

The Zen Of Stan

By Stan Adler

Story 1

The Viewpoint of the Client

Here you meet two main characters — Carrie and Victor. Carrie is a real estate agent and the wife of the narrator and Victor is a noted business consultant and friend of the family.

Think about the last time clients thanked you for helping them find the perfect property. When that happened, did you sell the property or did your clients buy it? The answer is obvious: they bought it. You just showed them how.

When you're with your clients, do you try and get to know them or are you intent upon showing how much you know about the market? Are you communicating or are you wondering when the clients will stop talking so you can start selling and tell them what you think they need to know?

What is your main objective—to close a deal or make sure the client gets the perfect house? Do you plan what you're going to do to the client or what you're going to do with the client?

In a good sale, nobody does anything to anyone. Instead, you do something so good that your clients will thank you and ask you to do it again, either with them or with someone else.

Sometimes the best examples of how this happens are surprisingly close at hand.



Carrie and I had been promising ourselves a new front door for about fifteen years, but for one reason or another we never seemed to get around to it. We might have waited another fifteen years, had it not been for Brad.

Carrie met Brad when she was almost ready to give up. She had decided this was the year to finally do something about the door, but her preliminary research did not go well. Whenever she inquired about doors, the salesperson either asked who her contractor was or handed her a brochure. She was repeatedly brushed off, talked down to, patronized, and generally discouraged. Keep her in the dark and maybe she'll disappear seemed to be the general approach.

Then one day, while she was shuffling through some hinged samples, a friendly young man approached and said with a smile, "You look confused. Could you use some help?" Carrie came out of her shopper's stupor and said yes, yes she could. As they talked, Carrie quickly saw that choosing a door was more complex than she had realized. Brad offered to drop by the house the following day to talk with both of us about the door.

I was skeptical at first—what's the big deal about a door, I thought—but two minutes with Brad showed me how wrong I was.

"The front door is the first thing visitors see when they come to your house," he said. "It tells a lot about how people feel about their home."

All the while he talked, Brad was running his hands carefully over our door, like a doctor examining a patient, quietly and respectfully.

"It's amazing," he said, "Some people will spend thousands of dollars remodeling their entryway and then have their neighbor put on the door. I guess that's all right, I mean it's their business. Some people don't care about quality. But if you do care, you need to have the right door."

"If one is a master of one thing and understands one thing well, one has at the same time, insight into and understanding of many things."

—Vincent Van Gogh.

Brad's enthusiasm was as genuine and bright as his red hair and easy smile. We assured him we did care, and he proceeded to teach us about doors.

We learned the difference between custom-made and manufactured doors. We saw and felt the textures of many different woods. We learned the history of various door designs and which ones are appropriate for which types of architecture. We learned all about floating panels and trim styles. We got a thorough lesson in different types of locks and the many possibilities of hardware, both in terms of style and finish.

Before Brad, I would have bet that no one could get excited about the different types of doorknobs. Appreciating beautiful wood is easy, but it takes a complete craftsman to put the whole package together and genuinely care about the small details like locks and hardware.

Brad was thoroughly prepared with photos and samples. "Now here's a kind of doorknob you might like," he said. "It's shaped sort of like an egg, rather than completely round."

I took the sample he held out. It had a nice solid heft, and fit beautifully into my palm. "I love the way this feels in my hand. But I don't know . . . I'm used to the lever we've always had."

"That's another way to go," Brad said. "Here's a few to look at . . ."

That's the way things went all morning. Brad presented all the options, outlining the pros and cons of each, but insisted we make the final decisions. "This is your door, not mine. Remember you're going to be living with it the rest of your life."

Carrie and I agonized over the finish for the hardware. Bronze, with its slightly aged look, seemed more appropriate for the outside; on the other hand, gleaming brass seemed right for the inside. We practically begged Brad to tell us which to choose. With a pleasant smile, he said, "No, you decide."

In the end, we opted for a custom made door of Honduran mahogany. From Brad we had learned that mahogany is resilient in damp climates, and we also felt it went well with the existing redwood trim in our entryway. We settled on a Baldwin mortised lock with a quick-release safety latch for emergency exits. And we decided to have brass hardware for the inside and bronze hardware for the outside.

Several days later, Brad returned to install our door. When the door was hung and the hardware and lock was installed, it turned out that Carrie and I had one last decision to make. "Okay now," Brad asked, "do we want a bronze or brass peephole?"

He was holding a shiny brass tube upright in his hand. I was thinking that I actually wanted it to be bronze on the outside and brass on the inside, but before I had a chance to say it, Brad reached in his pocket, took out a bronze peephole, combined the two, and gave me more than I thought I could have.

Carrie and I spent that evening exchanging seats on the sofa to get the best view of our new door. It was picture perfect.



The next time Victor paid us a visit, he still had his hand on the door when I opened it. "It's a pleasure to touch," he said. "He did a beautiful job, didn't he?"

As Victor swung the heavy door gently back and forth and ran his fingers down the edge and around the trim, I told him about Brad.

"You know, when Brad was leaving, he dropped his drawknife and said something I'll never forget. 'Some days you drop your tools,' he said, almost blushing. 'Other days you catch the pencil when it falls from your ear. . . . That's when you know you're ready.'

"I don't think Brad knew he was a consultant building a partnership with a client," I concluded. "And I'm sure he had never heard of a 'five-step selling cycle' or 'quantifying solutions.' But what he was doing, intuitively, was selling at its best."

After we were seated in the living room, Victor noticed that Carrie and I both glanced often in the direction of our new door. "You know," he said, "from what you've told me, Brad did four things that are absolutely essential to the mastery of selling. One, he helped you"—nodding to Carrie—"when others ignored you. He introduced himself and let his intuition guide him. Two, he knew there was really nothing to sell until he found out, truly and specifically, what you wanted. And three, he shared his enjoyment of his craft with you, because people who love what they're doing have the ability to instill that love in others. And four, he really knew what he was talking about. What you saw and heard were years of research and practice reduced to a few hours. In short, he made it his business to get to know you."

"He didn't just sell us a door," I said. "He showed us how to buy a door."

"You're right," Victor replied. "It was a classic case of 'with' not 'to.'"

When Victor left that evening, Carrie and I walked him to the front door. As we were closing the door, we heard Victor comment quietly to himself, "Of course—brass inside, bronze outside." When we looked through the peephole, we saw him wink in farewell.