more concerned with the bottom line than their trust in you. The level of trust a leader can expect to receive is directly related to the follower's perception of the leader's respect, empathy, integrity, generosity, listening and communication skills.

How important is trust? It's the difference between hearing the sound of contented purring and getting your hands scratched and bit.

Trust is what makes everyone feel more invested and committed to each other. It is the most important intangible asset you have with your customers and clients.

You might want to spend more time on earning and building trust these days... and less on the things that anyone can copy.

Stop Selling

Customers and prospects know their problems much better than you do. Don't make the mistake of thinking that you already have the solutions. To assume you know the solution before you really understand the problem, once again, is like a physician writing a prescription before making a diagnosis.

Likewise, remember that positive customer relationships are not just about getting paid. The prospect might not need what you're selling—this time. But if you do know how to solve their problem (even if it doesn't mean a sale for you) don't you owe it to them to provide that solution? Would you rather be thought of as the salesperson who sells (insert anything here) or as the person who solves problems, regardless of your reward? Helping people only when you are getting paid falls short of best sales practices—and best life practices.

One of my first jobs was selling copiers for 3M at a time when Xerox—their competitor—was at its height in popularity. 3M was still focused on selling coated paper machines when Xerox had plain paper. (Plain paper cost the customer less than

a penny a copy, while coated paper copies could cost as much as ten cents.) I learned very quickly that if all I did was sell copiers I was going to lose almost every time.

Instead, I established relationships with prospects. I asked questions about their lives, hobbies, goals, you name it. I shared the same kind of information about myself. And then I went about becoming a solutions provider. Any one individual solution might not have a thing to do with copiers. It might have to do with providing an introduction to a business client. Sometimes it meant telling them I couldn't help them this time and I'd give them the name of a competitor.

Regardless, I would stay in touch. And when they needed another copier or knew someone who did, I most often got the call. I broke every sales record for the company my first year. What's more, I did it in a territory that was considered to be economically depressed—a territory nobody else wanted.

Stop being a salesperson. Become a solutions provider. You'll be much more productive.

It's more fun.

And, it's the right thing to do.

Change Happens

People buy for their own reasons—not for yours.

(That includes voters.)

It's not enough that you know all the reasons why someone should want to buy what you're selling. It's not enough to throw advertisement after advertisement at them without knowing their reasons for buying. And, quite often,

the reasons why they bought what you (or your political party) were selling the last time they bought—changes.

Things happen to alter their view and their viewpoints. One day Walker came into my life by accident, and all my thinking about cats changed. Everyone is affected by events like this (even when it's not about a cat!), and everyone changes. When your long-time customers experience change in their lives, you'd better be on top of what they're experiencing. The same old story isn't likely to get their attention.

You have to learn their reasons for buying—ask them. You don't need to persuade them or "sell them." They'll sell themselves if they see you as the person who best understands their needs and can do something about it.

They buy because of what they believe you will do for them.

Our Customers Want Belly Rubs

The dogs and cats I live with bring me so much joy—watching them live in the moment has, frankly, taught me more about life than I ever learned in school.

Today my youngest dog, Bucca, taught me another lesson. He loves to have his belly rubbed. Three or four times a day I'll hear the jingling of his collar tags as he makes his way up several flights of stairs to my third floor office. His sole purpose for these visits, as far as I can tell, is to have me rub his belly.

Recently, I was reading a blog entry by Seth Godin about "Customers That Care"¹ when Bucca made the trip to

¹ http://sethgodin.typepad.com/seths_blog/2008/01/customers-that.html

my office. Bucca whined, barked and pawed at my legs until I gave in and proceeded to rub his belly. Seth's article, coincidentally, was about the importance of getting customers to care about our business—and then actually listening to them.

Think about it. Our customers also want us to give them belly rubs! I'm not suggesting you actually rub their bellies, although such a movement might make for a kinder, more civilized society. But think of belly rubs as paying attention to and communicating with your customers, and letting them know you appreciate them.

You know yourself how good it feels to get a massage, especially when you've had a tough day. You could make someone feel wonderful by showing that you appreciate them. You could change their entire outlook for that moment—or more—just by giving them that attention.

Business is about relationships.

Customers want belly rubs!

We're All Connected In Some Way

As I began writing this book, an image of how I learned the value of relationships in business came flooding into my mind. I couldn't help but smile at the memory.

I was a brand new Major Account Sales Executive for 3M Company. I had just been promoted after several years in their employ, and I was expected to call on major accounts—but primarily ones where we'd never had any business. This essentially meant that I had to go out and find new customers in larger companies with more gatekeepers and bureaucracy!

One of the accounts I was expected to "open" was a steel company headquartered near my home town. It turned out there was one man whose primary job was to manage the copier equipment and supply program for the entire company. His name was Frank.

Did you ever meet someone and instantly know there was going to be mutual loathing between the two of you? That was Frank and I. It took us both about 10 seconds to make our determination.

As far as I could see, Frank was the kind of person who plodded though life all wrapped up in habit, routine and insignificant details. Since I was very driven (probably called Type A at the time), I found everything Frank did to be frustrating. I would ask him a question, and I'd wait for the answer. Then I'd wait some more.

Frank would pull a pipe out of a holster he carried on his belt and begin the process of filling and lighting it. Since that took at least five minutes, I was on to the next question since I assumed he'd forgotten the first one. Just about the time I was on my fourth or fifth question without an answer, Frank would respond to the first question—which led to more frustration and loathing on my part. And so it went every single time I paid a call on Frank. I was getting nowhere and I dreaded having to go see him.

Then one day, I stopped at a drug store near his office. While at the cash register, I saw a display of corn cob pipes. They were inexpensive, so I picked one out and then picked out a bag of pipe tobacco that looked familiar to me. I stuck them in my suit pockets and made a resolution: When Frank went to light up, I'd do the same. Maybe if we had pipe smoking in common he'd find me more acceptable.

The meeting began as before, only this time I pulled out my pipe and tobacco when Frank went for his. It was the most animation I had seen from the man in months. He said, "I didn't know you smoked a pipe."

"I haven't for long," I told him. I asked him about the tobacco I had picked out, and whether he liked it. He went on to tell me more about tobacco and pipes than anyone, in my mind, would want to ever know—over the next two hours! It turned out he blended his own tobacco and he told me mine was junk with perfume added to make it smell good. He had me dump it and gave me some of his private blend. We smoked pipes and got to know one another.

Over the next few months we found out we had a lot more in common than we did in differences. It turned out we had both grown up in the same little Ohio town that I had left years before; he had lived there his whole life. When we started comparing notes we found out we knew a lot of the same people. Apparently my younger brother had dated his daughter for a while! (I was worried when I heard that, but it turned out fine.) We started meeting for lunch. He always had lunch at his desk so on the days we had a meeting scheduled, he packed a sandwich for me. One day down the road, after a few pipes, sandwiches and meetings, Frank said: "I guess we ought to talk about copiers."

We talked, and he bought. I finished the year as one of the Top Ten Sales Executives in the United States for 3M. Frank's company's business was one of the major contributing factors to my success.

It's all about the relationship—the connection we have as human beings. I had figured out that if I wanted to communicate with Frank and have any kind of business

relationship (which was the whole idea); I was going to have to learn how to communicate with him in a way that made him comfortable. Talking at 500 words a minute and interrogating him before he liked and trusted me was never going to work with Frank. It isn't going to work very often with any of your clients either.

The next time you're having a problem establishing a relationship with someone, think about Frank and our pipe smoking. Find some common ground. Focus on your relationship with that person—not your services or products. Don't interrogate people. Learn to match the pace and tone of their speech. If they speak slowly and softly and you speak quickly and loudly, slow down and lower the volume. Put them at ease and get them talking about themselves, the things you have in common. Most people like to talk about their families and what they do in their spare time. People have to "buy you" before they buy anything from you.