

Ian Altman

The Dynamics of Success

After knocking on three different doors and having three successful experiences, eleven-year-old Ian Altman was feeling elated. His baseball team had given each player a set of raffle tickets to sell that included coupons for \$1 off every \$2 dollars spent at a popular local pizza place. The prize for most tickets sold was a new bike, and Ian was determined. It was his first attempt at sales, and after being greeted warmly by the first several houses he tried, his confidence was soaring.

When the door of the fourth house opened, he gave his winning smile and began presenting his objectives, when he was abruptly cut off. “We don’t want any!” the man in the doorframe grumbled, promptly slamming the door in Ian’s face.

Shock and the sting of rejection swept over him in equal parts, and he ran home in tears, swearing off the contest and giving up on his dream of winning the bike. His mother, however, lent some constructive comfort. Pointing out that three of the four attempts had been successful, she asked him to take a step back from the effect to examine the cause. “Why do you think those people didn’t buy it?” she asked. “Maybe they don’t eat pizza. If they don’t, it wouldn’t make sense for them.”

It was the first time Ian had taken a critical lens to the science and art of sales. He began selling raffle tickets again, but more thoughtfully. Then, several days later, he was walking past the house that had broken his spirit that first day, when he noticed several pizza boxes in their trashcan.

Facing his fear, he marched up to the door and knocked. A woman answered, and he tried a different approach. “I noticed you have pizza boxes outside,” he said. “With each raffle ticket you buy to support the baseball league, you get a coupon you can use to get two dollars off for each

one dollar ticket. One of the other neighbors said they’d be a fool not to buy a bunch of them, unless they didn’t eat pizza. So how many would you like?”

As the woman handed him a \$20 bill to buy a book of twenty tickets, Ian understood that selling is so much more than making an ask and hoping for a positive outcome—it’s about tapping into why something matters to a person. “Making that connection was key for me, and it’s stuck with me ever since,” Ian says today. Now the founder,

President, and CEO of Grow My Revenue, LLC, he has built a career out of reconstituting the seller-buyer relationship and re-conceptualizing of what it means to enrich another’s life through sales. “I work with people to help them step back and say, ‘What’s the biggest problem people face that I’m good at solving?’” he explains. “By taking this approach, you never feel like you’re selling—you’re providing a much-needed service to people. Through a focus on perspective and attitude, we improve the buyer-seller dynamic, leading to real and sustainable success for our clients.”

Ian launched Grow My Revenue, a consulting firm specializing in helping clients target and win business by tackling their toughest sales challenges, in 2010. In this capacity, he ensures his clients focus on the right strategic accounts for growth, and that they understand how people make purchasing decisions. He helps clients frame themselves not as salespeople, but as trusted advisors. Many of these tenets are reflected in his first book, published in 2012 and titled *Upside Down Selling: An Integrity-Based Sales Approach to Avoid Being Predictable*. Aimed at helping leaders engage their non-sales employees in the growth of their business, he drew on case studies of companies that doubled their growth rate by pursuing 40 percent fewer opportunities while strengthening their sales team. “Integral to



our philosophy is the idea of working smarter, not harder," he points out. "If a client has a great product or service, the key to revenue growth is oftentimes just getting that message out to the right people."

Today, Ian works on strategic growth initiatives with a maximum of six companies per quarter. He aims to impart new skills and evolve clients to a state of independence within two quarters—the general timeframe for results to become evident. Seeing best results in the business/professional services and technology sectors, he notes that the client must be willing to put in the work to change. "It has to be a priority for them," he says. "Adding value is important to me, and if I'm not confident we can achieve results, then I don't want to be involved. The simple lesson is that if you're selling to a market that doesn't see the value in what you do, go sell somewhere else. Helping clients do that is my life's calling, and it's a practice I live by myself."

Thanks to his integrity- and outcomes-based approach to business, Ian is invited to deliver keynote addresses all over the globe. He works with CEO coaching organizations like Vistage International, and with leadership groups like the Entrepreneurs' Organization. He's a seasoned speaker, at home before crowds of 20 or 2,000, and hosts workshops for companies hoping to shorten their sales cycles or shift the focus of their customers from price to value. To supplement these efforts, Ian partners with other highly respected experts to host the Remarkable Growth Experience twice a year, limiting attendance to a hundred people. "We call it an 'experience' instead of calling it an 'event' or 'conference.' Eighty-six percent of attendees report that it's the single best event they've ever attended," he says. "We get emails to secure spots even before we've announced the time or place of the event. It's great that we've been able to team up with the right people and deliver an experience that's so effective."

Effective design and sales was a cornerstone of his childhood growing up in Southern California as the youngest of four. His father ran manufacturing in the garment industry, managing huge factories for companies like White Stag, as well as more refined women's boutique operations. "My mother had the tougher job in raising all of us," he laughs. "On top of that, she volunteered for everything, serving as President of

the Homeowners Association and the PTA. I ended up inheriting that gene from her—I always join organizations intending to be a member, but invariably taking on leadership roles."

As a boy, Ian was a natural attention magnet, so much so that he caught the eye of a child talent manager while out to dinner with his family when he was eight years old. When the woman came over and told his parents he would be great as a child actor, Ian thought she meant 'acrobat.' "I thought, how cool will this be!" he laughs. "When we went in for the first interview, I remember thinking, 'Where's the trapeze?'"

Ian soon became a seasoned pro, acting in over fifty commercials for national companies like Mattel Toys and McDonalds, and even winning several parts for television and film. He'd land one gig for every five auditions—an exceptional hit ratio for the industry, but a healthy lesson in hard work and rejection for a young boy. On the days he had to miss school for acting, a tutor was provided on-set to make sure he kept up with his studies. All the while, he played sports and lived a normal childhood in the San Fernando Valley of Los Angeles.

Ian retired from acting at age 15 and invested his time in starting a band during his junior year of high school. They sent demo tapes to studios all over town, and as he was graduating from high school, they received word that one label wanted to have them record some songs in the studio and potentially sign them. "I turned it down, though, because I was heading to college and saw music as a hobby, not a career. Who knows?" he says. "Acting and music were fun, but they weren't what I wanted to do professionally." Rather, Ian wanted to become a doctor. When he started college at UC San Diego, he jumped on the premed track but found that he hated chemistry. He asked the guidance counselor how much chemistry he would have to take between then and completing medical school. The counselor said, "All of it." Ian replied, "What other majors do you have?" He graduated with a degree in Quantitative Economics and Decision Science.

Ian wanted to stay involved in baseball in college, but he had torn his rotator cuff, so playing wasn't an option. Taking the opportunity to reconstitute the possible, he teamed up with a physical education teacher at the university who taught umpiring, and who showed Ian that anything is possible—you just have to figure out

how to do it. "I learned that the umpire organization in San Diego produces more major league umpires than any other North American association, by a landslide," he says. "I learned how to umpire, which in some ways is about resilience, given that it's a relatively thankless role. But I really enjoyed it, being in college and umpiring Division 1 college baseball. Because of my age, I had to get approval from both teams before each game, and there I was—umpiring alongside college kids my own age."

Ian was told time and again that he should go pro, but he remained resolutely focused on developing a more stable, long-term profession. The summer after his freshman year, he got a job as an assistant selling microfilm services to law firms. He saw tremendous flaws in the sales approach of his superior, so he sought permission to try again with prospects that had previously said no. He ended up reversing a large number of previous rejections, and by the end of the summer, the CEO named him the Western Area Director.

Ian had achieved a nearly perfect GPA his freshman year, but his focus shifted dramatically as he sought to pragmatically balance academics with his new position. He was fully engaged in classes like Decision Theory, which he saw tremendous value in, but then flippantly dismissive about others like Labor Economics, which seemed to be based on unfounded and nonsensical assumptions. Oftentimes, he would ace the first midterm and then check out for the rest of the semester, averaging out to a C. "I was audacious enough to ask professors to set up alternate times for me to take tests if I had prior work engagements, like a trade show in Chicago," he recalls. "As if that wasn't a big ask! But there were benefits for the educators as well. They wanted to see if their material actually applied to the real world, so I'd do internships with them and put it into practice in the workplace. Bridging that gap between academia and real world business environments in that way was invaluable."

When Ian finished with school, he continued his professional stint with the same company, helping to design software that could perform character recognition from scanned document images. He was surpassing his performance plan, yet the company itself was faltering, and when the owner said they'd have to reduce his compensation, he decided to leave the company. When a partnering firm from

Washington, D.C. heard of the change, they promptly contacted Ian to hire him as a consultant for a trade show, and then brought him in to meet with the CEO for an interview. When Ian laid out his salary demands, the CEO pointed out that that was a lot for someone his age. "When you decided to hire me for the trade show, I'm sure my age never entered the conversation," Ian said boldly. "Either this makes sense, or it doesn't."

The company decided it did, in fact, make sense, and Ian landed the position and the salary he deemed appropriate. He worked there for several years before leaving in 1993 to start his first company, ITM Associates. Focused on applying technology to solve business challenges, the company was fairly novel at the time. Their first client was one of the top pharmaceutical companies in the world, who was looking for ways to speed up FDA approval of new drugs. "All the other firms vying for the project were focused on finding ways to force the FDA to change," Ian explains. "Instead, we asked the company how long it took them to get their own documents to the FDA. It turned out there was considerable lag time on their end as well—about a year. We proposed that the company focus resources to shorten its own review time, providing a basis to convince FDA reviewers that it would make their time more efficient as well."

Ian's approach succeeded in saving the company an average of 23 review days per submission, and at 11 submissions per year, the value added translated to a quarter of a billion dollars in annual savings for the pharmaceutical company. That victory drew the attention of major insurance companies and other new clients, and by 1998, ITM was named a "Fast 50" company in the Washington, D.C. area by Washington Technology. They created a software solution that engendered its own company, and both businesses were sold to an investment banking group, BTI, in 2005. Ian was asked to stay on and run the enterprise, raising the value of the 4 million privately-held outstanding shares from \$25 per share to \$500 in just over three years. The company grew from \$100 million to \$2 billion in value and underwent an international expansion to twelve countries, including China and India. "I was flying 175,000 miles a year doing joint ventures all over the world, meeting with the Secretary of State in one country or the Secretary of Interior in another," he remembers. "They were all just clients

with a need, from anti-counterfeiting to fraud prevention.”

Through it all, his wife, Deborah, was the rock of the family. The two had met seven years out of college, and her pragmatic and grounded approach to life was a perfect balance to his passion for growing businesses. As he flew around the world building a company, she handled the day-to-day of raising their children and keeping the household intact while balancing her career in physical therapy. “She’s a source of calm and support for me, and she’s amazing with our kids,” Ian avows. “She has all the patience in the world and doesn’t take things too seriously. I’m really lucky to have her.”

Ian remembers fondly the power players he worked with and the incredible individuals he had the opportunity to lead and support, but by 2008, he felt he was no longer building something—just going through the motions. With that, he left the company and assumed the presidency of a country club, allowing him to play golf and spend quality time with his family while doing pro bono consulting work for struggling businesses. He was ultimately named one of the top 21 country club presidents in the world by *Boardroom Magazine* and was hailed for his transformative leadership, but to him, it was more about building something. “My focus was on creating memories for my family and thinking about what I wanted to do next,” he recalls. “I didn’t want to rush into anything. Then, I realized that, whenever someone came to me with a business challenge, I was inclined to drop whatever I was doing to help them achieve a state of growth. It was what I truly loved to do—things that many people view as challenging, but I view as easy and fun. With that, I started Grow My Revenue and began helping people translate their companies into beacons that truly capture their ideal clients’ attention.”

In advising young people entering the working world today, Ian highlights the importance pursuing work because it’s one’s passion, and not due to the pressure of others. “If you thoroughly enjoy your work, it won’t feel like work,” he says. “Learn from people who do it well, and never do something that doesn’t resonate with your own sense of integrity. And, in interviews,

ask about the characteristics that make people succeed or fail in the position under consideration, and whether the interviewer thinks you have those skills. That method of engagement is sure to set you apart.”

The suggestion, a microcosm of his business and life philosophy as whole, shows how taking the time to redraw the lines of any given situation can transform the dynamics at hand, leading to more genuine connections and more successful outcomes. The idea is a central point in his most recent book, *Same Side Selling: A Radical Approach to Break Through Sales Barriers*. By re-conceptualizing of the line between buyer and seller, the approach turns confrontation into cooperation and seats people on the same side of the table, instead of across from one another. “If you push, you create resistance,” he says. “If you create interest and then give space, the right people will come to you. In many ways, sales is the purest form of leadership—it’s about trusting and respecting people, feeling the energy of a room or organization, communicating it, building consensus, and getting people aligned on a common vision. In business, in family, and in life, so many of the challenges we face can be overcome through an attitude flip, a perspective rotation, and a slight but profound adjustment to the dynamics at work.”

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