

\$elling with Killer Instinct

by Jason Steadman, foreword by Joseph Finder

Foreword

by Joseph Finder

It's one of the aspects of the business world that has always fascinated—and amused—me: the dog-eat-dog, kill-or-be-killed ethos that some companies promote. This predilection can be seen in just a few recent business self-help books: *Business As War*; *Workplace Warrior*; *Eat or be Eaten*; *West Point Leadership Lessons*; *From Battlefield to Boardroom*; *Team Secrets of the Navy SEALs*; *The Art of War For Executives*; *Winning Under Fire*; and *Unleashing the Warrior Within*. The bookstores are filled with them. These books inspired in me the question: What if a *real-life* warrior—a Navy SEAL or a Special Forces officer, say—put his battlefield skills to work to get ahead in a company? What if he took this stuff literally?

As I thought this premise through and refined it, I began writing a tale of ambition, corporate machismo, and the meaning of success, which became *Killer Instinct*. I made my hero, Jason Steadman, a sales executive, because salesmen (and yes, most of the salespeople in the companies I visited were men) tend to be super-competitive. They're all about winning. There's a premium placed on "animal aggressiveness." Very often, if they're not cut out for it, they hit the wall, flame out around thirty or so. (There's a good reason why so much great drama, from Arthur Miller to David Mamet, involves salesmen.)

Jason, then, is a guy of around thirty who's starting to burn out. One day Jason meets Kurt Semko, who served in the Special Forces in Iraq and has contempt for the Aeron-Chair corporate 'warriors'. As Jason and Kurt become fast friends, Kurt teaches Jason all the skills he learned in war in order to help Jason up the corporate ladder. It's part fantasy, part nightmare—pretty much the ingredients of the kind of suspense fiction I enjoy.

I did extensive research in order to write about the high-tech, high-stakes world occupied by elite salesman like Jason Steadman. Ultimately, I was able to observe some of the techniques—tricks, you might say—the more clever salesmen use. While the notion of “Killer Instinct” may be central to my newest work of fiction, in practice, this essential quality is not a myth. There are tips and tactics, specific disciplines that can be learned to improve one’s performance in this critical function. But I’m not the expert: Jason Steadman is. So I’ll step back and let Jason share his winning sales laws.

Selling with Killer Instinct

By Jason Steadman, CEO ENTRONICS USA

The way I see it, you don't have to be a killer to have killer instinct. I learned this the hard way. There was a time when the lines blurred. The lines that demarcated right from wrong, good from evil. A time when someone I loved was obsessed with success and when I met a man equally interested in seeing me succeed at all costs.

Those ten months are over. And I survived. These days, I work as the CEO of the U.S. subsidiary of a major Japanese corporation, and many people, especially my employees, see me as ruthless. And at the same time, outsiders sometimes mistake me as easygoing, or, to use a Japanese phrase, *gokurakutonbo*—a happy-go-lucky fellow. Truth is, success, especially in the competitive world of sales, demands something of both qualities.

It's a long story, what happened to me. I won't go into detail here. I'd like to say its because I've washed my hands of the ordeal, purged the memory. But, to be honest, I've sold my story to writer, Joseph Finder. You can read the gory details in his book, *Killer Instinct*. But for now, let's just say it was an experience I wouldn't wish on anyone, even my competition. But, every cloud...as they say. So let me save you the drama and share a few important insights about selling that I've picked up in the course of recent events.

BE CREATIVE.

One morning I was sitting in the plush waiting room of the Harry Belkin Mercedes dealership in Allston, waiting for my new car to be prepped. I sat there for a good hour on a leather sofa, drinking a cappuccino from an automatic machine, biding my time watching “Live with Regis and Kelly” on their surround-sound TV.

And then I thought: how come they don’t have Entronics plasma screens in here, running features and ads on the latest Mercedes models? You know, beauty shots. Mercedes would pay for it. Then I started thinking, the Harry Belkin Company was the largest auto dealership in New England. They had BMW dealerships, and Porsche dealerships, and Maybach dealerships. Lots of others, too. Why not suggest the idea? Hell, supermarkets were doing it—why not high-end auto dealerships?

There are always sales opportunities out there that no one else recognizes. Selling can be a creative profession. At least once a week, try to think of markets, or uses, for your product that your company hasn’t thought of.

Long story short, I eventually closed a major deal as a result of this insight. Let me show you a few of the tactics that helped nail this one.

THE BEST SELLING IS HELPING.

I did some research online and identified the right guy to talk to. He was the Senior Vice President for Marketing, and his name was Fred Naseem. I called him, pitched my idea, and he was immediately intrigued. Of course, the price was a concern, but isn't it always? I pulled out my entire arsenal of tried-and-true sales tricks. I told him about how much added revenue the supermarket chains were generating using plasma screens to advertise at checkout lines. Dealership waiting rooms are like checkout lines, I told him. Everyone hates to wait. It's a waste of time. But people like to be informed, to get new information. And be entertained. So entertain them and educate them—and sell them on the most exciting features of your new-model cars.

What I mean is, you figure out what your potential customer wants, help him realize that he truly does want it—and then give it to him.

If this sounds cynical, it's not. Unfortunately, salesmen often get a bad rap for being too pushy. If a salesman comes off as pushy, that just means that he's not doing his job right. It means that he's trying to push something onto someone who doesn't want it. And that's always a losing proposition.

Figure out what they want. Convince them—genuinely, sincerely—that they want it, and then help them to get it at the best price you can. If you do this, you learn quickly that you're actually doing your customers a favor. And that will change the dynamic of the sales process entirely. You'll feel good about it, and so will your customer.

NEVER OVERSELL.

It's a real temptation, when you're trying to hit your numbers, to sell a customer too hard—to sell him stuff he (or his company) doesn't need. Sure, you'll make your nums that year—maybe even outperform your colleagues. But I guarantee it'll come back to bite you on the butt next year. Your customer will take the hit, and he'll pass that along to you. And you've just lost a customer.

Instead, *sell only what your customer needs*. Don't try to push the most expensive model on him, the one with features his company doesn't really have any use for. Pull him back from ordering the newest and best and most expensive just because it looks or sounds exciting. Yeah, you'll lose commissions in the short run. But your customer will never forget how 'un-greedy' you are. He'll appreciate it, and that gratitude will pay you back tenfold.

YES LEADS TO YES LEADS TO YES!

Then I did the classic 'yes-set' close—giving him a series of tie-down questions to which I knew he had to answer 'yes.' Your customers are discerning, aren't they? I'll bet they appreciate the amenities you provide for them in the waiting room, like the coffee and the bagels, don't they? They'd think the Entronics monitors looked cool up on the wall, don't you think? Boom boom boom. Yes yes yes. Then: Is it accurate to say that your boss, Harry Belkin, would like to increase the average general revenue generated in each of your auto dealerships? Well, what's he going to say? No? Then I moved it in for the kill. Asked the Big Question: Are you ready to start making the additional profits that the Entronics monitor will surely generate for you?

The Big Yes.

My wife once tried to force me to read some Irish novel that might as well have been in Gaelic. But I do remember skipping to the ending, which went something like “yes I said yes okay fine yes buy yes buy!” Maybe I’m remembering it wrong. Anyway, this can be used very successfully in the course of closing a customer. It’s paid off for me.

LEARN TO READ PEOPLE.

“You know what a ‘tell’ is?” Semko asked.

“Poker, right? Little signals that tell you when someone’s bluffing.”

“Exactly. Most people aren’t comfortable with lying. So when they’re bluffing, they smile. Or they get stone-faced. Or they scratch their noses. Some of us in Special Forces took classes in facial expression and threat assessment with this famous psychologist. To learn how to detect deception. Sometimes you need to know if a guy’s going for his gun or just pulling out a stick of Wrigley’s.”

You might not need this skill to save your life, but it is one of the most valuable skills you can acquire—and you CAN acquire it. Yes, some people are born with it, but you can learn it too. There’s even a psychologist named Paul Ekman who gives seminars on understanding facial expressions, how to read emotions, spot deception. There are all sorts of books and articles on his work. We all have a little bit of that ability—it’s why you have a gut reaction to someone. You might not be able to explain why, but you don’t trust that person, or you think they’re lying. Well, that skill can be developed. However you do it, you should. It’s probably the most useful tool in the salesperson’s toolbox. I learned about this from a master, a guy I would soon know to be a master killer.

DON'T BE A SHOWOFF.

Gordy, my boss, stood so close I could feel spit land on my face as he spoke.

“I want you to say that aloud, Steadman. Say, ‘I drove a Geo Metro to work today.’”

I exhaled noisily. “I drove a Geo Metro to work today because—”

“Good. Now say, ‘And Gordy drove a Hummer.’ Got it?”

“Gordy—”

“Say it, Steadman.”

“Gordy drove a Hummer.” “Correct. Is anything sinking in? Show me your watch, Steadman.”

I glanced down at it involuntarily. It was a decent-looking Fossil, about a hundred bucks at the kiosk in the Prudential Mall. I held out my left hand reluctantly.

“Take a look at mine, Steadman.” He flicked his left wrist, shot his cuff, revealed a huge gaudy Rolex, gold and diamond-encrusted with three subdials on its face. Tacky-looking, I thought.

“Nice watch,” I said.

“Now look at my shoes, Steadman.”

“I think I get your point, Gordy.”

When you're doing well, it's tempting to flash it around, in the clothes you wear, or the car you drive. After all, we sales guys judge ourselves by how well we do. And sometimes we like our customers or leads to see how well we're doing, because we think it enhances our reputation. But it doesn't. If anything, it's a turnoff. People hate braggarts.

A good case in point would be my former boss, Gordy. He was obsessed with superficial matters: a braggart about his clothes, and an idiot about cultural differences. Ultimately these obsessions helped lead to his downfall. I remember how he tried to motivate me to succeed:

Today Gordy is out of work, and has had to trade in his Hummer for a used Taurus. And I'm running the company. I'm not bragging here—merely illustrating that one style really does win out in the end.

SILENCE IS GOLD. TWENTY-FOUR CARAT GOLD.

"I'm taking a huge chance," I said.

"Life is a risk," he said. "Hand it over."

"First, tell me where Graham is," I said.

He stared at me, incredulous at my request. In return, I was silent for a long time.

True sales champions, Mark Simkins said, can sit there quietly all day if they have to. It's not easy. You want to say something. But don't! Keep your mouth shut.

"Fine," he said. "You know where the old General Motors assembly plant is?"

“On Western Ave., about a mile from here or so?”

“Right. That vacant lot there.”

I picked up the gym bag, unzipped it. Pulled out the piece, which I’d wrapped in plastic and duct-taped up.

Handed it over to him.

“Good,” he said.

This principle is so powerful that I used it to save the life of a friend being held by my ex-Special Forces colleague. On that surreal day, I needed to close the biggest deal of my life—to broker an incriminating piece of evidence I had in return for Kurt sharing the whereabouts of my friend.

Sometimes the most effective closing tactic is the most counter-intuitive. There’s a time when saying nothing enables you to control the negotiation far more effectively than any words.

PEOPLE BUY FROM PEOPLE THEY LIKE.

I’d been dealing with both Albertson’s and SignNetwork, trying to sell them on the advantages of paying a bit more for quality and all that. No dice.

“They went with NEC,” I told Gordy.

“Why?”

“You want to know the truth? Jim Letasky. He’s NEC’s top sales guy, and he basically owns the SignNetwork account. They don’t want to deal with any other company. They love the guy.”

“I know Letasky.”

“Nice guy,” I said. Unfortunately. I wished I could hate the guy, since he was stealing so much of our business, but I’d met him at the Consumer Electronics show a couple of years back, and he was great. They say people buy from people they like; after we had a drink, I was almost ready to buy a bunch of NEC plasmas from Jim Letasky.

Being a nice salesperson doesn’t mean coming on strong or being falsely ingratiating. It means being a genuinely nice person. Let your best self show through. Hide that aggressive streak, that “killer instinct.” When I was “carrying the bag,” doing sales, I never resented the success of a competitor named Jim Letasky.

Bottom line: I ended up hiring Letasky for Entronics. And one of the first things I did on becoming CEO was to make him head of sales.

SALES IS LIKE BASEBALL.

Am I saying sales is a game? Sure. Yeah, I know. Sales helps put dinner on the table. For others, it helps pay for that cabin in Tahoe. Helps pay for the box seats, and whatever else it takes to make your life pleasureable. But at its heart, sales is a competition. For Kurt Semko, and others near and dear to me, it was life and death. But for the average selling Joe, sales is like baseball. And should be respected accordingly.

What I mean is, in sales as in baseball, you pretty much *have* to fail a bunch of times in order to succeed. You're never going to be a success if you don't allow yourself the luxury of failing. Some call it taking a risk. A baseball player who fails 14 out of 20 times—who hits safely only 6 times out of 20—is an all-star. He's a .300 hitter.

Or look at it this way: the difference between a great baseball hitter and an average one comes down to about 30 hits over the course of a season: both athletes produce outs more than 65 percent of their plate appearances

Same way in sales. In our line of work, you get rejected every day, multiple times a day, and if you let it get to you, you burn out quickly. But great salesmen and great baseball players all share a trait that experts call an *optimistic explanatory style*. In other words, even when you play your best, there are situations beyond your control where you're not going to score. It's not your fault, and not a mark of character. What matters is moving on, making the necessary adjustments, and stepping up to face the next client believing that you will close the deal.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joseph Finder was born in Chicago in 1958. As an undergraduate at Yale, Finder majored in Russian studies, sang with the Whiffenpoofs, and graduated summa cum laude and Phi Beta Kappa. In 1984, he received a master's degree from the Harvard Russian Research Center and later taught on the Harvard faculty. At twenty-four, Finder published his first book, *Red Carpet: The Connection Between the Kremlin and America's Most Powerful Businessmen*, a controversial expose. Later, Finder turned to writing fiction. Finder's fourth novel, *High Crimes*, was been made into a major motion picture starring Ashley Judd and Morgan Freeman. His best selling *Paranoia* won Finder acclaim for writing corporate thrillers. Finder continues to write extensively on espionage and international affairs relations for *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The New Republic*. He lives in Boston with his wife and daughter.

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