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How to Captivate Any Audience

*“Son, I’ve made a life, out of readin’ people’s faces
And knowin’ what their cards were
By the way they held their eyes.”*

As a lifelong salesperson, these words could be the opening lines of my autobiography. They are; of course, a verse from Kenny Rogers hit song, *The Gambler*. Professional gamblers and professional salespeople have a lot in common—both occupations attract highly competitive, self-confident people with a high tolerance for risk. The most successful people in both fields become highly attuned to the subtle signals sent out by the person sitting across the table from them. They also learn how to control and manage the messages, verbal and nonverbal, they are sending out to others. We human beings are complex creatures who seldom say precisely what we mean. This is why gambling and selling can be so addictive, learning to unravel the puzzles of human behavior is endlessly fascinating. Learning to understand others and to help them understand us, is a skill that not only will help us to make more sales but will enrich every interaction we encounter in our lives. *Captivate—The Science of Succeeding* with People by Vanessa Van Edwards offers some powerful insights into mastering this art.

Dr. Van Edwards is a researcher, speaker and writer whose research lab, *The Science of People*, conducts ongoing studies of human behavior. She goes beyond academic research to develop practical applications of the information collected to enhance the personal and professional lives of her clients and readers. It is this focus on putting her research to use that led many Fortune 500 companies to take advantage of her work. Dr. Van Edwards describes herself as a “*human behavior hacker*.” The Urban Dictionary defines a “*hacker*” as, “*one who programs a computer in a clever, virtuosic or wizardly manner.*” This is exactly what *Captivate* teaches its readers to do!

“*Human behavior hacking*” is a life skill and like any other skill it can be learned. Dr. Van Edwards own life story illustrates this fact. She is a “*recovering awkward person*” who in her younger days would break out in hives when she had to interact with strangers. To overcome her anxiety, she immersed herself in the study of human behavior. Her studies led her to create a number of “*hacks*” which enabled her to overcome her fears and flourish in her dealings with others. This book encapsulates what she has learned from her research and her observations of how people interact. Many books on human behavior require a Ph.D. in psychology to understand them, but *Captivate* is written in a simple, conversational style and uses many anecdotes to describe how the “*hacks*” can be used in your everyday interactions. She includes a number of scripts and lists of suggested phrases, which can be adapted to almost any situation.

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Experienced salespeople know the importance of making a good first impression. Dr. Van Edwards' book delves into the psychology behind quickly connecting with others. She notes that when we first meet another, they have three questions about us—"Are you a friend or a foe?" "Are you a winner or a loser?" and, "Are you a potential ally, what can you do for me?" Captivate talks about the importance of adopting positive body language to get others to trust you. Dr. Van Edwards recommends using a "launch stance," keeping the shoulders back with your chest, and face pointed directly at the other person. There should be space between your arms and your torso with your hands clearly in sight. The best communicators like to, "talk with their hands." Captivate cites a study of Ted Talk speakers showing a direct correlation between the speaker's popularity and the number of hand gestures they use. When we use these behaviors, we are taking up more physical space and appear stronger and more confident. Human beings are conditioned to watch a stranger's hands, an ancient security check to make sure they are not an armed foe. This is also the reason we continue to shake hands long after most folks have stopped carrying stone axes. Science of People finds that a confident handshake is dry, firm and level.

Vanessa Van Edwards and Kenny Rogers both agree that "*the way they hold their eyes,*" can tell us a lot about the people we encounter. Captivate describes eye contact as, "*the differentiator between a good first impression and a great one.*" Open body language shows that we present no risk to the prospect; our confidence shows them that we are a winner and good eye contact shows our respect and concern for them as individuals. When we maintain eye contact with another, our brains produce oxytocin, a chemical associated with feelings of trust and affection. While many people worry about making too much eye contact, research shows that we should be more concerned that we do not spend enough time looking at one another. Dr. Van Edwards believes that ideally we should be looking eye to eye about 60 to 70% of the time. Maintaining eye contact demonstrates true courage and a willingness to open ourselves up to others. Research has shown that appearing confident is critical to making a good first impression. Vanessa Van Edwards' studies have shown that most people decide whether we will like, believe and trust those we meet before they utter a single word. This means that we should constantly monitor and manage our body language.

Unless you're a professional mime (*Perhaps the only professionals people avoid more than lawyers and salespeople!*) body language will only get you so far. Most people try to "*break the ice*" and start a conversation talking about the weather, sports, or some other trivial matter. Dr. Van Edwards believes rather than using this "*small talk*" approach, we should engage in "*big talk*" with our prospects. She notes that small talk is trite, boring and does not engage the other person's mind. Saying, "*It sure looks like it could rain,*" tells the prospect that you have nothing new or of value to offer them. Instead, Captivate suggests opening

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conversations with what Dr. Van Edwards calls “Conversation Sparkers.” It is easy to use “the usual suspects,” the weather, the news, facile compliments etc., these are expected, meaningless and require little or no thought. These kind of comments are known as “social scripts” and are the conversational equivalent of a sprig of parsley on a dinner plate at a greasy spoon diner—they look pretty but they really don’t make you look forward to the meal. “Sparkers,” on the other hand, are different, intriguing and thought provoking. For example, instead of saying, “You sure have a nice florist shop here, Mr. Customer.” Say something like, “You have a lot of beautiful flowers, what is your personal favorite?” This approach offers several advantages. It is likely that every one of the thousand and one salespeople who called on that florist this week used a variation of “nice shop here” to open up a conversation. The florist responds by saying thank you, with a blank look on his face. It is like having the doctor tap your knee with a little rubber hammer, your foot jumps without any mental effort on your part. Asking him or her about their favorite flower forces them to actually use their brain. While their mental cogs are turning, they think to themselves, “Wow, this guy/gal is not your ordinary salesperson! It might be fun to talk to them for a bit.” This response is sparked by the activity in the substantia nigra and ventral tegmental areas of the brain, which, for obvious reasons, is also known as the brain’s “novelty area.” This area of the brain releases large amounts of dopamine into the brain when we experience new things. This is why we like to try new foods and go on vacation. Neurobiologists have found that this out of the box creative approach engages the prospect both mentally and emotionally. They found that this “*oddball approach*” enhances memory and learning and makes the interaction more pleasurable for all parties involved. A creative approach also leaves the prospect “*wanting more.*” Since the initial interaction was pleasurable, the person is willing to continue the conversation, if only because they are curious about what you will do next.

Dr. Van Edwards’ book includes the following quote, which should be posted in every sales office in the land, “*It is not your customer’s job to remember you. It is your obligation and responsibility to make sure they don’t have the chance to forget you.*”—Patricia Tripp. In our case it is the salesperson’s responsibility to say something memorable, something that will engage the prospect’s mind and emotions. This is not an easy task, we can not default to the usual social scripts; we have to craft “sparkers” which will engage the reader and move us closer to our objectives. These “conversation sparkers” create a mental post-it note that stick in the prospect’s brain long after we’ve moved on to our next call. This is not something that even the quickest thinker will find easy to do in the midst of a call. Making the effort to learn about the prospect’s business, to think about our products in relation to their needs and to use this information to craft unique and interesting “sparkers” will not only increase our sales but will make our interactions with our prospects and clients far more enjoyable.

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Your efforts to make yourself memorable by pleasantly surprising your customers should go far beyond the sales call. After a meeting with a customer, do what only 1 in 100 salespeople do—send them a thank you card. Even better, send them something. I know a rep, a very, very successful rep I might add, who sends his prospects a large box of Cracker Jacks after a call with a note saying, “*You’re a real Cracker Jack and I really enjoyed meeting with you. I’m sure we’ll both get a prize as we dig deeper into your needs. Thanks.*” I know this is a bit “*corny*,” no pun intended, but it gets results. Whenever you do something unexpected, you make yourself more memorable to the customer. They will not only remember you, but doing these kinds of things makes the customer associate your name with pleasurable and positive experiences.

Captivate—The Science of Succeeding with People is a book which I highly recommend to anyone who makes their living working with other people (i.e. ALL OF US). Each of its 271 pages is packed with insights into the human psyche. In this month’s Link & Learn, we’ve only hit on a few of Vanessa Van Edwards’ key points. Next month, we’ll look at what she has to say about what motivates human behavior and how we can solve “*the human puzzle.*”

This article was written by Jim Busch.

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