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## Zen and the Art of Selling

BY ROBERT M. METCALFE '68



**T**wenty-eight years ago I was an MIT freshman, and I wish someone had sold me then what I plan to sell you now—the idea that selling is an art to practice no matter what your calling. After decades of painful on-the-job sales training, I am sad to find that the MIT culture, at all levels, is still permeated with the notion that professional salespeople are properly placed in the food chain just below green slime.

That attitude relegates too many MIT students to bleak Saturday nights alone, because they think it unseemly to do the bit of selling conducive to lining up a date. But there are also serious professional and institutional effects as well as personal ones: Too many MIT professors are marginalized and their ideas ignored, not in technical journals or academics or science, but where they are most needed: in the corridors of power. Too many MIT administrators, paralyzed by false notions of academic dignity, fail to put MIT's best feet aggressively forward to win the Ivy League endowments that MIT deserves. And too many MIT entrepreneurs launch companies that give no thought to selling and so promptly crash and burn.

I can tell you firsthand that selling is one of the highest arts in entrepreneurship. Most companies, even successful high-tech companies in Silicon Valley, spend 10 times more on selling than on engineering. And if it's proof you need, then read "How to Succeed in Business: An Interview with Edward B. Roberts," in the February/March 1992 *Technology Review*. Roberts shows the strong correlation between the success of startups and the marketing orientation—the sales consciousness—of their founders.

In short, nothing happens until something gets sold.

So now let me tell you about a fantasy of mine to which I think MIT grads will relate.

## **A Better Mousetrap**

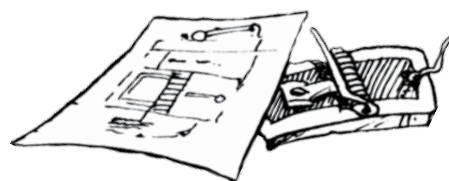
It began with my attending a meeting about better ways to catch mice. The meeting opened with a superficial discussion of mousetraps, to which I perfunctorily listened. Having settled on one of several ideas that occurred to me during the discussion, I spoke.

The meeting fell silent as I sketched my concept for a better mousetrap and then sat back. A moment of suspense passed, and then the meeting came alive with enumerations of the many advantages of the mousetrap I had proposed—all in what seemed to me like slow motion. As enthusiasm built, and after only my occasional corrective interjection, a consensus formed around what was thereafter referred to, on every occasion, as "Bob's mousetrap idea."

For years after the meeting, my long, contemplative weekends were too often interrupted by ceremonies at which I graciously accepted prestigious awards for my mousetrap idea and its many derivatives, all of which, no matter how remote, were scrupulously traced back and credited to me. I was invited to posh parties by the most hip and happening mouse exterminators and was approached often with outrageous propositions from beautiful strangers.

Among the many checks I received spontaneously in the mail, I cashed only those from companies whose commercial applications of my mousetrap idea were socially responsible, environmentally sensitive, and politically correct. My fantastic wealth grew, and all but the modest fraction required to support my ascetic existence in various hideaways around the

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world went to support the selfless teachers and researchers at MIT's Robert Metcalfe Laboratory for Mousetrap Technology.

## **Selling Consciousness**

I have been waking up from this fantasy for 28 years. In reality, inventors who believe that better mousetraps automatically bring the world to their door are in the lowest of the four states of selling consciousness: the unappreciated state. And they are probably alone in the bushes.

I moved up to the next higher state of selling consciousness when I ventured out to hit people over the head with facts they were too lazy or stupid to find out for themselves—that they should have been beating a path to my door, buying my mousetraps. In this state of consciousness—the argumentative state—I *told* people to buy my mousetraps. They argued with me, I snickered at their ignorance, and I expected that my clever and decisive counterarguments would force them to buy. This occasionally worked, but only up to an unsatisfying point.

In our free-market system, of course, people are not compelled, even by overbearing cleverness, to buy a better mousetrap. And so, with experience and desire to succeed, I moved up to the third state of selling consciousness: suffering fools gladly. I quietly listened to concerns about buying my mousetraps and was careful not to call them stupid. I explained in single-syllable words why my mousetraps were superior. I found that people respond positively to politeness and simplicity. Increased sales resulted.

I have observed, however, that people stuck in the fool-suffering state of selling consciousness are twisted by their own insincerity and soon stoop to the kind of overselling and underdelivery that have given sales its poor reputation. What ultimately separates the sheep from the goats in this field is understanding that prospective buyers of mousetraps are not fools. I learned that they are in fact experts—in knowing what they need. When they did not buy my mousetraps, it was either because they didn't need them or because I failed to sell them competently.

Now, in this fourth and highest state of selling consciousness, I learned to

listen to prospective buyers to find the maximum overlap between their mouse-elimination needs and the mousetraps I had to offer. I worked hard to understand my buyer. I learned to communicate the benefits of my mousetraps, first establishing my credibility and always keeping in mind that it is not mousetraps that buyers need, but fewer mice.

I learned to ask buyers for their order, to listen for their objections, to handle objections creatively, and to ask for their order again ... and again. I delivered my mousetraps when needed and ensured that buyers were satisfied.

This was selling as a high calling, and I learned to revel in the subtleties of its practice.

## Selling versus Engineering

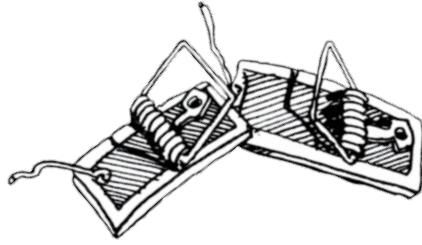
Let me flash a few numbers by you about the relative importance of selling and engineering. Let's say a buyer spends \$181 on a Metcalfe Mousetrap. Right off the top, \$81 goes to distribution—the outside people responsible for locally selling and delivering our product. Believe me, they earn it.

Of the \$100 after distribution, about \$50 goes to manufacture the mousetraps, including \$40 to buy the parts, \$9 for overhead, and \$1 for the direct labor to actually assemble the device. Administrative expenses absorb \$5, taxes take \$7, and shareholders receive \$10 for the use of their capital.

That leaves \$18 for my company's own field sales and factory marketing activities and, finally, a mere \$10 for what MIT teaches best: engineering. (Of course, this last \$10 is also spent on engineering support and management, not strictly on engineering, but let's not split hairs.)

Almost all of the \$81 spent on distribution is selling, and of course the \$18 for field sales and factory marketing is selling. That pattern—spending about 10 times more on selling than on engineering, \$99 versus \$10—is true of 3Com, the \$400 million company that I founded. 3Com is not atypical of a successful high-tech company.

Perhaps instead of using the old math to make my point, I should use the new. The set of all potential buyers for mousetraps is usefully divided into three dis-



*“Selling is a high calling, and I learned to revel in the subtleties of its practice.”*

joint subsets: the set of buyers (including my mother) who will automatically buy mine, the set of all mousetrap buyers who will never buy mine (parents of my competitors and the like), and the set of mousetrap buyers who will buy mine only when competently sold.

Clearly the sizes of these sets vary both absolutely and relatively, but the third set is much larger than many MIT people think. Selling matters.

## Selling Curriculum

Let's say I am successful in selling the MIT faculty on the importance of selling. What would be covered in a curriculum designed to teach it?

Certainly there would be the basics of talking—and, especially, listening—to people. Students would learn that one of the nicest things they can do for a person is to ask for advice. They would be taught how to identify prospects for mousetraps, and how to “qualify” them—to determine whether they need mousetraps and have the means to buy them.

There would be some instruction on making presentations that build credibility and translate the features of mousetraps into benefits for buyers. Students would learn—this is critical—that it is rarely the purpose of a presentation to show how smart you are.

Students would learn about spotting “buying signs,” asking for the order, and handling the inevitable objections.

Toward the end they would learn the difference between sales and marketing. It would be hard to cram all this into the existing four-year programs, but selling, like engineering, requires lifelong learning.

So now, while I work on getting MIT to establish the new Interdisciplinary Program in Selling, perfecting your sales skills is something that each of you has to do on your own. Start with the most intimidating part of selling—asking for the order. Most of our reluctance to sell comes from our fear that if we ask for the order, we will be told no.

If there is one trick to selling, it is getting over the fear of rejection, and I can suggest a strategy for doing it.

Decide that you are going to sell something today. Start with something simple, like selling the idea of going to a particular restaurant for lunch. Find a couple of people with whom you would like to have lunch and ask them to go with you to this restaurant. Then force yourself to stop talking so you can listen to the answer. If they say yes, you can move on to more challenging sales situations.

But what if your worst fears are realized, and your associates say no? This is it, the moment of truth. Smile and just ask why. Listen to the objections and try to deal with them. The way to overcome that paralyzing fear of rejection—the whole trick of selling—is to hear “no” as a learning opportunity. That's the distillation of years of learning about selling.

So, I urge you, sell something today. And if you are not convinced about why you should sell, I want to hear your objections. Or if your first few selling attempts go awry, I want to hear how. So, sell already.

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ROBERT M. METCALFE '68 received bachelor's degrees from MIT in electrical engineering and management, and a PhD in computer science from Harvard. He invented the Ethernet local-area networking system and founded 3Com in Santa Clara, CA, to commercialize it. This article was developed from a lecture at the MIT Laboratory for Computer Science.

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