

# THE BIRTH OF A SALESMAN

by George Shaffner



George Shaffner,  
author of  
The Widows of Eden

Editor's Note: *In the novel The Widows of Eden, a salesman comes to a town on the verge of collapse and turns it, as well as the people who live there, around*

When I was a young man, I had the same idea of a salesman that most people have: glad-handing, fast-talking, and about as trustworthy as a snake in a henhouse. It probably wasn't fair to lump them all together like that, but every time I passed a used-car lot, I saw at least one salesman who seemed to fit the mold, all the way up to the oily hair, the gold chain, and the disingenuous smile.

Then, in my midtwenties, I had my general notion of the sales profession turned upside down by none other than the IBM Corporation. They recruited me out of graduate school and promptly sent me to—*gasp!*—sales school. Not only was I afraid that I wouldn't make the grade, but I didn't own a single gold chain.

How little I knew. It turns out that big league sales, where millions of dollars are at stake,

by asking the right questions and listening. We asked George Shaffner how he came to this unique character and his distinctive style.

is as much like selling a used car as making a chocolate soufflé from scratch is like dropping a Pop-Tart into a toaster. IBM taught me that the best salespeople don't talk; they ask good questions and shut up. I was a slow learner, I suspect, but it turned out to be an important lesson on more than one occasion.

Long ago, when "mainframe" computers were the size of semis and cost more than the national debt, my technical sales partner and I were in a fight to the death for a large account in the Midwest. We were the incumbent but we were losing badly, mostly because our mainframe threw off so much heat that it required water cooling and about a zillion dollars' worth of expensive plumbing. In contrast, the competition's was air cooled, meaning that all it required was air, a commodity that was in abundant supply.

One day, my technical part-

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ner and I were hanging out in the computer room at the account, a glass-enclosed area for the mainframe, plus a long line of refrigerator-size tape drives and a cluster of disk drives that were bigger than washing machines. We noticed that the plant engineer was working at a computer terminal in the corner, and he appeared to be in distress. Since we were a curious pair, we sauntered over and asked him what he was doing. It turned out that the plant was about to double in size, and he was trying to figure out how he was going to heat so much additional space.

To make a long story short, our mainframe generated so much heat that it could solve the whole problem, and it could compute to boot. The competition's could only compute, which, in light of the expansion, was a clear disadvantage. We closed the sale soon thereafter, and all because we asked some questions and listened.

Here's another thing I didn't know: It

turns out that being a salesman is a lot like being a Marine or a pilot. Once you are one, you are one, even after you stop making a living at it. When it came time to pick a profession for Vernon Moore, the protagonist of my first novel, *In the Land of Second Chances*, there was never a doubt in my mind. He had to be a salesman. His job, after all, was to sell hope to a spent, hopeless man, and he did it by asking questions and paying attention to the an-

swers. He was called back to Ebb, Nebraska, in *One Part Angel* to sell charity to an angry teenaged felon. In my new book, *The Widows of Eden*, the stakes are higher: Vernon must sell faith to a godless businessman facing his mortality while helping the town through one of the worst droughts in history. Vernon, though, is a master salesman and knows that answers to the big problems come with asking the right questions. The same, it could be said, is true for writers. ■

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