

The Soft Sell  
by Art Buchwald  
(*The Washington Post* c. 1970)

One of the problems with today's economy is that it's very hard to find young people who are good salesmen. Many students coming out of college are more interested in a customer's motivation than they are in closing a sale. They also have a tendency to be too honest, which can play havoc in the retail business.

A friend of mine has a dress shop here in Georgetown, and she told me of the problems she had with a young lady, a psychology major, whom she had hired as a salesgirl. This, in essence, is what happened.

The first day a lady came in the store, and the salesgirl (let us call her Miss Brampton) asked if she could be of help.

"I'd like a suit for the fall," the lady said.

"What price range?" Miss Brampton asked.

"It doesn't make any difference," the lady replied.

"Well, let me ask you this question: Do you want the suit because you need it? Or have you just had a fight with your husband and are trying to get even by making a very expensive purchase?"

"I beg your pardon?" the lady said.

"Perhaps you suspect he has a girlfriend, and you think this is the only way you can get back at him."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," the customer said.

"Spending money in anger is a very expensive form of hostility. My advice to you is to think it over for a few days. Try to patch up your differences. Buying a new suit won't save your marriage."

"Thank you very much," the customer said coldly and left the store.

"She's angry with me now," Miss Brampton told the dress shop owner, "but in a week she'll be grateful I talked her out of it."

My friend the shop owner decided to let the incident pass; but that afternoon another customer came in, and Miss Brampton asked if she could be of help.

The lady said, "I need something really exciting. I'm going to the Kennedy Center, and I want a dress that will knock everyone dead."

Miss Brampton said, "We have some lovely evening dresses over here for insecure people."

"Insecure people?"

"Oh, yes. Didn't you know that clothes are one of the main ways women compensate for insecurity?"

"I'm not insecure," the lady said angrily.

"Then why do you want to knock them dead at the Kennedy Center? Why can't you be accepted for yourself instead of what you wear? You are a very attractive person, and you have an inner beauty you try to disguise. I can sell you a new dress that will attract attention, but then you would never know if it was you or the dress that made people stop and stare."

By this time the dress shop owner decided to step in.

“Miss Brampton, if the lady wants an evening dress, let her see our evening dresses.”

“No,” the customer said. “Your girl is right. Why spend five hundred dollars to get a few compliments from people who really don't care what I wear? Thank you for helping me, young lady. It's true I've been insecure all these years and didn't even know it.”

The customer walked out of the store.

The last straw for the dress store owner took place an hour later when a college student came in to buy a miniskirt, and Miss Brampton gave her thirty minutes on women's lib and then said, “All you do when you buy miniskirts is to become a sex object.”

That night the dress shop owner put a sign in the window:  
HELP WANTED — NO PSYCHOLOGY MAJORS NEED APPLY.