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# RIDICULOUSLY OBVIOUS THOUGHTS ON SELLING ▶

BY TOM PETERS

# “Everyone lives by selling something.”

— Robert Louis Stevenson

1. “Strategy” overrated, simply “doin’ stuff” underrated. See Kelleher and Bossidy: “We have a ‘strategic plan,’ it’s called doing things.”—Herb Kelleher. “Execution is a systematic process of rigorously discussing hows and whats, tenaciously following through, and ensuring accountability.”—Larry Bossidy & Ram Charan/ *Execution: The Discipline of Getting Things Done*. **Action has its own logic**—ask Genghis Khan, Rommel, COL John Boyd, U.S. Grant, Patton, W.T. Sherman.
2. **What are you personally great at?** (Key word: “great.”) Play to strengths! “Distinct or Extinct.” You should aim to be “outrageously good”/B.I.W. at a niche area (or more).
3. Are you a “personality,” a de facto “brand” in the industry? The Dr. Phil of ...
4. **Opportunism (with a little forethought) mostly wins.** (“Successful people are the ones who are good at Plan B.”)
5. **Little starts can lead to big wins.** Most true winners—think search & Google—start as something small. Many big deals—Disney & Pixar—could have been done as little-er deals if you’d had the nerve to step out before the value became obvious.
6. **Non-obvious targets have great potential.** Among many other things, everybody goes after the obvious ones. Also, the “non-obvious” are often good Partners for technology experiments.
7. The best relationships are often (usually?) not “top to top”! (Often the best: hungry division GMs eager to make a mark.)

First prepared for presentation to GE Energy 01.24.2006.

8. **IT'S RELATIONSHIPS, STUPID—DEEP AND FROM MULTIPLE FUNCTIONS.**
9. **In any public-sector business, you must become an avid student of “the politics,” the incentives and constraints, mostly non-economic, facing all of the players.**  
Politicians are usually incredibly logical—if you (deeply!) understand the matrix in which they exist.
10. **Relationships from *within* our firm are as important**—often more important—as those from outside—again broad is as important as deep. Allies—avid supporters!—within and from non-obvious places may be more important than relationships at the Client organization. Goal: an “insanely unfair ‘market share’” of insiders’ time devoted to your projects!
11. **Interesting outsiders are essential to innovative proposal and sales teams.** An “exciting” sales-proposal team is as important as a prestigious one.
12. Is the proposal-sales team weird enough—weirdos come up with the most interesting, game-changer ideas. Period.
13. **Lunch with at least one weirdo per month.** (Goal: always on the prowl for interesting new stuff.)
14. Gratuitous comment: Lunches with good friends are typically a waste of (professional) time.
15. **Don't short-change (time, money, depth) the proposal process.** Miss one tiny nuance, one potential incentive that “makes my day” for a key Client player—and watch the whole gig be torpedoed.
16. “Sticking with it” sometimes pays, sometimes not—it takes a lot of tries to forge the best path in. Sometimes you never do, after a literal lifetime. (Ah, life.)

17. **WOMEN ARE SIMPLY BETTER AT RELATIONSHIPS**—don't get hung up—particularly in tech firms—on what industries—countries “women can't do.” (Or some such bullshit.)
18. **Work incessantly on your “story”—most economic value springs from a good story (think Perrier)!** In sensitive public or quasi-public negotiations, a compelling story is of immense value—politics is about the tension among competing stories. (If you don't believe me, ask Karl Rove or James Carville.) (“Storytelling is the core of culture.” —*Branded Nation: The Marketing of Megachurch, College Inc., and Museumworld*, James Twitchell)
19. Call this 18A, or 18 repeat: Become a first-rate Storyteller! (“A key—perhaps the key—to leadership is the effective communication of a story.”—Howard Gardner, *Leading Minds: An Anatomy of Leadership*)
20. Risk Assessment & Risk Management is more about stories than advanced math—ie brilliant scenario construction.
21. Good listeners are good sales people. **Period.**
22. Lousy listeners are lousy sales people. **Period.**
23. **GREAT LISTENERS ARE GREAT SALES PEOPLE.** (Listening “skills” are hard to learn and subject to immense effort in pursuit of Mastery. A virtuoso “listener” is as rare as a virtuoso cello player.) (“If you don't listen, you don't sell anything.”—Carolyn Marland, MD/Guardian Group)
24. Things that are funny to me (American) are often—mostly not funny to those in other cultures. (Humor is as fine-edged as it gets, and rarely travels.)

25. **You don't know Jack Squat about other peoples' cultures—especially if you are a typically myopic American.** (Like me.)
26. **Are you a great interviewer?** It's a make or break skill. (Think Barbara Walters—i.e., her skill at extracting unwanted truths from pros in persona-protection ... in front of 10s of millions of people.)

“If you don't listen, you don't sell anything.”

—Carolyn Marland, Managing Director, Guardian Group

27. **Are you a great (not merely “good”) presenter?** Mastering presentation skills is a life's work—with stupendous payoff.
28. **Work like hell on the Big 2: LISTENING/INTERVIEWING, PRESENTING.** These are “the essence of [sales] life”—and usually picked-up in an amateurish, catch-as-catch-can fashion. Mistake! (Become a “professional student” of these two areas, achieve Mastery.)
29. Are you good at flowers? Think: FLOWER POWER! (see Harvey Mackay's “Mackay 66”—what you should know about a Client; e.g., birthdays & anniversaries.) **(My “flowers budget” is out of control. Hooray for me.)**
30. You can't do it all—be clear at what you are good at, bad at, indifferent at. Hubris sucks.
31. The point is not to “prove yourself.” (That's ego-talk.) Let the best person present to the Client—perhaps a “lower level” geek. (“Control freaks” get their just desserts in the long haul—or sooner.)

32. The numbers will more or less take care of themselves over the long haul—if the relationship/s is/are solid gold.
33. **The Gold Standard in selling: INDISPENSABLE to the Client.**  
No other goal is worthy.
34. Never stop growing—broadening—deepening the relationship. **The key to “indispensability” is to get the Client more and more ... and more ... and then more ... imbedded in “our” web.** Hence the so-called “selling process” is only the first step!
35. **USE THE WORD “WE” ... CONSTANTLY & RELIGIOUSLY!** (Eg: “We”—the Client & me—“are going to change the world with this service.”)
36. **Don’t waste your time on jerks—it’ll rarely work out in the mid- to long-term.**
37. **Genius is walking away from lousy “scores” (deals)—and accepting the attendant heat.** Big Business is the premier home to Big Egos overpaying by a factor of 2 to 22 with billion\$\$\$\$ at stake. (Think Jerry Levin and AOL TimeWarner.)
38. You haven’t a clue as to how this situation will actually play out—be prepared to move fast in a different direction.
39. Keep your word.
40. **KEEP YOUR WORD.**
41. Underpromise (i.e., don’t over-promise; i.e., cut yourself a little slack) even if it costs you business—winning is a long-term affair. Over-promising is Sign #1 of a lack of integrity. You *will* pay the piper.

42. There is such a thing as a “good loss”—if you’ve tested something new and developed good relationships. A half-dozen honorable, ingenious losses over a two-year period can pave the way for a Big Victory in a New Space in year 3.
43. It’s a competitive world out there. New, innovative products are harder to sell than old stand-bys. **Nonetheless, you will be a long-term star to the extent that you are willing to push the harder-to-sell-at-the-moment Innovative Products that cement long-term Client success (Indispensability!)**—even if it means a #s hit this quarter. **PART OF YOUR JOB: TAKE CLIENTS ON AN ADVENTURE THAT PUTS THEM AHEAD OF THE GAME CALLED (GAMECHANGING—hopefully) COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE!**
44. Think “legacy”—what the hell is all this really about for you and the world? (“Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”—Mary Oliver)
45. **THERE ARE NO “MODERATES” IN THE HISTORY BOOKS!**
46. **Keep it simple!** (Damn it!) No matter how “sophisticated” the product. If you can’t explain it in a phrase, a page, or to your 14-year-old ... you haven’t got it right yet.
47. **Know more than the next guy.** Homework pays. (of course it’s obvious—but in my work it is too often honored in the breach.)
48. Regardless of project size, winning or losing invariably hinges on a raft of “little stuff.” **Little stuff is and always has been everything!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!—or, “one man’s little stuff is another man’s 7.6 Richter deal-breaker.”**
49. **In public settings in particular, face saving is all.** When something changes, allow the other guy to come out looking like a winner, especially if he has lost. (Even if you must accept the egg on your face—he will always remember you!)

50. Don't hold grudges. (It is the ultimate in small mindedness—and incredibly wasteful and ineffective. There's always tomorrow.)
51. **IT'S ALWAYS "THE POLITICS"—wee private sector deal or giant public sector deal.** (Every player, small or large, is angling for something. Master the calculus of advantage.)
52. **To beat the "turnover problem" in key Client posts amidst long negotiations, invest outrageous amounts of time building a wide & deep set of relationships with mid-level (& lower!!) "plodding" "careerists."** The invisible careerists are the bedrock upon which repeated success is built! (My "Capitol Hill Axiom": It's the 24-year-old LA who in the end briefs the Senator right before **she** goes to the Floor to vote.)
53. Speaking of "she": Gender differences are Enormous—dealing with a woman and dealing with a man are different kettles of fish—you must become an A+ student of gender differences. (Eg: Men are typically more interested in the short-term "score." Women are more interested in the long-term consequences.)
54. **"LITTLE PEOPLE" OFTEN HAVE BIG FRIENDS.**
55. This is *not* war, damn it. All parties can win (or not lose, anyway). And losing bidders can walk away from a deal with increased respect for you and your team.
56. Never, ever dump on a competitor—the Tom Watson IBM glory-days mantra.

**“Nothing is so contagious as enthusiasm.”**

—Samuel Taylor Coleridge



57. **Never forget the “Law of Cousins!”** In developing nations in particular, power brokers at all levels are at least cousins! Consideration for a second cousin can pay off big time.
58. Speaking of “favors,” jail sucks.
59. **Work hard beats work smart. (Mostly.)**
60. **REPEAT: HE/SHE WHO HAS THE MOST-BEST RELATIONSHIPS WINS. RELATIONSHIPS ARE THE ESSENCE OF THE WORK OF THE SALESPERSON. THE HARD ... AND LONG ... WORK OF THE SALESPERSON.**
61. Mano v mano “hardball” is seldom the answer—end runs based and patient multi-level relationship building via deeper-wider networks win.
62. If the deal is wired from below, truly wired, than the so-called “big negotiations” are essentially irrelevant.
63. If every quarter is a “little better” than the prior quarter—then you are not taking any serious risks.
64. **Phones beat email.**
65. **A THREE-MINUTE CALL TODAY CAN AVOID A GAME-LOSER OF A FIASCO NEXT MONTH. There was always a time when a little thing could have been addressed that headed off a subsequent big thing.** As to avoiding that call, didn’t someone say, “Pride goeth before the fall”?
66. Be hyper-organized about relationship management—you are in the anthropology business. Study the great pols! Brilliant NRM (network relationship management) is not accidental! It is not catch-as-catch can. (Football analogies are cute—but deep political understanding pays the private-school tuition.)

67. Think/obsess on **ROIR** (Return On Investment In Relationships).
68. **“THANK YOU” NOTES: World’s highest-return investment!!!!!!!!!!**
69. The way to anyone’s heart: Doing a nice thing for their kid. (But, gawd, does this take a gentle touch.)
70. Scoring off other people is stupid. **Winners are always in the business of creating the maximum # of winners—among adversaries at least as much as among “partners.”**
71. Your colleagues’ successes are your successes. Period. (Trust me, my greatest personal success—financially as well as artistically—has been creating a bigger pond in which everyone wins, even if my “market share” is down.)
72. **Lend a helping hand, especially when you don’t have the time.** E.g. share relationships—**the more you give away the more you get in return** (just like they say in church).
73. Listen up: “It was much later that I realized Dad’s secret. He gained respect by giving it. He talked and listened to the fourth-grade kids in Spring Valley who shined shoes the same way he talked and listened to a bishop or a college president. He was seriously interested in who you were and what you had to say.”—Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot, *Respect*. (I.e., Respect is Cool.)
74. Mentoring is a thrill—*and* the practical payoff is enormous. The best mentors have the whole world working its buns off for them!
75. Hire for enthusiasm. Promote for enthusiasm. Cherish enthusiasm. **REMOVE NON-ENTHUSIASTS—THEY ARE CANCERS.** (“Nothing is so contagious as enthusiasm.” —Samuel Taylor Coleridge. “A man without a smiling face must not open a shop.” —Chinese Proverb.)

“You can’t behave in a calm, rational manner.  
You’ve got to be out there on the lunatic fringe.”

—Jack Welch

76. **IT’S ALWAYS YOUR PROBLEM—you sold it to them.**
77. **It’s never over: While there may be an excellent service activity in your company, the “relationship” belongs to You!** Hence the “aftersales” “moments of truth” are at least as—if not more than\*—important to the Continuing Relationship as the sale “transaction” itself. (\*I vote for “more than.”) You’ll get your biggest “points” with the Client for being an effective after-the-fact go-between with your company.
78. Don’t get too hung up on “systems integration”—first & foremost, the individual bits have got to work.
79. **For God’s sake don’t over promise on “systems integration”—it’s nigh on impossible to deliver.**
80. On the other hand ... winners clamber Up the Value-added Ladder, and offer ever so much more than “mere” product. **ALL SUCCESSFUL SALES PEOPLE ARE IN THE “SOLUTIONS BUSINESS”**—no matter how jargony that may sound.
81. “Systems”/“Solutions” selling means grappling directly with “culture change” in Client organizations. (“The business of selling is not just about matching viable solutions to the customers that require them. It’s equally about managing the change process the customer will need to go through to implement the solution and achieve the value promised by the solution”—Jeff Thull, *The Prime Solution: Close the Value Gap, Increase Margins, and Win the Complex Sale*)

82. **Shit happens. That's what they pay you for.**
83. This is not a “GE” or “Ben & Jerry’s” sale—it is a Joe Jones/Jane Jones sale. **YOU ARE THE “BRAND” THE CLIENT BUYS**—especially over the long haul.
84. Duh: You make money, the company makes money, on repeat business.
85. Master—yes, you—the “PR” Game. “Word of Mouth” is not accidental! **You want Word of Mouth? Make it happen!**
86. **GOAL #1: MAKE YOUR CLIENT A HERO—YOU ARE NOT THERE TO GET CREDIT.** (“Taking credit” is for ego-maniacs. And losers.)
87. “Decent margins,” over the mid- to long-term, are a product of better relationships, not better “negotiating skill.” (Mostly.)
88. In the immortal words of ex-GE Vice Chairman Larry Bossidy, more or less, “Realism rocks.” (“Bullshit artist” and “great salesperson,” contrary to conventional wisdom, are Diametric Opposites. “Truthteller” and Great Salesperson is more like it.)
89. Be the first to tell the Client bad news (e.g., slipped delivery); his intelligence sources, and he has them, will tell him fast—you want to be there first with your story and to enhance your rep as Truthteller!
90. Work like hell to get a reputation as a valued industry expert, to become an industry resource.
91. Work the Trade Association angle for all its worth—it may take a decade to pay off—e.g., when you become an officer or are on an important panel or testify before Congress.
92. **PAY YOUR DUES IN THE CLIENT ORG AND IN YOUR OWN ORG!**

93. **It's all bloody tactics.**
94. You must ... LOVE .... the product! (Period.)
95. **YOU MUST LOVE THE PRODUCT!**
96. **Don't over-schedule.** "Running late" is inexcusable at any level of seniority; it is the ultimate mark of self-importance mixed with contempt.
97. It takes time to get to know people. **(DUH.)**
98. **Women are better salespeople.** (See Addendum)
99. The very idea of "efficiency" in relationship development is ... STUPID.
100. **MBWA (still) rules.**
101. "Preparing the soil" is the "first 98 percent." (Or more.)
102. **WORK THE PHONES!**
103. Rule 5K-5M: 5K miles for a 5-Minute meeting often makes sense. (Yes, often.) (Even with constrained travel budgets.) (Thanks, super-agent Mark McCormack.)
104. Become a student! Study great salespeople! (Including Presidents.) ("Natural" is a little bit true—but then Naturals are always the ones who study hardest—e.g., Jerry Rice.)
105. Become a student! Yes, you can study Relationship Building. So, study ...
106. Beware complexifiers and complicators. (Truly "smart people" ... simplify things.)
107. The smartest guy in the room rarely wins—alas, he usually is aware he's the smartest guy. (And needn't waste his time on that "soft relationship crap.")

108. **Be kind. It works.**

109. Be especially kind when there are screw-ups. (There's plenty of time later to play the Great Accountability Game.)

110. Presidents never tire of being treated like Presidents.

111. **Luck matters. So: Good luck!**

## **ADDENDUM: WOMEN ROCK (AS SALESPERSONS)**

And the answers are?

“TAKE THIS QUICK QUIZ: Who manages more things at once? *Who puts more effort into their appearance?* Who usually takes care of the details? *Who finds it easier to meet new people?* Who asks more questions in a conversation? *Who is a better listener?* Who has more interest in communication skills? *Who is more inclined to get involved?* Who encourages harmony and agreement? *Who has better intuition?* Who works with a longer ‘to do’ list? *Who enjoys a recap to the day’s events?* Who is better at keeping in touch with others?”

Source: *Selling Is a Woman’s Game: 15 Powerful Reasons Why Women Can Outsell Men*, Nicki Joy & Susan Kane-Benson

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Fortune* calls Tom Peters the Ur-guru of management and compares him to Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman and H.L. Mencken. *The Economist* tags him the Uber-guru. His unconventional views led *BusinessWeek* to describe him as “business’ best friend and worst nightmare.” Tom describes himself as a prince of disorder, champion of bold failures, maestro of zest, professional loudmouth (as a speaker he’s “a spitter” according to the cartoon strip Dilbert ), corporate cheer-leader, lover of markets, capitalist pig...and card-carrying member of the ACLU.

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This document was created on 24 February 2006 and is based on the best information available at that time. To check for updates, please click here to visit <http://changethis.com/21.111ThoughtsOnSelling>

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