
C H A P T E R

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Top 10 Sales Hall of Shame: When Bad Salespeople Go Even Worse

After more than 15 years in the sales business, we've seen some of the very best this profession has to offer—and more than a few of the worst. The following definitely fall into the latter category. We call them the Top 10 Sales Hall of Shame—a listing of the 10 worst sales practices we've ever had the misfortune to stumble upon, culled from our own personal experience as well as submissions from clients, colleagues, and fellow sales practitioners. The examples below are all true. You may laugh, you may cringe, you may even think, “There is *no way* I would ever do that!” Regardless of your reaction, we encourage you to take note of the lesson in each story. And, before you read any further, we urge you to make sure you haven't got a weak stomach, and please—leave the lights on . . .

They can reach us in our homes. They track us down when we're at the office or on the road. And unless you've spent the last 30 years living on the moon or under a rock, odds are, you've fallen prey to them more than once.

Bad salespeople. Not just bad—beyond bad.

Whether it's the telemarketer who won't take no for an answer, the cold caller who swears she went to school with your dear Uncle Al or the retail salesperson who simply refuses to give you a straight answer, these are the people who give all salespeople—most of whom are decent, honest, hardworking members of the community—a reputation that hovers somewhere between arms dealer and professional heroin merchant.

What's even worse (at least from a sales point of view) is that the vast majority of these misguided, wrongheaded, or

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just plain dishonest approaches don't work. So while these lowest-of-the-low are out there busily giving all salespeople a bad name, they're also likely just as busy working themselves out of what could have been a promising career.

iPhone, uPhone, We All Phone

From Chris:

In Canada, a national cell phone provider was recently granted exclusive rights to carry the much-awaited new iPhone.

Not two days after this landmark announcement had played all over the television, radio, and Internet, a representative from one of that provider's biggest competitors called me out of the blue. Apparently, he just wanted to share with me the wonderful news that they would be able to offer me the iPhone too!

Now, my wife and I were as eager as everyone else on the planet to get our hands on these shiny new gadgets. But we also knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that only one company had the iPhone in Canada, and it was definitely not the company with which I was speaking.

As politely as I could, I told the salesperson that we were indeed getting iPhones, but that we would be sticking with Company X, which actually had the right to sell them to us. Undaunted, the salesperson insisted that his Company Y was carrying the iPhone as well and practically demanded that we sign up with them instead.

Still as politely as possible, I reminded him that his firm couldn't possibly offer the iPhone, because (a) its non-GSM network couldn't support it, and (b) it was public knowledge that Company X had an exclusive contract with Apple.

Despite my repeated protestations, he continued to insist that he could supply us with iPhones and demanded that we

switch to his company. After trying without success to make him realize (or admit) the truth, I finally just hung up.

Needless to say, we are now very happy with our new iPhones and Company X. As for Company Y—let's just say, we haven't exactly been seeing "i" to "i."

It's the Factory's Fault!

From Amanda:

When it came time to buy our current car, I tried my best to do everything the experts say we all should.

I did my research. I identified which manufacturer, make, and model I was interested in. I even picked out a color and made a list of all the options I wanted. In short, everything was going perfectly according to plan.

That is, until I took the test drive.

To make sure I was going to get the best deal, I decided to test drive my chosen vehicle at three different dealerships in three cities. The first two went just fine. I drove the car (with standard transmission, my preferred choice). The salespeople were both helpful and professional. I got my price quotes from them, and went on to the last dealer on my list.

When I arrived at the third dealer, I asked if I could take the car I wanted for a drive—same make, same transmission, same everything. Only this time, the salesperson told me that they didn't have a standard version of the car, and asked if I'd like to try an automatic instead.

I thanked him, said I preferred standard and started to walk away. But before I could leave, he begged me to wait for a moment while he checked with his manager.

When he came back, he told me that I wouldn't have any luck finding the car I wanted with any transmission other than automatic. Why? Because, he told me with an

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apologetic smile, the factory had decided not to make any this year.

I guess the standard models at the other two dealerships must've been the product of some kind of automotive Immaculate Conception.

A Little Sizzle with Your Steak?

From Susan:

I like the warm summer months as much as the next gal. Maybe more. But even for me, heat has its limits.

One particular August, it had been over 100 degrees—and humid—without letup for about a week. Our grass was turning brown. Our dog wouldn't go outside. And my husband and I were trying to figure out how to hook up our lemonade supply intravenously.

On the hottest day of that hottest week, I got a call from a salesperson asking if I had received the free sample of meat his company had sent me in the mail.

Meat. Sent by mail. In 100-plus degree weather.

Even in my heat-addled state of mind, it was pretty obvious that he hadn't sent me any samples and was only calling to get me to request information about his company's products.

It was almost enough to make me become a vegetarian.

Ms. President, I Presume?

From Cheryl:

One day while I was working on a sales presentation, I got a call at the office from a company sales rep trying to sell me an updated web site. I asked the sales rep how he had gotten my

name and number, and he told me that he had spoken personally with the president of the association I belonged to, and *he* had given the company permission to call all the members to see if they wanted to upgrade.

Sounds convincing, right? There was just one problem: I happened to have the honor of serving as president of the association that year, and I had never even heard of this company, let alone given them permission to contact our membership.

My guess is, they had simply gotten our member profiles off of the association web site, and were using this lie to try to sell us their service. A shame that, while they were online, they hadn't taken the time to note down the president's name—or gender!

The Blind Leading . . . Period

From Brent:

One of my first jobs in sales was working as a rep for a large copier company. I can still remember the day I made my first sale of a brand new copier to the Institute for the Blind.

It wasn't a top-of-the-line machine, but it was a solid sale, and I couldn't have been happier. I treated myself to a celebratory cup of coffee (extra cream and sugar) and went to tell my manager the good news.

The party didn't last long.

When I told him the particulars of the sale, he ordered me to send the client a used copier instead of a new one because, and I quote: "they won't be able to tell the difference."

I quit the next week. As for my manager, I can only hope he got everything he deserved. Like, say, a transfer to the branch office in Siberia.

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Made in China

From Tim:

Several years ago, the company I was working for at the time decided to save a little money by phasing out a successful product line that had been made in Canada for many years and substituting it with one that came from China.

That's all well and good. The only problem was, they didn't advise their clients—or their sales team.

Four months later, we were all called together for a North American sales meeting and asked if there had been any quality issues with the product line. None of us had received any specific client complaints, so they told us about the switch they had made, and congratulated themselves heartily on their success.

A few months later, one of my biggest accounts called to ask me about a change they had noticed in the quality of the product they'd been ordering from us for years. They asked me if anything had recently changed, and I dutifully told them that we now had a partner in China making the product to our specifications, and we had been shipping this instead.

For the next 15 minutes, the client proceeded to tear a huge strip off me for not advising him of the change. He was upset with my company for making the change in the first place, but even more furious with *me* for not advising him of the change when I first heard about it.

I learned a valuable lesson that day. My company could have launched the made-in-China product as an economy line at a lower price and still made a respectable profit.

Instead, by keeping the change a secret from both its employees and its clients, the company cost itself—and me!—one of our oldest and most loyal clients.

Get It in Writing

From Casey:

I was negotiating a few years back with a major hotel chain for a large event that we were hosting at one of its finer properties. Because of the importance of the event, I made sure to lay out every detail of what we needed at every step of the negotiations.

The hotel's RFP response clearly stated that there would be no food and beverage minimum. But in its second written response a short while later, the hotel demanded a minimum food and beverage order of no less than \$50,000.

When I called to confirm the numbers, they told me that the \$50,000 minimum was in fact for every two days of the event, making the total tally that much higher.

I spoke with my partner, and while neither of us was happy with the magically changing numbers, we agreed to go ahead as planned. The hotel sent over the final contract to be signed, and sure enough, it laid out our minimum food and beverage order of \$50,000—*per day*.

They had missed deadline after deadline in sending us the information, and when the contract finally did arrive, none of the clauses we had agreed to by e-mail were included in the paperwork.

It was too late for us to do anything at the time but swallow our anger, strain our budget, and proceed with the event. But you can bet that was the last time either my partner or I used the services of that particular hotel chain.

Just Sign Right Here . . .

From Christopher:

I was approached at home one day by a door-to-door salesperson selling an energy contract. His rates sounded reasonable,

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so I asked him if he could give me a firm quote based on our home and general energy usage.

He told me that he would be more than happy to give me a quote, but to get it, I would have to sign some paperwork authorizing him to look into how much we could save by moving to his service.

I noticed that the paperwork he gave me to sign had the word “contract” written in big, bold letters across the top of it. I asked him point blank if what I was signing was a contract, and he immediately assured me that it was not.

I wanted to make absolutely certain that what I was signing was just an authorization to get a quote, so I asked him again in a different way along the lines of: “So by signing this, I will in no way be locked into any kind of agreement to buy energy from you at a specified price over a set period of time. You are *not* locking me into *anything*. Correct?”

Once again, he assured me that this was not a contract, and I would not be locked into anything in any way.

In order to process my quote, we had to call his head office to confirm a few details. In the course of our conversation, I asked the head office agent if the paper I was signing was a contract. She replied that yes, it certainly was, and by signing it, I would be locking myself in for three years at a fixed rate.

I couldn’t believe the blatant lie the door-to-door sales rep had told me. After thanking the head office agent, I hung up and happily kicked him out the door. Thank goodness not everyone in his organization was as deceitful as him.

Parlez-Vous Français?

From Eliot:

One of my responsibilities with a former employer was to hire a new sales rep for a bilingual position (French/English) to serve our overseas clients.

I received many resumes written in both languages. Several of them included a note explaining that the potential candidate spoke a third language as well—usually Spanish or German.

The resume of one particularly promising candidate indicated that she was proficient in English, French, and Spanish. So halfway through the interview, I suddenly switched to French. I asked her a question that would be simple for anyone with even a rudimentary understanding of the language to answer, but it was obvious from the look on her face that she hadn't a clue what I was saying.

Sensing that she might not have been completely honest with me, I switched to Spanish. She was equally lost. To give her one last chance to redeem herself (and allow myself to blow off a little steam after having been misled for the better part of the morning), I asked her, in Spanish, if she was a liar.

When my question was once more met with a deer-in-the-headlights look and stunned silence, I switched back to English, gave her back her resume and asked her to leave.

Funny—this time she seemed to get the message fast enough.

It'll Be Here Next Week—Honest!

From Cindy:

During the sales process with a large, government-owned central bank, the client asked if we could support an expensive database they already had in house. We told them that our product couldn't currently support their database, but it would be able to in the next release, which was expected to be available within the next few months.

Based on the promise that we would be able to meet their specs soon, they bought our product, and just worked around the limitations until the next release came through.

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Five years and a constant flow of compatibility problems later, the COO of our company was visiting the client on-site one day when he was asked when the support for their database would be ready.

He assured them that it would be part of the next release. The client's answer was to pull out a sheaf of five letters, signed by our company's top executives over each of the past five years, all claiming that the modification was coming "in the next release."

Since we had been releasing new versions of the software each year, it was clear that we had simply chosen to ignore their request and then lied to them about it. Not just the salespeople, either, but the technology, marketing, sales and product management executives as well—all in writing.

Needless to say, we were kicked out and replaced by a company willing to be honest about its capabilities from the start. In all my years in sales, I've never seen a more just or well-deserved dismissal.