

SALES STAR


A Sales Master Shares His Expertise: Don Zihlman

[By Akbar Ali]

Don Zihlman is president of DRZ Marketing & Design, an advertising agency that helps clients fulfill their sales, marketing, and advertising goals. He is also the founder of *StreetSmart Selling*, a sales training and consulting program which teaches sales professionals the necessary skills to build their careers, meet their goals, and enhance their views of what is possible in the sales

Believe it or not, this master of sales and marketing graduated from the University of Cincinnati with a B.A. in Chemistry. Zihlman traces the beginning of his career back to nearly 30 years ago when he was working in radio in Maine. Though he began his radio career as a disc jockey, he was continually prodded by others at the station to get into sales, which he initially resisted and never anticipated as a career. His ambition at the time was to land a job on the air in one of the big markets; quickly, however, he learned that there was much more money to be made working in sales than there was emceeing the airwaves and, thus, made the transition to radio sales. After working with the radio station for 10 years, he bought his own sales business, a printing brokerage.

About six months into his new business venture he learned that selling printing was an "absolute bore." He redirected the focus of his business to working on advertising and marketing with clients. Since that pivotal time, his business has continually evolved to the point that it is now more of a marketing and consulting firm with a focus on sales training services.

StreetSmart Selling is an extension of Zihlman's marketing and consulting business. He created the name and logo about five years ago because he wanted to start doing more sales training work. All of his sales training services are currently

Q. What do you do for fun?

A. Golf and skiing. If I could do them both in the same day, that'd be real nice.

Q. What CD is in your CD player right now?

A. I don't listen to CDs very much. I just punch around the radio in the car. I'm more of a Top 40 listener.

Q. What is the last magazine you read?

A. BusinessWeek SmallBiz.

Q. What is your favorite TV show?

A. 24.

Q. Who is your role model?

A. My dad. He was in business for himself from 1950 on. He was a TV repairman. The mindset for most parents back then was "Go to college, get a degree, and land a secure corporate job." I think that attitude came out of the fact that most of those parents were coming out of the Depression and World War II. TV was so new in the 50s, and repair was a big business back then. He went out on his own, stayed in that until the day he retired, and I think that never made me afraid to go out on my own. I get my nutjob sense of humor from Dad, which helped me in my days when I worked on the air as a disc jockey. I also got my crummy golf swing from my Dad!

marketed under the StreetSmart Selling brand.

While training sales professionals, Zihlman refrains from delving too much into sales techniques-what he focuses on in his seminars is getting professionals to understand what sales is about in order to develop long-term relationships with clients.

"If you're out to sell something one time and never see the client again, my sales training probably won't fit that need very well," he said.

Zihlman believes that the single most important aspect of creating sales is the relationship between the salesperson and the client. One of the themes of his program is "People buy people." This translates as the idea that customers like to know whom they are buying from on a personal level and that if you want to maintain a relationship that is mutually satisfying, it pays-literally-to get to know the customer. He offered the example of a marketing client he has been working with over the last year and a half: "Every time we talk, we discuss our families."

Zihlman works primarily with service organizations-businesses that sell services rather than products. His seminars focus on a few key ideas: developing client relationships, making sales, cold calling, time management, and upselling. The most

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important of these, however, is finding out what clients' needs are and how one's company's services can meet those needs.

Among the sales tips Zihlman utilizes when coaching clients are tips on how to be successful at cold calling, using the telephone and using it a lot, and making contact as personal as possible. He believes that too often salespeople are content with sending emails or interacting with potential clients in an impersonal or detached manner, which, given modern communications, can be difficult to avoid. He said that if you have the ability and opportunity to talk to people face to face, then it is imperative that you get out and make your contacts personal.

One concept frequently missing from sales professionals' regimens is the idea of targeting their market. It isn't possible to cater to everyone, so you must define your market and determine what types of clients you might work best with based on whatever service or product you are selling.

When dealing with the common but (according to Zihlman) often misapplied concept of upselling, he tries to move salespeople away from the traditional approach, which he summarizes with the proverbial McDonald's question: "Do you want fries with that?" It is important when upselling to have both the business and the client in mind, he said, and to be careful not to sacrifice one's interests for the

other's. For instance, he has worked in the past with dental practices, finding out what patients were looking for, what services or procedures they were willing to pay for, and what the practices could offer, all without abusing patients in any way, shape, or form. This is of paramount importance because reputation is everything in the healthcare industry, and the only way to build a good one is to put the patient first.

Another common mistake Zihlman discusses with clients relates to the manner in which the sale or advertising effort is initiated. He said that all too frequently the pitch will start with the salesperson talking about how great he or she is or how long the company he or she works for has been in business. He calls this approach "features vs. benefits" and claims that too many professionals try to conduct sales by talking about their features rather than the benefits of sales to customers. This approach is totally wrong. The pitch should begin with a statement which focuses on the product or service and what it can accomplish for the client.

"The client is looking for an end result, not a resume. The [salespeople] come at it backwards," Zihlman said.

Zihlman also encourages sales professionals to be open and honest with their clients about what they are selling. He said, "If there's a problem, don't try to double talk or dance around things. Be direct and

straightforward about the product or the service. This will increase your credibility." Another tip: listening! In everything from building strong relationships to determining values to cold calling, listening is key.

Five individuals have been influential along Zihlman's path to success. Ron Frizzell, owner of the radio station he worked for early in his career, taught him the value of "undying enthusiasm." He recalled that Frizzell's contagious enthusiasm showed him that enthusiasm must be projected toward everything in sales, especially one's job, clients, and products. He credited Jim Doyle, a sales training consultant, with teaching him the basics of sales, especially assimilating into the "sales mindset," and showing him the importance of "thinking big." He also cited well-known speaker Alan Weiss as having instilled in him basic sales concepts (which are now forgotten). Sales manager Craig Hoffses helped him develop a range of creative talents, from coming up with ideas to selling ads and concepts to gaining a fresh perspective on the familiar. And last but certainly not least is Zihlman's wife, Linda, who with the best of intentions is always telling him he needs to think bigger.

And think big Zihlman certainly does. From the airwaves to consulting to becoming an industry expert, he has proven he is among the best in his field.

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