

Featured story:

FUNNY THING HAPPENED ON THE WAY HOME FROM WORK

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Sometimes when you feel desperate or that you must go along a path you wouldn't normally take, you discover things you needed to learn.

It was another recession year in Canada. Not many jobs going around and Statistics Canada was working overtime trying to find new creative ways to bring those unemployment figures down.

I always had the option of going up north, making good money while slaving in the smelter. But I wanted to spend the summer in the city. I was living in Winnipeg in my own place, no longer spending the winter and a big part of the two neighbouring seasons in residence on campus, and the rest in Flin Flon. I no longer had the need nor the desire to move all my possessions twice a year. So I had to find work to support myself.

There was that grasscutting job but after several hours of waiting in that long queue outside the building, gradually following the line up the stairwell, down the hall and finally into the office, (I swear had there been a snail going for a stroll paralleling that long line of people, it would probably have been a blur in comparison as it raced by), I discovered that I was without the adequate requirements. I didn't have an impressive list of reputable references and I didn't have more than two years of practical experience. I guess they felt they could afford to be highly selective on who will be cutting lawns and the like. I just found it curious that it would take them so many hours of interviews to weed out the under qualified. A simple walk down the line or a crudely written sign taped onto the wall of the hall would suffice to inform everyone to go home unless you had the right stuff.

So then, ruling out prison guard, bread baker and an international finance consultant, it seemed I was stuck with being a salesman. Never, never in my wildest dreams could I have ever imagined myself in such a position. But it was either that or enlisting in the army. It seemed the list of final resorts was endless. Looking at them I was starting to reconsider returning to the smelter. But I wasn't quite ready to throw in the towel. I was determined to stay in the city. So, salesman it was.

I chose one business that seemed the least of the evils being offered. I entered the centre where they were recruiting. We were a motley crew and I suspect each and every one of us candidates was there reluctantly, having gone through all the other alternatives before landing there. I wondered lightly at what their storylines would be, bringing them to this brightly lit room waiting for the man with the shiny teeth to address us.

He was looking us over, too, sizing us up not unlike a sergeant inspecting the fresh meat pouring out of the bus at boot camp. He didn't bark out "Fall in," but might as well have, his deep voice projecting well beyond the confines of that small room. He had our attention and proceeded to inform us that not all of us will make it through this training session. He outlined his expectations and reiterated that not all are cut out for this job. If we wanted to apply what we'll be learning, then there will be rewards. If not, only frustration and failure.

I actually started to like the guy. He was projecting an image and kept in character, but he also played it straight, which is something that I appreciate. He was contracted by this photography studio which used three simplified movie sets as backdrops to portrait photos, on top of the regular passports and driver's licenses. He showed us around so we could become better familiar with the product and services we were to push. He told us if we didn't believe in what we were selling, we'd have a hard time convincing the potential clients.

The sets looked interesting and if you wanted your family to appear that they were sort of on a farm, for example, it wasn't badly done. The price was reasonable, some fifteen dollars, but if you wanted extra copies you'd have to fork out a bit more. I looked around me and thought of much worse jobs I could be doing.

There was another deciding factor which helped me return the next day. I have a fairly strong gullible streak. I'm not ashamed or even particularly concerned about it. I suppose I like it or at least accept it in some ways. It goes with my trusting nature and slightly offsets the cynicism which often creeps in as my experiences chalk up. I didn't want to replace that gullibility, just open my eyes a little further. I thought if I worked on the other side, being one working a mark, I'd have a better understanding of how it functions and could better prevent some future trappings. My conscience wasn't that disturbed, as it was just for an inexpensive photography certificate.

The second training session started with a slightly lower number of us listening as our gruff but likeable sergeant enlightened us about the three drives that motivate us all:

Need, Greed and The Fear Of Loss

He elucidated the significance of each of these. Our role was to bring to the individual's awareness the need she or he would have of this product. A way of bringing close ones together in a shared moment captured forever.

Greed. This was normally a \$39.95 offer but for the sake of this promotion was now available at the low cost of \$14.95, less than half the regular price.

Fear of Loss. If you don't act now, the prices will go up and you'll miss this unique opportunity.

See?, he smiled, showing off his expensive teeth as they reflectively played with the overhead lighting. You're lucky. You can meet all three drives by transferring this very special portrait certificate over to their possession. And at a very low investment, he added. It's a win-win-win situation. His teeth accentuated this last point.

He engaged us in role-plays and discouraged any shyness lurking around in the shadows. If we were to be salespeople, we would have to be confident. Too shy and people could misinterpret that for shadiness or insincerity. He showed us how to take charge, sometimes subtly leading, sometimes less so. We were to listen well to the excuses freely volunteered by the people. They were telling us how we could reach them, and redirect the flow to satisfying one or more of those three basic motives.

We were shown how to approach a person, look out for landmarks appearing within the conversation, how to rein the person in, and how to close. Closure, he insisted, was the delicate part that many people screwed up. Just when you have everything on the platter in front of you, if you don't close it right, that platter is going to walk away from you.

He also told us of being flexible, that if a person jumps to the close before you barely got off the ground, roll with it and tie it up immediately. However, if the person is not budging, let it go, wish the person a good day and be on your way.

We would work solely on commission. If we don't bring in the certificates, we get nothing. But he warned us in a very serious voice that low performance would not be tolerated. It's not only ourselves that are on the losing end. It also affects others, burning the territory and preventing lucrative harvests carried out by more competent staff.

On our third day of training he told us to pile into the car and he drove us off to some pre-determined residential neighbourhood. He stopped, assigned different individuals to different blocks, gave us our packs of certificates and photo presentations to demonstrate the options, and told us he'll meet us at a donut place in an hour. He expected good things from us.

In a way I had gotten used to 'school' and this abrupt change into 'reality' was disorientating. I knew it was coming but I was getting comfortable with the classes. So here I was, in a long stretch of a street, with many doors between myself and all those homes on the other side. It was time to get my feet wet as they say and I approached the first house.

Immediately I started breaking one of the commandments he had pounded into us time and again. When the first door opened I rushed into my spiel. This was followed by the door quietly closing as gently as it had opened. I continued speaking until the soft click struck deeply into my ears. I tried a few more homes, stumbling my way through until I gradually got a feel for it.

I think I actually made a sale or two, but I don't remember well. Whether nothing or just a few, there were no big reasons for celebration. Still, our sergeant was surprisingly positive, saying that this was our initiation. Tomorrow he was going to cover a few last things and from then on, we were on our own. A certain quota was expected and if we were consistently below it, well, we'd be looking at the classifieds once again. Should we go beyond it, surpassing 20 every day for a week, we would be rewarded with the mall job. There, he smiled, people came to you. All you have to do is close. But no-one gets there without proving themselves in the field. And don't get complacent. You have to keep the numbers up every week to earn a place there for that Saturday. A slow week will keep you out.

Our boss had a favourite, one guy who had a good feel for it. He wasn't what you expected. Not handsome or charismatic, but he was a quick study and he landed himself a mall position if not the first weekend, then for the second. There was an older woman who dressed and presented herself well. He said it was easier for a woman to gain the trust of people, but high sales weren't automatic. She'd have to learn and work for it, too. After a while she became a frequent player in the mall scene as well.

I didn't do so badly myself. I was harbouring mixed feelings about it all, but I had to admit (and remind myself) that there was no deception involved. The price was a good deal, and no-one got hurt in any way. This made it easier to do my job, but when I was standing on the other side of a door and the person was obviously in the middle of doing something, I really felt like an intruder and questioned why I was there in the first place.

Our sergeant was firm but good-natured. He liked to make jokes, break the ice between us, keep us in good spirits. He was a good leader in many respects. Sometimes I felt he was wasting his talents on us and had greater potential than simply motivating a door-to-door sales team for one summer. Perhaps he was between jobs and took this on just to keep in shape.

He liked to give us incentives, like pulling \$20 out of his wallet, slapping it on the table. This is a bonus for anyone, and I mean anyone who gets X sales today. If you all do it I'll be going home a happy man. \$80 poorer, but a happy man.

Working the malls was a more pleasant experience and I got there eventually. As we got more experienced, the mall option expanded to include the weekdays as well, but we had higher quotas to meet than those set for the street. It was a different way of dealing with people. We were still informing them, and to those open to it, we would sell those special certificates. But there were no harsh words or doors closing on us. We could act with more relaxed dignity. I used part of that while working door-to-door and I'm sure that contributed to my success. The people didn't sense desperation behind the appeals. I was sincerely offering something I thought could have some value but it was up to them to decide if they wanted it.

We were beginning to become seasoned veterans, now freely and bravely exchanging war stories when we met each night. It wasn't easy work but there was something to it and I can see why some people might even thrive on it. I wasn't sure how long I'd be at it, but I thought I was nearing the end, or will be before the summer finished.

One day he announced that he was going to promote us to another zone. It turned out there was something beyond the coveted mall scene. He said it was a special place, ripe for picking, but only those who had the experience and character could enter it. He drove us to a poorer neighbourhood and explained in a clear no-nonsense tone. These people don't have much. The rich contract their own photographers and the middle class can spare the money but don't have all that much need for what we have to offer. On a whim, it works well and can make old Auntie Tessie feel good inside, looking at her cute nephews and nieces.

But the poor people, he paused for effect, the poor people don't have much good in their lives. They can't make ends meet, there are always problems. They are the ones most likely to part with their so-little money to purchase a

piece of happiness, even for only a moment. That's why so many of them drink or frequent the casinos. They shouldn't and they know they shouldn't, but they of all people want to escape the lives they're in.

This, he emphasized, brandishing the certificate firmly in his hand, this will give them something to feel good about. It won't solve any of their problems, but the temptation will be right there. All you have to do is remind them of that. He promised us that with the right attitude we could sell more certificates here than on any good day in the mall.

Until then I had learned much of what I had hoped to and my misgivings were slowly growing. Now they were very noticeable. I wasn't sure how much further I wanted to go with this.

The other evening I had started my normal routine, talking with a family man, warm and on the younger side of being middle-aged, hurriedly getting things ready in the kitchen. I pointed out all the salient reasons why it would be to his benefit to take advantage of such an offer. He hesitated and then decided against it. He mentioned that his wife wasn't home and it was up to her. This triggered something my boss had referred to in an earlier training session and his words came out of my mouth, "Do you always need your wife's approval to make this kind of decision?" (One could as easily substitute husband for wife.) It was very effective as my boss had predicted. The man came round and in a show that he could be his own man, signed the paper, paid the money and received his certificate.

I thanked him and set on my way. I didn't get too far, though. I felt bad about manipulating him into signing and the more I thought about it, the less I wanted to be successful in this manner. I didn't know how his relationship was with his wife but I guessed her reaction wouldn't be pleasant. Maybe she wasn't the principle decision-maker in their relationship, maybe she was. It could also very well be that they liked to make decisions together, and she was now left out of this one. Maybe they badly needed the money and although it wasn't much, these decisions shouldn't be made lightly.

I turned back, double-checking the address written in my receipt book. I knocked on the door and he answered it, a little bewildered about my return. I told him I felt bad about what I had done and offered to return his money. After giving it some thought and talking it over with his wife when she got home, if he still wanted the certificate, he could give me a call and I'd be happy to sell him one.

He looked at me, relaxed his shoulders a bit and smiled. He admitted having some reservations after I had left, but he was fine with the decision he had made.

The events of that evening stayed with me a few days and were with me when I hit the streets again. I decided to indeed present the product in a good light to each household that opened their door to me, but I wouldn't use those other tactics. I would play straight and easily accept whatever decision they came up with.

So, here I was. Working my way through a block or two in one of the poorer areas of town, looking at the bright sun on this hot summer day. I politely used the sidewalks rather than cutting across the lawns, walking a good yet relaxed pace.

I entered yet another front yard, letting myself through the gate and approached the waiting house. I went up the stairs, opened the screen door and knocked clearly on the inside one.

No response. No-one pounding down the stairs or calling out to someone else to get the door. I tried one more time and respectfully took a step back. A moment later I heard something and the door handle started to move. The door opened inward and soon I could make out a man slightly shorter than myself with a bulging paunch rounding out the lower part of his sleeveless whitish undershirt. He looked like he hadn't been home for all that long, was just settling into his second beer while watching TV from his comfortable armchair.

He had no idea who I was or why I was there. The second knocking on his door forced him out of the cozy niche he had made for himself. Now he was opening the door to see this young guy cleanly dressed beginning to spew off his long string of friendly-toned words.

I continued speaking but not one word or question prompted a change in his behaviour or even in his facial expression. He just simply noticed I was this phenomenon occupying the space just past his screen door. I never stopped talking, switching to new appeals and tones and he continued to look at me for all of maybe half a minute.

With every new sentence, every new appeal, I had higher hopes of my words somehow reaching him. But they didn't. I'm not sure why, perhaps it was nerves but the entire situation struck me as hilariously absurd. I had an almost uncontrollable urge to burst out laughing but instead I maintained my original plan of action and he continued to simply look at me.

Then it happened. A slight giggle slipped in between some words. I couldn't stop it. It just snuck itself in there. I looked at the man I was speaking at. There was no reaction on his part. So strange. Both my inappropriate giggle and his unchanged facial expression. Right there in the space between us. Another giggle snuck out followed by a little longer one. Then a big, albeit short outburst of laughter. I was really struggling with this. On the one hand I felt obliged to see this spiel through to the end. On the other hand everything was becoming uncomfortably surreal. It didn't help that he hadn't blinked once. We were two lone people, standing and looking at one another. One guy a rock statue, temporarily frozen in time. The other blabbering on about something unknown and uninteresting. The facial muscles vainly fighting for some kind of decorum, a more formal dignity to accompany those words. But the laughter and all the lines in the face were winning out, intruding with greater frequency and intensity.

My laughter soon overcame me, tears rolling down the sides of my eyes. I even doubled over while I was trying to apologize for my unexplainable behaviour. No reaction from his part other than he expressionlessly proceeded to slowly close the door. "Wait, wait," I called out. "There's more." Then I squealed while trying to suppress more laughter, and doubling over even more than before. The door closed completely, leaving me alone with my laughter.

I imagined him not bothering to peek at me behind some closed but slightly translucent curtain in a nearby window, nor even mumbling something unpleasant as he headed back to his well-used armchair. His expression would be the same as the one he greeted me with but now only parting his lips to accept another swig of beer as his eyes fixed themselves to the TV scene now before him.

I was left on the outdoor veranda, in a semi-sitting position, my legs no longer capable of supporting my weight. The tears were flowing easily and I was laughing so hard internally that I had very little energy left over to make but just the occasional sound, maybe approximating a long stifled high-pitched squeal of a pig in labour.

This continued for some time. Eventually I somehow managed to draw together the resolve to get myself on my feet and head towards the gate. I had to stop a few times and at least once I sank to the ground again. I don't think I've ever experienced such a laughing fit before or since. It took a long while to work itself out.

I left his lot but didn't bother to stop at the next home. I simply kept walking, past the donut place. No need for reflection. I knew what I had to do. I made it to the photography studio, found the amiable brusque sergeant and handed him all my gear. We spoke for a short time, I cashed out, kept my ID card as a souvenir, and left, never to return.

I don't think there could have been a clearer nor more fitting ending to this adventure. Even now, many years later, I can still picture myself in tears as the door was quietly closing and it inevitably brings forth a giggle or two.

Adventures can take many forms, including trying something out of routine or even character. They can bring us to new experiences which add to our ever-changing perspectives. Being a salesman than one summer taught me many things, not the least of which was that sales were not my calling, and that it's important to know when to throw in the towel.