

By Bill Guertin

The 800-Pound Gorilla

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## Lessons From Benny

Benny speaks a little slower than he used to. The stroke has taken a little bit of quickness from him, but he's still got it upstairs. It just doesn't come out as fast as it used to.

The "it" is the wit and personality of a sales professional 79 years young, an entrepreneur enjoying his retirement years traveling and seeing the world.

I met Benny on a recent flight from Chicago to San Diego. I was going on business. Benny was going for fun.

"So what do you do in Chicago?" Benny asked, smiling. He's always the first to start a conversation. He's never met a stranger.

"I work in market development for a major hospital health system in Kankakee." I said. "I'm on my way to a big conference."

"Oh, that's great!" he said with genuine enthusiasm. "Those conferences are fantastic. There's so much to learn. I went to plenty of them myself."

And then I began to ask about Benny.

For 30 years Benny Rae was the floor covering king of Rochester, NY. His single store did incredible volumes from 1965 until he gave the business to his son in 1995.

He began in business by going door-to-door selling commercial accounts during the day, and selling carpeting to families in their homes in the evenings. He worked tirelessly to get the business started, and eventually had many people working for him.

"That's fascinating," I said. "I do some sales training myself. From all your experience, what would be your best advice to a new salesperson today?"

He stared right at me, and I could almost hear his mind whirring, looking for exactly the right words. Slowly and deliberately, one word at a time, he said, "Ask for the order."

"Salespeople need to learn to always ask for the order. From the day you begin, you're closing every minute."

You could see him light up as he talked about the subject. "By closing, I don't mean to be pushy. Some people learn all these fancy, pushy lines and think that's closing."

"When I was selling, people told me over and over again that one of the reasons they bought from me was because I didn't pressure them. The thing is, I actually did use pressure, but they just

didn't know it. The words I chose and the way I said them helped to persuade them to say yes. I was just persistent in a nice way."

One of the things Benny learned early on was the importance of listening.

"My partner in the business was the best salesman I ever knew. He taught me everything I needed to know to get started. I was willing to listen to him. And while I was listening, I wasn't talking."

Many times Benny would hear the word "No." It didn't stop him from continuing on.

"When a customer said no, I took it as a sign that said, 'Tell me more.' I gave people more reasons why they should buy my product."

Throughout his career, he taught the fundamentals of selling to dozens of his employees. He found that not everyone was willing to work as hard as he did.

"Lots of salespeople today are lazy. They don't take the time to learn what people want, or how much they're willing to spend. They're order takers."

"True salespeople help people to figure out what it is they have, and what it is they need. To do that, you have to ask questions and be willing to listen. That takes time and effort, and many people today don't seem to want to put in the effort."

He also talked about the importance of a spotless reputation.

"My reputation was everything," he said. "When I bought flooring directly from the mills, my word was all they needed. I never once let anyone down. My word was my bond, and it was golden to everyone I dealt with. If a salesperson today can build a reputation like that—to always do what you say—it's better than money in the bank."

He should know. Benny and his family had plenty in the bank, as well as a lavish home in the city and a summer home with several boats, jet skis, and other toys.

"Everybody accused me of being lucky in life," Benny says, a smile crossing his expressive Italian face. "The truth is I was always going, going, going. I never stopped trying, even when the chips were down. When you stop trying, you're out of business."

New salespeople, take note: Benny wasn't expecting to give a sales lesson on the plane. For the very best in any profession, however, if it's what you love, it just comes naturally.

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