

# The introverted rep.

Delivery without **Hooha**.

Sales disciplines & business development practices  
of the listeners.

Troy Forrest



## The farmgate.

They're waiting for me to tell them what's in my secret sauce.

"Nothing different to the past 3 months. Two big ones finally came through - they were always 'when' rather than 'if' - just had to go through the process. Patience and persistence. And I'm a really nice guy." Three months ago, when the number was rubbish, the looks on these same faces said *why are we paying you again?* Fickle beast, selling. The coalface is for hard miners.

I'm sitting with our sales, leadership and op's team in the monthly meeting. The new sales manager's putting our monthly figures up and asking the why, how and what's next questions. I don't love the forensic analysis carried out as a group, but know it's useful. I do look forward to the meetings though. Bit of bonding time, sharing, learning a little, show off my numbers when they're good, maybe even get a little pride poke when they're not. Guilt works for me. I think of these get-togethers as a kind of 'leaning over the farmgate', swapping snake stories and rain predictions with the neighbours. They're good - I just come out of them exhausted.

I'm an introvert in a team of blatherers.

"J., that's fantastic - what a platform to build more business with the commercial builders! Who's the next key target?" The new guy can be a bit blowhard, but he's alright. I just have to keep him at arm's length.

The crowd I sell for is called Ctenotus Technology (after the sun-loving skink lizard). We make & sell some funky solar products - sun-cooled postage & parcel storage systems. Simple but clever receptacles - shipping crates to mail boxes - that use the magic of evaporation to keep contents cool and safe. My line is called "The Nest", a unit that stores home deliveries - groceries, wine, you name it. Everyone shops on the net now. Ours is a space flirting with explosion.

"Well, you can see on the forecast & activity map...", turning the groups eyes to the board. "I've started talks with Moby Constructions and they're excited about The Nest as a saleable point of difference in the competitive new housing estates. Couple of the retirement villages up there you can see, we're talking to them about the benefits of home deliveries to their decreasingly mobile residents, and... can you scroll down Mike? Ta - the wine delivery companies, I've pitched that it's a great freebie to accompany their minimum-buy fixed-term contracts. Australia Post... we'll talk about later."

The bit I love most about my job is translating the upsides of a fixed product line into an aroma that appeals to the unique noses of some very different clients.

Everyone on my radar has a need for what I sell.

I just help enough of them smell the notes that arouse.

## Unpacking in the car.

The new guy's got me thinking. How can I make better use of the early adopters of The Nest? We've solicited testimonials and got their words in marketing materials... but what else?

Heading out after the sales meeting. Got an appointment in an hour. I like, no, need that time to set the ideas and learnings and actions to come from the session. Driving through easy post-lunch traffic. I do better alone. Make better decisions. I need the group input. But I decide best in the quiet with my thoughts speaking softly to each other. Much to my impatient colleagues chagrin, so do a lot of our customers. Gotta factor that into managing sales expectations.

Maybe longitudinal testimonials? Pre-purchase - where they cover off their buying rationale - then early post-purchase, when they're on a new-owners high and it's all strawberries and pav, and then maybe after a few months... that could appeal to the carefals.

The phone rings. Blocked number. Go to message bank, anonymous one. Maybe a recruiter. Certainly someone who's happy & used to playing phone tag. Will check it after pre-call planning this next catchup.

Maybe I have a chat to some of the nouveau home delivery crowds, talk to them about making a real song and dance of this first customer cohort. Team up & do something to wow them, catalyse word of mouth. I'll diarise a half hour to make phone calls tomorrow morning, book some coffees.

First customers are so important. I've found they don't always turn out to be the biggest, or longest-serving. But they start things. Momentum. Improvements. Confidence. They're the blue fairy that makes Pinocchio a real boy.

The phone rings again. The boss. Just spent half a day with him and he wants more time. He can wait too. I've got to get my thinking right for this call.

Aloud to myself. "Rick, what do you think your residents' internet shopping habits will do in the coming few years?"

## Fruit picking.

Old mate's a talker. A real talker. There goes my pre-call-planned questions, right out the window. He's oh-ing and ah-ing and selling and arm-waving as he describes the flash new retirement living community he manages. Stories about Harry who's just moved into Unit 12, a "Banksia" style 2-bedroomer, and how Harry's an ex-copper who's a gun bridge player and is setting up a competition in the community centre. About Marlene and Francis, an 'alternative lifestyle' couple who love the gums and walking trails. About his staff, how they're all such advocates of this unique little slice of terroir, they go home and actively sell their neighbours on moving in ("they hand out our branded pens like there's no tomorrow!")

I'm not 100% sure yet how I'm going to switch gears to sell him Nests without creating an awkward stilted moment.

"... our residents love the freedom to come and go as they please, but they also like to know that as they get less mobile, there's comfort and convenience right here..."

Ah, the door crack.

"I can imagine it's really important to offer your residents peace-of-mind that they don't need to venture into town each day if they can't or don't want to. Can I ask, do many of them get home deliveries of groceries, or buy much on the internet?"

"Well, that's interesting! You see, a few years ago, I'd have said our residents weren't so tech-savvy, but you know, with the explosion of technology....."

And away we go.

I can see this account being 'deciduous'. Sporadic bursts of sales when there's a new stage development or another village opens up. A gross purchase of Nests, a mass fruit pick, followed by dormant periods where I just keep in touch and updating and asking about the experience. I've learnt to actively try and balance my sales revenue between deciduous and evergreen accounts. Councils, government, big builders, they're evergreen. Fewer big purchases, but consistent - cash-flow. Spread their mess and problems and buying evenly.

"... I saw your email brochure about The Nest. I'm interested to know how it works - how can making the box hot cool down - and securely store - any manner of parcels?"

Low hanging fruit that's sweet and soft on the tooth.

"It's a really good question. Let me show you..."

## Filling in your paint-by-numbers.

"... so the advantage for people like Harry, who you said lives by himself, is that he doesn't have to sit at home alone waiting for a delivery all day, or deal with the annoying little slip that says "sorry we missed you". The one-way valve lets parcel deliverers carefully and securely leave the package and Harry can use his key to open The Nest's door when he gets home."

The village manager's standing with me at the open boot of my station wagon. He's pushing his hands through the aluminium quad-cuspid valve that makes our parcel storage receptacle cleverly secure. It was roughly modelled on a heart valve. Biology - the ultimate innovation feedlot.

"That's really clever, isn't it?" Stewing on the applications.

"For your Marlene and Francis's - the more active or social residents who might like deliveries like wine or even just milk and bread - the simple evaporative cooling system means their perishables aren't left in the sun. It means reducing the likelihood of spoilage, and their goods can't be pinched. No-one likes losing property, and I imagine when you're living on a fixed retirement income..." I let him finish the sentence in his head.

The benefit of listening to talkers is they sketch the paint-by-numbers diagram that an attentive seller can fill in with a paint mix of 'your words' and 'my solutions'.

"It's so clever, and simple! No power required, just occasionally topping up the water..."

"Even that can done away with - we connect them to your rainwater tanks, which you described all your units have. So for your less mobile or, uhhhh, memory-challenged residents, it's completely maintenance-free."

"OK, the million dollar question then... how much are they?"

We talk broadly about the options. There's no dramatised wincing when a number pops up.

"OK.... phhhh..... I mean, this kind of thing will go through head office... I can see for future villages where we can build it into the price.... but what about existing residents? They're not made of money, is there anything we can do for them?"

My pre-call plan comes back into the game. "Ideas to inspire a coal-face client champion to sell up their food chain." I smile and nod and pull out my pen to play with some win-win-win ideas with him.

## Co-travelling.

I call the new sales manager back. Message bank. I hang up. My phone rings 30 seconds later. Keen to talk, then.

"Hey J., really good work at the meeting this morning. I'm excited about what this team can do. We've got to keep focused, we've got an amazing opportunity here and a window of time." He's in that "first 90 days" mode that new and newly schooled managers go through, where their fervour treads the line between inspiring and stinky desperation. I'm not a lover of the cheer squad stuff, but I get it.

"Cheers. Agreed. What can I do for you Mike?" I'm busy. Another presentation to pre-call plan and I need to start the next-steps process for the retirement living opportunity, now that I've got a bullish internal champion who'll cool down if I leave it too long.

"We didn't book a date for me to come ride with you for the day. Have you got your diary handy?"

In my sales career I've had the gamut of bosses, from the religiously must-clock-my-cotravelling-days-up KPI followers (who didn't care what sort of days they booked in for) to the office dwellers who wouldn't know how to get to my territory, let alone know what any of my customers looked like. Personally, I prefer the latter. But I'm up for using them strategically. Regardless, he's got the comm, so I grab my diary.

"Mike, I've got a couple of 2nd and 3rd conversations with some bigger opportunities next Wednesday - I think you could add some real value to those conversations."

"Nah, next Wednesday's out. How about I come out with you tomorrow?"

That bothers me for a raft of reasons. That he doesn't have a plan of his own for how he'll spend a day less than 24 hours from now is kind of up the top.

"I've got 2 proposals to put together tomorrow and 3 first meetings. I'll be frank, it's not the best day or use of your time."

"I'd like to see how you handle first appointments."

My Achilles heel is impatience with dumb agendas.

"I'll happily role play them for you in the office. But in my experience, prospective customers don't like being double teamed on the first visit. We look like desperate Mormons. Next Friday, there's a couple of meetings you'd get value from...."

The pushback pays this time, but I can see I'm going to battle with this. Breathe deep. He's here to help J. Find a prospect, a prepped one, you think this'd be OK with, and book it proactively. Control the situation.

## One yes, five anti-no's.

When the guys designed The Nest, they consulted the sales team. Now our sales guys aren't all rocket scientists, but it was a pretty smart thing to do. Here's why.

Proud Product Creator to Imaginary Customer - "Here's my fantastically clever new home parcel storage system that keeps your home-delivered purchases cool and secure with our fantastically clever dual-layer evaporative cooling system and one-way valve opening. Neat, huh?"

Said Imaginary Customer - "But... you said it needs water. So how do I keep it filled with water... and keep remembering to?"

PPC - "Uhh, well, you..."

IC - "And what's to stop someone picking the thing up and walking away with it, contents and all?"

PPC - "Yes, well, you could..."

IC - "And is it environmentally friendly? And will it fit in the space where my letterbox is? And what do I do with my old letterbox? And will it match my drapes? And does it come in different sizes. And how much does it cost? And what happens when there's already one parcel inside? And how will I know there's a parcel inside? And how will it save me money? And...."

The one thing our sales team can do well (well, not the one thing, that's harsh... something they do *particularly* well) is anticipate the scared-to-spend questions they'll be asked by clients. Because they've heard them in different incarnations before. Daily.

It was sales team feedback that led to The Nest evolving from an unsexy all-aluminium box to a flexible product line whose outer sheaths come in Melaleuca brush (very Adelaide), recycled plastic, artistic scrap metal designs, rendered or decking timber. Their stating-the-seemingly-obvious alerted the introspective designers to the need to incorporate a simple ground-securing mechanism. Their natural Devil's Advocate postures forced the engineers to rethink how the insulation layer of sand or straw stayed wet on hot days, and how you'd know when to top it up (or even automate it).

The one thing our sales team know is it's not enough to have one really good reason for a customer to say yes. That gets you to the dance, but no kisses.

Coal-face archers discover they need a quiver full of anti-no reasons to talk nervous purchasers away from the ledge. To defuse the fear, blow the distracting worry fog away and let the potential beneficiary of our kit see the one big shiny yes reason with crystal clarity.

Five anti-no's is the team that works to get the one big yes to home base.

## Passing on details.

I pull the wagon into the car park out front of the building company headquarters. One of their new home designers, Sally, who loves The Nest and our service, arranged for her new boss to give me a call and tee up this chat. She's just moved over from a competitor, who I signed up 6-months ago and who now offer Nests as standard kit in all their new home developments.

Kevin. Straight-down-the-line. Will try to screw me on price and will want demo showroom stock. But actively sells fancy options like The Nest to every new home buyer 'cause it makes him money. And barracks for Collingwood. I flick through the notes Sally's set me up with and double-check my pre-call plan.

These I-told-a-friend-about-you referral meetings go so much better than those where a happy client passes the name of their friend on to me and suggests I call them. Maybe it's just introverted me - I strangely seem to have less success with prospects that I've contacted on the recommendation of a happy client than I do with an unreferral suspect.

Inside. Before I can get the words out, the sun-ripened builder running through some instructions with the front desk receptionist looks up, eyeballs me and says "Ah good, J. I recognise you from your LinkedIn picture. Come through - Sally's here too, I'll get her."

I get more nervous contacting a friend of a client - there's so much on the line, and I know I'm eating into the client's friendship credit until such time as I can demonstrate proportionately more value than the risk they've underwritten. It's like, when a client tells me the name of their friend, they've chosen to be on *my* team rather than their friends. And I think their friends think that. But when they tell their friend about *me* and that they'd do worse than getting in touch, well, I lose control of the process (and there's a pretty high no-call attrition rate that I'll never be able to measure), but virtually every one that does get in touch ends up delighted and spending.

Kevin leads me to a back office. I spy Sally who glances up from a pow-wow and mouths a silent smiling hi. She's played this one beautifully. We'll all come out looking clever here. I owe her my best efforts.

I want happy clients to be on their friend's team. If you like what I've done for you, tell a friend. If that results in people calling me, it's triple wins. But don't ask me to call a friend, particularly an unprepped one, no matter how much you think they need what we offer. I know you think you're doing us all a favour, but in my experience, it usually only scares them, makes them feel double-teamed, and you give me a hill to climb just to get them close to trusting us both.

"So, Nests, huh?" says the builder, readying his easily-crossable barricades.



## 2-stroke.

When it comes to networking, I feel a bit like your old Victa 2-stroke lawnmower. Solid, but takes an age to start, to get myself in the headspace to want to do it, to make the first move and begin the first conversation, often with another wallflower. I've learnt - forced myself - to be more active at it. But the choke's still on for us introverts until the conversation's flowing and the magnet starts working.

I prefer narrow and deep networking. These out-there teflon butterflies that go for broad & shallow, lots of starts and card swaps, well, you're kept busy, but does much actually go anywhere? And I don't like meeting people that way - feels so contrived. If I have 2, maybe 3 really good conversations at a schmoozefests, and I put some diligence into the follow-up with added value afterwards... I can tolerate it, and for me at least, it's more sustainable.

There's a woman standing off to one side of the industry cocktail swarm. Holding her flute of bubbles and smiling, looking, trying to make eye contact but not really. I walk over and catch her eye.

"Hi, I'm J."

"Hello, I'm Linda. Nice to meet you."

"You too. A busy event! Have you been to one of these before Linda?"

And we do the little networking icebreaker conversation dance. Op's manager for one of the Councils. First time at this event, boss recommended attending. No real goal for being there other than to find out who's who in the zoo. She asks my story.

"I work for a business called Ctenotus. Among other things, we make solar-cooled parcel storage systems - modern mailboxes - for homes, businesses, commercial applications. I look after our residential product called The Nest - have you heard of it?" Get her back in the conversation. Elevator pitches are overrated. As I read somewhere recently, no-one ever sold in an elevator.

"I have, as a matter of fact." It turns into a good Q&A feedback session, and uncovers a potential longer-term opportunity with the Council. I commit to the let's-book-a-meeting follow-up call tomorrow, and then move the conversation along to more general industry discussion. I want to learn more about her world and perspectives. The selling can happen later.

The crowd buzzes. The 4-strokers move deftly. The old Victa's take the walls in pairs and go deep.

## Choosing.

My morning discipline went to pieces today. I overslept after the networking function kicked on later than hoped, a sick bub awoke in tears at 3am and the poxy alarm never chirped. Missed the early run I'd intended, not to mention the day's planning, now the mad dash across town to drop the feverish cherub at Grandma's. And now I'm at the office and it's 8:22 and the first of 3 meetings is in an hour and I've got some choices to make. Because the to-do list in its entirety simply won't get finished. I can't slow the clock. I've got to play to it smartly.

Rush through the 3 meetings? Which one's most important? Solid Prospect A, happy existing customer B, internal VIP C. Before bumping or reframing, I consider the other highlights of the to-do cascade.

3 proposals.

5 follow-ups (including yesterday's meetings and last night's networking cocktail).

Expenses.

A staff feedback survey due tomorrow.

Research for the suspect meetings I've proposed for next Monday.

The PowerPoint presentation for next Thursday.

The team huddle today.

A supplier in town wanting a coffee (man, I hate it, but it's the first to get bumped).

The marketing materials mailers I was doing (an easier bump).

They're all important. I can't do them all today.

Deep breath. What's your #1 goal here?

Obliterate my number.

(Why?)

Because I said I would. Because it's my job. Because if I don't, we don't have a business. Because Maslow will give me 5 hierarchy stars. Because Ziglar said "*If you aim at nothing, you'll hit it everytime*". Because sales begets more sales. Because it helps customers. Because (alright, I've sold myself again on my goal)...

The external meetings are fixed and cancelling them will do the most damage to short & long term opportunities. The internal meeting is important, but moveable. So move it. The follow-ups come before proposals because they're quick and they're super-time-sensitive. The proposals have another 48 hour shelf life, so tomorrow's diary gets prioritised around them. I can get one started today - 20 minutes locked in. Expenses - I know, I know... the wee small hours of the am in 2 days, I'm afraid. Feedback? I'll pick the eyes out of it in 5 minutes at lunch. Got 2 days to do my research, in the diary. Same with the preso.

The team huddle. Mmm. I tell Mike I'll be there because it's important, but can we make it a cream-only meeting please? I've even got to try finishing early to get back to my little one.

Diary's full. No buffer today. I diarise a double-buffer in 2 days. Gotta go.

## Associative selling.

What else might the solution-seeking inspector of my wares want or need?

Surfing the net in my sales R&D time, looking at the product line changes a fencing company I sometimes recommend has recently developed. When new home builders or buyers think about a letterbox, they often think about a fence. The brush fence option for The Nest was co-developed with these guys so that it would slot right in, be nearly invisible if that's what the client liked.

The McDonald's drive-through squawk box got me thinking about this idea of associative selling. Statistics told them that a quorum of people interested in burger A might also be keen on the idea of fries-with-that B. One offering associated with another, so tell your clients about both.

I'm only employed to sell one product, and sure, it comes in an options array, but the associations I also choose to sell are other people's products or services. For most of these associations - well, all bar one - we don't have a formal referral or incentive system in place with. I recommend fences, landscape gardeners, builders, concreters, rainwater tank manufacturers, internal and external fixture businesses, wine delivery groups, home shopping crews, a big rolodex full. Not even by name sometimes, just general pointers to a hub to find the right provider.

I don't get paid for this. Well, not in an immediate transparent transactional way.

When I sell something that I have nothing to do with, man, the street cred, the trust...

And by not asking for anything in return, you want to see the principle of mutual reciprocity kick in.

The high moral ground bit of me thinks it comes down to a deep belief in doing what it takes to help and delight the customer. It's fair to say though that this generosity isn't mutually exclusive to longer-term profitability and extra cash for me. I mean, who's that happily-shocked client going to recommend to friends? And how many of those suppliers I referred, who aren't officially obligated to me for the referral, will point to me when their clients express a need I might serve? And who gets to be known as the go-to person? Not to mention a continuing broad self-directed-learning program that's mind-sharpening and opportunity-revealing.

In every call, I set myself a challenge to ask an association-identifying question that could help the client. Where I can, I make a suggestion. I've got a funny little private goal of being my industry's equivalent of Amazon. To be able to say with confidence "People who liked this also bought...." .

Seems to work for them.

## **Pre-call orienteering.**

I'm sitting in the car, eyes closed, imagining a compass. 2 minutes to circumnavigate the sale in advance.

To the south of the impending conversation lives history - previous call notes, data on sales & market share, the reason they agreed to a meeting. It covers their perceptions of us and the competitors as well as my own research findings. Unchangeable stuff that needs factoring in, awareness of as I step forward.

The North for this chat - the warming sales sun at which I'm aiming - is my goal. What I think we can realistically achieve today, and what I'd like to do with this client beyond. I invent a couple of progress markers I can see staked along the path to true north, so that if I don't get to the sun today, we've at least hit a base camp to start the next expedition from.

To the West, the left, the place of progressives, the frontier lands of opportunities and movement and change. A pointer for me to consider and ideate and suggest some mutually beneficial innovations. The scary path and dice-rolls we might hold hands and try together in the quest to differentiate, to blaze new trails & reap unknown rewards.

And the East, the right, the conservatives, a place of order and structure and realities and formalities. A reminder to plan to climb the frameworks and rule structures we have to operate within, the realities our progress map needs to follow.

Right back to where I sit at this very moment in time - on the needle fulcrum, looking at the 360 degrees worth of considerations that will make up my approach to this conversation.

I take a panoramic view of each call before I step into the frame. The picture's sometimes quite different on the other side of the lens, but it's comforting and empowering to kick a call off knowing I've been here before.

Right, let's go sell some Nests.

## Shooting clay pigeons.

"So it's refrigerated? I can't see many customers wanting to run power to their letterbox?!"

"There's no power required. It uses evaporation to keep the contents cool. There's a layer of sand between the outer and inner sheaths of the container. You just pour some water into it once or twice a week and when the outside of the Nest warms up, the water that evaporates out of the sand cools the inside down to around 6 degrees. It keeps contents cool without needing any power."

"Huh! So you've got to keep pouring water into it? No-one will remember to do that?"

"Yes, that was our biggest challenge in designing it. We offer an option to connect it to your water tank or even the front yard tap. We give clients stickers to put on their rubbish bins, so that once a week when they put the bins out, they get reminded to top it up. It then becomes routine. And there's a little moisture indicator on the back you see each time you grab your mail. It's a simple process, and we've found most customers get used to it really quickly."

"Well, a lot of the units I build have very small land footprints. For blocks with banks of mailboxes, these won't work, they're too big."

"I understand what you're saying - this one I've brought in is designed for a freestanding home with a yard. We make a modular version that can be stacked 3-high and as many across as you like. Because they've been designed to fit a box of wine inside, there's a limit to how small we can make them, so they're not necessarily right for high rise blocks with 100 mailboxes. But, if you have a front yard, even courtyard, then this can be integrated into your fence, or as a freestanding unit needing only 70cm by 70cm. If you're after a simple, secure way of keeping home deliveries safe and cool when you're not at home, and you don't have time to chase up the "While you were out" notes the freight companies leave, we think this is for you."

"Huh! ....."

The clay pigeons have nearly all been shot. Almost earned the right to have a crack at the real one.

"Craig, can I ask ....."

## Indefatigable.

Purchasers want to pick Superman.

I'm back in the office for half an hour, picking up the mail, swapping demo units, grabbing a quick cuppa and an Iced VoVo (well, two). Rose in Customer Service is always good for a quick chinwag. I haven't got time or patience for deep discussions - why I avoid Jan - but it's nice to have a short humanising non-Nest conversation with another salt miner. Rose's daughter just got selected for a tennis scholarship. Wish I could play tennis. Glad I can sell.

Mike's not in - long entertaining lunch, no doubt. I don't begrudge that. Schmooze away buddy, if it helps. Not my shtick.

I park it at my desk, slouch back in the chair and exhale.

It's a funny way to make a living - running around telling people about a box in the hope that enough will pay for it. It doesn't cure cancer. I'm not building shelter for homeless African kids or educating scientists of tomorrow or feeding the crowds or entertaining with rock'n'roll or deft baseline shots. I do Powerpoints and product demo's and ask questions and deliver pitches and collect signatures. I use a CRM. All in the aid of growing Nest numbers. And if The Nest fell over tomorrow? I'd do it for another widget.

On the pinboard above my desk I've got the 7 rules from customers . I take 75 seconds to think about them, about how they work and why I have to deliver on them every conversation.

Sitting here, in the relative quiet of the office, avoiding conversations where I can, I charge the fuel cells. I do this because deep down, clients want to think I'm indefatigable. A magical source of energy and fixes and smiles and things just go better when I'm involved. And, not actually *being* indefatigable, I need a secret curtain to hide behind occasionally to help me perpetuate the illusion.

Because what I do is perceived to be simple, I have to do it very very well. That's not just for customers - that's for me. Because I can't cure cancer.

I can make 'em think I'm bulletproof though.

## Colouring around the black and white.

"Ah, J., you didn't have to do that... what a nice surprise!"

Jenny, the retirement living village site manager, on the blower to me. She found her eggs.

"You're very welcome, and it's the least I can do. It's also a product test - did they stay cool?"

"Yes, they did! Not a melted chocolate amongst them! The staff are gorging themselves - I think you've found a few customers who'll tell a few more!"

Three weeks ago, Jenny's organisation bought Nests for their 48 village units. They were all installed last week, and I snuck into the site on my way home last night and posted a home-made basket of chocolate eggs into The Nest standing outside Jenny's office. It's summer, and besides showing a little love to a good client, I wanted to demonstrate as quickly as possible that they've invested in something that works. Nothing kills word-of-mouth quicker than early post-purchase remorse. I may be the only person to horde Easter eggs as client give-aways throughout a year.

"Just to give you a heads-up Jenny, your residents, and you, will each receive a little flyer in their Nests in the coming days, which is a collection of special offers we've negotiated with different suppliers whose products benefit from being Nested." The marketers thought it'd be smart to brand the adjective.

Because my introversion sometimes comes off as a little aloof, or shy, or anally retentive, or black and white, or dismissive of others, I've made a habit of injecting a little colour and creativity into my processes. It 'softens' how others see me a bit. I used to think it wasn't so professional, maybe wanky. It more often proves a hit. The couple of quirky little extra's I designed for Jenny & her crew are just a couple of examples.

I try doing similar things with my colleagues and boss - I think they get frustrated that I'm not as much of a gossip as other reps, that it's somehow less team-playing. I stopped fighting it. Instead, I've found an outlet for my home-brand creativity, something I normally just let play out in my head. The internal team today will find a note in their pigeon holes inviting them to a little "Nest party" to celebrate Christmas. I've got 100 Nest's in our warehouse, saleable stock, that we'll play a little "Deal or no deal" game with, see who can guess which Nest has a big basket of chocolate and wine in it (plus a heap of fun booby prizes). I don't like running the event myself, but it's a good way to get busy people on my side heading towards a new year.

"J., I'm writing an article about The Nest's for our next residents newsletter that we'll hand out at next week's Village Christmas Party. Our National Director will be here, and I think he'll want to talk to you about installing Nests at some other sites. Can you come up for a photo and some cake on ....."

## I have a plan.

Mike, my still-overcompensating new boss, has obviously been talking to a consultant of some sort, who's obviously been extolling the virtues of business planning, and it's obviously fired him up to fire *our* planning efforts up. I've got to talk to that consultant and see how he sells. So now, in my inbox, lives a must-do note and an attached template to help us "be thorough & consistent in our planning and reporting". To what end? For them, I guess. The boss and the consultant. I file it for Monday.

I already plan my selling & serving efforts thoroughly, have done for years. I've got my own ways. Damned if I'll be changing what I use to guide my activity decisions each day according to leadership whims or trends. I first started business planning in my first year of selling, when a boss showed me a really simple method. He just said "*Start with your goals - what do you most want to achieve this coming year?*" The obvious bit was my number - that was non-negotiable - but he took me past that to the personal reasons I wanted to ring the bell (cash, pride, keep my job, a customer group that loves me - it was like therapy). Then, on a blank page, we just stepped it out in pen. Took about an hour and a half. What 3 or 4 key sub-goals could I realistically achieve - not without effort - that when added together would make up my number? Couple of key client groups, greater penetration with a product, a number and quality marker of an event series. Then, for each of those goals, we just listed out who'll need engaging, what I've got in my kit bag that can help, what I and they will need to do to make the goal happen, what could get in the way, how I'd mitigate obvious risk and what the clear, time-homed next steps were. It's just a cascade. The trick I found was getting from big and warm to uber-specific physical activities I could own and diarise, all on a single page. And then keeping it alive.

Mike's template is 8 pages long. Man.

Over the years, I've tried different business planning methods. From tables and spreadsheets to Venn Diagrams and hand-sketches. I've been very process-focused and prescriptive with my actions, and then I've tried to keep it loose - just a constant reminder of the outcomes I'm trying to achieve, trusting my judgement if it's been given good oasis pictures. I've played with values-based plans, where my prospective effort map was holistically built around doing the right thing, and I've created daily discipline rules, which were specific checklists I wrote covering the proven bite-size activities I just had to do right every single day. Confronting but simple and theoretically unailing.

And you know what I found? I bet you do.

I rethink my Monday procrastination and flick Mike back a quick email.

"Hi Mike, thanks for the template - I'll review and populate key points for you by next Wednesday. I'll chat to you about the format I currently use that works for me - a daily disciplines approach that aligns upwards to the sales goals and market reputation we're working towards. I like planning and have seen it pay year after year. My experience in using a broad array has been the format of the plan is largely irrelevant. They all work - as long as you work them continually. Cheers, speak soon, J."

I'm all for aesthetics in documents. But, like any artwork, beauty and your willingness to engage with it is unique to each beholder. I figure if the plan is to be a daily refocusing point, a reminder of how to filter decisions, then you better want to look at it repeatedly without wincing. And I like mine better than his.

So there.



## Soft drilling.

When we first decided we'd role play at our sales meetings, it would've been fascinating to be deaf. All you would have seen was the old boss Pete moving his lips to an attentive group, and then snap! A subtle but uniform slumping of shoulders, drooping of eyes and nodding forward of heads. The audible groan, you didn't really need to get a sense of the feeling about the idea.

Now though, any newbie joins the crew, and it's just part of business as usual. Whatever you're inducted with, that's your norm I guess. We role play every meeting. We call it "soft drilling" because there's something programmed into a sales rep's DNA that just repulses them when they hear the r and p words together. Soft because it's soft stuff we hone in on, reading people and body language and influencing answers and interpreting questions - the "soft" stuff that's so damn difficult. The stuff that earns us the most money. And drilling? Well, it's a little sharper than the glossy pretend stuff I know a lot of teams do.

"Go!"

"Rick, why don't you take one and test drive it for a fortnight?"

"Too expensive."

"Oh! How do you mean?"

"I mean it costs too much – clients won't pay for it."

"I see - but you think they'd like the functionality - the fact it cools and securely stores their home deliveries when they're at work during the day?"

"Yeah, sure, I see the internet shopping thing will keep growing and we do premium houses, so lots of home wine deliveries and the like, so they'd like that. My worry is, can I add my bit to it and ..... how much is it again?"

"Stop!"

We pull together as a crew and discuss the likelihood of a conversation going down this way, variations on objections and answer strategies, then swap shoes so the seller gets to think like a client a moment. That's the other benefit of role playing that most teams miss.

I don't like big group sessions. But I love role plays. That little voice in your head that can pop up in the darkest moment of a real sales dance and say "Well, J.! Here's that one we prepared earlier! Why don't you give it a try?"

## Easy on the service.

No-one else makes anything quite like what we sell. For that single reason, "Service" isn't the most important part of what we do.

Ouch. I know, right? What sales rep wants to believe that? What *customer* wants to hear it? It's true, though.

When a customer hears about The Nest and silently connects some neurons to think "what an amazing idea!" and then they go get themselves into a sales conversation, they're not thinking about service. It's all form and functionality and I-gots-ta-haveme-oneathem. They set about coordinating a fit with a need they'd not previously enunciated but are now thinking about the benefits of meeting.

I've worked in businesses where "Service" was the golden chalice. I think Service with a capital S, in its myriad of confused incarnations, can work as a genuine sales differentiator when the playing field is busy and otherwise pretty homogenous. If they charge the same for the same widget and similar T's&C's, why of course I'll go for the nice guy who made me a cuppa and showed me a fancy rewards program and delivered on the 24-hour how's-it-all-travelling follow-up call. And sure, we still do these things, because we know we're not unique forever (and because it's fun). But it's secondary and many of its manifestations are cullable in finite and over-filled schedules. And between you and I, I think because it's sort of the easiest-to-influence bit of the value delivery, many salespeople won't even consider some harder, more lucrative work they could invest sweat in.

For us, at our stage of product lifecycle, more important is maximising exposure and education and getting it right, both from a supply chain perspective and a make-sure-it-works viewpoint. In my experience, lots of service-as-differentiator businesses take the whole "it works!" bit for granted. That's great, if you're 100% confident in a static market and a perfect product. I don't play in that space, and The Nest has kinks. I'm a fan of the more organic, become-magnetic sales approach - make sure it does what you said it would do, what they said they wanted it to do, and make them realise it (again, easily overlooked). And you'll sell more.

So my primary role, as I see it, is to be the easy-interface. The sushi train that carries a client's eyeballs to their needs (yoo hoo!) and then to the product-as-solution, and then carries their expectations north via purchase and delivery and first use, ultimately to a rewarding experience as quickly as possible. So much of my time is in working with my internal VIP's to make sure nothing slows that electric engine down. That's the kind of service I think a new product like mine should be supported by.

That's the kind of service I think purchasers enjoy.

## Who Christmas is for.

"OK crew, there's a big box of fruit mince pies in the kitchen - we've allocated 20 packs for each of you. Don't let them go to waste!"

We break out of our sales meeting and Rick, my solar-cooled shipping containers counterpart, heads towards his desk grumbling bah humbug's, half tongue-in-cheek, half hating the idea that clients might see him as some kind of glorified caterer or delivery boy.

"It makes us look cheap. I'd rather take them out for a few beers, a steak to shore up the business. A plastic packet of 6 mince pies?! What does *that* say?" A man's man, is Rick.

"These clients have PA's though, who you want on your side?"

"Ahhh, they love me already. Most of them. And the grumpy ones, stuff 'em. I've got a couple of favourites, and I'll get them a little bottle of something nice. But they don't make the call on sales - you gotta save the love for the decision makers."

Never ceases to amaze me, the shallow ponds in which some of my colleagues' brains soak.

"Well, not sure about you Rick, but there's a heap I deal with that can decide to make my life easier or harder. A morning tea on you? Lubricant. I hear you about coming across as cheap... but I've never seen a client sneer when you hand them free pies and wish them Merry Christmas - even MD's."

Rick kind of grunts something while diving his nose into emails (the great post-meeting refuge of the unprioritised). Being something of a sh\*t stirrer, I nudge just a little more.

"The other beauty is these freebies don't come out of your expenses budget - they're gifts the boss is paying for - so you can save your own A&P cash for your fancy steak dinner while the rest of your adoring crowd grow fat on shortcrust pastry. They'll love you even more, Rick. A sea of front-desk Marys swooning and moaning, "*Oh Rick, you're the best!*"

Grumpy Guts sneer-smiles at this.

"P\*ss off J. Go sell a letterbox."

"Fine. If you really don't want yours, I'll take them."

My next meeting isn't for 90 minutes, so I take out my top 20 clients list along with the pile of blank Christmas cards left over from last year (who can tell?) and start writing in them to accompany the pies.

It's not selling, but it'll keep the chestnuts roasting awhile...

## Refreshments.

A catch-22 of spending so much time in your own introverted head is you're in constant conversation with yourself, questioning, assessing, adjusting your posture. You make lots of incremental tweaks to your approach based on your undoubtedly astute micro-observations of the changing world and on what you're trying to be and how you're trying to be it. But because you do this naturally, easily, constantly, you often poo-poo the need and the moment to have longer, harder, rawer looks at your abilities and plans and even your goals. You don't put the priority on a sweeping punctuated self-analysis because you think you're doing it in bite-size bits every day (and that annual refresher is for other people, right?) Nor for that matter are you particularly interested in other people's impartial, sometimes better-vantage-pointed 20 cents worth. No, you know best.

Truth of the matter (hard as it is to swallow), they're both pretty important.

Something I apply each Christmas build-up is a discipline of getting a little personal advisory board together. People I trust who'll tell me how it is whether I like it or want to hear it or not. An old boss, a current colleague, a potential client-friend. We do it over a cold Coopers on my coin, probably more to lower my own defences than anything else. No paperwork - I do the interpretation and mapping in a 24-hour post-Pales timehome, alone.

"J. you said this time last year you wanted to ....., but it sounds like you've been focusing your efforts on ..... - WTF?"

"You know you're bl\*\*dy good at ....., but it doesn't sound like you've applied it to ..... - why the hell not?"

"Why on earth are you wasting your time on ..... when you said you want to achieve .....? You're GOOD at those things... you keep telling me you WANT that prize. So....."

".....'s not your shtick, so what are you going to do to get around it?"

This ego blowtorch sometimes backfires, gets my back up and my resolve to blaze my own path just knits tighter. But even that I'm OK with - it gives me palpable passion & focus even if it's in the opposite direction to the advice.

More often though, after I take a bit of tough-love input (followed by some beery kiss-@rsing to make me feel better), I process it alone in the following days and use it to reshape the organoplan I evolve that segues me across sales years. There's always truth in their words. I just choose whether or not I think it'll help me achieve my outcome and process goals more than my routine. Whether or not I'll take it.

And being able to tell others I have a professional advisory board of my own has another effect.

How many reps do you know take their business that seriously?

## One for the team.

My mince pie loathing colleague Rick has thrown a late curve ball at us. He's gone and invited a couple of big prospective customers into our office for drinks and then promised them a full product range expo without consulting us, his other-portfolio chums. These maybe-clients are massive transport companies and their potential to spend with our business is huge, and soon.

With me though? On Nests? Not so much.

Mike's asked us all to make ourselves available for a couple of hours late tomorrow afternoon. If there are existing appointments, shift them. Kids Christmas Carols? Can you be a bit late?

After a little fit of pique alone in my car, I roller-coaster over the grief curve and get from upset to annoyed to resigned to considering the opportunity pretty quickly. It's not like I have a choice. Well, I do. If I'd really jumped up and down and suggested that restructuring my nicely crafted plan that's making the very most of the handful of days left until Christmas would have seriously jeopardised our new-year's profit potential (and hurt my hip pocket nerve on the way), I think he would have found me a hall pass.

But there's 3 realities I have to confront.

I'm an employee, no matter how focused my incentive plan or portfolio delineation, so I'm there to do the bidding of my boss.

I'm part of a team. And that means giving a bit, even if I'm never likely to see proportionate reciprocation from my less holistic co-workers. If I want a tighter knit support crew, and a profitable business that pays for more and more yarn, then I've got to pick up the needles for others occasionally.

The biggie though? I'm a sales rep. And everyone I deal with is a prospective customer, referrer, word-of-mouth spreader and sharpening stone to hone my questions and pitches on. Never know, these guys might want Nests for all their employees. Don't make assumptions J. just because their primary business is shipping containers.

The phone rings. Blocked number. I take it anyway.

"Hello, Janelle speaking."

Never make assumptions.

## The end.

Thanks for reading - please share it with a friend or 10 if you enjoyed it!

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