

WHITEPAPER

**SMALL
WINS,
BIG
VICTORIES**

Small Wins, Big Victories

One cold night, as an Arab sat in his tent, a camel gently thrust his nose under the flap and looked in. "Master," he said, "let me put my nose in your tent. It's cold and stormy out here." "By all means," said the Arab, "and welcome," as he turned over and went to sleep.

A little later the Arab awoke to find that the camel had not only put his nose in the tent but his head and neck also. The camel, who had been turning his head from side to side, said, "I will take but little more room if I place my forelegs within the tent. It is difficult standing out here." "Yes, you may put your forelegs within," said the Arab, moving a little to make room, for the tent was small.

Finally, the camel said, "May I not stand wholly inside? I keep the tent open by standing as I do." "Yes, yes," said the Arab. "Come wholly inside. Perhaps it will be better for both of us." So the camel crowded in. The Arab with difficulty in the crowded quarters again went to sleep. When he woke up the next time, he was outside in the cold and the camel had the tent to himself.

This fable, *The Camel's Nose in the Tent*, illustrates the effectiveness of small wins: first, the nose, then the head and the neck, followed by the forelegs and hind legs, resulting in the whole body in the tent and crowding out the Arab. Human rights champions, environmentalists, and other change agents have used the small-wins strategy for creating incremental changes that lead to bigger victories.

You eat an elephant one bite at a time

Karl Weick first wrote about this strategy for change in *American Psychologist* in 1984. He defined a small win as "a concrete, complete, implemented outcome of moderate importance. By itself, one small win may seem unimportant. A series of wins at small but significant tasks, however, reveals a pattern that may attract allies, deter opponents, and lower resistance to subsequent proposals." The study of small wins pre-dates this research, as the nearly two-century old fable illustrates. Social psychologists call this strategy the foot-in-the-door technique or the domino effect. It often appears in discourses on persuasion.

Small wins work because they are small. Small change, which leads to small wins, is easier for people to accept than big change. There is less resistance to small change. Since it is more manageable, small change and its consequent wins require fewer resources and time to complete. With

SMALL WINS, BIG VICTORIES

small change, people feel like they are more in control of their situation. This sense of control lowers change anxiety, an inhibiting force for most people. The cost of failure with small change is lower, so people are more willing to risk. Small wins do not attract a lot of attention by opponents. They may view the battle over small wins a waste of energy.

Small wins work because they are wins. Everyone likes a winner. Everyone wants to be a winner. Winning is self-reinforcing and self-enhancing. People feel better about their efforts when they win. Others may witness the victory and be willing to join the ongoing effort. Success is easier to leverage than failure, and a series of small wins can lead up to huge victories over time.

Small wins include easy wins as you pick the low-hanging fruit. Low-hanging fruit requires less effort for a high-probability success. Winning the easy ones adds up. The easy wins combined with the occasional big win result in major traction for your ideas.

Small wins work because they are small, and they are wins.

Small wins have special relevance for salespeople because success in sales is generally the outcome of completing many short-term sales objectives. From contact to contract, the typical salesperson must achieve several intermediate sales objectives. These short-term objectives are benchmarks along the path of contact to contract. Achieving short-term sales successes along this path is easier and more practical. Buyers agree to a product demonstration much quicker than they agree to purchasing a product. To use this strategy effectively, you must understand the next, best step that you must take to move the customer along this path to contract. This next, best step is your small win. The more of these small wins that you achieve, the more leverage you have for the final sale.

As buyers travel this path with you, they invest time and other resources. The greater their investment, the greater their commitment to your desired outcome. As they sink more costs into the process, the more they have to lose by failing to move forward. This sunk-cost investment ensures that buyers cannot afford to change course. The buyer is too pregnant with your concept to quit. This increases the likelihood that they will help give birth to the idea.

SMALL WINS, BIG VICTORIES

Here is a partial list of small wins for salespeople:

- Securing the initial appointment
- Getting agreement to the next meeting
- Arranging for a demonstration or test of your product
- Setting up a facilities tour of your location
- Securing a list of other contacts in an account
- Getting your product or service specified for a bid
- Having the buyer agree not to bid this sales opportunity
- Getting buyers to reduce the number of competitors that they are considering
- Getting your buyer to view the problem in the long-term versus short-term

There are dozens of next, best steps that you could ask your buyer to take that would move them closer to your position. Achieving the next, best step is a small win. A series of these small wins leads to the ultimate goal of securing the order—the big victory.

This process is called **Limited Objectives Selling** because at every step along the path, you want to accomplish a limited sales objective—a small win.

Knowing your *next, best step*—your small win—will help you achieve victory in your territory.

About the Author



Tom Reilly is co-author of *Value-Added Selling*, 4th edition (McGraw-Hill 2018). Additionally, he has written twelve other books including the hot-selling *Crush Price Objections*. His award-winning column appears in *Industrial Distribution Magazine*. Tom has a Master's degree in psychology and is a faculty member at the University of Industrial Distribution. He began his career as a salesman for a Fortune 500 chemical company and then opened his own distribution company in Houston, Texas. He sold that in 1981 to pursue a full-time speaking and sales training career. You may contact him through his website www.TomReillyTraining.com.