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This I Believe...

Twelve years ago I was sitting at my desk at the Pittsburgh Pennysaver when asked if I would, "Write a few short articles for PaperChain?" I agreed and thus began my relationship with Link & Learn and each of you. My mother-in-law used to say that as one ages, "the days get longer and the years get shorter." Time has taught me that she was absolutely right! Somehow I turned around and discovered that I have written over 140 monthly columns and that the online PaperChain archive contained approximately 275,000 words I'd written about our industry. I have been gratified by the response to this column. The feedback we've received from our readers, ranging from successful publishers to entry level salespeople, tells us that they've found Link & Learn to be a valuable resource. This is why it is with great reluctance that this is my last regular column. I will continue to take an active role in the industry, but I feel it is time to hear from some new voices in the industry.

Since retiring, I've been teaching classes to local writing groups. I am currently preparing a class on writing a personal essay based on the old Edward R. Murrow "This I Believe" series. Murrow asked people, both ordinary folks and world leaders, to share their personal beliefs on life. What follows are ten core beliefs that I've learned to embrace in my thirty plus years in advertising.

Knowledge is power

I believe in the importance of training. In the 1970's I worked for an industrial sales firm that was owned by a WWII bomber pilot. Since his Air Corps training had saved his life, he was a big believer in educating his troops. We were required to attend a training session every Monday evening from the week after Labor Day to the week before Memorial Day. The session was scheduled from 6 p.m. to 9 p.m. but often lasted until 10 or even 11. Like everyone else, I complained about these classes and about giving up an evening with my family. I didn't realize how valuable these sessions were until a client set up a meeting with both our company and our biggest competitor's sales reps. To put it mildly, "We crushed them like a bug!", we not only knew our products, but we also knew the capabilities of the competitor's products and the customer's industry. We were also much more effective in communicating the value of our products. Since that time I've never questioned the value of investing time in training myself or my team. Throughout my career, I've sought out every opportunity to hone my skills and expand my knowledge base. I took advantage of every class available at my company, invested in outside training opportunities and read everything I could on selling and advertising. This dedication to improving my skills has paid huge dividends both in bigger paychecks and greater self-confidence.

Practice makes perfect

I believe that practice allows us to make our mistakes where they can help us grow, rather than where they cost us money. Roleplay was a big part of the training sessions described above. Like most salespeople, I hated roleplaying, it just felt weird and artificial. My experience in the "real world" taught me to embrace roleplaying. When I was feeling stressed on a sales call and in danger of choking, the words I had practiced seemed to roll off my lips. Just like an athlete, what we learn in practice,

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pays off in the midst of “playing the game.” In addition to roleplaying, writing out your presentations and visualizing how you’ll behave on a call will improve your presentation skills and effectiveness.

Failing to plan is planning to fail

I believe in the importance of planning. The statement at the head of this paragraph is a hokey old saying, but it is far too valuable to ignore. As salespeople, we only get paid for the small percentage of our time spent in substantive conversations with prospects. To be successful, we must make effective use of every precious second in front of a customer. If we know something about the client, their business, their competitors and how we can help them going into the call, we are less likely to waste time fumbling around during the call. Planning out what we want to say and how we are going to say it makes us feel, and sound, more self-assured and confident. Many salespeople take a great deal of pride in their ability to “think on their feet,” and the ability to improvise on a call is important, but taking the time to plan a call almost always improves our chance of success. Like my Dad used to say, “When you shoot from the hip—you usually miss!”

Tick—Tock

I believe in the inestimable value of time management. Every successful person I’ve ever met has a well-developed sense of urgency. In the words of Rudyard Kipling, they try to, “Fill each unforgiving minute with 60 seconds of distance run.” We are all in business for ourselves. We sell our time for the money we need to support our families and to purchase the things we want. Like all good business people, we want to maximize the return on our investment of this most precious resource. One of the most valuable books I read early in my career was Alan Lakein’s *How to Gain Control of Your Time and Your Life*. I continually ask myself the “Lakein Question,” “What is the best use of my time...Right Now!”

Creativity Is the Ultimate Competitive Advantage

I believe that exercising our creativity not only gives us a powerful competitive advantage, but also makes our work interesting and fun. I had a number of sales jobs before I became involved in advertising. I liked my previous jobs, but I soon came to love advertising and to see it as my life’s work. Advertising’s main attraction was that it gave me a chance to exercise my creativity. Like artists, we create the products we sell. Our clients look to us to find creative ways to present their business and to promote their products. Human beings crave variety and fresh ideas. The two most dangerous phrases in our industry are, “So should we keep the ad the same for next week?” or, “What do you want in your ad?” Customers look to us for ideas, and unique ways to position their business. If we do not provide creative promotional ideas to our customers, we reduce ourselves to selling “space” in our products. Space is a commodity and, like all commodities, its value is based solely on price—the lower the price per unit, the better the value. Our customers value creative ideas and are willing to pay for it. Using our creativity is how we add value to our products.

Our creativity not only helps our clients sell their products, but is also a critical factor in selling our products. Exercising our creativity in reaching our prospects and in presenting our products is guaranteed to add quite a few dollars to our paychecks.

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Get in Touch with Their Emotions

I believe that people make decisions emotionally and then justify them with logic. We humans are very proud of our big brains. We believe that our ability to use logic enabled us to climb down from some ancient African trees to become masters of the planet in the modern age. The truth is, if we had taken the time to think everything through logically, the sabretooth tigers would have eaten our ancestors before they got more than twenty feet away from the baobab tree. In actuality, our subconscious mind and our emotions, which react much quicker, allowed us to respond to our environment in a more timely way. Though the sabretooths have departed the scene, we still use these ancient sections of our brains to guide us through life. This is why customers will reject your proposal in spite of all of the evidence you have shown them to prove your case. They may see the logic of your proposal, but they will never buy if it doesn't "feel" right to them. To close a sale, you need to connect with the customer on a human, emotional level. Your goal is not to get them to think about how your products can help them achieve their goals, you need to get them to imagine how good it will feel to advertise with you.

You Never Get a Second Chance to Make a Good First Impression

I believe in making a good first impression. I've read several books by graphic designer, Chip Kidd. Kidd is the most sought after and highest paid designer of book covers in the world. He makes the "big bucks" because publishers know that a well-designed cover can make the difference between a book landing on the best seller list or in a bin at the dollar store. In spite of the age old warning to not "judge a book by its cover" people do it all the time. In fact, we do this all the time in almost every situation, a fact well documented in Malcolm Gladwell's excellent book Blink. This is why I am always conscious of how I dress and how I move. Like Rodney Dangerfield, the free paper industry "gets no respect." By dressing professionally and being aware of my body language, I attempt to build rapport with my prospect before I ever open my mouth. Knowing that "non-verbals" are an important component of how others perceive us, I am very careful of my facial expressions (my smile) and my body language. Likewise, I put a lot of thought into the design and appearance of my sales materials.

Free Prize Inside

I believe that content is king. Though this may seem at odds with the previous sections of this article, I believe the information we deliver in our presentations or in our papers is vital to our long-term success. This is like Christmas morning, the pretty paper and the clever wrapping may determine which package gets opened first, but the gift inside determines what the recipient will treasure for years to come. We must make a good first impression and engage the prospect emotionally, but it is what we show them once we have their attention that will make them want to do business with us. This is where our planning and creativity comes to bear on the client's decision making process. This is also why our papers continue to draw readers as other publications decline. Our local content and our intimate connection with our communities, is the "free prize" people discover when they open our publications.

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The Hedonic Paradox

I believe in helping others. Psychologists call it the “Hedonic Paradox,” that the happiest people paradoxically aren’t the ones who think about themselves, but those who live their lives for others. The great sales trainer Zig Ziglar said it this way, “The best way to get everything you want in life is to help as many people as possible get everything they want out of life.” Experience has shown me that the most successful salespeople aren’t the ones who are focused on their commission, but rather those who work to get the best results for their advertisers. Likewise, the best managers aren’t the ones who want to advance their careers, but those who want to help their people grow and develop. As a rep, I gained a reputation for selling big programs to my customers. I did this because I knew that aggressive programs would produce the best results for the business I was trying to help—the big commissions I earned were just a very nice side effect.

Advertising People Just Want to Have Fun

I believe in having fun. I have a confession to make, I’m a bit lazy and not all that disciplined. Like a spoiled twelve year old, I only like to do things that are fun to do. Fortunately, I was lucky enough to find a career that let me have a barrel of fun while still supporting my family. We all know that to be successful in sales we must maintain a positive mental attitude and a high level of enthusiasm. It is impossible to fake these critical personal attributes for any length of time. Only those who enjoy what they can do, can achieve the success described by Winston Churchill as, “Success is the ability to go from one failure to another without loss of enthusiasm.” I believe that selling advertising is either the hardest easy job in the world or the easiest hard job. It is an easy job in that we don’t have to dig ditches or lift heavy objects, but it is hard in that we constantly expose ourselves to rejection and disappointment. It takes a special kind of person to do this for a living, one who truly enjoys the challenge of advertising and the opportunity that it provides to help others. When I started my career, one of my mentors told me, “If you stick it out long enough to wear out a good pair of shoes, you’ll know you’re cut out for this crazy business.” Well I’ve worn out countless pairs of shoes over the last three decades, but I’ve always had fun.

Keep Up the Good Work

In conclusion, I’d like to thank all the people who have made my career so enjoyable and rewarding. I would especially like to thank all the people who have attended my classes and read these columns for their generous feedback and attention. I plan to continue taking an active role in the industry and as a member of The Leadership Institute. I may even write the occasional article. For now, I would like to wish you all continued success. I will end this column in true Edward R. Murrow fashion, Goodbye and Good Luck!”

This article was written by Jim Busch.

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