

# **If Dale Carnegie Walked Into a Salon**

A thought experiment, ninety years on

By Colin Shove

I spent a few weeks recently writing a training guide for salon teams. The subject was the conversations stylists have with clients every day. The fine thanks, you that opens almost every visit. The mid service chat. The questions that come up over the colour bowl. The exchange at the till. Small moments, dozens of times a day, that almost everybody in the industry treats as ambient noise.

The argument I was making was that those conversations are not ambient at all. They are the single most under-used asset in any salon. Done on autopilot, they fill time. Done with purpose, they change the business.

About halfway through writing, I realised I was retreading ground.

Almost everything I was describing, the answers I was suggesting, the small shifts in language, the demonstration in place of explanation, the warm beginning, the assumptive close, had already been written. Not for salons. Not even for this century. In 1936, Dale Carnegie published *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, and ninety years later, more than 30 million copies in, it is still in print.

Carnegie never set foot in a salon. He was thinking about salespeople, executives, parents, public speakers. The salon as an environment did not exist in the form we know it. But the principles he laid down map, almost word for word, onto what happens behind a chair every day.

So this piece is a thought experiment. If Dale Carnegie were alive today, and you handed him a coffee and walked him through a busy Saturday morning in a good salon, what would he see? How would he weave that environment, the one his principles seem almost designed for, into his own framework?

Here is my attempt to write the chapter he never got to.

## **Why he would have loved the room**

The first thing Carnegie would notice is the environment itself. He spent his life arguing that real influence happens in calm, undivided, one to one conversations. The harder you push, the more people lean back. The more genuinely interested you are in them, the more naturally they lean in. He wrote that you cannot make anyone do anything, you can only create the conditions in which they want to do it themselves.

Now look at what a stylist has.

Anywhere from thirty minutes to several hours of one to one time with a client who is not distracted, not in a hurry, and not being interrupted by competing

messages. Established trust, because the client has chosen to come back and has handed over their appearance for the next few hours. A natural rhythm of conversation, because clients ask the same handful of questions every visit. The opportunity is in how those questions get answered.

Carnegie would have called this the ideal classroom for his principles. There is no environment in modern commerce better suited to them. A call centre cannot do it. A shop floor cannot do it. An online ad cannot do it. None of them come close. Yet many of the salons I see are treating this advantage as if it were not there. The conversation runs on autopilot. The how are you gets a fine thanks. The product gets used silently. The rebooking gets asked as a closing question rather than confirmed as a decision that has already been made.

## **The autopilot problem**

Before we get to the principles, it is worth being honest about why this happens.

The stylist is not lazy. Anyone who has spent a day on their feet behind a chair will tell you the job is anything but. The reason the conversation defaults is not effort, it is preparation. Nobody has handed the team a slightly better answer to the questions they get asked dozens of times a day. So they reach for the answer that requires nothing of anybody, which is fine thanks, you, and the moment passes.

The other reason the conversation defaults is that almost every attempt to fix it has been framed as sales training. Owners call a team meeting and say right, from now on, we need everyone asking clients for reviews and recommending the products we sell. The team nods, leaves the meeting, and nothing changes. Or something does change, but in the wrong direction. Clients start to feel a small pressure that was not there before, and the team start to dread the parts of the visit they used to enjoy.

Carnegie understood this nearly a century ago. His whole framework rests on the observation that the moment a person feels they are being sold to, they stop listening. So the question is not how to sell better in a salon. It is how to have a better conversation, knowing that the conversation is what does the work.

*"The only way on earth to influence other people is to talk about what they want and show them how to get it." Dale Carnegie*

## The nine principles, in the chair

Carnegie's book is built around a long list of principles, each one short, each one obvious in hindsight, each one quietly changing how you treat the next person you meet. What follows is not all of them. It is the nine that map most directly onto what happens behind a chair every day.

**Become genuinely interested in other people.** Almost every client can tell, within thirty seconds, whether their stylist is interested in them or going through the motions. The difference is not in what gets said. It is in the questions that get asked, the things that get remembered from last time, and the moments where the stylist looks up from the colour bowl and actually responds to what the client just told them. Notes on the booking system are the cheapest, most powerful tool a salon has. A line about the client's pet, their job, their last holiday, takes thirty seconds to write and pays back for years. Two visits later, when their dog is mentioned by name, the client is quietly amazed. That amazement is the foundation of every referral and every five star review they will ever give.

**Arouse in the other person an eager want.** Carnegie's example is fishing. You do not bait the hook with what you like to eat, you bait it with what the fish likes to eat. Obvious, once said. And it applies, almost word for word, to the how are you question. The autopilot answer does no work. The purposeful answer, *I am great actually, I got two referrals this week which really made my day*, plants a seed. The client now knows three things they did not know thirty seconds ago. That referrals happen. That referrals are valued. And that, by implication, their own recommendation would be welcomed. There has been no ask, so there is no pressure. But seeds, given time, grow.

**Talk in terms of the other person's interests.** The phrase that does all the heavy lifting here is *so that you can*. Every recommendation, every product, every rebooking interval can be reframed in terms of what the client gains. I am going to use this heat protector so that you can get the same smoothness when you style it at home. I would recommend coming back in six weeks so that you can keep the shape and it stays easy to manage. The grammar of *so that you can* will not let you end the sentence with a benefit to the salon. It forces the answer to be about the client.

**Make the other person feel important, sincerely.** Asking permission is the smallest sentence with the largest effect. *Are you happy for me to use this on your hair?* In one move, the client is treated as a partner in the decision, not the target of a pitch. The product gets introduced, the result gets demonstrated, and the client feels respected. Carnegie wrote that a person's name is the sweetest sound in any language. The same goes for any specific

detail you remember about them. None of it has anything to do with hair. All of it tells the client that they matter.

**Be a good listener. Encourage others to talk about themselves.** A poor consultation is a stylist telling a client what they should have done. A great consultation is a stylist asking the right questions and then actually listening. What is your morning routine. What products do you already use. What did you hate about your last cut. By the time the scissors come out, the client should already feel understood. That is not a coincidence, it is the product of listening properly for three minutes. The same applies during the service itself. The temptation is to fill silence with talk about yourself. Resist it. Let the client talk about what they want to talk about. The visit becomes about them, not about you.

**Let the other person feel the idea is theirs.** People are far more committed to ideas they have arrived at themselves than ideas they have been handed. If you tell a client they should buy a product, the decision is yours and the resistance is theirs. If you use the product, let them see and feel the result, and let them ask *what was that you used*, the decision is theirs and the resistance disappears. Every product applied during the visit is a quiet demonstration. The stylist's job is not to convince, it is to make sure there is something worth being convinced by, and then step back.

**Begin in a friendly way.** The conversation is decided in the first sixty seconds, not at the till. The client who is greeted warmly, by name, with a real question, has already started to relax. The client who is told to take a seat, I will be over in a minute, has not. Both clients will get the same haircut. They will not have the same experience. And only one of them will mention you to a friend. The seasonal opening is the simplest application. *Gosh, next time I see you it will be almost Christmas. You will be all set for your summer holiday.* These tiny comments do enormous work, connecting the rebooking to something real and planting the seed of the next visit without ever asking for it.

**Give the other person a fine reputation to live up to.** If you treat someone as if they already are the person you would like them to be, they will often become that person. *You are so good at staying on top of this, shall I get the next one in the diary while you are here. You always look after your hair so well between visits, this is the product I would actually recommend for you.* The client now has a reputation, and the rebooking or the retail purchase is the natural way to live up to it. Used sincerely, this is one of the kindest things you can do for a client. You are giving them a flattering, accurate picture of themselves, and they will work, quietly and willingly, to maintain it.

**Be assumptive, with permission already granted.** By the time the client reaches the till, the groundwork has been done. The consultation set the expectation. The commentary reinforced it. The product was demonstrated. The interval was explained. Now you simply follow through. *Do you prefer morning or afternoon*, not *would you like to rebook*. *Do you have this at home*, not *would you like to buy a product*. Assumptive questions only feel pushy when the groundwork has not been done. When it has, the assumptive question is not introducing a new decision, it is confirming one that has already been made.

## **Worked example: how reviews get talked into existence**

The principle of arousing an eager want is easiest to see when you apply it to one specific outcome. Take Google reviews, because every salon owner I have ever spoken to wants more of them, and almost no salon is using the conversation to get them.

There are two routes. The first, which lots of salons try, is asking. *Could you leave us a review when you get home?* It works sometimes. It makes everybody slightly uncomfortable every time. Asking puts the client on the spot and puts the stylist in the position of seeming to want something from them. The transaction has changed.

The second route is the one Carnegie was describing. The stylist does not ask. They answer questions they were going to be asked anyway, with answers that mention, in passing, that reviews exist and that they matter. The client decides what to do with the information. No pressure on either side.

This is not manifestation. Nobody is hoping the universe provides. It is the deliberate framing of routine answers so that they do a small piece of work in the background, every time the question gets asked. The questions are predictable. The answers can be prepared.

Five examples.

### **How are you?**

*Autopilot answer.* Fine thanks, you.

*Strategic answer.* Really good actually. We had a lovely review come in last night that made everyone smile. It is amazing how much those things mean when you are running around all day.

The client now knows reviews come in, that they are noticed, and that they matter. Some leave the chair thinking nothing of it. Some leave thinking they

should write one. None feel asked.

### **Have you been busy?**

*Autopilot answer.* Yes, really busy, you know how it is.

*Strategic answer.* Lovely and busy actually. We have had a brilliant few weeks. I think a couple of really kind Google reviews recently have brought new people in, which has been the best feeling.

This one does double work. It tells the client that reviews bring real clients through the door, so writing one is genuinely useful, not just a kindness. And it makes the salon sound like the kind of place worth recommending.

### **Have you got much on this weekend?**

*Autopilot answer.* Just the usual really.

*Strategic answer.* Probably just the usual. Honestly, the highlight of my week is when I check Google and find someone has taken the time to leave a review. It sounds a bit sad when I say it out loud, but it genuinely makes a Saturday.

This works because it is honest. It is the kind of thing a stylist would actually say if they were being open. And the small self deprecation, *it sounds a bit sad*, defuses any feeling of an ask.

### **Do you enjoy working here?**

*Autopilot answer.* Yes, love it.

*Strategic answer.* I really do. We had a review last week where the client described the salon better than we ever could. Those are the moments that remind you why you do the job.

A new client hearing this is being told two things at once. That the salon is a happy place, which they want to know. And that reviews are noticed and treasured, which plants the seed for later.

### **What is the difference between you and other salons?**

*Autopilot answer.* Oh, you know, we just really care about our clients.

*Strategic answer.* Honestly, the best answer to that is not from me, it is from our Google reviews. Our clients describe what we do better than we ever could.

This one works in two directions. The new client now has a reason to look up the reviews, which means the existing reviews work harder. And any existing client overhearing it is being shown, clearly, that the salon values what its

clients say about it.

The same five questions get asked every day. The autopilot answers do nothing. The strategic ones, repeated quietly across a small team, are how reviews get talked into existence.

## **Worked example: how referrals get earned without being asked for**

The same pattern works for referrals, and the salon is the best room in the world for them. A referral carries more weight than a review, because it comes from a person the new client already trusts, not a stranger on a screen. But the rule is the same. The moment a salon asks directly, the magic vanishes. Asking turns the recommendation from a gift into a chore.

So you do not ask. You answer routine questions with answers that show, in passing, that referrals matter, that they happen, and that the salon notices.

Five examples.

### **How are you?**

*Autopilot answer.* Fine thanks, you.

*Strategic answer.* Honestly, brilliant. Two new clients in this week came through people who already come to us, which is the highest compliment going. You spend a lot of this job hoping people will tell their friends, so when they do, it makes the week.

The client now knows that referrals happen, that they are noticed, and that they are treasured. None of which they were thinking about thirty seconds ago.

### **Have you been busy?**

*Autopilot answer.* Yes, you know how it is.

*Strategic answer.* Really busy actually, and the lovely thing is a lot of the new clients have been friends and sisters of regulars. They walk in already trusting us, which makes everyone's job easier. That stuff happens slowly and then all at once.

This one does double work. It frames referrals as how the salon actually grows, and it signals to the existing client that their recommendation would land in fertile ground.

**How long have you been doing hair?**

*Autopilot answer.* Around twelve years.

*Strategic answer.* Twelve years, and the bit that has not got old in twelve years is when someone books in and tells me a friend sent them. That is the best feeling in this job by some distance. It still feels like a proper compliment every time.

The client has just been told, with no ask attached, that sending a friend would do something quietly important. It costs the stylist nothing to say. It plants a seed that can sit for months.

**It always feels like such a calm place to come.**

*Autopilot answer.* Aw, thank you!

*Strategic answer.* That is honestly the nicest thing. The clients who come through other clients all tend to say the same thing, which I think is because the people you would send here are the people you already think would fit in. The salon kind of curates itself that way.

This is the smartest answer in the set. It tells the client that referrals are how the salon's character gets preserved. Send a friend, and you are not just doing the salon a favour, you are protecting the room. That is a far more powerful idea than the polite version.

**It is so quiet today.**

*Autopilot answer.* Yeah, Tuesdays are always like this.

*Strategic answer.* Tuesdays! They are always our quietest. The funny thing is we have basically never advertised, we have grown through people telling their friends. So a busy Saturday is just a bunch of people who all know someone who came in on a Tuesday.

The client now knows two things. That the salon does not advertise, which makes their recommendation more meaningful. And that the room around them, the one they are enjoying, was built by people doing exactly what they could do.

The mechanism is the same across all five. The stylist answers a routine question with an answer that names what they are quietly hoping for. The client decides what to do with the information. Some send friends that week. Some never do. None feel asked.

## **Worked example: how rebooking gets agreed before the till**

Rebooking sits differently from reviews and referrals, because the decision happens in front of the stylist, at the till. The seed and the harvest are minutes apart. So the strategic answers have to do their work earlier in the visit, during the consultation and the commentary, not afterwards.

The principle at work here is *let the other person feel the idea is theirs*. By the time the till question gets asked, the client has already decided that the next appointment matters. They are not being asked to make a new decision, they are being asked to confirm one that was made an hour ago.

Five examples.

### **How long should I leave it between visits?**

*Autopilot answer.* Whatever suits you really.

*Strategic answer.* For colour like yours, six weeks is the sweet spot. Any longer and the regrowth starts pulling the eye, and we end up doing more work next time, not less. To keep it looking the way it does today, we want to see you back around six weeks.

The interval has now been tied to a result the client cares about, which is the colour looking like it does today. The till question becomes easy, because the decision is already made.

### **My hair grows so fast.**

*Autopilot answer.* Mine too, it is annoying!

*Strategic answer.* It really does, and that is actually useful information. It means the trick for you is shorter gaps, not longer ones. If we keep you to six weeks, your hair never gets to the point where it feels like it is fighting you. Stretch it to ten and we are catching up rather than maintaining.

The client just gave the stylist a fact about themselves. The stylist used it to build the case for a shorter interval, in language the client cannot disagree with because it is built on something they said.

### **I always leave it too long, I am terrible.**

*Autopilot answer.* Don't worry, lots of people do!

*Strategic answer.* The good news is that is a fixable problem. The clients who never feel that way are the ones who book the next one in while they are still in the chair. By the time you are sat at home wondering when to ring, you have

already pushed past the easy version of the appointment. Want me to lock the next one in before you go?

This is a *fine reputation to live up to* answer. The client has identified themselves as someone who slips. The stylist has reframed them as someone who could easily be on top of it, and offered the path. The till question is now welcomed, not endured.

### **Will it last until my holiday?**

*Autopilot answer.* It should be fine!

*Strategic answer.* It will, but you will be right at the edge. If your holiday is six weeks away, the colour is just starting to drop by the time you fly. Better to book you in for the week before, so you go away with it looking sharp instead of spending the last week thinking about it.

The booking has now been tied to the holiday, which is something the client cares about far more than the rebooking itself. The decision feels practical, not transactional.

### **What do you think we should do today?**

*Autopilot answer.* Whatever you fancy!

*Strategic answer.* I would do X. And to keep it looking like that, the bit that matters as much as the cut is the timing. We want to see you every six weeks if we are going to keep this shape. If we set that rhythm from today, you never get to the point where the in-between feels like work.

The rebooking has now been built into the recommendation itself. The consultation is no longer about what to do today, it is about what to do today *and* how to keep it. The till question becomes the closing of a loop the client has been part of from the start.

By the till, the question is no longer would you like to rebook. It is morning or afternoon. The client agreed, an hour earlier, that this is what they wanted.

## **Worked example: how retail gets demonstrated, not sold**

Retail is the conversation stylists worry about, because in everyone's mind it sits closest to selling. Which is exactly why handling it as a sale almost never works. The Carnegie answer is to never explain a product, only demonstrate it. The strategic answers below all sit downstream of a moment when the client has noticed something the demonstration has created.

That is the key shift. In retail, the strategic answers are responses, not openings. The product gets used silently and confidently during the visit. The client comments, asks, sniffs, touches. The answer to that moment is what does the work.

Five examples.

### **What are you using on my hair?**

*Autopilot answer.* Oh, it is just our blow-dry cream.

*Strategic answer.* This one. I am using it because of the way your hair takes heat, and it is what is giving you the smoothness you can see in the mirror right now. The bit nobody tells you about home styling is that the product is doing eighty percent of the work. The brush is there to direct the result.

The client has just been told that the product in front of them is creating the result they are looking at. The decision to take one home is now theirs, and they have all the information they need to make it.

### **My hair always goes flat by lunchtime at home.**

*Autopilot answer.* Yeah, it can be tricky.

*Strategic answer.* Almost always that is because the product you are using at home is not pulling its weight. I am using this on you right now and it is the difference between hair that holds and hair that drops. If you ever wanted to swap one thing out at home, this is the one I would replace first.

The problem the client just stated has been linked, in the same breath, to a product they can feel working on their head. No pitch happened. The client has been given useful information.

### **How do you get it to look this good?**

*Autopilot answer.* Lots of practice!

*Strategic answer.* Honestly, the products are doing almost all of it. I am just blow-drying it, but with the right things on it, it falls into shape on its own. The skill is in picking the right product, not in the brushwork. The brushwork is the easy bit.

This reframes the result. The client probably assumed the magic was in the stylist's hands. Being told the magic is in the product is the moment retail starts to make sense to them.

**This smells lovely.**

*Autopilot answer.* Doesn't it!

*Strategic answer.* Doesn't it. That is this one here, the same ingredient that softens the cuticle is the bit that gives it the smell. Lots of clients end up wanting one to take home because the smell is the bit they notice in the moment, and the result is the bit they notice the next morning.

The client has been given a reason to want the product without anyone asking them anything. The decision sits with them, where it belongs.

**What would you recommend I use at home?**

*Autopilot answer.* Well, we sell loads of nice things, let me show you when we are done.

*Strategic answer.* For what you are working with, this one. If you only had one product on the shelf at home, this is the one that does the work, so that you can get the same finish without having to fight your hair every morning. The other things are nice to have. This one is the one I would actually use if your hair was mine.

The phrase *the one I would actually use if your hair was mine* is the line in retail that does the heaviest lifting. It signals genuine recommendation rather than upsell. Clients can tell the difference.

The pattern across all five is the same. The product is being used. The client has noticed. The stylist's answer connects what the client is enjoying to the product creating it, and then stops there. The client reaches their own conclusion about whether to take one home. No selling has happened. A demonstration has, and the conversation has done the rest.

## **What happens when the principles are in use**

This is the part the spreadsheets care about, and the part owners are usually thinking about when they pick this kind of guide up in the first place.

Within a few weeks of a team starting to use this approach, the salon begins to feel different. Clients comment on how attentive everyone is. Reviews appear without anyone asking for them. Referrals arrive from clients who have never referred before. Rebookings get suggested by the client at the till, sometimes before the stylist has mentioned the interval. The average bill rises, not by any single dramatic step, but by the quiet compounding of small purposeful moments throughout the visit. Frequency improves, because the rebooking is tied to a result the client now cares about maintaining.

And then there is retail, which is worth lingering on because the gap there is so striking. 100% of salon clients buy hair products. Every single one of them. Shampoo, conditioner, something to style with, often something to protect with. Around 95% of them buy those products somewhere other than the salon they sit in. The person they trust to advise them on their hair is the one holding the brush. The product they would benefit from is the one being used on them. And almost all of them walk past it on the way out and buy something else on a Tuesday in Boots. The gap is not because the product is wrong. It is because the conversation around it never happened. Purposeful conversation closes that gap quietly, with no pitch, by letting the demonstration do the work and the client reach their own conclusion.

None of these outcomes require anyone to sell anything. The principles do the work. The reviews, the referrals, the rebookings, the retail, the rising average bill, are byproducts of a better conversation, not the goal of one.

That distinction matters. Set them as the goal and the team feel the pressure, the clients feel the pressure, and the whole thing falls over. Treat them as the natural consequence of conversations that finally do what the chair has always allowed them to do, and they arrive on their own.

## **What Carnegie would say at the team meeting**

If Carnegie were here, I think he would tell salon owners three things at the team meeting where this gets introduced.

First, do not call it sales training. The word is a flag for everybody in the room. Call it what it is, which is having a slightly better conversation than the one already happening.

Second, do not set targets. The moment you say I want to see five extra reviews this week, you have reintroduced the pressure the approach is designed to remove. The reviews come, the referrals come, the rebookings come, but they come because the conversations changed, not because anyone was chasing a number.

Third, lead with what the team get out of it. Stylists want to feel like experts. They want clients who trust them. They want the satisfaction of a referral. That is what this approach gives them. The improved business outcomes are a byproduct.

Then hand them the principles and let each of them try one thing. Pick the principle that feels natural. Try it on a few clients. See what happens. That is genuinely all it takes.

## **The chapter he missed**

Carnegie wrote his book in 1936. He was thinking about salespeople and executives and parents, and he never set foot in a salon as far as we know. But every principle he laid out finds, in the chair, an almost perfect home. The salon is, in many ways, what Carnegie was describing all along. A space where the relationship is the product. Where trust is built over time, one conversation at a time. Where the small things, remembered names, sincere compliments, real questions, do more work than any clever pitch ever could.

Your team are already having these conversations. They are already being asked the same handful of questions every day. The only thing standing between an autopilot answer and a purposeful one is preparation. Pick a principle. Choose what to plant. Let the conversation do the work.

Carnegie would have loved this room. The pity is he never wrote the chapter.

So here, for what it is worth, is mine.