

Successful people credit Cutco, the company that recruits college kids to sell knives, with teaching them business lessons that last for life

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John Ruhlin, Jon Levy, and Jennifer Gluckow all learned valuable lessons selling Cutco knives when they were younger. *John Ruhlin; Jon Levy; Jennifer Gluckow; Cutco; Samantha Lee/Business Insider.*

- **More than 1 million people have sold Cutco knives over the course of the company's 70-year history.**
- **Some of Cutco's most successful alumni include Uber cofounder Travis Kalanick and David Plouffe, manager of Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign.**
- **We talked to four successful Cutco alumni who said their experiences selling knives taught them about rejection, framing, and salesmanship.**

Chances are, you or someone you know has been recruited to sell Cutco knives at some point.

Advertisements to sell the famous cutlery, via Cutco's sales arm Vector Marketing, appear on school bulletin boards and at job fairs around the country. An estimated 60,000 people are hired as Vector sales representatives over the course of each year — usually young people looking for summer jobs and side hustles — to pitch Cutco knives through in-home personal demonstrations.

Although some people swear by the quality of the knives themselves, Cutco's reputation as a company has come under fire before. Vector has been sued in the past on allegations of violating state labor laws and misleading recruiting practices, and tales of negative Cutco work experiences abound on the internet.

But among the roughly 1.5 million Cutco alumni are successful people like Uber cofounder and former CEO Travis Kalanick, comedian Daniel Tosh, and David Plouffe, a senior adviser to Barack Obama and the manager of his 2008 presidential campaign. Other alumni include executives at companies like Facebook and Square and partners at the venture capital firms Menlo Ventures and Khosla Ventures.

For some of them, Cutco wasn't just a way to make extra cash — it taught them valuable business lessons they've carried through their careers.

Selling is all about framing

Jon Levy, a behavior scientist and author who created the Influencers Dinner networking event, said his experience selling Cutco knives as a college undergrad piqued his interest in human behavior.

One helpful lesson he learned was on the framing effect, the cognitive bias in which people's decisions are influenced by the way information is presented. For example, when Levy was scheduling an in-home appointment, he'd never ask the client something like "how's Friday?"

"They know they might have that one big thing on Friday in the evening, and they're like, oh my God, it's such a busy day," Levy told Business Insider. "We learned to frame questions differently: 'Are you free on Friday at 2, or is 4 o'clock better for you?'"

"That's the type of thing they would teach us, and I became really good at testing it."

You can find new ways to pitch the same product

As a 20-year-old Cutco rep in 2000, John Ruhlin quickly learned the knives sold better when he pitched them as potential business gifts— he once sold 100 paring knives in one appointment to a businessman who thought they'd make good gifts for his clients.

His company, Ruhlin Group, is now the world's biggest distributor of Cutco knives, allowing Ruhlin to claim he's the No. 1 salesman in the company's 70-year history. He wrote the book "Giftology" in 2016, and says a good corporate gift can increase a company's referrals and lead to long and meaningful relationships with clients.

The key to his success, Ruhlin said, was understanding that knives represented much more than just a kitchen tool.

"I realized nobody cared about the knife — they cared about what the knife does to a relationship, from including someone's spouse, or sending a gift to someone's assistant," Ruhlin told Business Insider. "We became their poster boy for how to use the product as a kind of differentiator in business. So it's never really been about the knives."

From his Cutco days, Ruhlin learned a good gift communicates that you value not only the recipient, but their inner circle, too. He said you'd be wise to target areas of their lives where they spend lots of time with people close to them, like the kitchen.

"Whether you make 50 grand a year or \$5 million a year, the hub of everybody's house, the intimate place of their house when they host friends and family, is the kitchen," Ruhlin said.

"Our whole goal is to get something in somebody's hands where you're remaining top-of-mind and triggering that memory of it being given by that particular person."

Alums got a head start developing resilience

Levy, who was a Cutco rep while attending New York University in the early 2000s, said the job taught him self-discipline and communication skills. He said the job is "great for people who are willing to get their butts kicked a little."

"If you want to succeed at anything, you've got to develop some grit," he said. "You need to be able to, like, come home after a day where you got rained on and sold nothing, and then have a support system in place to back you up. Because the next day — there were times I literally went into an appointment and sold \$30,000 and earned \$1,500."

Jennifer Gluckow, a sales trainer and speaker who wrote "Sales in a New York Minute," said she made "thousands" of dollars selling Cutco knives as a teenager in the late 1990s. The experience taught her how to deliver a sales pitch and, importantly, how to rebound after failing to seal the deal.

"Now, you go into a sales call, and adults — adults! — get so upset when they hear 'no,' and they take it personally that they've been rejected," she said. "One of the things Cutco taught me is that it's not personal."

For some, it sparked the entrepreneurial bug

For Gluckow, Cutco sparked a love of selling that led to a professional career.

"Just the thrill of seeing that success, not only in my bank account, but also on paper — being on top, that competitive spirit — was huge. That played a role in my entire sales foundation," Gluckow told Business Insider.

She even said she now seeks out potential hires who have Cutco on their résumés.

"If Cutco hired you, I know you're likely a self-starter, you're likely motivated to sell, you have a great sales foundation with training, and you've done something," Gluckow said. "You woke up and said, 'I want to go out and try this thing.'"

While most Cutco reps cut their teeth in the field, the top sellers are often called on to lead local division branches. That was the case for Michael Coscetta, who spent two summers in the early 2000s as a Vector Marketing manager in Rockville, Maryland, teaching the art of the sales pitch to hundreds of fresh hires.

Coscetta went on to become the global head of sales at Square, and is now chief sales and strategy officer at Compass, a real estate technology company.

"At 19, 20 years old, being able to say you ran a million-dollar business for a summertime, even if it's something as stupid and awkward as selling Cutco knives, it's pretty awesome," Coscetta told Business Insider.