

REPRINTED FROM

agency sales magazine

January 2010 • vol.40, no.01

16A Journey, Suite 200
Aliso Viejo, CA 92656-3317

toll-free 877-626-2776
local calls 949-859-4040
fax 949-855-2973

MANAonline.org

COPYRIGHT ©2010, MANUFACTURERS' AGENTS NATIONAL ASSOCIATION (MANA)
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. REPRODUCTION WITHOUT PERMISSION IS STRICTLY PROHIBITED.



Connecting with customers is harder than ever.
These days you must imagine new ways to help your
customers – **prove yourself invaluable.**

SALESPEOPLE UNDER SIEGE: The Profession *Redefined*

BY JOHN GRAHAM

Whether we like to talk about it or not, the sales profession has been under siege for years, and the siege won't be ending any time soon. "What will happen when I can no longer get in front of people and work my magic?" This question was posed by a highly successful, but confused, salesperson that was losing access to customers and prospects he counted on for sales. The year was 1998.

If he were still in sales today, he would be astonished at the often impenetrable barriers that now isolate salespeople from their prospects and customers. In many cases, salespeople not only can't get through the door, they find it impossible to get to the door. Customers are isolated behind both communication and security barriers, and the actual decision-makers are hunkered down in the purchasing department's relation-free environment, focused solely on their "lowest cost" mission. There

are exceptions, of course, but they become fewer and fewer by the day.

Beyond a doubt, it's increasingly difficult for salespeople to find ways to "work their magic" due to multiple changes in the business environment:

- Within the dramatic uptick in business networking, whether through the social media or face-to-face groups, salespeople often find themselves talking to each other rather than with customers, who avoid them by quietly gravitating elsewhere;
- The recession has shown companies that they can get by with less, whether it's economically necessary to do so or not;
- With customers so busy, meetings with salespeople are not an option unless initiated by the customer;
- With everything available to everyone on the Internet, more customers are going direct;

What we sell may be *beneficial for buyers*, but the salesperson is the real winner. Here's the point: when someone buys from you, *they are doing you a favor*.

- No one has time to listen to a sales pitch. Even the vaunted 30-second “elevator speech” is too long;
- “Consultative selling,” the thinly veiled attempt to re-position salespeople, has joined the growing junk pile of useless gimmicks;
- The only ones who advocate cold calling are sales managers who don't have to do the dialing.

The exceptions to those situations tend to be salespeople who are unaware of the new challenges they are up against, like those who claim to get along just fine without computers.

“Defining the future” was the tantalizing title of a presentation at a recent sales conference. However, it seems the future is beyond definition. Even so, the task of the salesperson is too important to either ignore or to continue offering naïve solutions. Here are some thoughts about the redefined salesperson.

Stop Selling and Start Helping

Those who are helped the most

when sales occur are salespeople, not customers. What we sell may be beneficial for buyers, but the salesperson is the real winner. Here's the point: when someone buys from you, they are doing you a favor.

For most salespeople, the task is one of plotting how to get the customer to sign the order – a strategy, no matter how it's cloaked, that becomes more and more transparent to the customer.

Instead of asking for the order, disarm the customer by asking what you could do to be of help. It may be identifying a problem and recommending a solution. It may be directing a prospect to new sources of business. It may be pointing out an inefficiency or suggesting a way to reduce a particular cost.

A few days after meeting with an executive in the financial services industry, a salesperson thought about an almost off-hand comment the prospect had made and came up with an idea that could solve the particular problem. The

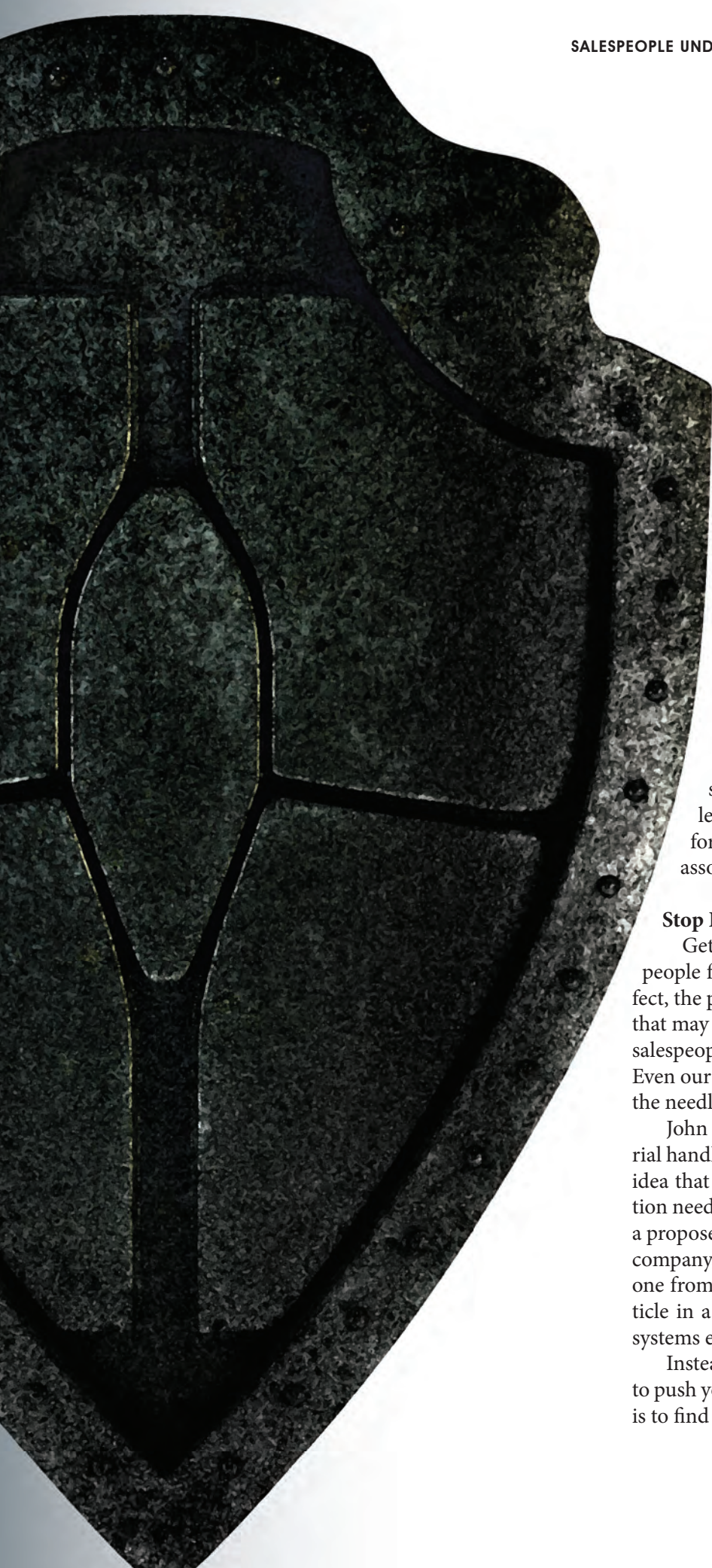
goal of what some would view as a “sales call” was not to get the order, but to figure out how to assist the prospect.

By helping prospective customers, salespeople are given rare and valuable opportunities to demonstrate their competence and value, as well as build relationships that may translate into sales.

Stop Talking and Start Listening

Paul Cicone went into sales more than 20 years ago, after his job as a school counselor was eliminated as the result of budget cuts. Today, Paul is a salesperson/principal of Hanson Printing in Brockton, MA, where he has been employed for the past two decades.

“I use my Masters in counseling degree every day in sales,” he says. “I know how to listen.” Just as counseling kids is a helping profession, he sees this as his sales mission too. “This means asking questions to fully understand what the customer wants to accomplish and not just getting the specs so I can come back with a quote,” he says.



“The more I know how the project is going to be used, what’s important about it and who is pushing it in the company, the better job I can do for a customer.”

Paul Cicone goes a step further. The answers to his questions become a permanent legacy of the account and serve as reminders for him and a source of understanding for his associates at Hanson Printing.

Stop Pushing and Start Pulling

Getting through the barriers that separate salespeople from customers can be a daunting task. In effect, the people we want to see don’t want to see us. But that may be a minor issue compared to the fact that, as salespeople, we have no way of knowing who needs us. Even our educated guesses are still guesses, the story of the needle in the proverbial haystack.

John T. Phelan Jr., COO of TriFactor, LLC, a material handling system integrator in Lakeland, FL, had no idea that ICS Logistics could benefit from an automation needs analysis for its 3PL cold storage operation in a proposed new distribution center. While he knew the company, he didn’t know they had a need until someone from ICS Logistics called him after reading an article in a trade publication written by one of Phelan’s systems engineers.

Instead of spending time trying to figure out how to push your way in, a much more productive approach is to find ways to help the customer find you.

At the end of the day, the *best salespeople* are the best marketers.

Stop Hunting and Start Marketing

After many years as a successful business insurance producer, Carl Zeutzius, a vice president of the UNICO Group in Lincoln, NE, knew there had to be a better way to attract new business, other than getting lucky when sending out a stream of quotes.

He found a new direction through the Institute of WorkComp Professionals, a national group based in Asheville, NC that trains insurance professionals how to help employers reduce their workers' compensation expenses. The concept of bringing unique value to clients captured his imagination.

At that point, Zeutzius went through what might be viewed as a "career change." Both Zeutzius and the members of his team at UNICO have become expert marketers. They've partnered with occupational health facilities, as well as other professionals, and they reach out and hold educational seminars for employers, write articles for business publications and distribute information-based eBulletins to a growing database of clients and prospects. In fewer than three years, their reach extends far beyond their original market area and now includes the whole state. With his team's strat-

egy, he is already looking beyond Nebraska.

He sums it up quite simply, "We're getting in doors that were never open to us. People look forward to seeing us because they are interested in what we know."

With its marketing mindset, there are no limits to the UNICO workers' comp group's success. At the end of the day, the best salespeople are the best marketers.

A business writer recently mentioned a comment by Al Ries, the legendary marketer, in an article. Not long afterward, a package arrived in the writer's mail from Ries, with a copy of his latest book, an intriguing statue and a letter expressing thanks for quoting him. Ries is not just a great marketer; he's a superb salesperson.

It's clear that there are salespeople who, whether recognizing it or not, put these four strategies into practice every day. They've adapted, quite naturally. Others, however, are still looking for the "silver bullet" that will get them in front of customers so they can "work their magic." Unfortunately, disappointment will drive them to look for the next gimmick. **ES**

JOHN R. GRAHAM

Graham is president of Graham Communications, a marketing services and sales consulting firm. He writes and speaks on business, marketing and sales issues. Contact him at 40 Oval Road, Quincy, Massachusetts 02170, 617-328-0069 or jgraham@grahamcomm.com. The company's website is grahamcomm.com.