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Sales Negotiation as a Discipline

It was a dark night. No stars. Black. Cold. Snow was falling. The only connection we had to the gunman inside the small mobile home was a cell phone. He was holding three hostages and threatening to kill them all.

Earlier in the day he'd lost his temper, and in a fit of rage, shot his wife. As the police arrived, responding to the 911 call, he'd taken her parents and his stepdaughter hostage.

It was another sad case of domestic violence. Every attempt to negotiate a peaceful solution had been stonewalled.

By the time I arrived, things were getting desperate. The gunman had become extremely agitated and fired several rounds at the SWAT team crouched in the snowy woods. He was surrounded with nowhere to go. A violent man with nothing to lose.

Somehow, I had to convince him to back down and let the hostages go. It was a negotiation situation I'd found myself in many times before...

Reality Check

OK, stop! This story is total BS. I'm a sales professional, not a hostage negotiator. No one in their right mind would allow me to get near a situation like this. Don't get me wrong. I negotiate almost every day for a living. But not like this. In the sales profession, it's never life or death (though at times it can feel that way).

Yet this is exactly how so many books on negotiation begin. Their tense narratives include epic boardroom negotiations, dealing with terrorists, negotiating hostage situations, pulling off game-changing mergers, settling massive lawsuits, or mediating international diplomatic crises. Typically, the book's author, portrayed as the hero, pulls off the impossible in the negotiation.

These stories, with all of their drama and tension, make for compelling reading. It's the art of the deal. We love to envision ourselves in those same situations, coolly exerting influence, persuasion, and clever language to turn the tables in our favor and save the day.

But no matter how romantic and compelling the stories, they have absolutely nothing to do with reality in the sales profession. The stories, examples, and techniques discussed in such books are generally focused on:

- Complex, high-stakes negotiations in which each party has many alternatives to a negotiated deal and power plays are the name of the game
- Life or death situations, where neither party can afford to walk away
- Law enforcement and military operations with dire consequences if the negotiation fails

- Governmental, diplomatic, and international relations with the fate of entire countries on the line
- Business mergers and real estate deals
- Legal settlements, including trademarks, intellectual property, and class-action lawsuits
- Resolving conflicts and disagreements, including domestic disputes, personal and business relationship issues, or contract disputes
- Career advancement and salary negotiation
- How to negotiate when *you* are the buyer

There is a massive amount of printed work available on personal, business, diplomatic, legal, and law enforcement negotiation. Some of these books are classics. Many are best sellers. The lessons in these books (and accompanying training programs) are useful.

Except for one problem. These books and training programs fail to address the unique and rapid-fire negotiations that 99% of sales professionals find themselves in each sales day.

Sales Trainers Don't Teach Sales Negotiation

There are few true sales-specific resources on negotiation. A large part of the reason is the false (and perhaps arrogant) belief that sales negotiation is equivalent to all other types of negotiation. That is, the skills, tactics, techniques, patterns, and situations are the same. Sales negotiation, therefore, is lumped in with diplomatic negotiation and attorneys hashing out a class-action lawsuit settlement. But they're not the same.

In addition, there are few true experts and authors who choose to write sales-specific negotiation books. Patrick Tinney's classic *Unlocking Yes: Sales Negotiation Tactics & Strategy* is among the very few exceptions.

Frankly, many sales experts and sales trainers shy away from the subject because they are emotionally uncomfortable with negotiation and find the subject unpalatable. Since many of these

same trainers are also poor sales negotiators, salespeople are more likely to encounter contrived BS than training that truly addresses the challenges that they actually face at the sales negotiation table.

Sales Negotiation Is Boring

Adding to all of this is the truth that sales negotiation is boring. There is way more drama when the legal teams from Apple and Qualcomm sit down to work out patent and royalty disputes, or when Chinese and American diplomats negotiate a trade deal. Those negotiations make the front page of the *Wall Street Journal*.

But when...

Maria, an account executive with a SaaS company in San Francisco, is negotiating the per-seat cost of her software with a mid-market company from Waco, Texas;

Joey is working out a deal on a new combine with a farmer in central Pennsylvania;

Jessica is negotiating a lease for 22 commercial trucks with a CEO of a small logistics company located in Des Moines;

Praveen is negotiating an office furniture contract with a large enterprise in New Delhi;

Kendra is negotiating a long-term facility services agreement with a hospital in Singapore;

Colton is negotiating a three-year agreement to put 32 people in rental uniforms at a manufacturing plant in Grand Rapids; or

Robin on my sales team is working out an agreement to train new hires for a payroll processing firm in Dallas

... nobody cares.

Except, of course, for the sales professionals whose compensation depends on the outcome of the negotiations and the companies that depend on those same salespeople to protect their profits.

Millions of sales negotiations take place daily across the globe. Few, if any, ever make the front pages.

Yes, there are exceptions. Certainly, some global account managers are negotiating contract renewals that have far-reaching impact on the enterprise. There are start-ups working on big opportunities that, if won, can generate a flood of venture capital investments. In the overall scheme of things, though, these situations are rare compared to the routine sales negotiations that dominate our profession.

Yet, in these routine and mundane sales negotiations, billions of dollars, rupees, euros, pounds, pesos, yuan, or yen (among other currencies) change hands. The cumulative effect of these mundane sales negotiations directly impacts the profitability, market valuation, customer retention, and long-term viability of the enterprises on whose behalf sales professionals are negotiating.

Author's Note

I use a variety of terms in this book to describe people, companies, and situations.

- **Negotiation Table:** This is the figurative platform for a sales negotiation that may include a physical meeting, telephone or video conversation, email, or text messaging.
- **Stakeholder:** This is an individual person at a prospective or current customer with whom you interact. The stakeholder may play any variety of buying, influence, or negotiation roles.
- **Stakeholder Group:** The array of stakeholders in a deal who are responsible for selecting the vendor of choice.
- **Buyer:** The stakeholder at the table who leads the sales negotiation.
- **Prospect, Account, or Customer:** These terms refer to the enterprise, company, or organization to which the stakeholders belong.

I regularly change terms up to avoid repeating myself and boring my readers. Also note that though many of my examples describe negotiating with new prospects, the techniques described in this book are just as applicable for negotiating with existing accounts.