

SELLING IN TOUGH TIMES: *IT'S A MATTER OF ATTITUDE!*

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Having started two successful businesses during recessions and having learned how to sell in a tough commodity market, I feel uniquely qualified to write on selling in tough times and tough markets. The United States government defines tough times as two consecutive quarters of negative economic growth. On a personal level, you know when things are tough—the market feels soft and buyers negotiate harder than when demand is greater than supply.

At this time, we have a whole generation of salespeople that have only sold during great economic times. We also have veteran salespeople that may have forgotten how to sell in tough times. One out of four will fail in tough times. Seventy percent barely survive. And five percent will thrive. Which are you?

You fight this battle on two fronts. One, you fight it on the streets with your knowledge and skills. Two, you fight it in your mind—your thinking and your attitude. In this article I discuss the mental side of selling in tough times. You must win this psychological battle to thrive in tough times.

Attitude drives behavior. We move in the direction of our thoughts. We behave as we believe. What we feel on the inside we generally demonstrate on the outside.

Consider the source

During tough times you are surrounded by bad news. Everywhere you turn you hear negativism: the media, peers, customers, concerned family and friends, and a worried management that is trying desperately to keep things afloat. How you choose to input and process this information determines your attitude and behavior. A major problem that salespeople experience during tough times is that they believe everything that people tell them and allow it to influence their thinking. You must selectively input this information. How credible is the source? There are three types of people to consider.

The commiserator wants information, time, and empathy. This person has legitimate concerns and uses you as a sounding board. Listen and provide helpful information. Empathy is not the same thing as sympathy. Empathy is the intellectual understanding of someone's pain. Sympathy is crying with the other person. Empathize, don't sympathize.

The manipulator wants to use whatever means and opportunities he has available to his advantage. Therefore, the manipulator will use the negative press and scuttlebutt to negotiate tougher with you. Don't fall for this game. Remember, you cannot make a good deal with a bad guy.

The professional pessimist has a full-time job being negative. The sky is always falling in and the next disaster is just around the corner. Don't give this much time and attention. Consider the source.

Optimism

One study of salespeople found that optimistic salespeople sold on average thirty-seven percent more products and services than their negative counterparts. Hang on to your optimism. How do you maintain this positive attitude in tough times?

First, view success in the long term and failure in the short term. You are working diligently toward your success. That is your long-range goal. Of course there will be failures along the path! But the failure is always short term. You experience momentary setbacks as you pursue success. Everyone encounters these short-term failures. How you process this experience determines whether you learn from it or you inhibit and limit yourself because of it.

If you define success as the quality of your habits—work and personal—you are living success the minute you leave the house in the morning and begin your day of calling activities. By emphasizing quality efforts, you are practicing the habits of successful people.

Second, reframe what you hear and see. Perception is the meaning that you attach to incoming stimuli. It's how you choose to interpret events. There is generally more than one way to interpret that which occurs around you. If you habitually think in terms of the worst possible outcome, you will live a life of worry and despair. You'll fret over the smallest things.

Ask yourself, "Is there another way to perceive this situation?" "Is there something positive in this message?" The meaning that you attach to events determines your attitude and response. Habitually negative people have learned only one way to interpret life—the negative way.

Third, remain focused. Lock in on your goal and lock out the distractions along the way. There is plenty of noise or clutter on your radar screen during tough times. It's everywhere. Focus is positive tunnel vision. It's concentrating your efforts with laser-like activities on those areas that will give you the return that you desire. On which would you rather focus: all of the negative information that many people overdose on or the positive actions that you can take to elevate yourself to the next level.

You may not be able to control your environment totally but you can control your reaction. You may not be able to control the outcome of your efforts but you can control your input. You may not be able to silence the cynics and the critics but you can prove them wrong with your attitude and behavior.

Fourth, give tough times an appropriate amount of emotion. Is it scary? Yes. Is it disabling? No, unless you allow it to disable you. Does it require a reasonable amount of concern from you? Yes. Does it require incessant hand wringing? No, unless you permit it. Tough times are unnerving but not incapacitating. It's normal to feel the emotion. Feel it. That means you're alive and knee-deep in reality. How you choose to use this emotion determines whether or not it's healthy.

Some salespeople view this energy as extra fuel for their afterburners. It fuels their hard work. Others are intimidated by it and it causes them to retreat into the helplessness that victims feel. "What's the use? I can't do anything about the economy." That's how victims talk to themselves.

Those who thrive in tough times capitalize on this energy to work harder. It gets them out of bed earlier in the morning. It stirs their creative juices for better solutions. It sharpens their negotiating focus. You have a choice

for how you want to use this energy and emotion. It can stimulate you or discourage you.

Positive mental programming

Garbage in—garbage out. Good in—good out. That's the old computer principle. We can apply that same principle to your thinking. Put good stuff into your head and good stuff will come out in your behavior. Surround yourself with motivational quotes and slogans. For example,

“Tough times never last, but tough people do.” *Robert Schuller*

“Any fact facing us is not as important as our attitude toward it, for that determines our success or failure.”
Norman Vincent Peale

“The last of human freedoms: to choose one's attitudes in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.” *Victor Frankl*

Read inspirational stories of others that have persisted in the face of defeat and failure. It helps to know that others have walked this path before you. Fuel yourself emotionally, spiritually, and mentally. Your abilities will expand to your capacity for believing.

Positive mental programming is how you talk to yourself and how you program your thinking. Program yourself for success by concentrating on those things that will help you versus hurt you. Does it really help you to obsess on the negative news from your industry or to go out and increase your calling efforts?

Paradoxically, salespeople reduce their calling efforts in tough times by thirty-eight percent. They call at sixty-two percent of their good times calling rate. If you increase your efforts by twenty-five percent you have in effect doubled your exposure on the streets. This is positive mental programming. Successful salespeople make it a habit to do those things that others can't or won't do for whatever reason.

Regardless of your industry, there are great challenges ahead of you. Tough times are a reality of business. If you're in business long enough, you will experience a downturn in your industry followed by an upturn. That is the cyclical nature of business. Watch the stock market. It ebbs and flows. Professional athletes also understand this. There will be good years. There will be bad years. And there will be great years. The one constant in all of this can be your performance.

What makes you a champion in any profession, market, or business is how you perform your job and excel at your career. There are no sometimes champions. Those that thrive in tough times do so because they practice the habits of success all of the time. It's never too soon to think about your future and never too late to do anything about it.

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