

# The Confessions of a Company Rep: Jase Alphonso

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The Confessions of a Company Rep

By Jase Alphonso

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In memory of my grandfather

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## The Beginning

It all began when I answered an advert in the local newspaper. I had been unemployed for a year. My previous job had been in telephone sales for a construction company. It involved calling local building companies in order to either sell or rent out construction equipment. I also arranged appointments for our sales guys to visit prospective construction sites. It involved a lot of cold calling. I looked through the Yellow Pages and trade directives in order to source prospective leads. It was a tough task and I'd dread Monday morning meetings when I was expected to have all these leads for our sales guys. Having had no training I was left to my own devices, which resulted in almost near zero results. It didn't help that the Office Foreman took an instant dislike to me. He was a giant of a chap, built like a barn door and swore like a trooper. It wasn't just me, he took a dislike to a female colleague in the office. She was my ally and had taken time to introduce me into the office. Having been there years she knew what he was like. Our manager had no control over him. This guy had a hold over him and always got his way. My manager was forever joking about. He would say if I got all my work done by lunchtime I could go home, but what was my work? He gave me no guidance.

Back to my nemesis. I think he didn't like me because of what I was earning. He had opened an envelope addressed to me, which was my contract, so he saw what my salary was. He was not happy as he was no doubt earning less than me. I was over qualified for the position, having an honours degree. At the interview my prospective boss was so pleased with me he offered me the job there and then. When asked how much I wanted, I said £20,000, even though I had been unemployed for a year and previously only earned £12,000. My granddad would always say ask for more than you want because they'll always come down, but you'll probably still get more than you really wanted. He come down to £18,000. Result!

With no training I had no idea what I was doing. I was sent out to another branch. My boss gave me a hire car to get into London. In that branch my counterpart was really helpful. A completely different environment. He gave me lots of tips and I went back to my depot full of confidence. I got back at 6pm and my nemesis was still there. He gave me a lot of grief about bringing back the car, something about not filling it up with petrol. I had enough. We had a brief argument, I ended it by throwing the keys at him and walking out. That wasn't the end of it. The next day I was made to pay for it. My boss told me I was to work outside in the yard. It involved the menial task of humping scaffolding around the yard, under the instruction of my nemesis. From arriving at the office in my suit at the leisurely hour of 8.30am I was now coming in at 7.30am, dressed like a tramp. I'm a slight guy and was not adept at lifting heavy pieces of scaffolding. The final straw was having to do a stock take on a Saturday morning. Do you know how interesting it is counting pieces of scaffolding? I think it is on a par with watching paint dry. I survived all this without a hint of complaining.

It was not enough for my nemesis. He turned the screw by having words with my boss. Next thing I knew I was on a disciplinary charge, if you can call it that. It was just a letter listing some unbelievable statements. A lack of communication between myself and team members. I thought that was a two way process. It was laughable. Only five people were in the office. My nemesis had one on his side, but that was all. The manager would pop in now and then. I responded to the letter, but in the end I gave up and resigned, stating a so called member of staff and I were having difficulties which could not be resolved. After a few months that was it. I was once again unemployed and had given up all hope of ever getting another job.

A year went by and nothing materialised. I applied for the position of an Area Retail Merchandiser, which had been advertised in the local paper. This was back in 2004. The position was with a manufacturer of household goods and it involved visiting high street department stores to make sure the company's products were merchandised correctly. Other duties included, recording stock levels and implementing the appropriate point of sale, e.g. branding, price cards, brochures and price lists. I would give staff training and deal with faulty returns. It sounded ideal, out on my own, no boss on my back all the time and a company car thrown in. I would be a representative for the brand. I applied out of hope more than anything. To my surprise I got an interview.

The company was based a distance from me so the Personnel Manager came down and interviewed me in a local hotel. It went well, so well that I got a second interview, this time with the Sales Manager. In the meantime I got a reply from another advert I had replied to. Not as glamorous, it was for a job cleaning carpets. The job was basic, menial and hard physical work. I'm not averse to hard work but having graduated from university I felt the company would be getting the most from the arrangement. The company car turned out to be a van. I declined the offer and banked on my other one coming up trumps. The second interview had gone fine. Imagine my shock when they phoned me back to say I hadn't got it. My only consolation was it had been a close run thing.

I was back where I started. Why had I been so stupid to turn down the other job? When would I get another opportunity? I kept on looking. A few weeks later I got a phone call about the job I had just missed out on. The person they had employed had left after only a week. The company piled it on and said I definitely wasn't a certainty for the position but I was the next best candidate. Still had to be interviewed again. I tried to contain my excitement. They paid for my train up to see them. It was an official interview with the Personnel Manager. He gave nothing away, but I knew the job was mine. He let me go home still wondering. A few days later I got the call I expected.

## Induction

I'd be managing my local area, but for my first week I had to travel up to the company for my induction. It was all the usual formalities you have to go through when starting with a new company. I won't bore you with these. It wasn't all company based. After seeing how the products were made I was given a schedule for the remaining week. It involved going out with a couple of colleagues, the first was Katherine, who looked after the North area. I should have been watching how she did the job, instead she used me to do the work for her. I remember standing in the middle of a shop floor with a report in my hand, trying to count the stock as I had been shown. I looked around for Katherine but she was nowhere. My motivation started to sap. When she did come back she expected me to have finished, forgetting this was my first stock count. I could sense she was in a hurry to get to her next call. We finished the day early, which meant a quick return to my hotel. She dispatched me at reception and was off.

Next day I met up with Marcus. He had worked in my position before being promoted. We met up in a car park at midday. He was an interesting character, very particular in his manner. Always kept his distance and certainly let me know he was the boss. He was in complete contrast to Katherine. She didn't seem to care for the job whereas Marcus was the complete opposite, going overkill on the simplest of things. He made the job seem more difficult than it was. He had done it for seven years and didn't want me to be able to pick it up in five minutes. He felt very close to his customers, not wanting to let go of them. I remember one time how he put me down in front of one of them. A display he had left me to do was apparently so bad it had to be done again and of course he told me this in front of the customer. The customer liked it and I had done it according to the company guidelines, but he had to find something wrong with it. I think the customer felt embarrassed for me. I started to despair until I met Pete. He was an American who managed the South East/South West areas. I met him at a service station on the M25. He was built like a barn door. A hulk of a guy, but such a nice person, the most helpful colleague I had met so far. He had a laid back approach which put me at ease. I was nervous and he kept telling me to relax. This was at odds with his driving. Trying to keep up with him in my car was no easy task. He put his foot down. We both had estates. I didn't know the area and in those days I didn't have a sat nav. My main concern was getting lost. I remember following him up onto a motorway trying to keep up with him, but he was too fast for me. We drove onto it and passed a speed camera. I phoned him hands free and asked if he hadn't seen the speed camera. "It's not working", he replied. I guess he knew, it was his territory.

I had never driven an estate and my first few days were of panic trying to adapt to it. Car parks were a nightmare. Pete took me to a very dark narrow multi storey. He had found a place and I was meant to go in one a couple of cars away. I always liked to reverse in, so there I was backwards and forwards. My pet hate was having a car behind me. I could sense their urgency, I knew they were watching and thinking that I couldn't park the car. Pete was as cool as a cucumber and directed me. I got out with my face as red as a tomato, all my excuses at the ready. He just shrugged it off as no big deal. That was his attitude with everything. I walked down the street with him and thought, yeah bring it on, let's do this, and so we did.

His relaxed manner was no act, it was just him and his customers warmed to this, seeing he was genuine. It's funny, there are so many books written on sales techniques but at the end of the day the customer is only human like you and me and just wants to feel a connection with that salesperson, someone they can trust, that understands them, and you can't do that under a multitude of textbook techniques. No acts, no gimmicks, and the customers warmed to him.

Not all the sales guys were so laid back. My next colleague came across as laid back but when push came to shove he was far from it. He was a bit pessimistic. Having said that, he was a lovely chap. I remember the meetings. The sales guys would have to report on their current sales accounts. The

four other guys would go through theirs quite smoothly, then would come Len. Whether the figures were good or bad for a particular account he never cut loose. He would always add just one more thing. Like in Columbo when you thought the detective had finished, he would turn around and add just one more thing. If the figures were good I'd wish he stopped there, but he would add something which would then raise questions from his manager. Sometimes you need to know when to call and when to fold. If the figures were bad he would try to justify them, some might say it was an excuse, but often he talked a lot of sense.

He could be a bit negative. When asked how many new ranges he could sell in, there would be a brief pause and everybody knew what was coming next. He would contradict what his manager thought he could sell. There were numerous reasons why, too many to mention. That frustrated me. I saw these new ranges and thought, "Wow these are good". I would have been really enthusiastic to have sold them, but he had already talked himself out of selling them. You have to like the product or at least pretend to if you want others to buy it. I'm sure his negative vibes were passed onto his customers. I didn't know his customers. Maybe they wouldn't be so keen to take those new ranges without the right incentive. I wasn't in his shoes so shouldn't have really judged him and of course I didn't.

He was the complete contrast of the Irish guys. They were always upbeat, even when things didn't look good they always managed to laugh about it with their manager. I suppose it helped that their manager was from Northern Ireland. We had two Irish guys, one from the republic and one from Northern Ireland. I always got confused which was which, their accents sounded similar to me. It didn't help that they were both called Duncan and looked similar. Only clue was when they talked about money, one in sterling and the other in euros. Both were fun guys, especially on nights out. Rick their manager, was tall, dark, slim build, and according to the ladies a bit of a looker. I think he had a wife but he never talked about her. Never knew what his title was but he seemed to be high up in the company. He was always in charge of the meetings and organising everything. Always in discussion with the Sales Director. Appearances can be deceptive, as I was to realise years later.

## Learning on the Job

Not long after I started I was asked to help with a company tour. A large group of staff from a number of stores were waiting for me at our factory. I walked in and there was my boss and a young lady chatting away with them. I wasn't sure who she was. Her name was Clara. She had been doing my role for a couple of months. She seemed quite shy. Our job was to bring up the rear of the group as the tour went around all parts of the company factory. It was a great insight for me as I was learning along with them. I was impressed, it was so well organised. We stopped for lunch which gave me a good opportunity to meet some of my customers for the first time. I was a bit nervous but I think we got on well and the lunch was lovely.

My boss was in his forties. Softly spoken. Came across as laid back but would have minor little outbursts. I say outbursts, but he never raised his voice, just gave me a look and talked in a strict tone like a headmaster. He greeted me on my first day. I was nervous waiting at reception. He jogged downstairs all smiles and shook my hand. His first comment was to criticise me for wearing a tie. I didn't know what to think, it wasn't the first reaction I hoped for, but as they say, first impressions count. I'd rather have been too smart than not smart enough. He was smart, just didn't wear a tie. That seems to be commonplace now, even politicians are seen without one. I guess I'm old fashioned. I always feel naked without a tie. With a tie I mean business, without it

I'm saying I'm not that bothered. Society doesn't dress up as much it did. I like old fashioned glamour from the forties. I think we've lost that in society. Men don't feel the need for a suit and tie and women think less is sexier. When in fact I don't think that's the case. In films from the forties and fifties the women wore glamorous outfits which I think are on a par with today's fashion. I digress.

My boss wanted to come and visit me in my area. He suggested that he visit me in London, the most important place in my area. Unfortunately for me it was the most difficult place for me to get to. I lived only twenty miles away but as I was later to find out it would take me two hours to get there. I never went to London until I started in the job. We were due to meet at nine in the morning and I didn't get there until half ten. I had left at eight, thinking an hour would be more than enough. It was only twenty miles. Bad enough being stuck on the M4 for an hour but the London traffic was a law unto itself. I had no sat nav and no time to think, couldn't just stop anywhere to read a map. I was told which car park to go to and where to find it but it was easier to find on the map than when I was on the road. It was somewhere near Marble Arch. I ended up going round in circles.

That wasn't the end of it, when I got to the car park I had to park my estate car. It was underground, very dark and cramped. How was I to park it? I don't know how I did it. Took me long enough. Then I had to get out of the car. Only just managed to squeeze out of the door. I'm not a big guy but the spaces were so narrow. I was so stressed, but just relieved to have parked the car. It couldn't get any worse. Yes it did. I found the store and there was my boss waiting for me. I went in very apologetic. It wasn't enough for him, no leeway for it being my first time in London. He tore into me. I had never been so stressed, so I retaliated and told him where to go. I said if he didn't like it he could sack me. He backtracked and said he didn't want to do that. I was so fired up after having a nightmare to get there. The last thing I needed was to be chastised. At that precise moment I couldn't have cared less if he had got rid of me.

My boss came with me to my stores to introduce me to managers and staff on the shop floor. He'd tell them I'd visit once a month to merchandise and do general housekeeping. That was it. Our products covered a large area of the department. Impossible to miss us. Our branding was all over the place, on back walls, pillars and fixtures. This was Oxford Street, our main store, so everything was bigger and better than anywhere else. For this reason I was continually told how important it was to get this one looking the best and make sure I visit regularly. I had to go there fortnightly.

After a brief look around it was probably too much for my boss. "Right let's go and discuss this over a coffee", he declared. I thought this is okay. We spent five minutes trying to find the coffee shop, even though they had several, just not on our floor. He had a penchant for Danish pastries. I tend not to eat between meals but I'm partial to a cappuccino. Whenever he went out with me this was the usual routine. A quick brief look around and then off for a Danish pastry. We only had time for one store visit instead of three. If I had done that every day I would never have got around all my stores. He commented about what an easy, relaxing job I had. This was just after we had been talking to some attractive female staff. For him this was a day out from the office, whereas my normal routine was never like this. It was usually being stuck on the M25 for hours. In half an hour after leaving home I would get just nine miles, if I was lucky. It often took me fifteen minutes just to get one mile down the road.

One of my first store visits was with Alice, one of the Account Managers. We went to a store in Reading. She did all the talking and introduced me to the manageress. It was a rude awakening. She shook my hand and asked if I'd had any experience. I was stunned, I said no, but bear in mind I had an honours degree in Business Studies, I thought it wasn't rocket science. Several visits later she was still frosty towards me until I eventually thawed her out and we got on quite well. I never saw Alice much after that. Saw her in a few meetings, she was always very vocal. Then she got

pregnant. Not by me I hasten to add. We all went out to dinner to say goodbye to her. We had a regular hotel we went to, over the years that changed, but you couldn't beat the original.

## Fitting In

When I was training I stayed in a small village hotel not far from the company. I'll never forget my first overnight stay. I was with the National Sales Manager and one of the sales guys. No ordinary sales guy, he had been with the company since he left school and was close to retirement. He knew more about the company than the National Sales Manager. It made for great verbal sparring in the meetings. We had dinner together. They saw a guy dining on his own, so they invited him over to our table. He was Italian. Next thing I know we were downing shots. First British ones, then our guest ordered us Italian ones. This was on top of the wine we had drunk for dinner. I wasn't good with shots but I had to keep up as I had just started with the company and was looking to impress. Don't ask me how many we had. I remember going to bed and feeling the room spinning. Before I knew it vomit was shooting from my mouth and going everywhere but mainly all over the bed and floor. I could hardly move but I knew I had to clear the mess up. That was easier said than done, I was in no fit state. I cleaned as much as I could, or so I thought.

I woke the next day, still fully clothed on top of the bed. I realised it hadn't been a bad dream, I had the evidence there to remind me. In the cold light of day the vomit didn't seem to have been eradicated. I did the usual things, drink water, have a coffee and try to sober up. I didn't really get hangovers, sure I felt a bit rough but no thumping headaches. After I had recovered I set to work trying to leave my room in a decent condition. I lost count of the amount of tissues and toilet paper I used to clear up the residue. I knew I couldn't leave the sheets and floor spotless but I thought if they were left not too bad I'd be okay. They would be washed. One thing I couldn't get rid of was the smell. That awful sick smell. It lingered around for ages. I had to hurry or I'd be late for breakfast. I went downstairs and had the full works, eggs, bacon and everything. My colleagues had already left for the office. These guys were hard-core. They partied hard but also worked hard. True professionals. Me? I was just in time for my meeting.

When I met them in the office I'd never had guessed they had been up until the early hours. They were bright eyed and busy tailed. It wasn't the last I heard of our infamous night. A week later my boss received a letter from the hotel. Apparently I hadn't cleaned my room as well as I thought. The owner was complaining, the room had taken a lot of specialist cleaning. My boss was reasonable. He told me I had to write a letter apologising to the owner and phone him up to say sorry. So I did. He was okay about it. I was more embarrassed than anything else. "This has never happened in the company before", ranted my boss.

It had been out of character for me. I never had gone out boozing regularly. Maybe that was part of the problem, I wasn't a hardened drinker and so not use to it. I'm sure most people would had been fine with what I had drunk. Lesson learnt? Stick to beers, and wine with food. Don't take spirits.

## Departures and Arrivals

I never saw Katherine again. She never turned up for any of our meetings. The next thing I heard she had left. It was Christmas, I remember because I was surprised they didn't let her go to the Christmas dinner. Strange. She had been with the company for seven years. Maybe there was more to it. They said she left, maybe she was sacked. She went off to start a florist. As one left so another one started.

I was asked to train the new lady. Her name was Lucy and she was from the North East. Slightly older, in her forties and very extrovert. She come down South to work with me in my area. It was for a couple of days, so I put her up in a hotel nearby. The company paid for it. I'd been to it before to partake of its carvery and it was the nearest decent hotel within the budget allowed. The hotel was fine but not the location. A few planes were going overhead. It wasn't exactly on Heathrow's flight path but it was in a village not far from there and Lucy wasn't use to the noise. Lucy and I got on fine. She was very jovial with my customers. I tried to show her what I had learnt, which wasn't much as Katherine hadn't really shown me anything. She saw the good relationship I had with my customers.

I remember our first meeting. The night before we all stayed over. It was a new hotel for us, overlooking a cricket ground. Really nice. Had a couple of restaurants, one in the hotel and one next door. Lucy and I decided to meet in the bar next door and wait for the others before we went to dinner. I was waiting at the bar and she came in all kisses and cuddles. I was quite taken aback. I got her a drink and we waited for our colleagues. My job was to introduce her to them. I wasn't really needed, she was all over them. They instantly took to her and I slunk into the background. That was the natural order of things for years to come. Many would have thought she had been at the company longer than me but I was quite happy for her to take the limelight. I was never a big fan of meetings, I did my talking when I was with customers. Over the years we had our clashes, more in the early days. I think it was just her personality, maybe the difference between a Northerner and a Southerner. More on those meetings later.

Just as we had a full team, lighting was to strike. I was stunned but more disappointed about how I heard the news. Clara and I had got on really well. She was from the Midlands. Quite attractive but also a lovely personality. We'd often chat on the phone. I remember her telling me once about had she hadn't any money for the pay and display car park. Whilst on the phone she was trying to find someone to give her some change. All the time she was bemoaning how she never had any change when she needed it and how frustrating it was in a situation like that. She saw the funny side. Being on the road was a lonely existence so to have someone on the other end of the phone who had similar experiences was a comforting thought. It was all to come to an abrupt end.

She had only been with the company for a few months but was planning to leave. I found out at a trade fair at the NEC. Our company was exhibiting there. We had a large stand with a second floor on top where meetings could be held with customers. Before we even had a look around, Clara and I were summoned to the top floor. My boss had his serious face on. He dropped the bombshell, she was leaving. She had never said a word. I thought it all very formal. "Why didn't you tell me?" I asked her. My boss answered for her and said he had told her not to say anything. Clara apologised. I felt I had lost my mentor.

We spent the rest of the day looking around the exhibition halls. Most of the time we were discussing her departure. I knew she was into fashion and her boyfriend was down in London. She had made the decision to move down there with him. I remember saying that I probably wouldn't be with the company for much longer than a year. After Clara left the company was never the same again. Lucy and I got on okay but I was never as close to her as I was with Clara. I suppose it was the age gap. Clara and I had been closer in that respect. She was more laid back, Lucy was very pushy, always wanted to be the centre of attention. Having said that, I hardly ever got a phone call from Lucy. However, when I called her she wouldn't stop talking. The dynamics of our relationship

was soon to change.

A replacement was soon found for Clara. Her name was Becky, also from the Midlands. At first I thought she was the complete opposite to Lucy. I took her out for a few days to train her. My first impressions were, she's very short and a bit scruffy. She wasn't dressed very smartly and knee high to a grasshopper, not that I can talk, I'm not very tall myself. She hardly said a word but didn't stay like that for long.

## Company Meetings

I remember our first company meeting. Before Becky arrived it was Lucy who always took control of the meeting. Our manager being laid back would just let her get on with it. I couldn't get a word in so I just let her carry on. The first meeting was quite funny, it was Lucy versus Becky. Lucy didn't know what hit her. They were at loggerheads. Lucy was trying to rule the roost but Becky was having none of it. Lucy would start up about how good her stores were doing and Becky would come back with some statement either disagreeing or explaining the reason. She seemed to think she knew why the stores were doing certain things. She always mentioned their Head Office as if she had contacts there. Rather strange, considering she was new to the company.

I just sat back and almost fell asleep. It was like a scene from *The Apprentice*, both fighting for their lives in the boardroom. Every now and then my boss would wake me up and ask me what I thought. I was so bored that I gave a brief answer and let them get on with it. After a few meetings I noticed that Becky would always take the lead and Lucy was quieter. Very strange, considering Lucy was old enough to be her mother. The trouble was our manager was not strong enough to intervene. The meetings never ended on time, not that we ever had a schedule. Meetings were due to start at eleven but started at half eleven. The boss was always busy. Which meeting room? There was a small meeting room up in the main office or the showroom downstairs next to reception. If the meeting was with the sales guys it was downstairs but often we would be upstairs on our own in a smaller room. Sometimes we'd go downstairs for the main meeting with the sales guys and then upstairs for our own meeting.

The main meeting would include information about new ranges, topics that affected all of us. However, often the meeting would be very sales orientated. I'd fall asleep listening to the sales guys' forecasts. Well not literally but almost. I thought what a waste of time, this didn't even concern us but because there was more of them we had to put up with it. Occasionally Lucy or Becky would make some comment even though they didn't really know what was going on. Sometimes we'd be shown new products and asked for our comments. Of course if we didn't like them it was too late for them to be changed. A fairly useless exercise. Most of the guys would pander to the belief that they were perfect already. We were always asked, "You might not personally like it but do you think it will sell?" It would normally be a different answer for the sales guys. We dealt with national department stores, the sales guys were dealing with smaller independent stores. These were often family owned. Their customers would be different, more regular and specific tastes for that area. A product range that may have been discontinued in the national retailers could still be found in some of these stores as they sold well there. It was nice for us to see the new ranges so we could tell our customers what would be coming out in the future.

Our own meeting moved upstairs, where more specific goals were set for us. Beth from marketing would sit in with us and give us a sheet detailing guidelines for the next couple of months until the

next meeting. These would vary depending on the time of year. Coming up to Christmas was a busy time for us. That's when our sales would peak, therefore we needed our products to be fully stocked and in their best displays. Just before Christmas we'd always bring out a new range and that always needed to be promoted well. We were given POS (Point of Sale), meaning branding and other material we could use to market the product. It needed to be able to sell itself, in most stores there weren't many staff.

Ironically Christmas was the worst time, most of the staff would be on the tills. If I was given a pound for every time a customer asked me for help I'd have been very rich. Of course I didn't mind when it was my own product but not when it was someone else's. Customers would drag me to the other side of the floor. I've always apologised and explained to them I didn't work for the store.

### Always Sign In

In every store I visited I had to sign in. It was so security knew I was from a supplier and working for them. Otherwise they would see me on their cameras messing about with products and get suspicious. However, I don't think many shoplifters go around in suits and clean the items before stealing them but I had to follow protocol. I sometimes thought security, or to give them their proper title, Loss Prevention, had too much time on their hands. Don't get me wrong, I think they had a tough job to do but if for once I hadn't signed in and yet they had seen me each month, did they really need to get so pedantic about it. I might have just popped in and be talking to staff, sometimes before I signed in. I could have just sneaked into a particular store from the shopping mall instead of a cross country trek to the staff entrance. If I was in a hurry and it was my last call of the day, just enough time to pop in and say hello, I didn't really want to spend a lot of time signing in for just ten minutes in the store. Once when I did this, the security guard, very smartly dressed in a suit, came up behind me and asked if I had signed in. I had only be in the store five minutes. Obviously not one of their busy days.

I usually signed in the Visitor's book and wrote out a sticker. It would have on it, "VISITOR". Usually blue or white, depending on the store. I would put on it, the date, store number, and the number in the book that I signed. In the book I would put, my name, company, date, time in, and sign it. Then put time out, when I left. Generally this went quite smoothly. There was one store in which this process turned into a nightmare albeit there were exceptional circumstances.

### London Bombings

A store in Essex always had their Visitor's book on the shop floor. It made life so much easier. This particular time it wasn't there and I was told I'd have to sign in through the staff entrance. I went down several floors and turned up outside. I went through the staff entrance and was at the bottom of some stairs. The Visitor's book was on one side next to a phone. I signed in and read the instructions. Had to phone a number for security, which I did. The response I got was unbelievable. It was like the Spanish Inquisition. I was on the phone for ages. It would have been easier to get into the Bank of England. They wanted all sorts of ID, which rightly or wrongly I didn't have. Eventually the man on the other end of the phone agreed to come and get me. It was twenty minutes before he came down. He was a big bruiser of a guy. I told him I'd visited many times

before. He replied, "We have to be careful, you know what's happened in London today." He was assuming I knew. "You can come up to the next level", he said. Whoopee, I thought. So we trudged upstairs and he put me in a tiny room, like I was some kind of shoplifter. He was on the phone for ages. "Someone's coming to collect you," he said. It was nice to see a friendly face when a member of staff collected me. That store holds the record for the longest signing in.

It wasn't until I got in my car that I found out what had happened in London. All morning I had been driving without the radio on. I had been listening to my Spanish CD, trying to learn the language. What better way to use my time out on the road. Of course I missed all the traffic reports but this particular morning I missed something far more important.

I had planned to go to London that day but it would have meant an early start and I didn't feel like it that morning. I turned on the radio and couldn't believe my ears. It took me a while to gather the whole story. There had been a terrorist attack in London. A bomb on a bus and a tube train. London was shutting down, roads were being blocked off. That's what the security guard meant. My first thought was it could have been me in London. I had to get home. I was on the other side of London, had to get moving quickly, this time with my radio on. My phone rang and I answered it hands free. It was Pat from the Sales Processing department. She was wondering if I was okay, bearing in mind what had just happened. I was relieved to hear somebody from my company. I only ever spoke to her about faulty returns but she was the first and only person from my company to have contacted me. I never did hear from my manager. For all he knew I could have been caught up in the carnage in London. As I was to realise many years later the company never did care about me.

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Ever wondered what a Company Rep does? He or she is in their car traversing the country's highways. That's only half the story. Life on the road isn't as glamorous as it may appear. Jase worked eight years for a British household name. He was the face of that brand for high street retailers. This is his account of the trials and tribulations he experienced.

The story begins with how he landed the job. It was his dream position but he almost didn't get it. He was thrown in at the deep end and it was a case of sink or swim. It was a steep learning curve and he hit the ground running. After a week of induction he was out on his own.

He covered a large proportion of the country. Thousands of miles were travelled and many nights spent in motels. Life on the road was precarious. In 2005 he just avoided the terrorist attack on London. He wasn't so lucky when he had an accident, and he couldn't help being sick after a drunken evening with his colleagues.

When he visited his customers he never knew what to expect. Some days he would be in and out in five minutes. Then there were times when a short training visit lasted all morning. One training session had to be done in a corridor. Not forgetting the training session where only one person turned up. On one visit he was greeted with bags full of faulty stock, the store demanding them to be refunded. In most stores he couldn't find a member of staff. Customers would ask him for help on all sorts of different products. One customer even berated him for not being able to help her.

Of course he always had his boss to help him out. A visit with him always meant an easy day of coffee breaks. His new manager wasn't quite as accommodating. A visit with him meant doing all the work while he swanned around chatting on his phone. Managers came and went, all had their own way of doing things which made life interesting.

The unpredictable nature of being a rep is what makes this book a fascinating read. Life was never dull.

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