

Nice Guys Finish Last

I grew up on baseball fields and basketball courts, where there were no shortage of “inspirational” quotes and proverbs used to motivate young men like me. Looking back, most of my coaches were more practitioners than philosophers, but some of the things I heard from them have been with me all of my life.

Just this morning, I had occasion to consider the one about nice guys finishing last.

“He’s a really nice guy,” my client told me, “but he hasn’t brought in any new business, even from the ‘old’ customers I assigned to him. We have to change that, quickly.”

Courage and Assertiveness

“OK, he’s nice,” I said, “but is he brave? Does he have courage?”

I’ve written before that it takes three kinds of courage to be successful at selling: courage of knowledge, courage for contact and courage to question.

Courage of knowledge is pretty straightforward. The more you know about what you sell, the more confident you’re likely to be in selling it. According to my client, the salesperson could use some work on his product knowledge.

Courage for contact is all about the willingness to engage with customers and potential customers; to put it simply, it’s all about making the calls. According to my client, this is not the problem. “He’s very outgoing, he’s good at networking, he makes lots of calls.”

Courage to question is all about the willingness to ask and use provocative questions to challenge the status quo. “Can I quote on your next order?” is not a provocative question, nor is “Would you like to save money on your printing?” Here are some examples of the kind of questions I’m talking about:

- “What could go wrong with a project like this, and how bad would that hurt?”
- “Are you 100% happy with every one of your current suppliers?”
- “Do you feel like you can trust me to keep every promise I make to you?”
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Questions like this are the foundation of assertiveness, and assertiveness is all about positioning yourself as a buyer’s best choice – *we are, here’s why, and he’s how I back that up!*

“Yeah,” my client said, “he’s not good at that at all.”

This Guy

I’m sure you see how courage and assertiveness go together. I hope you see that this guy – like most printing salespeople – has both strengths and weaknesses. Being a nice guy is an asset, but it doesn’t stand alone. Being a nice guy, with expert knowledge, plus courage and assertiveness, is a much better profile. So with that in mind, we’ve established a plan. It starts with a two-week crash course on product knowledge, which is organized around an article I wrote for *Quick Printing* back in 2002. If you haven’t kept all of your old copies, you can find it in the article archives at my website: www.davefellman.com. Click on *Article Archives*, then *Sales Management*, and you’ll find it at the top of the list.

The second stage is to work on his questioning skills. Over the following six weeks, we’re going to coach the salesperson on what questions to ask and how to respond to the most likely answers. We’re also going to make it clear that he has to “toughen up” in order to keep his job.

Let me make this clear, we’re not trying to turn him into a salesjerk, one of those “push-push-push, close-or-die” guys. We’re just hoping to turn him into a braver and more assertive nice guy.

By the way, I hope everyone will understand that I’m using “guy” in its non-gender-specific tense. This is not a guy-girl thing, it’s a salesperson thing. The best salespeople, male or female, are courageous and assertive.

Beyond that, if you’re interested in my views about women in printing sales, look for “A Feminist Perspective on Printing Sales” just below “A Two-Week Plan For Training A New Salesperson About Printing” at my website.