

# Are You Sales Phobic?

Alas, the cure is to sell more often.

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Leadership and innovation are the glam aspects of entrepreneurship. But the job description of many founders also includes a whole lot of selling. Entrepreneurs must sell investors on their ideas, employees on their workplaces, and customers on their products, value, and reputation. Perpetual pitching is dandy for happy extroverts who salivate at the scent of each new lead. Others, though, rate the process somewhere between distasteful and ulcer inducing.

Part of that aversion is cultural. The term *salesman* has long been shorthand for "slick," "obnoxious," and "integrity-challenged." An analysis of movies and television shows from 1903 to 2005 found that "the salesperson character personifies some of society's most despised characteristics--greed, deception, distrust, and selfishness," according to Katherine B. Hartman, a marketing professor at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington. That's an unfair generalization, to be sure. But it's tough to shrug off a century's worth of stereotyping and view sales as a noble pursuit.

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Selling frequently may help people for whom sales aversion reflects a temporary anxiety. It will not help when the obstacle is something more fixed--specifically, the entrepreneur's personality. Introversion is rarely the problem; true shrinking violets rarely start and lead their own companies. But entrepreneurs are used to calling the shots, and selling transfers decision-making powers to someone else: the buyer. Also, good salespeople are good listeners. Some entrepreneurs don't like that role. They would much rather talk about their favorite subjects, such as themselves and their companies.

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**You don't need professional assistance to try this technique. Beth Zimmerman is one entrepreneur who did it on her own. As principal of Cerebellas, a Long Beach, New York, strategic planning consultancy that has worked with companies such as Motorola (NYSE:MOT) and Western Union (NYSE:WU), Zimmerman was less worried about rejection than put off by the reputation of sales. "It conjured up all kinds of negative associations for me, with ugly types of selling," she says.**

**So Zimmerman mentally reframed the process. She tells herself that she's "not pushing used cars, not selling things that are unseemly." In fact, she no longer considers what she does as sales at all. "Instead of selling, I think of it as listening to the challenges that my customers face and providing them with a way to help solve them," she says.**

Another proponent of the rose-by-any-other-name-smells-sweeter approach is H. David Hennessey, professor of marketing at Babson College in Wellesley, Massachusetts. Hennessey, who teaches a sales skills class to M.B.A. students, counsels them to think of selling as helping people, "just like a doctor, a fireman, or an EMT."

Of course, the decision to tackle a boss's sales demons should be considered in light of the company's real needs. "Most entrepreneurs have the sense that they need to be independent and do it all on their own, and if the objective is to get over the sales fear, that's great," says Kase. "But if the objective is to expand the business, then it could make sense to consider hiring people to make the sales calls."

Unfortunately, not all entrepreneurs have the resources to hire salespeople--especially early in the life of their companies. Others shy away from mental reconditioning as a solution. For those who doubt they can change themselves, the challenge is to modify the sales process to make it more palatable.

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Though the natural born salesperson may not exist, hatred of sales may be bred in the bone.

## **Resources**

How is sales evolving? Richard Hodge, co-author with Lou Schachter of *The Mind of the Customer*, assesses the most pivotal changes in the sales process in a series of podcasts at [www.mindofthecustomer.com](http://www.mindofthecustomer.com).

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