

THE FRENCH CANNOT SELL

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Accessible Intelligence for the French-American Business Mind and Soul

I was stunned to read that Machiavelli had us already figured out in 1510 when he wrote, "The French cannot sell". How much have we, the French, truly evolved since then?

Let's make sure we agree on the term: I'm not talking about an old-fashioned view of sales, telling people how wonderful our goods and services are until they can't take it anymore and give in. I'm talking about presenting ourselves every day in ways that influence the decisions of others.

You're in job search mode? Definitely consultative sales. Networking? Yep. Dating? You bet. Changing careers, running a business, launching a startup? Even more so. Managing and leading others? Absolutely, and you're selling yourself and your ideas down to your team, across to your stakeholders, and upward to your boss and more.

So how did we, the French, get to be so challenged at selling our stuff and ourselves?

1. We were brought up to think we're never enough: if you were raised in France, you know that getting of grade of 18/20 never felt quite like the A+ your American counterparts got for a great job. And if you "only" got into the 3rd, or the 10th, or the 30th best school or university in your field after high school, your destiny was set in stone. You could have been great, you could have been in the "elite" but you did not make the cut. You've got A- or B written all over you, and that A- or B may actually determine your salary grid for the rest of your life...

And it gets better. Even if you *did* make it into the #1 school in your field, you were never as cool as *those* students in the same #1 school who got picked up by discreetly wealthy parents with a "nom à particule".

No one will ever blame France for making it easy for people to feel like winners.

2. We were brought up to think we're superior: best food, best fashion, best women, best culture, best engineers, best art, best wine, best education... Seriously? It is so easy to think we're the best when we don't compare ourselves to others. Most people these days are more curious about New Zealand wine than they are about French wine. I'm always amused when French people describe French education as being "the best in the world". Did they actually send their kids to schools in *other* developed countries for comparison? Did they notice the Dutch kids at the beach last summer all speaking English without a detectable accent? And they're 11 years old, and they never even had homework until they were 10... Did they read the widely respected and publicized statistics from the EOCD ranking France's education at 24th out of 65 countries? Behind Estonia, the Czech Republic, Slovenia and New Zealand? Yes, including in math. I know, it hurts me too.

What is even more perverse is that being French allows us to be part of an exclusive club, the club of people who get to feel both "individually never enough" and "collectively superior" all at the same time. A cocktail sure to alienate most potential customers, investors, or employers, any time, and anywhere.

Why would this alienate them? Because most customers, investors or interviewers outside of France, and certainly in the US, are looking for confidence, partnership and solutions, not inadequacy mixed with superiority and intellectual brilliance.

3. We're too smart: I mean it. "La thèse, l'anti-thèse, la synthèse" about "The end of Theater as we know it", "La Raison ou la Passion" (in "Terminale S"!) and "Comparing Molière and Rousseau" trained us to analyze problems as if most problems were *intellectual* exercises. Few people can beat us at pointing out flaws in other people's reasoning and detecting glasses half-empty everywhere.

The only difficulty is that in the real world, particularly in the business world, most people have *real* problems, not intellectual dilemmas. And people with real problems will not hire us, invest in us, or buy our services unless they are convinced that we will solve their problems, preferably in the most efficient way rather than the most brilliant way. I know, it is a bit "flat" and lacking in panache at first, but we can get used to it.

4. We're too busy protecting ourselves from failure and from criticism: Maybe growing up in a country where failure is fatal and where we had to be smart, stylish and cultured all at the same time while fending off all these other smart, stylish and cultured people did take a toll after all. And that's not counting the toll taken by critics, rude waiters and strikers.

Being so preoccupied with ourselves can make it hard for us, the French, to really hear what others need from us. I mean to really pay attention to what keeps potential buyers and potential employers up at night. Typical example: a potential employer, or a potential client, mentions during a conversation that one of their challenges is high turnover, but we're so busy managing our inadequacies and superiority that we "forget" to demonstrate precisely how we could be part of the solution. We're champions of lost opportunities.

What to do then?

1. Recognize that you're most likely already good enough. You just need to clarify your strengths and where they can add value. Yes, you may need another degree, but in most cases you don't. These strengths may be quite different from what you've been told, and it takes a while to figure them out. It's just sad to have grown up in a country that makes it so much work to figure out one's strengths. Get started. Get help if you need. You'll be glad you did.

2. Get off the French high horse. We can be proud to be French; there is so much to be proud of. And yet we have a lot to be humble about as well. Yes, we can tie a scarf better than anyone else, and cook, and talk about wine, and about philosophy, and about advanced math. But if you are like most French people working in the US, presentation skills are "not your strength," as Americans so generously put it, and your communication skills may present "development opportunities". These are often worse than we realize. Really.

We all have a lot to learn, all the time. So instead of analyzing and criticizing what others are doing, start doing what you already know you should be doing. You may fail until you get things right; that's okay, you'll be in good company. People will actually pick you up when you fall and help you get back on if you're not on your French high horse. Just a regular size horse is plenty.

3. Become accessible. Sure, we will always be smart, and cultured, and sophisticated. It's just that people have to actually understand what we do and where we add value to be able to buy our goods and services, to invest in our ideas, or to hire us. *You* know what you do, and if you're really good at your craft, your *peers* know how good you are. But most of our clients, investors or potential employers won't understand unless we speak in *their* language about *their* preoccupations. Easier said than done. Tell more stories about your recent projects so others can relate. Be a real person. People actually like real people in the US.

4. Bounce back quickly and learn all the time. There are no failures, really, just lessons. So you did not get hired for that position? Pick up the phone and show that you paid attention: "I really heard in our interview that you wanted someone with a slightly different profile from mine. At the same time, you mentioned that you would soon be launching a campaign using this software I'm particularly experienced with. Would I be a better fit for this type of position? If so, who would you recommend that I speak with about this?"

You did not close that sale? Ask them why and take it in. There is always another time.

Most Americans are open to giving and receiving feedback and they really value those who learn and adapt quickly. Failing is not the problem in the U.S.; it's FAILING TO LEARN FROM FAILURE that gets us in trouble.

And learning from our failures, my French friends, is a skill we can all master.

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