



Riding the Shark:

[Vanquishing Fear in Selling

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There are many ways to think about sales and selling. You can focus on value propositions, sales processes, sales management, motivation, techniques, and models. Another aspect of selling, often ignored is fear. We'd like to focus on something else that's common in sales – fear.

Fear comes in many flavors; it's triggers will vary by industry. It will arise differently for different product levels of technicality and of course by the individual salesperson

All kinds of selling involve some fear. Some forms of selling involve more fear than others. There are multiple ways to deal with fears. None is always better than the others; and often more than one approach is necessary to overcome fear.

Just When You Thought It Was Safe To Go Back in the Market

Remember the first time you saw the movie Jaws? The tale of a giant shark tapped into a primal human fear. Its sequel raised the ante on fear with one of the most famous taglines "Just when you thought it was safe to go back in the water . . ." who could look at the beach again without some kind of shiver?

Selling has some of that same aspect of fear. We've all had some negative experience in selling – and like Jaws, it keeps some sort of control over us ever after. The sharks of fear unexpectedly seem to arise from the dark, unknown depths. "Just when you thought it was safe to go back in the market..." is all too real.

Addressing your fears means taking risks. There is no trust without taking risks. Those who avoid risk lose priceless trust-building opportunities. (See, for example, *Six Risks You Should Take to Build Trust*, by Charles H. Green and Andrea P. Howe)

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Fear destroys sales. It separates you from your customers, makes you behave in narrow ways, lowers the value you can add, and in a thousand ways cuts your sales effectiveness.

Some may disagree. Let's look at some ineffective examples of how some may believe they use fear and why in reality it negatively impacts sales and fails to build trust.

Fear is the Enemy

"Fear helps keep me on edge, sharp, focused." If you require fear to keep you sharp and focused, then you're only motivated negatively – That means you're sub optimizing – for your customers, and for yourself. You lack motivation based on affirmative customer interaction."

"Fear keeps me on my toes, always looking around for new trends and issues." But if you seek these only to assuage your own fears, then simply feeling comfortable will make you oblivious to trends and issues."

"Fear gives me adrenaline, energy, passion, things that my customers pick up on and love." Note that drug addicts and alcoholics also believe that they are flat, boring and uninteresting unless hopped up. Are you different?"

Fear, in all cases, is the enemy. If you're fearful, you're not selling as well as you can. And if you're not selling as well as you can, someone else will. You should be afraid of that. And if you are, you *increase* the odds of precisely the thing you fear, because fear of fear is just as destructive as any other kind. It's a lousy way to subsist.

The Four Sharks of Fear

There are many ways to categorize fears, just as there are ways to categorize sharks. We like to lump them in progressively more fearful categories, from relatively tame to terrifyingly fearful. *All* four types of fear can drive equally negative impact on sales.

- 1 Execution Fear. "I might mess up in doing this sale; I might not do it right."
- 2 Competence Fear. "I might not know *how* to do this sale right; I may not even know what I don't know."
- 3 Outcome Fear. "I might not get the deal at all – everything I wanted to happen won't happen."
- 4 Shame-based Fear. "They're not going to like me or respect me anymore; and they're probably right."

The first thing you'll notice about that list is that it gets "worse" as you go down the list. It starts off with incomplete education – a condition that "happens to us" – and ends up with self-loathing – a condition that defines us. All of us find it a lot easier to deal with the former than the latter.

1. Recognize and Categorize Fear

1 Execution Fear

2 Competence Fear

3 Outcome Fear

4 Shame-based Fear

INCOMPLETE EDUCATION

SELF LOATHING

2. How Fear Affects Selling

Whether your fear is tactical, existential, or in between, it will *keep you from doing something right*.

- 1 If you have *execution* fear, you are likely to not make the call, schedule the appointment, or send the email. You will be physically absent. You will miss opportunities and appear undependable.
- 2 If you have *competence* fear, you are likely to appear ragged, insecure, changeable and second-guessing.
- 3 If you have *outcome* fear, you are likely to annoy everyone around you, because you try to over-control, micro-manage, obsess, and frequently blame others; you are in a bad mood because the world doesn't obey your commands.
- 4 If you have *shame-based* fear, you are mentally not present; you are probably chronically sick, or often busy elsewhere; you are probably inconsistent, moody, and often a poor listener. And in sales, the inability to listen is a major handicap.

3. Negative Feedback Loops

One of the most pernicious aspects of fear is its self-fulfilling nature. If you don't make the appointment for fear of making an error, you have made an error. If you're afraid of appearing ineffectual almost anyone will perceive that fear and interpret it as incompetence.

If you're afraid of a bad outcome, then it often seems as if some kind of karmic rule of life intervenes. You end up nurturing what you fear because of the attention you pay to it. If you are ashamed of yourself, nobody will be comfortable being around you. Making everyone around you uneasy is more fish-food for your shark of shame. This self-feeding aspect of fear is powerful. Picture a feeding frenzy where sharks congregate around some little piece of distress, signaling more and more sharks to the area, thus compounding the terror.

4. The Wrong Shark Repellent

Unfortunately, due to our innate fight or flight response people are almost hard-wired to respond badly to the Sharks of Sales. In the real world, if we see a shark in the water – we rush to get out of the water. Avoiding the shark is the right thing to do. However, with Sales Sharks of Fear, that's exactly wrong. In almost all cases, fear of *doing* something *wrong* drives us to *not* do something that is *right*. We are so afraid of saying the wrong thing that we say nothing. We may not lose what we have (dignity), but we end up creating a bigger failure; we don't get the sale.

Imagine a lifeguard who sees someone drowning. If the guard dives in to save the person, and if the person was just playing, the lifeguard may be slightly embarrassed, and feel put out. On the other hand, what if the person really *was* drowning and the lifeguard thought, "Well, I'd look stupid if I dove in after them and it was a false alarm, let me wait a bit longer and see." Wrong answer!

Yet *that* is the mistake that fear drives us to make in sales. The pattern is clear: fear drives us to avoidance, which ensures failure. Embrace hockey great Wayne Gretzky's words: "You miss 100 percent of the shots you never take."

Four-Step Shark Repellent

Conveniently there are four forms of “shark repellent,” i.e. tools to vanquish those fears, until you can Shark-proof your selling. Inconveniently, they don’t coincide one for one with the Four Sharks of Fear. Conveniently, they come in a sequence: all you have to do is follow the four-step sequence. The steps depend on your recognizing your state of fear in the first place. If you can’t get outside of your fears long enough to notice that you’re afraid, then you need to start elsewhere. Assuming you can identify your fears, follow these steps.

Solution Step 1. Write It, Read It, Talk It.

Write down your fears in plain, simple language: using pencil and paper, not a keyboard.

Read it out loud.

Now the hard part: read it aloud to someone else.

Merely reading that paragraph and “understanding” it cognitively and intellectually *doesn’t* actually do anything for you. If we could “understand” our way out of fears, sharks would be out of business.

You actually *need to do* those steps. Write it down. Say it out loud. Say it to another person. The reason to do this is simple. Many fears dissolve in the light of day. And even if they don’t, it’s important to be able to state them clearly. Don’t skip this step or think it’s enough to “understand” your fears.

Solution Step 2. State the 95% Worse Case Scenario

Identify the worst thing that realistically could happen. (Leave out the 5% doomsday scenarios).

Again, write down the worst thing that could happen

Write down the consequences of that bad thing happening

Write down the probability of it happening.

For example: "I don't know enough about this industry, and that might come out in the sales call. Then the client will see through me. I will be embarrassed and I won't get the sale."

What's the 95% worst case? Probably losing the sale and being embarrassed. You can get over embarrassment easily enough; it doesn't have to scar you. You'd like the sale, but is your job at stake? Your house? Your mortgage?

You must right-size your fears. Our fears are almost always exaggerated versions of what is likely to happen. Your fears will most likely subside.

Solution Step 3. Identify the Customer's Fears

Put aside *your* fears for a minute, and ask yourself – what is my *customer* afraid of? Being fooled? Being made a fool of? Making a bad decision? Appearing indecisive? Giving away competitive information? Forgetting to ask critical questions? Wasting 20 minutes of their life on an unproductive sales call, etc.?

List your guess of the top three fears of your customer.

Think about how these fears might show up in your customer?

Write down what words or questions or mannerisms might suggest those fears?

This exercise is partly to get yourself out of your own skull, where all the fear-talk is happening, but it's also substantive. If you can surmise what fears your customer has, you can then come up with ideas and solutions and perspectives to help your customer address those fears. And that would be *excellent selling*, by anyone's book.

Solution Step 4. Define Your Limits of Control

If your fears have made it through steps 1 through 3 and are still not vanquished, you're ready for Step 4: Clarify for yourself what you can and cannot do in the situation. Do what you can, and let the rest go.

For example: You may fear losing the sale to a competitor with a more appropriate degree in say, chemical engineering and you're a philosophy major. There are some things you can do between now and the sales call, but getting a graduate degree in chemical engineering is probably not one of them. So let it go.

Instead, do what you have some control over. Identify the business dynamics, the value proposition, and possible sources of chemical expertise outside yourself should you need it for the job. (Don't even *think* about leading the customer on to think that maybe you have a Chem degree when you don't).

The hard part for most people is "letting the rest go." But think about it. If you're 46 years old and 5'9", odds are good that you'll go to your grave without ever having played in the NBA. Get over it.

Letting go what you have no control over is more easily understood when it comes to an extreme case like playing in the NBA. However, it's no different when the stakes are smaller and the case is not so extreme. If the job really does require someone with a degree in chemical engineering, then you deserve to lose the deal to someone who does. You only deserve to get what is within your power to deliver. Save your emotional energy for the next customer, and leave a good impression with this one.

There's no shame in losing a deal for which you were unqualified, or for which you couldn't possibly get qualified. In fact, in those rare cases where you do succeed in selling a deal without being qualified, you'll cause yourself far more fears when you actually have to deliver on your false promise.

Shark-proof Your Selling

How do you conduct your selling life in ways that keep the Sharks of Fear permanently at bay? In other words, how do you deal with fear itself and can you reduce the incidence of fear?

First, let's be clear where the solution to Shark-proofing Your Selling does *not* lie. The solution does not lie in your sales process or your sales management, and you won't get there by tweaking your value proposition.

The solution consists of constantly applying five principles, or values, to every aspect of your selling life.

Five Keys to Vanquishing the Sharks of Fear in Selling.

1 Always Sit on the Same Side of the Table. You are on the same team as your customer. Your interests are allied. There is no such thing as win-lose or lose-win, there is only win-win or if not, part on friendly terms. You are not playing a zero-sum game; you are looking for a mutually beneficial relationship. Don't speak, write or think anything that posits you vs. your customer. Your proper seat is on the same side of the table as your customer.

2 The Customer Gets Theirs First. The way to a successful partnership is not by insisting on 50-50 from the outset and at every step of the way. It comes from being gracious, putting the customer's needs first, offering up some value, taking some risks, and listening before talking. The single best behavioral tool you can employ for this principle is – listen empathetically, long, and well. The result is that, when it's your turn, you will be listened to in the same way.

A trust-based partnership has to work for both of you; but you get there by being willing to first focus on the customer's needs, not your own.

Five Keys to Vanquishing the Sharks of Fear in Selling [Cont.]

3 **Play the Long Game.** The most powerful force in selling is the natural human tendency to return good for good, and bad for bad. Again – the *most powerful force*. Think of it this way, time is your friend. Time lets you develop relationships, not transactions. Don't think of the sales process as a transaction, to be repeated. Think of it as a relationship, with ongoing interactions, and with permanence of its own. The more you develop relationships, the more your transactions will have context. This context is of mutual courtesy, obligation and goodwill.

Remember, the way you behave is the way you will be treated in turn. You empower what you fear; and you get back what you put out.

4 **Keep No Secrets.** Transparency is to fear as a cross is to vampires. If you have no secrets, then there can be no surprises. If you don't know something, say so. If you have information, share it. If you're the best for the job, say so and say why. And if you're not, say so as well – see point three above. Your job is not this particular sale, but the relationship and *that* will be a lot more believable. Be the same person at all times to all people.

There are three exceptions, of course. Don't give away trade secrets; don't do anything illegal; and don't hurt someone. If you think giving away all your information will empower your competitors, you are sadly mistaken – they can never replicate your relationships. Other than that, deal strictly in the Truth in all your affairs and no one can or will fault you.

Five Keys to Vanquishing the Sharks of Fear in Selling [Cont.]

5 **Lead With Your Chin.** The thing that triggers trust, allows you to play the long game, and encourages collaborative reciprocal behavior is to be the one to take the first risk. There is no trust without risk. If you want to create trust, you must lead with risk-taking.

- Talk price early, not late.
- Admit your shortcomings up front.
- Give away samples – especially if you're in an intangible services business like consulting, insurance or advertising. If you think that sounds like free work – you're right. The best proof in the world of your competence is a healthy sample of it, served up in real time.
- Have a point of view.
- Go out on a limb.
- Invest a little time, rather than checking your sales efficiency watch every minute.
- Dare to empathize.

That's it. If you conduct your sales life by those principles, about 90% of customers will return your behavior in kind. Leave the other 10% to your competitors. Life is too short. Be assured, they won't do as well as you and the 90%.

Unless you can ride the shark – vanquish your fears – you will always sub-optimize, afraid to go back in the water. The great news is – *riding* the sharks produces better sales than fleeing them.

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Riding the Shark: Vanquishing Fear in Selling was written by Charles H. Green, author, speaker and world expert on trust-based relationships and sales in complex businesses. Founder and CEO of Trusted Advisor Associates, he is author of Trust-based Selling*,* and co-author of the classic *The Trusted Advisor* and its practical follow-up, *The Trusted Advisor Fieldbook*.

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