

35 SPONTANEITY TAKES PRACTICE

*'Sales are contingent upon the attitude of the salesman, not
the attitude of the prospect.'*

W. Clement Stone

Here's a story I was told by a successful salesman about his boss, Tim, when he was just the bag-carrying rookie. The experience clearly made a big impression on him, as it had taken place over 20 years before:

'We were pitching to Unilever in a meeting room on the 15th floor, floor-to-ceiling plate glass windows with a breathtaking view of the Thames. Everything was going wrong. They sat there. No reaction. But we battled through to the end. Silence. You could hear a pin drop. So my boss Tim said, "We may not be winning this business, but I would sure as hell love your window-cleaning contract." We had nothing to lose. They laughed. We could start again.'

The ability to seize the moment is heady stuff, the stuff of legends. You may wonder whether such an event really occurred. (I often wonder this when listening to salespeople describing their feats of daring.) But even if it is only a parable, it is worth telling. It says that spontaneity can help you to win.

People often imagine that spontaneity is a function of personality, a sort of chutzpah, a kind of courage, potentially a mild form of insanity, as it appears to take a massive risk with what has already been gained to just push the client a bit further. Actually, your ability to be in the moment can be learned and it improves with practice.

How can you practise being spontaneous? It sounds like a contradiction. Actors have to learn to improvise as well as speak from scripts. They learn it by adhering to a few simple skills,

which underpin good (i.e. compelling, memorable) improvisation. These skills include:

- trust in the other actors to support you – the ability to make yourself vulnerable to your colleague’s skill
- suspension of the civilized tendency to self-censor – the ability to do or say the first thing rather than the more considered option
- acceptance of other actors’ ideas (‘offers’ as they are called) – the ability to build on others’ ideas and behaviour using the ‘Yes, and...’ approach
- awareness of others – the ability to acutely observe and listen
- mastery of narrative – a continuous sense of ‘where this might be going’
- presence and status in performance – the ability to attract attention.

Not all of these are equally applicable in sales situations, although many of these skills will help to bridge the customer/supplier gap by giving you a sense of working ‘with’. They can all be improved with practice and review.

PLAY WITH THE IDEA OF VULNERABILITY AND SEE WHAT HAPPENS

As already noted, the ability of clients to trust you is in part a function of perceived risks in the situation. Your ability to trust them is also about perceived risks. But if you focus on the emotion of vulnerability, you may notice that many of the risks are imagined rather than real. How are you feeling? Why are you feeling vulnerable (if you are)? What is the worst that can happen from this meeting? It is probably that the conversation goes nowhere, for now, or that they show you the door before the agreed time – or even, potentially, that you do not get any chemistry going with them at all.

What happens if you flip all this on its head? What happens if you trust your client’s goodwill? One of the techniques used to direct actors to manage their behaviour is not to instruct them to ‘act more confident’, or to ‘act more bravely’ but rather that

you give them a presupposition about the other character: ‘She is frightened but doesn’t show it’ or ‘He has no chance of winning this fight’. The actor’s behaviour – increased confidence or bravery – becomes a response to a supposition and flows more naturally. If you apply this to your own situation with clients, you behave differently, more trustingly. Tell yourself that the client is not actually a critical or judgemental person but that they have reasons – problems and issues – that account for their behaviour, no matter how difficult. They want the best from this conversation, as you do. Negative behaviour is not about you; it is about them.

What tends to happen when you make this assumption is that you are more relaxed, less guarded, more open, feeling less ‘on trial’ and more fun to be with. This person is like a colleague who shares the same goals. You are working together on something. You can be spontaneous.

BUILD ON THE CLIENT’S OWN IDEAS AND DON’T INTERRUPT THEIR THINKING

In B2B service-selling situations, your solution is capable of many variations. The deal can be constructed in many different ways. When a client objects, they are giving you information about something they would value more than the offer you are currently making, not criticizing you or your offer. When you welcome this (spontaneous?) reaction from the client and build on it, you are heading off in a different direction, one which might be more valuable, not just for them but also for you. If their issue is genuine (not just a negotiation tactic), try saying something like:

- ‘That’s an interesting observation. And we understand that. And we would add that...’
- ‘True. What’s more...’
- ‘Yes. I think I see that. Say more about that...’

This aspect of spontaneity goes against the ‘control the sale’ messages that you carry in your head, *but* if you think about where that comes from, it belongs in the world of scripts, not improvisation, which is where most successful salespeople now live. When you are in a play and your fellow actor forgets a line or suddenly does a speech from Act Two, you have to find a way to get the show back on track, but in improvisation this diversion is seen as positive, leading to an even broader seam of gold than the one you were just mining.

Of course, all this sounds risky, but if you want to be more ‘in the moment’ then you have to experiment.

BE CLEAR ABOUT THE NARRATIVE IN WHAT IS HAPPENING

In the scripted product world, controlling the sale meant controlling the discourse. If the customer says this, you say that. If they make this objection, we offer this rebuttal. ‘These are the five main reasons to do business with us...’ ‘These are the three messages we need to communicate in our pitch.’

In the less structured, more relationship-based solutions world, we try to control the sale by narrative. In improvisational terms, this means working out where you are heading with this improvisation. Of course, different actors in the improvisation will have a different storyline in mind and part of the fun for the audience is watching the players twist the narrative and then have to respond to the other actors’ offers.

In business, this would be frustrating if it carried on too long, but there are basic narrative ‘arcs’ in the start of most sales situations. Here are some examples:

- A stable situation becomes less stable, leaving the client with a challenge and a quest to find an answer. The salesperson is a person she trusts.

- A decision to make a change has been taken but the client does not know how to deliver this change and wants to find alternatives. He is asking several salespeople's advice.
- The client is new to the organization and sees opportunities that her colleagues do not realize. She needs to find a way to alter their scepticism about the possibilities and, coincidentally, a salesperson's contact arrives on the day she has to deal with this.
- The client has no idea about a missed opportunity and nor does his company. He is reluctant to put current performance at risk for the sake of a potentially better future because he is approaching retirement. Enter a salesperson with new thinking.

When in this situation of narrative ambiguity, improvisers often test out their own understanding by asking questions of the other actors. ('So we are off to the zoo now, are we?' 'What happened to your mother-in-law when you jumped off the cliff?' 'Am I supposed to fly the plane?') In sales situations we also need to check out what the customer's narrative-in-mind may be, while expressing ours. ('I get a sense of urgency about this. Do you feel this conversation is helping you clarify your thinking?' 'Where would you like to take this next?' 'I think the next step should be a joint meeting with your boss.')

Just as there are acts in plays, there are acts in sales situations:

- Act One: client in state of ignorance, alerted by some incident (bad quarter's results, new boss, salesperson's contact)
- Act Two: client sets out on journey to discover causes and effects, current situation and potential solutions (hopefully with you)
- Act Three: clash of the titans – client has to choose the best proposal (hopefully yours)

Practise thinking about this by reflecting on past (successful) sales narratives and using these to shape the narrative options with existing clients.

Putting it all together

The ability to be spontaneous takes practice because it takes confidence to go in a creative direction and to feel that you can create a sensible narrative with your client. They say that pre-prepared jokes are the death of real improvisation, but sometimes prepared elements – the equivalent of props – are useful. The salesperson who leaps up and says, ‘Can I just draw something on your white board?’ and then produces a neat piece of her company’s intellectual property made relevant to the clients in the room is always more impressive than the same idea on a PowerPoint slide. ‘Did she think about doing this before? Does she always do this in client meetings?’ is what runs through clients’ heads.

But actually it doesn’t matter. The spontaneous offer of a new way of looking at the issues illuminates and the client, improvising in turn, will build on the gift. ‘Yes... and...’ Isn’t that what you want to happen?