

BUSINESS WHISPERER

Winning Edge talks to sales entrepreneur and author, Peter Wilcock

What is your background in sales?

I've been in sales for over 25 years, starting out with Unilever as a young sales trainee without a clue what I was doing.. Thankfully things improved and I eventually found myself as sales and marketing director of Comcast, just as we set up a brand new cable franchise in Teesside. This was in 1995, when cable TV was full of repeats and no-one knew what the Internet was – nor wanted it. I helped build that business to over six million customers as it became NTL and then Virgin Media. I then left to work for myself and have some fun. I bought into a contact centre called Carpeo (www.carpeo.com), where we now have over 250 staff. I'm proud to call myself an entrepreneur. I did an MBA at Durham University Business School, but most of the things I've learnt have been in the office, not the classroom.

How did you get started in sales?

I was working as a trainee in the sales department of Elida Gibbs, part of Unilever. I kept telling the sales director that I could sell the socks off the other reps if he gave me the chance. One Friday night he called me in to tell me the good news – I was going on the road selling. The bad news was I would be starting the following Monday and I'd have to move to the west coast of Scotland. I was horrified. The only thing that attracted me to sales was having a company car. In truth, I've never actually been that good at selling, but I'm not bad at getting teams and companies to sell.

What have been the highlights of your career so far?

The cable period was amazing. Not many people get the chance to a) be in a company from the very start and b) introduce a new product to the customer that eventually becomes part of everyday life. We started with zero customers and it was a tough sell, as we were taking on BT and, in some cases, Sky. In my franchise, we had over 50% customer penetration on our network, which was unheard of at the time. I knew nothing about cable and recruited the same type of people, so none of us knew any better. The same happened when we launched broadband – even we didn't know what it was. I can remember telling my CEO we would sell 50,000 units in a quarter, when we were selling 2,000 a month at the time. He thought I was mad, and so did my team. But we did it with plenty to spare, which goes to prove that if you set out to



“Selling doesn't get the respect it deserves. I love the fact that the ISMM is raising the profile of sales as a profession”

achieve something, it tends to get done. It's funny to think of all those people who used to shut the door on us saying they'd never use the Internet, when a majority of people now have broadband.

What have been the toughest challenges?

I've found the only tough thing is to get enough people to believe things can be done. Once they believe, it tends to happen.

What's been your most memorable or amusing moment in sales?

When I was first out on the road, I was touring chemists in Scotland selling a new acne lotion. I had been told always to be nice to the shop assistant, as they were often involved in buying. On one of my calls I noticed the lady I was talking to behind the counter had the same surname as the name above the shop. I was chatting away nicely to this lady, trying to get her on my side, and she told me lots of the local kids had spots. Feeling like this could be a good day, I launched in to my sales pitch. A few minutes later the chemist arrived, so I explained to him that his mother had already told me there was a demand for my acne solution. His face turned red. “That's my wife!” he retorted. I was duly despatched back down the M74 to England, with the image of the furious chemist and his disgruntled wife indelibly etched in my mind.

What are your future ambitions?

I'd like to build the best sales business in the UK, when I get time...

What advice would you give to others who aspire to a career in sales?

I would say go for it – it beats working for a living...

What do you like about the ISMM?

I've always thought sales is badly under-rated as a profession. Numerous skills are required to be a good salesperson, yet for some reason selling doesn't get the respect it deserves in business. Where would any finance director be without sales to add up? So I love the fact that the ISMM is raising the profile of sales as a profession. As an ISMM Fellow, I hope to do more to help in its mission. I have written my first book, *The Business Whisperer*, which has been fuelled by my business experiences as I searched for the key ingredients to build a personal and business philosophy. My goal now is to share those stories.