

Portrait of a Sales Genius

By Richard Israel

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Ralph Roberts wasn't born being the best at what he does. In fact you'll read that he was pretty hopeless at other businesses. The key was that he found something he had a passion for, turned it into a dream and didn't mind working harder than anyone else he knew.

Ralph Roberts manages to sell 600 houses a year! In 1995 Time Magazine named him 'America's top realtor.' Ralph is so good that real estate agents from around the country pay for the opportunity to 'shadow' him so they can learn about the methods he uses.

Born in 1956, he got a job as a teenager cutting a neighbor's lawn for \$10 a time, while all the neighborhood kids were charging \$5-because he convinced the neighbor he would do a better job. As a recent high school graduate in 1975, the Warren, Michigan dynamo took \$900 and invested it in a three-bedroom house. 'I moved in and rented out all three bedrooms to different people,' said Ralph, author of Walk Like A Giant, Sell Like A Madman. 'I lived in the hallway.'

Over the next 15 years, Ralph lived in 23 houses, selling each one at a profit and moving on to the next opportunity. Although Ralph seems to have been born with a knack for selling, he wasn't born knowing how to succeed. He claims that he was the class clown at school and could have been voted the 'most likely not to succeed.' In fact, he failed at several business ventures before he discovered his gift for selling real estate. Despite the heartache they caused, Ralph says he's grateful for the failures, which preceded his success because each one taught him valuable lessons that brought him closer to realize his dreams.

'To be successful you must surround yourself with successful people' says Ralph who runs his real estate sales business with the help of a secretary, two listing agents, two buying agents and one closing coordinator.

Ralph believes that setting goals, writing them down with specifics about how you want to achieve them and visualizing them are absolutely essential for success. One of his goals is to pay \$1 million a year in taxes. Another is to do \$1million a month in business with a particular investor group he works with. To symbolize this goal he often passes out fake \$1 million notes to those investors.

Twice a year, Ralph's key staff comes to his house for a workday during which they storyboard the area in which they work. They set goals, brain storm and put good ideas down in an 'idea of the week' book. Employees are encouraged to write ideas in the book whenever they occur, even if the timing isn't quite right yet for implementation. Ralph and his department heads look through the

book regularly. Often they find a good idea that they had forgotten about and realize that now is the time to implement it.

The book is also used to 'educate' new employees. 'When we hire someone we have them read the book and buy into the concept,' Ralph notes. 'If they don't we don't want them working for us because we only want people with us who share our vision.'

Although Ralph is a Sales Genius, he's not infallible, so he encourages his key people to give him feedback 'They have to be able to tell the truth for your success to be long lasting,' he explains. 'You can't hire people to give you advice and then ignore it.' He admits that some of the feedback occasionally wounds his ego and that his initial response is often 'I can't believe I said that!' but after the initial sting he considers what has been said and makes changes if he feels they are justified.

One such situation involved changing Ralph's strict policy that business attire should be worn at all times. One of his managers suggested establishing a casual day to help office morale. Ralph finally gave in after agreeing a dress code he was comfortable with, and everybody was happy.

Being truthful has helped Ralph's business succeed, he says 'There's no shame in making an honest error of judgment, but dishonesty will hurt you in the long run. The only way to be successful is to tell it to people like it really is: here's the problem and here's the solution and only suggest solutions in their best interest, even if it means you makes less money or none at all.'

Ralph set himself high standards in being an expert: 'I make sure that I know more than anyone else. This starts by surrounding myself with knowledgeable people, going to professional meetings and reading all the time.' Ralph scans newspapers and magazines for articles of interest, highlights the salient points, rips them out and reads or rereads them later. He considers himself to be a 'speed scanner'. Recently, before being interviewed about foreclosure – a topic he knows extremely well – he nevertheless had an assistant research the subject for the latest information. Being less than the very best simply won't do in Ralph's book!

Another source of information for Ralph is his advisory board. Four times a year he meets with six friends and acquaintances from different lines of work. He tells them what he has done and what he plans to do and they give him feedback. One valuable outcome was persuading Ralph to put a monetary value on his time so he could use it more wisely. He also gets together twice a year with a group of agents who all make a \$1 million year or more in commission to discuss the same sort of topics.

Because he only sleeps three or four hours a night Ralph has mastered 'power-napping'. He closes his eyes for 15-20 minutes, visualizing whatever situation he is involved in and his brain works on problems and ideas, such as going to high school football games and throwing his business cards up in the air the first time the crowd jumps out of their seats. 'I don't have brainstorming days, I have a brainstorming life', he says.

Adapted from: Tony Buzan & Richard Israel, Sales Genius, (2000), pp. 3-9.

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