

## Sales Hara-Kiri

**No one in their right mind would sabotage their own sale...would they?** BY JEFF THULL

Self-sabotage in sales – the act of undermining one’s own credibility and alienating the very customers and prospects we count on for our livelihoods—occurs with dismaying frequency.

The many ways in which salespeople sabotage their own efforts range from obvious mistakes, such as blaming customers when their own products and services do not deliver as promised, to subtle insults hidden in something that’s said to a customer. It’s easy to recognize the obvious “I should have known better” mistakes that damage relationships with customers. The far more common and harmful situations occur when words and actions insidiously erode the customer’s

trust and personal credibility that one works so hard to establish. hundreds of thousands of dollars in lost...” you’re dangling insults. Even if true, telling a customer that she’s wasting hundreds of thousands of dollars also suggests that she isn’t doing her job well.

Salespeople often are unaware of the negative impact because these statements are built into their mindsets and the conventional sales training they received. A salesperson may think he is delivering a compelling message and connecting to the customer’s pain.

reaction isn’t obvious and salespeople don’t realize they have insulted their customer. As a result, they misinterpret the customer’s reactions and can’t properly address them. In fact, salespeople’s natural response patterns often make matters worse.

### The Old Brain

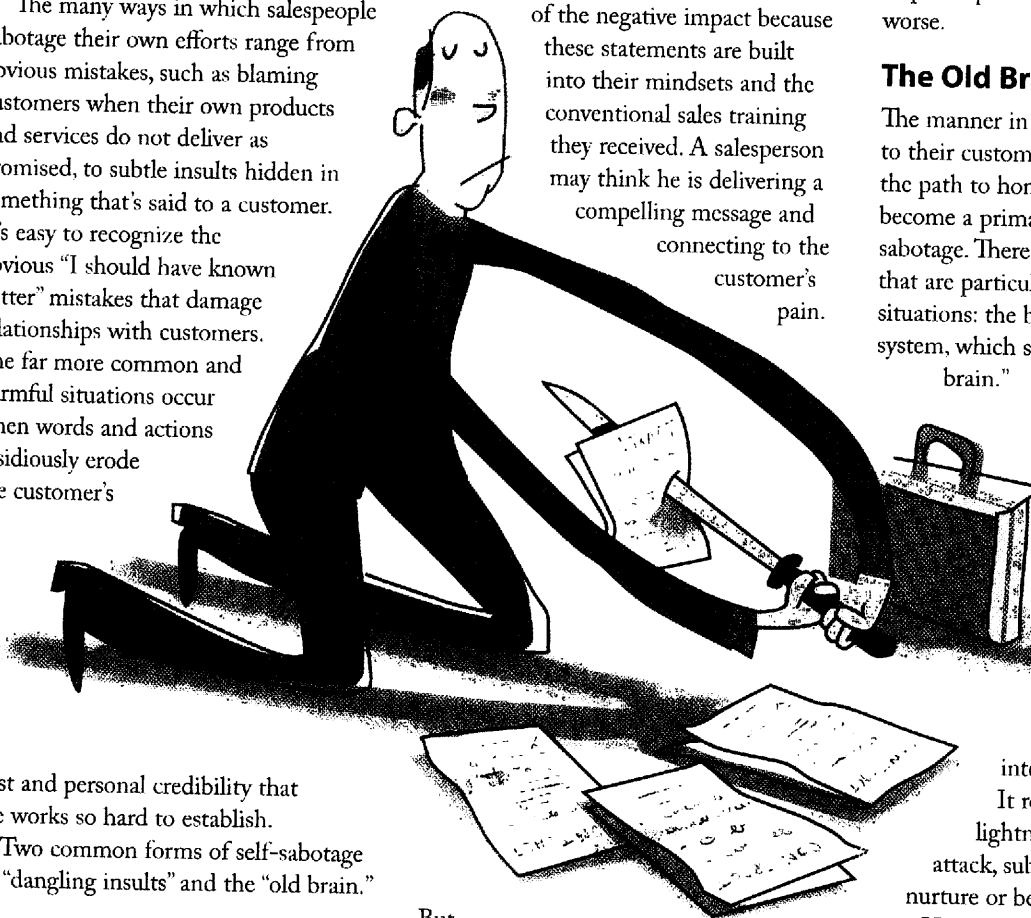
The manner in which salespeople react to their customers’ responses can open the path to honest communication or become a primary instrument of self-sabotage. There are two parts of the brain that are particularly problematic in sales situations: the brain stem and the limbic system, which scientists define as the “old brain.”

The brain stem or “reptilian brain” controls involuntary actions, while the limbic system generates basic emotions, such as fear and aggression.

The old brain is not big on

interpretation and analysis. It reacts to situations with lightning speed in six ways: attack, submit, flee, reproduce, nurture or be nurtured.

How does the old brain affect sales conversations? Continuing with the example above, when a customer says, “We’re not losing anywhere near that much money,” a salesperson might counter with, “I’m sorry, but I think you misunderstood...” This implies it is the customer who just doesn’t get it, and often triggers an even more irritated retort. The salesperson is unconsciously engaged in self-protection at the expense



trust and personal credibility that one works so hard to establish.

Two common forms of self-sabotage are “dangling insults” and the “old brain.”

### The Dangling Insult

No one sets out to insult a customer by suggesting he’s incompetent or by implying to an executive that she’s negligent. The very idea is inconceivable, yet salespeople unknowingly insult prospects and customers every day.

For example, when a salesperson introduces a solution by saying, “We save companies like yours from wasting

But to the customer, it can sound like the salesperson is ending sentences with, “...you idiot.”

Occasionally, customers react physically to a dangling insult. They may lean back in their chairs, cross their arms, and scowl. They often react verbally, by saying something like, “We’re not losing anywhere near that much money.”

Most of the time, however, the

ILLUSTRATION BY TRAVIS FOSTER

of the customer, who will often protect their self-esteem and strike back.

I've also seen salespeople unwittingly play the critical parent with customers: Early in a customer meeting (and with the intent of "creating interest"), the salesperson will say something like, "You probably don't realize how much time and money the many IT-related activities cost companies like yours each year." What do customers hear? Many of them hear a parent or superior insinuating that they don't know their own business.

#### Helpful Hint: Self-Sabotaging

How can you help keep your salespeople from sabotaging their own efforts? The first step is awareness. They can't solve a problem until they recognize it.

The second step is getting them to stop behaving like a salesperson and start

focusing on keeping the customer's best interest in mind.

A good example to follow is that of a doctor diagnosing a patient. During a "diagnostic conversation," the full extent of the patient's problem is explored, measured, evaluated and communicated. A salesperson in the diagnostic mode deals directly with customers' reality. That is, he is working with situations they have experienced in the past, are currently experiencing, or those they likely will be exposed to in the future. Through diagnosis, your salespeople can help bring clarity to problems and help prospects make quality business decisions.

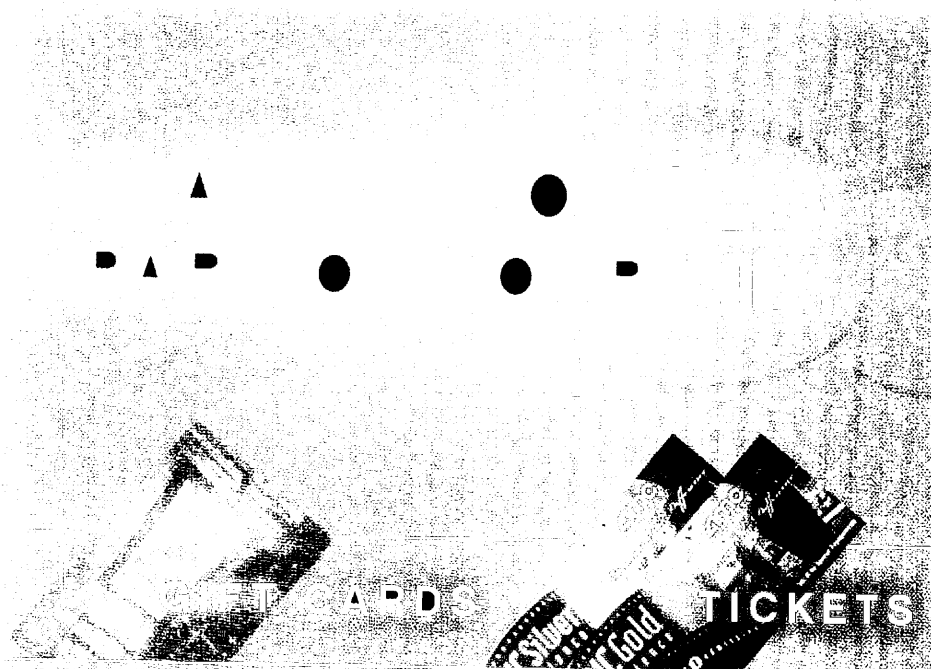
Include diagnostic tools in your marketing communications to help your customer develop clarity around the issues that your salespeople address. Consider a "Seven Early Warning Signals" brochure

to help customers recognize the absence of the value that your solution can provide.

Make sure that your salespeople understand the symptoms of the problems that your solution is meant to solve, and how to quantify the impact of those problems on your customer's business.

I'm not suggesting that all of this is easily accomplished. Success will come as a result of awareness, application, and practice. Of course, it will all be much easier if your salespeople stop sabotaging their own efforts. **XP**

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