

Sales Call Disaster #7: The Day of the Dead Battery

By Daniel Baitch



I never did very well in sales – especially on this one day in 1996.

I was nervous all morning. An initial sales meeting with the Director of HR at Mercedes-Benz was scheduled for 11 am. I was a new account rep for a training company, and I hadn't gotten my sea legs yet. It was grossly premature for me to be meeting with a client at that level. But the account rep I was replacing had quit; she had set the appointment. Despite my arguments to my sales manager that I had no idea what I was doing yet, he said I couldn't miss an opportunity for this contract. It was too important.

Preparation wasn't my sales manager's thing. In fact, he repeated his mantra: "*Look good, smell good, be on time, don't f*ck up.*" That was his secret to selling, as if nothing else mattered. Not skill, not patience, not preparation, listening ability or experience.

I dropped my three-year-old son off at the day care center and ran across the parking lot to my car in a warm, muggy, windy rain with a cheap umbrella. If I timed it right, I could easily make it across the Tappan Zee Bridge to the company's home office in under an hour.

I turned the key to my Nissan. The starter made a metallic *tick tick tick*, then went silent. I tried again. Nothing. "*Oh God, not today!*" I rattled the key, pumped the pedal, banged the wheel. Again, *tick tick*...nothing. No use...the car was dead. So I did the only reasonable thing. I panicked.

Fortunately an auto repair shop was a few blocks away. While fighting the wind with that flimsy umbrella, I ran to the shop in a mania. I burst in and pleaded with the mechanic Pepe, who clearly felt sorry for the miserable dripping dude groveling before him. Pepe put on a parka and we shloshed back to the car. Together, we pushed it back to the garage. By the time we got it into the repair bay, my socks were floating and my suit was drenched with sweat and rain.

In the repair shop's waiting room there was another customer, a pot of coffee and a carton of orange juice. As I poured a cup of juice, I collided with her. The juice spilled onto my white shirt and tie; her coffee landed on her sleeve. I apologized profusely. If I hadn't been so distracted trying to wipe the juice off of my shirt, I might have noticed the gum on the chair before I sat on it.

*"Look good, smell good, be on time, don't f*ck up."* Those words echoed in my head.

Pepe replaced my dead battery. I paid, thanked him and left, unaware that the gum was stuck to my pants. Fortunately, Pepe had placed paper seat and floor protectors in the car. By driving a bit recklessly, I made it across the Hudson to the Mercedes-Benz parking lot, just over 15 minutes late.

As I got out of my car and ran from the parking lot to the front door, the rain was blowing sideways and the umbrella blew out, flapping like a rag. I entered the lobby soaked, stained, sweaty, and smelling like a high school boys' locker room. My hair was a bird's nest and the umbrella hung from my arm like a dead bat on a stick. The HR Director's Assistant was waiting at the check-in desk. She gave a cold look and said, *"He's short on time."*

She stepped around the reception desk, looked at me pathetically and said, *"Um...is there something...stuck to you?"* I reached behind me. The huge paper seat protector was stuck to the seat of my pants. In large blue letters it said "PLACED HERE FOR YOUR PROTECTION AND CONVENIENCE." Any dignity that remained vanished as I tried to gracefully pull the sign off, wrestling with a sticky string of warm gum.

Not surprisingly, I lost the sale to a competitor. My guess is they looked like a catalogue model, smelled like lavender, were perfectly on time, looked before they sat down, and spent more on umbrellas.

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