

Lessons from the front lines

By DAVID GURLIACCI
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Several years ago, Ron Volper, a business consultant who specializes in sales and sales management, started improving his skills as a public speaker, writing more articles and networking in more organizations.

"I joined Toastmasters (International) and I worked hard at being engaging, dramatic and compelling in my speeches," Volper said. "I said the same thing I was saying two years previously, but I said it with a lot more force and humor. That helped me a lot, and I've gotten many more calls from people who were in the audience to come and speak at other events." That, in turn, led to more clients, he said.

Volper, who once taught business writing at a community college and later received a doctorate in communications, also wrote pieces for Nation's Business, Fortune, Accounting Today and other business publications. He appeared a couple of times on CNBC. He and others in his company became more involved in various business groups to network, including The Business Council of Westchester. As a result of all those efforts, he said, the company got more business.

The company has been growing well for a while, but last year was particularly good, with 40 percent growth in annual sales. This year the consultancy has been growing at an annual rate of 25 percent to 30 percent, Volper said. Ron Volper Group has five full-time employees and another six freelancers who do a significant amount of work for it. He would not



Ron Volper, managing partner and owner of Ron Volper Group Inc. in White Plains.

Business Journal photo by BOB ROZYCKI

release revenue figures, but said the company takes in more than \$1 million in annual revenue.

Forty percent growth in the consulting industry last year is "just extraordinary," said Elizabeth Kovacs, president and chief executive officer of Association of Management Consulting Firms, a national association based in New York City that includes sales consulting companies. "I really don't know of any that grew that much in 2004."

For the past several years, growth in the industry has been below double digits, and it's possible growth may exceed 10 percent this year, Kovacs said.

Ron Volper Group's list of clients includes a number of Fortune 500 com-

panies and other well-known businesses, including American Express, AT&T, Bristol-Myers Squibb, Hilton Hotels, Thompson Publishing and Merrill Lynch.

TOP TO BOTTOM

Volper cites several other reasons for his company's success, including providing clients with customized programs, measuring many different aspects of sales and sales practices and comparing them with the consultancy's large database; providing measurable plans so the client can know that the new methods are working; and basing recommendations on Volper's and his staff's deep experience in selling.

Since Ron Volper Group was hired by Epana Inc., a New York City-based company that sells prepaid phone cards, sales have improved, said Eric Raab, Epana's chief technical officer.

"They did a top-to-bottom analysis of our call center operations," Raab said. The consultants came up with a system of incentives for call-center agents and worked with the company to create a plan to increase sales involving many different parts of the company, he said. "They came up with recommendations that were spot on. We implemented a lot of them, and it's been very helpful."

When he managed sales units for Xerox and McGraw Hill, Volper found that his best sales representatives would tend to be far more specific than other sales people when he asked them to describe what they had been doing.

"I made 13 new sales calls. I spoke

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with seven customers." Volper recalled them saying. "I noticed that there was a direct correlation between sales success and sales metrics. They also did a far better job in planning."

LOST MERCEDES

After briefly teaching business writing at a community college in New Jersey, Volper later joined Xerox Learning Systems in Greenwich, Conn., and eventually headed up that division's sales unit for training and consulting. He later ran the sales and marketing unit of McGraw-Hill Training Systems.

In the mid-1980s, he joined Omega Consultants to Management and became the top salesperson there for his first two years. The company gave a Mercedes 190 to the top salesperson, and Volper loved it.

But in his third year, although he sold well, another salesman grabbed the top spot and Volper lost his Mercedes.

He thought and thought about what he might have been doing differently and eventually came to the conclusion that when he initially knew less about the services he was selling, he did more listening to potential customers. Later, when he knew more about the product, he talked too much.

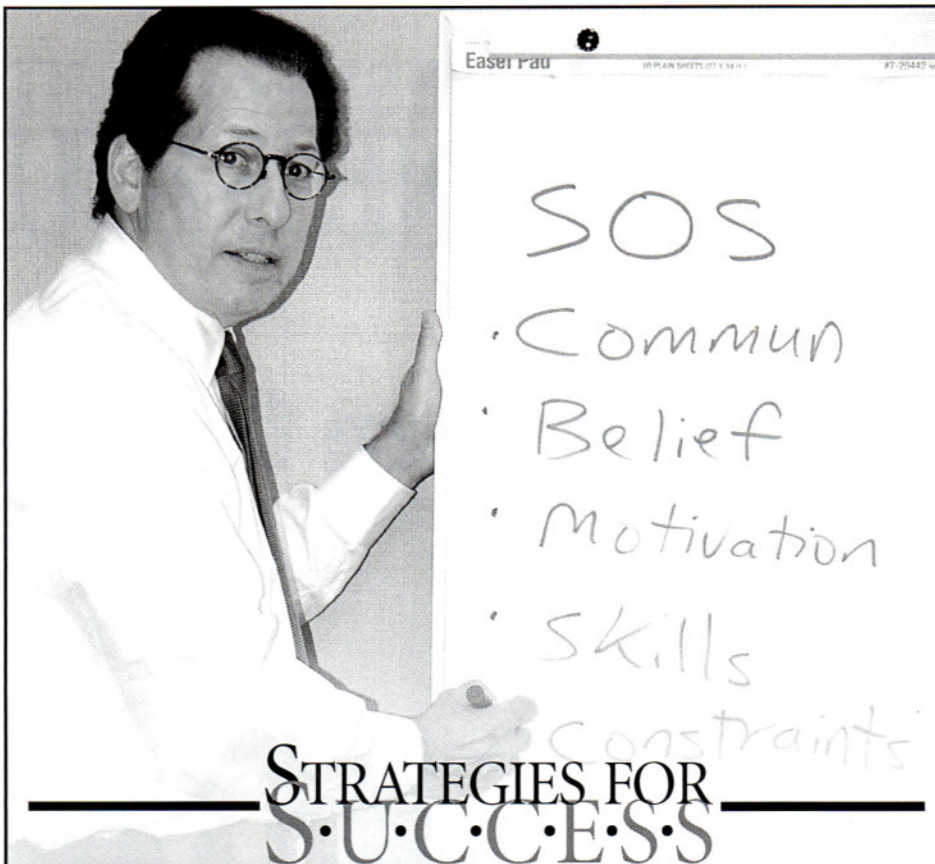
"The biggest mistake salespeople make is they think selling is telling. Selling is not telling," he said. "Selling is understanding the customers' needs and goals and seeing how you can help them to get to where they want to go sooner and more safely. The best sales people talk less and talk later in the conversation with clients, as a generic rule of thumb."

Volper said his thinking about salesmanship was what led him to start his own sales management consulting company in 1984, initially as a one-man operation. It took about three years for him to hire his first employee. Ten years ago he moved the company from New York City to White Plains.

He is now trying to get more customers in the New York metropolitan area because "none of us enjoys being on airplanes."

Over the next several years, he expects to rely more on technology for information collection and storage and staying in touch with clients. He and others in his company also want to give more speeches, write more articles and network more.

"Our industry, like all industries, is intensely competitive," he said. We're not immune from any of the business currents. You can't rest on your laurels. I think that's a key lesson. You always need to be fully engaged in business development."



STRATEGIES FOR S·U·C·C·E·S·S

**RON VOLPER, MANAGING PARTNER AND OWNER,
RON VOLPER GROUP INC., WHITE PLAINS**

Age: 59

Home: Larchmont

Grew up in: Brooklyn

Education: Bachelor's degree in English from Queens College; master's degree in English from Indiana University; doctorate in communications from New York University

Family: wife, Hillary, a psychotherapist; son, Erik, 25; daughter, Mandy, 20

Company Web site: www.ronvolpergroup.com

Best advice he's ever received:

"Follow your gut, trust your gut. I've gotten into trouble when I've tried to suppress it. Trust your instincts. Your body knows."

If he had to do it all over again:

"I would have done the same thing but sooner. I wouldn't have waited as long to start my own business. I think it was the fear."

Recommended reading:

"From Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap ... and Others Don't," by Jim Collins. It's actionable. It gives you a prescription on how to improve your company."

How he unwinds:

"Golf, writing, reading. My wife and two kids and two dogs and our vacation home in the Berkshires."

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