



False Summits – Sales Forecasts and Other Illusions



It is such a privilege to live in the Colorado Rocky Mountains. As summer approaches the mountain climbing season is about to be in full swing. Many people who live here know the term "Fourteener" which refers to mountains in Colorado with an elevation over 14,000 ft. It is generally accepted that there are 54 Fourteener's in Colorado and as you might expect many people have set the goal of climbing all 54 peaks. This is known as completing a Grand Slam. These peaks range from easy to dangerous with the easiest still providing a good days workout.

I discovered my love for climbing 20 years ago while on a trip to Aspen. One afternoon a buddy of mine and I set out to climb Mt. Elbert, Colorado's highest peak, without much preparation. We were promptly put in our place by the mountain as it turned us back. Looking back on that it reminds me of the salesperson who is unprepared to tackle a sales opportunity. We quickly determined that we needed to better prepare ourselves to make the climb. We needed the proper gear, a plan of approach, the right timing and better conditioning. I am sure you can see where I am going with this, so we will come back to it later.

I have now climbed 48 of Colorado's 54 Fourteener's. Nature can be a wonderful teacher and I have learned many things as a result of my climbing. Unfortunately much of that learning was trial and error and there were a few lessons learned that could have cost me my life. When I first started climbing my tendency to set goals kicked in. At first it was to climb the highest 10 peaks, then the top 25 and soon after that the goal of the Grand Slam was firmly in place. My original motivation was to get to the summit of the peak without much appreciation for the trip along the way. Later on I discovered that what this was really all about was my love for making the trip and reaching the summit came naturally if I was properly prepared.

Over time I also discovered that having the right climbing partner made a big difference. We both understood what to expect of the other and knew how to support each other. You see, I have a fear of heights also know in the climbing world as "exposure" or finding yourself in a place with nothing but air and a long ways down with the bottom in full view. By contrast my climbing partner Michael had a fear of what he could not see. We discovered this one day while straddling a crevasse with nothing but darkness below. That did not bother me but it terrified him... an interesting learning for both of us. We also created our own pace for the climb. We discovered that we liked to climb at a rate of about 1000 vertical ft. per hour. By contrast others who had climbed with us were much slower. Strangely, for us going slower was harder and tired us out faster. I could probably go on forever about what the mountains have taught me but what I really want to discuss is the phenomena of the False Summit.

On a spectacular August morning we set out from our camp to climb Wilson Pk. near Telluride. If you remember some of the older Coors beer commercials featuring a striking pointed peak, that is Wilson Pk. Our guidebook told us that this was going to be a class 3+ climb meaning it would get a little spooky with some exposure. After climbing for a few hours we were over 13,000 ft. and we knew we were nearing the summit. After traversing across a boulder field we set our sights on a our goal, the summit of Wilson Pk. Our hearts began to beat faster and a rush of adrenaline kicked in. 40 minutes later we approached the



summit. Michael was just in front of me as I looked up... I knew he was there. Then all of sudden he burst out "Damn, damn, damn..." he shouted. A few moments later I understood why. What we thought to be the summit was actually a False Summit.

It is hard to explain the rush you feel when summiting a high peak. Along with the feeling of accomplishment you are also rewarded with a view that is impossible to describe. Anticipating that feeling is part of climbing and what drives you through the tough stretches of the climb. It provides a good lesson in the power of setting goals.

As I pulled myself up to the summit I immediately saw several things. First, where I was standing was very small with what we describe as a "see ya later" drop off on 3 sides. Second, there was a treacherous down climb in front of us to the base of the real summit pitch, which was in full view and did not look like the class 3+ climb we were expecting. Third, all of the energy drained from my body as I realized this was a False Summit and there was much more work to do and it was staring me right in the face. To swing from such a high to a low in the same moment is exhausting. The same is true of Sales Forecasts.

There are many common characteristics of Sales Forecasts and False Summits.

False Summits most often occur when you are near your ultimate goal

One of the more interesting characteristics of the False Summit is that as you get closer you become more and more convinced that it is the actual summit. Why? Because that is the only thing you can see. It gets larger as you approach it... the anticipation builds. Early in the Sales Cycle when we are looking at next steps we rarely encounter a false summit. When we are close to the close many times we overestimate what will close. Do not let emotion interfere with reality is what we are taught, but in sales as in mountaineering that can be easy to say but very hard to do. Salespeople need a consistent approach to take as much of the guesswork out of forecasting as possible.

Experience alone is not enough

I would like to say that I only experienced a False Summit once in my climbing adventures but that is simply not true. Many salespeople live their entire careers over-estimating their sales forecast, not because they want to, but because they never got good help to improve. More help is needed in the form of good coaching and tools in addition to experience.

A Map and the Right Partner can help

The art of using a map and compass is vital to the successful mountaineer. The existence of a map is not enough. The mountaineer has to have the skills to use the map. A tailored sales process is vital to the success of the sales professional. It has to be the right sales process for their market.

The mountaineer that climbs in the Cascades Range of Washington State does not follow the same process as those of us who climb in Colorado. The conditions are very different and both need their own process. A salesperson has to have the right sales process that maps to their customers buying process to be successful. Understanding and following that sales process can help avoid False Summits.



When we first began climbing 20 years ago it was different than it is today. It was not unusual to only see 2-3 other climbers during the trip since the sport was not terribly popular. Such is not the case today since the sport has exploded in popularity. If you are going to climb a Fourteener today expect a crowd... sad, but true. The same is true of competition in the marketplace. We have better equipped and more skilled competitors than we did in the past.

Tools can help, but you have to know how to use them

20 years ago we relied solely on a guide book and a topo map, where we tore the pages of the route out to take in our pack to keep weight down. I will be forever indebted to our Trusted Advisor, Gerry Roach, who shared his experience and advice to keep us on track and out of harms way (most of the time). I also appreciated his advice and pearls of wisdom which included: "Never get separated from your lunch" and "Expect to get lost some of the time". There was very little in the way of pictures to guide us and from a discovery point of view that was great. However, from a process point of view the new tools that exist today would have been very helpful.

There are now many sites that provide trip reports along with full pictured documentation of the climb so you know what to expect every step of the way. Not as exciting for sure, but in the world of professional selling this is a good thing. The new Sales 2.0 Tools that exist today can streamline the sales process and even take the guess work out of sales forecasting allowing for more time to concentrate on sales. I agree with many recent articles written stating that these tools alone are of little value. But, when coupled with the right Sales Effectiveness Partner, Sales Process, Methodology and Training the sales professional will become a worthy adversary indeed.

Like mountain climbing, professional selling can be an adventure. Achieving our sales targets are important, but remember to enjoy the trip along the way.

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