

WHAT YOU SEE IS WHAT YOU GET

MY AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Alan Sugar

In Weald Square, the flats opposite ours, lived Manny Phillips, one of my brother Derek's pals. Manny's family was more well-to-do; they had quite a good business selling things in the markets. During the summer holidays I'd go with Manny to Oxford market and Chelmsford market, as well as Ridley Road, Dalston. Manny sold foam rubber bits and pieces which people would buy to make cushions. I'd help him load up the stall with the stuff, wrap it up for the customers and generally run back and forth to the café for him during the day. It was at Chelmsford where I first experienced the amazing salesmanship of some of these stall holders. The man on the stall next to Manny's sold towels and bedding and he attracted a crowd of people by piling his items one on top of another, creating a perception of value-for-money. He'd start his patter by letting the crowd know the high prices of these items in the shops.

I was fascinated by his spiel. 'There you are, two big bath towels, three hand towels, four flannels, five pillow cases, three sets of sheets. I'll throw in two pillows and, wait for it, a wonderful full-size blanket. Now, the lady over there – put your hand down, love – I don't want twenty-five pounds, forget twenty pounds, forget fifteen, don't even think about ten. The lady over there – put your money away, dear. Now, I want five – hands up – five pounds the lot.'

One day he was making his pitch, he had the audience all teed up, and just as he reached the crescendo and was about to announce the final punchline – I don't know what possessed me – suddenly I blurted it out. If looks could kill, I'd have been stone dead there and then.

When the crowd dispersed he got hold of Manny and started shouting at him. 'What is this kid doing? Is he mad? Is he crazy? Tell him to shut up.'

I really got it in the neck from the guy and Manny. Mind you, Manny should have known I couldn't be relied on to keep quiet. When my brother and sisters came over on Friday nights for dinner, they'd inevitably end up playing cards and Manny would sometimes be in the card school. They'd play for pennies or shillings, but took it very seriously. I used to sit there watching studiously and sometimes I'd say something that disclosed one of the player's tactics. I'd quickly be told to keep my mouth shut.

Around Christmas time I worked with Manny and his father in Ridley Road market. At that time of year they changed their wares. They put their foam rubber into storage and decked out the stall with toys: dolls, Meccano sets, children's cars and prams, and so on.

Mr Phillips, Manny's father, was quite a tough person. I recall one day watching him sell a very large doll which came in a presentation box. I don't remember the exact price, but let's say it was £3. Shortly after he sold it, a lady came up to the stall and asked me how much the same doll was.

'Three pounds,' I said immediately.

Sharp as a needle, Mr Phillips jumped in. ‘What are you talking about, you idiot – it’s much more than three pounds.’

He then turned to the lady. ‘I’m sorry, dear, he’s made a terrible mistake – it’s not three pounds, it’s much more than that. I’m sorry, love.’

I was dumbfounded. Had I made a giant error? I didn’t think so.

Mr Phillips continued: ‘Okay, dear – look, we’re honest traders down here. This stupid boy offered it to you for three pounds – what can I do? I’m gonna have to stick to it. Okay, love, you can have it for three quid if you want.’

The lady obviously felt she had a bargain. Meanwhile, I was still standing there gobsmacked.

When the lady had parted with her money and taken the doll, I said to Mr Phillips, ‘I’m sorry I made a mistake.’

You would have thought he’d say, ‘Don’t worry, kid, I didn’t mean it – I know you didn’t make a mistake. I was just using a bit of salesmanship.’ But instead, he said, ‘Well, you’re not getting paid today – forget it.’

‘What are you talking about?’ I complained. ‘I saw you sell that doll for three pounds no more than an hour ago. I thought I was doing the right thing.’

‘No, you didn’t. No, you didn’t.’ And he smiled and walked away.

Being only twelve, I genuinely believed I wasn’t going to get paid that day. On the way home in the van, Manny and his father continued the charade and I was nearly in tears.

When we arrived back at the flats, they said, ‘Here’s your money – we were only joking.’ Bastards.

This was one of life’s lessons. The joke was cruel, of course, but at the same time I understood how astute Mr Phillips had been, making that customer feel she’d got a bargain.

Back to the man in Chelmsford market. Let me tell you, he is no different from the suited and booted executive with a fancy PowerPoint presentation, trying to sell Rolls-Royce engines to Boeing. The commodity may be different, the environment may be different, but the presentation and selling skills are exactly the same – and don’t let anyone tell you otherwise.