

90 Ridiculously Obvious Thoughts on SELLING

Tom Peters

1. “Strategy” overrated, simply “doin stuff” underrated. See Kelleher and Bossidy. (“We have a ‘strategic plan,’ it’s called doing things.”—HK) Action has its own logic—ask Genghis Khan, Rommel, COL John Boyd, U.S. Grant, Patton , W.T. Sherman.
2. **What are you personally great at?** (Key word: “great.) Play to strengths! “Distinct or Extinct.” You should aim to be “outrageously good”/B.I.W. at a niche area (or more).
3. Are you a “personality,” a de facto “brand” in the industry? The Dr Phil of ...
4. Opportunism (with a little forethought) mostly wins. (“Successful people are the ones who are good at Plan B.”)
5. **Little starts can lead to big wins.** Most true winners—think search & Google—start as something small. Many big deals—Disney & Pixar—could have been done as little-er deals if you’d had the nerve to step out before the value became obvious.
6. Non-obvious targets have great potential. Among many other things, everybody goes after the obvious ones. Also, the “non-obvious” are often good Partners for technology experiments.
7. The best relationships are often (usually?) not “top to top”! (Often the best: hungry division GMs eager to make a mark.)
8. **It’s relationships, stupid—deep and from multiple functions.**
9. **In any business such as GE’s you must become an avid student of “the politics,” the incentives and constraints, mostly non-economic facing all of the players.** Politicians are usually incredibly logical—if you (deeply!) understand the matrix in which they exist.
10. **Relationships from *within* our firm are as important—often *more* important—as those from outside—again broad is as important as deep.** Allies—avid supporters!—within and from *non-obvious places* may be more important than relationships at the Client organization. Goal: an “insanely unfair ‘market share’” of insiders’ time devoted to your projects!
11. Gratuitous comment: Lunches with good friends are typically a waste of time.
12. Interesting outsiders are essential to innovative proposal and sales teams. An “exciting” sales-proposal team is as important as a prestigious one.
13. Is the proposal-sales team weird enough—weirdos come up with the most interesting, game-changer ideas. Period.
14. Lunch with at least one weirdo per month. (Goal: always on the prowl for interesting new stuff.)

15. Don't short-change (time, money, depth) the proposal process. Miss one tiny nuance, one potential incentive that "makes my day" for a key Client player—and watch the whole gig be torpedoed.
16. "Sticking with it" sometimes pays, sometimes not—it takes a lot of tries to forge the best path in. Sometimes you never do, after a literal lifetime.
17. **Women are simply better at relationships—don't get hung up on what industries-countries women can't do.**
18. **Work incessantly on your "story"—most economic value springs from a good story (think Perrier)!** In sensitive public or quasi-public negotiations, a compelling story is of immense value—politics is about the tension among competing stories. (If you don't believe me, ask Karl Rove or James Carville.) ("Storytelling is the core of culture." —*Branded Nation: The Marketing of Megachurch, College Inc., and Museumworld*, James Twitchell)
19. Risk Assessment & Risk Management is more about stories than advanced math—and of incredible value in long-term deals.
20. Good listeners are good sales people. Period.
21. **Great listeners are great sales people.** (Listening "skills" are hard to learn and subject to immense effort in pursuit of Mastery. A virtuoso "listener" is as rare as a virtuoso cello player.)
22. Things that are funny to me (American) are often-mostly not funny to those in other cultures. (Humor is as fine-edged as it gets, and rarely travels.)
23. **You don't know Jack Squat about other people's cultures—especially if you are a typically myopic American.** (Like me.)
24. Are you a great interviewer? It's a make or break skill. (Think Barbara Walters—i.e., her skill at extracting unwanted truths from pros in persona-protection ... in front of 10s of millions of people.)
25. Are you a great (not merely "good") presenter? Mastering presentation skills is a life's work—with stupendous payoff.
26. Are you good at flowers (Harvey Mackay's "Mackay 66"—what you should know about a Client.)
27. You can't do it all—be clear at what you are good at, bad at, indifferent at. Hubris sucks.
28. The numbers will more or less take care of themselves over the long haul—if the relationship/s is/are solid gold.
29. **Don't waste your time on jerks—it'll rarely work out in the mid- to long-term.**
30. **Genius is walking away from lousy "scores" (deals) and living through the attendant heat. Big Business is the premier home to Big Egos overpaying by a factor of 2 to 22 with billions at stake.** (Think Jerry Levin.)
31. You haven't a clue as to how this situation will actually play out—be prepared to move fast in a different direction.
32. Keep your word.
33. There is such a thing as a "good loss"—if you've tested something new and developed good relationships. A half-dozen honorable, ingenious losses over a ten-year period can pave the way for a Big Victory in year 11.

34. Underpromise (i.e., don't over-promise; i.e., cut yourself/GE a little slack) even if it costs you business—winning is a long-term affair. Over-promising is Sign #1 of a lack of integrity. You *will* pay the piper.
35. Think “legacy”—what the hell is all this really about for you and the world? (“Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?” —Mary Oliver)
36. **Keep it simple!** (Damn it!) Yup, even in your business. If you can't explain it in a phrase, a page ... you haven't got it right yet.
37. **Know more than the next guy.** Homework pays. (of course it's obvious—but in my work it is too often honored in the breach.)
38. Regardless of project size, winning or losing invariably hinges on a raft of “little stuff.” **Little stuff is and always has been everything!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!—or, “one man's little stuff is another man's 7.6 Richter deal-breaker.”**
39. **In public settings, face saving is all.** When something changes, allow the other guy to come out looking like a winner, especially if he has lost.
40. Don't hold grudges. (it is the ultimate in small mindedness—and incredibly wasteful and ineffective. There's always tomorrow.)
41. **IT'S ALWAYS “THE POLITICS”**—wee **private-sector deal or giant public sector deal.** (Every player, small or large, is angling for something. Master the calculus of advantage.)
42. **To beat the “turnover problem” in key Client posts amidst long negotiations, invest outrageous amounts of time building a wide & deep set of relationships with mid-level (& lower!!) “plodding” “careerists.”** The invisible careerists are the bedrock upon which repeated success is built! (The “Dale Moss Axiom.” And mine from Capitol Hill.)
43. **“Little people” often have Big Friends.**
44. This is *not* war, damn it. All parties can win (or not lose, anyway). And losing bidders can walk away from a deal with increased respect for you and your team.
45. Never, ever dump on a competitor—the Tom Watson mantra.
46. **Never for get the “Law of Cousins!”** In developing nations in particular, power brokers at all levels are at least cousins! Consideration for a second cousin can pay off big time.
47. Speaking of “favours,” jail sucks.
48. **Work hard beats work smart. (Mostly.)**
49. REPEAT: He/she who has the most-best relationships wins. Relationships are the essence of the Work of the Salesperson. The hard ... and long ... work of the salesperson.
50. Mano v mano “hardball” is seldom the answer—end runs based on deeper-wider networks win.
51. If the deal is wired from below, truly wired, than the so-called “big negotiations” are essentially irrelevant.
52. If *every* quarter is a “little better” than the prior quarter—then you are not taking any serious risks.
53. **Phones beat email.**

54. **A THREE MINUTE CALL TODAY CAN AVOID A GAME-LOSER OF A FIASCO NEXT MONTH. There was *always* a time when a little thing could have been addressed that headed off a subsequent big thing.** As to avoiding that call, didn't someone say, "Pride goeth before the fall"?
55. Be hyperorganized about relationship management—you are in the anthropology business. Study the great pols! Brilliant NRM (network relationship management) is not accidental! It is not catch-as-catch can. (Football analogies are cute—but deep political understanding pays the private-school tuition.)
56. Think/ obsess on **ROIR** (Return On Investment In Relationships).
57. **"THANK YOU" NOTES: World's highest-return investment!**
58. **The way to anyone's heart: Doing a nice thing for their kid.** (But, gawd, does this take a gentle touch.)
59. Scoring off other people is stupid. **Winners are always in the business of creating the maximum # of winners—among adversaries at least as much as among "partners."**
60. Your colleagues' successes are your successes. Period. (Trust me, my greatest personal success—financially as well as artistically—has been creating a bigger pond in which everyone wins, even if my "market share" is down.)
61. Lend **a helping hand, especially when you don't have the time.** E.g. share relationships—**the more you give away the more you get in return** (just like they say in church).
62. Listen up: "It was much later that I realized Dad's secret. He gained respect by giving it. He talked and listened to the fourth-grade kids in Spring Valley who shined shoes the same way he talked and listened to a bishop or a college president. He was seriously interested in who you were and what you had to say."
—Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot, *Respect*
63. Mentoring is a thrill—*and* the practical payoff is enormous. The best mentors have the whole world working its buns off for them!
64. Hire for enthusiasm. Promote for enthusiasm. Cherish enthusiasm. Remove non-enthusiasts—they are cancers. ("Nothing is so contagious as enthusiasm."
—Samuel Taylor Coleridge. "A man without a smiling face must not open a shop." —Chinese Proverb.)
65. **It's *always* your problem—you sold it to them.**
66. Don't get too hung up on "systems integration"—the individual bits have got to work.
67. **For God's sake don't over promise on "systems integration"—it's nigh on impossible to deliver.**
68. "Systems" / "Solutions" selling means grappling directly with "culture change" in Client organizations. ("The business of selling is not just about matching viable solutions to the customers that require them. It's equally about managing the change process the customer will need to go through to implement the solution and achieve the value promised by the solution"—Jeff Thull, *The Prime Solution: Close the Value Gap, Increase Margins, and Win the Complex Sale*)

- 69. Shit happens. That's what they pay you for. (A man without a smiling face must not open a shop.) —Chinese Proverb)**
70. This is not a “GE sale”—it is a Joe Jones/Jane Jones sale. **YOU ARE THE “BRAND” THE CLIENT BUYS.** (Mostly.)
71. **GOAL #1: MAKE YOUR CLIENT A HERO—YOU ARE NOT THERE TO GET CREDIT.** (“Taking credit” is for ego-maniacs.)
72. “Decent margins,” over the mid- to long-term are a product of better relationships, not better negotiating skill. (Mostly.)
73. In the immortal words of Larry Bossidy, more or less, “Realism rocks.” (A little truth goes a long way.)
74. Work like hell to get a rep as an expert, to become an industry resource.
75. Work the association angle for all its worth—it may take a decade to pay off.
76. Pay your dues in the client org and in your own org!
- 77. It's all bloody tactics.**
- 78. You must ... LOVE the product!** (Period.)
- 79. Don't over-schedule.** “Running late” is inexcusable at any level of seniority; it is the ultimate mark of self-importance mixed with contempt.
80. It takes time to get to know people. (Duh.)
81. The very idea of “efficiency” in relationship development is ... **STUPID.**
- 82. MBWA (still) rules.**
83. “Preparing the soil” is the “first 98 percent.”
- 84. WORK THE PHONES!**
85. 5K miles for a 5-minute meeting often makes sense. (Thanks, Mark.)
86. Beware complexifiers and complicators. (Truly “smart people” ... simplify things.)
87. The smartest guy in the room rarely wins—alas, he usually is aware he's the smartest guy.
- 88. Be kind—it really is okay, even if you work for GE.**
89. Presidents never tire of being treated like Presidents.
- 90. Luck matters. So: Good luck!**