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BUSINESS

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The Canterbury Sales®

The Model Maker

By Andy Gole

For years I have found myself thinking about the model maker, without a clear reason why. I met John when I worked at a point-of-purchase display manufacturer in the 1970s. The firm designed and produced displays, made with wire and sheet metal. (Think of the wire grids in your refrigerator as an example.)

I had been promoted to manage the sample and estimating/pricing department.

John was the model maker. He was an immigrant who spoke limited English. When one of the salespeople had an opportunity that merited the effort, John would create a model point-of-purchase display.

I remember watching him work, fascinated by the process.

John would look at the package brought in by the salesperson. Then he would pick up a piece of wire and start sculpting it, often with a pair of pliers. Soon, there was a pocket or a device to hold one package. Then, he would conceive an entire display to integrate the pieces into a whole. He used a backward thinking process.

Sometimes he would work for days on one complex sample. First he would produce sub-components that only he could see; then he welded them together.

It was an awe-inspiring process to observe.

Where did he get his vision of what was possible?

How did he translate this vision into reality? This was very impressive to a young person in his early 20s.

When the process was finished, the masterpiece conceived was a reality.

Next the production people would visit the sample room and start "tearing the design" apart.

"This makes no sense," they would say. "We have to move the wire ½-inch to the right or it won't fit into our presses." "We have to use a thicker wire here, or we can't weld it in our machines." "This element is pretty, but we can't possibly produce it. We have to cut it from the design."

Invariably, the production team was scathing in evaluating a vision they could never create. They analyzed and implemented appropriate, minor revisions to make the vision work.

"That John is impossible with his creations; it's a good thing we're here to fix his mess."

I have been wondering for the last few years why thoughts of John and his work come unbidden to my mind.

On a general level, I have concluded it is because of the respect I have for great model makers in history, thinkers like Aristotle in philosophy, Newton in math and science, Madison in politics.

Yet I feel a more gut-level connection with John

the model maker, which goes beyond my personal history.

I just realized I see the connection in the work place, in observing consultants. Effective consultants are model makers. This isn't always appreciated by their clients.

Business owners and top managers expect the leader of a functional area to be a model maker. "After all, that's why we pay them the big bucks," say many owners.

Consider sales. The effective VP of Sales has diverse and complicated skill sets, including: selling skills, recruiting and hiring skills, management skills, etc. The owner also expects the VP of Sales to be a model maker, a designer of a sales system.

Model making is a unique and distinct skill set. For every 50 managers, there is perhaps one model maker. Until owners realize the distinction, they are embracing a "design for failure," an unacceptable and potentially disastrous risk in the current market.

We need to encourage and reward model makers.

For their contribution to our society, whenever you see a model maker, you might just want to thank him or her.



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