

“SALES AND THE STUDY OF GEOLOGY”

(Use Time and Pressure in Proper Doses)

Understanding the use of pressure is important in selling professional services. However, you must consider one other element if you want to make the sale.

At the end of the movie *The Shawshank Redemption*, Red, the character portrayed by Morgan Freeman, is narrating the details of the prison escape of his friend Andy, played by actor Tim Robbins. Freeman explains how Andy dug through his prison cell wall a few small rocks at a time using simple principles of geology. He says, “Geology is the study of pressure and time. That’s all it takes, really, pressure and time.”¹

If you’re involved in the sale of professional services, you should consider yourself a student of geology as well. Here’s why. If the prospect is unwilling to change providers at this time, applying great levels of pressure in your sales efforts is futile. Instead, you must apply a measured amount of pressure over an extended period of time, increasing the level as the prospect shows greater vulnerability and interest in your offerings. Often in sales, an eager provider applies a generous amount of pressure when the timing is not right. As a result, the salesperson walks away from the meeting frustrated, believing that converting the prospect to a client is a hopeless pursuit. If the timing isn’t right, excessive pressure is ineffective and may even be detrimental to your intent to position yourself for future opportunities.

Rather, your approach should be to continuously look for ways in which you can more positively predispose the prospect to buy, understanding that you can take an increasingly more aggressive sales posture as the buyer becomes more receptive. You must also understand that incremental moves often take place over a long period of time. Therefore, you must be patient and persistent in your approach.

Those from the “old school” of sales might view concepts such as measured amounts of pressure, patience, and timing as timid or showing a lack of determination, tenacity, or resolve. In fact, I can hear the automobile or aluminum siding salesperson cringing at the idea of letting the fish squirm off

¹ Castle Rock Entertainment, Inc., *The Shawshank Redemption* (Beverly Hills, CA, 1994).

the hook, so to speak. I can assure you, however, that other professionals in service industries consistently echo and confirm the sentiments I have found to be true in my own experience—selling professional services in today’s business environment requires multiple contacts, and the majority of salespeople fail simply because they give up before they’ve made enough selling attempts to win over the prospect.

The number of attempts required before you can expect to succeed varies depending upon the prospect, the nature of your business, and the vulnerability of the prospect when you begin the sales process. Of course, you’ll always find exceptions, as every once in a while a client calls randomly and gives you the go ahead to get started right away. However, a rule of thumb in professional services is that you can expect to engage the prospective client four to six times at a minimum before getting a sale. Yes, in some industries the “Don’t take no for an answer” and the “Don’t let them leave the showroom floor” approaches are valid, but rarely is this the case in service firms.

Employing the “geology” approach actually requires great determination and tremendous discipline. The ability to pursue prospective clients consistently over time with the understanding that the sales cycle might be long and the process might be terribly complex is a quality that embodies the true sales professional. The “hit and run” salesperson who relies on a polished sales pitch and a one-time offer will generally find selling professional services a difficult endeavor.

If a fisherman knows that the big fish swims in a certain hole, the professional consistently comes back no matter how many times the big one gets away, learning from each fishing experience. Like the fisherman, to get the big sale, you must apply the proper amount of pressure and have the patience to do so over the long haul.

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