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Sell Yourself First

The Most Critical Element in Every Sales Effort

THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

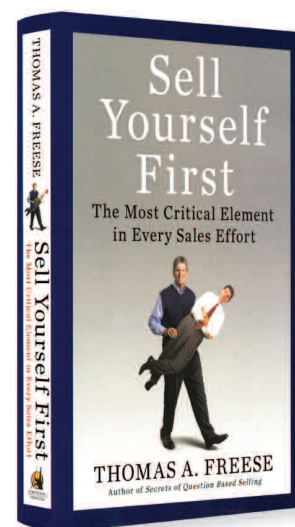
The familiar adage that “It’s a jungle out there” applies to sellers and sales organizations now more than ever. Competitors are hungry for business, decision makers are wary of change, and the market is crowded with products and services that are barely distinguishable from one another. Meanwhile, the tried-and-true sales methods of the past are simply no longer effective in a world where customers aren’t sure whom to trust.

According to Thomas A. Freese, author of the contemporary sales methodology classic *Secrets of Question Based Selling*, the single most effective way to separate yourself and your offerings from all the noise in the marketplace is to sell yourself first. After all, you are the greatest asset your competition lacks.

Freese has helped thousands of salespeople worldwide become more effective at penetrating new accounts, positioning a unique value proposition and closing more business. In *Sell Yourself First*, he shows how to leverage personal assets to win the confidence of customers by displaying a host of intangible attributes, such as credibility, competence, confidence, integrity, creativity, attitude and thought leadership. Ultimately, by maximizing your ability to convey a more impactful value proposition, you give yourself an unfair advantage over the competition to win more sales.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- How to gain a significant competitive advantage.
- Why you should earn credibility early in the sales conversation.
- How to treat every sales call like a job interview.
- How the biggest differentiator in a competitive marketplace is you.



by Thomas A. Freese

CONTENTS

Introduction: The Game Has Changed

Page 2

Your Next Job Interview

Page 3

Customers Won't Trust Just Anyone

Page 4

Establishing the Customer's Buying Criteria

Page 5

Making Prospects More Receptive to Your Message

Page 6

Paint Pictures with Your Words

Page 7

Wrapping Up the Sale

Page 8

THE COMPLETE SUMMARY: SELL YOURSELF FIRST

by Thomas A. Freese

The author: Thomas A. Freese is the founder and president of QBS Research Inc., and the author of five books, including *Secrets of Question Based Selling*. He has been featured in numerous articles and is considered to be one of the foremost authorities on sales effectiveness, buyer motivation and competitive positioning strategies.

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Introduction: The Game Has Changed

Skills development has become the new field on which the game of selling is now being played.

Keep in mind that your doctor went to school and studied for 10 or more years before you were willing to take his or her advice. Likewise, it takes five to eight years of formal education to become an architect, an accountant, an engineer or an attorney. With that in mind, perhaps it's reasonable to expect that it should take a little effort and commitment on your part to learn how to cause potential buyers to trust you with their time, money, problems, issues, goals, needs and concerns.

Even if you are indeed a capable individual, it's unlikely that you are the only talented person in your industry. Companies offering similar solutions will be competing against you harder than ever to gain the customers' trust and ultimately earn their business. Eventually, someone is going to win these battles and, as you might expect with any competitive situation, your ability to prevail has a lot to do with *you*.

In today's competitive landscape, your long-term career aspirations, along with your day-to-day livelihood, depend on your own personal effectiveness more than ever. And how you approach the profession of selling will ultimately determine whether you will be seen by customers as a sales professional or just another hungry vendor who's trying to make a buck. Even if you are not a career salesperson, whether you manage a small business, support the organization in a customer service role or are an executive in a Fortune 500 company, you

will definitely be selling yourself every day.

When selling yourself, you must remain true to yourself by doing things in the way that makes the most logical sense in today's business climate. Make it your goal to be perceived as competent and purposeful when talking with customers, and keep it simple and current by allowing reasonability and relevance to be your guide. ●

The Elephant in the Room

Starting with an "elevator pitch" to convey value is officially dead as a viable differentiation strategy. After a salesperson finishes spewing all the wonderful benefits of his or her product offering, the customer's two biggest issues have not been addressed. What decision makers really want to know is "who" to trust and "how" to make a good decision.

Even if you have a great story to tell about your products and services, customers are skeptical of sales pitches. Thus, for the sake of maximizing your credibility and differentiating your company's value, you must be willing to give customers what they really want — the rest of the story. Customer skepticism is the "elephant in the room," and you will help yourself by dealing with it up front.

Customers tend to buy from whoever they like the best. It's just that likability is no longer just a function of friendliness and sociability. Instead, customers will "like" whoever represents the greatest value, which is now a function of being perceived as credible, intelligent, capable, professional, creative, honest, prepared, customer-focused and responsive to their needs.

The same logic applies in virtually every competitive



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market, whether you sell financial services, pharmaceuticals, technology or sales training courseware. Customers are ultimately going to partner with someone in an effort to meet their needs, and whether or not they choose to deal with you has a lot to do with how you choose to deal with them. Consequently, the difference between winning and losing in today's business environment usually comes down to the ongoing perceptions customers form about you.

Learning How to Win When It's Close

A salesperson's ability to earn some initial credibility in order to get deeper, wider and more strategic within his or her accounts can give an otherwise ordinary salesperson an unfair advantage. Potential buyers aren't just looking for a sterile listing of features and benefits when talking with vendor representatives. What they really want is to gain a certain comfort level that comes from a set of intangible benefits that don't necessarily show up on the company's preprinted product brochures.

Discerning customers are especially looking for creative ideas, transparency and thought leadership, the combination of which can all roll under the heading of getting sound advice. Add to these qualities the many other intangible character traits you bring to the sale, such as knowledge, experience, integrity, vision, preparedness and responsiveness, in addition to someone who cares more about the needs of the customer than about padding his or her own commission check, and we may indeed be on to something. Whether the customer verbalizes it or not, these intangible qualities tend to be extremely important and will determine the outcome of many sales opportunities. When the time for a decision arrives, customers want to know that they are dealing with someone who cares about their long-term success, and they want to feel comfortable that you have the depth and perspective to help them make the right choice. ●

Your Next Job Interview

Whether you are a person interviewing for a desirable position or you have ever evaluated potential candidates as a hiring manager, a job interview scenario is something that virtually everyone can relate to. It also provides the perfect metaphor for why it's important to sell yourself first.

As an applicant for employment, in addition to being solely responsible for selling yourself, you are also the product that's being sold. And even if you are the most qualified candidate applying for a position, you still have

Desirable Qualities of the Perfect Candidate

It's pretty easy to create a top 10 list of desirable attributes a hiring manager might be looking for in the perfect candidate. Those qualities might include:

1. Knowledgeable, experienced, savvy.
2. Likable, easy to get along with.
3. Customer-focused versus self-serving.
4. Could easily blend with existing business culture.
5. Quick learner, short ramp-up time.
6. Offers a new perspective with fresh ideas.
7. Independent, motivated, hard worker.
8. Track record of success, combined with a dose of humility.
9. Positive attitude and commitment to excellence.
10. Solid references.

If a candidate for employment possessed each of these qualities, and he or she could effectively demonstrate them during a job interview, can we agree that in addition to having a pretty good chance of being hired, he or she would also have the potential of being a valuable long-term asset for the company?

to say and do things during the interview process (or during a sales call) that will cause you to be perceived as such.

The Real Purpose of a Job Interview

The real purpose of a job interview is twofold. First, a face-to-face meeting provides qualified candidates with an opportunity to sell themselves to the hiring manager and second, it gives the hiring manager a chance to see, experience and evaluate many important intangible qualities about the person that wouldn't otherwise show up as specific line items on the candidate's resume.

Not surprisingly, the purpose of a sales call is very similar. For customers, time spent with a salesperson either on the telephone or in person gives them a chance to evaluate the vendor's value proposition. Your probability of success and the customer's perception of your value will be significantly influenced by some key intangibles, like professionalism, preparedness, energy, passion, personality, commitment, assertiveness, helpfulness, confidence and mutual respect, and the extent to which you can demonstrate these during the call. Think

Summary: SELL YOURSELF FIRST

of it this way. Every job interview is a sales situation and every sales situation is also a job interview. In sales, if you want to have opportunities to position your product or service offerings to qualified decision makers, then you must be able to *sell yourself first*. ●

Customers Won't Trust Just Anyone

Understanding the dynamics of how mutual trust is created is particularly important for salespeople because trust serves as the foundation for building solid relationships, whether personal or professional. Especially these days, if someone is not willing to trust you, then it is unlikely that any attempts you make at offering potential solutions will produce a positive result.

Trust is also a critical element in maintaining existing relationships. At the point where someone decides he or she can no longer trust you, it is predictable that whatever relationship you may have had with him or her will abruptly come to an end.

Problem, Alternative, Solution (The PAS Approach)

Essentially, every value-based decision that you or your customers make is arrived at by using PAS logic. Whether you are considering the purchase of a new computer, car, house or fancy outfit, the underlying decision process is essentially the same. Because you have a problem (P) that the alternatives (A) don't solve as effectively, you are going to choose this particular solution (S).

The underlying logic is universal. If a hospital administrator must choose between multiple suppliers from which to purchase medical equipment, the decision maker in the hospital will ultimately conclude the following: "Because we have certain goals, objectives, issues, concerns, wants, needs, desires or problems (P), which the alternatives (A), other suppliers, don't solve as effectively, that's why we are going to procure these solutions from this particular vendor (S)."

The underlying logic of this new PAS positioning model comes with a hidden benefit. Simply put, you bond with people by focusing on what's most important to them (their goals, issues, needs, concerns, desires and problems (P)), as opposed to whatever is most important to you — your solutions (S). This especially makes sense in the selling arena because in order to communicate the value of your product or service, you must first have something to build value against. Bonding with potential customers on what is most important to them is strategi-

cally significant because that's what allows them to begin to trust you. Your ability to solve problems is also the trigger that piques the customer's interest. ●

Managing Conversational Dynamics

Ever wonder why some of the conversations you have with customers seem to flow along with inexplicable ease, while other times it feels like you're pulling teeth to initiate a dialogue or suggest possible next steps? The extent to which other people will respond to your questions, listen to your ideas or take your advice is largely a reflection of how effectively you communicate with them.

Reducing conversational tension is an area where superior technique can give the strategic salesperson a significant advantage. As you've probably heard many times, it's not just what you say (or ask) that's important, your success is also contingent on how those messages (or questions) are actually being delivered.

In sales, achieving trusted adviser status has become the Holy Grail in terms of placing yourself in the strongest possible position to earn the customer's trust and close business. Why? Because customers usually do business with the person or company from whom they feel most comfortable taking advice. You have to assume that other vendors will also be competing as hard as ever to have a share of the decision maker's ear. The challenge in today's competitive marketplace is putting yourself in a position to be the vendor who ends up in the coveted role of trusted adviser.

Understanding Question-Based Logic

The real skill with regard to selling yourself first is causing customers to *want* to open up and engage in a more productive conversation about their needs and your potential solutions.

Only if a product or service seems to provide a good fit might customers be willing to listen, and then only to the extent that the salesperson makes a valuable use of their time. This is where Question Based Selling (QBS) comes in — using logic, not just asking a bunch of questions.

It's best to secure the customer's permission prior to asking questions. Knowing that a mini-invitation from the customer instantly opens the door to a more productive conversation, it is very easy to think in terms of saying, "Ms. Customer, I'd be happy to give you all the details. Can I ask you a couple specifics about your upcoming project?"

Summary: **SELL YOURSELF FIRST**

Asked at the appropriate time, customers will surely say yes. This is not about fooling people into answering questions a certain way. It's about being customer-focused, respectful and demonstrating that you want to make the best use of the decision maker's time. ●

Establishing the Customer's Buying Criteria

Have you ever noticed that your local hardware store sells drills and drill bits? But if you think about it, no one actually wants the drill itself. What they really want are holes. Isn't that odd? Hardware stores don't sell what the customer really wants — holes. Instead, they sell drills and drill bits as a means to accomplish the customer's true objective.

In the same manner, the decision to purchase your product or service is usually a way to accomplish other more specific goals or objectives. Knowing the customer's true motivations, therefore, is very important. Identifying multiple reasons for customers to buy from you can also boost your sales while significantly benefiting the customer.

Once customers begin to form the impression that a salesperson might be able to help them, they are usually willing to share tons of information with a salesperson they believe to be a valuable resource. The customer's perception of the value you bring is, therefore, largely in your own hands and establishing credibility is a direct function to your ability to *sell yourself first*.

Getting Your Arms Around the Customer's Decision Criteria

Getting your arms around the customer's decision criteria is complicated by the fact that customers often speak in generic or general terms, as opposed to articulating what they really need. This natural vagueness creates another good opportunity for sellers who are prepared to facilitate more in-depth conversations.

The actual value of your product or service doesn't change whether you have a detailed conversation with potential buyers or a superficial one. But if the solutions you offer are capable of addressing multiple issues and implications, and you know customers are not going to fully articulate their own needs, then your success is closely linked to your ability to facilitate more in-depth conversations, which is very different than just probing and having customers reluctantly share some fraction of their needs.

Applying Your New Decision Logic

This participative philosophy on needs development has dramatically shifted the older-school paradigm away from the idea that customers will openly share all their needs with a salesperson they don't yet know and trust. Instead, mutually beneficial sales conversations will only occur as a result of a proactive facilitation where you are able to gain credibility and focus on which issues are most important to the customer. In QBS, my vision includes having salespeople convey more value by helping customers recognize possible implications that potentially otherwise wouldn't have been considered.

The difference between success and failure often boils down to a simple formula that starts with putting in the time and effort to give yourself an unfair advantage. ●

How to Be More Strategic with Your Sales Questions

Sellers have been taught to ask lots of questions. But just because a salesperson wants to ask a bunch of questions doesn't mean potential customers will share information with a salesperson they don't yet know or trust.

In today's competitive business environment, if it is possible to ask questions in a way that could be considered highly ineffective, then it must also be possible to ask effective questions, in a way that causes people to "want to" share lots of valuable information. The difference between these two outcomes is generally dictated by the logic behind the questions you ask.

Scope, Focus and Disposition

Your ability to manage the *scope*, *focus* and *disposition* of your questions will have a direct impact on how productively people respond.

The scope of a question refers to its broadness or narrowness. Like closed-ended questions, questions that are narrow in scope can easily be answered with a single word or phrase. These questions tend to be less invasive because you are asking about specific data points. This makes them easy for salespeople to ask and easy for customers to answer.

Narrowing the scope of your questions essentially serves as a steppingstone strategy for kicking off the broader needs development conversation. Once you have earned some initial credibility, you can easily broaden the scope of your questions and probe more deeply into the customer's issues and concerns.

Once you understand how to narrow the scope of your questions to initiate a more productive needs

Summary: SELL YOURSELF FIRST

development conversation, it's time to escalate the focus of your questions to get into more depth. Every question a salesperson asks has a strategic focus, where you are either asking about the status of an opportunity, issues that a customer might be facing, the implications of those issues or possible solutions for moving forward. Hence, the second strategic attribute that sellers have an opportunity to manage is the strategic focus of their needs development questions.

As potential buyers start to perceive you as a valuable resource, they will begin to confide in you regarding their problems, issues and concerns. They will also want you to recommend the appropriate next step in the decision process. After all, you're the expert. That's why it is critical to have a strategy that escalates the focus of your needs development questions — first earning the right to engage, then identifying multiple opportunities to provide value and, finally, closing on potential next steps. If you can consistently accomplish these goals, you will differentiate yourself from all the other salespeople who are stuck in the mindset of asking highly invasive and probative questions. ●

Cost-Justifying Your Intangible Value Proposition

The actual value of any product or service is highly intangible. Even if you sell tangible goods, the benefits of your offerings must still be recognized by potential buyers as being valuable, enough so to justify the cost of your proposed solution.

What if it were possible to increase your probability of success in making a sale merely by causing customers to perceive more benefits? In addition to separating yourself from the competition, selling the intangible aspects of your solution is the best way to tip pending purchase decisions in your favor.

Even if you sell tangible goods, the true value proposition of those items comes from an array of intangible benefits that must be perceived by interested buyers.

If you think about it, the whole concept of selling yourself, especially in today's competitive marketplace, is extremely intangible.

What is the value of working with a knowledgeable and trustworthy salesperson instead of a vendor whose methods are somewhat questionable? The difference can be huge from the customer's perspective, even if the products being offered are virtually identical. In competitive sales situations, the customer's perception of your

value is equal to the benefits of your product or service plus the intangibles you bring to the table.

It's no longer enough to be friendly and polite. The concept of selling yourself is more about accruing enough value to tip the scales in your favor, whether you are up against a competitive proposal or the customer is considering the option of holding off altogether. Sellers must also accumulate enough value to overcome any concerns that may arise when dealing with objections.

Cost Justification: The Final Hurdle

In sales cost justification is often the final hurdle that must be cleared before customers are willing to pull the trigger on a purchase.

For sellers, cost justification is more about expanding the buyer's perspective. Since buyers tend to focus on a few specific hot buttons, sellers can accrue more value by causing customers to recognize additional needs or facets of their solution that would have otherwise gone unnoticed.

Qualities like integrity, leadership, desire, passion, vision, creativity, confidence, poise, honesty, compassion, resourcefulness and work ethic tend to be very important to decision makers who are forming impressions about you and the value you can offer. Even though you can't actually touch these things, your ability to convey these valuable character traits will determine not only whether you succeed in selling yourself, but also how much others are willing to pay for your services. ●

Making Prospects More Receptive to Your Message

Sellers should have a compelling story to tell about their products and services. But you must also have a receptive audience that wants to hear about your potential solutions. Particularly since today's buyer is increasingly cautious and skeptical, decision makers are quick to fend off even the most tenacious salespeople.

Rather than being more aggressive, however, why not take the opposite approach? What if we combined sound logic with proven communication techniques to pique the customer's interest, as a means of securing more time and attention with key decision makers? You can accomplish this by leveraging curiosity as a key ingredient in your new sales strategy.

The magical ingredient in the strategic sales process is *curiosity*. It's a simple formula really. If a decision maker

Summary: **SELL YOURSELF FIRST**

is not the least bit curious about who you are or what you can do for him or her, then you probably won't succeed in getting his or her time or attention. Fortunately, the opposite is also true. If you are able to do something to pique the prospect's curiosity, you will not only get more mind share within target accounts, you will also enjoy a competitive advantage throughout the sales process.

Mini-Invitations Are HUGE!

Mini-invitations are terrific conversational tools. They are also great curiosity inducers. In an account where you already have an existing relationship and the customer is open and willing to share with you, you may not need a curiosity strategy. But if your job function includes business development and you are responsible for creating revenue opportunities that otherwise wouldn't exist, then using mini-invitations to make people more receptive can pay huge dividends.

Basically, a mini-invitation is the customer's way of saying, "Tell me more." It's the equivalent of a decision maker saying, "Mr. Salesperson, I'm interested enough to continue the dialogue, so can you please take a few minutes and explain your solutions?" Of course, the customer's interest (in the form of an invitation) paves the way for you to educate him or her. Similarly, if a customer said, "Mr. Salesperson, could you please ask me a couple specifics to better understand my needs?" that would instantly change the complexion of your sales interactions. Customers would go from being standoffish to being intrigued, to the point where they are actually inviting you to take the lead in the conversation.

Inducing curiosity, as a positioning strategy, is applicable in every industry. While one could argue that some of this is just common courtesy, using curiosity to create mini-invitations is highly strategic because it generates a predictable outcome. ●

Positioning Your Solutions Against the Competition

Whether you are making a sales call, working in the booth at a trade show or delivering a product presentation, your ability to competitively position your solutions is critical to your success in sales.

Positioning an effective value proposition is more than just rattling off a bunch of features and benefits, however. For decision makers to register real value, they must conclude that your product's capabilities are the most cost-effective as compared to other options. Note that I'm not saying you have to be the cheapest. You just

have to be the most valuable solution that satisfies their particular needs.

If the outcome of the sale comes down to whoever has "the ability" to convey the most value, then having superior positioning skills can absolutely give you an unfair advantage.

The only question now is: What can you do to put yourself and your products in the strongest possible position to win business?

Winning the Battle for Conversational Control

To me, the most important reason to have at least some control over your dialogue is to make the best use of the customer's time, by keeping the conversation on track. As a salesperson, you should have a pretty good idea of how you can provide value prior to making the call. Thus, it stands to reason that if you are able to steer the conversation toward those areas that are most beneficial to the customer, you will accomplish much more than if you just let the conversation wander. Whether you get five minutes or two hours in front of a customer, providing maximum value during this window of time not only is good for customers, it also places you in a strong competitive position.

So, how exactly is a salesperson supposed to control his or her sales conversations, especially when decision makers are cautious or standoffish? Strangely, the answer to this question comes down to simple punctuation — use questions, not statements.

Always remember that decision makers are not so concerned about your resume during a job interview, just as customers don't really care what's printed on the product brochure during a sales call. What potential buyers are interested in is how those details will affect your performance in the job or how a salesperson's advice will help them accomplish their goals. Recognizing this will make you exponentially more effective when it comes to competitively positioning yourself and the value of your solutions. ●

Paint Pictures with Your Words

Most people think in pictures, not words. Thus, if you want to be an excellent communicator, your words must enable customers to visualize the potential value of your proposed products and services.

Painting pictures with words is an extremely valuable sales skill, but one that is generally left up to the individual to figure out on his or her own.

I'm sure you've heard the saying that a picture is worth a thousand words. It's true. Try reading a short

Summary: SELL YOURSELF FIRST

written paragraph describing something and then look at a picture of the same item. When you see the visual image, your brain begins to process specific shapes, colors, shading and depth. You will automatically recognize visual contrasts between the various objects that exist in the picture. An emotional response may also be triggered if you associate something in the picture with an experience you've had in the past. The neurons in someone's brain fire instantaneously when they see an actual picture rather than just hearing a bunch of words.

Create Visual Images in the Mind

If you want prospective buyers to recognize the full value of your product or service, then your company's story and the messages you convey must be articulated in a way that creates visual images in the mind of your target audience. You do this by painting pictures with your words. Essentially, this is the skill of storytelling.

One of the best ways to communicate with people as you execute the various steps in the sales process is to leverage stories, anecdotes, metaphors, analogies and parables to enhance key points you want to make.

Using stories to better relate to your audience enables you to translate the capabilities and potential benefits of your recommended solution into real value for the customer. Given that most people who evaluate your product or service are comparative thinkers, they will naturally try to put your value proposition into some type of context, most likely by relating it to something they are already familiar with or understand.

The best advice about articulating a valuable message is to think less about what you are trying to say and more about what the customer needs to hear in order to move forward with a favorable decision. ●

Wrapping Up the Sale

Closing can be relatively simple once you reach the point where your customer is ready to move forward with a purchase. But if a decision maker isn't yet convinced that your product or service provides the right solution, then more selling needs to occur.

Since a sales transaction usually represents the culmination of several smaller victories on the way to closing the larger sale, a savvy salesperson can revisit many of the same strategies and techniques used earlier in the sales process to close more deals.

The act of closing a sale should be an anticlimactic event. If a client clearly recognizes the value of your product or service and agrees that your solutions will help him or her address important needs, then wrapping

A Balancing Act

It's a balancing act — sellers must be forthright enough to find out where they stand in the sale and know how best to proceed, but there isn't any upside to being harsh, pushy or manipulative at the end of the decision cycle.

One of the ways to avoid sounding like a money-grubber is by focusing on the broader decision, not just the impending purchase. For example, I might ask, "What is the typical administrative process for this type of decision?"

up a sales transaction shouldn't be more difficult than just saying, "Press hard, five copies." However, if the customer does not see the value of your solutions, using manipulative closing gimmicks is probably not going to help you win the business against a viable competitor.

The real "trick" to being successful in sales is causing customers to see the value of how your solutions will address their needs and, within the process, make them comfortable enough to justify a decision to move forward with a purchase.

Find Out Where You Stand

Putting the awkwardness of the situation aside, closing is really about getting an accurate report as to where you stand in the sales process. Is the customer ready to move forward with a purchase? If not, what things might be holding him or her back?

Knowing the true status of the sale is the only way a salesperson can know how best to proceed.

The best way to find out where you stand in the sale is to put your closing question in hypothetical terms. After you have identified the customer's needs and educated him or her on the full extent of your value proposition, go ahead and summarize the progression of events that brought the decision process to this point. Then you can simply ask the customer if it "makes sense" to take the appropriate next step. ●

RECOMMENDED READING LIST

If you liked *Sell Yourself First*, you'll also like:

1. **Rainmaking Conversations** by Mike Schultz and John E. Doerr. Rainmaking Conversations offers a research-based, field-tested, practical selling approach that will help you master the art of the sales conversation.
2. **SNAP Selling** by Jill Konrath. In the new age of selling, sales is no longer a numbers game. Konrath offers four SNAP rules to win more sales and she teaches us that sales is an outcome, not a goal.
3. **Exceptional Selling** by Jeff Thull. Thull shows readers how to create a different kind of relationship with customers and reframe the typical sales conversation.