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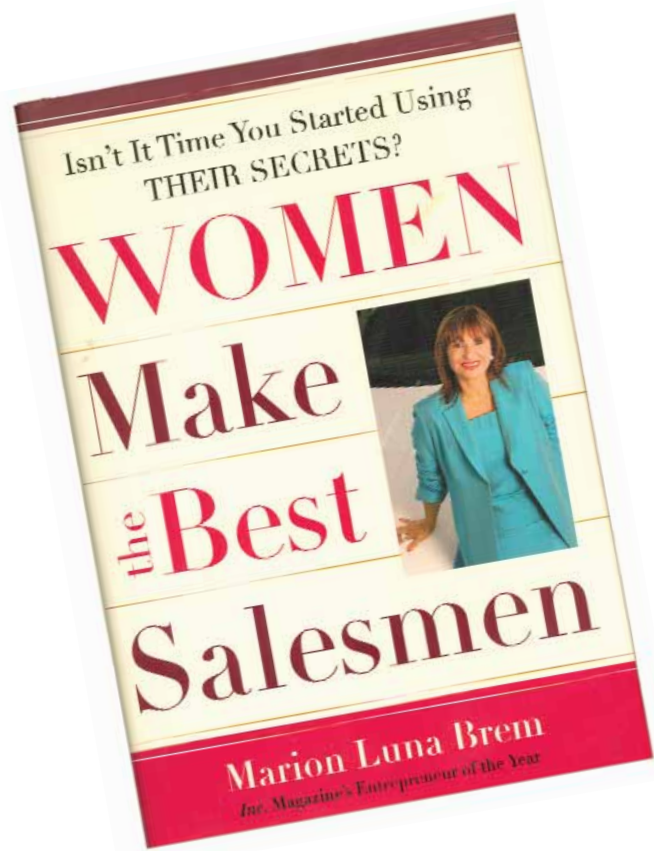
Why Do Women Make the Best Salesmen?



Is it time that men learned their secrets?

Many years ago I journeyed to a furniture market for the first time. I recall asking one of the “mossy back” furniture men (old timers for you non-westerners) this question: “Why is it that the furniture we sell is designed by men, built by men, sold wholesale by men to men, and eventually sold at retail by men to women?” As you may imagine, instead of an answer I got a blank, incredulous stare.

Things have changed since then, but not a great deal. The furniture industry’s general playing field is still greatly tilted in favor of men. The grass is greener for women in other industries. For example, a woman in another vocation recently won *Inc. Magazine’s* Entrepreneur of the Year award. Not long ago a woman was inducted into the



WOMEN ARE MAKING PROGRESS IN BUSINESS ...

A few years ago a woman won Inc. Magazine's Entrepreneur of the Year award. Not long ago a woman was inducted into the International Automotive Hall of Fame, and a female has been named as one of the 100 most influential Hispanics in the United States. Interestingly enough, these accomplishments were all achieved by the same woman: Marion Luna Brem. Brem has also written a book with the challenging title: Women Make the Best Salesmen.

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Males can learn a considerable amount if they listen more carefully to what successful women have to say. Marion Luna Brem is remarkably successful in two ways. First, because of her character, and second, because she offers an uncommon roadmap to sales success... one with more than a few unique twists.

Character is the Prime Ingredient of Leadership

Leadership in sales (or anything else) begins with character. Brem overcame seemingly impossible odds to reach the top in sales. As a thirty-year old mother of two, she was told a number of years ago that she was dying of cancer and had only five years to live. Her marriage collapsed under the strain of the treatment. She was soon a jobless single parent without health insurance. A friend suggested: "You like people. Why not try sales?" This suggestion was the beginning of her road to mental, physical, and spiritual recovery.

Sixteen interviews later, Brem made her first “sale.” She “sold” her potential skills to a car dealer and got a job selling cars. In less than two months, Brem was salesperson of the month. By the end of the year, she was salesperson of the year. Less than five years after selling her first car, Brem opened her first dealership in Corpus Christi, and went on to open several more. Interestingly, the name of her dealership is “Love Chrysler.”

What Brem demonstrated along her career path was character... the prime components of which are integrity, excellence, faith and caring. Did I say caring? Yes, we have come a long way since the early nineties, when psychologists were trying to heal women of their tendencies to be more caring and nurturing than men, and more desirous to serve others. As Sally Helgesen observed in her book *The Female Advantage*, the generally female characteristics of responsibility, connection, and inclusion have been too long devalued by our society. These same characteristics are the essential skills needed for modern relationship selling. Any furniture store that is not striving to develop relationships with customers... that has not recognized the negative effect this devaluation has had on sales and salespeople is in deep trouble.

The Basics of Selling for Everyone

So, what does Brem offer that has not been covered many times before by others? She draws a circle that includes the essential basics and the fear-pitfalls of selling, that cannot be reviewed too often. Beyond this, Brem offers some fresh and inspiring insights. I don't sell furniture anymore, but I do sell every day, and so do you—whether you are a salesperson, a manager or a CEO. This is the first of several fresh insights Brem offers. She reminds us that we are all salespersons. We all constantly strive to persuade others of one thing or another-and selling is the art of persuasion. Brem suggests that mastering the art of persuasion is one sure way to get more of what you want out of life. Moreover, Brem tells us that selling actually saved her life.

Another fascinating perspective that Brem offers is that of the lay person who believed she knew nothing about selling when she began her career. As she watched salesmen going about the business of selling, it occurred to her that there must be a better way to sell cars. Her first observation could easily apply to furniture, but in an inverse way. Brem noticed that the women were often ignored when a couple came into the

showroom. I have seen the reverse in a furniture showroom-it is the men who are often ignored. In both cases, the ignored spouse always has veto power. If they don't like the salesperson or the deal, there will be no sale regardless of the excitement level of their partner. Brem thought it would be far wiser to carefully divide attention about equally between the two. These, and a few other ideas, encouraged her to believe she could do better.

Who and What Are You REALLY Selling?

What you are selling is not furniture or mattress sets, but a four-letter word known as help. Brem points out that the job of every salesperson is to help someone improve their life. And, the key person you are really selling is the woman. This is not a contradiction with the principle of dividing attention carefully between the male and female. Having cautioned us to give fairly equal attention to both, Brem forcefully reminds us that it isn't just that women make 80% of the major buying decisions, it's also that they make or influence 100% of the major buying decisions. If you don't know how to sell to women, you cannot be successful.

One reason women are successful at selling is they are intuitive, and they understand the principle of the "hint." They are masters at picking up subtle sales clues that female customers tend to offer. The fact is that women shoppers like to please their husbands, but they need help in doing so. And men appreciate it when someone offers their partner this help. Women listen hard-not just to what is said-but what is not said. Brem also brought up a selling issue that I had almost totally forgotten over the years: children.

My first furniture job was with Curtis Bros. Furniture in Washington, D.C. Curtis Bros. was, at that time, America's largest furniture store under one roof, and the first store to do a million-dollar month (this was achieved in the mid-sixties, I can't imagine what that volume would be in today's dollars!) Curtis Bros. had a play area for the children that was supervised by an adult associate who had other duties when there were no children to watch. The play area had a western motif, and there were all kinds of great toys, a wooden "bronco" to ride, and so forth. But Brem took the Curtis Bros. idea one step further. She saw to it that the toys were constantly updated. In that way, the children of repeat customers were always excited to see what was new. A small trifle, perhaps. But as Michelangelo once said: *"Trifles make perfection, and perfection is no trifle."*

Brem also gives seminars for women on how to buy a car. This again reminded me of Curtis Bros., who had me develop a program that bussed high school senior girls from Maryland into the huge store for seminars on buying furniture. It was a low-cost, extremely successful operation—using sales reps and buyers as teachers, and hand-outs that manufacturers happily supplied.

Brem offers an abundance of ideas about the basics of selling. Most of these suggestions are well-known, but some have some interesting spins. She gives 12 ways to avoid losing a sale, some of them are obvious, such as: “don’t lie,” “don’t beg or panic,” and “don’t be rude.” However, in each case Brem gives a slightly deeper insight into what may appear at first to be obvious. For example, “don’t be rude,” sounds rather trite. But Brem insists that you should never be rude, whether you are talking to a customer, an associate, a family member, or a waitress down the street. The reason for this insistence is twofold. First, successful salespeople need to possess the key value known as integrity. The second reason is that you never know who may be listening to unkind, impatient or rude remarks.

Brem winds up her case for women with 12 sure ways to improve sales. Here we will just cover a few of her suggestions.

Sure Ways to Improve Your Sales

First is “make eye contact.” (I can just hear the shouts: “Everybody knows that!”) But once again Brem offers a subtle, but distinct observation. It is true that this is obvious advice, but a great number of sales people fail to make visual contact—both when talking and when concentrating on what the other person has to say. This shows you care, and doubles your charisma. Professional actors are always taught: “You must learn to listen to the other actors.” This is simple, powerful advice that is often overlooked. Brem offers the usual “wear a friendly smile” suggestion, adding that the smile is a great communications tool—emanating confidence, enthusiasm and caring.

Brem makes a powerful case for using a note pad rather than a Palm Pilot or some other electronic gadget. And she offers suggestions on how to make your cell phone your friend, rather than your enemy. After Brem explains the value of follow-up, you will be motivated to get back to customers much more quickly. Brem’s suggestions

about self-motivation are classic and interesting. But her final three suggestions: *ask, get the word out, and stay with it, are very powerful.*

ASK. Here women have an obvious advantage; because many have been people-pleasers almost from birth. Asking for what you want must follow a certain protocol: always work beyond expectations, and find someone who notices (even if you have to ask to get that person's attention). Brem embellishes this principle with the observation that: "When, and only when, you feel you have met the standard of not merely satisfying your customer but, rather, delighting them," ask for the sale. Assume the customers who walk into your showroom have "furniture fever," and you have the cure. All a salesperson has to do is learn what the customer's needs are, and then set out to exceed them.

GET THE WORD OUT. Let people know what you can do for them, and remind them often. Create a brand for yourself. Network with people with whom you share a common interest. You may have already forgotten my story about Curtis Bros. and their efforts to reach out and educate the public about furniture. The school program we set up was not easy. It took a great deal of networking and effort to pull it off, but this type of outreach is one of the better ways to distinguish your brand to young consumers.

STAY WITH IT. By this, Brem means follow up, follow up, and follow up! She tells us that she tracked her sales team for two months to identify the habits of the best sales performers and compared them to those of the weakest. The results were the greatest revelations of her career. The top two salespeople talked to the fewest prospects! They simply talked more often to the same prospects. In other words, they hung in resolutely... in some cases asking for the sale as many as five times. Brem carved out a spectacular career with this persistence. She was never pushy or high pressure, but she was eternally creative and persistent in solving customers' problems and exceeding their expectations.

Do women really make the best salespeople? This is generally true for furniture stores. But there is hope for the males who care to learn some of their secrets. All things being equal, people like to buy from people who are most like themselves, but skills that come naturally to women can be learned by men.

People prefer to buy from people they like. The so-called “disease to please” has a positive side to it that gives women an advantage. Pleasing others in a professional, balanced and poised way is a great way to make people like you and appreciate your expertise.

People like to buy from people who are consistently sensitive and attentive to their needs. Women are by nature more intuitive and they pick up subtle signals from others. Such observation and awareness are skills that can be learned, and are powerful sales tools.

People are more apt to buy from someone who explains things completely and who listens carefully. Good communication skills are critical to selling, and women are generally more natural talkers and better listeners.

As Brem points out, though, these are not magical skills. Men simply must face the fact that what worked in sales just a few years ago may no longer apply. The new skills can be learned, and women, bless their hearts, want to teach us. Fortunately, they also want to learn from us. And, who knows? Perhaps when a furniture entrepreneur is able to modulate the salesman’s warrior mentality and fearless drive with the female’s caring, excellence, and attention to subtle detail, we may end up with hybrid salespersons of greater power than ever before.

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