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Get Carter

Do you think you can sell? This is how David Carter started selling: 'I started on £15 per week, plus £3.50 per week for the car and 1½% commission. Using the Buyers Guide, a big directory of office products retailers, I quickly set to work. A typical day would see me getting to Ipswich for 8.30am and working my way home. I'd open an average of six new accounts every day. Within two months the factory couldn't make what I sold. I was good because I was so naive. I didn't make any appointments and I had no brochures. All I had was a sample chair.'

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▶▶▶ slitters. What he didn't know was the reason I was on top of the job was that I went home after a day's work, had my tea, and then came back to set the machinery in the evening for the following day's shift. I said to Ted that I'd got enough to do. He said 'David, go away and think about it – remember I can be a good friend or a bad enemy'.

'Ted, I thought about it,' I said. 'I'm not doing it, and I'm handing in my notice.' I knew he'd be sorry. He lasted four months.

'They asked me to go back, but I wasn't interested. I knew I wasn't getting anywhere on the shop floor. So I decided to be a salesman – succeeding or failing on my own merits.

'I joined Trueform – who made posture chairs. Bill Hoyle (who was well known in the industry in those days) gave me the job because I looked smart and had my own car. I was a young man talking to the owners of the retailers like Margolis, OEP, Wolf and Hollander, Straker Bedser... their Mr Edwards thought Trueform sold shoes, tripped over my chair in reception, but ended up giving me so many orders. People buy from people.

'If you want to sell, sell yourself before trying to sell the product.

'When I was thinking of leaving Trueform to set up Pledge, I told one of my dealers what my idea was. Don Harrison of Hoggs immediately sent me an order to my home for 24 chairs. 'But I'm still at Trueform,' I said to Don, 'I haven't even shown you anything yet – no prices, no product even'.

'I thought the order would make you get off your arse and do it,' said Don.

'As I said – sell yourself before you sell the product. People buy from people – and people like Don supported me.'

We moved our conversation to the here and now and asked David about his plans for the future. 'I've thought about retiring, but I still enjoy what I do. I have to admit the last year or two has seen tough market conditions – I see my priority as keeping the company on an even keel. That means making at least 3,500 chairs every week. I'm proud that we've got four generations of the same family that have worked for me, and I take my responsibilities to those people very seriously.

'Business has changed over the years. For example Public Sector purchasing is more 'one stop shop' these days, which means we still make a lot of chairs for the sector, but trade with others to do it. I like to think the worst of the threat from cheap Chinese imports is over, and I'd like to think people will think more about buying British – particularly as it relates to certifiable sustainable products.

'And there's a few competitors I respect – Boss and Orangebox have done well, for example. The one who has done really well is Colin Mustoe at Senator. As I said, many companies that used to be important have gone now. It appears in this industry, which is mostly privately owned companies, that once the head goes it all goes. Maybe that's all to do with the relationships that I've been talking about.

'As for me, I still talk to some major customers every day. In some cases I'm dealing with the grandchildren of people I first started working with generations ago! But mostly it's not just about me – we've got a good team here. There are probably plenty of accounts that don't even know me!'

You're wrong David. Those people know very well who you are – and just like it always was, and always will be, people buy from people ●