

## ANNA BRITNOR-GUEST

ISM Companion, founder and growth consultant at Leading Edge Coaching



My first job in sales was knocking on doors making appointments for a burglar alarm company around Cardiff. That funded me through my final year of college. I was good at it and enjoyed it, and that led me towards B2B sales. From friends who'd already graduated I figured out that the land of opportunity was in "computers" – but as a humanities graduate, that was more or less all I knew about IT..

My careers adviser couldn't understand that tech sales was my goal, and told me that to get a job in marketing I might have to bear a stint in sales first... In 1989 I was one of only two successful candidates of over 100 to be recruited onto a graduate sales career programme with global data/electronics company, Harris Corporation. I was young, just 5'3" tall, with big hair, big shoulder pads and big ambitions.

Harris was a perfect grounding. My manager, Peter Howells, was a fantastic mentor who supported me at every stage. By 21, I was out visiting customers on my own – these were senior IT managers in large blue chip companies and public sector councils. They were all older than me and, with only a couple of exceptions, male. And that's where I learnt an important lesson: be good at what you do.

I knew from the doubtful tone with which some of my contacts asked about my level of knowledge, they questioned whether this young, female rep could really be of any value. But when I was able to hold my own in the conversation and got things done, I stood out because I was a bit different. But, of course, you have to be different in a good way.

My most satisfying achievement was becoming top sales performer within about three years of joining – and then staying top. I didn't set out with that goal, but to be the best that I could be. I had a lot of energy and drive. I worked hard, and late when necessary, to make a proposal as good as I could get it, and I assumed all our competitors were sharper, cheaper and better than us so we had to pull out all the stops to win. I worked closely with the support teams, listening to them and supporting them.

I was persistent. I didn't give up the first time a prospect said no to a meeting. I did what I said I'd do, so that colleagues and customers learnt to trust me. I played the long game, putting myself in their shoes, and steadily built relationships in small ways until they were ready to award us the big contracts. And I made sure that I got better at my job. It was a continuous process and for that I learnt another lesson: build support.

In these collaborative days, we talk about support networks. Back then I just saw it as seeking out those people who knew stuff I didn't or could help me do things I couldn't. Some of it's social and I worked in a team – and we were in an era when pub lunches and post-work drinks were common with both colleagues and customers. They were great for getting to know each other and having a laugh. When I or one of my customers needed support it was a lot easier to work together – and I was better able to support my colleagues in return.

Over the time I worked for Harris the division was sold off,

merged and then bought out by management. While each change was unsettling I kept on looking after my customers and winning business, with the result that once the dust settled I found myself promoted or in a stronger position. Those lessons I've described stood me in a good stead.

Fast-forward to 2002 when I set up Leading Edge Coaching. We specialise in helping B2B companies in complex or fast-changing markets, like IT and technical sectors, to grow their revenues and profits. I work in the UK and internationally and have a "roll up my sleeves" approach to helping clients develop the skills, processes and capabilities they need to adapt and grow.

Over the years I've developed a sales methodology that aligns to the customer buying journey. I use this to help clients map their own customer journeys to grow their business. A clear structure that focuses on the customer's journey is essential to identifying and replicating success factors. Often, companies don't have a shared or clear sales methodology in place, which makes it hard for leaders to really know what's going on and for salespeople to learn and repeat what works. I'm excited to be getting our programmes endorsed by the ISM and certified for Brinkerhoff High Performance Learning Journeys.

I gain great satisfaction from making a difference for clients, demonstrating clear growth. If growth were easy they wouldn't need me, so we have to work through and overcome the challenges

they face. It's enormously rewarding to see salespeople flourish in their roles, develop their confidence and skills and go on and up in their careers. Helping that journey is a highlight of why I do this. I also love that I get to operate internationally and have learnt so much from working with different business cultures.

Overall, I've been 30 years in sales, 29 in complex B2B sales. Now, if I were to give advice to those who aspire to a career in sales, I would

simply say, "go for it". The best opportunities for me have come from going with an idea.

I would especially encourage girls and young women to consider the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) sectors. All I ever hear is how difficult it is for women to work in STEM. No wonder so many pick different careers. I want to redress the balance by saying I haven't found it difficult – and maybe you won't either.

And never stop learning. Ask for training, find mentors and coaches, don't be afraid to ask questions, and learn from role models. Above all, put yourself in your customers' shoes and learn from them.

And join the ISM, of course. I joined the ISMM (as it was then) as a Fellow in January 1998, becoming a Companion in February 2013. Professions need a strong, professional body and sales is no exception. As a Companion, I feel the onus is on me to contribute to the ISM as much as to benefit from it. Being a 2018 BESMA judge and having our programmes endorsed by the ISM are really exciting. The world is constantly changing and I am looking forward to the ISM expanding its support for members to share experiences and learn from each other.

I didn't plan my career – most people don't. But I've been open to new things, and I hope I've got another 20 working years of new opportunities to explore. I have left youth, shoulder pads and big hair behind, but I am still 5'3", and still have big ambitions!

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