



Strategy 9

Fred Herman's K.I.S.S. Principle

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.*