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## GET REAL AND GET FOCUSED

*Economies and industries change; that's not your fault. But responding to the change profitably is your responsibility.*

— Dave Lakhani

You likely picked up this book because you are experiencing a sales slump of some sort. It could be caused by the economy or a change in your industry, or maybe a run of bad days. Whatever it is, I want you to know right now that you can change your results, and it won't take a long time.

This chapter is about reality, how you think, and how you work. You'll be tempted to skip this chapter and go right to the sections that have tactics that you can use. I'll caution you not to do that, because if you do you'll be missing one of the biggest lessons in how to overcome any economy and any slump. And the hidden lesson here is that being thorough, being complete, and taking all the steps are what lead to success in learning and in sales.

One thing every professional salesperson can be sure of is that throughout their careers, many things will change; there

will be exceptionally good times, very average times, and some really tough times. This is the nature of sales. Economies change, industries change, buyers change, and the most successful salespeople are able to react quickly, learn what they need to succeed, and take action. When it comes to selling in challenging times, implementation is everything, and money follows action. If you choose to sit around and think the sky is falling, you'll miss the many opportunities that show up that didn't exist when just anyone could show up and get a sale. Challenging times hone you to a fine edge that makes you effective and profitable when others struggle, and that allows you to prosper even more in the good times.

### **WHEN NOBODY'S BUYING, PEOPLE BECOME PREDICTABLE**

When economies or industries change, sales managers begin chanting their predictable mantra: "You just need to cold call more, push people harder, cut back on your expenses; no more client dinners or paying for golf." If simply cold calling new prospects and cutting back on client entertainment were the answer, there would never be a lack of sales. But with changing economies, with changing access to information, with changing and consolidating industries, sales strategies have to change, too . . . yet they've remained fundamentally the same for years.

When economies and industries change, CEOs, vice presidents, and buyers of all kinds begin chanting their own mantra: "We have to make across-the-board cuts, make do with the technology we have, cut back on all spending, negotiate everything, and put a hold on all contracts until we see what is really going to happen."

And with that, salespeople pick up the phone and start cold calling, trying desperately to reach buyers directly who they've never spoken to before—and buyers develop more sophisticated

strategies for avoiding their calls. Companies struggle to meet revenue projections, and salespeople wonder if they should look for greener pastures. Business continues to stagnate and decline.

But it doesn't have to.

You are about to learn what works today; you are going to learn how to think differently and to act differently so that you can always sell when nobody's buying and sell even more when they are.

There are two trains of thought about selling in tough times. The first is that times are not tough, it is really all in your head and you just need to work harder and with a better attitude to sell more. It is tough to accept that argument when the businesses you sell to no longer exist or when a major change in your industry or the economy causes people to behave differently. The second line of thought is that the sky is falling; everything is bad no matter where you look. Don't waste a lot of time trying to sell anything, no one is buying anyway. It is time to commiserate with others who feel the same way; they understand. Listen to the media for very long in any economic change and you'll soon be convinced that the apocalypse is on your heels and the only thing to do is bury your head in the sand and wait for the inevitable . . . whatever it is.

Reality, however, is something different. Difficult, challenging times offer unique opportunities for smart salespeople to make more sales than they ever have before and to position themselves for extreme success when the cycles change. Selling when nobody is buying requires a different approach, not the one that your sales manager learned in 1974 or even the sales techniques you learned a year or two ago—it requires that you learn some new but very simple skills that will allow you to dominate the current marketplace, no matter what the condition. It also requires that you do even more of what you are doing well. The exciting part is that as the marketplace changes, you'll constantly be evolving on the front edge of the change, not in the back,

where all the competition is. Before I get further into that idea, let's take a look at business cycles.

Dr. Clement Jugular (1819–1905) was one of the first to develop the idea of a business cycle. His work led to many more advanced business and economic cycle discoveries and definitions. For salespeople, his initial business cycle description is probably the most useful in terms of thinking about selling. The four cycles according to Jugular are:

1. Expansion
2. Prosperity
3. Contraction
4. Recession

In the current economy (2009) we've seen wholesale devastation of the housing market, bailout of banks, economic stimulus packages that really did nothing, and businesses and jobs disappearing at record rates. I think most people would agree that we are in Stage 4, recession.

And that is the best time to sell.

In recessionary times, several things happen. Many people steer away from sales jobs, leaving the market ripe for the picking. Even more salespeople believe that no one is buying because the techniques they've always used aren't working, so they stick their heads in the sand and do nothing. Coincidentally, I believe it is precisely what salespeople do that kicks off Stage 1, expansion.

Entrepreneurs and entrepreneurial salespeople get hungry; they go out, they find and sell solutions, they create opportunities in the vacuums left by others' exits. They take massive, focused action. The result is nothing less than expansion in industries where these pockets of revolutionary thinking exist, where people like you create the future. They do whatever it takes to be successful. They ask their clients what they can do to help, and then they get busy doing it. The law of reciprocation

says that people are much more likely to give you something when you've given them something first.

There is a gap between recession and expansion that is ripe for focused salespeople to really make their mark, and here's why: After the expansion phase has kicked off and is about halfway through its cycle, everyone jumps on the bandwagon and tries to grab what would appear to be low-hanging fruit. Everyone loves to sell in the good times. They see opportunity everywhere because the economy is flourishing. But in the space covering recession and expansion is real opportunity for those salespeople who think better, work smarter, and try harder. Those salespeople create expansion and they reap the rewards. This book is all about how to leverage that time as well as how to position yourself to sell even more in the expansion and prosperity periods.

The great news about economic cycles is that the good times last a lot longer than the bad times. Since the great depression of the 1930s we've had a good number of setbacks in the economy, and we've consistently recovered faster from each successive one. Where recovery took almost a decade after the Great Depression, we've recovered from most recent economic slumps in a few years or less. The same is true of your industry, unless you are in an industry that is truly going away; the need for your product or service will return to the masses more quickly.

## **REALITY IS WHAT YOU FACE EVERY DAY**

I've noticed that no matter how good times are, there are a lot of salespeople who can't sell, and when times are hard there are a lot of salespeople who are getting rich. And as you've probably heard before, whether you think you can or think you can't, you are right. And boy, would it be nice if it were that easy.

For exceptional salespeople, reality is not simply looking at what is happening in the economy or in the market. Reality involves,

in fact, taking in everything that is happening in your industry, in your market, and in your company and developing a powerful plan for leveraging that material in your favor to help your prospects while getting what you need as well. The question that will arise is: "How do I do that?" And the answer is quite simple.

## **YOU DO WHATEVER IT TAKES**

As I travel around the world training salespeople, I get the same question over and over: "What can I do to sell more now?" And the answer I'll give you is never the answer they want to hear. The answer is, you do whatever it takes to meet your quota and to get the sale. Of course, that doesn't give you permission to be unethical or untruthful, but it does give you permission to start thinking differently. I also tell salespeople that they need to take the time to learn what is working now.

Doing whatever it takes means just that—it means you dig deeper, you look harder, and you build relationships deeper and deeper in the organization. And your sales manager got it right: You make the extra calls, you call those people who are on your inactive list, you call new prospects, you call people who were doing business with you and left, you call old prospects you didn't close business with. Too many salespeople leave money on the table because they don't go back and talk to people who've raised their hands and asked for information, even if they didn't move forward before. But that is only part of the equation. You've also got to become an aggressive prospector who develops phenomenal skill at getting the appointment. A mistake many sales professionals make is asking this question: "What can I sell to people who have money to buy today?" The question they should be asking is, "How do I find the people who have a need and a capacity for buying the product I have to sell?" The difference is that flitting around trying to match products or services to people with money is a losing game and you'll never come out on top.

When nobody is buying, it is time to do whatever it takes to find the people who are, to learn new influence strategies to sell to the ones who are on the fence. It means that you have to get more creative than ever with the budget you have to reach the clients you need. It means working harder, longer, and often without immediate financial reward in order to achieve great success. The payoff in the long run is that as the economy changes or as your industry changes, you'll be on the front end of profitability from all the hard work you did today.

## **FOCUS IS THE REAL KEY TO MORE SALES**

In an over-communicated, over-stimulated world, most people will tell you that they are able to effectively multitask and to focus. In reality, however, nothing is further from the truth. Study after study is beginning to emerge that demonstrates that the time lost in trying to focus when attempting to multitask is much greater than the time people believe multitasking saves.

I wrote a book called *The Power of an Hour* (Wiley, 2006) that looked at focus and how to apply it, across the board, to your life. I want to share a key concept from that book and I want you to apply it as you go through your day and even as you go through this book.

## **PRACTICE FEARSOME FOCUS USING THE 45/15 FORMULA**

*Fearsome focus*<sup>™</sup> is the single-minded ability to concentrate fully on the task at hand without allowing anything to impact your effort to perform that task. That means that you don't accept interruptions for any reason, that you don't do anything else, even for a second, while you are focused on the task. If you are calling prospects, no checking e-mail for even just a second, no looking something up on the Internet because it entered your mind, no idle chit-chat with people who just need

a “quick second.” Your focus is on calling prospects, connecting with prospects, and moving the sale forward—nothing else.

Fearsome focus works best for sales professionals who use the 45/15 formula. That means that you practice fearsome focus for 45 minutes, and then the bottom 15 minutes of the hour give you time to quickly check e-mail and voice-mail, do anything else you need, move around a little, and then get back to the next task.

For this process to work best, it is important that you condition the people around you to your new process and that you follow the process rigorously.

## **HOW TO CONDITION YOUR COLLEAGUES TO RESPECT YOUR FEARSOME FOCUS**

1. Tell people that you are implementing a new plan for increasing sales and it requires all your attention for brief periods of time throughout the day. When you ask not to be interrupted, tell them you'd like them to support your commitment to increasing sales by not interrupting you until 45 minutes past the hour (or whenever your 45 minutes will end).
2. When people interrupt you (and they will), gently but firmly tell them that you are absolutely unavailable now but that you'll connect with them at 45 minutes past the hour (or whenever your 45 minutes end). Honor your commitment and follow up with people who need it.
3. Be consistent about your application of the process; try to schedule similar activities for the same time every day.
4. Condition your colleagues to expect to hear back from you on urgent e-mails at the bottom 15 minutes of the hour and non-urgent e-mails by the end of the business day.
5. Schedule times to talk to colleagues rather than dropping in; respect their time and focus as you ask them to respect yours.



To be successful with this process, you need to be sure that before beginning a task you have all your tools together to complete the task you are focusing on. Getting up to get something you forgot is not being in fearsome focus. Fearsome focus works because you can start the task and accomplish a significant amount without having to distract yourself for 5 or 10 minutes as you go looking for what you need.

## SUGGESTED FEARSOME FOCUS ACTIVITIES

*Prospecting.* You should have at least one fearsome focus block per day focused only on prospecting. When I refer to *prospecting*, I mean making calls to set up appointments to talk, not to researching potential prospects; that should be done at a separate time.

*E-mail.* E-mail takes up a massive amount of time for most people during the day. My recommendation is that you become very aggressive about what e-mail you handle. If it doesn't require a response, don't send one. Set up a time at the end of the day and focus for 45 minutes on all your e-mail. You'll be shocked at how much more productive you become if you simply scan e-mail in your 15-minute downtimes and then move e-mails that need to be responded to into a Respond Tonight folder, then respond each evening. Client and prospect e-mails should always get a timely response if they need it when you are scanning, but if they don't require immediate response, they go to the Respond Tonight folder. I like doing this process in the evening rather than the middle of the day simply because there are e-mails that I don't want to leave hanging overnight.

*Planning for tomorrow.* Each day I suggest that you spend an hour in fearsome focus mode, planning your next day. That means getting your call list together so that you can get to work and immediately engage when you arrive at the office. Get any tools, information, or other material together the night before

as well. Condition yourself to profitable action each morning when you arrive at your office and you'll be more profitably productive throughout the day.

*Review.* At least once a week, create a time to review this book and pull out ideas that you can implement in the coming week or with specific prospects. Use that time to discover what you can do differently than you've always done.

*Schedule.* Create a fearsome focus time for anything that you need to get done quickly and efficiently. The extent to which you follow this plan is the extent to which you'll succeed faster.

In later chapters of the book I'll describe things you can do that will allow you to maximize your effectiveness and increase the amount of time available to you as well. But for now I want you to focus on one thing at a time. *Focus, accomplish, relax, focus.* That is your new mantra for the coming days. As you begin using the process, you'll see what a better implementer you are becoming.

## **GET HELP: YOU DON'T HAVE TO DO EVERYTHING YOURSELF**

*I can do it faster and better myself are the fatal last words of the overwhelmed who never achieve their potential*

— Dave Lakhani

In this chapter I talked about focus and how important it is. And focus will take you a very long way toward your goals. But as your focus increases, so does the need to get rid of low-value activities. Low-value activities are some of the biggest time wasters and distracters from your sales efforts. Here are some typical low-value activities:

- Scheduling personal appointments
- Excessive Internet research

- Data entry
- Quick follow-up calls that are not moving the sale forward
- Spending time on hold with customer service
- Scheduling travel
- Getting restaurant reservations
- Deleting spam from your e-mail
- Confirming, changing, or canceling appointments
- Filling out expense reports

The list could go on for pages. If you'll take a week and write down how much time you spend on unproductive activities, I think you'll be surprised. It isn't the hours that you give up that cost you profitable selling time; it is the little things that take "only" 10 minutes that you do dozens of times a week that kill your productivity.

## **PASS OFF WHAT YOU CAN TO SUPPORT STAFF YOU ALREADY HAVE**

Nearly every organization has a set of support staff that can help you with certain tasks. I want you to see how many tasks you can either give or give back to other staff in your office right now.

If you've been doing things that support staff would normally do, you may get some pushback on your requests. This is where most people give up and utter the fatal, "It will be easier and faster if I do it myself." Don't do it. Stay committed and stick with it. Every task that someone else can do brings you one step closer to your next sale. You are not giving up things only you can do; you are giving up things that are stealing your profitable selling time. Every hour you gain back is an hour you can spend prospecting, speaking with prospects, managing clients, or working on other high-value activities.

## **A RADICAL APPROACH TO TAKING BACK PRODUCTIVE TIME**

I want you to become aggressive about taking back your time. Every minute you spend doing things that are low-value uses of your time is time you could be spending making a sale.

I want you to hire a virtual assistant. For \$40 a month you can hire a personal assistant who will do basic simple tasks for you; for around \$250 a month you can hire an assistant for 20 hours. These assistants are highly skilled at taking care of the administrative and life tasks that you waste time on. You can even try them for free for a week, and I want you to commit to doing this by going to [www.asksunday.com](http://www.asksunday.com) and sign up for the free trial. Let them take care of several tasks for you this week and see how freeing it is. It costs you less than \$13 an hour to have someone who will more than likely help you regain well over 20 hours per month. If that seems like too much, share the assistant with an officemate, your spouse, or a friend. Virtually anyone can find \$125 a month to buy back time.

What could you do with an extra half a week a month? If you look at it as an eight-hour day, you are gaining nearly three full working days per month, or you are gaining three extra days with your family. You could nearly take off every Friday and still be as productive as you are today. Here are just a few of the things that your assistant can do for you:

- E-mail
- Update your customer relationship management (CRM) system
- Create spreadsheets
- Prospect research/other research
- Competitive data gathering
- Find requests for proposal (Raps)
- Get on the phone with customer service to solve issues for you

- Pay your bills
- Schedule your doctor, dental, vehicle, and other appointments
- Shop for presents for you
- Format documents, create PDF files
- Create process maps, flowcharts, and the like
- Proofread your documents and letters
- Do comparison shopping for you and give you the top three choices
- Upload content for your blog
- Maintain your Face book profile and respond to general requests
- Set up autopsy for all your bills
- Create your expense report

Again, the list of what an assistant can take off your plate goes on and on. If you'll spend only a little time thinking this through, you'll find many opportunities to take back your time.

When I was a VP of sales I found that one of the biggest causes of slumps was not the economy or industry upheavals; it was time spent on "busy work" and low-value activities. I also found that salespeople who had the highest job dissatisfaction were those who spent extra time at the office doing low-value work rather than spending that time with their families. When I did a time audit with them and pointed out the low-value activities that they could pass off to existing support staff, they were relieved. However, the big challenge was getting them to actually pass off those activities. They were so conditioned to believe that they can do these things better and faster that they wouldn't give them up. I suspect you'll initially have the same problem, too. The trick is to give up the things that you think matter least and to get the things done that you never quite get around to. In other words, give up things that don't really matter to you but that you do anyway, and get the nagging things done that you

never get to. There is a great sense of freedom in giving up on things that don't matter and completing tasks that are occupying mind space.

### **THERE IS NO WAY I CAN AFFORD THIS**

In the tiniest number of cases, it might actually be true that you can't afford what I'm suggesting, but rarely has anyone told me that they can't afford \$40 a month for the most basic service or that it didn't save them tremendous time.

If you really can't afford it for whatever reason, consider getting an intern. Put together an outline of your requirements and take it to your local college to find out what it takes to get an intern at your company. Interns get valuable work experience and credit they need to graduate, and you get the assistance you need.

Also check at local job-retraining facilities. You can often find people who need to get practical experience in a new field (you'll often find people learning office skills to reenter the workplace). Again, give them what they need and get what you need.

Finding the help you need to regain the time you are currently giving up is not that hard; you just need to be creative.

One of the biggest reasons you are less productive when you are doing all these small tasks is not just the time you lose—it is the amount of mental energy you are expending thinking about them. The stress and pressure of trying to get something done quickly with other deadlines looming doesn't make you more effective, it makes you less effective at both things, and each ends up taking longer.

### **GET AGILE TO GET PROFITABLE**

When nobody is buying, it is time for you to analyze the problem, get focused, and take action. The faster, more specific action you take, the more successful you'll be. In war, guerrillas often

win battles because they are small, agile teams that are organized to get in and have great impact. They succeed where traditional troops don't because they are able to organize quickly, implement quickly, and move to the next target quickly. I want you to adopt that thinking. You are more powerful and more profitable because you can organize, act, implement, and profit more quickly than those around you. It doesn't matter if you are competing for the business against your biggest competitor or a fellow salesperson in your organization. The game goes to the one most focused and fastest to implement.

As you get ready to go to the next chapter, I want you to think fast, be agile, and discover what you can do differently *right now* to leap past your competition. Let's go!

