



It Is Better to Be Known for Something than Nothing at All

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

When I was 20 years old, running an asphalt business in Detroit, I purchased a fax machine and a couple of business phone numbers, as well as some lists of companies and businesses I thought would have big asphalt parking lots I could work on that I got from a mailing list company. I then rented a loft apartment for the summer and hired a salesman named Jim, who was a career salesman in his 50s, to come into the loft and cold call businesses about potentially hiring me to do some asphalt work.

"Hello. I am calling to ask you a question: Isn't it about time you invested in getting your parking lot patched up and sealed? Your parking lot is the first part of your business that your customers see and set foot on. I'd like to swing by and give you an estimate today."

The salesman typically started his workday very early. The loft was a big open space without many closing doorways, walls, and so forth between where I was sleeping and where Jim was making his phone calls. Typically, he would not wake me up when he would come in, and he would sit there for an hour or so before starting his day, smoking cigarettes, drinking coffee, and reading the paper. And then the phone calls would start, and I would awaken surrounded by a haze of cigarette smoke and the smell of freshly made coffee.

"Hey, Harrison!" he would scream as I meandered to the restroom rubbing my eyes each morning. Sometimes I was not alone and my guests were terrified when they got up to go the bathroom and saw a portly older man sitting at a desk talking to people about parking lots. Jim endured some shocking work conditions. My friends endured some strange sleepovers. Since my friends all lived with their parents, I had them sleep over a lot.

After Jim's first month or so, I realized that every place he seemed to be successfully selling happened to be churches. Churches have big parking lots, so this was a good thing; however, there just seemed to be a real preponderance of these churches. The summer before hiring Jim, I had done the work that Jim did myself and had used the same lists and made the cold calls. For one reason or another, I was most successful selling to car dealerships. I sold a ton of them. I had never sold a church before.

I was a little pushy with the owners of the car dealerships, or the [sales managers](#), who typically were the ones who set up the jobs with me:

"Okay. I will knock down the price by \$400, but you are going to need to have the job done on Sunday and Sunday only!" I might tell the dealer.

These guys loved this sort of dealing style, getting a good deal, time pressure negotiation tactics, and so forth. I loved working on the dealerships, and they seemed to enjoy all the back and forth I did with them when selling them.

I never took a lot of time speaking with Jim about the church parking lots and the process of setting up the job. Typically, he would just go out and give the estimate by measuring the parking lot, speaking with the people who owned it, and setting a time for the work to be done. I would then show up with a crew and complete the job.

After several weeks of doing churches every few days, I asked Jim why he thought he was doing so many churches and not auto dealerships, funeral homes, bowling alleys, strip malls, and similar businesses that typically have big parking lots.

"I do not know. I think I just get along with the people there better," he told me.

I asked to see some of the letters he sent out when he was giving estimates and I noticed the funniest thing: Instead of signing all of them "Sincerely," or "Very truly yours," he ended them all with "In Almighty Christ," or "In Christ," or something along those lines.

"What the heck is this?" I asked him when I looked at how all his winning bids had been signed.

"I am signing my estimates in 'the Name of Christ,'" he told me matter-of-factly. He was pretty serious about this. It was as if he were channeling Jesus and the power of religion right through his estimates.

Jim believed in this stuff and he was not using the signature line as a joke, or to manipulate the churches. He really meant it. What was so interesting to me about this, though, was that his enthusiasm for churches and the people he was assisting actually came through in the way he signed his letters. This one little thing made a difference in Jim's ultimate success as a salesperson.

How much was the way Jim signed his letters worth? I do not know. He was able to sell Catholic, Protestant, and every other sort of church out there. Jim made tens of thousands of dollars that summer, and he seemed to only ever be able to successfully close churches. He might close the occasional bowling alley, restaurant, or Dairy Queen; however, for the most part, all of his sales were with churches.

"Do you talk to the churches about religion when you give the estimates?" I asked him one day.

"Oh, no. I would never do that," he said. "It is never polite to bring up and discuss religion in a professional setting."

Over the years I have thought about this incident a great deal because I always tried to get to the bottom of Jim's enormous success in the asphalt [sales business](#), specifically related to churches. The more I think of this, the more I believe it has to do mostly with how he signed his estimates and letters to the church. I know this sounds absolutely crazy and hard to believe; however, as someone who has run sales organizations that have generated tens of millions of dollars throughout the years, I always do everything I can to analyze what makes one person more successful than another in sales, and I think that Jim's signature block had everything to do with his success.

There is a deeper reason why Jim's signature block worked so well for him, and I will get to this in a moment. Before I do,

though, I would like to tell you a couple of quick stories about signature blocks.

Every few weeks or so I receive an e-mail from someone about something or another, which has a footer that says something like the following: "*Mission: Excellence in All Respects*" or "*Delivering Value Through Outstanding Follow-Through*." These are not corporate slogans but are, instead, little statements that people have programmed their e-mail providers to inscribe automatically on the bottom of all their outgoing messages.

These small statements that discuss what these people and businesses are all about are what I would call a mantra or slogan. I think they are pretty interesting, and I also think they are quite effective. I have found that the people who write these little things on their communications tend to get my attention. When I see their messages, I always think to myself: "*Yeah, that person really is trying to give value*"; or, "*That person really takes their stuff seriously. I'm glad I am working with them.*"

I always like to speak with people about their little slogans, and the people who have these little slogans are always quite enthusiastic about them: "That's right, I believe in efficiency and productivity!" they might say. People do not typically use footers like this in their e-mails unless they take them seriously.

We respect people who believe in something.

These sorts of positive statements in e-mail headers and footers are more popular outside of the United States than they are here, but people use them here as well. Over the years I have also had well over 1,000 people working for my various companies, and I have had several people reporting to me or other managers that put these things on their e-mails. What I have noticed is that these people are typically the most enthusiastic, the most effective, and they tend to do the best in their jobs. In fact, people who do this with their e-mails and in their communications are almost universally in the top 5% of effectiveness in everything they do:

- The best real estate agents tend to have these slogans in their e-mail footers.
- The best salespeople tend to do this in their e-mail footers.
- The most popular doctors tend to do something like this in their footers.
- The best companies tend to have a slogan or something like this, which typically appears after their logos.

In fact, the more I have looked around, the more I have noticed that the people who are the absolute best at everything are the same ones who consistently stand for something and have a mantra of sorts that they write in their e-mail footers, put on their business cards, or otherwise become very well known for. Why do you think this is?

The reason Jim's signature blocks worked so well was that the "In Christ" he was signing his name with said it all to his potential clients. Think about what this communicated:

- I take this seriously.
- I am one of you.
- Like you, I am willing to be judged based on my faith, and to put it out there in the open.
- I am committed to being moral.
- I am a devout Christian.
- I should be trusted.
- I am a good person.

There are probably a lot of other things that signing his name "In Christ" connoted to the churches with whom Jim dealt. Nevertheless, the most important point is that, in signing his name like this, Jim was showing that *he stood for something*. The truth of the matter is that Jim believed very much in what he was writing, and it came across to the receivers of his messages. I am sure that signing his name "In Christ" probably did not work as well with auto dealerships. I can imagine what the average auto dealership thought when getting an estimate signed "In Christ" from Jim:

"Oh, shit! I hope this guy does not realize we are dishonest! I do not want to go to hell and had better avoid this guy!"

Despite not selling any auto dealerships and primarily only churches that summer, I would be willing to bet that Jim sold more total volume than he would have sold had he not stood for anything. Having that signature block made all the difference. When it comes down to it, when you stand for something and get behind an idea that represents who you are and what you represent (as long as it has positive connotations)--when you broadcast this to the world, you will do far better than if you do not get behind anything at all. I have seen it work this way always: The more you stand for something, the better you will ultimately do.

The people who put these little mission statements on the bottom of their e-mails may seem "cheesy" to some people, but they are also the same people you think of whenever you need "efficient service" or whatever the footer may say. I also think that the act of writing these missions down for many people motivates and reminds them to stand for something and get better at whatever skill it is that they want to be known for. It is better to stand for and be known for one thing than to not stand for anything--and to be known for nothing.

In your career, you should stand for and become known for something. Choose being friendly, being a hard worker, being a perfectionist, or something along those lines. The more you become known for something and the more you work on it, the better you will do.

In my first job out of law school, I worked for a federal judge. In this role, it was extremely important that typos were never, ever made in any of the [legal work](#) that I was doing. The reason was that the opinions our office wrote were sometimes published, and in all cases, they were looked at by numerous attorneys locally, and by attorneys working other cases around the country. Despite the fact that proofreading is not my greatest skill, I put all of my effort into this and decided that I needed to be exceptional at it if I were going to do well as an attorney. I truly went all-out in my proofreading.

When I started practicing law, I started getting compliments from partners and others I worked with about my proofreading skills, and pretty soon people started asking me to proof their work. Thinking back on this, I cannot believe that this ever happened. Even other young attorneys I worked with started asking me to review their work because they had heard I was good at this. I made this a skill of mine, doing my best to become known for this, because I thought it was the most important thing. It was an asset for me when I was practicing, and it helped me to do well as an attorney. I simply picked something I thought was important and then focused on it.

I no longer make being known for great proofreading a focus of my job, but I did at one time when I thought this was the most

important skill I could have, and something others would value. You need to be known for something and have a skill that others value. You want to do your best to focus on something in your career and do the best you can at something that others will appreciate. It is better to be known for something than for nothing at all.

THE LESSON

It is better to be known for something than nothing at all; make yourself known as having a skill that others value. Become known among your peers for being friendly, a hard worker, a perfectionist, or something else positive. Your success will grow as you become known for something and continue to work at it. Standing and being known for one thing is always preferable to being unknown.

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