

Personality

Entrepreneurs must fight fear of selling

CAITLIN CRAWSHAW

Special to Globe and Mail Update

Published Friday, Jun. 17, 2011 6:00AM EDT

When a client suggested that Minna Van make cold calls to promote her business, the prospect brought chills. “It’s kind of terrifying,” she says.

In the five years since she and two business partners started [The Network Hub](#) in Vancouver, they have actively dodged direct sales.

Instead, they’ve relied on word-of-mouth advertising, referrals and a social media presence to find clients for their business, which offers different working space arrangements, including co-working and shared space. About 40 companies now rent desk space regularly or semi-regularly at the downtown Vancouver facility.

But now Ms. Van and her partners have aspirations to expand, to open another suburban location and move into franchising. That would require direct selling – and the thought of it is unimaginable to her.

Ms. Van chalks up a big part of her aversion to selling to a fear of rejection. “To some extent, I have ugly baby syndrome, where I’ve invested so much time into my business and what I do that “what do you mean, you don’t like what I do” is a reaction she dreads.

Entrepreneurs may often be bold and risk-taking, but they’re not immune to a fear of selling, says Dr. Derek Hassay, a marketing professor at the University of Calgary’s [Haskayne School of Business](#).

Many experience what academics have called “inhibited social contact initiative syndrome” and actively avoid direct sales, he says.

A fear of rejection is just one of many reasons for what he dubs “call reluctance.” Many people, including Ms. Van, dread coming across as pushy or intrusive, while still others are cowed by approaching those they perceive to have greater power, wealth or status.

Still others are intimidated by the business environment, including a lot of people unaccustomed to being part of it. “Today, a lot of businesses in Canada are being started by immigrants,

housewives, and people trying to earn income for their family,” Dr. Hassay says. That unfamiliarity may make them feel deficient, he says.

Personality characteristics also play a role, says David Lahey, Whitby, Ont.-based president of human resource consulting company [Predictive Success Corp](#)

“Fear of selling is often seen in those entrepreneurs who are natively analytical, detailed, sequential processors of information and not naturally extroverted and assertive types,” he says.

While these personality characteristics may allow entrepreneurs to find some kinds of success in their industry, they can be a hindrance when it comes to the actual act of selling.

Stewart Thornhill, a professor at the University of Western Ontario’s [Richard Ivey School of Business](#) in London, Ont., says a fear of selling often boils down to a fear of public speaking.

Whatever is behind it, entrepreneurs need to come to terms with their fear of selling if they want to succeed.

“It really does hamper entrepreneurship and many people say that as much as 50 per cent to 70 per cent of entrepreneurial failure relates to this call reluctance issue,” Dr. Hassay says.

But he stresses that if entrepreneurs push past their anxiety and pitch their product anyway, most will find their stress lessens as they discover that the “worst case scenario” isn’t so bad.

Scott Phillips, an engineering physicist, did just that. Back in the late 1990s, when he launched a medical device company in Victoria, he was the quintessential introverted techie. Without the funds to hire a sales person, it was up to him to secure opportunities. “I had to force myself to pick up the phone and talk to people I didn’t know,” he recalls.

He was surprised to find that he didn’t need to be extroverted and aggressive to sell; being introverted and thoughtful became an asset.

“I didn’t realize it at the time, but I came to understand that when people sense you’re really interested in them, and trying to solve the right problem for them...that’s very disarming. That’s a very powerful sales strategy,” Mr. Phillips says. More than two decades later, he continues to sell for [Starfish Medical](#), which designs, develops and manufactures medical devices.

“We’re close to a \$10-million company now and I’m still doing the front-line interaction with customers,” he says.

Even though Mr. Phillips has hired sales associates to help, he enjoys talking about the technical side of things with his clients.

Julie Steelman, author of [The Effortless Yes: Get the Sales You Want and Make All You’ll Ever Need](#), says entrepreneurs can rid themselves of their sales aversion by changing their mindset.

Instead of thinking about themselves and what they'll get out of their selling efforts, "it's thinking of selling as a way to serve someone else, to help them solve a problem, to really listen to them so you can improve their quality of life or make things easier or better for them," she says.

This was Vancouver entrepreneur Rick Sloboda's cure to cold-calling angst. When he started his Richmond, B.C.-based company [Webcopyplus](#) in 2006, he forced himself to make cold calls to prospective clients, without success.

"I could tell the people on the receiving line were annoyed and it was very uncomfortable for me," he says.

He abandoned the idea until a few years later, when a business coach suggested he call up businesses simply to network. Now, he sells without pitching. "I don't even mention our products and services; it naturally comes up."

A fear of public speaking can be overcome with plenty of practice, Prof. Thornhill says. "The success of [Toastmasters](#) and [Dale Carnegie](#) speak to the fact that the fear can be overcome, like all of the skills we learn," he says.

Over time, confidence in public speaking can help entrepreneurs move away from canned pitches – which no one likes – and move towards story telling, Prof. Thornhill says

"Nobody wants to be sold. We want to be spoken to as individuals," he notes.

Even so, experts agree that there are cases when entrepreneurs should farm out the selling, and stick to what they're good at. Those who are extremely shy might be better off finding a talented salesperson, Dr. Hassay suggests.

"If you know it's a limitation and something you'll never overcome...why would you sacrifice the success of your business, trying to do it alone?" he asks.

Mr. Lahey points out that most successful companies have a variety of personality types working in roles that best suit their personalities.

And small business owners of all stripes can struggle to see the bigger picture, even if they aren't terrified of sales.

"Often, [entrepreneurs] are so passionate about what they do that they don't see the forest for the trees, so they need people who can take their message and sell it differently," he says.

FIGHT THE FEAR OF SELLING

Here are some tips from the pros:

Be seen as an expert

Raise your profile in your industry through public speaking, media mentions etc. It's easier to sell your company or yourself when your name is already familiar to potential customers.

Join a public speaking group

You can't sell without communicating, and you can't communicate well when your nerves get in the way. Practice often, in the presence of friendly critics.

Don't assume they hate salespeople

Your job as an entrepreneur is to fill a need in the marketplace and many people will want to know about what your company offers. Just 11 per cent to 17 per cent of business prospects are actually annoyed by cold calls, found a survey by U.S. research firm [MarketingSherpa](#).

It's not about you, it's about them

Put the focus on the customer, not on you. Rather than just pitch your product, turn the attention to problem-solving for your customer's needs and how you can specifically help.

Develop a thick skin

Don't take rejection of your company's products or services personally. Promoting your business well requires letting go of defensiveness.

Nix perfectionism

Don't let paralysis by analysis delay your company's growth. There's no such thing as a perfect pitch and rejections are a normal part of the process.

Don't be derailed by stereotyping

Don't be put off by perceptions of stereotypical images of the used-car salesman.

Practice makes perfect

Spend time honing your pitch so you feel comfortable and confident with what you have to say.

Special to The Globe and Mail

Join The Globe's Small Business LinkedIn group to network with other entrepreneurs and to discuss topical issues: <http://linkd.in/jWWdzT>

© 2011 The Globe and Mail Inc. All Rights Reserved.