

Why Selling is Human

Recently I interviewed Daniel Pink, one of my favorite all-time authors. Daniel Pink is the author of *Free Agent Nation*, *A Whole New Mind*, *Drive*, and *Johnny Bunko*. In his most recent book, *To Sell is Human*, he's moved into the sales arena..

During our conversation, he shares some groundbreaking research that has totally changed the conversation about sales. He also reveals how salespeople can more effectively motivate themselves before a call.

This research will change how you think about sales. Read the transcript below or listen to the audio recording at: <http://konrath.co/daniel-pink-interview>

Interview with Daniel Pink

Jill Konrath: Hi there. It's Jill Konrath and I'm here today with Daniel Pink, one of my favorite all-time authors. He's written "Free Agent Nation," "A Whole New Mind," "Drive," and "Johnny Bunko." In his most recent book, *To Sell is Human*, he's moved into the sales arena. That's what we're here to talk about today. Thanks for joining me, Dan.

Daniel Pink: Jill, it's a pleasure to be with you.

Jill Konrath: Thanks so much. So I have to ask: whatever prompted a non-sales guy to write a book on selling?

Daniel Pink: That's an interesting question. As you mentioned, I've spent a lot of time,—almost 20 years now—writing about business. I realized at a certain point that I'd never written about sales.

A couple of things happened to make me write a book about selling. One is that I looked at my own calendar and I realized how much of my own time was spent just selling. Not only selling books, but selling people on ideas and what not.

I wrote a previous book called *Drive* that makes an argument about rewards. One of the conceptual takeaways from that book is what I call "If-Then Rewards." Those control and contingent rewards—if you do this, then you get that—are good in some cases and not so good in other cases.

After that book, I started hearing people say, "Well, what about sales? Does that mean we should get rid of sales commissions?" And then I started hearing about companies that had eliminated commissions for salespeople, and seen their sales go up.

So, I decided that this was a really rich and interesting topic. There's been a lot of stuff written by people who are experts in the field. I like to take something and look at it with fresh eyes and a beginner's mind. So that's what I tried to do with *To Sell is Human*.

Jill Konrath: That's what I liked about your book. Because you come at it not from a salesperson's perspective, you don't carry the heritage that all of us who grew up in sales do. You don't have preconceptions about what works and what doesn't work. And, you actually threw yourself into the body of research that's out there and found out some very interesting things.

Daniel Pink: Thank you. That's exactly what I tried to do. And the other thing that I tried to do, which is easier to do, I think, if you're not part of that whole sales community, is to look at it from an anthropology perspective.

If someone outside your tribe says that your tribe is cool, people take that seriously. Whereas if someone inside your tribe says that your tribe is cool, you say, "Well of course, you're inside the tribe."

One of the things I tried to do as a non-salesperson is to look at sales and say: "Good god, why don't we take this field more seriously? Why don't we admire the people that are doing this, rather than look down on them? Why don't we recognize that these people are way more courageous than the smarty-pants' in other parts of an organization? Why don't we recognize that selling is as intellectually sophisticated as the practices of certain kinds of law, or accounting, or other things that we do take seriously?"

Looking at this world of sales that I didn't know that well, I look at it with not only fascination, but with admiration for what folks do.

Jill Konrath: I think most people have no idea what goes into being good at sales. Instead they look down at it from the schlocky perspective of the 1950s quack who was going door-to-door trying to sell things to people. Or, the telemarketers that call at home.

But real selling, I tell people, is a thinking-intensive profession. I mean, you really have to have your brain in in order to be effective at it.

Daniel Pink: And even more so now today than 5 years ago, 10 years ago, 15 years ago, or 20 years ago.

Jill Konrath: One of the concepts you talk about in your book is Information Asymmetry. I love that term because it really ties into what we're talking about now.

Daniel Pink: It's very simple. A lot of what we know about sales is about the sale of products and services. Most of the world of sales has been a world of Information Asymmetry. That means the seller always had more information than the buyer. Often a lot more information. And here's the thing: When the seller has a lot more information than the buyer, the seller can rip you off if he/she wants. The seller has a huge advantage.

This is one reason why we have the saying of "Buyer beware." Buyers had to beware because they're at a huge disadvantage. They didn't have many choices, they didn't have a way to talk back, and they were at a huge information disadvantage. And that's one reason for the 1950s view of schlocky, sleazy, and deceitful kinds of salespeople. It's really about information asymmetry.

But in the last 10 years especially, that world has pretty much disappeared. We no longer live in that world of Information Asymmetry. We live in the world of information parity. And that's fundamentally different.

Jill Konrath: A lot of salespeople are having a hard time adjusting because the buyer's expectations have changed. For one thing, the buyer now goes online and can check everything out, and learn as much as they want before contacting a customer. In fact, research shows that buyers are often 60 to 70% of the way through their decision process before they pick up the phone, or reach out to a company. Which means they know a whole lot.

And if a sales guy, or sales gal, comes in and starts wanting to talk about his/her stuff and explain what they do, they're really looked down upon. It's like, "Come on, salesperson. Wake up. I already know this. I've been on your website. I've checked three people out." It's different. Plus, the talking back thing that you just mentioned is interesting too.

Daniel Pink: I think it's a big deal. Because if I had a bad experience... it's making its way to things like Yelp. For example, somebody was selling cleaning services and customers weren't happy, so they complained on Yelp. Then the owner of the cleaning service is saying these are fake things, and we've got to take it to the Supreme Court to figure out whether we can reveal the identities of these people.

If I had a bad experience with a seller, I used to tell a friend or my next door neighbor that I got ripped off or that this person's a sleazebag. Now I can blog about it. I can tweet about it. I can go on Facebook. So customers have a way to talk back. And believe me, if you listen watch what's going on Twitter, there's a lot of talking back. It's

to the point where companies have dedicated staff members whose job it is to listen to customers talking back on Twitter. It's a different world.

Jill Konrath: That's right. This same thing goes about forums too. It's not just about complaining, it's about doing your homework before you buy. So somebody will go into a forum looking to make a decision about telecom or some computer system. They'll be saying to their friends on the forum, or strangers on the forum, "What are you guys using? How did you make your decision? What did you like about it? Who's good? Who's bad? What should I watch out for?"

So all this is all out there, which means, salespeople really have to be different.

Daniel Pink: Right. That word is so rich. Different. Different from the way that they used to be. Different from each other. Different in terms of providing services, ideas, and information, context, and point of view that are different from what people can get online. Absolutely right.

Jill Konrath: They have to learn how to turn themselves into an invaluable resource. They can't think that their product, or service, or their company speaks for them. They themselves have to be the differentiator today.

Daniel Pink: Yeah, I agree. Especially in business-to-business. I think a lot of times in selling we don't immediately think of B2B, which is obviously a gigantic part of our economy. I interviewed a lot of B2B salespeople and every single one of them said, "Expertise. You've got to be an expert."

Jill Konrath: One of the things I liked in your book was when you talked about problem-solving versus problem-finding. Because I really think problem-finding is a crucial thing. So can you talk about that?

Daniel Pink: Sure. I think it's really important, B2B. I mean, it goes to what you were saying earlier about customers coming in 60 to 70% of the way through the traditional sales process. We have this notion of this sales process; it goes from 0 to 100 as a timeline. They used to come in at 5, or 6, or 10, and now they are coming in at 60 or 70. What that means is that they are already reasonably well-informed. So, if they know exactly what their problem is. That means they can probably find the solution without you. Right?

Jill Konrath: Yes.

Daniel Pink: You know exactly what the problem is. So in B2B, where do they need you in B2B? They need you in B2B to be one of two or three vendors to bid against each other to drive down the price.

Jill Konrath: Right.

Daniel Pink: So if you're just solving existing problems that people know that they have, that's not that valuable. What you have to be able to do is identify problems

customers don't realize that they're having. Surface latent problems. Look down the road and anticipate problems. The premium has shifted from the skill of problem solving to the skill of problem finding, and it's a very, very different skill. And it's not only in sales. It's in all kinds of white collar work. The era of problem solvers, problem solving still matters, but it's not the be all and end all. It's really about problem finders. Can you identify what problems people should be addressing?

Jill Konrath: So, what advice do you have for that? Any thoughts or suggestions on how to be a better problem finder?

Daniel Pink: I think it goes to what you were saying earlier. This idea of being an invaluable resource, this idea of expertise. What you have to do in B2B is to know the other person's business better than they do. And be able to look at their business and say, "You are caught in the day-to-day. Let's take a big picture view of this, here's what I'm seeing at other businesses in your industry. Let me come in on my sales call and tell you something you don't know. Let me tell you something that I've learned elsewhere that's going to surprise you."

You want to come in there as someone who knows their business inside and out. Who can put yourself in their shoes and say, "What can I do to help their business run better?"

There's a premium now on insights as much as products and services. In my opinion, it requires a little bit less of the smooth talking and placating. And a little bit more provocation.

Jill Konrath: I really think that provocation is important. It's interesting though because a lot of people don't think they have any expertise. They don't realize, that what you learn from other companies is invaluable to your prospects because they don't get out a lot.

They're in the corporate offices, they're in their small business, they're working their butt off every single day and they don't look up too often. If you can bring them ideas and insights from the company down the street that is similar, that's valuable. And they don't know that.

Daniel Pink: Exactly. Let's say you're selling enterprise software for financial services. You go talk to a CFO and if you start doing your regular presentation, she's going to say, "OK, please." But if you go in to the CFO and you say to her, "You know, it's interesting. In the last month I've talked to seven other CFOs, and here's the thing that's blindsided them. Are you interested in that?"

And she'll go, "Whoa. Yeah."

Now, you've suddenly woken her up. It's a very different kind of ball game. Or, you say, "I just ran into a CFO who was a customer beforehand, but their company went out of business. He was telling me why they went out of business and I think that has some lessons for your company."

Jill Konrath: Whoa.

Daniel Pink: And it got your attention. It's not like being a jerk. It's not being a provocateur for provocation's sake. But, it's what experts do. Experts help you see things in new ways.

Jill Konrath: Right. I think for salespeople to redefine themselves mentally as an expert is a challenge. They really need to realize that is their role. That they have to be problem finders, not just solvers. They have to know their customers, like you said, inside and out. Would you share your thoughts on servant leadership?

Daniel Pink: Yeah. Servant leadership came about by a relatively obscure management writer, Robert Greenleaf, in the early 1970s. At the time, his idea was kind of radical and weird. He said leaders are not at the top, they're at the bottom. To lead, one must serve first and lead next. That service to others gives you the credibility to lead. This was a radical idea 44 years ago.

We are now in a place where selling is something very analogous. We're in a world of servant selling where you serve first and sell next. That service to others gives you legitimacy to sell.

I'm not talking about customer service. I'm talking about asking yourself, "What can I do to serve this prospect? What can I do to serve this client? What can I do to make this other party's life/business better? Am I actually truly serving them?" It's a shift in mindset.

Jill Konrath: When you say serve your customers, or serve your prospects, or your clients, what does it mean? What do you see a salesperson doing that is service?

Daniel Pink: Let's go back to our B2B salesperson. Say you're selling software. Have a conversation with them as an expert and say, "After talking to a lot of other people in your industry, here are the three things that I'm seeing and here are three things that I think that you guys could do better."

You're basically giving them free advice. You're saying, I'm trying to help you run your business better and you're not looking for immediate remuneration for that.

Here's an example. A privately held Italian candy company, Perfetti Van Melle makes sales calls to retailers. They changed their sales approach entirely.

They now use their own data and some of the local data. If they can get data from the retailers, then they do that. The sales call is basically a sales rep saying, "Here, based on our analysis of the data, is the collection of products that we think are going to make you the most money in your store." And those products might even include products from their competitors.

That's an act of service. You're serving them.

It turns out that sharing insights about the confections business is actually a pretty good way to sell candy. Now, if I go in there and tell you three things about your business that you didn't know, the next time I come back, you're going to let me in.

Jill Konrath: And by being a curator, that means that they actually have to spend time learning themselves. They have to be a researcher and they have to understand their market. They have to understand their customer in more depth, sort it out, and continually bring their customer this kind of information.

Daniel Pink: Absolutely right.

Jill Konrath: In all your research, what surprised you the most?

Daniel Pink: One of the things that surprised me the most was the research showing that strong extroverts don't have any advantage in sales.

Jill Konrath: Why did that surprise you?

Daniel Pink: I was gripped by the stereotype of the back-slapping, super gregarious person as an effective salesperson. As someone who is not a back-slapping, super gregarious person I said, "Oh, I don't know if I could do that." And it turns out, it's a complete myth.

This doesn't mean that strong introverts are good salespeople. They're not. They stink. Research shows that the people in the middle, what social psychologists call ambiverts, are the ones who do the best.

It makes sense, now that I think it through. People always associate salespeople with the super cheery, gregarious kind of manner. Veteran salespeople, people who have toughed it out for a long time, kind of chuckle at that. They've seen the more moderated people really flourish.

The good news is, looking at the population as a whole, relatively few of us are strong introverts, and relatively few of us are strong extroverts. Most of us are actually somewhere in the middle.

The distribution is along a bell curve with most of us in the middle. It suggests that a lot of us can do this reasonably well if we're willing to do the hard work of becoming experts and so forth.

Jill Konrath: Tell our listeners specifically about that research.

Daniel Pink: Oh, it's new. It was just published. It's a great study by a guy named Adam Grant at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School.

Adam Grant conducted a very simple study. He went to a very large software company with a large sales force and measured the introversion/extroversion levels of the sales force and of the folks who sold software. The data needed was gathered in a very clean way. We know who the introverts are, we know who the extraverts are, and we know how much software each person sold.

When he plotted the data, it turned out that the extroverts did a little bit better than the introverts, but neither group did nearly as well as the ambiverts; the people in the middle. The people who are a little bit extroverted and a little bit introverted ended up doing the best of all.

Jill Konrath: Why do you think that occurred?

Daniel Pink: Think about strong introverts, they don't assert themselves. You have to be somewhat assertive in sales. Strong introverts are often shy and don't want to strike up conversations. That's a big problem in sales.

Strong extroverts have a different problem. They come on too strong. They talk too much. They don't know how to listen. So they flop too.

It's really the people in the middle who excel. I really like the term, ambivert, since it's sort of like ambidextrous.

Ambiverts can go left, they can go right. They know when to push, they know when to hold back. They know when to speak up, they know when to shut up. They know when to assert, they know when to respond. Those are the folks who do the best. And Jill, the good news is that most of us are ambiverts.

Jill Konrath: Yeah, because we're right in the middle.

Daniel Pink: Somewhere in the middle, right. Just think about a bell curve. Think about a chart. On the horizontal axis is a scale of extroversion, where on the left-hand side would be strong introverts, and on the right-hand side would be strong extroverts. The vertical axis is how many people are represented. And it's basically a bell curve. High in the middle and low at the ends. So the vast majority of people are right in the

middle, more people are kind of close to the middle, and very few people are on the sides.

Jill Konrath: I think that a lot of people are shocked if you take a look at who is successful. You have to be the experts. We have to spend time studying and learning. It's not the gregarious, rah-rah, type of person. It's somebody who spends time learning, and studying, and . . .

Daniel Pink: And listening.

Jill Konrath: And listening, and figuring out who they're talking to and what they're doing, and that's kind of what the whole thing is about.

Daniel Pink: Right.

Jill Konrath: One of the things I liked about your book is the research that you've gone out and done. You've brought me some ideas that I've never seen before out there on the concept of sales.

I have one last question I want to talk with you about. You had some interesting research on buoyancy that you brought to the table as well. I think we'd better define buoyancy because it's one of your ABC's of selling. Which is not Always be Closing, which was the old icky stuff. Your ABC's are...

Daniel Pink: They are attunement, buoyancy, and clarity. The social science tells us those are the platform qualities necessary to be effective in a world where buyers and sellers are evenly matched on information.

Attunement is perspective-taking. Can you get out of your own head into someone else's head?

Clarity we talked a lot about. Can you move from accessing information to curating it? Can you move from solving existing problems to identifying hidden ones?

But buoyancy is an interesting one.

I was able to get this term itself from a fellow who I love talking to. A guy named Norman Hall, who is the very last Phillip Brushman in North America. He spent the last 40 years selling Phillip brushes door-to-door in the business district of San Francisco.

When I talked to him, he said something quite remarkable. He said, "You know, Dan? Here's what you got to understand. The hard part about being in sales is that 'Every day I face an ocean of rejection.'"

Jill Konrath: "An ocean of rejection."

Daniel Pink: That's what sales is. An ocean of rejection. I wish I'd come up with that. Buoyancy is how you stay afloat in that ocean of rejection.

The social science gives us some clues. Some very interesting things like, what do you do before an encounter with a prospect? As it turns out, before a sales call, questioning your abilities is more effective than pumping yourself up.

Jill Konrath: I thought that was fascinating. I've never heard that before.

Daniel Pink: Interrogative. It's a relatively new study. There's some really interesting new work on something called interrogative self-talk.

Let's say I'm going on a sales call and I say to myself, "Dan, you've got this. You can do this. You're awesome."

That's better than doing nothing. There's no question about it. That positive, affirmative self-talk is better than going neutral. That's very, very clear.

But it's not as good as going in and saying, "Dan, can you do this? And if so, how?"

That happens because when you ask a question, questions provoke an active response. So, your brain has to respond in a way. And so, if I say, "Can you do this?"

My brain goes, "Yeah, I can do this. I've done this kind of thing before. Yeah, I can do this. I'm totally prepared. I know this client's business inside and out. I've got to make sure that I mention these two key points.

"Can you do this?" Yeah, I know that the one possible objection that could come up is this. I've got a great answer for that.

"Can you do this?" Yeah. On the last sales call I didn't listen well enough, so I'm going to make a concerted effort to listen more here.

What am I doing? I'm preparing. I'm rehearsing. This interrogative self-talk, is more powerful than the positive affirmative self-talk.

Again, positive affirmative, you can do this, you've got this. That pump-up is better than going in neutral. I just want to make that clear. Don't go in neutral. If you have a choice between going in 'eh', and going in and pumping yourself up. Pump yourself up. But your choice isn't only that.

Your choice is between pumping yourself up and doing interrogative self-talk. And that ends up being more effective. What's interesting is you can take some of this research and extend it well beyond sales.

There's some great research on athletes. And it turns out that athletes who use interrogative self-talk, a version of which is often called instructional self-talk, do better than the ones who merely pump themselves up.

Jill Konrath: "Can you do this?" sort of affirms in your body. It's not like you're trying to pump yourself up, it actually feels stronger. "Can you do this?" And my answer feels like a stronger response mentally when I say yes. And you say to follow it up with "how?"

Daniel Pink: Absolutely. Because you're rehearsing. You're preparing. Listen, "you can do this, you got this, you're awesome." That actually feels good, but...

Jill Konrath: But I don't always believe that. That's the truth. I don't always believe it. It's like you go into a call and go, "Can I do this?" It is kind of a quieter one. It's "Yes. Yes, I think I can." And then, how? "Well, I need to start here and I need to do this." It seems to bring in my mental engagement at a deeper level by saying that.

Daniel Pink: Bingo. There you go. Mental engagement at a deeper level. That's exactly what it's all about. The other thing is that sometimes if you say to yourself, "Can you do this?" and the answer is no.

That's not a bad thing. It means maybe you shouldn't be going on this sales call right now. Maybe you're not ready to do this right now. Whereas this affirmative "you can do it, you've got this" glosses over some of your weakness. So it's an intellectually-honest response.

Jill Konrath: I think it is. There are some times you shouldn't be going because you don't have the information you need, you're not prepared, and to go would make things worse. And you would dig your own hole if you did that.

Daniel Pink: Exactly.

Jill Konrath: You also had some research in your book too about how you explain your failures.

Daniel Pink: Yeah, this was some other interesting work. It's pretty enduring work by a guy named Martin Seligman, who is essentially the founder of the field of positive psychology. Also at the University of Pennsylvania.

In this landmark study of insurance salesman, he found that the best predictor of sales success was how these people explained failure. They had a way of explaining failure that put it in a different context. That looked for honest and authentic ways to say it's not entirely personal, it's not pervasive, and it's not permanent. A lot of times,

especially people who are new to sales, people who are getting their legs on persuasion and sales in general... I mean, we don't like rejection very much.

Jill Konrath: Nobody likes it.

Daniel Pink: Even the veteran salespeople don't like it. I mean, you and I have written books and we're used to getting criticized every once in a while, and it's part of the game. And, I still don't like it. I don't lose any sleep over it, but I still don't like it. Some idiot gave me a one star review and he clearly hadn't read the book. And I'm like, "Come on."

A lot of times rejection feels like a catastrophe and this explanation can de-catastrophize that feeling. It can de-catastrophize that failure by saying honestly, "Maybe he didn't buy, not because I'm an idiot, but because the company is going to go out of business or he has a brother-in-law who's a vendor."

All right. So, it's not all my fault. It doesn't always happen.

So this explanatory style ends up being a way to maintain your buoyancy on that "ocean of rejection."

Jill Konrath: I think that's a really good place to end. We've talked about what makes a salesperson successful today and how it's critical to serving customers today with valuable information. But another big part of being a successful salesperson is attitude, and how you feel about what you're doing. That's something that's hard to maintain in a field where you do have that "ocean of rejection." So, thank you.

Daniel Pink: Absolutely.

Jill Konrath: Thank you so much for sharing just some of the excellent information that's in your new book, To Sell Us Human. Which I'm delighted you wrote and have shown us that it's OK to be in sales. If Daniel Pink says it's OK to be in sales, it's got to be OK.

Daniel Pink: Of course. But I do mean that, as an outsider, I have a new respect for the difficulty and the degree of intellectual firepower needed in sales. I think a lot of civilians don't realize that. I have an absolutely new respect and appreciation for it.

Jill Konrath: Thanks for taking your time to share all these valuable insights. I really appreciate it.

Daniel Pink: My pleasure, Jill. Great talking to you.

Jill Konrath: Yeah, you, too. Thanks.