

Confessions of a Reluctant Saleswoman

By Joyce M. Coleman

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Like many of my generation and upbringing, I never thought of myself as a saleswoman.

When I was growing up in Mississippi, insurance salesmen and others who managed to find their way to our home way out in the country were met with skepticism. While we were happier to see the Watkins man (yes, they were men) who drove from county to county to sell bedspreads, blankets, Watkins products, candy, and you-name-it from the backs of their station wagons, it still was a pretty risky business, all things considered.

Can you imagine making a living driving unpaved, country back roads, dodging farm animals, and rugged hunters with large guns? Ugh!

As a black girl in pre-civil rights Locust Hill, Mississippi, I grew up believing that selling was not a desirable or dependable profession. Through example and overt instruction, I was taught that my goal in life was to get an education and become a teacher. If God intervened, I might get a good, solid job with a strong, reputable company and, through association garner even more respect than teachers and preachers. Couldn't get any better than that!

But selling? Not an option. (No one ever explained why sellers, including local fishermen, always had cash!).

So, the notion of selling never entered my mind. Although my brother and I were constantly tinkering, and hoped to one day write that great novel, new song, or develop the ultimate gadget, it never dawned on us that we'd have to sell our creation. I guess we thought that if we built a better mousetrap, the world would magically find out about it and beat a path to our door. Ha!

Childhood notions of our great creations took a back seat, as I made sure that I could get "a good job" (no selling). I earned a degree in Chemistry and Mathematics, but soon discovered by trial-and-error that being a chemist or traditional teacher did not fit with my spirit. That reality check sent me searching for an alternative. While searching, I figured I'd have a good time and see the world. I landed squarely in corporate America, where I learned lessons that were not taught in

Locust Hill.

One of my first lessons was to live is to sell! The first product I sold was ME. Imagine! It's 1968 and I am convincing an international world-class airline that an afro'ed young black woman is the ideal candidate to be one of its stewardesses across the Atlantic. It's 1969, and that same young woman is the ideal candidate for a management position. This process continued every few years, including selling them on the notion that I should be the industry's first black corporate female executive.

In corporate America I earned my stripes by selling my employees, bosses, and customers on the reality that I brought better than a square deal to the table. I promised a lot, and over-delivered on the promise. However, I never thought of it as selling. I simply practiced what I'd been taught during my childhood - put your best foot forward at all times, know your stuff, always give more than you take, and show respect for others.

I have learned that no matter what we do, we must sell something - our ideas, our capability to produce a product or service, or someone else's ideas, goods and services. Even the heroes of my childhood - teachers and preachers - must sell their customers on the notion that they bring value to the table

In effect, all of us sell each day of our lives. Those who excel at it deliver on their promise; their products and services bring added value to their users. Those who purchase them tell their friends, who tell their friends, and so on.

For me, it has been a long road to realizing that one has little control over one's destiny and wealth as long as there is dependency on a corporation or some entity (other than oneself) for employment. At the end of the day, we must look to our personal capabilities to support our family and ourselves. Just ask any of the hundreds of thousands who were recently laid off through no fault of their own, or read lessons learned by millionaires.

It has been an equally long road for me to become sufficiently confident to develop some of those creations my brother and I attempted back in Locust Hill. I've known for some time that people who need my expertise, and who will be happy to trade money for its value, will not find out about it through osmosis. I must let them know about it, just as I happily touted the goods and services of my corporation all those years. Expertise, brainpower, or product, no matter how wonderful, must be successfully marketed, or "sold."

As I more closely examine my evolving notion of selling, I realize that it isn't "selling" that makes me such a reluctant participant in an arena that creates wealth faster than any other. (By the way, it is also the fastest way to get ahead in the corporate world). It is my link to a childhood misunderstanding of the wonderful act of providing people with something that actually fulfills a dream, makes lives easier, and provides financial freedom for so many. Each time I receive a "thank you for sharing your opportunity, your book, your time, or your words of wisdom," I am so thankful that I've learned the marvel of selling.

My reluctance has turned into eagerness and gratefulness as I continue to discover ways to put my own brainpower and skills to good use, on what I consider to be relatively close to my own terms. Each day I seek out new opportunities, that I share with my new and lifelong friends. Together, we are embracing the wealth-building wonders made possible to each of us through modern technology.

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Joyce Coleman is a speaker, author, and consultant on writing, personal success, and getting ahead in corporate America. Her free newsletter is online at:

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