

THE TWENTIES

ROBERT BENCHLEY on SALESMANSHIP

“How to Sell Goods,” *New York World*, May 10, 1920

One of the foremost humorists of the 1920s-1940s, Robert Benchley often dedicated his columns to witty commentary on recent books and plays.

The Retail Merchants’ Association ought to buy up all the copies of *Elements of Retail Salesmanship* by Paul Westley Ivey (Macmillan), and not let a single one get into the hands of a customer, for once the buying public reads what is written there the game is up. It tells all about how to sell goods to people, how to appeal to their weaknesses, how to exert subtle influences which will win them over in spite of themselves. Houdini might as well issue a pamphlet giving in detail his methods of escape as for the merchants of this country to let this book remain in circulation.

The art of salesmanship is founded, according to Mr. Ivey, on, first, a thorough knowledge of the goods which are to be sold, and second, a knowledge of the customer. By knowing the customer you know what line of argument will most appeal to him. There are several lines in popular use. First is the appeal to the instinct of self-preservation—i.e., social self-preservation. The customer is made to feel that in order to preserve her social standing she must buy the article in question. “She must be made to feel what a disparaged social self would mean to her mental comfort.”

It is reassuring to know that it is a recognized ruse on the part of the salesman to intimate that unless you buy a particular article you will have to totter through life branded as the arch-piker [tightwad]. I have always taken this attitude of the clerks perfectly seriously. In fact, I have worried quite a bit about it.

In the store where I am allowed to buy my clothes it is quite the thing among the salesmen to see which one of them can degrade me most. They intimate that, while they have no legal means of refusing to sell their goods to me, it really would be much more in keeping with things if I were to take the few pennies that I have at my disposal and run around the corner to some little haberdashery [men’s clothing store] for my shirts and ties. Every time I come out from that store I feel like Ethel Barrymore in *Déclassée*. Much worse, in fact, for I haven’t any good looks to fall back upon.

But now that I know the clerks are simply acting all that scorn in an attempt to appeal to my instinct for the preservation of my social self, I can face them without flinching. When that pompous old boy with the sandy mustache who has always looked upon me as a member of the degenerate Juke family tries to tell me that if I don’t take the five-dollar cravat [tie] he won’t be responsible for the way in which decent people will receive me when I go out on the street, I will reach across the counter and playfully pull his own necktie out from his waistcoat and scream, “I know you, you old rascal! You got that



Déclassée: 1919 Broadway drama about an upper-class Englishwoman who loses social rank (becomes “unclassed”) after divorcing her titled husband

Juke family: New York family studied in the late 19th century by a sociologist researching the potential genetic basis of criminality and pauperism

stuff from page 68 of *Retail Salesmanship* (Macmillan).

Other traits which a salesperson may appeal to in the customer are: Vanity, parental pride, greed, imitation, curiosity and selfishness. One really gets in touch with a lot of nice people in this work and can bring out the very best that is in them.

Customers are divided into groups indicative of temperament. There is first the Impulsive or Nervous Customer. She is easily recognized because she walks into the store in "a quick, sometimes jerky manner. Her eyes are keen-looking; her expression is intense, oftentimes appearing strained." She must be approached promptly, according to the book, and what she desires must be quickly ascertained. Since these are the rules for selling to people who enter the store in this manner, it might be well, no matter how lethargic you may be by nature, to assume the appearance of the Impulsive or Nervous Customer as soon as you enter the store, adopting a quick, even jerky manner and making your eyes as keen-looking as possible, with an intense expression, oftentimes appearing strained. Then the clerk will size you up as type No. 1 and will approach you promptly. After she has quickly filled your order you may drop the impulsive pose and assume your natural, slow manner again, whereupon the clerk will doubtless be highly amused at having been so cleverly fooled into giving quick service.

The opposite type is known as the Deliberate Customer. She walks slowly and in a dignified manner. Her facial expression is calm and poised. "Gestures are uncommon, but if existing tend to be slow and inconspicuous." She can wait.

Then there is the Vacillating or Indecisive Customer, the Confident or Decisive Customer (this one should be treated with subtle flattery and agreement with all her views), the Talkative or Friendly Customer, and the Silent or Indifferent one. All these have their little weaknesses, and the perfect salesperson will learn to know these and play to them.

There seems to be only one thing left for the customer to do in order to meet this concerted attack upon his personality. That is, to hire some expert like Mr. Ivey to study the different types of sales men and women and formulate methods of meeting their offensive. Thus, if I am of the type designated as the Vacillating or Indecisive Customer, I ought to know what to do when confronted by a salesman of the Aristocratic, Scornful type, so that I may not be bulldozed into buying something I do not want.

If I could only find such a book of instructions I would go tomorrow and order a black cotton engineer's shirt from that sandy-mustached salesman and bawl him out if he raised his eyebrows. But not having the book, I shall go in and, without a murmur, buy a \$3 silk shirt for \$18 and slink out feeling that if I had been any kind of sport at all I would also have bought that cork helmet in the showcase.

