**Preparing Like a Pro**

Professionals prepare differently. 

You want your customers to trust you. Your personal credibility and trust are vital parts of any successful salesperson-client relationship.

In the early nineties, US Air (now US Airways) had five crashes in five years. Airline travel is extremely safe, with a mortality risk of about 1 in 40 million. So for one airline to have five crashes in five years is an extreme example of very bad luck, pilot error, mechanical failures, and/or coincidence.

One of US Air's crashes occurred at LaGuardia Airport in New York. According to published reports, the pilot and copilot had never flown together before. It was a stormy night. As they barreled down the runway, the pilot thought that the copilot had done the pre-flight checks. The copilot assumed the pilot had done them. Too late they discovered that nobody had done the cockpit checks.

The flaps were not set properly so the airplane could not lift off. As the East River loomed off the end of the runway, an instant decision was made to abort the takeoff. They reversed the engines and put on the brakes. The landing gear collapsed and the plane slid nose up into the East River. Two passengers died and sixty-four were injured.

The FAA investigation revealed that pilot error and not weather was the chief factor in this airline accident. In fact, the headline in *USA Today* two months later read, "Tape reveals USAir crew's mistakes."

Flash forward three weeks from the US Air crash. I was sitting on an American Airlines flight out of Chicago. I was in the First-Class cabin filled with business flyers on their way to their next meeting. The flight attendants did the usual safety announcements.

Then the captain flipped on his microphone and made an announcement. I suspect that he was reading from a script written by the marketing department. If not, he had decided to create one of the greatest sales pitches his airline had ever had. He said these exact words: "Ladies and gentlemen, this is your captain speaking. We are currently number two for takeoff. I have completed all of my cockpit checks and would like the flight attendants to please be seated."

The impact of the pilot's new greeting on the frequent flyers in the cabin was palpable, immediate and dramatic. My own attention perked up and my body involuntarily relaxed. Several seatmates let out a sigh of relief and visibly relaxed. The price of the ticket was the furthest thing from their minds. Any apprehension about flying today was alleviated by the very professional approach of the captain, who told us that he had done his cockpit checks.

**The big lesson:** You must market your professionalism and not just assume that your clients know you're a pro.

An airline pilot wouldn't think of taking off without completing the preflight checklist. Nor would s/he think to point out to a passenger that they had done it. And yet, something that American Airlines pilot took for granted had a profound impact on his passengers--the airline's customers.

So, what do you do behind the scenes that, if your customers knew you had done it, they would feel more comfortable doing business with you? You can have a profound effect on your customers by telling them what you do for them when they aren't looking, just like the pilot marketed his professionalism to a cabin full of uptight frequent flyers.

**Magic Phrase**

"In preparing for this meeting, I . . ."

Airline captains operate, for the most part, behind closed doors. Similarly, most of the work you do on behalf of your customers happens behind the scenes. Customers do not think about you as much as you think about them. They have many other problems and concerns competing for their attention.

Going the extra mile is fine. *Marketing* the fact that you've gone the extra mile is how you gain extra mileage from your efforts.

The next time you meet with a prospect or customer, open the meeting with this phrase: "In preparing for this meeting, I . . ."

Then quickly list two or three things you did to prepare. You will experience a new level of attention and respect from both clients and prospects. And you'll blow away competitors whose idea of a good sales opening is, "Anything coming down for me this week?" Or, “Your account has just been assigned to me.”

If you don't tell them, they'll never know. Remember the big question: What are you doing behind the scenes for your clients that, if your clients knew you were doing it, they would feel more comfortable doing business with you? Once you've answered the big question for yourself, tell your clients.

* Did you hit your client's Web site to gain information about the company? Make that known.
* Did you make your client's problem the subject of a thirty-minute brainstorming session with the engineering department? Don't keep that a secret.
* Are you getting some extra training, taking a course, or reading a book that will make you capable of better service? Disclose it early in the meeting.
* Have you read any relevant books about the client's industry lately? Summarize the key points and share them with your client. Making a statement like “I’ve been reading (blank) and one of the key points for me was (blank),” positions you as someone who is more “impressively competent” than the last salesperson who darkened his door.

If you learned math the old-fashioned way, your teachers always made you "show your work." They wanted you to get the right answer, sure, but they also wanted to see how you arrived at the answer.

This same principle applies in sales. Clients reward people who have worked to earn their business. Showing your work is a winning strategy. That brings us to . . .

**Accidental Salesperson Axiom:**

Professionals put a premium on proper preparation.

**Corollary:**

If you tell them what you did to prepare,

your clients will appreciate you more.

(Excerpted from *The Accidental Salesperson: How to Take Control of Your Sales Career and Earn the Respect and Income You Deserve.* Permission granted to reprint and share with attribution to the author.)