

THE ART OF THE SALE

*Learn*

THE ART OF THE SALE

*Learning from the Masters About  
the Business of Life*

PHILIP DELVES BROUGHTON

to expand his list of clients. Knowing rich people was one thing, knowing rich people who would actually buy from him was quite another. Over tea and rosemary biscuits at his house, Gibbs told me, "the darling grocer [Sainsbury] would say go to America, make a list of what you have and go to provincial museums and see the ghastly trustees, which I used to do." Like Duveen, Gibbs could ensnare buyers with the lure of his rarefied tastes, and set prices according to nothing more than his own enthusiasm. "I can sell things I'm mad about," he said. "And I won't budge on price. In fact, I'll jack it up." Yet despite all his success, Gibbs reached a point where he could no longer stomach the selling. Just as Memo dreams of one day escaping the contractor business of Baltimore and living in a maintenance-free house in Oaxaca, Gibbs has sold almost everything antique he has ever owned. It was never the product that exhausted him. "Really," he said, "it's the people you have to deal with."

For a saleswoman like Carolyn Klemm, however, the people she deals with as a realtor keep her going. Klemm is the top real estate agent in Litchfield County, a dreamy corner of northwestern Connecticut full of colonial towns and gentlemen's farms owned by wealthy New Yorkers. Her client list has included George Soros, Henry Kravis, numerous Goldman Sachs partners, and Henry Kissinger. Since starting her business, in 1979, after a career as a department store buyer, she has sold nearly \$2 billion worth of houses in this one small market. Every Labor Day, she holds an end of summer barbecue at her home, a whitewashed Georgian brick manor house just off the town green in Washington, Connecticut. She has tents put up in the garden and Japanese lanterns hung in the trees leading down to the swimming pool. Caterers prepare vast quantities of fried chicken and coleslaw, home cooking for what Klemm insists is

a “casual affair.” Then around two hundred guests arrive—former, present, and future clients, bankers, writers, movie stars, business-people. And through this whirl passes Klemm, in her late sixties, recently widowed, wearing a bright pink jacket, puffing on a Benson & Hedges cigarette, throwing her arm around shoulders far higher than her own, and talking nonstop.

When I visited her at her office, furnished with a checkered sofa, piles of papers, and a chocolate brown Labrador named Teddy, she barely paused for breath. A typical Carolyn Klemm story goes like this. It is delivered circuitously, breathlessly, and with the relentless dropping of names and the adjectival use of “darling.” “So I received a call the other day from an Englishman in New York looking for a summer rental. ‘Hellooo, I’m looking for a rental,’” she said in a mock English accent, as if holding a phone to her ear. They get to talking, because that is what you do on the phone with Carolyn Klemm. “Most people have no idea how to answer the phone,” she said. “I’m able to form a very quick connection.”

It turned out the man was the creative head at a major retail chain—more than enough for Klemm to begin her trick of shrinking the world for him. “Well do you know Richard Lambertson and John Truex?” she asked, mentioning two handbag designers who share a country house in Litchfield County. “Or Calhoun Sumrall [a senior executive at Ralph Lauren]?” The man said he didn’t, but naturally knew all about them. “Well, listen,” she told him. “Rent a house up here and I’ll make sure you meet all these people.” The Friday after this conversation, she went to a cocktail party a couple of towns over from Washington and met an old friend who worked for Brooks Brothers. She discovered one of his employees was the Englishman’s partner. The circle was closed, and the following Monday, Klemm’s Englishman signed up to rent in Litchfield County

over the summer and she had plans to host a dinner party for him in early June. "Most people can't remember their broker long after a sale goes through," she said. "Hopefully no one forgets me." Christopher Gibbs ended up exhausted by his clients. Klemm is energized by the effect she can have on them. Both reached the top of their respective areas of selling.

So too did Ashok Vemuri, head of the Indian business process outsourcer Infosys's operations in America. He came to the United States in 1999, leaving a comfortable and successful career as an investment banker in India. He had the salesperson's drive to test himself, to see if he could thrive in a Western economy. A few months after he arrived in New York, he and twenty other young Indian men arrived by bus in Portland, Maine, to make a pitch to Hannaford Bros., a regional supermarket chain. Vemuri recalled stepping out into the freezing cold in his thin overcoat. He had never seen snow before. The residents of Portland gathered in their doorways to watch this unusual-looking rabble walk down the street. The Infosys pitch was about offering cheaper, better technology and management systems. But at the outset, it was also about India itself. Customers would routinely ask if Indians could speak English. "We had to sell India as a place where educated people lived and worked," Vemuri told me, "as more than a land of snake charmers and elephants on the streets."

As Infosys's American business grew and Vemuri had to hire and train more salespeople, he said he was appalled by the caliber of people and how they were taught. "It seemed everyone had to be either Dirty Harry or the girl on the beach in her bikini teasing people." What he sought was intelligence, curiosity, and an agile mind, not the chest-beating alpha male of sales myth. He wanted low-ego characters who regarded client service as the highest goal.

*Advance praise for*

## THE ART OF THE SALE

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