



# PUTTING PEOPLE FIRST AND PRODUCT SECOND

A NEW APPROACH TO SALES Steve M. Rigby

# Careers can be difficult, particularly those that involve sales.

I know. I've sold sawmill equipment and starved. I've sold automobiles and sucked. I've sold real estate and struggled. You noticing a pattern? Hey, at least I was consistent and persistent.

Then, I tried selling new homes and succeeded—succeeded beyond my wildest dreams. So what changed? What was different? Why the turnaround?

As corny as it may sound, I learned how to smile. Not the finished version of S.M.I.L.E. I lay out in my new book of the same name, but a fragmented version—a version that came to me in bits and pieces, from a variety of sources, spread out over many years. Some came from books I read. Others from sales people I studied. Many came from training I received. And a few, the result of personal experiences. With each sliver I gained more insight into learning how to S.M.I.L.E.

Growing up, I followed the Golden Rule. I was taught to always take the high road with everyone and everything. I focused on serving and caring. I was most fortunate for that early direction. Unfortunately, much of the knowledge and training I received in my failed attempts at sales focused not on serving and caring but on selling and closing. It took me in another direction—down a different path—one that led me to losing who I was. I wasn't proud of what I was becoming. I wasn't pleased with the person I saw in the mirror.

I was lost. And I wasn't ... smiling.

I know I'm not the only one to have lost their way. I see them everywhere I shop. I recognize that look on their faces when I'm looking for appliances, clothing, furniture, and bedding. I witness it when I search for automobiles, RVs, insurance, or real estate. I see them struggle, I see them lost, and it pains me. Because I've been there, and I don't want them to be there another day.

And I'm not just

interested in making the life of every sales person less difficult. It goes far beyond that. Ultimately, it's about making their life one worth celebrating—one that's fulfilling, enriching, and purposeful—personally and professionally!

To do that, I came up with a modern business fable about the joyous journey of a real estate agent, Sherri Montgomery, not unlike the road I traveled that led me to writing this story. And it all begins with ...

## A Pleasant Surprise

At last the weekend was over, and Sherri was exhausted. She had expected this new career in real estate to be challenging but never imagined it would be this tough. After taking a call from the one family who had purchased from her, she quickly checked her messages before collapsing onto the loveseat under the shade of her back patio.

Watching the blades of the ceiling fan spinning around and around, Sherri was reminded of her efforts the past few months. She had been touring clients around and around and had only the one sale to show for it. And she was convinced that family only bought because they felt sorry for her.

Worse yet, she had few prospects for future sales. As for listings, the only one she had secured was overpriced, but she took it because she needed the exposure. “Maybe I’ll get lucky and the market will heat up,” Sherri thought. “Then people will be more willing to spend.” All she knew for certain was that she was spent.

Seeing her reflection in the glass patio door prompted another reflection—her decision to get into real estate. She had considered renewing her teaching certificate after her daughter left for college. Sherri had enjoyed her years in the classroom and felt gratified knowing she’d made a difference in her students’ lives. But longing for more, she decided to become a real estate agent, hoping to make a difference financially for her family. “I deserve to be compensated fairly for my hard work and dedication,” she stated with conviction.

Six figures was the goal Sherri had set for her first year as an agent. With only one sale in three months, attainment seemed unlikely. Sighing, she leaned back, put her feet on the coffee table, and closed her eyes. It would be hours before her husband would return from a music venue with his buddies. Perhaps some quiet time was what she needed.

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Suddenly, an unfamiliar noise disturbed her slumber. Sherri sprang to her feet to discover a parrot perched on the other end of the loveseat. A parrot! It was a stunning bird, both in beauty and stature, easily two feet in height. Its body was a bright yellow with wings and tail feathers a vibrant shade of blue. Curiously enough, it apparently meant her no harm. It just sat there quietly, almost as if it had been invited.

Seeking space to regain her composure, Sherri took a seat in a chair at the end of the coffee table and watched in awe as the magnificent bird calmly looked around, taking everything in. She felt compelled to say something. “Polly want a cracker?” she asked instinctively.

The bird slowly turned in her direction and tilted its head slightly. “I don’t mean to disappoint you, ma’am, but my name is not Polly,” it calmly replied. “And are you genuinely offering me a cracker, or is this how you greet all parrots?”

Sherri was stunned. Not that the parrot could speak, she expected that. But it seemed to be communicating with her. Again she responded with the familiar question, “Polly ... want ... a ... crack ... er?”

“Thank you, ma’am,” it answered, sounding more human than parrot. “It would be rude not to accept your offer. I would very much like a cracker.”

“Well, that won’t be a problem ... I guess. I mean ... well, I don’t know what I mean,” Sherri stammered.

“You remind me of a farmer I met who was holding a rope,” the parrot stated. “He was so confused, he didn’t know whether he had just found the rope or lost a mule.”

Sherri was even more dumbfounded. Not only was this parrot talking with her, it was joking, too! She chuckled, feeling a little more comfortable. “I guess I am confused. I’m just not used to having a real conversation with a parrot. Can parrots actually communicate with humans?”

“Yes, ma’am, but most folks in your species aren’t good conversationalists,” it replied with a wink.

“Well, perhaps I am part parrot,” she chuckled.

“Who knows, you might be. And I love your sense of humor, ma’am.”

“As I do yours, and your manners,” Sherri responded. “But you don’t have to call me ‘ma’am.’ I’m not that old.”

“I assure you my manners have nothing to do with age; they show my respect. My parents taught us that good manners never hurt anybody. Saying ‘yes, ma’am’ and ‘no, ma’am,’ and ‘please’ and ‘thank you’ weren’t an option, Sherri.”

“How do you know my name?” she asked with suspicion. “I haven’t introduced myself. Are you one of those secret drones that can spy on people?”

“I assure you, Sherri, I’m as real as real can get.” Tucking its beak under one wing, the parrot pulled out a small feather and presented it to her. “See if this is real enough for you.”

Sherri examined the feather and then moved back to the loveseat. “I’m sorry. I just wasn’t sure if I should trust you.”

“No need to apologize. After all, we just met. It’s important that you trust me, just as I must trust you. Trust is the most important thing in any relationship,” the parrot explained. “Now as for

how I know your name, I was referred to you by someone you know and trust, someone who really believes in you and wants you to be successful.”

“It’s my best friend, Charlene, isn’t it?” Sherri guessed. “But now that I think about it, she wouldn’t do that without giving me a heads up. But my broker would. He’s worried I’m not going to make it in real estate. It’s him, isn’t it?”

“Sherri, at this moment, who sent me is not important. What is important is that we get started off on the right foot. Is that offer for a cracker still on the table, or is it in a box somewhere in a kitchen cabinet?”

Sherri laughed. “I love your quick wit.”

“Thank you, ma’am. My folks always told me to keep my wits about me. ‘Don’t take life so seriously,’ they’d say. ‘We’re not going to get out of it alive anyway!’”

As Sherri nodded in agreement, her cell phone signaled a new text from an agent notifying Sherri that her listing didn’t work for her clients. She texted back that she would contact her later. “Now where were we?” she asked, returning her attention to the parrot. “Oh, we were about to head to the kitchen.” She put her phone in her pocket and extended her forearm.

“May I walk you in?”

“I would be honored,” the parrot replied, hopping onto her arm. “By the way, my name is Rolly.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Rolly,” she said with a grin. “Polly ... Rolly ... I wasn’t far off, was I?”

“Only one letter,” Rolly chuckled. “But then close only counts with horseshoes and hand grenades.”

Their laughter was interrupted by Sherri's cell phone. She positioned her forearm so Rolly could hop onto the kitchen island and then fumbled in her pocket to answer the call. After a brief conversation, she put away her phone and explained the interruption. "That was Charlene. Along with being my best friend, she's also my hairdresser. She invited my husband, Doug, and me for dinner tomorrow. Which reminds me, I still owe you those crackers."

As she searched the pantry, Rolly responded, "You really don't have to go to any trouble."

"It's not a problem," Sherri assured him. "No problem at all. Now if I could just remember where I put them."

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# Make Me Feel Important

Rolly took the opportunity to view his surroundings. The spacious kitchen opened to a comfortable great room that was tastefully decorated. Above the fireplace was a portrait of Sherri and her family. Just off the kitchen, an engraved plaque was prominently displayed on a desk area.

“I’m admiring your beautiful home,” Rolly stated.

“Just disregard the dust,” Sherri yelled. Moments later, she shrieked as if she’d discovered gold.

“Rolly, do you like Goldfish?”

“I do, Sherri, but I have a hard time catching the little critters. They are too fast and slippery.”

“I’m not talking about the swimming kind,” she explained. “I’m talking about the cracker kind.”

“Yes, I do like those,” he said eagerly.

Sherri presented a bowl of Goldfish crackers and a cup of water so Rolly could easily reach them.

He gulped one cracker down. “I appreciate the treat—and the thoughtfulness.”

“It’s no problem. I’m enjoying your company.”

“It’s an honor to be here!” Rolly remarked. Glancing toward the great room, he added, “While you were on your treasure hunt, I couldn’t help but notice the portrait above your fireplace. Beautiful setting and gorgeous family. Is that recent?”

“Let me think ... that would have been four years ago when I taught Carly, our baby, during her freshman year in high school. And John David, her older brother, had just started college.”

“One big happy family!” Rolly said, admiring the portrait again. “Where are Carly and John David now?”

“Carly is attending a local university and has made the Dean’s List! As for our son, he just graduated and is now working at Doug’s car dealership.”

“Congratulations! You must be proud!” Turning toward the desk area, he continued, “And I love this plaque—especially the message!”

Sherri brought it over for Rolly to examine more closely. Engraved in bold letters were the words:

***Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire!***

Sherri also shared the handwritten note she displayed with the plaque. The message read, “Thanks for lighting our fire!” and was followed by dozens of signatures. “The plaque was a gift from my last class. It still brings tears to my eyes.”

“I can tell. I would love to have a photo of you holding it to use in my training.”

“I can take a picture with my cell phone and print it for you,” Sherri offered.

“Thanks, but I’ll use mine.” Reaching under his left wing, Rolly pulled out his phone. “I had a special sling made that’s hidden beneath my feathers.”

After posing for Rolly's picture, Sherri placed the plaque and note back on the desk. "So you do training? What kind?"

"Mostly sales, in all sorts of industries."

"And how did you learn that?"

"Years ago I lived with a top trainer for IBM and Dale Carnegie. He practiced on me, and over time, I just picked it up. I was honored to eventually train with him."

"Impressive! You must be really good at it."

I know there is a better way, one that helps salespeople, sales teams, and companies get in the "people" business, redefines success, and focuses readers on making a difference, not just a dollar, that focuses on people over the product.

“My graduates tell me I have a gift,” Rolly answered humbly. “I get numerous referrals and am blessed with a very full calendar.” Glancing down at his water, he added, “My cup runneth over, so to speak.”

“If you’re that busy, I’m surprised your phone hasn’t been ringing off the wall, so to speak,” she said, sounding skeptical.

Rolly held out his phone so Sherri could read the screen. She counted two missed calls, one voice message, two text messages, and one email. “Has your phone been on mute the entire time you’ve been here?”

Rolly tucked it away. “I was just being respectful.”

“But weren’t you afraid you would miss something important—perhaps some new business?”

“At this moment, there’s nothing more important to me than you,” Rolly replied. “Think about it. If I were to take a call while visiting with you or if I simply glance at my phone to check an email or a text message—even for just a moment—what message am I sending you?”

“That whoever or whatever is on your phone is more important than me.”

“Precisely! And that is the exact opposite of what I want to say. My goal when I’m with you is to make you feel like you’re the most important person in my world, period!”

“That makes me feel so special!” Sherri exclaimed. “Have you always treated people that way?”

“I was inspired by Mary Kay Ash, the founder of Mary Kay Cosmetics. She was speaking at a hotel where I was training. On a break, I overheard a reporter ask what the key was to her success. Can you guess what her answer was?”

Sherri considered the possibilities. “Innovative marketing? Product research? Superior business strategy?”

“Those are all plausible, but Ms. Ash attributed her success to something very simple. She pretended that every person she met had a sign hanging around his or her neck. And that sign said ...”

***Make me feel important!***

“That is simple! And profound!” Sherri cried. Then the lesson of the sign dawned on her. “I feel horrible about the sign you must have thought I saw you wearing. The one that said, ‘Make the person contacting Sherri feel more important than Rolly!’ I’ve done that twice already. And the irony is both could have waited until later. Will you forgive me?”

“There’s nothing to forgive, Sherri.”

“But I didn’t mean to be inconsiderate. I just thought I was staying on top of my business—being responsible.”

Interesting choice of words,” Rolly said. “Instead of being respons-*ible*, imagine how you would feel being respons-*able*. Able to respond in a way that’s respectful to the person in front of you and the person trying to reach you.”

# A Better Way

Careers can be difficult, particularly those that involve sales. It's a field with a rather tawdry reputation, and one that can be easy to lose your way in. I know there is a better way, one that helps salespeople, sales teams, and companies get in the “people” business, redefines success, and focuses readers on making a difference, not just a dollar, that focuses on people over the product. There is a way, in sales, to love what you do, to do it in a way that impacts lives, and reach new heights of personal and professional success—a way that makes you ... *smile*.

The lesson on phone etiquette is just one of many I offer to put people first in my new book, *S.M.I.L.E.* If you've enjoyed the tale, I hope you'll consider continuing the journey.

*“What do we live for if not to make life less difficult for each other?” — George Eliot*

Pure, profound, and poetic. **What a beautiful philosophy by which to live one's life. Yes, even—perhaps especially—a life in sales.** 📖



# Info



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### About the author

For nearly two decades, Steve Rigby served the homebuilding industry as both a student and a teacher of selling, managing, and training. He was responsible for directing the sales efforts for three of the nation's top-ten public homebuilders. As a result, those companies experienced tremendous growth with very healthy bottom lines. In the past decade plus, Steve has continued to prove his proficiency as a thought leader through his own business, New Wings Consulting, LLC, which serves companies across a variety of industries. As he's accustomed to seeing, those companies are also experiencing tremendous growth and very healthy bottom lines. Steve resides on Lake Travis, just outside Austin, Texas, with his wife, Susan, their two horses, Blondie and Envy, and their dog, Drizzle. If you're up for a visit, he and Susan conduct retreats at their cabin on the lake.



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