

# Inside IAG

The Weekly Newsletter of the Independent Agency Group

February 17, 2006

## Pulling Ahead of the Competition, Part II

by Fred Firestone



Fred Firestone

### Step Two – Differentiating the Selling System

Once the foundation of differentiation is established, many agencies need to go beyond merely communicating their differentiators. They need to focus on the crucial moment of truth that greatly influences whether their products/services are bought: how they sell. This can be the ultimate Kodak moment. Whether prospects end up doing business with an agency often has as much to do with the selling process as the effectiveness of products/services to address their needs.

When we started our company in 1988, we offered workshops and keynotes on how to differentiate products and services. We found, however, that some of our clients who had to “sell” their products or services faced this scenario: They would approach their prospects and convey the fact that they successfully differentiated their products/services — that there were compelling reasons why their prospects should buy them versus the competition. The response they received all too often was, “Leave the literature and we’ll get back with you.” Our clients firmly believed the best decision their prospects could make would be to buy their products/services, yet buyers were commoditizing them; they were being put on the spreadsheet. (Nothing is more frustrating than being categorically dismissed as being the same as everyone else.) The issue they wrestled with was once you build it (effective differentiation), how do you ensure people will come (sales)?

Our challenge then was determining how to move prospects from the point of saying, “We already have what you offer,” or “Just send me your literature,” to the point of owning the unique advantages our clients brought to the marketplace. We didn’t believe the answer was found in conventional sales training programs that sought to manipulate prospects into buying with gimmicks and manipulative closes. These programs and their methods too often only served to compromise integrity, not enhance it.

Given this realization, a number of years ago we started to look for a selling system that enhanced the perception of integrity — that delivered on the EthicalFactor™.

I read in one of Tom Peters’ books about the individual who hurried into Beltramo’s Liquor Store in Palo Alto, CA., told the clerk what he wanted and threw down his American Express card. He wanted the clerk to move. That day American Express’s processing time was inordinately long. Customer became

*Continued on Page 2, Differentiation*

FOR AGENT USE ONLY —  
NOT FOR DISSEMINATION TO THE PUBLIC.

extremely frustrated — not at American Express, but at the clerk behind the counter. Finally, Amex approved. The clerk realized the customer's frustration and how Beltramo's service image was in jeopardy. He reached behind the counter and brought out two five-cent mints and put them in the customer's bag. He thanked the customer for his business and asked him to accept mints as a small token of appreciation for having had to wait so long. His sincere words and action went beyond what the customer expected. The customer walked out feeling good about the clerk and Beltramo's. The clerk differentiated Beltramo's by delivering on the EthicalFactor™.

Two five-cent mints can make a difference. I was waiting to board my Southwest Airlines flight. An announcement was made that the flight was cancelled and that passengers should check in with the gate agent to secure a spot on a future flight. I got in line and saw what seemed like miles of people in front of me, all with a ticket and all with an "attitude," silently fuming about the inconvenience and the implications of not reaching their destinations on time. I recalled the Beltramo's incident. The similarity struck me. I was selling and the ticket agent was buying. Other than valid tickets, the only other thing the buyer/ticket agent expected from our line of disgruntled passengers was a lot of "venting of frustration." It occurred to me that if I could provide the agent with a better "buying experience" than she expected, I could differentiate myself and have a better chance of being on the next flight.

I happened to have had two five-cent mints in my coat pocket. Finally, my turn. As I presented my ticket, I put the two mints in her hand, told her not to misconstrue my actions and inquired whether there might be a seat on the next flight for me. She looked at the two mints and with a deadpan expression said, "For four mints, you're first on." We struck a deal. The fact that the clerk expected an "attitude" to accompany each ticket worked to my benefit.

What an "A-ha moment!" It occurred to me that effective selling had a lot more to do with differentiating the selling process by conveying more of the EthicalFactor™, than it did with multiple closes or sales gimmicks. We developed the Ethical Selling System to reflect our philosophy. The System presupposes there are no contradictions between doing what is best for you and doing what is best for your clients. There are no victims. Salespeople are not "motivated" or taught magic words that get people to buy. Rather, it is a process that allows prospects to self-discover: **1.)** that you understand their product or service-related concerns better than anybody else in the industry and **2.)** that these concerns are best addressed by the unique solutions you bring to the marketplace (your differentiators). If done successfully, an "advisor" becomes a "trusted consultant," and the selling process is differentiated.

Fred Firestone is president of the Ethical Selling Institute, ([ethicalselling.com](http://ethicalselling.com)), a subsidiary of Sempact, Inc. They provide training, speaking (keynotes, breakouts) and coaching services to companies and organizations on how to pull ahead of the competition by building more of the EthicalFactor™ (Trust, Credibility and Partnership) in to their products and services as well as their selling process. Their philosophy is that doing so is not just the right thing to do; it is the ultimate way to pull ahead of the competition. Mr. Firestone can be reached at [firestone@ethicalselling.com](mailto:firestone@ethicalselling.com) or by calling 314-863-4000.