

THE ACADEMY OF ELECTRICAL CONTRACTING

Paper Presented by

Aldo P. Lera, Fellow

The Power of the Soft Sell

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"The world is a stage and we but players on it."

We sell electrical contracting services on this stage. Let us set our scene - the Power of the Soft Sell. On one side sits the Technical Person, and on the other side the Salesman stands. Our stage is limited, but there is an infinite distance between these two as to method and style. We, the Electrical Contractor, sit with each of them, but move constantly along the infinite line which separates the technical from the commercial; we tread between them; so that we may bridge the gap and sell our service softly.

Let us look closer at our cast. The Engineering Technical type of person is the person whom the social structure of our society casts as an introvert; a man that sits at a desk, who does not have drapes on his windows, does not have a carpet on the floor, who rolls up his sleeves, loosens his tie, and does everything logically by a formula. He derives his formulas, takes his time, checks and double checks, makes sure of his answer, moves along in a logical sequence, thinking and plodding until he solves his problem. This is our man, somewhere left stage, apart from the midpoint of that infinite line where the contract is signed.

Our man on the right is cast as the Salesman. The public eye sees in him the extrovert. He wears a tailor made suit, his shirt is initialled, he wears cufflinks, drives an expensive car, has a large expense account, wines and dines, three martini lunches, and six martini dinners. There seems to be no logic to what he does, he pounces on an opportunity and exploits the situation; he wants to sell.

We, the Electrical Contractor, are center stage and play all parts that lie between the two extremes, interfacing at all times with the immediate environment, adjusting to the situation like the chameleon, changing colors as environmental conditions

change. We must be as flexible as the chameleon when we begin to sell our services. We have the technical know how; we can be elastic in its application; also we are selling, softly. We must understand and accomodate the human being we are dealing with. We must be ready to put our technical knowledge into language our client understands, always willing, like the chameleon, to adjust to the environmental conditions surrounding us.

Now we have set the stage. The character of our chief player, the Electrical Contractor, is cast. His role is to keep moving along that infinite line between both ends of the vector, the chameleon changing his colors to meet changing conditions. In other words, he is well informed of the service he is selling and has a little expertise in human behavior.

Before we talk about how to approach the client, there are a few axioms we should look into. It is absolutely important that you do not try to sell the Chairman of the Board, the President of the Board, a Director or Vice President in charge of the group to whom you are making your Soft Sell. These men hold high offices in their corporation. They usually have more important things to worry about than the scope of the work you are trying to sell. The man you want to sell is the man on his way up the ladder, somewhere in the middle management group. You have got to find him. If you think the Chairman of the Board and the other people I mentioned are going to take care of you, you are mistaken. Unless you were a college fraternity brother, or perhaps buddies in the armed services, or married into the family, he will probably tell you he is going to take care of you, but he will go to that middle management person you should be seeking. He will ask Mr. Middle Management, what do you think of so and so. Now you are really in trouble. You bypassed the person who can make the recommendation or decision on whether or not you are going to be able to sell them. You have built a line of resistance, a barrier between you and your objective.

Because it is important in the Soft Sell technique not to sell to the top man in the organization, the first thing you must do is search for the person to whom you want to make your pitch. Find this person in that middle management group, on his way up, a person that has a reputation of sticking up for people, and a person who will not usurp any privilege of someone else's position. When you determine who this person is in the organization, remember his name. Listen to the name, repeat the name, call the person by the name, spell the name right, and engrave that face in your memory and put a name to it. Do not insult this person by spelling his name wrong. Do a little research. Find out what is important to him: does he like baseball, does he fish, does he save stamps, is he married, do his children go to the same school with your children, did he go to the same college you attended, did you see his name in the papers. Find out all kinds of things, find out about him. Remember even little details. These details will help you begin to create the battleground on which you will attempt to make the Soft Sell.

Once you have prepared yourself, you have got to call on him. You must choose between a cold call or follow protocol by making an appointment. Decide which is the best approach in a given situation. You then pay him a visit. Since you have not met your client before, your first impression of him may startle you to the point where you may have to readjust your pitch. Remember, you are going in there to sell him yourself; that you are trustworthy, that you are a quality person. He wants to feel that if he gives you a contract, you will meet all his demands. Try not to talk about what you are trying to sell, but try to talk about what your client is interested in. Once he feels that you have a genuine interest in him as a person and in his problems, you have a friend. You have his confidence. Learn to say goodbye. Do not oversell.

After a reasonable time, call him up and ask him if he will have lunch with you. Some people do not like to go to lunch.

Some people like to go to dinner. If it is a dinner engagement, maybe he would like to take his wife. Whatever the arrangement you make, lunch or dinner, do not talk business during the lunch or dinner. If you want to talk business, go to his office at 11:00 AM if you are going to take him to lunch. If you want to talk business when you take him to dinner, go the next morning or early afternoon. Avoid ganging up on him. Go to lunch or dinner on a one-to-one basis. Do not bring your Vice President in charge of whatever department. Do not bring your Secretary. Do not even bring a briefcase. Talk about things he is interested in. Eventually you will like him, he will like you. His wife will like your wife, your wife will like his wife. You have a friend. You do not have to sell this person, this friend, the immediate project you have in mind. Remember, you have a friend. Wherever he goes, whatever he does, do not ever forget him; Christmas card, Birthday card, little trinket gifts for special occasions, anything to remind him that you are around. Do not ever forget him and do not let him forget you. It is nice to remember him when you do not need him, not when you need him. To have a good friend in middle management is fundamental to the Soft Sell.

The second axiom is that you must be believable. Before you can sell your service, you must sell yourself. To do this, you must instill your credibility to the people you hope to sell. Who will buy anything from someone they do not trust? Once you have gotten credibility, then and only then, can you act as their consultant. Like the Technical Person at the left end of our infinite line, you must know about what you are selling, how it operates, and how it is going to help your client. You must be able to convince this client that you are going to fill a need, rather than tell him why he should buy. However, before you attempt to sell anything, you better prepare your pitch to fit the client's human behavior characteristics, his psyche, his soul. Knowing the personality makeup of your client is vital, and here is where you must adapt like the chameleon. You change

your color but never to deceive; only to adapt or fuse with the situation and personnel with whom you are dealing. Credibility is built on honesty, but you must accommodate your approach to your prospect. If you can do this, you have achieved another fundamental of the Soft Sell.

You will meet various personalities. Among them are: the Conservative, the Good Guy, the Worry Wart, the Self-Centered, the Shy Guy, the Know It All, and the Plodder. In order to handle them, you change or you soften your color to blend with them.

The Conservative, the dependable perfectionist, the conformer, how do you deal with him? You will have to be objective and logical. Do not give too much criticism to what he wants, but identify his needs rather than his wants.

The Good Guy, the guy who wants to be friendly, who does not want to rock the boat, who wants to keep everybody happy, how do you handle him? You are enthusiastic and optimistic. Do not give him too much detail, you will only confuse him.

The Worry Wart, the guy that is pessimistic and cautious, always procrastinating, is handled by encouraging him. Show confidence in him. Ask him for his opinion. Be mild in criticism and praise him greatly when he comes up with a good idea.

The Self-Centered Man, ambitious, selfish, arrogant; a gambler type who always blames someone else for his mistakes, how do you handle him? The first thing you remember is that he is probably untrustworthy and disloyal, so you stress the immediate gains to him if he will buy your service. Make sure you tell him what he stands to lose if things do not work out.

The Shy Guy who is sensitive and bashful, usually a dreamer, to help him you must provide confidence. You have to give him confidence in his ability. You have to ask him for ideas. You have to appeal to his imagination. You have to praise him.

The Know It All, the aggressive, driving, argumentative person, how do you handle him? He wants his ideas now. He wants to do things fast. He does not want any kidding. Make sure that

you convey to him, if he lets you perform a service, that he gets all the credit and all the recognition for any good idea.

And last, but not least, is our Plodding friend, project oriented, detail minded, deliberate, slow. You have to give him details, lots and lots of detail. You have got to help him accomplish his desires. Make sure when you talk to him that you set goals and timetables, and then avoid interrupting his work. Do not get too emotional with him. Do not criticize too much, but emphasize that you will aid the overall objectives of his goals in a precise step by step manner.

Understanding people and harmonizing with the personality of each is another basic of the Soft Sell.

It is important that you create the battleground on which the Soft Sell will take place. You do this by knowing the person to whom you will make your pitch, knowing his needs; in what environment he is approachable, such as office, restaurant, etc.; what time of day he is in a good mood, more inclined to listen and see someone, what days his position puts heavy demands on him. In other words, attempt to pick the best environment that will favor you and your presentation of the Soft Sell. Do not let someone else pick the battleground for you. You should take the attitude that everybody is smarter than you. If you need help, you can always get information and support from the man from middle management. Above all, you must sincerely show a genuine, inherent interest in people. Remember, when you talk to that middle management person, if you do not sell him and your competitor beats you to it, do not kiss Mr. Middle Management off. Go back and try again another day, on another battleground. This man, if you can gain his respect, will be a great reference in the future. In fact, he may show up some day at the top of the middle management in another corporation which may be more friendly to you.

When you have established a conduit of communication within his company through a friend, in no way, in any shape, manner or form, do you ever go above this man's head in his organization



without him being briefed on what you are going to say or what you are going to do. Once you have established this relationship, this person will know your needs. You want to do business with him, and he knows that. You do not have to tell him. You do not have to remind him. You do not have to feel hurt if he skips you once in a while. Stay with him. Keep that social contact. The Soft Sell demands quiet loyalty and perseverance.

Another important axiom is to justify the need and give your client justification for spending the money on the proposal you are attempting to negotiate. You must remember when talking to the people involved, that your client already has decided to do something. The only question in his mind is with whom. They will buy your proposal if you can furnish a reason for dealing with you. Therefore, you must give them a reason for selecting you. If your client was buying an automobile or refrigerator, or any other product, he can see the product. He can kick an automobile tire. He can touch a refrigerator. He can compare a refrigerator with a refrigerator in another store. But you are not selling refrigerators, you are selling a service, a skill suited to the client's needs. Not only that, you hope that this is not the last time you will be dealing with this client. So once again, you must cast yourself in the role appropriate to the next situation, selling a service and a capacity adaptable to a new situation.

A famous pioneer in the electrical construction business once said, your competitor is your best friend. Try to keep in mind that your competitor is your best friend. When you make your first contact, this man is going to tell you, I have so and so doing my electrical work, or we do a lot of work with Mr. Contractor so and so. Your immediate response should be, yes sir, Mr. So and So is a good contractor, I am not interested in getting into a price war with his organization. He is one of the good contractors in this town. He is competitive. Remember, you do not care if he is the worst contractor in town, you dislike

him intensely, he is flaky, forget it. He is good. You tell your prospective client he is good. If he is not good, then it will only be a matter of time before he fails to deliver, and you will have the opportunity to serve. But remember one thing, out of sight and you are soon forgotten, so you must not ever be out of sight. While you are waiting for opportunity to knock, you must be visible with weekly visits, monthly visits, quarterly visits, or whatever action you think it takes to capture this account. There is no exact way, no formula that runs step 1, step 2, step 3, and so on which can be used in selling. However, there are certain guidelines that are universal.

Now that you have a friend in the organization, and you have established yourself with this organization, place yourself and the person you are talking to somewhere along that vector line which extends from technical knowledge to selling it. Interface with him at that point along that line where you think he is positioned.

Be ready for stalls. You have created your battleground. You have started your battle. Do not let him get you into a stalemate. Have some way to counteract any stall strategy you can expect from the person to whom you are making your pitch. Remember, you know this person now. You have had lunch with him, you have had dinner with him, you have been calling on him, be ready for whatever you think he may do. Before you make your pitch, put yourself in his place and try and think of what he may ask of you.

Throughout your presentation, be courteous. As easy as it may sound, being courteous is not always easy. There are times when some of the characters you are dealing with can be a pain, but remember, your appearance and actions build the client's confidence in you. A friendly, helpful attitude will encourage him to ask you to come back for more work. Graciousness and manners will reflect your pride in yourself and in your company.

The size of job you sell is not important. What is important is that you sell. Little jobs generate large jobs, and large jobs

generate a multitude of small jobs. Positive attitude, diligence, integrity, and the appropriate appearance will go a long way in achieving your goals. If you do not make the sale, do not feel bad. You must have self-confidence to overcome rejection. Go back, cast the role once more, set your stage, create your battleground, and be the chameleon.

If you made the sale, congratulations. You now have a contract. Contracts are just pieces of paper, not people. What you have is a piece of paper where someone says that they are giving you something in return for something you are going to give them. It is a piece of paper that can be interpreted as saying I will try to give you the minimum, and he will try and extract the maximum, and now we are going to match wits with the friend we have worked to long to cultivate. If you stop here and make no additional effort or, even worse, try to get as much out of the contract as you can, you may make a nice profit and you may get a repeat job, but you have failed in the Soft Sell. You do not love them and leave them once the mission is completed. Once you have made that sale, you better be there to make sure that client is happy.

In today's competitive market, it is important that we surprise our clients by giving them a little more service and love than they expect. We, the Electrical Contractor, must stop following the tradition that we are very technical people, that we get jobs by bidding in feverish competition, that we participate only in construction management in a very technical line of work. We must broaden our base of jurisdiction of work. Let's not give away the new fields that are on the horizon, such as fibre optics, robotics, lasers, computers, telecommunications, etc. Instead of letting them go by, let's go out and sell them. Let's become expert in them. Let's go out and use the Soft Sell.

The Soft Sell does away with all the evils involved in bidding, cheap prices, and the destruction of the reputation of the building trade industry, and the prostitution of our market. Let's go out, sell quality, sell quality with knowledge of what

we are selling. Couple this with the real price for the job, and believe it or not, this will limit competition to high class competitors, and will result in a better price for your job. You will deal with the calibre of people who believe in you, and their faith in you will be passed on in conversations throughout their industry. This will result in more people asking you if they can be your client.

When you feel despondent because someone else seems to have outmaneuvered you with a client, take heart and keep the faith in yourself. Above all, remember the bitterness of poor quality lingers long after the sweetness of a cheap price is forgotten.