

What I Learnt at the Shoe Shop

When our family moved across town in the 1980's, I lost my boyhood friends and plunged into a lonely period of teenage insecurity. For months, I moped around the house until my Dad finally made me get a job at the local supermarket putting customers' groceries in paper bags and then carrying them out to their car. I hated it.



One scorching day, as I carried shopper's bags out to the car park, I looked across at the large shoe shop across the street. The shop had a cool pristine appearance, with a red painted exterior and big, awning shaded windows filled with shiny new shoes. I had always wondered what it would be like to work in an office in air-conditioned comfort, so I decided to find out.

Days later, wearing my very best clothes, I summoned all my courage and stepped into the shoe shop. A lanky tower of a man greeted me, his black curly hair neatly cut, and his face glowing with a genuine smile. He wore gold rimmed glasses, a navy blue suit, a conservative tie, and a pair of impeccably buffed wing tips.

"Looking for work!" he asked.

"Yes sir," I mumbled, unable to imagine how he knew I was looking.

"I saw that you weren't browsing the displays, so I figured as much," he said, still reading my mind. "I'm Matt Mills, the shop manager. We could use another salesman around here. Do you like dealing with people?"

The question surprised me. I could count on my right hand the friends I'd made since we'd moved to this area. To me, the kids around here seemed standoffish and unreceptive, and I was near the point of saying, "Na, not really." But I dug my toe into the carpet, and said, "I suppose." I know my answer came with little conviction emanating from my voice.

"That's not much of an answer," he said, placing his hand on my shoulder. "Half of selling is putting people at ease. If they get the feeling you really do care, they'll respond to that. They'll actually become reluctant, **not** to buy from you. But if they get the impression you'd rather be doing something else, they'll be out the door before you know it".

He made it sound so simple. Something told me I might learn a great deal from this man who seemed to like everyone.

For whatever reason, Mr. Mills hired me. My first days on the job were spent listening to the do's and don'ts. "We don't do things like other shoe shops," Mr. Mills said, pointing

toward the busy street outside. "People have to go to a little extra trouble to come over here, so we try and give them something extra in return. Think you could do that?"

My self doubts crept to the surface. "What if you don't have what they want?" I asked, surprised at my own boldness.

Judging by the look on his face, I must have just committed sacrilege. "Never tell them that!" he intoned. "Instead show them what you **do** have."

"But what if....."

"Show, don't tell," he interrupted.

"You can't always offer people what they want. But you can always offer something. Whether they accept it, is up to them. But if you show an empty hand, you take away that choice. Just remember that you've always got something that will light up a persons eyes. You just have to figure out what that is."

He then took me on a tour of the shop and explained to me the system: hourly wages, plus a percentage of the sales. The biggest commission was on shoe polish, with handbags and accessories close behind.

Next we pretended I was a customer just arriving. "Welcome to my shop", Mr. Mills said, genially shaking my hand. He escorted me to a seat, pulled up a stool and before I knew it, had gently removed my shoes. "Would you mind standing on this," he asked. Then he measured both feet.

"Aren't you even going to ask what I want", I said, when I sat down again.

"Yes, now that I am in control", Mr.. Mills replied. "See, you're sitting in a comfortable chair, with your shoes off. You just can't get up and leave, so this is when I ask people what they have in mind".

"Why don't you just ask me my size?" I asked him.

"Never ask someone's size"! he insisted, shaking a finger at me. "The purpose of measuring is to establish in the customers mind, that you know what you're doing. That gives them confidence in your recommendations."

Confidence! It was hardly by best asset, but Mr.. Mills certainly had it, and I was determined to see how it worked. As the days passed, I became his shadow. I watched as he defused the grouchiest of customers, by making jokes. Often they were at his own expense about his skinniness. "You know", he'd say, patting his bony bottom, "if I don't quit eating so much, I'm going to get too big for this darn stool!" He would then grin at the customer.

Once I watched as he worked with two women shopping together. He brought them not only the shoes they had asked for, but several other pairs. While they were trying out the requested shoes, in front of the full length mirror he handed them the matching handbag. "Let's see how this looks," he said, almost innocently. Then he displayed other shoes in a neat semi-circle round his stool. Next to each pair he placed a handbag. Who's to say what those customers had in mind when they came in that day. But when they walked out, each had a pair of shoes, a couple of handbags, and a very satisfied smile.

"If you only give people only what they came for", he said during a lull, "then you haven't sold anything. Give them that, then sell them something. It's good for the shops volume, it's good for your commission, and it's good for me. Selling gives you a feeling of self-confidence, and once you've discovered it, it's yours for life. You'll use it in more ways than you could imagine, because everything we do, involves some form of sales."

Soon after, when it was time to assist my first customer, the butterflies swirled in my stomach. Mr. Mills pulled me aside and offered me his assurances.

"Just treat them like you'd want to be treated, and the rest will take care of itself," he said. After seating a woman and her daughter, measuring their feet, and showing them matching suede loafers, I suggested a water-repellent spray and a wire brush for maintaining the nap. The woman bought everything, and I don't know who was more pleased, - me or Mr. Mills.

Though it was hardly an overnight transformation, I became a marginally gifted salesman, thanks to Mr. Mills' example. It was a rare day that I didn't learn some new technique from him.

Once, I even saw him suggest to a rather large woman, that the size nine shoe she was trying on was actually the size six she had requested. With a puzzled look on his face, he turned the shoe over, and showed it to her again. They must have stamped it upside down, he explained with a silly grin. Obviously amused, the woman bought the shoes, and vowed to come back soon.

As the months lapsed into years, Mr. Mills became more like a wise old uncle, than a boss. His guidance touched many facets of my life - from career counselling to the torment of teenage romance. "I wish my parents could be more like you," I told him one quiet evening, when we had the shop to ourselves.

Mr. Mills dropped his chin and peered at me over his glasses. He had met my family on many occasions and thought highly of them. "And how's that?" he asked. "You and I can talk about anything, and you never get upset. I can't do that with them." For a long moment his eyes drifted from mine. Finally he turned back to me and said, "it's difficult to be a good parent and a good friend at the same time, so don't be too hard on your parents. They're fine people."

Mr. Mills was right. I had learned a lot under his tutelage, but I'd taken little of it home with me. Perhaps if I were to act more like an adult, they'd treat me that way to. I'll never forget the look on their faces, a few days later when I volunteered to stay home with my little sister so they could go out for an evening by themselves.

I continued working at that shoe shop until it was time to leave for university. Never once did I dread going to work - until it was time to say goodbye. With the others already gone for the night, I walked up to Mr. Mills and swallowed hard.

"You've done an awful lot for me," I said. "I will always appreciate it." When he looked at me his face was flush, his eyes slightly moist. "I didn't do anything", he said flashing a bright smile. "You did." "But you showed me how." I said.

"Anyone could have done that - your parents, your teacher your pastor. It's just that you were ready to listen, when you met me. It was inside you all along."

I thought about that for a moment. Since coming to work at the shoe shop, I had taken part in the senior play, got involved in some organisations, run for a couple of offices, and made many new friends. It turned out my peers had never really closed me out of their lives. It was the other way around, just as it had been with my family. As soon as I opened up to them, everyone responded.

Have confidence in yourself and others will too.

-Don't tell, show!

-Treat people as you would like to be treated.

-Always offer more than expected.

These simple rules have since found their way into many corners of my life - to business, to family and beyond

In teaching me about selling shoes, Mr. Mills gave me something far more important - a *powerful secret for living*.

*You don't always have what people ask for. But you'll always have **something** in your vast inventory. If not another pair of shoes, or a fine of polish, try offering a piece of yourself.*