

Strategy 2

The Positive Power of Negative Preparation

I've been involved in what I've labeled "the success education business" since 1976. Since 1978, I've been an active member of the National Speakers Association—fraternizing and consulting with hundreds of people who earn their livings as professional lecturers and seminar leaders, including some whose names you know. During that time, I've spoken to nearly 6,000,000 people from the platform, maybe more, about success-oriented topics. I've delivered as many as 100 speaking presentations a year for major corporations and associations and at large public events; only in the past couple of years have I deliberately cut back that pace.

I have frequently been mislabeled and misintroduced as a “motivational speaker” from the platform, in meetings, at cocktail parties. As a result, I’ve had more conversations than I care to count with my students, clients, customers, peers, and friends about “positive thinking.” Through it all, I’ve come to the conclusion that at least 95% of the people who think they’re positive thinkers actually have no idea what positive thinking is really all about.

Too many people think it’s some kind of mystical, magical shield from the real world. They believe that if they just think positive, bad things cannot happen to them. If something bad happens to somebody, they say: “See, you weren’t thinking positively.” But it just doesn’t work that way. You can think positively until you are turning blue from the effort, but you’ll still run into obstacles from time to time. People who believe that positive thinking is supposed to keep the bogeyman away eventually wind up frustrated, discouraged critics of positive thinking.

Being a positive thinker does not mean that you should refuse to acknowledge the way things are. In fact, people succeed in business, sales, and marketing by dealing with “what is” not with “what ought to be.” The true positive thinker acknowledges potential and existing negative circumstances and reactions, and engineers a plan to overcome them to achieve positive results. In selling or negotiating, I call this the *positive power of negative preparation*.

How General Patton Used the Positive Power of Negative Preparation

There’s a great sequence in the movie Patton where General Patton is dozing the night before a battle. He has Field Marshal

Rommel's book on tactics in his lap. The next day, Patton's troops drive Rommel's troops off the battlefield into retreat. As the gunfire and other noise ends, Patton is standing alone, leaning forward, stage whispering across the battlefield:

"Rommel—I read your book."

Some people would say that acknowledging Rommel's expertise as a tactician and preparing to counter any possible successful moves was being negative. They're wrong. It was positively brilliant.

In several of the most successful, profitable, complex negotiations I've been involved in—buying and selling businesses; assembling capital; developing relationships with celebrities, manufacturers, and producers in the TV infomercial business—I've prepared by anticipating and writing down every possible question, concern, and objection the other party could raise, and then formulating my responses in advance. I carefully analyzed every weakness in my position that might be attacked and thought of ways to respond effectively. I thought of every possible thing that could screw up the deal and then thought of some preventive measure to take in each case. I was thoroughly prepared, from a negative perspective.

In 1999, I sold one of my companies—that entire process, from first approaching my chosen buyer to cashing the check, took only six days. In 2003, I sold another of my businesses, in less than 20 days. These are typically complex sales situations fraught with peril, from deal-killing lawyers to hidden agendas to misunderstandings, and on and on. The speed with which I completed these sales is testament in large part to careful negative preparation.

Who Else Uses the Positive Power of Negative Preparation?

I'm a bit of a sports freak, and as a speaker, I've had the terrific opportunity of spending time backstage in "the green room" with champion athletes like Troy Aikman, Joe Montana, George Foreman, Mary Lou Retton, and with top coaches including Lou Holtz, Jimmy Johnson, and the late Tom Landry. My friends in the world of sports have included Brendan Suhr, who has been an assistant head coach of three NBA teams; and Bill Foster, former head basketball coach at Northwestern University and one of the "winningest" coaches in college basketball.

I have talked about this subject with all of them and found consensus. These champions have super-strength positive attitudes, but they also wisely use the positive power of negative preparation.

Most successful coaches go into each game with more than one prepared game plan. They have a plan to follow if their team gets ahead early in the game. They have a different plan to follow if their team falls behind. They have alternate plans ready to use different combinations of players in case one key player is injured during the game. That's not negative thinking; that's the positive power of negative preparation at work.

I've done a lot of work in planning, scripting, and implementing group sales presentations and training others to do the same. What I call "group presentation marketing" applies to everything from a Tupperware party to a seminar designed to sell \$50,000.00 real estate partnerships. There are a lot of special techniques for this type of marketing, but one of the most important is the anticipation and removal of the reasons for refusal or procrastination on the audience's part. Sometimes this is done

with subtlety, weaving the objections and responses into the presentation. Other times it's done quite openly. One very successful presentation I designed ended with the presenter listing on the flip-chart the four main reasons why people don't join—and then answering every one of them. But in every case, every possible problem was thought out in advance and countered somehow during the presentation.

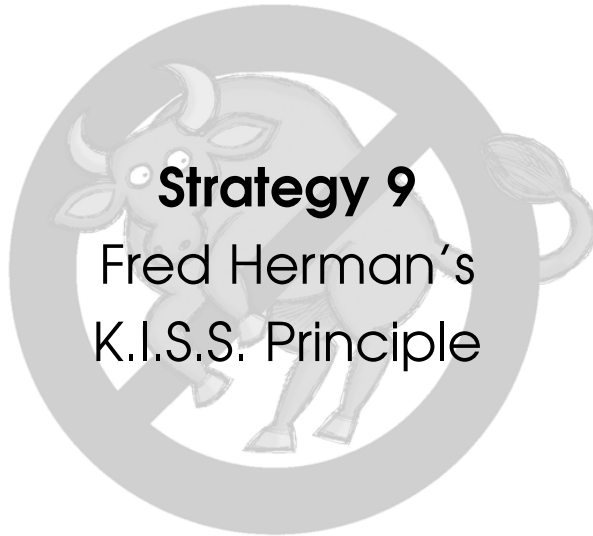
You also have to do this when you are selling in print. I am paid from a \$15,000.00 to \$70,000.00 plus royalties as a direct-response copywriter to write full-page newspaper and magazine ads, sales letters, infomercials, and other marketing documents. More than 85% of all clients who use me once do so repeatedly—in spite of my high fees. Why? One reason is my very thorough negative preparation. When I'm creating an advertisement, brochure, or direct-mail piece, I make a list of every reason I can think of why the reader would not respond to the offer. I use that list of "negatives" as a guide in writing the copy. And the other top direct-response copywriters I know, like my friend John Carlton, also carefully consider these potential obstacles to the sale when crafting a message. This approach produces some of the most powerful selling techniques in print in the world.

If this strategy is important to us, the people behind the scenes who get paid as much to write one sales letter as many professionals earn in six months, then it is important to you, too!

Six Steps for Using the Positive Power of Negative Preparation

1. Forget preconceived labels of "positive" or "negative."
2. Make a list of every question, concern, or objection that the other person could possibly come up with.

3. Make a list of everything that could go wrong.
4. Develop positive responses to all the negatives you've thought of.
5. Have your information, ideas, and documentation well organized so you can lay your hands on the appropriate notes and materials at a moment's notice.
6. Take great confidence from your thorough preparation.



Earl Nightingale once called the late Fred Herman “America’s greatest sales trainer.” It’s a title I think he deserved. To my knowledge, Fred is the only salesman ever to appear as a guest on *The Tonight Show* with Johnny Carson. (Carson said, “OK, since you’re the greatest salesman, sell me this ashtray.” Fred picked it up, examined it, and asked, “If you were going to buy this ashtray, what would you expect to pay for it?” Carson named a price. Fred said, “Sold!”)

I discovered Fred Herman’s work after I already had years of experience in selling; I wish I had found it when I started. Fred is probably most famous for coining the KISS Principle for Selling:

Keep It Simple, Salesman! This is an immensely valuable lesson that I learned the hard way.

In my first sales position, with the publishing company I described earlier in this book, one of the spots where I was most effective was opening new accounts where we could place the entire six-foot-tall spinner rack. The standard procedure prescribed by the company was to review the catalog of books with the buyers so they could choose the titles to be displayed in the rack. As the rack held only about one-third of all the available titles, this selection process was a time-consuming chore. The customer and I had to discuss just about every title. Inevitably, he wanted more variety than the rack could accommodate. I found it took almost two hours, on average, to place a new rack.

Then I realized that almost 90% of the racks I placed carried the same titles. So I reasoned that I knew better than the customers which titles would sell best and that I was wasting their time and mine discussing products that would not be on the rack. From this realization, I created a “standard rack assortment,” which I copied and used every time I sold a new customer a rack. All the customer had to do was initial the precompleted form, and I was on my way. Average time savings: 90 minutes per new rack placement!

How come nobody else in the company had thought of this?

People have an incredible tendency to complicate their lives. I’m not sure why that happens, but I know that it happens. I even have a name for it: complexity creep. Complexity just creeps up on you when you’re not looking. And, unnecessary complexity creates a whole host of problems. It wastes time, it drains your energy and enthusiasm and it often confuses the customer. And confused customers do not buy!

You Can Get Rich Making the Complicated Simple

I recently saw an interesting advertisement placed by a copywriter looking for work. He billed himself as a “professional explainer” who specialized in “making complicated things simple and easy to understand.” That’s exactly what you need to do in your efforts to persuade others. (Too bad there’s nobody who’ll do that for me with assembly directions for things I buy or for my damned computer.)

Not long ago, I was wrestling with a direct-mail project involving the sale of a rather complicated financial product to essentially unsophisticated investors. Two consecutive test mailings failed miserably. I thought they were well-written, clear, and exciting. I thought they offered a great deal to the customer. I thought everything was right. Just one small problem: they didn’t work. I read through them a hundred times and still found no clue to the problem. One evening, I got the idea to add a little diagram at the end of the literature that showed—in cartoon form—the gist of the product. The addition of this little drawing, which showed visually what was said in the copy, made the piece a huge success. The mailing with the drawing got phenomenally good results. That one little drawing made the complicated simple and understandable.

P.T. Barnum once said, “No man ever went broke overestimating the ignorance of the American public.” Maybe that judgment of the American consumer is a little harsh, but it does introduce a major mistake made by the majority of sales and marketing people over and over again: overestimating the sophistication of their customers.

It’s natural for you to insist that the people you deal with are smarter than everybody else’s customers. That reflects well on

you, doesn't it? It's good for your ego to think that you're dealing with a "better class" of people. It may be good for the ego, but it's bad for the bank account! Here is the best way to succeed in advertising, selling, marketing, or persuading others (regardless of who they are or how smart and sophisticated you believe they are): present *everything* in the simplest possible language and in the simplest possible form.

Close the Doors on the Sales Prevention Department

A lot of companies have a more active Sales Prevention Department than they do a sales operation—overrun with sales-killing policies, rules, laws, forms. Often this happens if the lawyers and bean-counters gain excess power back at the home office. I do not envy those of you working for the worst of these. My first and only sales job mentioned earlier in this chapter was with a company who had such a department, but even more so, had management focused on everything but the ease and simplicity with which an account could be opened and a new customer brought into the fold. I was able to circumvent the home office and invent my own streamlined, simplified sales process. Maybe you can too. But if you must try dragging the powers-that-be above you out of the sales prevention mode, here's a story that may help you sell your ideas. Feel free to use it as your own.

I sometimes eat breakfast at a little, neighborhood, mom-and-pop coffee shop near my home. There on the counter next to the cash register sit three different receptacles for charitable donations of coins—one for Kiwanis, one for some organization for the blind, one for disabled veterans. One morning, as I

dropped my change into one of the receptacles, it registered with me that I always plunked my change into the same one. Why? I stood there for a few minutes, pondering my own behavior.

Then it hit me. The reason I *always* put my change into the disabled veterans jar was

- NOT because I had any preference for that charity over the others
- NOT because of any reasoned decision to support it instead of the others
- NOT because of the graphic design or appearance of the different containers
- NOT because of any sales copy on the containers
- NOT because of their arrangement on the counter.
- NOT for any thoughtful or logical or admirable reason

The reason, and the only reason, I put all my change into only one of these charity jars, each and every time, is because *the hole in the top of my favored jar is bigger than the holes in the lids on the other two jars.*