



SELLING YOUR
CONFIDENCE

Forging A Successful Sales Career
From Mint Cookies To Martinis

JEAN WRIGHT

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J E A N W R I G H T



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PREFACE

I knew something wasn't quite right when I asked a group of entrepreneurs at a women's business group meeting whether they considered themselves salespeople. Of the fifty or so in attendance, about five brave souls raised their hands. As a longtime member of this organization, I knew there were more saleswomen in the audience who were holding back. I heard the phrase "sleazy used-car salesman" murmured in the crowd.

It was obvious the job title didn't sit well with them. As we explored their reluctance, many confessed they didn't want to be seen as aggressive. And only a few thought of their work, which almost always involved selling products or services, as sales. It wasn't until I started telling stories about why I loved being a sales professional that these ambitious women perked up and started seeing the potential of increasing their effectiveness without sacrificing their ethics.

This conversation with successful female entrepreneurs confirmed my suspicion that stereotypes about aggressive sales practices made many women in business uncomfortable. I knew that sales could be positive, even empowering, for both seller and buyer. But many in my audience had a hard time with the term and all the baggage that came with it.

Did they feel inferior about being salespeople? Did their limited understanding of sales also limit their business success? How could I help them see sales as more than self-interested greed? I knew at that moment: they needed some guidance to build confidence and authenticity as sales professionals.

Let's face it—we're all selling something. Sometimes we don't even realize it. Whatever the product or service we're sharing, we need to be viewed as capable and knowledgeable. Even better, we can be genuinely excited about the work we've chosen. Confidence in sales builds successful sales relationships as we become skilled experts who love what we're selling.

I never thought about being a salesperson as a profession until I just started doing it. I've sold just about everything in my sales career—office space, personnel services, kitchen products, and television and magazine ads, to name a few—lots of different products using basically the same sales techniques.

What I found is that selling is not about being aggressive or shifty like a used-car scammer. It's all about having confidence in your *ability* to make connections with your customer and sell well. In my presentations and mentoring, I've learned over and over that the old stereotypes are still strong. Convincing women entrepreneurs to own their role as sales professionals requires sharing actual life experiences I gained in my sales jobs. This book does just that, step-by-step outlining confidence-building practices, while sharing the experiences that shaped my lifelong career in sales.

WHAT'S NEW ABOUT THIS BOOK?

Most how-to-sell books promise to teach “proven” sales techniques to improve performance or guarantee higher commissions if you follow a certain formula. They generally teach approaches that fit the aggressive, masculine stereotypes that turn women and many men

away from sales careers. These boilerplate strategies can't work for everyone, in every setting, with every customer. Even if they claim to be supported by the latest theories about persuasion or innovation or corporate excellence, these books need a lot of translation into your personal sales style and your actual product or service.

What new and experienced sales professionals need aren't formulaic strategies or interesting theories they have to translate into action. No matter how engaging these how-to-sell books can be, salespeople navigating the challenges of real-world situations need real-world insights to help them understand how to succeed in real-world sales.

I asked myself, "what are the stories none of these high-powered sales prescriptions share?" Formulas don't build confidence as we face the daily challenges of successful sales like: the miles you put on your feet and car when cold-calling, the feelings you have when doors are shut in your face, the loneliness of dealing with unexpected life events while maintaining the stamina to meet your goals, and the nagging (and self-sabotaging) worry that you are coming across as aggressive instead of showing who you really are—a confident sales professional.

How do we gain the confidence to keep going and get to the good stuff? Those are things like the surprise connection that opens up a whole new market, the customer relationships that last so long they become colleagues and friends, the big *yes* after a long day of cold-calling, the follow-up call that opens a door no one else in your firm could unlock, and the satisfaction of coming home to celebrate meeting quarterly goals and earning a solid bonus that helps your family weather hard times.

Building confidence comes from experience, and my own stories about those experiences are what makes this book stand out from all the others. I learned to be confident selling in the trenches.

I had little formal training when I started, but because someone saw potential in me, I grabbed the chance, and I learned what worked for me.

Would it have been easier if I had known what I was getting into? Maybe, but then I wouldn't have such great stories to tell—like being caught on a security camera while cold-calling in an office building, pitching closed-captioning to a famous Hollywood television producer, or stepping around horse manure while entertaining gamblers as the group sales director at a racetrack. I did say trenches. Those experiences and many others were confidence builders.

Whether I was selling products or services, I learned to overcome challenging situations. In this book I'll share tips on how to balance a career when dealing with economic and personal change, and how to be taken seriously as a woman who is confident in her role. It's my hope that I can help other salespeople face similar challenges more easily and build their successes as they build their sales careers.

I've written this book primarily for women, but I believe men can benefit from its lessons as well. Anybody wanting a satisfying sales career will find most of these insights useful. It's not just women who resist identifying with the stereotype of the sleazy used-car salesmen. (In fact, most car salespeople hate that stereotype, too.) Men don't have to fall into the traditional stereotypes and need to build self-confidence as much as women do. In my experience, many of my sales peers, both men and women, excelled because they built their own personal style of selling. They built successful careers by being authentic.

The real world is calling all of us to improve our sales abilities, because the workplace is evolving and changing. In today's post-pandemic world, more people than ever are changing careers.

Many will choose jobs they didn't think they would ever try. Some will start their own businesses or build a side business designing and selling a new product or service to meet new demands. Or an employer may add sales to an employee's job description, expecting them to shift roles without much training. With the right set of expectations and support, a new salesperson can sell just about anything and be very successful.

Whether we're pushed into sales or choose the profession, we can't succeed without the confidence to learn. I hope what you'll discover in this book will inspire you to think of sales as an adventure that you can take on with assurance. The highs and lows, the challenges, and the triumphs will become your greatest inspiration. For anyone exploring this career—looking for a job change, graduating from college, or seeking a fresh approach as an experienced salesperson—I know you can be successful, because confident sales come from qualities you already have: a desire to be authentic, a passion for your product or service, and the motivation to learn.

Jean Wright

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GIRL POWER AND COOKIES

“I’m Thumbbody!” I cradled the pint-sized embossed glass with pride.

It was the first validation of my sales success—a thumb-printed yellow smiley face on my incentive mug for selling Girl Scout treats. I was eleven, but to this day I still remember the joy I felt, holding my prize for going door-to-door selling cookies.

It was my first selling experience. Little did I know then I’d started a lifelong sales career with boxes of scrumptious confections and this tacky little mug as a reward. Over the years, those “branded” Girl Scout Cookies brought joy to my neighbors anticipating their annual arrival. There was a need—an insatiable need—for these cookie lovers to obtain mass quantities of their favorites and I was not going to let them down.

I learned how to meet this need in a sea of green-uniformed ten-to-twelve-year-olds, sitting at folding cafeteria tables in a beer-stained, stale-smelling fire hall basement in a Pittsburgh suburb. I didn’t know it at the time, but this was my first sales meeting.

I felt inspired by our leader moms. “We get a lot of funds from our cookie sale so the troop can do fun things,” I was told. *Oh boy,*

I thought, *we can go camping in the rain, make corny crafts for our parents, and go on field trips to planetariums.* It seemed worth it to me at the time.

We were given our goals: “Girls, sell at least fifty boxes if you want to be eligible for the prizes.” So, I did the math and figured if I went to every house on my street and each neighbor bought at least one box, I would be halfway to my goal. Then I would venture out to the unexplored parts of my suburban neighborhood and sell the rest.

I felt optimistic about my success, although I had never sold anything in my young life. We were told to present ourselves as responsible young ladies while knocking on doors to ask for support of Troop 899’s cookie sale. I had my marching orders, including the all-important money collection envelope and the permission slip for my parents to sign. I was ready to hit the streets. Or so I thought.

But my parents didn’t get it. I handed them the permission slip, which they promptly handed back to me, unsigned. “No one from this house is going door-to-door to ask for money,” my dad said.

My mother agreed: “We’ll just give you a check.”

My parents were embarrassed that the neighbors would think *their* child was pressuring them to buy something they might not want. Salespeople they were not. My dad grew up in Europe, so maybe he didn’t understand the fundraising requirement for members of an organization like Girl Scouts. And they had bought into the sleazy sales stereotype without a second thought.

I convinced them both that I was asking people to donate to a good cause, and every customer received delicious cookies in return. Didn’t they know that for the amazing price of seventy-five cents a box (they’re five dollars now), I was fulfilling my customers’ desire to have unlimited quantities of Tagalongs and Do-si-dos? It was the only time of year one could easily justify eating an entire

box of Thin Mints in record time (usually alone, in a place where you don't have to share).

One by one, I addressed my parents' objections—the first hurdle in the sales process—and they signed the permission slip. My sales career was about to begin.

If they only knew how many streets away from our house I would walk to persuade people, mostly strangers, to buy as many boxes as possible. I would finish one street and then push myself to go the distance to the next. Who cared if it was getting close to dinnertime, or the streetlights were coming on? I had cookies to sell.

Walking along a new road in my uniform, as the next row of houses appeared I was confident they were mine to conquer, with no other Girl Scout selling cookies in sight. More streets, more houses, more customers, and more money.

I simply knocked on doors, inviting my future customers to take advantage of a limited offer, "Order your cookies now before they are sold out! How many boxes would you like?"

I don't think Girl Scout Cookies ever really sold out, but I wanted a decision on the spot. There was no time to delay—urgency was the key. I closed sweet deal after sweet deal. When I came home with a bulging envelope, my parents were impressed with my success.

I do not remember winning any major awards for top seller, or even what the big prizes were. If there was an award ceremony, I wasn't there. But I loved my "I'm Thumbody!" mug, the prize for selling fifty boxes. I was also proud I'd met my own goal, persuading people to buy something they needed and wanted from me. Of course, the product sold itself, but it had some extra help from a smiling blond girl with a green sash and beanie.

Decades later, my mother, now in her nineties, fessed up with something startling to me, a bit of regret in her voice, "I can't believe

I almost thwarted you from selling those cookies.” She had carried some guilt all these years as she watched me succeed in my sales career—as group sales director at a racetrack, marketing rep and sales manager for two personnel companies, account executive for a magazine and television station, membership recruiter for a chamber of commerce, marketing rep selling closed-captioning services, and general sales manager for a global office rental company. She is truly proud of me now and regretted her impulse to hold me back from what she calls my “God-given talent” for sales.

Even today, I appreciate the valuable skills I learned in Girl Scouts about selling. Where else can you get free training? We were taught how to cold-call, present the product, and close the deal. Of course, I did not know these were sales techniques. I was just following instructions.

I wonder how many women in sales, former Girl Scouts, now realize the cookie drive was the start of their sales careers. Fifty, seventy-five, one hundred cookie boxes sold and flash forward twenty years to closing high-powered sales deals.

My cookie-selling experiences made me feel more confident about my communication skills. I did not need the help of anyone else to sell successfully. I could convince people to part with their money, to buy something they wanted, and, in fact, could not resist. Plus, using an effective sales tool, the art of persuasion, I also sold my parents on the idea to let me do it. After that hard sell, I had no problem knocking on strangers’ doors and asking them to buy. I loved the thrill of the hunt. Cookie lovers: I’m coming for you.

I also felt motivated by social values. I not only met my personal goals, but I also worked as a team member for the common good. It never occurred to me that as a girl I had anything to overcome. I wore my iconic green uniform that represented my company. I was a valuable member of an organization that was bigger than me.

That's why I kept the "I'm Thumbbody!" mug, a reminder of what inspired me to sell all those years ago and what continues to inspire me today. As I continued my sales adventure, all I had to do was follow those cookie crumbs of knowledge along the trail to my success.