

The art of coaching

Building trust

Linda Aspey

How do I get clients when I hate selling? This is a £64,000 question, asked by coaches everywhere. It's normally followed by: 'I could never be a pushy salesman – I just don't have the gift of the gab.'

I don't think you have to be pushy to be successful in sales; in fact some of the best salespeople I know have more in common with coaches than they have with Arthur Daley. They're good listeners, interested in people, genuinely keen on building relationships rather than making a quick killing and they like to be liked.

Yet whether it's lack of experience, lack of confidence, fear of rejection or dislike of talking about money, most coaches I've met don't like selling. So some just avoid it. I once met a newly qualified coach who'd spent four months and a lot of money putting his business cards onto a database, getting glossy brochures printed and optimising his website. His next step was emailing 2,000 directors, with one of those appointment-making companies doing follow-up calls. But in all that time, he hadn't met any potential customers in the flesh.

People buy from and through people. Think about it – if you wanted an extension built or someone to come in and clean your house, would you pick a name off a website or ask around for recommendations? I think that most of us would say the latter. Having said that, some coaches do get clients directly from their website, but they're not the majority.

When I started in business I got quite a few knocks to my confidence from fruitless cold calling and hours spent stuffing envelopes with carefully crafted letters. Some people love the chase and the challenge of going in cold but I don't. I hated following up the

letters so I didn't, instead naively hoping they would get in touch with me. Nothing happened. So I contacted several people I already knew and one suggested I meet her boss. Her boss asked me to do some work and because she recommended me to someone else, it grew from there, with ongoing and concerted effort from me. Everyone will do it differently, but these are the top three things that have worked for me, that might work for you:

1. *Get networking.*

Networking is not about pumping people or working a room, but it is about building real and reciprocal relationships that endure. Contacting people I already knew was the most obvious and I didn't go in asking for business, just if I could tell them a bit about what I was doing. I've joined local and national networking and business groups – traditional and online – attended conferences, run taster workshops, shared ideas, materials and contacts with others, accepted invitations to all kinds of events and done joint ventures with other coaches. Also, my involvement with professional associations has been a lifeline for networking, learning, support and a sense of community.

2. *Develop a strong professional brand but don't spend a fortune.*

Whilst many of my clients have never even looked at my website, if they refer me to someone else, that's the first

place they will go. Get one you can content manage yourself, but have the main bits done professionally – it'll be money well spent. Don't let your teenager at it. Don't waste money on glossy brochures but do get a logo and use it consistently on everything you produce, so your brand becomes familiar. Finally, always look the part when you're out and about. It's quite easy to forget the importance of looking businesslike, especially if you work mainly from home.

3. *Pick one type of PR that works for you.* PR can be quite time consuming so I think it's worth focusing on one area. I decided to write about coaching, management and leadership for professional finance and management journals, e-zines and blogs. I think it's helped to make me human to readers, build my reputation in their field and I also get the odd bit of work as a direct result. Local papers too are always on the look out for good editorial and you can take a coaching perspective on almost anything – from what makes a good MP to how to deal with the stress of juggling child care and work commitments during the school holidays.

In summary, whether you're offering coaching to private clients or organisations, I recommend you focus less on selling and more on delivering good work and building trusting relationships. A simple business card and website are enough. Then get out there.

And in case you're not convinced, just take a look in your paper bin and tell me how much it's cost someone else to fill it for you. ■

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