

Chapter Twelve

Alameda Street Store

*“You don’t make your money buying. You make your money selling.
If you’re a good enough salesman,
it doesn’t matter what kind of a buyer you are.”*



OUR NEW WAREHOUSE on Alameda Street was actually in the first strip shopping center ever built in El Paso, right across the street from the old Del Camino Motel. It wasn’t a luxury location. Our landlord was an older Greek/Mexican gentleman named Miguel Papadopolous. His family was from Torreon, Mexico. He was a tough old character. One time, when I was negotiating to rent some additional space, we stood inside the warehouse property and talked about air conditioning.

“I’ll need to have air conditioning in this space,” I told him.

“I will get you air conditioning,” Papadopolous said.

“Well,” I suggested, “Maybe it would be good if we wrote it down in a contract.”

“Write it down!” Papadopolous yelled. “Write it down! I will write it down!” He picked up a pencil and started writing on the wall of the warehouse. “Air conditioning.” Then he turned to me. “What else do you want me to write down?”

We didn’t wash off that wall until he delivered on his promise.



LIKE I SAID, the Alameda Street location wasn't the best neighborhood in town. There was a methadone clinic two doors down, a halfway house for convicts just out of jail across the street, and a pretty big number of transients and junkies who hung around the place. When we first moved into the location, I noticed a group of guys hanging around the front door. I decided it was time to make a point. So I took out my 22 pistol, stepped out of the store, looked up at the telephone line and started blasting away at the pigeons. I think I made my point because we never had any trouble with anybody in all our years at Alameda Street.

In fact, I used to hire them to help unload trucks and clean up around the warehouse. The last thing the halfway house guys wanted was to get in trouble again and the first thing the junkies wanted was a couple of bucks for their next fix. Some were bums, but a lot were decent people who just got a little out of step with society.

AT ALAMEDA STREET, I learned a lot about selling. If you have ever seen a good jewelry salesman, you know there is a certain way they hold the jewelry, a certain way they present it that makes it attractive to the buyer. Taking buyers through the warehouse, I sharpened my skills at presenting the saddleblankets, rugs, and other merchandise. I developed a way of talking, a way of moving my hands, a way of handling the merchandise.

The art here is to come across very politely and never be arrogant in any way. It's the old, "I really wish I could, I really, really do, because you seem like a great salesman and buyer and I think we could work together well..."

Usually, I like to walk a potential buyer through our shipping department to show how much and where we are shipping. I like to say, "Man, I wish you were my buyer. I can see why you are so successful. Your company is really lucky to have you..."

There have only been a few times when I've handled a buyer one-on-one and he has walked away without buying. Through the years, I have

developed a reputation for being fair, very independent and most of all, POLITE. On Alameda Street I learned that a key to making a sale is to make the person you are dealing with feel important. You will never gain anything by putting people down.

I used to deal with a lot of Mexican vendors coming up to the Alameda Street warehouse and selling off their trucks. Making the deal usually followed the same script.

First, I always took a long, slow look at the merchandise. While I looked, I talked politely with the vendor. Most important, I never asked about price before I gave the “sermon.” At the end of the sermon, I told the vendor, “I don’t like to play games. In fact, I won’t play games with you because I think you may be a lot smarter than I am. We both more or less know what the prices are on your merchandise. So here’s what we’ll do. Take your time and quote me the best price and I’ll tell you yes or no.”

If the vendor actually heard and believed what I said, he quoted me a real good price, and I said, “*Hecho*” (done/made). But most of the time, he gave me a bad price and I said, “No, thank you,” and abruptly walk off.

Next, the shocked vendor chased after me saying maybe a better price or something about why his first price was so high. I acted a little offended but not mad and told him that by not first offering me his best price, he had disappointed me by not being honest. Then I started to soften up a little by saying that since he didn’t know me, I could maybe understand why he wasn’t up-front with me. “Look,” I told him. “I tell you what. Go across the street to the Del Camino Motel. Get a room and tell them to charge it to me. Rest a little. I think you had a long hard drive from the interior.” Then jokingly I always said, “You need to let your eyes rest because when you were in line coming over the bridge from Mexico, the reflection of the gold you saw must have hurt your eyes.”

Then I always joked around with him in a very respectful way, adding a little of the jive-boys talk and Spanish slang. I talked silly, refused to discuss the deal and acted like I was trying to say good-bye.

Right before I left, I looked him in the eye for a long time and said dead serious, “OK. If you want to get serious and give me the best price

I will be back in thirty minutes because I have to make a very important phone call.”

Probably about seventy-five percent of the time I made a deal right then. If I didn't, I thanked the vendor and told him that we almost had a deal and the prices were good overall but the price on this, this and this should be X amount. Why doesn't he go along with this and then I'll cut him a check? If not, I told him that next time maybe I could pay the price he asked, but not today. At this point, I got my way ninety-five percent of the time.

I also learned a lot about employees. We never had many until we set up shop at Alameda Street. It was difficult at first to figure out how to train our employees, but eventually we figured it out. Some of the employees who started with us on Alameda Street are still with us today. I guess we're doing something right.

NOW, I'VE DONE a bunch of dumb things in my life but I have done a few smart things too. And, I must admit, one of the best things I've done was to figure out how to fix a problem I was having with my weavers in Juárez.

I have been dealing with weavers for a lifetime. Weavers are strange people. They have a kind of blue-collar mentality combined with the emotions and sensitivity of an artist. And to add to that, most of the weavers that I work with in Juárez are “cholo” types: long haired, tattooed, street smart, tough guys. You go into their workshop and there's heavy metal music playing.

Anyway, for years we had a problem with yarn. The weavers were all stealing yarn. They made sweaters with it or sold it or whatever. For years and years I told them, “Look, you can steal some yarn but don't be stealing over your quota or we're gonna have to fire you or do something about it.”

My threats didn't do much good, and I wrassled with the problem for years. Then one day I came up with a plan. I decided to sell the weavers yarn at a high price and buy it back from the weavers at the same price

according to weight (the weight of the merchandise plus the scraps). I figured that if I did that, then the weavers could steal all the yarn they wanted, and I would make money on what they were stealing.

My plan worked like a charm. The weavers stopped stealing yarn. The only thing I had to watch for was that the weavers didn't dump extra yarn into their pile of scraps to boost the weight. It solved my problem completely.

WE STARTED WITH the corner store at Alameda Street, then expanded and expanded until we took up almost the entire old shopping center. We began mailing thousands of wholesale catalogs and using a new concept for business called the toll free watts line. Our Alameda Street warehouses were bulging with tack and saddles from Mexico, rugs and blankets, rustic furniture, curios, Oriental rugs, hides and skins from all over the world, Indian pottery, and baskets. In those days we were also importing container loads of Belgium rugs and Philippine products. Traders were driving in from New York, Alaska, Florida and everywhere else to load up and take back merchandise by the truckloads! It was an exciting growth period.