



The SMMarT Guy

Door-to-Door Sales

By Kim Robinson

I was about to sit down to dinner with my family when the doorbell rang. I opened the door and greeted the stranger standing on my porch.

"Yes?" I asked.

"Hello. I'm earning money for college selling magazines," said the stranger at my door in one long burst of un-asked for information. He paused, waved a crinkled paper in a plastic cover my way, smiled crookedly, took a breath, and added, "How are you today?"

I was just fine until you disturbed me at dinnertime, I thought.

Like most of you, I have met magazine salesmen at my door many times—some better than others, but each one waving a semi-official looking ID while giving me a run-on pitch to purchase magazines I don't want so that I could help him "earn money for college."

At my front door I have also met the Fuller Brush man (I'm not *that* old—he was selling brushes to my mom), the "all purpose miracle cleaner" salesman (the one shiny spot on my door's brass foot stop testifies to his product's effectiveness—still, no sale.), the vacuum cleaner salesman (no kidding—and no sale!), the landscape contractor "representative" (since he emphatically stated he was *not* a salesman I had no problem *not* purchasing his services), and, of course, cute little girls too numerous to mention selling Girl Scout cookies (a big sale every time).

Although the Fuller Brush man disappeared from our porches many years ago, door-to-door sales people are here to stay. As a sales channel, the practice is steadily gaining in popularity among companies totally unrelated to magazines, miracle cleaners, or vacuum cleaners. Entertainment and high-tech communication companies and, in many states, even power and natural gas companies are using door-to-door sales to gain customers. In fact, Texas has no less than 10 different companies using door-to-door sales teams to sell their residential and commercial power and natural gas services.

In the last 10 years, companies not accustomed to competition (like power

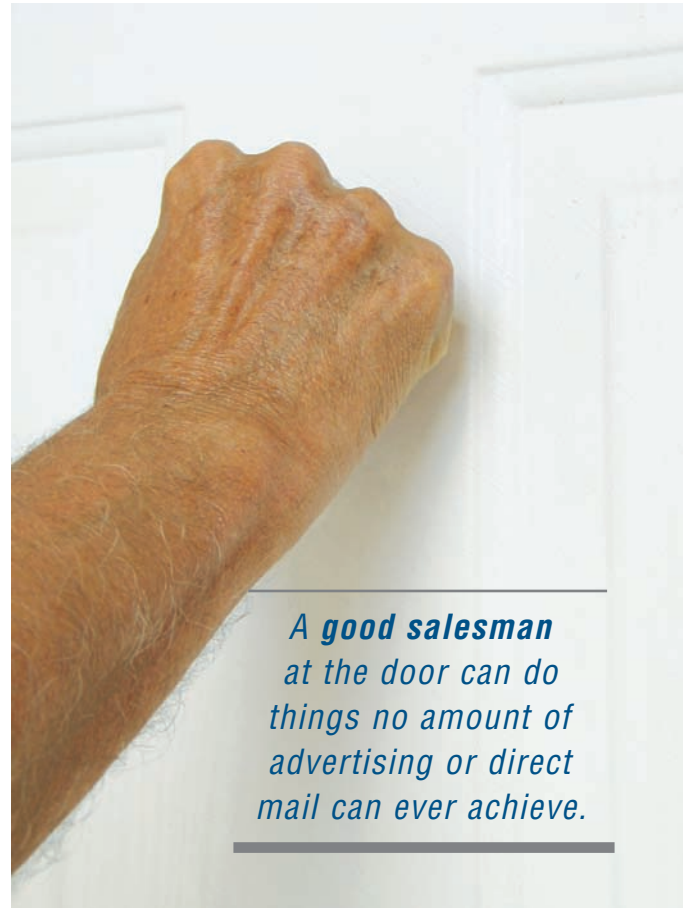
companies) have come under competitive attack from all sides. The Telecommunications Act of 1996 enabled cable television and telephone companies to offer each other's products. As a result, competition for video, Broadband, and telephony has grown so brutal that the companies in these industries have seen their direct mail take rate fall right into the tank. A 2 percent direct mail response rate used to be minimum expectation; now it is considered exceptional.

These telecommunications companies learned the hard way that what worked in the past does not always work now. A free install or movie channel, or even unlimited calling everywhere from Guam to Puerto Rico, will not move the needle much because the company's competitors make about the same offer at about the same price point. What should these companies do to drive penetration and high-end sales?

Enter the door-to-door salesman.

Door-to-door sales are cold calling and the consultive sales process in their purest form. A good salesman at the door can do things no amount of advertising or direct mail can ever achieve. First and foremost, a door-to-door salesman puts a human face to a corporate entity, and it is harder to hate a person who smiles at you than a giant, faceless corporation that charges you *just to watch TV!* Additionally, those few who communicate well can establish a rapport with a prospect, uncover needs, and fulfill those needs with the features and benefits of their product.

Regardless the product (I once coached a man on how to sell home mortgages door-to-door), the key to success selling anything door-to-door is to treat the personal contact the same as a telephone cold call. That means you should smile, be sincere, ask questions, and *be brief*. In addition, do not open the exchange with "How are you?" because nothing screams "I AM A SALESMAN



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TRYING TO SELL YOU SOMETHING YOU DON'T WANT" louder than an insincere question that only wastes time. Instead, smile, cut to the chase with a qualifying question to see if there is even a chance of making a sale, and, depending upon the response, either move on verbally with the consultive sales process or move on physically to the next door.

The next time you answer the door to a salesman in the evening, and you ask him why he's coming by at dinner time, he may just tell you the truth: *Because now is when you're home.* ■

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