

Book Review Reprint # 52-04

Hard Sell: The Evolution of a Generation X Salesman

By John Mack



I have little in common with Jamie Reidy, the author of the book “Hard Sell: The Evolution of a Viagra Salesman,” which is a tell-a-lot-but-not-all about pharmaceutical sales. I did not graduate from an Ivory League school, nor did I serve as an officer in the army, and I wasn’t born with a silver spoon in my mouth. Pfizer sales people, however, apparently do have a lot in common with the author. Generally,

according to Reidy, they fit a pattern comprised of the “Three M’s”—Military, Minorities, and Mormons. “Pfizer loved its Mormons,” says Reidy who alleges that one-third of Pfizer’s sales force could sing the Brigham Young University fight song. “If you can sell religion door to door in a foreign language you can sell anything,” according to Reidy.

Pfizer also loves its former military officers. Reidy suggests that a benefit to hiring military officers is that they are used to taking orders. Pfizer, like all pharma companies, needs to push its message exactly the way it was intended. “Who better to do that than people who are used to following instructions perfectly?” This attribute, no doubt, was lost on Reidy—an admitted “free thinker.”

Aside from giving outsiders an inside look into the culture of the Pfizer sales organization, the book chronicles Reidy’s “evolution” as a slacker who discovered ingenious ways to cheat the system, which “had more cracks than an old sidewalk.” Basically, he implemented what he claims is “commonly” known as the “T to T” work schedule—Tuesday to Thursday, ten to two. While Pfizer

corporate espoused a traditional work ethic, Reidy contends that it “failed to see” the generational differences that prevented its sales force from achieving lofty work activities.

The Generation X Sales Force

Reidy is a Generation X’er, the cohort born between 1965 and 1980. A UCLA survey of college freshmen cited in the book “Bowling Alone” showed that Generation X’ers—who were freshman in 1990—were much more concerned with achieving wealth than boomers who were freshman in 1970 (see chart). “Greed,” says author Robert D. Putman, “trumps community among college freshman.”

The promise of a high salary, bonuses, expense account, and company car motivated Reidy to interview for the Pfizer sales rep job in the first place. Throughout the book he exhibits other Generation X traits, such as the frequent conversational use of the word “dude” as in “Dude, I need a little favor” and “Dude, pass the Viagra!” He is also frequently at odds with boomers, including his father and managers at Pfizer, especially

when it comes to work ethic and other traditional values of older generations.

Reidy mentioned a Pfizer survey that revealed an “alarm-ing high attrition rate” among reps with 4 to 6 years of service. In contrast to this are the Pfizer Masters — sales reps whose sum of Pfizer service plus age equals at least 65 years and who have tremendous sales success. “Most of the Masters,” quipped Reidy, “still comb their hair the way they did when they first saw Rebel Without a Cause in the movie theater.”

Reidy often compares Pfizer people with characters in TV sitcoms. For example, Reidy thought the HR person who initially interviewed him resembled Nick Tortelli, Carla’s ex-husband in Cheers. Reidy’s own

“...after my twenty years in medicine and having many friends in the pharm. industry, there is nothing in this book that strikes me as not potentially true, and much of it is most certainly true. This will be regarded as perplexing and/or infuriating to many not in the industry and probably quite a few doctors.” -- James J. Hollandsworth, Amazon.com customer reviewer

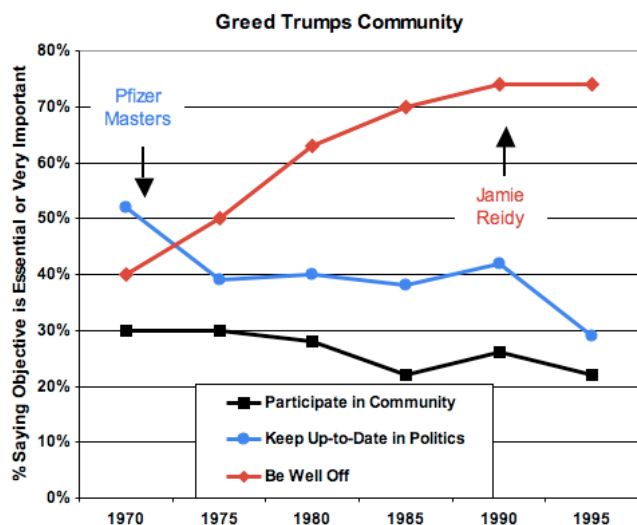


FIGURE 1: This chart represents data from the UCLA college freshman survey and is based on a figure in the book "Bowling Alone." For Generation X'ers like Reidy, being well off was a much more essential objective when they were college freshmen (circa 1990) than it was for Pfizer Masters when they were freshmen (circa 1970).

characterization of himself reminds me of Sargent Bilko, a TV character that predates Generation X.

"...while frequently humorous, most of the book is a summary of how a lazy, dishonest salesperson learned to fool management into thinking he was hard at work while instead at home sleeping or away vacationing abroad, and to misuse drug samples and other "freebies" given out at physician offices. It thus becomes a disappointing insight into some people's integrity and motivation." – Compassionate Conservative, Amazon.com customer reviewer

You're in the Pfizer Army Now

Reidy served in the United States army as a lieutenant for a few years before quitting and joining Pfizer. Throughout the book he piles on numerous comparisons between pharma companies and the army. Pharmaceutical sales districts and regions, of course, are the counterparts of army companies and battalions and sales reps are the troops in the field.

Most of these parallels between pharma and the military have been noted by many other authors. The buildup in pharma sales forces, for example, often has often been likened to an "arms race" and competition between pharma companies has been called "trench warfare." But Reidy has come up with some new ones. "Just as army trainees learn to disassemble and reassemble their M-16 rifles while blindfolded," says Reidy, "we [drug rep trainees]

could turn without hesitation to any page of the visual aid [visual aid] and regurgitate the verbiage we'd been taught."

"Jamie Reidy is the Ferris Bueller of the Pharmaceutical Industry. Like Ferris, he is a modern day anti-hero. We admire him for how hard he works at getting out of work. We root for him, even as we marvel at the lengths he goes to deceive his supervisors. Why? Because Reidy is smart, funny, self-deprecating and self-aware. And he is honest—certainly more honest than the doctors who choose which drug to prescribe based on the length of the drug rep's skirt or the nurses who only provide access to doctors if they are plied with free M&Ms. And more honest than the drug companies who care only about their stock price." – Sam Butterworth, Amazon.com customer reviewer

After reading all these comparisons to the military, I felt that physicians were justified in mounting military-style defenses, such as denying access, to counter the onslaught of pharma sales reps. Another defensive measure, discussed in detail elsewhere in this newsletter (see "Free Gifts to Physicians: What's the Big Deal?"), is the proposed banning of "free gifts" to physicians.

"Rep Creativity" or Questionable Sales Practices?

The really interesting bits of the book, of course, are where Reidy describes the techniques he honed for slacking off as well as for getting the attention of doctors in his territory. Nothing here would probably be new to industry veterans who have "carried the bag." Nevertheless, it is entertaining to read.

Giving gifts or "freebies" to physicians and their office staffs is well-documented by Reidy. The first day on the job, he was confronted with thirty-two cardboard boxes, "each big enough to hide a preschooler." The boxes, of course, did not contain preschoolers—they contained samples, sales materials, and "freebies" like pens, pads, and other promotional items, which Reidy characterizes as industry-wide "brand paranoia."

Reidy mentions other techniques that were commonly used by pharma sales reps to gain access to physicians, including a whole series of Gift-n-Dash programs like "Pizza-n-Dash", "Christmas-Tree-n-Dash" (docs swing by a Christmas tree lot and pick out a tree paid by Pfizer and get detailed as the tree is tied atop their cars), "Flowers-n-dash", "Movies-n-Dash", "Gas-n-Dash", "Turkey-n-Dash", "Manicure-n-Dash", etc. [Actually, I made up that last one. It's fun!]

Continued on next page...

According to Reidy, these “outside-the-box” programs drew the best attendance of any sponsored program. “Unfortunately,” says Reidy, “...there existed a directly proportional relationship between ‘rep creativity’ and the speed with which Pfizer headquarters declared an event illegal. ...headquarters took a while to figure out that it had to ban all such programs at the same time or else reps would invent other ones that had yet to be outlawed.” Eventually, Pfizer did figure it out and it and other pharma members of PhRMA—the industry trade group—implemented guidelines for promotions to physicians that DID ban all such activities.

Free Lunch for All – Except the Docs?

“From the pharmaceutical companies’ perspective,” says Reidy, “free lunches provided salespeople with their best low-cost opportunity to interact with their most important customers, the doctors.” It also was Reidy’s best opportunity to score free dinners from leftovers, which he conveniently engineered by over-ordering a few times a week. It was also good for the physician’s

staff. Unfortunately, as Reidy tells it, “there seemed to be an inversely proportional ratio between a woman’s job importance and her appetite, so the food would occasionally be gone by the time the doctors rolled in.”

Reidy doesn’t come down hard on docs who take advantage of all the freebies, although he does relate a few instances where docs solicited free samples for their own use. He does not spare the office staff from scorn, however. During his Viagra rep era, he claimed that “office staff members were going through Viagra samples at a faster burn rate than a dotcom through start-up cash.”

“This is not about greed abounding and compassion lacking across generation divides. This is simply about greed knowing no bounds and compassion being made irrelevant when your performance is solely judged on how many pills you have sold this week.” – Jane Chin

Pharma Marketing News

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