

## Merchants in a Middle Eastern Bazaar

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

There are different negotiation styles around the world and different ways of doing business. In some parts of the Middle East, for example, there is a bazaar mentality among the people doing business.

The biggest characteristic I have seen among merchants, job seekers, employees and others with the “bazaar mentality” is that everything comes down to one transaction.

People meet randomly in a bazaar and one has something of value the other wants to buy. The person with something of value uses every trick and artifice they can to get the absolute highest price they can for something here and now. There is no thought of establishing a relationship with the buyer. The only objective is to get the absolute best possible deal –ripping the person off to the maximum extent you can, if possible.

Refund? Out of the question! Everything is about one transaction here and now! Who knows what tomorrow will bring and who cares!

Years ago I spent several weeks in Turkey with some very advanced rug traders. They specialized in selling rugs to people who came off of cruise ships. As I watched these men sell rugs I became convinced they were some of the best salesman in the world. I ended up changing my airline ticket and spending extra time learning about how they did it.

They used all sorts of tricks to sell people things. They used lighting. They staged various rooms of their rug shop to make different points and allow potential customers to reach different conclusions at different times of the transaction.

For example, a copy of Ernest Hemingway’s “A Farewell to Arms” would be put out on the roof of the building as if it was being read by the owner of the rug shop when English-speaking tourists came in. The owner would often take potential clients up on the roof to watch the sunset, smoke a cigarette, or take in the view.

“Why are you reading that?” the people would ask. The book would always be placed in a very visible place on the roof, under an umbrella sitting by some pillow tapestries that made up the staged event.

“I love things of beauty. Hemingway uses words in a way that reflects beauty because they are woven together like fine rugs. I study beauty daily. Here, let me show you the most magnificent rug in our shop crafted like a Hemingway story.”

And so it would go. Another part of the building contained a small hand weaving kilim that had a rug being woven in progress. The owner scarcely knew how to use it – but there it sat.

“What is that?” people would ask.

“I love rugs,” the owner of the shop would say. “Sometimes to just feel and appreciate the art of rugs I come in here and weave myself when the store is closed. It moves me deeply. You too will one day understand the art of a rug and what it means once you own a fine one. I wish I had the entire day to weave. But rugs are never sold for what they are worth – people who enjoy making them only make pennies per day – just enough to eat and feed themselves. What do I know about life? I have a family to take care of and also support the poor. I cannot do what I love and make rugs.”

But it was all a “trap” and “skit”. The poor? The man went in his new BMW to casinos at night where he smoked, drank and gambled and talked to women decades younger than his wife –some who charged him for the privilege of doing so. He made his living putting on an act for unsuspecting people in a bazaar – just as traders have been doing for thousands of years.

The idea was to take as much money from people as rapidly as possible because the owner of the rug shop would never see them again. Highly developed and professionally-orchestrated, there were many tricks like this to establish trust and take as much money as possible from tourists.

There were “common” tricks as well – ones that I have seen used (with variation) in rug shops in other parts of the world. For example, if the client saw a rug they seemed to really like, the owner of the store would always say the same thing:

“That rug is special. I was taking a trip to Northern Turkey near Iraq to visit some relatives. My car broke down outside of a small unpopulated village and I had to stay the night while waiting for a part to arrive. I learned of this rug from a local tribesman I met who worked at the local inn and went to see it. It was a special rug given to a relative in the family when she got married over a century ago. It took me hours and days of meetings before they would finally part with it ... it was quite emotional really. It is such a good rug. I am not even sure I should be thinking of selling it.”

To fresh-faced Americans, English, Italians, Germans and so forth (the people working in the rug shop spoke multiple languages), these stories always hit a chord and they most often bought the rugs. How could anyone possibly make this stuff up?

The man selling rugs had an education and understood what he was doing. He also had a remarkable perspective about the way business is done in different parts of the world and why he operated the way he did. The particular bazaar I was watching him in had likely been there for thousands of years. The buildings were stone and the boats were all stopping there to look at the ruins of a Roman city built a few thousand years before.

I asked him why he never tried to establish relationships with people and why everyone needed to be sold and “ripped off” if possible.

“It’s cultural,” he told me. “For thousands of years in the part of the world I am from, nomadic people would be travelling through the deserts and meet up in the middle of nowhere. They most likely never would see each other again before scattering in opposite directions. They enjoyed trading for things they might use on their journey. When they did business with each other their only objective was to get as much from the other person as possible immediately.”

For whatever reason, this was one of the more important lessons in my career – because to me it represented the exact opposite way people should do business and conduct their career. Instead of making everything short term – about this bonus, about this quarterly result, about this paycheck—people should run their careers and lives as if business is about getting long-term results over time.

- You do not build a career overnight: It takes time.
- The vast, vast majority of people do not get rich quickly: They get rich slowly.
- The vast, vast majority of companies do not become successful instantly: They become successful slowly.

Notwithstanding my feelings on this matter, this is how I see people and companies behave all of the time. They expect to get results right now – not later— and are unwilling to put in the time and the commitment to get the results they are after. Everything must be tit for tat.

In business there is no shortage of people who want to take from you right now without offering anything in return.

A few weeks ago someone from a company trying to sell me something came to visit me from the East Coast of the United States. The person:

- Pestered me with cold calls, emails and LinkedIn emails for months simply asking for a meeting.
- I finally spoke with the person on the phone and the person told me they wanted to come speak with me.
- The person booked a plane ticket.
- The person then travelled over two hours to the airport.
- The person then got on an airplane and travelled five hours to California.
- The person then rented a car.
- The person spent the night in a hotel.
- The person then drove through rush hour to get to my office.

When the person got to my office I thanked them for coming in. Before I had any chance to get to know the person, exchange niceties and so forth, the person launched into a sales pitch that lasted no more than five minutes and concluded with:

“... If this is not something you are interested in then now is the time I shake your hand, say nice meeting you and we go our separate ways.”

“Thanks, but I’m not interested in that right now,” I told them.

“Well, then I wish you the best,” the person said.

I shook their hand and they left. I never heard from them again.

If the person had been successful in their pitch of me their company might have ended up making over \$1,000,000 a year. Alternatively, they could have offered to stay in touch with me. Or, they could have thanked me and proposed a smaller engagement. Or, they could have asked me if I knew of anyone else interested in the same product.

Albeit, this person could have made an effort to establish a long-term relationship with me instead of needing to “close” me right then. A relationship with me would have brought them the possibility of additional business at some time in the future – and probably right then and there.

I had a similar experience yesterday. A salesperson from another company had been pestering me for days to set up a meeting with her. When I finally met with her I asked how much what she was selling cost. She told me it was \$650 a license. My response was:

“Sure. I’ll try it for a year.”

“But you need it for your entire company,” she said. “I do not want to sell it to you unless you get it for at least 25-people to try out for at least 90 days for \$13,000 a month.”

She argued and went back and forth and ultimately I ended the conversation after over 30 minutes of arguing. The entire experience was very strange. At some point in the beginning of the call she had been talking about making her “first quarter sales objectives”. On reflecting on this, it occurred to me that she wanted to make one large sale instead of establishing a relationship – which she could have done by making a smaller sale.

She was treating me like a rug seller in a bazaar and had no interest in a future business relationship – she just wanted to get paid now.

You should always establish a relationship with people for when there is future demand. You should stay in touch with people who express interest in you and do your best to keep them active so you can place them in the future.

When I was growing up I remember that there were always real estate agents in my town who kept in touch with my parents and dropped off coffee or other things at Christmas, invited them to holiday parties and went out of their way to be nice to them – even though both were perfectly happy in their homes.

This is smart.

The idea was that eventually they might move and when they did they would use them – both my parents ultimately did move and when they did, they both used the real estate agents that had treated them well over an extended period of time.

Probably not so coincidentally, these were also the most successful real estate agents in our towns – the ones who could afford billboards, splashy magazine ads, big spreads in the Sunday paper and so forth.

You should always do your best to nurture people for the long-term instead of being strictly transactional – “what can you do for me now” in nature.