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### The well-read sales person

I may be the least qualified person on the planet to write this column. I have never taken a business or marketing course in my life. I am the proud possessor of a dual liberal arts degree in medieval literature and European history. In spite of this rather weak resume, I have had a successful career as an advertising sales person and sales manager. I work as the training director for a major media organization and I have been asked to speak on sales and marketing all across the USA. How have I been able to pull this off for almost three decades? Certainly, nothing I learned in college prepared me for a career in advertising. On the other hand, my second grade teacher gave me everything I needed to be a success in this industry—she taught me to read! I am an autodidact, this is a fancy way of saying I am self-taught. In the great American tradition of Benjamin Franklin and Abraham Lincoln, I have used reading to overcome my educational shortcomings. When I landed my first job in the industry, I devoured the advertising section of the local Carnegie Library. I read books by advertising greats like David Ogilvy, John Caples and Rosser Reeves. I read sales books by Zig Ziglar, Tom Hopkins and Bryan Tracy. By tapping into the experience of these experts, within a year I had an understanding of sales and marketing which far exceeded what I could have learned on the job.

#### **Planning to be better**

Every profession requires its practitioners to constantly improve their skills and knowledge. Physicians, lawyers, accountants etc. are required to acquire CEU's (Continuing Education Units) to maintain their licenses. Our chosen profession doesn't require us to maintain a "Selling License," but we are rewarded for continuing our education and punished for not studying our trade. There is a direct link between our business knowledge and our paychecks. If we plan on increasing our earnings, we must plan on increasing our knowledge. Here are some suggestions on developing a personal reading plan:

- **Schedule time to read**—Set aside some time each day for business reading. Just 15 minutes a day adds up to more than 62 hours in a year. Breaking up your reading in these small blocks helps you to retain the information and allows time to think about what you've learned. I like to start my mornings with some reading, because it puts me in a positive frame of mind for the rest of the day. I supplement my daily reading by listening to business audio

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books in my car. Like Zig Ziglar, I am a regular student of “AU—Automobile University”.

- **Make a reading list**—Plan your reading. Browse the business shelves of bookstores or look online. Ask co-workers for recommendations. The business section of my local paper often has reviews of new business books. Think about the specific areas where you want to improve your skills and seek out books on that subject. It is a good idea to have a book or two ready to go when you finish what you are currently reading. This way you don't lose a single chance to improve yourself and you make daily reading a habit.
- **Capture the best ideas**—Take notes as you read. This will help you to remember key ideas and will permit you to go back and review what you've learned. I file away notes on my reading by subject, so that if I am having a problem in a particular area, I can go back and refresh my memory. When I became a manager this became the basis of my sales training file.
- **Use what you've learned**—As I am reading I always ask myself, “How can I use this?” Think about what you are reading and how you can apply it to your situation. Experiment with the techniques you learn by trying them in the field. Take the author's concepts and make them your own by integrating them into your personal selling style.
- **Mix it up**—Vary your reading to develop a broad base of knowledge. In addition to books on sales, advertising and on general business, your reading should include books on economics, psychology and technology. I find biographies to be a very good way to learn from the lives of others. Acquiring a broad knowledge allows you to converse with customers at all levels, positioning you as a valued consultant in their eyes.

Because I reference a lot of books in my training, the people in my class often ask for a list of books that sales people should read. Here are some books and authors that I've found to be helpful in my career. This is far from a complete list and there are terrific new books being printed (or downloaded) every day but this is a start:

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The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People by Stephen R. Covey—Reading this book literally changed my life. The seven habits provide a plan for personal productivity and achievement. I have reread this book many times and each time I find something new. (Please note: there are several articles about applying the seven habits to advertising sales in the Link and Learn archive on the PaperChain.org website)

How to Win Friends and Influence People by Dale Carnegie—An “oldie but a goodie,” this book has never been out of print since 1937. It offers practical advice on working with others and building relationships.

Spin Selling and The Spin Selling Workbook by Neil Rackham—Rackham observed and analyzed thousands of sales calls to identify which sales techniques were the most effective. From this research he developed the SPIN questioning method. I have used SPIN for years and find it to be a powerful technique to help customers see the need for advertising and close them.

The Little Red Book of Selling by Jeffrey Gitomer—What Jeff Gitomer’s books lack in size, they make up for in content. Every page of his little books is filled with simple straightforward sales advice from a master sales person.

The One Minute Manager Series by Ken Blanchard—These little books can be easily read in an hour or so but are packed with powerful techniques and actions that apply to all aspects of business. Search “One Minute Manager” on Amazon and you will find hundreds of titles such as the One Minute Sales Person or the One Minute Manager Builds High Performing Teams. One of my favorites is The One Minute Manager Meets the Monkey which covers delegation for managers. The strange title comes from the image of problems as a “monkey” on the back of a manager. I have read many of the books in this series and found them all very useful.

How to Get Control of Your Time and Your Life by Alan Lakein—This is a classic book on time management and still one of the best. A few hours reading Lakein’s book will pay huge dividends in time saved every day of your career.

Predictably Irrational by Dan Ariely—Have you ever wondered why a customer will not buy in spite of all the benefits your publication has to offer? Dan Ariely may have the answer. This book explains the mysteries behind human behavior and the importance of emotions in a customer’s decision to buy.

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Talking 9 to 5 by Deborah Tannen—Deborah Tannen is the leading expert on linguistics. Her research on the psychology behind our conversations with co-workers and customers can help you defuse potentially explosive situations and enhance your persuasive skills.

Purple Cow and Linchpin by Seth Godin—The theme running through Seth Godin's many books is how to be "Remarkable," making yourself so memorable and unique that customers will talk about you. A certified marketing "genius," Godin makes his books both informative and enjoyable to read.

Talent is Overrated by Geoffrey Colvin—This book dispels the myth of a "natural" salesperson, a "natural" manager or a natural "anything." He covers the research that proves exceptional ability isn't an accident of birth, but something that is earned through a defined process. This book tells what we need to be to be great in any endeavor.

Hey Whipple, Squeeze This by Luke Sullivan—As you can tell from the title this book takes an irreverent look at advertising. In spite of its lighthearted approach, this is an outstanding book on creating and designing powerful and effective advertising. It's question and answer format makes it a good reference work to use when building an ad for a customer.

As I stated above, this list represents just the tip of the iceberg of books for sales people and managers. In addition to books there are many great online newsletters and magazines such as Advertising Age, which provide valuable sales information. One of my sales managers was fond of saying; "There are no shortcuts on the road to success." I disagree with this—reading provides a shortcut to a successful sales career. When I read a book, I am able to tap into the experience of the author. Combining what I learn from my reading with what I learn in the field accelerates the process of becoming a great sales person. Learning from the successes and failures of others saves me from having to make all the mistakes myself. Here's the bottom line, if you want to hit your sales goals, you need to hit the books first!

*This article was written by Jim Busch of the Pittsburgh Pennysaver.*

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