SELLING BEFORE I KNEW I WAS SELLING: THE MAKING OF A GROWTH STRATEGIST

BY MICHAEL ABBIW

I did not know I was in sales when I was sixteen years old, standing behind a corn mill in Awoshie, grinding maize for neighborhood women. I thought I was just surviving. I thought I was simply helping my father's business stay afloat after the operator fell ill. But looking back now, as CEO of MGA Consulting Ghana Limited with a portfolio spanning management consultancy, insurance brokerage, and logistics, I realize the truth: I have been selling all my life. I just did not have the language for it yet.

The Corn Mill Sales Academy

The corn mill taught me my first lesson in sales: show up when others can't. When the operator became ill, everyone assumed the business would close. But I stepped in. I was a Presec-Legon secondary school student, and people were shocked to see someone with my education operating a corn mill. That shock was my first experience with exceeding expectations, a principle that would define my career.

Every morning, customers came with their maize. They didn't just want grinding services; they wanted reliability, speed, and respect. I delivered all three. Word spread. Business grew. I was selling consistency and quality service, though I wouldn't have called it that at the time.
But my siblings hated the noise. The business had to go. **That's when I learned my second sales lesson: when the market changes, pivot.**

Tips, Trust, and the Power of Communication

At age seventeen (17), I found myself at a gas filling station, helping customers carry cylinders. No salary. Just tips. This was pure commission-based sales, though I didn't think of it that way. I thought I was just being helpful.

Then I discovered my competitive advantage: I spoke excellent English. In a market where most carriers communicated in broken English or local languages, my eloquence set me apart. Customers didn't just tip me, they requested me. They trusted me with their purchases. They asked my advice on cylinder sizes. I was building relationships and establishing credibility, the foundations of consultative selling.

When the station manager was dismissed for financial mismanagement and company executives came to investigate, my communication skills caught their attention. "You attended Presec? What are you doing carrying cylinders?"

I was selling myself without knowing it. They offered me a position receiving payments. My first official job at Tropic Oil wasn't just about handling money, it was about being trusted with the company's revenue stream. They saw something in me: integrity, intelligence, and the ability to represent the brand well. Soon, I was helping audit financial irregularities across branches. I was identifying problems and proposing solutions, essentially business consulting, though I lacked the formal title. I opened my first bank account before I turned eighteen (18 years**). I was building a track record of excellence that would become my most valuable sales tool.**

The Academic Entrepreneur

When I entered Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) in 2000, I wanted to study architecture. Instead, I was offered Publishing. I accepted it and made a decision that would shape my sales philosophy**: if you can't get exactly what you want, excel at what you're given and create opportunities from there.**

University life was financially challenging, but it became my training ground in business development. I didn't just study, I created revenue streams:
I tutored students, selling my knowledge and teaching abilities. I formed project groups with wealthier classmates and handled their assignments for a fee, selling my academic skills and work ethic. I consistently topped my class, eventually graduating with First Class honors and multiple awards, selling my intellectual capabilities to future employers and clients.

But the most valuable sales training came from my leadership roles. As Electoral Commissioner for the Publishing Association and through various SRC committees, **I learned to sell ideas, build coalitions, and navigate organizational politics.** When we opposed unfair fee hikes, I learned that selling sometimes means persuading people to resist, not just to buy.
These weren't just extracurricular activities. **I was building a personal brand of excellence and leadership that would open doors throughout my career.**

From Rejection to Resource: Selling Your Way Back In

After graduation, I applied for a teaching assistant position in my department. I was denied due to departmental politics. This rejection stung, but it taught me a critical sales lesson: when they won't buy what you're offering, change the offer.

I found work at Buck Press, where my diligence became my calling card. I wasn't just an employee; I was someone who delivered exceptional value. Soon, KNUST invited me back, not as a teaching assistant, but as a resource person contributing to publishing education. I even co-authored chapters in an entrepreneurship book.

They had rejected Michael Abbiw, the job applicant. But they couldn't resist Michael Abbiw, the proven performer and thought leader. I had repositioned myself in the market.

The MBA in Business Development

My pursuit of postgraduate studies, including an MBA, wasn't just about education, **it was about building credibility and networks that would fuel business development for decades.**
As President of the Graduate Students Association (GRASAG), I sat on the University Council. I connected with influential leaders, including Otumfuo Osei Tutu II. I was selling my leadership capabilities to Ghana's elite, though I saw it as service at the time.

These relationships became my sales pipeline. One connection led to an opportunity at KEK Insurance as a business development manager. Finally, my role matched what I'd been doing all along: selling. At KEK Insurance, I formalized everything I'd learned intuitively. I built relationships. I identified client needs. I positioned our solutions. I closed deals. Within less than two years, I rose to Executive Manager, proof that I had been a natural salesman all along, even when I was grinding corn or carrying gas cylinders.

The Entrepreneurial Sales Pivot

In 2013, I founded MGA Consulting Ghana Limited. My entrepreneurial spirit wouldn't let me work for others anymore. I wanted to build, not just sell for someone else's company. But wanting to sell and knowing what to sell are different things. My first ventures into hire-purchase and microfinance failed. By 2017, I was in debt and my wife, a banker, had lost her job during Ghana's banking sector crisis. Friends we thought would help us didn't come through.

This was my valley of testing. I learned that sales without the right product-market fit is just expensive networking. I learned that relationships alone don't sustain a business, you need a compelling value proposition.

I resolved to rebuild. I focused on MGA Consulting on what I knew best: management consultancy, research, strategic planning, leadership training, and market research. I was selling my accumulated expertise, from corn mills to corporate boardrooms, from campus politics to business strategy.

The Breakthrough: When Strategic Positioning Meets Opportunity

December 2022 changed everything. Within a thirty-minute period, we received four major business alerts. Four significant contracts, almost simultaneously. **This wasn't luck. This was the harvest of twenty-five years of strategic positioning.**

Every relationship I'd built, from KNUST to GRASAG to the University Council to Otumfuo to KEK Insurance, was now a potential client or referral source. Every skill I'd developed, research, strategy, leadership training, market analysis, was now a service offering. Every achievement. First Class honors, GRASAG presidency, executive management experience, was now a credibility marker. I had been planting seeds since I was sixteen years old. December 2022 was the harvest season.

The Portfolio Approach: Diversified Revenue Streams

Today, MGA Consulting isn't just a consultancy, it's a multi-business platform. We offer management consultancy, research, strategic planning, leadership training, and market research to leading corporations. We've worked with state institutions, international organizations like the World Bank, and every major insurance company in Ghana. We acquired an insurance brokerage firm. We run a logistics company.

This diversification reflects a mature understanding of sales and business development: don't rely on one product, one service, or one revenue stream. Build a portfolio of offerings that serve interconnected markets.

When we organized the Ghana Digital Innovation Week for GIZ, bringing together over 3,000 participants, we weren't just executing an event, we were selling our project management capabilities, our convening power, and our ability to deliver at scale.

The Sales Philosophy I Didn't Know I Was Building

Looking back, I realize that every stage of my journey taught me something about sales and business growth. From a corn mill in Awoshie to consulting rooms with the World Bank, I've learned this: we're all selling something. The question is whether we're doing it with intention, integrity, and strategic vision. That's the difference between surviving and thriving. That's the difference between having a job and building a legacy. I didn't know I was selling. Now I teach others how to do it with purpose.

Today, MGA Consulting, has become an international management consultancy firm with indigenous identity, providing sustainable solutions and value for stakeholders.