Show business has always been something of a mystical profession. This was especially true in the beginning, when the art of acting first developed out of Greek choruses assembled to sing the praises of the god Dionysus. That's about as mystical you can get. When directors hit upon the idea of having a chorus member actually proclaim to be Dionysus, the concept was sufficiently novel to capture the imaginations of the whole of Greece, for whom the theater quickly emerged as the most important artistic product of a society already steeped in cultural innovation. At the same time, it was also unprecedented enough to evoke distrust and even downright scorn towards the actors themselves. Who, they asked, were these lowly crooners to swipe the identity of a hero, a king, or even the gods themselves?

Though their status has improved a bit, film industry folks can still run into contempt in our era, such as when finding themselves cast as an extra in a poorly-conceived sitcom or being Michael Bay. And though the profession is still as mysterious as ever, the intrigue is no theological; the big mystery today is not, "What becomes of the man who takes on the attributes of the immortal?", but rather, "How do I get work?" This latter question wasn't as important back in the 4th century B.C. when actors tended to be actual slaves without a lot of creative control over their careers, much less a desire to someday direct. Today, it's the most important question an actor can ask himself - but a surprising number of actors simply don't bother.

The business end of acting is only mysterious to those who approach the matter without context. The underlying problem is that actors often look at acting in a vacuum, as a sort of extra-dimensional profession unconnected to mundane, lesser pursuits like working at a grocery store or producing films. Actors who view acting without a reference point are depriving themselves of the sort of insight into the clearly crucial pursuit of actually, you know, getting work. What they should be doing is thinking of acting as a business - more specifically, the business of sales.

I've spent my professional life riding an unusual career arc, although things started out normally enough, at least for an actor; I got into the discipline in college, struggled in the usual manner, and eventually started landing some roles. The work came in an amusingly wide variety. On the one hand, I played Lieutenant Morgan in Rambo: First Blood; on the other hand, I wrote comedy with then-roommate Nathan Lane. On the third hand (I'm deformed), I appeared on television shows ranging from Dynasty to Cheers, and had the great pleasure of working on the stage as well. But after about a decade of financial uncertainty, it occurred to me that I wanted to raise a family - and it also occurred to me that I didn't want to do all of this family-raising out of the backseat of a Volvo. Being broke is a virtue when you're young and single but it's a crime when kids come into the picture. So I bit the bullet and got a real job.

My friends steered me towards sales. After all, I'd suffered through rejection after rejection as an actor, thereby hardening myself in advance to the rejection after rejection I'd be suffering through as a salesman. In fact, I was to find that the respective skill sets of acting and sales tended to overlap not just a little, but a lot.

When I went in for my first interviews with the sales departments of various magazines, I was always asked why I should be hired on despite having no experience in salesmanship as such. "But I've always been a salesman," I explained. "And I've been selling the most difficult product of all - myself." This usually got a laugh and a nod, and occasionally got me a job as well. But that was just a cute line intended to break the ice; I didn't really believe it myself at the time. An actor is an actor, I thought, and a salesman is a salesman.

Soon after I started selling, though, I began to realize that I had accidentally told the truth - acting and selling are very much one and the same, and so understanding either profession can help one to excel in the other. As I started to apply what I'd learned in acting to sales, things began to take off. I started off as an account executive at Advertising Age, where to my great surprise I managed to "make my numbers" quarter after quarter - pretty good, I thought, for a guy who had never used a fax machine before. Later I found myself working as the vice president of sales at a California firm that specialized in interactive marketing programs for Fortune 500 companies; again, what I'd learned as an actor was instrumental to my success. Among our first clients was Yahoo; I sold the company's first ads in 1995. A few years later, when the iconic young firm had established its own sales department, I was asked to come on board and direct its southwest U.S. territory, managing a 20-employee office in Los Angeles and overseeing new business. Between stock and salary, I had made myself a nice chunk of assets by 2000, at which point I decided to take some time off. By 2002, I had gone back into entertainment, this time as a producer - and equipped with a better understanding of the entertainment industry than I could have ever hoped to acquire had I never left entertainment in the first place.

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The purpose of this book is to jump-start actors into re-thinking the business of acting as a business that involves acting.

Actors, like all creative types, don't want to think of themselves as salespeople. Perhaps they want to appear in a production of Glengarry Glen Ross or play Willie Loman on the stage, but portraying a salesman is the closest that most of them generally want to get to actually selling something. Many of them see salespeople as alien to art - as shifty, snake oil-selling ne'er-do-wells clad in flashy clothes and too much cologne. Most actors would be reluctant to associate their own pursuit of the role with the salesman's pursuit of the close. And it's the reluctance to make the comparison that prevents them from gaining crucial insight into how they can make the sort of moves necessary to land the gigs they want.

It's called show business for a reason. It's a world rife with politics, personalities, rules, procedures, and great expectations, which is why this book will provide the actor with a guide to thriving in such a scene by reworking into a salesroom(?) The intention is to give readers a new and better understanding of how they can succeed in such an ultra-competitive environment as this by applying the lessons I and others have learned in another ultra-competitive environment - one in which the product isn't being offered just a couple of times a week at casting calls, but a hundred times a day in sales calls. Just as a long-distance runner will train at high altitudes before running the race in an easier, more oxygen-rich environment, inculcating himself with the insight gleaned from high-stress sales work will give the actor a comparable advantage in his bid for gigs. Just to be clear, my book doesn't require any actual running.

Many of the strategies detailed here derive in part from the sales principles are taught in Fortune 1000 conference rooms and weekend seminars, and are reworked to address the unique requirements of the acting trade. Rather than useless generalities or motivational tips hammered into goofy acronyms, these are applicable techniques that address specific challenges of the sort encountered by both experienced thespians and part-type neophytes. But some of the most useful material will stem from my own experiences as an actor and producer, as well as the experiences of others in the profession; several chapters will include conversations with an array of industry veterans with whom I've worked in the past, including Brian Dennehy, Nathan Lane, Jason Lee, Kathy Baker, and Gregory Garcia, as well as a couple of producers and others with special knowledge of the in's and out's of getting in without being thrown out.

Between a dozen actors and producers, we can probably expect one or two good pieces of advice to come up. Just to be on the safe side, I've composed a few in advance.

There is, for instance, the classic admonition to know one's customer. This is something of a trope among even the greenest of salesmen, but a surprising number of actors pay it no attention whatsoever. That's a shame, because in neglecting to do their homework prior to a meeting, an actor has already begun to sabotage himself before he even arrives. And it costs very little in time and effort to pull off this kind of research. You can learn a lot simply by asking who will be in a room, for instance; you can learn even more by looking up those people's names on IMDB. When you've bothered to determine someone's body of work and thereby get a sense of what sort of angle will interest that person, how that person approaches a project, and how that person's last name is pronounced, you've vastly improved your chances of being able to deliver what's desired. And when you put all of this information together and use it to work out the likely dynamic you'll face in a room - the pre-existing relationships, the differences in creative direction, the collective intent of the team with regards to what that the finished product is supposed to be - you've gained an additional edge over a competitor who walks into that same room without a clue as to how to proceed.

Related yet still distinct is the "game plan," which in the context of acting involves the development of a strategy by which to get yourself or your project in front of the right person rather than having it tossed aside by the wrong one. Within the unique bureaucracy of entertainment, one encounters both gates and gatekeepers. Some of these lead to the guy in charge; others lead to would-be players without any real access or capabilities of their own. Being able to identify the real decision makers is imperative; it can also be unusually tricky in this industry, in which image and actuality tend to coincide even less than they do in more traditional business settings. Once an actor has identified the right people and coupled this knowledge with the right research, the next step is to adapt the right approach - the process by which the actor makes contact with whoever has a finger on the green button. This requires you to know how to deal with the gatekeepers; to engage with the entry level-types to the extent that such engagement works to one's advantage, and only to that extent; to determine an organization's actual hierarchy rather than its official one; and to otherwise do the sort of research, planning, and execution that is almost routine among the nation's top salespeople but which is nonetheless commonly neglected among those who are selling themselves.

Equally important to understand (and more fun to read about) are the mistakes that actors and other entertainment professionals regularly make when running amok in the business end of art. The problem that tends to come to mind for myself and many other producers is that particular brand of entitlement which seems to be unique to actors though certainly not universal among them). When approaching someone who's in a position to hire or otherwise advance a career, the actor's frame of mind is too often along the lines of, "What can this person do for me?" This tends to come through without the actor even realizing it, and it makes a terrible impression. This is not to say that it hurts the producer's feelings or that he's expecting you to show up for purely altruistic reasons; rather, it's simply a wasted opportunity whereby the actor could have raised his value in the eyes of whoever is doing the hiring. The theme of an actor's discussion with any producer or casting director should always be, "Here's how I can make your life easier." And there are a variety of methods by which to make that case, both explicitly and implicitly.

A few anecdotes are probably in order. They always are.

My brother Tim managed to sell a show to FX by way of a rather unconventional approach, and did this by adhering to several of the principles that will be detailed in this book. Years back, he bartended a Christmas party put on by Don Buchwald, a New York-based agent who himself was on the rise. Tim stayed in touch afterwards, occasionally reaching out to Don in order to let him know what he was up to. When Don landed Howard Stern as a client, Tim was ready. Upon learning that Stern was looking for a television concept to develop and produce, Tim went to New York and sold the show right there in the room. Tim knew the right gatekeeper, Buchwald, through which he had access to the real decision maker, Stern. And he was able to acquire and maintain those relationships by knowing when to approach, when to pursue, and when to wait.

Early on in my sales career, we were looking for a keynote speaker for our conference on interactive marketing, a semi-annual affair catering to high-end sales and marketing execs with an itch to learn about the mysterious new world of internet advertising. Time was running out and we had yet to secure our "big deal" speaker. I had read in the Wall Street Journal that the number two guy at Procter & Gamble was developing an interest in the general subject, making him a prime contender to headline our intent. Rather than waste time trying to get through the chain of command at P&G, I wrote to him directly and received a note in reply. He had to decline due to a scheduling conflict, but said he would have been delighted otherwise. I made a mental note to always start from the top and work down; it's the best way to generate contacts.

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Acting is one of the most rewarding pursuits imaginable, and actors have good reason to think highly of the skill sets they develop in the process. Too often, though, they insulate themselves from the practical aspects of the trade, which in turn prevents them from maximizing their opportunities to ply their craft. Contacts matter. Approach matters. Timing matters most of all. And in these and other aspects of getting what one wants, the world's businessmen in general and salespeople in particular have pioneered their own artistic pursuit - that of the interpersonal wonk. This was very nice of them, as we can now take the end result of some hundred years of research into the art of the deal and apply these same principles to the business of acting, an industry in which many participants give little or no consideration to the strategies that can mean the difference between landing a career-defining role and working another five years as a bartender on the side. Those actors who learn and practice the tactics described in this book, then, will gain considerable advantage over their competitors in one of the most competitive fields imaginable.