



# THE POLITICS OF SALES

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**It is an extraordinary irony when the very foundations of free market capitalism are “celebrating” government intervention.**

Isaac Asimov, the successful science fiction writer and biochemist, once said of the Great Depression of 1929:

'No one can possibly have lived through the Great Depression without being scarred by it. No amount of experience since the Depression can convince someone who has lived through it that the world is safe economically.'

It is too early to tell how deep the scarring will go, but there is no doubt that the vulnerabilities in our economy have been painfully exposed. With coordinated global interest rate cuts, and massive government backed loans, all the

salvos have now been fired in the battle against financial Armageddon. There really are no more cards to play; it is simply a matter of time to see how the markets respond, whether trust can be rebuilt within the financial system, and that the gross misconduct by some of the institutions is eradicated by stringent regulation forever.

In my last article, I stated that successful businesses are those that behave as though they are in a constant recession. Building quality relationships with their customers, not pricing themselves out of the market, and successfully differentiating themselves, not just through their offering, but in the way that they present it. Companies that adopt this approach will be the last ones to be 'cut', and the first ones to be paid when inevitable pressures on

cash flow take their toll on payment terms. It is a principle that will serve many well in the months ahead.

The original synopsis for this article was to focus on the concept of how sales underpins the entire political process. At a time of significant political change on both sides of the Atlantic it is apparent that the difference between Government and opposition is whether your guy (or girl) has the ability to sell an idea. Whether it's a concept for change, or the need for incumbent stability and experience, the challenge is in diluting ideology to create a different sales message that can persuade the swing voters (based on the principle that if you're a hereditary left or right, you'll vote that way anyway). This idea was prompted by Gordon Brown's pillorying of David Cameron when he described him as a 'used

car salesman'. Obviously the intention was to criticise Cameron's perceived lack of substance to his rhetoric, but it was a shame that 'sales' was used in such a derogatory way. There is irony here given the fact that to coincide with the start of his tenure as Prime Minister, he announced a sell-out, UK-wide 'Listening and Learning' tour, which also became the stock answer for every journalist question throughout every disaster that he has faced over the past 12 months. Listening to your customers, their issues and their challenges, their market needs and then shaping them is key to success in sales and should be seen as a prerequisite and an accolade in politics, not a negative.

It is an interesting concept to look objectively at the political process in the UK, and, certainly before the financial crisis, the disconnect between politics and the public. From a sales perspective there has not been that focus on the action after the listening. If you shape and understand customers' needs with them, it is easier to sell and generate a positive response, and results. In politics, certainly over the last ten years, the message has been 'we know what is good for you, therefore that is what you'll get for the next five years'. Being told what to do inevitably breeds cultural cynicism, which in turn breeds apathy towards the political process. One could easily argue that 'big' government is the hallmark of socialist ideology, although no one could ever say that Thatcherism was based on embracing populist opinion. It is an interesting dynamic that while apathy towards the political process exists in the UK, it is based on the perception that government does not listen. But in reality, we should take

comfort from the fact that we do challenge the foundations on which democracy is built; the apathy that exists is ultimately a basic, although perhaps not well directed, form of protest.

Conversely on the other side of the pond, politicians are treated like rock stars, selling-out the equivalent of Wembley stadium twice over, so that people can hear what they have to say. Their politics is based on selling rhetoric. It is about language, personality, raw human dynamism; people want to hear the poetic eloquence of oration at its best. They want to be sold to. It is fascinating from a commercial perspective, that in the US, people are interested and far more open to sales as a career, and are happy to do it. They view it, quite rightly, as a key element of the business process and are more aware of the core skills in doing it successfully.

In the UK, while style and rhetoric is still important, it has to be backed by real substance, delivering on the policies that are set out. And so it is interesting that despite Gordon Brown's depreciating use of 'sales', his handling of the financial

crisis that has beset us has seen 'selling' at its finest. Ultimately, the financial bailout that has ensued is the biggest deal we have ever seen in the UK, and second in the world after the initial Paulson deal and further federal backed economic stimulus in the US. Whether it works or not (and we all hope that it does) the complexity of the deal and the requirement to convince such different stakeholders with polar agendas have been extraordinary. The bankers and institutions were faced with little choice, other than to accept it, but Parliament, who essentially was representing the British public, has bought into a proposition that sees a cost of £16,000 for every taxpayer. And on the back of that Gordon Brown led a delegation that lobbied for a universal cut in interest rates, and succeeded.

At the Labour Party conference in September, Brown was given days. The financial crisis escalated and he pulled off the deal of his life, and the press turned in his favour. Politics may be a fickle business, but it was just good selling that gave him a lifeline.

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