

He's the Cold Call King But Chuck Piola has HOT Tips for Business, Life

The Herald Star, Steubenville, OH, April 2007

By: Paul Giannamore

Steubenville—Your knees shake. Your mouth goes dry. Your thoughts reel. And you've got 30 seconds to capture the attention of a sales prospect and try to turn him into a customer.

That's the experience of cold calling, a character-building lifelong learning experience—and earning experience for the successful.

The most successful at cold-call selling would include Chuck Piola, dubbed "King of the Cold Call" by Inc. Magazine, who spoke to business students Tuesday afternoon at the Franciscan University of Steubenville's St. Joseph Center.

Piola delivered a monologue of experience, wisdom and wit, honed after being a junior high school teacher for seven years and then more than 20 years as a cold-call salesman. He and partner Michael Barrist grew NCO Financial Systems from a small collection agency into an international firm with more than 80,000 clients and more than \$700 million in annual revenues before the company went public and Piola retired in January of 2000.

Cold-call selling, where a salesperson stops by the office unannounced and without an appointment and tries to market a product or service is a lost art in today's e-mail, telecommunications, keycard protected world.

But Piola has found success beyond belief of many salespeople and experts, and he worked to impart some of his life experience on the undergraduates.

face-to-face communication with a stranger is not the way of the world today because it involves potential confrontation, which also explains why some brilliant students can't do well on tests.

He said it's the way confrontation drives down self-esteem, which stymies mental ability.

Though he makes it look easy, with a personality that brings the listener immediately into his presentation, Piola said life wasn't always about big income.

"I stuttered for 10 years, and I have attention deficit disorder. It destroyed me in school," he said. "You reach a point in life where you re-evaluate. The world is a phenomenal place. If you believe you were made in the image of God, then you have a job to enjoy it.

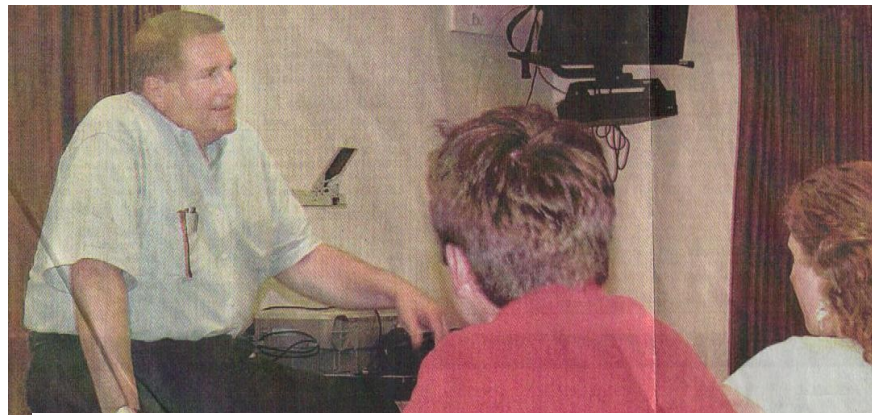
"You're not enjoying it if you're stuttering. It reached a point where I said, 'Enough is enough.'"

Piola said he worked through his stuttering and became a teacher after being part of the third graduating class of Sacred Heart University, back in 1969.

The sense one gets from talking to Piola is that all of life is a learning experience that can be applied to any situation.

For instance, in his book, "Going in Cold," he describes making a tough sale on his first job as a salesman for space on phone book covers in Bristol, Conn.

The prospect fought off Piola's presentation by saying he was buying local TV ads on "The Tonight Show" when Johnny Carson was host.



Chuck Piola, a nationally recognized business speaker and author, addresses students at Franciscan University of Steubenville

The ads ran, he said, right after Carson's popular monologue, so they were in the perfect spot.

Piola had data showing a spike in water usage right around the time Carson's monologue ended every night, indicating people were going to the bathroom and heading to bed.

"Nobody's seeing your ads," Piola said. He never finished his presentation, but the man bought a double ad space.

He loved teaching, and by all indications in the classroom Tuesday, he was the kind of teacher kids enjoy learning from. His school gave him an appreciation dinner when he quit. He left education, he said, not because he wanted to, but because he couldn't support his family on the income.

He wound up seeking employment as a salesman for about a year when he answered a classified ad for salespeople for the phone book covers. Anyone who walked in pretty much was hired and most left. Piola survived at the job.

His message wasn't lost on the Franciscan business students, as they asked question after question about applying his techniques and learning them. Under the questions seemed a tone: How do we transition into life after college?

Piola answered the undercurrent in a variety of ways.

He emphasized that people need a statement of purpose for their lives, to list what they stand for.

And, he said, "Just have fun. Your generation does not know how to have fun. There is organized baseball and organized football and organized soccer and the parents are involved in everything instead of letting you just go out and play."

He also used a quote from the Rev. Robert H. Schuller: "I didn't know how

heavy my bags were until I put them down,” to try to get the students to think in different ways about what the statement could mean.

“The educational system teaches you not to take a risk, but you can learn from failures. In school, you cannot fail,” he said.

Attention deficit disorder hasn't been a handicap to Piola. He railed against the drive to put children on medication to keep them under control.

Hearing him describe ADD, it's a gift.

“I see things that people do not see. My creativity is higher. They want to medicate me. They want to homogenize people. I like seeing 21 TV sets in my head at the same time. I can carry on two conversations at the same time,” he said.

During an interview, after class, Piola said he wants young people to think about living their lives, about setting a purpose.

“We don't talk about that. You do get that in a place like this,” he said of Franciscan. “But in general, young people aren't taught to know what they stand for and to live their lives for that.”

He said he tries to teach young people how to confront their fear of change, the same kinds of fears that must be overcome to do well at a cold sales call.

“But I've seen grown men, tough guys, melt just walking in the door,” he said.

Today's society, with organization foisted on children at a young age, adds to that fear, blocking out any chance for true confrontation or a response with creativity.

“There is no space for a kid to be a kid. And Sunday afternoon soccer? Please. Sunday is supposed to be a time for family. Does anybody eat together anymore?” Piola asked.

Part of overcoming fear is to realize that the people on the other side of the door are just people, too, and the worst thing that can happen is that a sale won't be made.

He advocates being aware of all the people around in an office, because any of them could prove to be the one who leads to the decision maker who could buy the product.

And, he says, gatekeepers—secretaries and administrative assistants—are people who deserve to be treated as such. And, remembering their name and using it on future attempts to make a sales call often is just the right overture.

Piola has plied skyscrapers in Philadelphia, starting at the top floor and working his way down, making cold calls and tracking his way across businesses from department to department until the person who could make a decision on buying his collection agency's products was found.

And he opens his calls with a quick confrontation diffuser, right at the gatekeeper's desk.

“I wonder if you could help me out,” Piola says. It diffuses confrontation because people want to help other people and it puts the other person in charge in their mind.

Insight into what makes Piola capable of dealing with the uncertainty of cold calling and daily life can be found in his discussion of his time as a schoolteacher.

He took seventh- and eighth-graders on several field trips a year, to plays, to operas, to the symphony, to the United Nations, to the Capitol and to a TV station. He taught them about the performances or places they would visit before the trips and try to let the children find their place. No disrespect for one another was tolerated.

“I like to pick up the quiet ones and quiet the big mouths,” he said. “I would not let anybody rain on anybody's parade in my class.”

He said he figured he'd have the kids in his classes for two years, so he dubbed his educational style “The Chuck Piola Experience,” playing off rock'n'roller Jimi Hendrix's band name. The result, he hoped, was to present the children with a love of the world, and he rolled American history, music appreciation and English creative writing into a blended curriculum that builds one off another. For instance, to study the American Revolution, students also were exposed to the Russian and French revolutions. Such a study reveals how truly different American ideals were, based on freedom and life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness instead of power and wealth or the lack thereof.

And from that, he would lead into an education on Romantic writings and art, the reflection of those ideals.

But often, education builds people who can't think beyond the textbook, and it shows in business.

“The worst thing from the country is the Harvard MBA,” he said. “They are people with no practical experience who live in a box, who think in a box and who are afraid to leave the box.”

He has taught new salesman by total immersion in techniques, but then they spend a week with him observing how he works a sale. By the end of their week, they fly solo, with Piola in the wings as adviser. His experience with various companies as a salesman taught him what works and what doesn't work, and he said any training is valuable at some point.

While emphasizing the need for education, for reading, for learning always, Piola also is not one for quantifying basic concepts.

For instance, the use of “ethics” as a business buzzword is meaningless to him.

“Don't worry about ethics,” Piola said. “Just do the right thing. That makes you vulnerable sometimes, but more often than not, I came out on top.”

“Just concentrate on doing the right thing. I do not have time to worry about not doing the right thing. I always tried to do the right thing for the customer, for the company and for the guys working for us.”

In talking to the students, the motivation was clear for Piola.

“If we believe God is perfection and I have a piece of that, I have to build on it. It's my gift back to God. Even if it's just a little piece, that's enough for me. If I don't build on that, I'm a screw-up,” he said.