

SALES STAR


Elinor Stutz: Pioneering the Smooth Sale by Breaking the Glass Ceiling

[By Akbar Ali]

The story of Elinor Stutz's climb to success in the sales business is unique in that it is one of overcoming extraordinary challenges and becoming something of a pioneer: she isn't someone who simply battled the competitive nature of the business world and worked her way up from a background of no sales experience; rather, she is someone who also had to contend with the institutionalized bias against women as serious sales contenders in the industry when she first started. Today, she is a much sought-after industry expert and the CEO of Smooth Sale, a sales training company which provides both coaching and training products for those hoping to propel their careers into the sphere of success. The advice she offers is the result of years of professional struggle during which she challenged hostile prejudice and established herself as a pioneering sales guru who promotes the value of relationships over returns. She is also a veritable fountain of incredible stories, wisdom, and observations which are as unique as they are priceless.

Stutz first decided to venture into the workforce out of necessity and her desire to help shape her children's future. After having been a stay-at-home mom for 15 years, she and her husband agreed that she had to go to work if they were going to be able to finance their teenage children's college education.

"He came home and said to me with my back turned to him, 'Elinor, I've got it, you have the personality of a salesperson,'" she recounted. "I turned around and asked him very quietly, 'Is that a compliment or an insult?'"

"You know the concept we all have in our minds about sleazy salespeople, and I was no different from anybody else," she admitted.

With the help of her husband, she found that if she could sell copiers door-to-door for one year, anyone would hire her. Finding information on selling, however, was the easy part — actually landing a job proved to be much more than simply going in for interviews and exchanging smiles. It would take her six interviews before she was able to land a job.

The story of how she landed her first sales job illustrates the formidable obstacles she

had to conquer just to get her foot in the door.

"The company that hired me was an unknown brand. The manager was very upset that I had been hired after I kind of trapped the director in the sixth interview because he said, 'Gee, if I only knew someone that knew you, I would hire you if they gave you a good reference.' I was incredulous after all he put

Q. What do you do for fun?

A. I *love* to travel. I just really view each day as a new adventure and take advantage of every opportunity that comes my way.

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

A. I just graduated to MP3s. I am listening to advice on how to build a business.

Q. What is the last magazine you read?

A. *Diversity Edge Magazine* (I contribute articles!).

Q. What is your favorite TV show?

A. *Boston Legal*.

Q. Who is your role model?

A. Golda Meir. We had so much difficulty in this country just getting hired as a salesperson — and she *ran* a country. A brilliant woman.

me through, and I said, 'You mean if I find somebody who knows you, you'd hire me?' He said, 'Yup, that's it, goodbye, have a good day.'

"I thought, 'Oh my goodness gracious, there's no chance in the world.' Before selling copiers and business equipment, [the director] had been an athlete, and I was just in suburbia. How would I ever find anybody he knew? Meanwhile, friends of mine found my interview stories so entertaining that I called them up and said, 'Boy, have I got a good one for you.' After sharing that story, my friend's husband said, 'You're not going to believe this. Before he was an athlete, the director had tried selling for my father.' And my friend's father-in-law was a very, very wealthy man.

"So I called him back the next day saying, 'Do you remember telling me that if I found someone you knew, you'd hire me?' There was a very slow, 'Ye-e-e-s...' and I said, 'How does this name sound?' There was a gasp on the other end of the line. I responded with, 'Will 8 o'clock on Monday be good, or do you prefer 8:30?'"

With her first sales job secured, she set out to prove herself as a serious sales

SALES STAR

professional, and though she had never sold before, she soon discovered that she already knew the most effective techniques. In spite of her innate capabilities, the opposition to her presence in the male-dominated company only intensified.

"I sold copiers for 15 months, but the manager did everything in his power to get rid of me. He was so upset because, according to him, 'women just can't sell.' So there was no training, and it was an unknown brand — I didn't know how to use the copier, and the men were told not to talk to me. I went out and asked the secretary what to do, and she said, 'You knock on every door in your territory' (this was in 1991). I did just that. I called up my marketing research, found out that little mom-and-pop shops do not buy business equipment, and bigger ones most likely would be repeat business. So I went in and made friends with everybody and, by the fourth month, I was the top rep. And I've held that level of success pretty much throughout my career."

That was back in the early '90s; since then, Stutz has gone on to enjoy tremendous success in the various positions she has held, though she has had to adjust her technique according to the dictates of modern technology. One company she worked for, however, turned out to be dictating something other what it had promised.

"Eventually, copiers became network printers and software, and then I went to high tech. At the last job I had, I felt that I had finally arrived: it was a 'man's salary' in my opinion and an exciting pilot project. I had the biggest ad agencies in the country lined up to buy, and all of a sudden I realized that the person putting the service in place was avoiding me. Once I cornered him and

he wouldn't look me in the eye, I discovered they were selling vaporware (meaning that the product didn't exist), and they were just waiting for me to collect money. God knows what they would do with it.

"So I quit on the spot once I realized it, and before I left the premises, I called each prospect that was lined up to buy and said, 'I just quit this exciting project, and I want you to take five minutes to contemplate why I might have done that.' They all got the message and thanked me profusely."

This experience left Stutz disappointed and disillusioned with the industry. After having worked for many years to achieve her success, she came to a significant realization about her career. Other personal trials, however, were about to unfold.

"I told my husband, 'I don't care if we have to move to the middle of the country, I'm just not working for anybody else again.' And then, I wound up with a severely broken neck. I was on a stretcher and the doctors were counseling my family that I would be paralyzed. It was the result of two car accidents, the first one ten years prior where I was badly rear-ended at a red light, and the second one was just a fender-bender in which I was a passenger and everybody was fine — except for me.

"So there I was on the stretcher while they were being counseled, and I had one of those near-death experiences you always read about: my life flashed in front of me like a report card, and I realized that one column was blank: community service. Right then and there I made a promise that if I were to survive the accident, I would start helping communities at large. The only thing I had was sales skill training. I had nothing else, but I decided I would just figure out how to

go about this. On the stretcher I started my *Beginning Business* plan. I'm always thinking about business, I can't help it.

"The next morning I used my sales skills again. As you can imagine, I was heavily doped up for surgery when the surgeon meets me and says with a very stern face, 'When you wake up, most likely you'll be paralyzed.' My response was to use the mirroring technique — something I'd never used before. I mirrored the look on his face, the seriousness of his voice, and the cadence of his voice, and I said to him, 'When I wake up, I fully expect to be well.' I had just made this business plan in my head, and I didn't have time for this. He actually jumped back because no one had ever spoken to him that way before and, four days later, I walked out of the hospital. I was extraordinarily lucky and felt that I had a second chance in life. And something happens when you do that — it's like each day is an adventure, you have no fear."



Once she had recovered and had started her new business venture, she suddenly found herself confronted with the realization that women were running away from her because of their preconceived ideas about salespeople — the same prejudice she had had years ago when she first thought about joining sales. She began to read a series of marketing books to help her undo the negative stereotypes in people's minds. Their advice? Write a book. Soon, Stutz was a published author.

SALES STAR

“As soon as I started chapter one, I noticed people started to pay attention, and by the time I got a publisher, credibility for my business just blossomed. Writing a book (*Nice Girls Do Get the Sale*, 2006) led to other products, a newsletter, additional services, and I just kept trying one thing after another no matter how scary it seemed. I find coaching too from time to time helps tremendously when you need to get to the next level. And it’s just all come together. I’m 60 years old now, and I’m having more fun in my life now than ever before, and I never expected to be doing any of this!”

Given her vast amount of expertise, Stutz uses a number of self-actualizing techniques to train sales professionals to reach their optimum performance. The key, she says, is to establish a relationship between yourself and the client.

“Number one: be yourself! Throw away any script that corporate has given you — just be yourself and listen to the other person. The power is in the listening. You have to listen for what’s being said and for what’s *not* being said; you have to watch the other person as they begin to relate to you, when their face lights up, or if a frown comes up. Tell them, ‘I can see you’re excited about this, you look so happy, or vice versa.’ Then start asking questions about what they’re telling you because sometimes people use words in a different way than you do. Listen and clarify, begin asking questions, and if you are selling something, then you know how to position what you have in concert with what they just told you — you can *match*. Then, once they understand what it is you do and how you can help them solve their problems, they’re going to start listening more carefully, and you can ask more questions to paint an even bigger picture to see if there’s interest there. By the time you’ve done all that, you’ve built

a really good foundation. You can then ask, ‘When would you like to start?’ It’s really as easy as that. Men sometimes get upset that I make it too easy, but it’s not a science, and you’re not dealing with chemistry — it’s really about building relationships. And it’s true for getting anything you want, even in your personal life.”

And what are the biggest mistakes she sees salespeople making on the job? Having a one-way conversation and working in self-centered, oblivious isolation, she says.

“Somebody called me up recently and talked for 30 minutes nonstop, selling me on what he has to offer, and he didn’t even know anything about my business. That happens more frequently than not. People don’t thank people who have helped them along the way. Say they start in a local group or chapter and they try to leap frog to the person who owns the whole networking venue — they forget about the local person. You have to keep everybody in the loop, keep thanking people for the success you find, help others behind you by giving them referrals. The whole idea is to build a grateful community or a community that *wants* to help you. You want to build repeat business or testimonials right from the beginning. Before you contact anybody, you have to establish your credibility. You do that by doing research on the companies or the people that you’re about to contact. You have to know what’s important for *them*.”

Much of her advice to young sales professionals, especially women, is contained in her highly successful how-to book, *Nice Girls Do Get the Sale*. Of the book, Stutz says, “I wrote the book as if I was having coffee with you, relating what happened to me, so it mirrors my career. Throughout the book I discuss what worked

and what didn’t work in sales. The strategies are highlighted, and some of the stories make you want to pull your hair out and cry, ‘I can’t believe you’ve survived all that!’ And the end of each chapter is highlighted with sales tips. Both men and women call from all over the country saying they love the stories, but more than that, it’s the first book that tells them everything they need to know to sell better. It’s a fun read, but it’s also jam-packed with information, and they read it with a highlighter in hand because they intend to use it as a reference afterward.”

Though the book is for both women and men, it is called *Nice Girls Do Get the Sale* and is the culmination of her breakthrough work in the sales industry as a woman who successfully battled what was then the standard widespread bias against women in competitive sales positions. How have things changed for women in the industry since the early ’90s?

She recalls that, “There were almost no women in sales back in the days when I started. I was apparently a pioneer. I have found that there’s a huge movement of women quitting corporate America to go out on their own and start their own businesses, which is wonderful, but they’re still afraid of having to sell. Some are shocked that they have to, having thought that if they opened up a business, people would just naturally come by, and that’s not the case. My claim to fame is making it easy using their natural skills of relationship building and nurturing people to make sales. I remove the fear of it.”

Of course, her mastery of the sales industry was not an individually achieved feat. Stutz notes one individual as having been instrumental in her professional success:

“At my third job there was a sales manager,

SALES STAR

Mike Baukol, who had been trained at IBM. I used to joke that I was IBM-trained! He used to meet with me once a week for coffee early in the morning, and he would just tell me stories, just as I tell stories to illustrate what works. Out of that meeting would always come a couple things that I said I'd try. He was the biggest influence in my sales career."

Stutz's advice to up-and-coming sales professionals is decidedly specific: there is no one-size-fits-all formula which will create the desired results. The rules and variables change according to context and understanding this is the most important thing to do in designing a sales approach.

"In corporate, find out who the top producer is — offer to take them out to lunch. If it's a man, he's going to think you're not a threat, you're not going to do well, and he will go with you and share everything he knows. Take a note pad and take notes on everything. You'll know how to sell well, find out what works, how they made their bonuses, and how to work the system in the office to your advantage."

It's also important, according to Stutz, to make yourself as appealing as possible to your supervisors: "You need to sell yourself to management, which is what Mike Baukol taught me. I learned a hard lesson: when

a manager asks you to do paperwork, stop right there on the spot, fill it out, and hand it right back to them. You will become a star in your manager's eyes and get anything you want."

The approach changes, however, if you're an individual trying to make your own mark: "If you're out on your own and you're in network marketing, these people are taught how to sell the product, but they're not necessarily taught how to sell. You want to get with your top producers and find out how people do it successfully. If you're really afraid of making calls and meeting people, hire somebody to get you started or read books. I offer *Sales Tips*, a newsletter that's free of charge, which people can find on my website, www.smoothsale.net.

"For others who are selling products, they will be helped by reading all those marketing materials — that was the piece that was missing for me. Sales and marketing go together like love and marriage. You really need to know how to market in today's society, particularly online. For entrepreneurs, it's very important that they form alliances because others will know aspects of business that they don't know, and they won't have time for all of it. Form alliances and get the help you need, whether it's reading or hiring people. There's another huge industry that just is blooming now

called virtual assistance, and many of them are assistants to CEOs in corporate. They're extremely efficient, they know about running a business, and they hire out on an hourly basis. You can hire them for two hours a week if you want. One of the things I did as CEO of a sales training company is that I found somebody who used to be in corporate sales to do cold calling for me. You need to get help wherever you can get it. I was concerned about spending every penny, but I've found it comes back ten-fold — *at least*. Then you can focus on what you need to do to get to the next level when you're ready."

And as her own history shows, Stutz has been moving beyond and creating new levels of success with grace and skill, and breaking more than a few glass ceilings along the way.

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