

Recognize Your Blind Spots

by Brandon Steiner

When you're in sales (and who of us isn't selling something), it's easy to slip into that dog-eat-dog mentality. Now more than ever before—when the internet and social networks show us who's doing what, all over the world, in real time—it's hard not to feel that if so-and-so is selling 100 widgets, you have to sell 1,000. If they can deliver it in three days, you have to cut your delivery time to three minutes. If they just redid their website, you need to hire Mark Zuckerberg away from Facebook to revamp your homepage. You have to do it bigger, and faster, and it has to come in more colors—otherwise you're toast.

And the truth is that, well, there's a lot of truth in all that.

But when you're operating a mile a minute under that mentality, you also open up some blind spots. Because there are some important aspects of selling that are counterintuitive. That are antithetical to that bigger, faster, stronger mindset. Here, I want to explore five such issues. The following lessons are adapted from my book *You Gotta Have Balls*.

1. JUST AS NO ONE CAN HAVE IT ALL, NO ONE CAN DO IT ALL.

Some time in the late 90s, as my collectibles company Steiner Sports was beginning to really take off, I was in Orlando with Jim Kelly, Hall of Fame Buffalo Bills quarterback. I had accompanied Jim down there for two appearances he was doing at a big sports memorabilia trade show. One night he took me out to a local bar, and at around 2 AM, while Jim and I were chatting with some people, I felt a tap on the shoulder. Turning around, I recognized one of the top collectors at the show.

"Brandon," he said. "I know you are starting to really grow, and I like what you're doing. But remember. There are three pillars of business—price, quality, and service." He paused. "And you can only excel at two."

To this day, I try to run my company with service and quality as the main goals.

Think about it – can you name a major company that gives its customers all three of these things at once? One of them always has to be sacrificed.

Figure out which two you can excel at the most, and don't let striving for the third interfere.

Because as Meat Loaf sang, "Two out of three ain't bad."

2. NOT OVERSELLING IS AN UNDERRATED PART OF SELLING.

My buddy Cliff Savage and I have stayed friends ever since graduating high school. In the nineties, when I was starting Steiner Sports, Cliff became VP at Franklin Sporting Goods and was an invaluable asset to me. Through his connections at Franklin, Cliff knew in advance which sporting goods retailers were on the rise. He introduced me to people at stores like the Sports Authority and Herman's. With Cliff's help, I was able to get my business in on the ground floor of those stores before they became industry giants.

Though Cliff is a great salesman, his style is very different from mine. I'd try to sell a meat Popsicle to a vegan; Cliff goes with more of a "soft sell." In that way, we've learned from each other.

My favorite sales lesson from Cliff is that "It's not what you sell the customer; it's what the customer has left." In other words, don't oversell.

If you convince someone to buy more than he needs, there's a good chance his inventory will be overstocked the next time you call on him. He won't buy from you on that call, and he might even look for a new sales rep—one who is more attuned to his needs. Better to sell the client just enough, or even a little less than that. Give him a chance to get that "It sold out!" feeling.

Not overselling is an underrated part of selling.

3. MAKE THE SMART SELL, NOT JUST THE SOFT SELL.

Like I just said, I like to think of myself as a darn good salesman. Those of us in sales need that kind of confidence. There's no other way to be successful at it.

But sales is also about knowing your customers' needs, and sometimes the confidence that makes a good salesperson can also make them a blind one.

In 2005, after we finalized our Yankees-Steiner Collectibles partnership, I began looking for the next big alliance we could form. Eventually we settled on Notre Dame Football.

But there was a big problem: I've never been a Notre Dame fan. I watch them, and I respect them, but I bleed Syracuse orange, not Notre Dame green. I'd be lying if I pitched to Notre Dame and claimed to be passionate about the school (as opposed to the brand). And no matter how confident a salesman I could be, they'd see right through me. This couldn't be a business deal that added up only on paper. It had to add up in the hearts and minds of the organization as well. I had to find a way to earn their trust.

It would all begin with the initial contact. I had to make sure that from the get-go, we showed Notre Dame the proper amount of reverence and respect. We had to execute a "smart sell" strategy.

My VP of Sales at the time was Pete Kelly. He was a Notre Dame lunatic — passionate about the team and the school. I knew he was going to be important here.

"Better to have a guy named Kelly call Notre Dame," I told Pete, "than a guy named Steiner."

Pete did some good legwork; eventually we got ourselves in front of the right people at Notre Dame. And after that, we engaged in a months-long pitch, which involved several other sales strategies. In the end, we got the deal done: Notre Dame Collectibles by Steiner.

But I'll always feel strongly that it was all predicated on that initial call – on having Pete make that first contact, instead of me.

Like I said, I'm a confident sales guy. But for the first overture, I was not the right sales guy. By speaking to Notre Dame in the right language – through our in-house authentic Notre Dame fan – we set the tone for the rest of the sale. Are you being smart- in addition to being confident – in how you sell?

4. YOUR WORST DAYS CAN BE YOUR BEST DAYS

My mother, one of the sharpest entrepreneurs I've ever seen, ran a beauty salon in Brooklyn while I was growing up. One of the more important things she taught me was that you can use your best sales day to promote your worst day.

Beauty parlors were usually packed on Fridays and Saturdays, because women went out those nights. As a result, it was a struggle to get good business going earlier on in the week. So my mother offered a special price for a wash and set on Wednesdays and Thursdays. She never stopped coming up with all sorts of deals, trying to get the place busier during the slow parts of the week.

Decades later, when I managed the Sporting Club restaurant in New York, I utilized that lesson. Some of our weeknights were slow, so I hired celebrities to come in on those nights, to be guest bartenders. We promoted those appearances, gave some of the profits to charity, and some of our most hopping nights became random Tuesdays or Wednesdays, when a Wayne Gretzky or a Keith Hernandez would tend bar, as opposed to a Friday or Saturday.

Is there room in your business to leverage a good day against a bad day, and make them all strong?

5. BEING A GOOD SALESMAN IS NOT ALWAYS ABOUT BEING YOUR CLIENTS' BEST FRIEND

Before I managed the Sporting Club, I managed the Hard Rock Café, back in the 80s, when it was on 57th Street, and one of the most happening restaurants in New York.

The Hard Rock was immensely popular with musicians and celebrities in those days. There were always famous people there: Mick Jagger, Jeff Beck, Elton John, Jack Nicholson. Daryl Strawberry, Ron Darling, Keith Hernandez. (The '86 Mets were there all the time.) While the rest of the staff was fawning all over these beautiful people, I made sure they got impeccable service, and didn't get taken advantage of if they were a little tipsy, or otherwise indisposed. I made sure they felt safe.

It didn't go unnoticed.

The stars saw how hard I worked. They came to rely on me. In that way, I developed real relationships with some of them.

I probably had more interaction with Keith Hernandez than anyone else. He stopped by most nights to meet up with friends. He frequently invited me to parties he was going to after dinner, or to go to a Mets game as his guest. But I wasn't as interested in being his friend as I was in being his favorite restaurant manager.

"How many times have I asked you to go to games?" Keith asked me one night at the restaurant.

"I wish I could go," I said. "But I need to be here."

He respected my answer.

I wasn't Keith's pal, but he saw me as a serious person. This came in handy later on, at the less-popular Sporting Club, when I relied on Keith coming to the bar to drive traffic, and later on when I started my marketing and collectibles business, when I relied on him as one of my first clients.

You don't need to earn your clients' friendship. You need to earn their trust and respect. That's what makes them want to do business with you.

These are but five examples of aspects of selling that don't seem obvious at first; there are countless more. The key is to look at all arms of your business and think: is this actually the most effective way of doing things? Or might I not be seeing something crucial? Am I just doing it this way out of habit?