

I got the call at 2:30.

You see, my wife and I just had our first child last Monday. She is home on maternity leave, and is already antsy. Her request? Try and negotiate an early turn in on the lease on her Honda Accord, and get her into a lease on a Honda Pilot ... the vehicle she has been eying down for two years now.

We were of like mind as to the terms of any potential deal. She was paying \$350 a month now on her Accord, and had 15 months left. That needed to be ripped up at no cost to us. She would pay no more than \$450 a month on the new ride, and we would put nothing down. We needed 15,000 miles a year, and bumper to bumper throughout the entire terms of the new lease. We wanted a brand new Pilot with leather and a moonroof, which would be a better vehicle for children.

Heading to the dealer, I put my chances at 50/50. After talking to some buddies in the business, and laying out my demands ... I received mixed responses from the three people I talked to whose opinions I trust. The wild card was that all dealers treat early trade-ins on leases a little differently, especially if you want to lease again and not buy. My wife had talked on the phone during the day with a gentleman to briefly outline what she was looking to do, and he was awaiting my arrival after I got off work. I implore her always never to talk numbers, and to let me handle that end. My wife is a smart woman, but is not nearly cutthroat enough to be speaking numbers with peeps that peddle cars. Anything she could say would only hurt her, and one miscalculated statement would and could be reused against the both of us throughout the entire terms of the negotiation.

Driving to the dealership, I felt almost guilty at how excited this made me. There are few experiences in life that more fully test the art of one on one negotiation skills than fighting for price on a vehicle. It's a true test of good versus evil. I, of course, am good ... and fighting valiantly to save my family money by negotiating the monthly payment down as low as possible. The dealership, represented by the salesman, is evil ... and is out to screw me over as bad as humanly possible. They have profitability floors they must adhere to, and every penny on top of that goes in the pockets of the salesman and the dealership. Rarely do people get their price down as low as they can if they just tried a little harder. I'm one of those SOB's that fights for every penny.

As I entered the show room, I put on my game face, and thanked the high heavens that I had went mano y mano with the 3 hour old pot of coffee still on the burner this afternoon. I felt sharp, I felt ready, I had a plan.

I went right to the customer service desk and asked for my guy. She called his name on the intercom, and I saw him react from across the showroom. He was at his desk, without customers. He came right over, introduced himself, mentioned speaking to my wife, then asked if I could wait five minutes while he finished up some paperwork.

About a minute after telling him that was fine, I realized what this bastard was doing. He was icing me like I was Adam Vinatieri with 30 seconds left in the Super Bowl. He had sized me up,

and was now deciding how to attack me like a surgeon about to enter the OR. This realization made me even more determined, more focused. This guy was trying to take food out of my kids mouth, and I wasn't going to stand for it.

While being iced down, I came up with a great idea for new legislation that would force dealerships to hand out stickers saying "I've been helped" to those waiting on someone to get back with them. In the ten minutes I spent waiting in the lobby, I felt more scrutinized than a Porterhouse steak on Rosie O'Donnell's dinner plate, as no less than three different shady salesmen in white dress shirts and moderately priced neckwear tried to suck their fangs into me and my checking account, only to be dismayed to find I had "already been helped".

It was clear I was dealing with a veteran of the business, and I was not surprised at all when the salesman told me 30 seconds into our conversation that he used to manage a dealership, and came out of retirement to sell Hondas because he was bored and they sell themselves. We walked over to my wife's current vehicle, which had to be assessed before we could start talking hard figures. The car is mint shape, was at or below her mileage limits. It was at this point when I told him that we had no real interest in doing anything unless we were blown away by an offer, and that we were more than content to ride the lease out ... a clear lie and negotiating ploy he likely gets all the time. He radioed over a guy who looked like a short version of actor Brian Dennehey, whose sole job appeared to be evaluating price on used vehicles. He took my wife's ride for a spin, and the salesman and I went back inside.

No numbers had been spoken yet, and I had designs on letting him do most of the talking. Often in negotiations, the less you say the better, and I wanted to see where his first move would come in at.

We BS'd for a minute, then got word the car was in very good shape, which I was also waiting for. I asked for some ballpark numbers, and he mentioned that the figures he worked up earlier ... without accounting for perfect vehicle trade in condition ... was \$487 a month. I told him we were just wasting time, and that was not in the same stratosphere as what we were thinking. We also went back and forth on the ramifications of ending a lease early. He saw it as us still owing almost 5 grand on the car (\$350 x 15 months). I saw it as them getting back a car over blue book, and a customer for another 4 years instead of us riding it out and going down the street to Mentor Mits and getting a new Galant for 299/mo. Luckily for me, I happened to notice a piece of shit Accord, same year, less car, roughly same miles that they were selling in the lot for 18k. I noted that the buyout on our present lease was just 17k, and that we could sell it for at least 20k if they were getting 18k for that piece of junk.

He implored me to hold on, and that he had to "speak with his manager" now that they saw the trade in.

"Speaking with the manager" means going over to that guy at the computer that they get prices from. He came back 5 minutes later and said "they were able to stretch it all the way down to \$467 a month". I kindly reiterated my position that we would be better served waiting until our current lease was over, or close to over, and trying again. I then came back with my first mention of price, saying it would take getting the price "well under \$450 a month" to pique our

interest, and asked him for my keys back.

His next move was predictable, and he had thus far played in my hands like putty. He says ... "OK. I'll go get the keys. Your wife was on a 3 year lease, right?" We both knew it was a 4 year lease, and I corrected him, as he desired. He then said "that could change things, let me go run this past him one more time."

While waiting for him to again consult with the Guy At The Computer, I got up and started pacing like I was eager to leave. I then realized that Brian Dennehey was also the Guy At The Computer. After 5 minutes of waiting, I walked over by the duo, consulting in whispers by the counter. Sales Guy said they could get it to \$459. I more forcefully asked Brian Dennehey for my keys, and said I would sign right now if they could get me a price of \$439, anything more was just wasting our time. He said he may be able to get there without leather interior. I pretended to call my wife, then let them know leather was something she had to have and was non-negotiable. After another 5 minutes of fabricated number crunching, they said they could do it.

However, a couple minutes later they revealed that the \$439 price was only with bumper-to-bumper coverage for the 1st 3 years of the 4 year lease. They then told me that \$454 was the best they could do adding the 4th year warranty. I balked, told them my position was clear, and that \$439 was the price that would get it done. I gave them my card, told them to call my cell phone if they could get there, and until then had no interest.

I got into my car, and my phone rang about 5 minutes later. They said they could do \$449, and that was bare bones. I realized that I had achieved my initial objective. But disturbingly, it was no longer good enough. I wanted more. I figured that worst case, I could still call back and get that deal tomorrow ... and the chances were better than 50/50 that they cave on the \$439 price this week. They were horrified when I passed on their offer.

Will my strategy pay off? Are we better served waiting? Should I have pulled the trigger? Am I a sicko that takes too much pleasure in this whole experience?