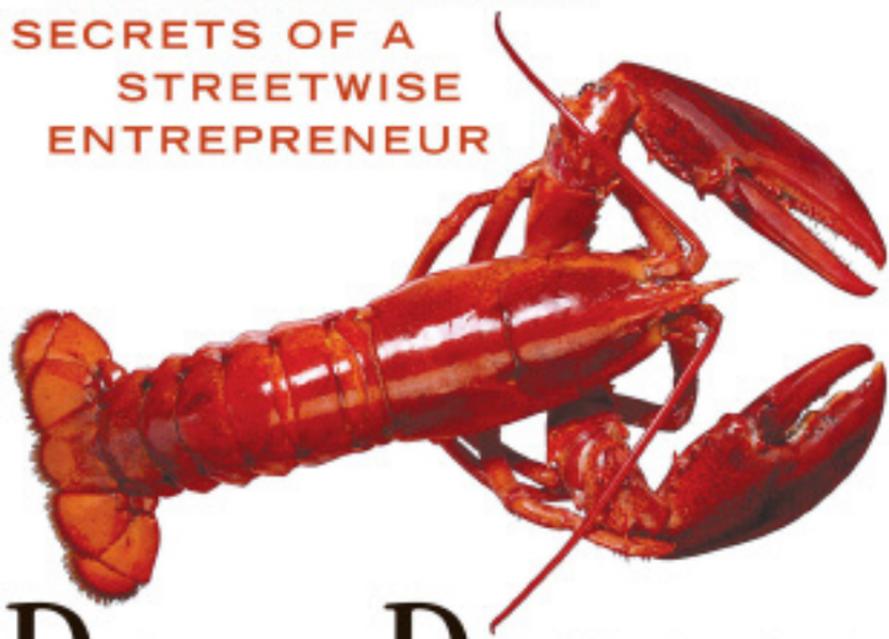


HOW TO SELL A Lobster

THE MONEY-MAKING
SECRETS OF A
STREETWISE
ENTREPRENEUR



BILL BISHOP

ONE

How to Sell a Lobster

When I look back over my multifarious career with all its twists and turns, I shudder to think that I could still be working as a salad bar attendant had not the fates intervened on my behalf.

Back in the early '80s while I was studying journalism, I spent my evenings slicing pickles and cleaning lettuce at a popular steak restaurant in Toronto. As a newcomer at the establishment, I started off as the lowly salad bar attendant, but that suited me just fine.

At that time, I had limited ambition. I just wanted to cut up vegetables in the kitchen, listen to music on the radio, and fool around with the dishwashers. But after six months of vegetarian bliss, my complacency came to an abrupt end when the manager asked me if I wanted to become a waiter.

"Who me?" I replied, making no effort to hide my terror. "You want me to be a waiter?" I trembled at the prospect. If I took the promotion, I would have to face customers. Real people. I would have to talk to them and take their orders.

“What if I make a fool of myself?” I worried. “What will I do if they have a complaint?”

But I couldn’t back out. There were kids five years younger than me working as waiters. Besides, waiters made ten times more money than salad bar attendants, and the cocktail waitresses were a lot prettier than the guys working in the kitchen.

So, reluctantly, I became a waiter. And I began by screwing up royally. I dropped a plate of rice into the lap of my very first customer. But I learned quickly, and within a few months I had become a competent waiter. I learned how to deal with people face to face. Hundreds of them. Night after night. I learned to juggle ten tables at once and take care of special requests. I learned how to mollify obnoxious patrons. I even tackled one guy running full gallop down the street who had tried to get away without paying his bill. Within no time, I thought I had the waiter game all figured out. That is, until the management launched The Great Lobster Contest.

The Great Lobster Contest was designed to boost the sales of lobster “add-ons” at the restaurant. Add-ons are secondary menu items—such as baked potatoes, vegetables, and seafood—which customers can order in addition to their steak.

To sell more add-ons, we were encouraged to use “suggestive selling.” We were told to ask customers, “Would you like a baked potato or some crab legs with your steak?” “Would you like some delicious cheesecake for dessert?” I never liked

suggestive selling because I thought it was too pushy, but I tried it. Sometimes it worked, and sometimes it didn't.

Management, however, wasn't satisfied with the sales of lobster add-ons, so they launched the contest. The waiter who sold the most lobsters over a three-month period would win a prize.

"How do we get more people to buy lobsters?" I asked the restaurant manager.

"Just make sure you use suggestive selling, and ask every customer if they want a lobster with their steak," he told me.

So for the next two weeks I asked every customer if they wanted a lobster with their steak. The response was usually negative: "Nope." "No thanks." "Not tonight, thank you." "What do you think we are? Rich?"

At the end of each night, the manager asked me how many lobsters I'd sold. "Three, one, four, none," I said sheepishly. Obviously, I wasn't doing very well, but fortunately for me none of the other waiters were selling very many lobsters either. But I was eager to make a breakthrough; I just didn't know what to do to sell more lobsters.

Then I had a lucky break that changed everything, not just in the contest, but in my life. I met Marketing Mike.

A friend of my father, Marketing Mike was a highly successful businessman with decades of

experience in sales and marketing. “Why don’t you visit him and see if he has any ideas on how you can sell more lobsters?” my dad suggested.

I didn’t think Marketing Mike would be interested in meeting a young kid with a seafood sales problem, but he readily agreed to meet me at the restaurant before work. When I told him about The Great Lobster Contest, Marketing Mike said, “The problem is, you and the other waiters are trying too hard to *sell* lobsters when you should be trying to *market* lobsters instead.”

“What do you mean?”

“Most people in business are sales oriented. They create a product or service, bang on doors, make their sales pitch, and hope for the best. Just like you do with the lobsters. Your manager tells you to use suggestive selling, but it isn’t working. And it isn’t working because you haven’t taken the time to think about what’s going on inside the customer’s mind.”

“But how do I know what’s going on inside the customer’s mind?” I asked.

“Start by thinking like your customer,” Marketing Mike said. “Start by thinking like a marketer instead of a salesperson.”

“What’s the difference between sales and marketing?”

“Sales is when you knock on someone’s door, trying to make a sale. And marketing is when you do something to get customers to knock on *your* door.”

“So how do you get customers to knock on your door?” I asked.

“By playing *marketing games* instead of *sales games*,” he replied.

“What are marketing games?”

“They are marketing strategies and tactics you can use with your customers and prospects to increase your sales and grow your business.”

“But aren’t marketing games bad? Aren’t they kind of sneaky and underhanded?”

“Let’s not forget that business is a game,” Marketing Mike said. “And the goal of the game is to get customers to buy something. First of all, to play this game properly, you should play to win. And to win you have to use strategies and tactics.

“Secondly, to get better at the game, you also have to be willing to take risks and try new things. To play marketing games, you have to keep trying until you find the tactics and strategies that work.

“And thirdly, it all depends on your motivation and integrity. If you don’t care about your customers, and you just want to make a sale no matter what, then you are playing a bad game. And you’ll probably lose. But if you are really trying to help people, then you are playing a good game. And you’ll probably win.”

“So what kind of marketing game can we play to get people to buy more lobsters?”

“Well, the first thing to do is to think like the typical customer at your restaurant. Try to see the

situation from their perspective.”

“Okay, how do we do that?”

“Well, it seems to me that a lot of people who eat at a restaurant are the guest of someone else who is going to pay the bill. Isn’t that right?”

“Sure.”

“If you are a guest of someone, and the waiter asks you if you want a lobster with your steak, you will probably say no because you don’t want to look greedy.”

“That’s right,” I said. “You don’t want to look like a pig, trying to get as much as you can because someone else is paying. So you just order the smallest steak or the cheapest thing on the menu.”

“But it’s probably okay to order the special if you are a guest, isn’t it?”

“Well, yes. A lot of people do order the special.”

“So why don’t we create a special that includes a lobster with the steak.”

“What do you mean, ‘create’ a special?”

“I mean, create something new. For example, how much does it cost if someone buys a steak, a lobster, and a side order of rice?”

“It would cost, let me see, \$18.50.”

“So why don’t we tell people we are offering a special for \$18.50, which includes a steak, a lobster, and rice.”

“How can I do that? The managers make up the specials.”

“Well, if you can sell more lobsters, I’m sure the

managers wouldn't care if you made up your own special."

"That's true."

"So are you willing to give this marketing game a try?"

"Okay. I'll try it."

The next night, I walked up to the first table—a group of eight people—and announced that we had a special: a steak, lobster, and rice for \$18.50.

Then I asked them what they wanted to order, and the answers floored me. "I'll have the special." "Me too." "I'll have the lobster, too." "The special, please."

I couldn't believe it. Everyone ordered the special. I sold eight lobsters on my first try. And that wasn't the end of the story. That night I sold fifty-eight lobsters. My nearest competitor in the contest sold three.

Excited, I returned to Marketing Mike because I wanted to understand fully why I was selling more lobsters.

"It's simple, really," he said. "Three things are going on. One, people like specials. They sound like more fun. They sound unique and fleeting—a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that you don't want to miss.

"Second, by combining three menu items into a single idea—the special—the customers can now visualize one small, tidy package in their mind. Instead of reading over the whole menu, they can now make

a quick and easy buying decision by choosing the special.

“The third thing is this: by making lobster part of the special, you’ve given all of the guests permission to get what they really want—a lobster—without looking greedy.

“So,” Marketing Mike finished, “everyone wins. The guests get what they want, the host at the table feels more generous, your restaurant makes more money, and you make more tips.”

Marketing Mike was right. Over the next three months, the lobster marketing game worked like a charm. I sold more than 1400 lobsters. The second-place finisher sold only ninety.

I was written up in the restaurant’s national newsletter as the greatest lobster salesperson in the history of the company. I became the poster boy for the power and potential of add-on sales.

“How did he do it?” everyone wondered. And the fun thing was I never let the secret out of the bag. Until now, that is.