

“The More Things Change, the More They Stay the Same:” Selling in the 21st Century by Jason Schroeder

Great 21st century salespeople will distinguish themselves by pulling off an impressive trick: they will harness new technologies to reach a larger audience than previously possible, in a more immediate and personal way than ever before. More importantly, they will resist the urge to abandon salesmanship in pursuit of gimmickry.

The fundamental human impulses that drive the purchase of goods and services are the same today as they were centuries ago. It is tempting for one to believe that the modern world requires a complete reworking of the art of the sale, but that is simply untrue. The sales handbook does not need to be rewritten – though there is plenty of material for an exciting new chapter; one that will be dictated by men and women well versed in the chapters that precede it.

The 21st century marketplace will be dominated by a growing multitude of voices vying unsuccessfully for consumers’ dollars. And while much of this sound and fury will be amusing or even popular, it will ultimately fail to make the cash register ring because its creators will be so enamored with their creation that they lose sight of its intended purpose. But truly great selling – the sort that David Ogilvy practiced – will remain largely unchanged in this new century.

All of this is not to say that a great salesperson must shun new ideas; quite the contrary. Today’s consumers are the savviest in human history, and they deserve cutting-edge advertising that keeps pace with their rapidly changing lives. OgilvyOne’s clients need high-tech implementation of a low-tech concept: well-researched messages that feature big ideas and respect the customer’s intelligence. This strategy will work just as well on Facebook as it does in printed media because it is based on proven techniques that pre-date both the internet and the printing press.

Luckily, today’s salesperson has at his disposal more avenues for identifying and reaching customers than ever before. Social networking sites in particular have incredible potential as sales tools. But like all tools, they are only effective in skilled hands, and they can cause serious damage if used improperly. Regrettably, the democratic nature of the internet ensures there will be many people misusing these tools, crowding an already packed marketplace with amateurish content that risks damaging the medium’s credibility. If a salesperson is to rise above the din, it is more important than ever that he produce an effective message that is not dependent on the novelty of its delivery method. A fancy social media campaign may garner favor or win awards, but if it does not generate sales it is worthless to the client.

Ogilvy on Advertising begins with the following anecdote: “When Aeschines spoke, they said, ‘How well he speaks.’ But when Demosthenes spoke, they said, ‘Let us march against Philip.’” This century will be awash with advertisements that speak well. If it is to succeed, OgilvyOne must create timely and timeless work that inspires a march to the sales counter.