



Michael A. Brown's

Business To Business By Phone[®]

Second Quarter 2000 Edition

THE GREAT FACILITATOR MENACE!

Twice in recent years, I have attended business meetings conducted for clients by 3rd-party "facilitators." In both instances, the "facilitators" behaved more like thought-Nazis, imposing inflexible structure and procedures on the meetings and on participants.

In the first experience, the client hired several experts to consult and advise about a marketing overhaul. And then there was our "facilitator," who specialized in doctrinaire, abrasive behavior that extended our meetings and costs unnecessarily. He offended *everyone* along the way. The client eventually fired the man and we overhauled successfully without him.

The second episode, last fall, featured not one, but *three* facilitators who effectively hijacked the meeting away from my clients. The trio came armed with implements of control and domination, such as color-coded flip charts, a list of rules, and stopwatches. They also brought arrogance, condescension, and a "parking lot," where they shunted ideas they deemed unworthy. ("We'll just put that in the parking lot and consider it if time permits.") They stifled any bilateral negotiation that might have produced positive results. I respectfully declined to continue, disengaged, and flew home.

But wait, there's more! A Florida company's CEO retains facilitators who are his pals from a previous corporation. His "hired guns" run roughshod over the CEO's own executives. For example, the facilitators assign seats to meeting attendees and then force the VPs to read pre-formulated questions to each other from flip charts!

Worst of all, facilitators sometimes wreck an organization's finances and people. A California hospital spent \$3 million on "facilitators" and then kept them around as "implementers." The result: a \$20 million loss the following year, plus the defections of physicians who refused to tolerate the

facilitators' schoolmarm-like behavior. And who picks up the tab? The taxpayers of the hospital district, of course. The facilitators and the hospital administration have managed to dodge accountability thus far. But just wait until the next election and the next grand jury.

Why would facilitators do such things? I wish I knew. But more important, why would otherwise smart organizations let them? Seems to me that if management can't run productive meetings on its own, then management needs to learn how. And executives, especially, should *never* default their obligations to facilitators who may mean well, but whose dogma too often blinds them to creativity, progress, and the tenets of respectful business.

"HOW CAN I USE COST JUSTIFICATION TO CLOSE THE SALE?"

It's a good question, posed by a Boston area software sales rep, whose company has an elaborate, computer-generated Cost Justification Worksheet. Here's my response.

Cost justification (CJ) is not a "silver bullet" against price objections. Indeed, cost justification may not be enough, or even right, because:

- CJ is valid only if the customer has "bought into" the benefits you sold.
- Requests for cost justification more often stem from a customer's lack of authority than from a price objection.
- CJ is most often to placate the CFO. CJ does not address timing, risk avoidance, the customer's competitive situation, nor their internal politics.
- Cost justification according to whom? Are you are trying to persuade them using a worksheet and calculations that you, not they, invented?

Best Advice: Before agreeing to, or attempting, cost justification, first prepare for a successful close by earning satisfactory answers to



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these three questions:

- “How do *you* go about justifying projects and purchases within the company?”
- “Besides cost justification, what else must we do to demonstrate our value?”
- and, “If we meet *your* cost justification criteria, will we be doing business together?”

IF IT REALLY IS A PRICE ISSUE, CONSIDER THIS ...

“It’s unwise to pay too much, but it’s worse to pay too little. When you pay too much, you lose a little money, that’s all. When you pay too little, you sometimes lose everything, because the thing you bought was incapable of doing the thing it was bought to do. The common law of business balance prohibits paying a little and getting a lot ... it can’t be done. If you deal with the lowest bidder, it is well to add something for the risk you run, and if you do that, you will have enough for something better.”

Benjamin Franklin of Philadelphia, 1790.

WEB SITES: ELEGANCE v. RELEVANCE

We’ve all been to beautiful sites featuring slick graphics and animation, but we can’t navigate the site easily or accomplish what we want to do there. Others sites may not be as glamorous, but they are attractive enough and easy to interpret and use. Can companies do artful, easy web? Absolutely!

In building www.michaelabrown.net, we tried to be relevant first. So when you visit (please do!), you’ll see that it loads fast, looks good, and is right up-front about its purpose and content. Check out airline sites for other examples: Continental’s is hard, Southwest’s is easy. Then look at your own.

I’m certainly not advocating functional but ugly web sites. I am suggesting that companies

build their Internet look and feel from their customers’ perspectives and for ease of use, not from their own opinions of what’s cool.

THEY WANTED TO BUY, BUT ...

Research firm Datamonitor reports in *CIO* magazine that in 1998, 237 million on-line transactions were attempted, but only 52 million (about 22%) actually were completed! Estimated lost business: \$1.6 billion ... revenue that Datamonitor says could have been earned if only the e-merchants had some form of live access during customers’ on-line shopping excursions. I agree!

“Considered decisions,” both business and consumer, *mandate* the ability to interact live. Indeed, an Austin on-line car buying service tried to do web-only, but now is scrambling to build a live-response call center so they can field the questions and clarifications that prospects have before plunking down 30-grand for new wheels.

Best Advice: “Click to talk” technology will help, and so will easy, responsive e-mail and fax-back. Most important by far: make sure that your customers and prospects always can communicate with a live, nice, smart human being.

SO WHERE DO WE FIND LIVE, NICE, SMART HUMAN BEINGS?

Especially ones who not only can do great phone, great e-mail, and great web, but who actually *want* to do those things ... for *you*? Well, you can recruit and hire them directly, hire via a temporary agency, or not hire at all, but outsource instead.

Whichever you choose, please know this: *you cannot get million dollar performance for \$7 per hour, even if your company tells you to!* That’s why we’ll explore recruiting, hiring, outsourcing, and money in the next edition.