Supersalesman or superhero: Do you have a choice?

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A tongue in cheek rural tale
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The saving of farmer pink

**The Cast**

- **Farmer Pink:** A bit conservative, but has a smartphone given to him by his grandson.
- **Supervet:** Enthusiastic, Problem solver.
- **Hissing Sid:** Snake-oil salesman.
- **The Black Vultures of Banking:** Just waiting...and collecting interest.
- **The Clouds of Climate Change:** Can't make up their minds. To rain or not to rain?
- **Kindot Commodity-Prices:** Money villain & meat processor.
- **The Herd Of Elephants:** Bureaucrats, politicians, environmentalists and other general do-gooders.
Farmer Pink is in trouble:

Kimdot Commodity Prices is paying him a pittance for his lambs. The Herd of Elephants are making him fill out lots of forms and spend money on planting trees in places he doesn't want to. The Black Vultures of Banking are demanding interest payments. The Clouds of Climate Change are gathering. His sheep look OK to him but they aren't growing as well as they probably should.

"Hi there Farmer Pink. You look worried and your sheep look bloody awful. I can save you. If you just follow my advice your sheep will grow better. You'll make more money and be able to go for a holiday in the Bahamas."

That all sounds a bit hard - I don't understand it and it will be difficult to do. Kimdot Commodity Prices won't pay me what they're worth. By the time I pay your bill and the Black Vultures of Banking take what they want, I'll have bugger all left.

"Why don't you buy this cheap drench from me? I promise - I'll give you instant results and you'll get rich real quick."

Besides, the Herd of Elephants are on my case and the way the Clouds of Climate Change are behaving I don't know if I'll have enough to feed the sheep in the first place."

"This stuff is cheap but it's really good. Why don't you give it a try. What have you got to lose?"

"You're far better off to look at the long term and let me use my superior knowledge to save you."

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"Oh I don't know - my sheep look OK to me. What I really want is to be in charge of my own destiny. What I need is sustainable profitability not just productivity. Can you help me with that?"

"Ooh! I'm feeling pretty weak! the one substance that takes away my superpowers is knowledge gap-ite!"

"I can offer you a discount if you buy two!"

"It says here the cure for knowledge gap-ite toxicity is to join minds with another person and create new knowledge."

"We'd better try it then. I'm nearly done for."

"I'll just download the knowledge-share app?"

"That looks like it might work!"

"How about a free BBQ if you buy three?"

"Go away you silly little man! We've got work to do!"

"Superver, what products and services do I need to buy from you to make all this work?"

"Oh dear I'm feeling a little faint again. I don't like selling!"
Six months later

“Do we need the knowledge-share app again?”

“No, now I know what you’re trying to do I think I’m getting over it. Let’s look at stocking policy like you suggested and assess their mineral status. Then how about I come and help you condition score the ewes in a month. After that we can discuss………..”

“The ewes are in pretty good shape. Thanks to you.”

“Thanks to us you mean”

“Yeah you’re right, two heads are better than one - cheers!”

By the way, how come you’re not wearing your red undies anymore?”
Veterinarians are taught to rescue. We are highly trained in problem solving, diagnostic methodology and in algorithmic, albeit often complex, ‘fix it’ tasks. These are essential skills, taught to a very high level and necessarily so. We use ‘diagnostic’ questioning to get the information we need to compile a differential list and ultimately arrive at a diagnosis. We then formulate a treatment plan and dispense product and ‘advice’ in the form of instructions. Compliance issues aside, our customers will generally then do what we tell them. In this situation we hold the power.

That’s fine for solving relatively straightforward clinical problems but it’s completely useless when it comes to the advisory situation where we are often attempting to convince or persuade people to do something differently or embrace a new idea. Here we need to become salespeople and develop knowledge-sharing relationships. We must also come to terms with the realisation that the power is now with the customer.

The knowledge economy myth and understanding value creation

“Knowledge and relationships are where almost all value resides. Together they are the only true source of sustainable competitive advantage.” - Ross Dawson 2005.

We delude ourselves if we think we are selling our knowledge. It’s not what our customers are buying. They are buying what our knowledge can do for them. The traditional (problem-solving) model of veterinary practice is the simple exchange of the application of knowledge and skills for money. This model leaves us wide open to commoditization (Wilson 2011a). Increasingly however, our customers now have service expectations that go well beyond this. They want to gain knowledge themselves that will enable them to make informed decisions.

A recent analysis of the last four decades of behavioural research shows us that people do not want to be rescued. Rather we want to be autonomous and in charge of our own destiny. Yet at the same time we want to stay connected and have mutually beneficial interactions with others (Pink 2009). The agricultural extension literature abounds with similar conclusions (Vanclay 2004, Paine 2004, Kilvington and Allen 2002).

These higher service expectations can only be delivered through the development of knowledge-sharing relationships. In other words we need to become knowledge brokers. Becoming a knowledge broker does not mean selling knowledge. It means providing a service in which specialist knowledge and expertise is utilized to facilitate the generation of new, need-specific knowledge with customers. Value is created when customers feel empowered by this new knowledge. This requires a shift in thinking from rescuing and ‘giving’ advice to engaging in mutual learning opportunities.

Knowledge-sharing and mutual learning

People with technical expertise often have difficulty sharing their knowledge or explaining what they know. Our expertise creates barriers and we easily end up on, what I have coined, “Expert Island”. In this situation we are blissfully unaware of our intuitive, and more importantly unconscious, use of our knowledge and specialist language. We are often unable to articulate what we ‘just know’.

Many veterinarians I speak to are, at the very least, aware of the need to avoid jargon. What they sometimes are not always aware of is that they use it so unconsciously. As marine scientist, turned filmmaker, Randy Olson said, “We think we are speaking normally, but civilians know otherwise!” (Olson 2009).

Explaining jargonistic terms is, itself, not always easy. This brings us to a second aspect of sharing knowledge; the simplification of technical concepts. The very idea of ‘dumbing it down’ is both arrogant and useless. The quickest way to turn someone off learning anything is to make them feel stupid, inadequate or inferior (Wilson 2011b). The art of simplifying something whilst still preserving the context is something we should all learn how to do well.

The key to escaping Expert Island is, I believe, adopting a concept that has been described as The Mutual Learning Model (Schwartz 2005).

“I have information, others may have other information, others may see things I do not and differences are opportunities for learning.”
Therefore I should test assumptions, share all relevant information, explain my reasoning and intent and jointly design the approach.

The result is increased understanding and trust, increased effectiveness and increased learning.” - Roger Schwartz 2005.

A new paradigm of selling

“The capacity to sell isn’t some unnatural adaptation to the merciless world of commerce. It is part of who we are.” - Daniel Pink 2012.

We are all salespeople. We’ve been doing it since the day we were born. Whether its trying to convince our mother to part with another piece of chocolate cake, applying for a job or encouraging others to behave in a certain way, we put effort into trying to persuade, convince or influence others. One survey of people working in non-sales roles found they spent around 40% of their time engaged in moving other people in some way (Pink 2012). This is exactly what we are trying to do when we are trying to persuade a farmer to adopt a BVD control strategy, or a pet owner to slim down an obese dog. Viewing it this way opens up the possibility for technical professionals, like ourselves, to embrace selling as an entirely comfortable, ethical and valued process.

What gets in the way is that for many people the word ‘selling’ provokes discomfort. Perhaps partly because we are trained to rescue, we might view selling as a predatory activity. We are not alone. Author Daniel Pink surveyed just over 9,000 people around the world. Among other things he asked, “When you think of ‘sales’ or ‘selling’ what’s the first picture that comes to mind?” The overwhelming response involved a man in a dodgy suit, selling dodgy cars (Pink 2012).

This stereotypic negative image of used car salesmen comes about because of a perceived imbalance of knowledge. Here the seller has information the buyer doesn’t. This creates mistrust and a heightened perception of risk. Will it breakdown? What does he know that I don’t? What is he hiding? Why is he trying to get me to buy this one? Although this might be the extreme example, there is an element of this in most buy-sell exchanges. Ironically these very concerns that hold many of us back from selling could provide the key to successful sales practice of the future.

Selling can be done differently and is a natural part of the advisory relationship. In this context it is an act of service. Selling products and services should be viewed as an integral part of customer engagement - not simply trying to match features and benefits to a pre-determined set of ‘needs’. People want to be sold on something not sold to.

As thought leaders in selling recognise that people are becoming increasingly aware of, and immune to, selling techniques a new paradigm of selling is emerging. Sales training authors Anderson and Jones have this to say, “Being customer-focused is more than just espousing the benefits of the supplier’s solution. It’s about being prepared by researching the customer’s business, gathering the necessary information and creating thought-provoking questions that lead to discussions about the things the customer values most. It’s about validating your understanding and sharing ideas in a consultative manner that brings clarity to both the supplier and the customer.” (Andersen and Jones 2014). In this new paradigm of selling the power is squarely with the customer.

Relationships depend on trust

Before we can hope to develop knowledge and sales/advisory relationships we need to have conversations with our customers founded on a high level of trust. Trust is not automatically given. A major barrier to developing trust is a failure to fully embrace the mutual learning philosophy. This is manifest in the kind of questions we use to start the conversation.

As veterinarians we are trained, and become very skilled at asking, what I call ‘diagnostic’ questions. Unfortunately this often spills outside our clinical work and we sometimes forget that we are dealing with people who have their own intelligence. What this means is we are still trying to be the fix-it guys (or rescuers) and ask leading questions that are really advice in disguise. Instead, and as part of the mutual learning philosophy, we should be learning to
ask questions with a view to genuine enquiry and to listen properly to the answers instead of slotting them into a differential diagnostic box. Diagnostic questions fall into a category of question that William Isaccs refers to as “statements in disguise” or worse still, “judgements in disguise” (Isaacs 1999). Neither respects the autonomy of the other person or fosters the creation of trust. More often than not they are more likely to create distrust. True enquiry, on the other hand, invites collaboration and promotes trust (Glasser 2014).

For veterinary practices to fully service the needs of their customers they must move beyond problem-solving, rescue oriented thinking and adopt more collaborative, knowledge-sharing relationships with their customers. I have suggested a knowledge-sharing approach that enables us to create value, sell it and keep our integrity intact. In embracing the mutual learning model, veterinarians can view promoting advisory services as a natural consequence of knowledge conversations and turn ‘bedside chat’ into opportunity creation.

“You may say I’m a dreamer. But I’m not the only one” - John Lennon (1971).

Some of you are already doing it.

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