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# Introduction

About a year ago, in a moment of procrastination masquerading as an act of reflection, I decided to examine how I spend my time. I opened my laptop, clicked on the carefully synched, color-coded calendar, and attempted to reconstruct what I'd actually done over the previous two weeks. I cataloged the meetings attended, trips made, meals eaten, and conference calls endured. I tried to list everything I'd read and watched as well as all the face-to-face conversations I'd had with family, friends, and colleagues. Then I inspected two weeks of digital entrails—772 sent e-mails, four blog posts, eighty-six tweets, about a dozen text messages.

When I stepped back to assess this welter of information—a pointillist portrait of what I do and therefore, in some sense, who I am—the picture that stared back was a surprise: I am a salesman.

I don't sell minivans in a car dealership or bound from office to office pressing cholesterol drugs on physicians. But leave aside sleep, exercise, and hygiene, and it turns out that I spend a significant portion of my days trying to coax others to part with resources. Sure, sometimes I'm trying to tempt people to purchase books I've written. But most of what I do doesn't directly make a cash register ring. In that two-week period, I worked to convince a magazine

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editor to abandon a silly story idea, a prospective business partner to join forces, an organization where I volunteer to shift strategies, even an airline gate agent to switch me from a window seat to an aisle. Indeed, the vast majority of time I'm seeking resources other than money. Can I get strangers to read an article, an old friend to help me solve a problem, or my nine-year-old son to take a shower after baseball practice?

You're probably not much different. Dig beneath the sprouts of your own calendar entries and examine their roots, and I suspect you'll discover something similar. Some of you, no doubt, are selling in the literal sense—convincing existing customers and fresh prospects to buy casualty insurance or consulting services or homemade pies at a farmers' market. But all of you are likely spending more time than you realize selling in a broader sense—pitching colleagues, persuading funders, cajoling kids. Like it or not, we're all in sales now.

And most people, upon hearing this, don't like it much at all.

Sales? *Blech*. To the smart set, sales is an endeavor that requires little intellectual throw weight—a task for slick glad-handers who skate through life on a shoeshine and a smile. To others it's the province of dodgy characters doing slippery things—a realm where trickery and deceit get the speaking parts while honesty and fairness watch mutely from the rafters. Still others view it as the white-collar equivalent of cleaning toilets—necessary perhaps, but unpleasant and even a bit unclean.

I'm convinced we've gotten it wrong.

This is a book about sales. But it is unlike any book about sales you have read (or ignored) before. That's because selling in all its dimensions—whether pushing Buicks on a car lot or pitching ideas in a meeting—has changed more in the last ten years than it did over the previous hundred. Most of what we think we under-

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stand about selling is constructed atop a foundation of assumptions that has crumbled.

In Part One of this book, I lay out the arguments for a broad rethinking of sales as we know it. In Chapter 1, I show that the obituaries declaring the death of the salesman in today's digital world are woefully mistaken. In the United States alone, some 1 in 9 workers still earns a living trying to get others to make a purchase. They may have traded sample cases for smartphones and are offering experiences instead of encyclopedias, but they still work in traditional sales.

More startling, though, is what's happened to the other 8 in 9. They're in sales, too. They're not stalking customers in a furniture showroom, but they—make that *we*—are engaged in what I call “non-sales selling.” We're persuading, convincing, and influencing others to give up something they've got in exchange for what we've got. As you'll see in the findings of a first-of-its-kind analysis of people's activities at work, we're devoting upward of 40 percent of our time on the job to moving others. And we consider it critical to our professional success.

Chapter 2 explores how so many of us ended up in the moving business. The keys to understanding this workplace transformation: Entrepreneurship, Elasticity, and Ed-Med. First, Entrepreneurship. The very technologies that were supposed to obliterate salespeople have lowered the barriers to entry for small entrepreneurs and turned more of us into sellers. Second, Elasticity. Whether we work for ourselves or for a large organization, instead of doing only one thing, most of us are finding that our skills on the job must now stretch across boundaries. And as they stretch, they almost always encompass some traditional sales and a lot of non-sales sell-

ing. Finally, Ed-Med. The fastest-growing industries around the world are educational services and health care—a sector I call “Ed-Med.” Jobs in these areas are all about moving people.

If you buy these arguments, or if you’re willing just to rent them for a few more pages, the conclusion might not sit well. Selling doesn’t exactly have a stellar reputation. Think of all the movies, plays, and television programs that depict salespeople as one part greedy conniver, another part lunkheaded loser. In Chapter 3, I take on these beliefs—in particular, the notion that sales is largely about deception and hoodwinkery. I’ll show how the balance of power has shifted—and how we’ve moved from a world of *caveat emptor*, buyer beware, to one of *caveat venditor*, seller beware—where honesty, fairness, and transparency are often the only viable path.

That leads to Part Two, where I cull research from the frontiers of social science to reveal the three qualities that are now most valuable in moving others. One adage of the sales trade has long been ABC—“Always Be Closing.” The three chapters of Part Two introduce the new ABCs—Attunement, Buoyancy, and Clarity.

Chapter 4 is about “attunement”—bringing oneself into harmony with individuals, groups, and contexts. I draw on a rich reservoir of research to show you the three rules of attunement—and why extraverts rarely make the best salespeople.

Chapter 5 covers “buoyancy”—a quality that combines grittiness of spirit and sunniness of outlook. In any effort to move others, we confront what one veteran salesman calls an “ocean of rejection.” You’ll learn from a band of life insurance salespeople and some of the world’s premier social scientists what to do before, during, and after your sales encounters to remain afloat. And you’ll see why actually believing in what you’re selling has become essential on sales’ new terrain.

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In Chapter 6, I discuss “clarity”—the capacity to make sense of murky situations. It’s long been held that top salespeople—whether in traditional sales or non-sales selling—are deft at problem *solving*. Here I will show that what matters more today is problem *finding*. One of the most effective ways of moving others is to uncover challenges they may not know they have. Here you’ll also learn about the craft of curation—along with some shrewd ways to frame your curatorial choices.

Once the ABCs of Attunement, Buoyancy, and Clarity have taught you how to be, we move to Part Three, which describes what to *do*—the abilities that matter most.

We begin in Chapter 7 with “pitch.” For as long as buildings have had elevators, enterprising individuals have crafted elevator pitches. But today, when attention spans have dwindled (and all the people in the elevator are looking at their phones), that technique has become outdated. In this chapter, you’ll discover the six successors of the elevator pitch and how and when to deploy them.

Chapter 8, “Improvise,” covers what to do when your perfectly attuned, appropriately buoyant, ultra-clear pitches inevitably go awry. You’ll meet a veteran improv artist and see why understanding the rules of improvisational theater can deepen your persuasive powers.

Finally comes Chapter 9, “Serve.” Here you’ll learn the two principles that are essential if sales or non-sales selling are to have any meaning: Make it personal and make it purposeful.

To help you put these ideas into action, at the end of each chapter in Parts Two and Three you’ll find dozens of smart techniques assembled from fresh research and best practices around the world. I call these collections of tools and tips, assessments and exercises, checklists and reading recommendations “Sample Cases,”

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in homage to the traveling salesmen who once toted bags bulging with their wares from town to town. By the end of this book, I hope, you will become more effective at moving others.

But equally important, I hope you'll see the very act of selling in a new light. Selling, I've grown to understand, is more urgent, more important, and, in its own sweet way, more beautiful than we realize. The ability to move others to exchange what they have for what we have is crucial to our survival and our happiness. It has helped our species evolve, lifted our living standards, and enhanced our daily lives. The capacity to sell isn't some unnatural adaptation to the merciless world of commerce. It is part of who we are. As you're about to see, if I've moved you to turn the page, selling is fundamentally human.

# Part One

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## Rebirth of a Salesman



## 1.

# We're All in Sales Now

Norman Hall shouldn't exist. But here he is—flesh, blood, and bow tie—on a Tuesday afternoon, sitting in a downtown San Francisco law office explaining to two attorneys why they could really use a few things to spruce up their place.

With a magician's flourish, Hall begins by removing from his bag what looks like a black wand. He snaps his wrist and—voilà!—out bursts a plume of dark feathers. And not just any feathers, he reveals.

“These are . . . Male. Ostrich. Feathers.”

This \$21.99 feather duster is the best on the market, he tells them in a soft-spoken but sonorous voice. It's perfect for cleaning picture frames, blinds, and any other item whose crevices accumulate dust.

Penelope Chronis, who runs the small immigration firm with her partner in law and in life, Elizabeth Kreher, peers up from her desk and shakes her head. Not interested.

Hall shows her Kitchen Brush #300, a sturdy white and green scrub brush.

They already have one.

Onto Chronis's desk he tosses some "microfiber cloths" and an "anti-fog cloth for car windows and bathroom mirrors."

No thanks.

Hall is seventy-five years old with patches of white hair on the sides of his head and not much in between. He sports conservative eyeglasses and a mustache in which the white hairs have finally overtaken the brown ones after what looks like years of struggle. He wears dark brown pants, a dress shirt with thin blue stripes, a chestnut-colored V-neck sweater, and a red paisley bow tie. He looks like a dapper and mildly eccentric professor. He is indefatigable.

On his lap is a leather three-ring binder with about two dozen pages of product pictures he's clipped and inserted into clear plastic sheets. "This is a straightforward spot remover," he tells Chronis and Kreher when he gets to the laundry page. "These you spray on before throwing something into the washing machine." The lawyers are unmoved. So Hall goes big: moth deodorant blocks. "I sell more of these than anything in my catalog combined," he says. "They kill moths, mold, mildew, and odor." Only \$7.49.

Nope.

Then, turning the page to a collection of toilet brushes and bowl cleaners, he smiles, pauses for a perfect beat, and says, "And these are my romantic items."

Still nothing.

But when he gets to the stainless-steel sponges, he elicits a crackle of interest that soon becomes a ripple of desire. "These are wonderful, very unusual. They're scrubber pads, but with a great difference," he says. Each offers eight thousand inches of continu-

ous stainless steel coiled forty thousand times. You can stick them in the dishwasher. A box of three is just \$15.

Sold.

Soon he reaches one of his pricier products, an electrostatic carpet sweeper. "It has four terminal brushes made out of natural bristle and nylon. As it goes along the floor, it develops a static current so it can pick up sugar and salt from a bare wood floor," he explains. "It's my favorite wedding gift." Another exquisitely timed pause. "It beats the hell out of a toaster."

Chronis and Kreher go for that, too.

When about twenty minutes have elapsed, and Hall has reached the final sheet in his homemade catalog, he scribbles the \$149.96 sale in his order book. He hands a carbon copy of the order to Chronis, saying, "I hope we're still friends after you read this."

He chats for a few moments, then gathers his binder and his bags, and rises to leave. "Thank you very much indeed," he says. "I'll bring everything forthwith tomorrow."

Norman Hall is a Fuller Brush salesman. And not just any Fuller Brush salesman.

He is . . . The. Last. One.

If you're younger than forty or never spent much time in the United States, you might not recognize the Fuller Brush Man. But if you're an American of a certain age, you know that once you couldn't avoid him. Brigades of salesmen, their sample cases stuffed with brushes, roamed middle-class neighborhoods, climbed the front steps, and announced, "I'm your Fuller Brush Man." Then, offering a free vegetable scrubber known as a Handy Brush as a gift, they tried to get what quickly became known as "a foot in the door."

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It all began in 1903, when an eighteen-year-old Nova Scotia farm boy named Alfred Fuller arrived in Boston to begin his career. He was, by his own admission, “a country bumpkin, overgrown and awkward, unsophisticated and virtually unschooled”<sup>1</sup>—and he was promptly fired from his first three jobs. But one of his brothers landed him a sales position at the Somerville Brush and Mop Company—and days before he turned twenty, young Alfred found his calling. “I began without much preparation and I had no special qualifications, as far as I knew,” he told a journalist years later, “but I discovered I could sell those brushes.”<sup>2</sup>

After a year of trudging door-to-door peddling Somerville products, Fuller began, er, bristling at working for someone else. So he set up a small workshop to manufacture brushes of his own. At night, he oversaw the mini-factory. By day he walked the streets selling what he’d produced. To his amazement, the small enterprise grew. When he needed a few more salespeople to expand to additional products and new territories, he placed an ad in a publication called *Everybody’s Magazine*. Within a few weeks, the Nova Scotia bumpkin had 260 new salespeople, a nationwide business, and the makings of a cultural icon.

By the late 1930s, Fuller’s sales force had swelled to more than five thousand people. In 1937 alone, door-to-door Fuller dealers gave away some 12.5 million Handy Brushes. By 1948, eighty-three hundred North American salesmen were selling cleaning and hair “brushes to 20 million families in the United States and Canada,” according to *The New Yorker*. That same year, Fuller salesmen, all of them independent dealers working on straight commission, made nearly fifty million house-to-house sales calls in the United States—a country that at the time had fewer than forty-three million households. By the early 1960s, Fuller Brush was, in today’s dollars, a billion-dollar company.<sup>3</sup>

What's more, the Fuller Man became a fixture in popular culture—Lady Gagaesque in his ubiquity. In the Disney animated version of “The Three Little Pigs,” which won an Academy Award in 1933, how did the Big Bad Wolf try to gain entry into the pigs’ houses? He disguised himself as a Fuller Brush Man. How did Donald Duck earn his living for a while? He sold Fuller Brushes. In 1948 Red Skelton, then one of Hollywood’s biggest names, starred in *The Fuller Brush Man*, a screwball comedy in which a hapless salesman is framed for a crime—and must clear his name, find the culprit, win the girl, and sell a few Venetian blind brushes along the way. Just two years later, Hollywood made essentially the same movie with the same plot—this one called *The Fuller Brush Girl*, with the lead role going to Lucille Ball, an even bigger star. As time went on, you could find the Fuller Brush Man not only on your doorstep, but also in *New Yorker* cartoons, the jokes of TV talk-show hosts, and the lyrics of Dolly Parton songs.

What a Fuller Man did was virtuosic. “The Fuller art of opening doors was regarded by connoisseurs of cold-turkey peddling in somewhat the same way that balletomanes esteem a performance of the Bolshoi—as pure poetry,” *American Heritage* wrote. “In the hands of a deft Fuller dealer, brushes became not homely commodities but specialized tools obtainable nowhere else.”<sup>4</sup> Yet he\* was also virtuous, his constant presence in neighborhoods turning him neighborly. “Fuller Brush Men pulled teeth, massaged headaches, delivered babies, gave emetics for poison, prevented suicides, discovered murders, helped arrange funerals, and drove patients to hospitals.”<sup>5</sup>

And then, with the suddenness of an unexpected knock on the

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\*A Fuller dealer was almost always a “he,” although in the 1960s, when the company launched a line of cosmetics, it recruited a group of saleswomen it called Fullerettes.

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door, the Fuller Brush Man—the very embodiment of twentieth-century selling—practically disappeared. Think about it. Wherever in the world you live, when was the last time a salesperson with a sample case rang your doorbell? In February 2012, the Fuller Brush Company filed for reorganization under the U.S. bankruptcy law's Chapter 11. But what surprised people most wasn't so much that Fuller had declared bankruptcy, but that it was still around to declare anything.

Norman Hall, however, remains at it. In the mornings, he boards an early bus near his home in Rohnert Park, California, and rides ninety minutes to downtown San Francisco. He begins his rounds at about 9:30 A.M. and walks five to six miles each day, up and down the sharply inclined streets of San Francisco. "Believe me," he said during one of the days I accompanied him, "I know all the level areas and the best bathrooms."

When Hall began in the 1970s, several dozen other Fuller Brush Men were also working in San Francisco. Over time, that number dwindled. And now Hall is the only one who remains. These days when he encounters a new customer and identifies himself as a Fuller Man, he's often met with surprise. "No kidding!" people will say. One afternoon when I was with him, Hall introduced himself to the fifty-something head of maintenance at a clothing store. "Really?" the man cried. "My father was a Fuller Brush salesman in Oklahoma!" (Alas, this prospect didn't buy anything, even though Hall pointed out that the mop propped in the corner of the store came from Fuller.)

After forty years, Hall has a garage full of Fuller items, but his connection to the struggling parent company is minimal. He's on his own. In recent years, he's seen his customers fade, his orders decline, and his profits shrink. People don't have time for a salesman. They want to order things online. And besides, brushes? Who

cares? As an accommodation to reality, Hall has cut back the time he devotes to chasing customers. He now spends only two days a week toting his leather binder through San Francisco's retail and business district. And when he unloads his last boar bristle brush and hangs up his bow tie, he knows he won't be replaced. "I don't think people want to do this kind of work anymore," he told me.

Two months after Fuller's bankruptcy announcement, *Encyclopædia Britannica*, which rose to prominence because of its door-to-door salesmen, shut down production of its print books. A month later, Avon—whose salesladies once pressed doorbells from Birmingham to Bangkok—fired its CEO and sought survival in the arms of a corporate suitor. These collapses seemed less startling than inevitable, the final movement in the chorus of doom that, for many years, has been forecasting selling's demise.

The song, almost always invoking Arthur Miller's 1949 play *Death of a Salesman*, goes something like this: In a world where anybody can find anything with just a few keystrokes, intermediaries like salespeople are superfluous. They merely muck up the gears of commerce and make transactions slower and more expensive. Individual consumers can do their own research and get buying advice from their social networks. Large companies can streamline their procurement processes with sophisticated software that pits vendors against one another and secures the lowest price. In the same way that cash machines thinned the ranks of bank tellers and digital switches made telephone operators all but obsolete, today's technologies have rendered salesmen and saleswomen irrelevant. As we rely ever more on websites and smartphones to locate and purchase what we need, salespeople themselves—not to mention the very act of selling—will be swept into history's dustbin.<sup>6</sup>

Norman Hall is, no doubt, the last of his kind. And the Fuller Brush Company itself could be gone for good before you reach the

last page of this book. But we should hold off making any wider funeral preparations. All those death notices for sales and those who do it are off the mark. Indeed, if one were to write anything about selling in the second decade of the twenty-first century, it ought to be a birth announcement.

## Rebirth of a Salesman (and Saleswoman)

Deep inside a thick semiannual report from the Occupational Employment Statistics program of the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics lurks a surprising, and surprisingly significant, piece of data: One out of every nine American workers works in sales.

Each day more than fifteen million people earn their keep by trying to convince someone else to make a purchase.<sup>7</sup> They are real estate brokers, industrial sales representatives, and securities dealers. They sell planes to airlines, trains to city governments, and automobiles to prospective drivers at more than ten thousand dealerships across the country. Some work in posh offices with glorious views, others in dreary cubicles with Dilbert cartoons and a free calendar. But they all sell—from multimillion-dollar consulting agreements to ten-dollar magazine subscriptions and everything in between.

Consider: The United States manufacturing economy, still the largest in the world, cranks out nearly \$2 trillion worth of goods each year. But the United States has far more salespeople than factory workers. Americans love complaining about bloated governments—but America's sales force outnumbers the entire federal workforce by more than 5 to 1. The U.S. private sector employs three times as many salespeople as all fifty state governments