



Make a List

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By Dan Norman

Years ago, when I was a salesperson at AT&T, I sold a new telephone system to a nursing home in Augusta, GA. I scheduled to have the new system installed late one night so the elderly residents wouldn't miss phone calls from loved ones during the day. I was at the nursing home the night of the installation training the employees how to use the system's features. While waiting for the installation to be completed, I wandered into the television room to watch the 11 p.m. news.

I became engaged in a conversation with a sweet, elderly woman named Mrs. Brown who told me what it was like raising her two daughters during the Great Depression. She described how tough it was, and how it became even tougher when her husband came home one day and announced he lost his job. I don't recall what she said his job was, but I do remember the new job he found. It was five miles away dyeing denim at a huge textile mill in Trion, GA. She told me each night her husband would come home late with dry, cracked, blue-dyed hands, complaining about how much he missed his old job.

While they were never rich, her girls always had what they needed, but they soon began to complain about not having anything. They complained about no longer getting presents on Christmas and birthdays and having to wear hand-me-down clothes from their older cousins.

Mrs. Brown called a family meeting and announced even though they had lost so much, they needed to be thankful for what they had left. Together they made a list of the 10 things they *did have* that they should be most thankful for and hung it on the wall above the kitchen table.

Within a year, as the depression deepened, she said her family lost all 10 of the things on the list, including their home. They packed and moved from their two-bedroom house into a two-room duplex one block from the mill.

I looked at her and said, "I'm so sorry, that must have been horrible. What did you do?"

She sat up straight, looked at me through her piercing, wise old eyes and said, as though it should have been obvious, "Why, we made another list."

Mrs. Brown said so much in those five little words. She subtly conveyed to me that we develop appreciation by acknowledging and listing how much we *do* have in life. The tone of her voice expressed her firm belief each of us always has something to be thankful for. And her quick, determined answer gave me a glimpse of a resilient mind-set that always picked up the pieces, adapted, and moved forward.

I've always drawn inspiration from Mrs. Brown's story and also have found that same spirit, mind-set, and appreciation in the best salespeople. When times are tough, they know they can get better. But they also know things can get worse. For that reason, they make it a practice to appreciate the opportunities and resources that are available to them.

When times get tough, remember the following:

Step away from closed doors. I know a realtor here in Orlando who told me she had been through downturns before and the market would come back soon. Her plan was to continue to prospect for customers and market her business the same way she always had. After 18 months, she gave up and took a job at one of the amusement parks. I always imagine her sitting by a big closed door waiting for it to reopen.

I know another realtor in Daytona Beach who realized many of his potential listings were trying to sell their own homes. Instead of trying to talk them out of it, he decided to help them. He loaned them a big "FOR SALE BY OWNER" sign, gave them a list of the top 10 things to do when selling your own home, and provided the names and contact information for the resources needed to complete the sale. He told me he knew they would remember him when they needed a realtor. He recognized another door had opened when the other one closed.

Make Mrs. Brown's list. Review and catalog the resources and strengths you have. Then make a list of them.

Stop selling and just listen. Make a "listening call" rather than a "sales call" to your best customers to find out how what they want and need has changed. During the Great Depression, 72 of the best companies in the United States created research and development laboratories to determine how to adapt and find new opportunities in a struggling economy. The formal first step in each of these lab's new product development process was listening. It may have been called something more formal, such as discovery, market feedback or customer input, but they simply were listening to customers' wants and needs.

Adapt. Determine how to make the best use of what you have to help your customers. Look at what your customers want and need, then determine how you can add value, help them, or refer them to someone who can.

Move forward. Revise your goals, or develop new ones and move forward.

And just in case things continue to get worse, remember the prophetic words of Mrs. Brown: "Why, we made another list."

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