

**SOFT
SELLING**
IN A
***HARD
WORLD***

PLAIN TALK ON THE
ART OF PERSUASION

BY JERRY VASS

RUNNING PRESS
PHILADELPHIA • LONDON

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Second Edition

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Digit on the right indicates the number of this printing

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Number 98-65178

ISBN 0-7624-0401-9

Cover design by Toni Leslie
Edited by Greg Jones

This book may be ordered by mail from the publisher.
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Running Press Book Publishers
125 South Twenty-second Street
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19103-4399

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WHY THE *SOFT SELL* WORKS

Living well is the best revenge . . .

The “hard sell” approach has developed as a natural outgrowth of the American culture. It sounds normal to us as Buyers because our defensive agents are calloused to the constant attack of hard-sell messages. While defending ourselves against attack and sorting the puffery from representation, we make mincemeat of the salesperson. The hard sell doesn't work well anymore. Buyers are hardened to attacks on their common sense.

Even though Buyers may not like the hard sell, they accept or reject it with a certain practiced comfort. They have heard it all before and their minds are prepared to deal with it. They listen and look for anything that triggers their defensive mechanisms—wrong tone of voice, negative body language, doubtful words—any attack, direct or implied. When their defensive agents spot something aggressive, Buyers reflexively erect armor against the Seller.

However, when the mechanics of the sales presentation are changed to deliver messages to the Buyer that bypass the usual attack routes, they flank the defensive armor. It is possible to have Buyers commit to a purchase rather painlessly, sometimes without even

knowing it. Even when Buyers realize they are being persuaded, they still enjoy it. Their “soldiers” are not prepared to mount a defense to say no—they just stand around and watch.

When you learn to sell softly, you retrain the old hard-sell habits you’ve built up over years of living in our culture. In learning the *Soft Sell*, first you learn new moves, how they are constructed and when to use them based on the Buyer’s usual hard-sell responses. Then, you practice to get your new habits in place. Once in place, your new habits do the selling work for you almost effortlessly.

It is much easier to teach soft selling techniques to new salespeople than to experienced, “high-mileage” salespeople. The new kids don’t have all those hard-sell habits getting in their way. High-mileage salespeople are a seething mass of illusion, bad information, enculturation, poor role models, flaky images, and hardened habits. They confuse motivation with sales training. They feel that they are so good and so experienced they don’t need to practice. Their hard-sell agents tell them that really good salespeople don’t need to study the profession of persuasion, which is like saying the quarterback for the Super Bowl team doesn’t need to practice and should only play during the game itself.

Soft Sell

The *Soft Sell* in a nutshell:

DON'T TALK - Listen

DON'T TELL - Ask

DON'T SELL - Solve

DON'T PITCH - Probe

DON'T LEAVE - Close

While this concept is simple enough, you cannot rely upon your good intentions and intuition to pull it off; it is counter-intuitive and demands well-constructed tactics to work.

*“Will you . . . Have you . . . Can you . . . Won't you . . .
Are you . . . Is this . . . Were they . . . Should you . . .
Would you . . . Could you . . . etc. ”*

The Seller usually charges directly at the point with the subtlety of a troop of Boy Scouts. While these questions sound culturally acceptable, they aren't persuasion. Until trained to question well, ordinary salespeople attack the Buyer with Frontal probes. (Yes, dear reader, I am talking about you.)

Sometimes they attempt to set clumsy traps using contractions to lead the Buyer into a favorable answer: *“Wouldn't you like to be the first person in your industry to use this ground-breaking technology?”*

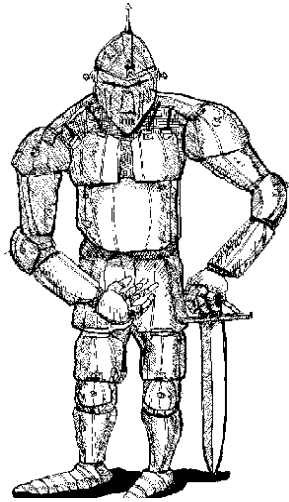
There is plenty of room for subtlety in selling. A key component of the *Soft Sell* is asking questions that require the Buyer to think and reach inside for the answer so as to reveal needs the Seller can fulfill with a product or service.

There are two types of probes:

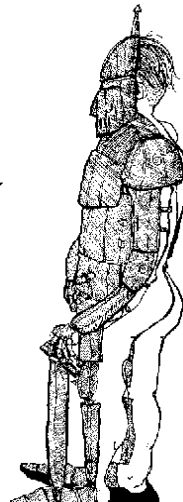
- **Frontal probes** fly directly into the Buyer's armor—
“Mr. Rogers, are you the decision-maker for the company?”
- **Flanking probes** get behind the Buyer's armor—
“Mr. Rogers, how are decisions like this made inside your firm?”

When we play our Buyer's role, each of us is armored.

The Seven Selling Moves



Buyer—front view



Buyer—side view

Frontal probes are questions that can be answered with a single word. These probes are generally used when the Seller attacks the Buyer. (Not on purpose, of course. Ordinary salespeople protest with unarguable certainty that they are “only requesting specific information!”) The problem arises because the Buyer’s defensive agents are perfectly prepared to resist the Seller—to give a negative answer if possible. Frontal probes are

tactless. They sound like attacks, or at least challenges. It's difficult not to sound adversarial using Frontal probes. It's how the Buyer's armor got built.

Ordinary salespeople are poor information gatherers. They believe they ask questions that gain information about the Buyer except that they nearly always use Frontal probes that force the Buyer into areas of the Seller's interest. Forcing the Buyer into those restricted areas seriously limits the Seller's opportunity to uncover Buyer information upon which an agreement can be struck. Frontal probes restrict both the area of conversation and the range of the Buyer's imagination. Since the questions usually call for a one-word answer (usually yes or no), the Seller must be very precise about the information that is needed. The Seller must carry the conversational burden since a one-word answer relieves the Buyer of having to think much. Frontal probes make the Seller work like crazy. And the more the Seller works, the harder it is to close softly.

The Buyer is used to yes-or-no questions not only from salespeople but from everyone. With Frontal probes, the Buyer has a ready answer even before the question is fully asked. The answer comes from outside the Buyer. It's quick and automatic and unhelpful in building a sales presentation because every salesperson asks it.

The Seven Selling Moves

Flanking probes are used whenever the Seller wants to discover what the Buyer needs or wants; uncover the Buyer's dissatisfaction with current products or services; allow the Buyer to express opinions about anything; and encourage the Buyer to discuss problems or needs without threat. In the *Soft Sell*, Flanking probes allow the Buyer and Seller to be non-adversarial.

Flanking probes work because the Buyer isn't used to being asked non-manipulative questions. The Buyer relaxes because the probe doesn't contain implications that the Buyer made poor decisions in the past or will in the future. The Buyer becomes non-defensive in giving information especially when you make the Buyer feel good, that is, support at every opportunity. By answering openly, the Buyer carries the burden of the presentation. The Seller has plenty of time to listen and think.

A Flanking probe requires the Buyer to search for the answer, make decisions, and create an opinion. It takes the Buyer off "automatic" and onto "think." The Buyer must go inside to develop a reasonable and well-thought answer. Usually that mind search takes some time. So, if the Buyer answers quickly, the probe is probably a Frontal probe.

Obviously, getting behind the Buyer's armor with Flanking probes is more effective. It makes the Seller

look smart, gets the Buyer to speak easily, and gives the Seller the information needed without threatening the Buyer. It is the non-adversarial way of asking questions.

Another expensive habit of ordinary salespeople is to ask several questions in a row, without letting the Buyer answer, and then guess at the answer (or add other questions as an afterthought) which limits the Buyer's response. This is called a "Run-on question."

A "Run-on question" example:

"Ms. Wilson, has that category been selling well for you? . . . have you been happy with it? . . . or not? . . . is it the right model for your customers? . . . or do they ask for something else? . . . another brand perhaps?"

If salespeople don't probe well for background information, they don't know how to launch the presentation. When salespeople don't know what to do, they talk. The ordinary salesperson vomits the presentation onto the Buyer's desk top. Only rarely will a salesperson ask a question that allows the Buyer to get involved, make decisions, or help author the sale.

Proper preparation of carefully constructed probes converts a mundane, lusterless presentation into one where Buyers carry the burden and feel good about themselves, the Seller and the decision that has been

made, and give the Seller more information than is needed to close.

Flanking probes start with one of these words: *who, how, what, why, when, where*. For instance, you sell software and you ask:

“Ms. Quigley, how’s the new computer system impacting your business?”

Ms. Quigley now has the opportunity to vent her spleen about the new system. Because Flanking probes are not specific, she will talk about the parts of the system that are important to her—what it does right and what it does wrong. Like most of us, she is rarely asked her opinion by anyone, so her answers will be honest. Now, sit back and listen for opportunities to give Supporting Statements. Ms. Quigley feels good about giving her opinions and you continue to make her feel good as you introduce Benefits of your product or service.

Flanking probes encourage self-expression on the Buyer's part. They keep the Seller from playing fortune teller: “Let me gaze deeply into my crystal ball and tell you what your future holds. Ahhhh, it holds exactly what I am selling. Isn't that amazing?”

Ordinary salespeople endlessly play a game called “Let Me Guess.” Instead of probing to determine the Buyer's

attitudes and opinions, problems and needs, the Seller guesses at them and designs solutions using guesswork as gospel. (A method called “Ready, Fire! Aim.”) More often than not, the Seller guesses wrong—trying to fill a need that doesn’t exist, or hasn’t been created, in the Buyer’s mind. Don’t guess at the Buyer’s need—ask Flanking probes.

Buyer's defensive agents aren't equipped to defend against intelligent questions requesting an opinion. For most of their lives, Buyers have been asked stupid questions requiring simple yes-or-no answers. They are experts in giving stupid Sellers “no” answers. Sellers must ask questions that make the Buyer go inside for the answer.

You, the Seller, are looking for silence from the Buyer, some quiet time in which they generate well considered answers. Fast answers from the Buyer work against your interest and are a symptom that you asked a Frontal question.

Ask the Buyer a yes-or-no question and you deserve the no you get.