



Thank God That Didn't Happen to Me!

My Top Five Sales Horror Stories

How to get started? Well, let's begin with some of the most dramatic experiences from my collection of selling blunders. This was a tough call to make. How'd you like to plow through 600 sales tales, looking for the best of the worst?

More than just amazing encounters that provide some laughs at the expense of our sales colleagues who've crashed and burned before us, these horror stories also each come with a brief postmortem or lesson learned—to show what (if anything) could be learned from the experience and what just might have turned the moment around.

We've all been there, and I trust you'll want to share these stories with your sales colleagues. You know they could use a lift after a rough day with tough prospects.

#5 Buyer with Big Ears Ends a Sale

In Tom's rookie days as a life insurance salesperson with a large firm, he had to be accompanied by his boss on all sales calls.

Tom's very first client meeting with his manager was with a successful female attorney. Tom watched as his boss smoothly convinced this prospect of her need for not only personal coverage but buy/sell policies for the law firm as well. Before leaving, Tom's manager asked the female attorney for some referrals and was rewarded with several highly qualified names.

As they waited for the elevator, the two agents didn't realize how well sound carried in the historic, marble office building. Tom's manager turned to his new protégé and said, "You see, Tommy, this business is so easy, it's like shootin' fish in a barrel."

Moments later the words "I heard that" echoed down the hall.

"Get back here!" She barked.

Tom and his manager walked into a cold room to a very heated client. The angry attorney waved their literature at them and asked for her life insurance applications and the list of referrals.

She slowly tore everything in half, then tore it again and dramatically walked to the shredder and fed their paperwork into the machine.

To this day, Tom still has a serious aversion to asking for referrals. He remains deathly afraid to use this strategy, even after a successful sale, despite it being the easiest way to gather new business.

Postmortem: What a plot: Drama with great dialogue on a sales call! And revenge to top it off! Just when you thought it was safe, new clients are reversing course and killing sales. There are lots of lessons here. Let's focus on one—and it's not asking for referrals. (How many more times are we going to have the phrase "ask for referrals" pounded into us?) This lesson is about handling adversity. How well do you maintain your professional demeanor, even when the weather turns nasty? You'll see this addressed in detail later in the book.



#4 Baaad Luck at the Farm

It suddenly didn't even matter that this financial services rep had to spend another \$5 to wash his dust-covered car after leaving this prospect's property.

John and his partner had finished a tough series of sales calls on a large corporate farm. The owner was taking on a complete insurance package—their company

was covering everything. The men were looking at almost \$50,000 staring them in the, well, bank accounts.

It didn't even matter that he had to thoroughly scrape the bottom of his shoes before soiling the carpet of his car again. A Chicago city boy like John could make good money in the country—even with minimal selling skills and zero knowledge about the farming life.

So there sat the four of them, the owner with hands folded on his desk and his accountant with hands folded atop a large leather book—the company checkbook. John and his partner beamed at each other and pulled out one last form.

"In order for us to see that you're completely covered, we need your livestock totals." John began to call out the animal names and receive the numbers of each herd, with babies listed separately—beef cattle, milk cows, horses, and pigs, then . . .

"Sheep?" 120 was the reply.

"E-wees?"

"Huh?" grunted the owner.

"E-wees." John said, clearly mispronouncing the word again. "How many e-wees you got?"

"Let me see that form," the farmer said.

John pointed and the farmer yelled, "That's ewes, you idiot! Have you ever been on a farm? How are you supposed to help me with my business if you know nothing

about farming? You know what? Don't even answer that, just get out, get out of my office!"

They walked quickly to the car, not even stopping to clean their shoes, hopped in, and drove away, \$50,000 poorer.

Postmortem: John will be counting sheep, instead of money, in his sleep tonight. Okay, so John was a bit short in his product knowledge training, but let's focus on another not-so-obvious lesson. What do you do when you blow it on a call? Do you collapse and write it off? One suggestion I offer in situations like this is to be very, very remorseful. Apologize for your mistake, then say something like, "Oh Lord. You must think I'm my company's village idiot. I'm so sorry. If you don't want to do business with me, I completely understand." Don't be surprised if the prospect says, "Hey, that's okay. I've done some dumb things, too. Let's keep going." If you feel bad, you'll make most people want to help you to not be so hard on yourself—and you could save a sale.



#3 Cold Wind, Cops, and a Car

Welcome to winter, John thought as he stood inside the Quebec airport terminal. Outside the snow was sideways from a furious wind.

John and his partner had flown in for a sales call—from the sunny south—Alabama, USA. The French gal at the Hertz counter pegged them immediately and began speaking in beautifully accented English.

John gestured over his shoulder to the weather. “Do we have to walk to the shuttle, walk to the Hertz lot, then walk outside again to our car?”

She smiled and shook her head. “Sir, we will deliver your auto right outside that door. It’s a blue Ford Crown Victoria.”

Five minutes later, a big blue Ford pulled up and a man jumped out and ran into the terminal. The two men looked at him and the guy nodded as he walked by. John glanced at his partner, who said “Let’s go!”, and they dashed into the snow.

Thank goodness the car was running and warm. They drove out of the airport and John told his colleague to pull the map out of the glove compartment where the car rental agent had said it awaited them.

When the door was popped open, paper trash and other garbage spilled onto his lap.

“This car is a dump!” John couldn't believe Hertz would give them a vehicle without cleaning it first. And then that little light went off overhead. They looked at each other and said together, “It's not our car.”

A glance into the rearview mirror and the men realized that someone else had come to the same conclusion. Another light was going off, a flashing light from a Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) vehicle.

Well, of course, they had taken that poor guy's car who nodded to them, thinking he was giving the “go ahead and get in” signal, when really, he was just rushing in from the cold.

The RCMP were very professional throughout, doing their best to suppress their grins at the stupid mistake. And Hertz apologized for the confusion, telling the two of them that they wouldn't be charged for driving the car that Hertz intended they use—once they finally got it.

John said his lesson was that impatience can have lots of unexpected consequences.

Postmortem: John, a wanted man north of the border! He's right, though. Life is getting too fast. We're always in a hurry. We cram cell phone conversations into our downtime during the day. We can't even relax and enjoy television commercials anymore. Our clients and prospects want us to get quickly to the point as well. We rush to sell and this

is when mistakes happen. BUT, if you learn to slow down and calm down, it will increase your energy when you need it most. Be wise about managing your time; take time for yourself. Your body, your mind, and, most importantly, your family will love you for those times you choose to slow down.



#2 Three-Ring-Circus Selling

It was a hot August day, and Scott and his colleague were about 45 minutes early to demonstrate their data technology services. To kill the time, they decided to get a cold drink at the closest convenience store. Scott bought a superlarge frozen cherry drink, and his partner got a lime-flavored one.

They drove back to the prospect's building and sat in the visitor's spot, mentally preparing while they finished their frozen drinks. When they were ready to go, Scott looked over and saw his partner's mouth, lips, teeth, and tongue were bright green—really bright, like a clown's. He grabbed the rearview mirror and flipped it toward his face, whose features were now glowing red.

The dramatic colors seemed indelible and even an oily rag under the car seat was useless for obvious reasons. But it was time for their appointment, so the two guys walked

to the entrance. People in the lobby actually burst out laughing at the sight of these two sales bozos. They sat down with the president but were so rattled about how silly they looked that they gave the most uninspiring presentation of their careers. They were not asked back.

Postmortem: Obviously, thinking more carefully about your actions just before a sales call is important. However, the psychological reason a call like this fails is that you can't gain rapport with a prospect who is uncomfortable being pitched by circus clowns. It might work if you happen to be calling on another circus clown or the ringmaster or, minimally, the guy with the shovel who follows behind the elephant. There's no hope for a rep who makes an unprofessional first impression on a prospect. I told this tale while speaking to the worldwide conference of the Sales & Marketing Executives International and received a smart suggestion for Scott: Bring a frozen drink for the prospect—it might just save the sale.



And my personal #1, SalesAutopsy.com fan's favorite and most requested sales horror story of all time . . .

#1 Foot in Mouth Kills Salesman

Rick sells printing services, and he's probably not as good as he is persistent. It took six months of phone calls and mailed literature to finally get into the president's office of a company that the rep wanted to sell very badly. It took less than 30 seconds to undo half a year of time and effort.

Rick had finally nailed this guy down to an appointment and wanted to make a very good first impression. He figured that this president would look at him as either a strong salesman or a pest. He would dispose of a pest as quickly as he could, so as Rick walked into the executive's office, he looked for something on the wall or on his desk to use for a little opening small talk.

There it was! "John Madden!" he cried, pointing at an 8×10 photograph on the prospect's credenza. Every sports fan knows the 300-plus-pound commentator. He's probably the best announcer around, despite a face that could stop a bus. "That's a fantastic photo! How did you get a picture of yourself with your arm around John Madden?"

Rick's rapport-building efforts crashed in flames as the shocked company president slowly answered, "That's not John Madden; that's . . . my . . . wife."

Postmortem: Our poor salesman, Rick, used an approach that was popular early in the evolution of selling. Are you like this at the initial contact with a prospect? Do you look for that fish on the wall, trophy on the shelf, or picture on the desk? We're often taught to comment on these items to break the ice. Can you distinguish yourself by being so ordinary?

Don't sound like everyone else who sells. This small talk is wasteful and disrespectful of a buyer's time. Here's a suggestion for that initial contact that many top-performing sales pros use today: Recognize that your prospects don't have the time to chat like they used to. Simply respect the prospect's time, and review what you agreed upon when you got the appointment.

Rick should have said, "Mr. Prospect, I want to respect your commitment to the time we have. When we talked on the phone you said we'd have 45 minutes to talk. Is that right? Good. What is the most serious reason you felt it was important to invite me in today?" As a sales pro, you've now honored someone's busy schedule and gotten right to business. Best of all, the prospect is about to do most of the talking.