

CHAPTER 3

PROFESSIONAL SELLING – IT'S NOT JUST A LOT OF JAZZ

Alex Walker is a part-time real estate agent with a full-time job as a waiter. He had hoped to earn enough in real estate to go into it full-time, but after two years he still had not secured enough listings or made enough sales to make the leap. Then, one Saturday morning at the restaurant while preparing the tables for a special party, Alex watched his boss, Pete, audition some musicians and learned what professional selling is all about.

Pete Groble owns a very fine restaurant featuring gourmet seafood. The atmosphere is elegant and relaxed. The food is renowned. To augment the pleasant environment, Pete bought a Steinway grand piano and made room for it just to the side of a beautiful fireplace with a hand-carved oak mantle imported from an old hotel in Stuttgart.

To keep the atmosphere simple, elegant, subdued and conversationally pleasant, Pete advertised for a pianist who could play semi-classical, light opera, Broadway show tunes, Strauss waltzes, favorites from yesteryear and generally pleasant dinner music.

Ed, Carolyn, Fred, Alice and Phil all heard about the job, all were “between engagements” and needed work and all, except Phil, made appointments to audition.

For his audition, Ed showed up on time, asked Pete what he would like to hear and in a most relaxed manner proceeded to demonstrate his skills. Mechanically, he was flawless. His range of memorized music included every category that Pete had specified. Pete was impressed, in fact, very impressed, and told Ed so, but he also told Ed he had several more auditions and would call him later.

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For her audition, Carolyn also showed up on time, but unlike Ed, she was a touch nervous. Just a touch, mind you. It was not very noticeable. But it did show. Pete asked her to play something. She responded by asking if he had anything special he would like to hear. He said, “No, whatever you like.” She fumbled for a piece of sheet music from her briefcase and began to play. She played rigidly at first, but after a few moments began to relax and soon had Pete swaying to the easy rhythm of her music.

“She’s a little inexperienced,” thought Pete to himself, “but people will like that kind of style. It will touch them, reach inside them and make them feel good.” Pete was impressed, in fact, very impressed, and he told Carolyn so, but he also told her he had several other auditions and would let her know. Carolyn pointed out that one key on the piano was a little out of tune and would need adjusting. Pete thanked her for her comment.

For his audition, Fred showed up half an hour early, just as Carolyn was leaving. He said he wasn’t sure whether Pete had said on the hour or half past, but “better early than late, right?” Pete hesitated for a moment. He had carefully scheduled the audition times so he could do a few other things between appointments. Fred’s showing up early threw his plans off. He felt a bit of pressure, and he didn’t like pressure.

“Why don’t you warm up for a few minutes while I make a phone call” he told Fred. “I’ll be about ten minutes.”

Fred settled himself at the piano, wiggled his fingers to relax them and plunged into the keys with a great New Orleans jazz beat. Rhythm followed rhythm, piece followed piece, as his fingers flew from one end of the keyboard to the other. Suddenly, 15 minutes later, in the middle of one very fast, very loud piece, he became aware of Pete standing in the doorway of the kitchen. He stopped and said, “Ya got a bad key here. It oughta be fixed, but it don’t really bother me much. Well, do you wanna hear some more?”

“No, thanks,” said Pete. “I’ve heard enough. I’ll let you know.”

When Fred left, Pete came over to Alex and said, “Alex, I want to think out loud. Just listen for a minute. The last guy, Fred, he’s out – no class,

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and he's not on our wave length. So, it's between Ed and Carolyn. Ed certainly had more poise and experience. He probably knows a lot more music. Carolyn played with more feeling, but was up-tight. She'd probably get over that soon enough, so I shouldn't hold that against her. Man vs. woman; the audience doesn't care. Tight decision – good. I always like to make a decision between two good choices.”

He paused, thinking deeply, then expelled his breath with a touch of frustration. “Do you have a coin?” he asked Alex. Alex offered a quarter. Pete flipped it into the air. “Heads it's Carolyn, tails it's Ed,” he said as the coin spun in the air. He caught it, slapped it over the back of his other hand and said, “Tails. Ed it is.”

“Don't you have another audition still coming?” asked Alex.

“Oh, yes. Blast. I don't need it. I wonder if I can still cancel out.” He dialed the number Alice had given him, listened to the phone ring eight times and said, “Too late. She's on her way.”

Half an hour later Alice entered. Pete glanced at his watch in the manner of a person who is behind schedule and impatient to get on to something else. With a wave of his hand, he gestured Alice to the piano and said, “Play a couple of tunes.”

“Mr. Groble,” said Alice, “May I ask you a few questions before I play?”

“Sure, sure,” he said impatiently. “What do you want to know?”

“May I ask why you want the kind of music you stated in your ad?”

“Well, look around,” he said with impatience. “I've put a lot of money into this place to make it rich and elegant. I want to attract the kind of cultured people who will appreciate the atmosphere and pay the price I have to charge to provide the quality of the food. I want music to add to – not detract from – the atmosphere.”

“Great,” said Alice. “May I ask just one more question?” And without waiting for an answer, she asked, “Do you want someone who can respond to the various moods of your customers?”

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“What do you mean?” asked Pete.

“Well,” said Alice. “Some nights your customers might tend to be mostly older folks – maybe in their seventies. On those nights I’d probably play something like this ...” and turning, she began to play a series of waltzes that were popular fifty to sixty years ago.

“On another evening,” she said while she played, “you might have a large number of people who are in their fifties, and for them I’d play music like this ...” and abruptly she shifted from waltzes to a medley of show tunes from thirty years ago.

“I’d also watch the hands and the heads of people, and if I see someone who starts keeping rhythm with his fingers or by swaying his head, I might play something like this ...” and now she played a few Scott Joplin numbers, including the theme from “The Sting.”

When she finished, she turned and said, “Mr. Groble, most people develop their taste for music in their late teens and early twenties, so people in their seventies will like music that was popular fifty years ago, and people in their fifties will like the music that was popular thirty years ago. Everybody likes to hear a song he felt good about as a youngster.

“In addition to that, some nights when it’s rainy and the barometer is falling, people tend to feel melancholy, so I play melancholy music. On other nights, when it has been a glorious sunny day, I play bright, exciting music.

“And one more thing,” she said. “I even watch the boss, and on an evening when things aren’t going too well and he looks troubled, I play something like this ...” and turning back to the keyboard she played a song titled ‘Love Walked In.’”

When she finished, Pete asked, “How did you know that is my favorite song?”

“I called the coOK this morning and asked him.”

“Lady, you’ve got the job. What’s your name?”

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“Alice – Alice Dian.”

“Welcome aboard, Alice. You can start tonight.”

“Thank you. By the way, some of your customers will have a good ear for music. There’s one key that is off just a little and might bother them. Would you mind if I had someone tune it?”

That afternoon, Alex sat in his car outside the real estate office where he worked part-time, mulling over the events of the morning. Suddenly he saw it. Music and selling were almost identical. Pete’s objective was to create referrals and repeat business through the atmosphere created as much by music as by food, service and decor. He needed a musician who could create that atmosphere and this morning four people had auditioned for the job.

Ed and Carolyn were both very good but not outstanding, while Fred was completely unprepared to deliver what his prospect wanted. But Alice would bring in so much business there would be a constant waiting list. She knew how to pinpoint what the prospect wanted, even made him conscious of a few things he wasn’t even aware he wanted.

Then, thinking about real estate, particularly listings, it occurred to him that every time he made a listing presentation he was auditioning for the job. The seller would give the listing – the job – to the salesperson who could demonstrate the greatest skill in making sure the house would sell ... quickly ... and for the most money.

Then another thought hit him. The musician’s responsibility is to make sure people enjoy themselves so they will recommend the restaurant to others and will come back themselves. It is the obligation of the musician to make sure the people enjoy themselves, just as it is the obligation of the salesperson to make sure the listing sells. In accepting the listing, the salesperson accepts that responsibility. The selling of the home becomes an obligation.

“Now,” thought Alex, “What do I need to know to make sure a home I list will sell, regardless of the market, regardless of the competition? There must be a lot more to selling a house – making absolutely sure it sells

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– than putting a sign on the lawn, advertising in the paper and maybe holding an open house.”

For the next thirty days, every chance he had, Alex analyzed the problem. He found that the average buyer looks at twelve homes before making a decision. That meant his listings would compete, in the minds of the buyers, against eleven other homes. He realized that the buyers would select the home that appealed most to them. He also realized that the selection would be based both on price and showability.

His thinking was reinforced when several experienced real estate people confirmed that a home which showed exceptionally well almost always sold faster – and for more money – than an average home. The key to assuring that his listings would sell quickly, he decided, would lie in convincing the sellers of the importance of preparing the home for sale, as well as in selecting a good initial market price – neither too high nor too low.

He also discovered that most homes are sold cooperatively through the multi-listing service. To sell a home once, he reasoned, it would actually have to be sold twice. First, he would have to sell it to the salespeople so they, in turn, would sell it to their buyers; all the more reason to make the effort to prepare the home for sale and select the best asking price.

EPILOGUE

Alex quit his job at the restaurant and soon became a top real estate agent. Within six months he was leading his company in listings and in the percentage of homes sold. In fact, except for a few early mistakes, he seldom had a listing expire and seldom took more than sixty days to sell a home. By the end of his first full year, he had made sixty-three presentations, secured fifty-eight listings and had fifty-one of them sell, four were still active, and three had expired.

His system was very simple. He made sure each listing was prepared for showing, priced right and sold to all the top salespeople in his area. He looked on each appointment as a chance to audition, so he memorized a presentation to explain his method of merchandising to a prospect. Because he was prepared – and confident – he almost always won the audition.

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And speaking of auditions, remember Phil? He also heard about the audition. He needed work and was a very skilled pianist. In fact, he was better than he thought he was. But Phil didn't make an appointment with Pete, because he heard that Fred was going and figured he didn't have a chance against him. He defeated himself by measuring his chances against a person who failed to get the job. Tragic, isn't it.

How about you? How do you see selling? As a skill? As a profession? Or just a lot of jazz? Do you have the skill to win your "auditions" eighty percent, ninety percent of the time? Do you have the skill to make sure your listings sell – in spite of the market – in spite of the competition? Can you make sixty-three presentations, get fifty-eight listings and make sure at least fifty-five sell? Would you like to be able to do that? What do you need to know to make it happen? What are you willing to do to make it happen?

The opportunity of a lifetime lasts only for the lifetime of the opportunity. Will you be ready?

