

Consultant has sales down to a science

(as featured in the Minneapolis Star Tribune, Dick Youngblood)

Danita Bye stands 5 feet 2 - if she stretches a bit. That, along with her ubiquitous smile and gregarious way, might lull the casual observer into thinking there's no fire or steel behind her non-threatening facade.

Think again.

As a sales trainee with Xerox in 1981, Bye figured she already had enough challenges, what with her assignment to cover sparsely populated southwestern North Dakota at a time when the state's oil industry was in repose and the national economy was in recession.

So she didn't appreciate that snippy receptionist telling the prospective client that "there's a little girl out here to see you."

By all accounts, her reaction was vintage Bye: "Wait 'til you see the size of the check I walk out with, then call me a little girl," she muttered as she headed into the meeting. The result: a \$10,000 sale, worth nearly \$20,000 in today's dollars.

It was the beginning of a sales career that saw her exceeding her quota in her first six months at Xerox and winning "Rookie of the Year" honors in the company's four-state Omaha district.

Yes, my assignment is to write about small businesses; and yes, the majority of Bye's time has been spent as an employee. But her performances as a sales rep at Xerox, and then a small, Twin Cities-based hearing-aid company called Micro-Tech Hearing Instruments, are compelling enough to warrant our attentions.

Consider: In eight years with Xerox, she won the "President's Award" four times as one of the top 25 percent of sales producers nationwide.

Besides, she started her own company in 1997, a sales-force development firm now called Sales Growth Specialists, Inc. Working about three-quarters time out of her home in Medina, she built a consulting business that should generate upward of \$250,000 in fees this year.

The science of sales

"She really understands the science of sales," said Eric Parker, sales manager at Eden Prairie-based Starkey Laboratories, her largest consulting client. "We're a \$350 million company and can afford whatever

resources we need, and we've stuck with Danita despite proposals from much larger consulting groups."

The daughter of a western North Dakota cattle rancher, Bye, 42, had her sights set on a career in medicine when she collected her bachelor's degree in pre-med from the University of Sioux Falls in 1981. Fortunately for a passel of companies that have benefited since then from her sales savvy, she decided to get a job and spend a couple of years "getting some experience in life."

If Bye and her husband, Gordon, hadn't invested \$40,000 in Micro-Tech in the late 1980s, she might still be at Xerox today.

Short of capital and battered by competition from larger rivals, the company was struggling in 1989 when Bye met with directors to make an unusual offer. She'd take over sales management in return for a minimal, \$25,000 salary and stock options.

"It looked like we might lose our investment," she said. "I had to do something."

When Bye joined Micro-Tech, sales were \$350,000, half the total in the

previous year. Within two years, sales quadrupled to \$1.2 million and by the time she left in 1997, they were up to \$10.3 million. Better yet, when Starkey Laboratories bought Micro-Tech in 1999, the Byes' holdings were worth about \$750,000.

Now, credit for the ensuing success must be shared with the company's technological innovations, which produced a tiny, in-the-canal instrument that served a niche market of patients with very high-frequency hearing loss.

'The key is listening'

But founder Larry Hagen acknowledged that Bye "undoubtedly played a crucial role" in stabilizing the company. Moreover, "the systems she developed remain in place today," he said, which contributed to the \$24 million in sales the company booked last year.

What's her secret?

"Salespeople love to talk - they're sort of walking brochures," Bye said. "But the key is listening to the customers. You



have to understand their business, identify their frustrations and needs and recognize their financial constraints. Only then can you come up with a solution that fits them."

Bye applied this collaborative approach to Micro-Tech's problems, but without the traditional face-to-face sales contacts, which were beyond the company's budget. Instead, she focused on applying the personal touch via telephone using knowledgeable, well-trained and consistently available salespeople.

"You might think the telephone is too impersonal, but we had customers sending us pictures of their kids, their dogs, their cats," Bye said.

Her salespeople, in turn, would be sure to remember clients' birthdays, anniversaries and other important dates.

Beyond listening and relating, Bye stresses that the key to success is attitude.

"Salespeople might blame the sluggish economy or 9/11 for poor performance, but once we investigate we often find a people issue, not an economy issue," she said. "We find people who are blaming external factors for their failure (instead of) taking personal responsibility to create success."

The bottom line: Clients must "screen potential salespeople for personal motivation, responsibility and commitment to success," Bye said.

In short, they should look for people like her.

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"Listening to customers is crucial to a successful formula."