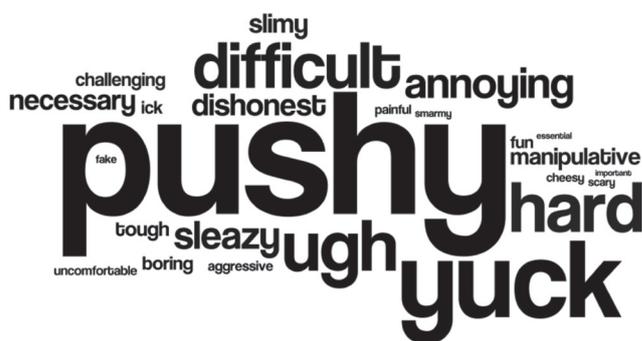


'The S-word': Why we need to confront the stigma surrounding sales

Picture the scene. A newly-appointed sales director assembles her several hundred-strong sales force for a kick-off conference. Staring out at the seated rows of team members, she asks their audience to raise their hand if they have the word 'sales' on their business card. Only one hand is raised – her own, writes Ian Price, business psychologist and honorary fellow of the APS

Why do sales professionals routinely avoid the S-word? Job title euphemisms among our delegates include account director, business development executive and client development manager. How can the industry establish a reputation of professionalism around the sales role and persuade bright, capable young people as to the attractiveness of a career in sales when those already in it cannot bring themselves to use the word in their own job title?

Is our diffidence about the S-word a typically British distaste for overt or pushy behaviour? Surely in the US we wouldn't expect the same sort of reaction, would we? When researching his book *To Sell is Human* – one of the best written about the profession – US journalist Dan Pink invited his broad online audience to send him the first three words that came into their heads when they thought of "sales" or "selling". The resulting word-cloud (pictured) is revealing in the overwhelming sense of negativity and distaste.



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When we examine popular preconceptions towards sales, we only have to think of depictions of sales people in recent films. *Glengarry Glen Ross*, *The Tin Men*, *Boiler Room* and – most recently – *The Wolf of Wall Street* all show ruthless salesmen extracting money from consumers that had no need of aluminium cladding or penny stocks. And that's the story of sales over the past hundred

years. The twentieth century began with growing consumer wealth and property ownership fuelling an explosion in industrial-scale advertising, marketing and selling. The expression "hard sell" was coined in 1952.

The unique circumstances of the second half of the twentieth century have cast a long shadow over the sales profession in the twenty-first. All of the film examples above, however, feature business-to-consumer selling and are all examples of what in game theory is called zero sum selling: the penny-stock salesman trades worthless stock for the customer's cash. Money has changed hands but there is no change in the overall value held by both parties. But this is not selling as we practise it today in the business-to-business context in which most of the industry works. Our customers buy from us because they derive greater value from our solutions and services than the money they pay us to deliver them. In other words, our sales are non-zero sum transactions.

If we regard the mid-twentieth century as a post-industrial aberration and cast our mind back to mankind's earliest beginnings, we find non-zero sum selling dating back tens of thousands of years. In his book *Non Zero*, Robert Wright argues that all of mankind's achievements derive from this early ability to trade and collaborate in non-zero sum transactions. Anthropologists have found tools

made from obsidian from twenty thousand years ago on the Pacific Island of New Ireland. There are no natural deposits of obsidian on New Ireland – it came from the island New Britain 400km away as a result of early trading.

Selling is not a toxic, unpleasant or disreputable practice. Bad selling is. What we have witnessed too frequently in the last half-century is bad selling but to tar the sales industry with this brush like becoming an anti-capitalist because of the banking crisis of 2008. We need to remember that capitalism and selling have helped mankind flourish since the beginning of time.

Fast forward to the twenty-first century and the most impactful research of recent years into the business of selling, the work of CEB best known for the resulting book, *The Challenger Sale*. Among a number of surprising outputs was the fact that the greatest driver of customer loyalty was the sales experience – at 53% well ahead of product/service delivery, value-to-price ratio and company/brand impact. Rather than thinking of the sales process as zero sum, the research suggests that it is of value in of itself. It makes sense, therefore, that the greatest share of high performers among sales people are to be found in the Challenger profile. The Challenger delivers insights to the customer and challenges the customer's assumptions. As Neil Rackham asks: "Would your last prospect pay you for your sales visit?"

It was pointed out to me recently that the word 'sell' derives from the Old English word 'sellen' which, in addition to meaning 'to exchange for money' also meant to 'give'. We need to reclaim this sense of selling as giving something of value to the customer, of a non-zero sum transaction.

It does feel as if the industry is ready to move in the right direction. High on the list of products with a reputation for zero sum sales approach is cars (think Arthur Daley and Swiss Toni). Andy Bruce, chief executive of Lookers, interviewed in *The Sunday Telegraph* in August 2015 says: "Changing that reputation is our number one priority. We want to be there to help people, not control them." So if Britain's second-biggest car dealer is setting about reframing sales in its own organisation, what more can the industry do to remove the stigma from the S-word?

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