



Client Bulletin January 2023

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"If you can learn a simple trick, Scout, you'll get along a lot better with all kinds of folks. You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view, until you climb inside of his skin and walk around in it."
— Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*

Some time ago the managing director decided to sell her perfectly practical German engineered SUV for an impractical variant. For reasons unfathomable to a mere male, she concluded that a firmer riding device with less head room, less cargo space and the capacity to induce claustrophobia would make a great daily driver. Clearly a German engineer had colluded with an Italian designer to come up with a modern version of motorised medieval torture.

No matter, once acquired the MD loved the thing and basked in the many compliments of passersby who had never experienced the compromises and deprivations required to achieve the end visual result.

As time went by and I continued my running commentary regarding the many failings of the vehicle, the MD seemed to grow tired of my rants and, one suspects, of the impracticalities of her mode of transport. Finally, just before Xmas, she agreed to rid us of the damn thing provided I replaced it with something of her choosing.

I suspect her cunning plan to punish me was hatched while she observed me mowing the lawn in 34-degree heat and 100% humidity. Heat and humidity are my worst enemies, I hate them both with equal passion. From the comfort of her air-conditioned abode, she decided that whatever vehicle she chose, it must be located somewhere hot, humid and far away. Furthermore, I must be compelled to travel to whatever hell on earth the purchase was to take place and drive the new ride home.

From here her task was fairly straight forward. Townsville in summer met all her requirements, with the added bonus of possible cyclone risk and the occasional flooded road and subsequent crocodile encounter. The purveyor of her preferred German brand had her perfect replacement in stock, and negotiations commenced. I would fly to Townsville, hand over the loot and drive home. Initial discussions with the sales guy went well and we struck up a bit of what felt like mutual respect. That is, I respected the fact that he was going to take my money, and he respected the fact that the managing director was calling the shots.

Then the sales guy went on holidays, and I ended up in discussions with someone else. The existing rapport and respect seemed to evaporate, and I started to get cold feet. The numbers still worked and the car was still very appealing, but... I now felt like I was doing business with someone who hadn't taken the time to get to know the customer or build any relationship. In my experience, buying a vehicle for someone who has the power of life and death in your world is an emotional one, and needs to be treated as such.

In any event the new guy turned out to be the dealer GM and, to his credit, worked me out pretty quickly. This ability to change tack, combined with the return of the original sales guy, got the deal done.

Here's the thing... Most people of my acquaintance don't like being sold stuff. They like to think that they made the purchase call, and the salesperson is merely the facilitator of information provided to support that decision. Really good salespeople know this and spend much time and energy building rapport in order for the information they provide to be well received and, more importantly, believed.

I am amazed at the number of times I've experienced a salesperson go for the close in the initial stages of rapport building. This comes across as insincere at best and high pressure at worst. I've had car salesmen tell me a car is perfect for me without ever asking what I intend to do with it or what I'm driving at present. It's a zero-credibility game that fails when selling low-cost items and gets worse as the value of the transaction increases. Needless to say, when a multi-million dollar business purchase is in play, the rapport stage becomes super critical.

Here's the other thing... Salespeople who depend on commission, and are not doing well, are the most predisposed to a lack of rapport building and a rush to the close. It's a self-fulfilling zero-sum strategy, as their desperation dictates a personal demeanour that is almost guaranteed to fail. Of course, it takes discipline to hold your nerve when every fibre of your being is screaming, for god's sake, just buy the bloody thing!!

Good salespeople like the bloke at Townsville provide information in a timely but low-pressure manner, are helpful but exude an attitude of wanting to sell you something but it being ok if you decide not to buy. Hell, you're such a good bloke I'd feel guilty if I didn't spend some money with you. Now, that's sales.

I'll leave you with this quote from famous departed American comedian George Burns:

"The key to success is sincerity. If you can fake that, you've got it made."

PostScript:

As luck would have it, I had the last laugh and left the managing director somewhat disappointed. It turns out Townsville is far from hell on earth, being one degree cooler than the Sunshine Coast. To add insult to injury (for the MD), the car dealership put me up at The Ville Hotel and Casino, which turns out to be an excellent hotel with a world class swimming pool area, magnificent views, lovely rooms, and very welcoming staff. I even had a good experience checking in at Brisbane Airport and flying Qantas. Flight on time, crew friendly and beer cold. It's a Christmas miracle! So there my dear, you should have come with me. Turns out hell on earth ain't so bad.

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