

BUSINESS

The many traps of being non-profit

By John William Templeton
Special to Sentinel-Voice

Many African-American entrepreneurs constantly hear this question, "Are you non-profit?" when they deal with large corporations. Some even create non-profit entities just so they can answer the question, "Yes."

After 10 years of hearing this myself, I had two bank executives in the past year unwittingly reveal to me that this is a purposeful question. One executive, provided a request for advertising, quipped, "Why don't you give a dinner, we'll give money for that."

The second revealing comment came from the manager for minority business and women business enterprise at one of the country's ten largest banks. She said, "Most of what we do is with non-profit organizations." The irony of that remark from an MWBE practitioner shocked me into pondering about a

societal preference for black people to be in non-profit businesses.

My first conclusion is that it is not because we prefer to go the non-profit route. As soon as African-Americans historically have had the opportunity to seek their own livelihood, they have headed toward creating their own businesses.

Colonial-era Philadelphia, Boston and New York all saw extensive numbers of African-American artisans, particularly in the construction and sailing trades. Paul Cuffee was the outstanding example as proprietor of a sailmaking factory in New England.

Those entrepreneurs then spawned such institutions as the Free African School in New York, and the Free African Society of Philadelphia which grew into the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Later on they were able to create the first black newspapers.

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After the Civil War, there was a real explosion of entrepreneurship, including the growth of family-owned farms. The newly emancipated began building cooperative businesses such as burial societies, insurance companies and banks. They were then able to translate that economic power into political power in the South, including statewide offices.

The birth of Jim Crow following the Plessy vs. Ferguson decision made those businesses even more critical as the support for the churches and institutions that protected our community from segregation and lynching.

However, there was a little-noticed form of Jim Crow that accompanied this shift. It was little noticed because this form came from the North and it came from the very wealthy.

The robber barons of the turn of the 20th century made their millions in the midst of tremendous suffering among their factory workers, often abetted by playing off groups of European immigrants against black workers.

To prevent a total social breakdown, the concept of the charitable foundation was created. Foundations could only make grants to "non-profit" organizations. With the onset of the income tax, restrictions were placed on "tax-exempt" groups, such as restrictions on political activity.

Prospects of receiving much larger sums of support led to the creation of black non-profit national organizations with local chapters. But that support came at a price. Up through the 1960s, and for some groups

even today, the elected heads of the organizations came from outside our community.

The subtle controls have shaped the agenda of those organizations and often led to conflicts with more grassroots groups. The black staff leaders of these groups have become protective of the broker role they have evolved into.

One hundred years later, African-Americans are finding that those controls are restraining our progress. As long as our agenda is limited to protesting and requesting, the access to power remains beyond our grasp.

Many of the breakthroughs for our people have come from the ad-hoc groups like the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, National Negro Congress, Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the Black Panthers or the Million Man March that overcame the constraints of the non-profit

bottleneck.

Rather than waiting for social pressures to create those kind of efforts, we must begin supporting and building organizations that exist solely to pursue our own agenda.

A non-profit dominated leadership is being outflanked by such groups as political action committees and business trade groups free to take potshots at blacks and people of color. A Fortune magazine listing of the most powerful influence groups in Washington lists no black organizations, despite the fact that we are 12 percent of the U.S. population.

Business leaders, with the support of their consumer base, have to take a more active role in building a power base. Otherwise, whenever we ask for our freedom, the answer will be, "No."

John William Templeton is executive editor of Griot, the African-American, African and Caribbean business daily.

ENTREPRENEUR'S CORNER

5 keys to developing a high-profit sales style

By Pierre A. Clark
Special to Sentinel-Voice

You are the chief salesperson for your business - the one whose ability to "bring home the bacon" will have the greatest impact on your company's bottom line.

As such, you know how well you are able to articulate both the features and benefits of your products and services to your clients.

Business strategists that have studied the styles and techniques of successful salesmen have tried to identify the strategies that are most effective. There are hundreds of books on salesmanship that present organizational or motivational strategies to increase your ability to "close" the sale.

While there may be some generic techniques that may help you master the cosmetic aspects of selling - becoming better organized, learning to follow up with prospects, or writing persuasive sales letters - successful salespeople use presentation styles as varied as their own personalities.

Are there some personality styles more inclined to or adaptable to selling? Probably. But the reality is that you will probably be a more effective salesperson if you learn to analyze, understand and effectively apply your own unique personality traits in presentations.

I believe that any of us can

- and if we are to be successful, must - adapt and apply our own personal styles in selling situations. I believe you'll learn that displaying a magic sales style that captivates and motivates clients, is at its most basic about being yourself and exhibiting the human touch that connects and moves another human being.

The results of many studies have documented that women are the most effective salespeople.

Women are generally more inclined to develop relationships with their clients, to discuss and inquire about personal information - kids, birthdays, interests, hobbies, etc. in order to establish a personal rapport. Studies of the most successful salespeople - the 20 percent of salespeople who consistently close 80 percent of the sales - demonstrate conclusively that the image of the slick, in-your-face huckster is neither effective nor attractive.

The fact is that in this highly

impersonal world, people gravitate and are more responsive to those who demonstrate an ability to listen, empathize, share, connect and build/establish personal relationships. The cynics might decry the touchy-feely ethic, but it sells, no doubt about it.

So just because you are naturally shy or a person of few words, those traits don't necessarily have to work against your salesmanship style. Any of us can become a great listener, can improve our ability to empathize, can become a problem-solver who understands their clients and can devise effective solutions.

To augment your listening and empathizing skills, here are some practical, easy-to-implement strategies to help reinforce your personal selling touch:

(a) Build a database of personal client information. Today's computerized contact management software packages can store birthdays, nicknames, favorite hobbies,

and other personal data. A sincere interest in the ideas, causes and interests of others is rare and appreciated.

(b) Look your clients in the eye. The eyes, more than "the window to the soul," are the connecting points to establish rapport.

(c) Practice active listening. One powerful technique during a conversation with a client is to repeat what the client said,

using the phrase "If I'm hearing you correctly, what you said was..." This technique allows the client to confirm that you heard him/her correctly and that you are actively listening.

(d) Position yourself as a problem-solver rather than salesperson. To most people, a salesperson's agenda is to convince them to buy. A problem-solver, however, is seen as a resource that adds

value. The perception difference is powerful.

(e) Demonstrate your willingness to share helpful information with clients by sending relevant articles and tips to them.

Using your unique personality skills to stay connected to your clients, their interests and desires, is the real secret to high-power, high-profit salesmanship.

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