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Who sold you this, then?

It still has an image problem, but a sales job can be very different from the stereotype. Zenab Short investigates

His foot in the door, his face invading your personal space, and the slick non-stop banter issuing from his insincere mouth. You would buy whatever it is he is selling, just to get rid of him. The wheeler-dealer timeshare- and target-driven sharks who talk you into a corner still furnish the image of the archetypal salesman. But the times, they are a-changing.

"There is that old cliché - you ought to be in sales, you've got the gift of the gab," admits Roger Foster, sales manager for training at the Chartered Institute of Marketing. "But actually the gift you need is the one of listening, not talking." Within consultative selling (the sales trade's new buzzphrase), you are talking with your customers, not at them. It is no longer about being a one-hit wonder, but about forging ongoing relationships.

"It's psychology-driven, about understanding an individual's reactions, and then attempting to influence them," says Alan Cotton of business development agency HCA. "We find it hard to recruit sales people with the prerequisite intelligence and integrity, who are relationship builders and problem solvers, because sales does still have an image problem."

But the days of the brash and persistent salesperson delivering an unrelenting barrage of persuasive messages is ending. The modern sales professional needs to be well-educated and highly skilled to be successful within increasingly sophisticated markets. Today's successful organisations are developing an ever greater market knowledge. According to the Marketing and Sales Standards Setting Body (MSSSB), it is their salesforces which are critical to their success, and which are also becoming more market-focused and customer-orientated.

There has been a blurring of roles between selling and marketing. Modern sales teams get involved in aspects of business that were previously the responsibility of marketing. These include reviewing and analysing sales data to assess market potential, and the development of marketing strategies and plans, as well as maximising the opportunities from key accounts. "There's less room for the mouthy, aggressive stereotype," says Michelle Nelan, business development director for Quintessentially magazine. "Communication in sales is very sophisticated now. We are more like business consultants, operating in partnership with the customer."

"We want it to be seen as a proper career choice, not something you fall



Doorstep challenge . . . sales and marketing have moved on

PHOTOGRAPH: DAVID OLIVER/STONE

into because you have failed at whatever else you were trying," adds Roger Foster. "The new standards-setting project by the MSSSB will give the job even more credibility. The project sets out a national framework of what skills, knowledge and

understanding a sales practitioner needs. It will raise the level of professionalism."

Selling is the lifeblood of British business, with more people employed in face-to-face and telephone selling than in any other sector, including

'There's less room for the aggressive stereotype'

medicine, teaching, ICT and accountancy. Some 766,000 people are employed as full-time sales personnel in the UK.

And yet the image problem continues. "All of the graduates and graduate-calibre applicants who come to us say they have editorial aspirations and would never, ever go near sales," says Carl Dines of media recruitment firm Reilly People. "But once they discover it, they love it. When you sell ad space on a new magazine and the launch becomes a huge success, you are part of that success story. You get a great sense of achievement because you brought to it a big slice of income through your skills as a sales person."

Emily Measor is an account executive with Mintel, selling reports on retail markets to big-name stores. "I find it really exciting to have targets that I'm aiming for," she says. "There is a real buzz in the office, with the team striving together to reach those targets. You see results instantly in sales."

And those results mean money. "I am earning a lot on commission, on top of my salary, and that is so good for my self-esteem," says recruitment consultant Simone Etheridge. "Yes, you can get 10 knockbacks before you get that one positive result, but you need to be able to pick yourself up and just get on with the next call. You need to be articulate, confident and not to take things personally if you get a 'No'. They are not rejecting you, but what you are selling."

Carl Dines advises new entrants to think strategically when planning their career. "Get the best training you can, with companies like Emap and Haymarket, who are known for the time and money they invest in training. Don't do commission-only, as it really is just for the hard core. It is based purely on results, and you get no career development." Roger Foster agrees. "The more the job is based on commission, the more short-term or aggressive the sale will be," he says. "If you get paid a salary, you are not persuading people that they have to buy now, and the need to close or win the sale is much less." So don't jump at the first chance that comes along, but do research organisations that will give you the strong foundations you need for your future.

And there are plenty of opportunities out there. "We've got more jobs than candidates, and are particularly desperate for second jobbers," says Carl Dines. Self-sufficient and self-motivated types do well in the profession. But the real secret of a successful career in sales, according to Roger Foster, is simple - "You have to love people."