

THE UN-COMFORT ZONE

With Robert Wilson

When Stories Work Better Than Facts

Recently I was asked by the sales manager of a company if I could reach his staff with a message he had been trying to “beat into their heads for months.” Uh, his words not mine.



He wanted me to accomplish what he failed to do: inspire his sales people to spend more time pursuing smaller accounts. He said they were all good producers so he couldn't threaten them with job loss, but the company depended on those smaller accounts because they made up the bulk of their business.

His sales staff only wanted to work with the larger accounts because they generated higher commissions. He said, they complained that the small accounts took up too much time, and were not worth it.

They were cold to his logic. In order to convince them, I knew I needed to translate the company's mission into human terms. In short, I needed to come up with a story they could personally relate to.

I did some research to find some good ones. Then I recalled a story of my own, one I had not thought of since the 1980s when I worked as a wholesale apparel salesman. Yes, I was a rag rep. One day at the Miami Apparel Mart, a clothing store owner stopped by my showroom to say she did not have time to shop with me, but asked if I would visit her store on my way back to Atlanta. I agreed.

Having never worked with her before, I did not know what to expect. When I arrived at her shop, I groaned. It was the smallest store I had ever seen. It was maybe 300 square feet. There was barely room to show her my samples. As I looked around the tiny space, I imagined the tiny order I might get. Nevertheless, I patiently worked with her. It took over two hours. When it was over - my prediction came true - I received a mediocre order.

As I drove away, I grumbled to myself about the time I had wasted. But it got

worse. The client called me multiple times with changes to her order. She was very demanding and had several special needs. I complied cordially. I was never brusque, but wondered how much more hand-holding this woman was going to need. Even my partner got annoyed seeing me on the phone so often with her; and said, “You need to cut your losses on that account!”

A few weeks later, the store owner visited my showroom at the Atlanta Apparel Mart. This time I ended up working with her for several hours. She wanted to see everything we had. I was patient and polite, and did not rush her, but I grew more irritable by the minute. She took copious notes, thanked me and left. I was furious - all that work and no order to show for it!

A couple of days later, she dropped off the largest order I had ever received. I was dumbfounded. My first thought was that such a small store would not have the necessary credit, and the manufacturers would never ship this amount of merchandise to her. But that was not my decision to make. I placed the order and waited to see what the factors would say. To my surprise the order went through without a hitch.

The clothing was shipped and a week later she re-ordered. Again, I was shocked. Completely baffled, I started asking other reps what they knew about her. I soon learned that she was a maven. She had hundreds of loyal customers who would not get dressed without her fashion advice. The merchandise in her store turned over every week. She had a multi-million dollar business that she started out of her home before she ever rented space in a commercial building.

Later on, she confessed that her first order with me was a test. She wanted to see how I would work with her. I passed. I was so happy that I had been patient with her because she became one of my top customers for a long time.

It worked! I could tell that my client's sales people connected with the story because it generated a lively discussion where several offered similar stories of their own. I then reinforced my message of “hidden gold mines” by sharing another story with them about a colleague who nurtured his fledgling customers to success by sharing his expertise in how to build a business. Because he took the time to help them grow, they became loyal customers.

As I told each story, the sales people imagined similar scenarios where they might benefit from working with their own smaller customers. Annette Simmons, author of *The Story Factor: Inspiration, Influence, and Persuasion through the Art of Storytelling*, said, “Story is your opportunity to create in your listeners' imagination an experience that feels real.”

When you need to persuade, forget the hard facts; instead share a relevant story that touches the heart.

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