
Broadening the Scope of Relationship Selling

Marvin A. Jolson

The concept of partnership or the bonding of the buyer to the seller by superior post transactional services has been well received by members of today's quality-driven market place. However, relationship selling is a multi-stage process that emphasizes personalization and empathy as key ingredients in identifying prospects, developing them as customers, and keeping them satisfied. This article takes readers on an arm chair journey through each of the phases of the process with detailed illustrations of typical issues and procedures.

Has the Hard Sell Disappeared?

Quite a few of the veteran salespeople and managers think so. In fact, they argue that "selling has progressed from the hard sell to the soft sell to no sell at all." Many of the old timers insist that "most of the order-makers have vanished, and today's salesperson is little more than an order-taker." Whereas the people who utter such remarks intend to be critical, the implication is that the image of the modern salesperson seems to be improving. But Charles Butler (1996), editor-in-chief of *Sales & Marketing Management Magazine*, shocked quite a few sales professionals and academics with his recent contrarious summary of the *modern* salesperson's traits.

Clearly, for most of the past five decades, the word "salesmanship" has conjured up a picture of pushy, insincere tactics engineered by a "get the order any way you can" philosophy.

Arthur Miller's presentation of pathetic, old Willy Loman dealt selling a mighty blow. Super actors Al Pacino and Jack Lemmon didn't help the cause with *Glengarry Glen Ross*, a film that depicts real estate salesmen as slick, ill-mannered, foul-mouthed manipulators. But it was difficult for many to accept

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Butler's report that *today's* salesperson is an insincere, fast-talking, despicable, greasy glad-hander whom we vilify more than a member of any business or professional group, and that includes lawyers and even politicians.

Is the Hard Sell Still Alive?

It looks that way! Just a few weeks ago at a sales seminar, a fellow speaker told an audience of young sales managers: "A good salesman in front of a typical prospect is like the Green Bay Packers playing against a high school team since he is using a well organized, often practiced offense against a seldom practiced disorganized defense."

Another annoying incident appeared when a publisher asked me to review a new manuscript carrying a title similar to "Selling in the Year 2000." The first two chapters used the terminology "selling arena" no less than twelve times.

The following paragraph in the preface of a *reported* popular book covering salesmanship written by a *reported* internationally known dynamic, brilliant, outspoken sales educator was noxious enough to persuade me not to reveal the source: "This book is a straightforward, honest discussion of proven tricks, maneuvers, and traps that produce sales. So if you are really serious about your selling profession, no matter what field of sales you are in, don't talk to another customer until you have read this book. It covers virtually every objection you will ever encounter. It gives you not only the answers but all of the ammunition you will ever need to get the sale that day and keep it solid."

The positioning of salesmanship in a battlefield or adversative role is a well established phenomenon. Historically, the arrival and expansion of the American entrepreneurial spirit have triggered an

Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management,
Volume XVII, Number 4 (Fall 1997, Pages 75-88).

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activity called "salesmanship" which seeks out prospective customers, persuades them to buy the seller's products, and recognizes those who achieve a victory or conquest with a reward called a "sale" (Peeler 1996).

How Do We Explain This Anomaly?

The answer to the hard sell vs. no sell argument lies in two seemingly diverse, interdependent, and simultaneous phenomena. First, it is apparent that the traditional hard sell is very much alive and productive in some industries and companies. Second, Relationship Selling has arrived and is growing in importance.

The Traditional Hard Sell

In essence, some traditional salespeople are still convinced that the work day consists of a series of one-on-one contacts, engagements, and clashes, each of which produces a winner and a loser. These salespeople strive to win in this transaction-based world by building an arsenal of weapons, including prospecting gimmicks, pressure pitches, and tricky closes designed to convince the prospect to buy.

The strategies used by those who sell automobiles, investment securities, long distance telephone services, legal services, health care products and services, and numerous other products have done little to alter their unfavorable images. Saturn's no-haggle selling program is a noteworthy exception, but this innovative approach shows little more than marginal promise for the future. Long distance telephone companies' attempts to capture market share triggered industry-wide pirating of customers with their less than admirable "pay to switch" offer. Surprisingly, the reentry of the once highly criticized multilevel marketing method of distribution is resulting in exponential growth in hundreds of industries, especially health care products, telephone debit cards, and cosmetics (Coughlan and Grayson 1996).

Relationship Selling

Instead of viewing selling as a series of struggles that the salesperson must win from a steady stream of prospects and customers of all sizes and shapes, relationship selling (RS) or partnering focuses on the building of mutual trust within the buyer/seller dyad with a delivery of anticipated, long term, value-added benefits to buyers.

This popular philosophy calls for selling firms to abandon short term transaction (individual sale) thinking and create long term relationships, alliances, and collaborative arrangements with selected customers whenever possible (Manning and Reece 1995).

A study by the National Account Management Association (NAMA) (*Wall Street Journal* 1996) concludes that too many sales accounts can be bad for business since the salesperson's attention is spread too thin.

Key Account Management

The most prominent example of RS calls for companies to focus their specialized attention on their key (often called national or major) accounts which are normally their largest and/or most important customers. Key accounts (usually 10 or fewer) are typically assigned to a key account salesperson (often called manager) who serves as the captain or leader of the selling team. The key account manager (KAM) is in charge of most post transactional matters and is responsible for providing expertise and resources for all product designs and installations, maintaining and improving communications and coordination, resolving complex problems, designing and assisting with required research projects, serving as sales consultant and advisor, providing sales and cost analysis, monitoring competitive activities, and generally building an aura of trust and warmth that should ensure a permanent bond between buyer and seller. Typically, the KAM is an account executive who is authorized to

select technicians and other specialists to serve on ad hoc teams that meet with specialists on the buying side.

RS as a Maintenance Task

Most treatments of relationship selling focus on the *duration*, rather than the *creation*, of a relationship which is typically defined as an orientation toward strong, enduring associations with individual accounts (see references in Figure 1). Accordingly, most discussions of RS emphasize descriptors such as "long term" or "lifetime customer," which position RS as synonymous with *maintenance* functions(e.g., strengthening commitments from existing customers). Therefore, the mention of RS activities gives little attention to *developmental* personal selling tasks such as prospecting, contacting, probing for needs, stimulating desire, and closing sales (Figure 2).

Both published and private studies indicate that KAMs spend a small to moderate proportion of their work time in face-to-face selling (for example, see Colletti and Tubridy 1987). My December 1996 interviews with several KAMs employed by IBM lead me to conclude that the typical IBM salesperson is responsible for 8 or fewer accounts and spends about 70% of his/her time performing maintenance functions such as identifying and responding to post-sale customer needs, selecting and debriefing members of the technical team, training the customers' salespeople, attending seminars, and so on.

The emphasis of the big sale and the focus on selected clients have identified key account salespeople as experienced executives who specialize in organizing and leading sales support teams while bringing in relatively few new customers. If we position the buyer/seller relationship as a continuum from personal to professional, the atmosphere seems to be more oriented toward a social setting than a business with the following observations:

"No sell at all" is obviously an exaggeration. But it's far easier to maintain a relationship with an old friend (established account) than to create one with a total stranger (perhaps a cold call).

The described sales support relationship facilitates the trust-building process and the adaptation of the seller and buyer to each other's styles.

Thus, the typical pressures of prospecting, pricing, closing, and keeping pace with offerings of competitors are minimized.

Relationship Selling Begins Early

The last thing the sales literature needs is another article that delimits relationship selling to large, important, key, national, or international accounts. Key Account Management is *not* appropriate for all selling situations especially when:

- Long term commitments interfere with the desired flexibility of either the seller or the buyer or both;
- Reorders or new purchases are infrequent or absent;
- A large proportion of the seller's revenue does not come from a small proportion of the seller's customers;
- Customers do not require or expect highly specialized sales support or attention;
- Customers do not use centralized purchasing;
- Customers do not use a buying team;
- The products or services are not costly or complex.

RS should be just as important for *getting* new accounts as it is for *keeping* existing accounts. Barbara Jackson (1985) grasps this point by the very title of her book, *Winning and Keeping Industrial Customers*. Without a solid relationship with a *prospect*, the salesperson may never *win* the account. Also, most complaints about traditional selling address violations and/or questionable behavior in performing developmental rather than maintenance functions.

Traditional and Relationship Selling

Some authors have presented RS as a polar opposite to traditional, transaction-oriented selling (Ingram 1996). More accurately, there is a need to reshape traditional selling to form relationships with prospects and customers across *all* functions of selling not just the maintenance (retaining customers) function. As argued by Manning and Reece (1995), "the relationship strategy must encompass every aspect of selling from the first contact with a prospect to servicing the sale once the prospect becomes an established customer."

Relationship selling is necessary for success in both large and small sales organizations regardless of the nature of the product, the type of buyer, the buyer's or seller's position in the channel of distribution, the size of the firms, the matching of buyers and sellers, and so on. As shown in the Marketing

Figure 1
Selected Articles Focused on Relationship Selling: 1980 - 1996

- Schneider, Benjamin, "The Service Organization: Climate is Crucial," *Organizational Dynamics* (Autumn 1980), 52-65.
Businesses have concentrated far more on how to attract customers than on how to retain them.
- Jackson Barbara B., "Build Customer Relationships That Last," *Harvard Business Review* (Nov-Dec 1985), 120-28.
Industrial customers focus on building ties with buyers by use of relationship selling. Customers think about switching costs and the use of additional or alternative vendors.
- Mackay, Harvey B., "Humanize Your Selling Strategy," *Harvard Business Review* (March-April 1986), 36-46.
The salesperson completes a 66 question continually updated personal information sheet on every customer. The seller uses small shows of sensitivity and awareness to keep in constant touch with all customers.
- Paul, Terry, "Relationship Marketing for Healthcare Providers," *Journal of Healthcare Marketing* (September 1988), 20-25.
Relationship selling is oriented toward strong, lasting relationships with individual accounts.
- O'Neal, Charles R., "JIT Procurement and Relationship Marketing," *Industrial Marketing Management* (February 1989), 55-63.
Discusses long term marriages in the automotive industry.
- Reichheld, R. and W. Sasser, Jr., "Zero Defections: Quality Comes to Services," *Harvard Business Review* (Jan-Feb 1990), 105-11.
Super service prevents customer defections.
- Evans, Joel R. and Richard L. Laskin, "The Relationship Marketing Process: A Conceptualization and Application," *Industrial Marketing Management* (December 1994), 439-51.
Relationship Selling involves a long term focus on loyalty and commitment.
- Keenan, W., Jr., "Best Selling Practices Revealed," *Sales & Marketing Management* (January 1995), 27-28.
The role of the salesperson is that of a consultant who helps customers achieve financial and strategic goals.
- Perrier, Jean, Sylvie Paradis and Peter Banting, "Dissolution of a Relationship: The Salesforce Perception," *Industrial Marketing Management* (August 1995), 317-25.
A study of Relationship Selling by commercial banks reveals that salespeople should bear the customer retention burden.
- Wotruba, Thomas R., "The Transformation of Industrial Selling: Causes & Consequences," *Industrial Marketing Management* (Sept 1996), 327-32.
In all Relationship Selling situations, the salesperson's role has changed to satisfaction creation such that selling as a persuasive act has diminished in importance.
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Figure 2
The Functions of Selling: Descriptive Information about Effective Performance

Prospecting. Effectiveness in prospecting involves generating sufficient numbers of good prospects to be contacted for the firm's products as required. (Good prospects are potential customers that have a need for the product, the ability to buy it, and the authority to make the purchasing decision.) Effective prospectors do not avoid cold calling when it is necessary to the job.

Contacting. Effectiveness in contacting involves routing calls efficiently, getting in the door easily, making excellent first impressions, establishing rapport quickly, and establishing the legitimacy of the company and credibility as its representative.

Probing for needs. Effectiveness in probing for needs involves being adept at identifying the needs or problem areas of prospects/customers. Effective probers are good listeners and direct the probing process through the use of discerning questions.

Stimulating desire. To be effective in stimulating desire for their firm's offering, salespersons must deliver articulate, informative, and persuasive presentations/demonstrations that address the needs of prospects/customers. Effective stimulators often use sales aids (e.g., visual aids, product demonstrations) effectively, as appropriate to the presentation, field questions and objections and deal with them effectively, and are knowledgeable about competitive products, making effective comparisons between them and the company's product. While continuously encouraging the prospect's input and participation, the salesperson is able to retain control of the interview.

Closing. Effectiveness in closing involves asking for, and obtaining, the order, as appropriate to the job. Salespersons who are effective closers approach the close with confidence, and have a good sense of timing when asking for the order. If the order is not obtained on the first attempt, they follow up as appropriate to the selling situation.

Retaining the customer and the sale. Effectiveness in retaining the sale and the customer involves follow up after the sale to be sure that the customer receives the product as promised (e.g., on time, in good condition, serviced, and installed), and providing good customer services as appropriate. Effective retainers maintain regular contact with customers, are responsible for changes in customers' product-related needs, and keep customers informed about new products and applications. They handle dissatisfaction and complaints expeditiously.

Source: Marvin A. Jolson and Lucette B. Comer, "Predicting the Effectiveness of Industrial Salespeople", *Industrial Marketing Management* (February 1992), 72.

Lesson in Figure 3, a relationship between buyer and seller corresponds with many of the analogous fundamentals that contribute to a successful marriage.

To introduce relationship selling in a traditional, transaction-oriented company, we shall address each developmental stage in the personal selling process with an emphasis on the typical challenges as well as selected problems and remedies that are frequently attached to each stage (Ekberg 1986).

For convenience, we call upon Chris Graham, a real life relationship-focused salesman, to implement some of the desirable solutions in each selling stage of a hypothetical sales call. Chris represents Crime Prevention Company Of America

(CRIMPCO), a regional designer and installer of commercial and residential security systems. Although CRIMPCO has a number of large regional accounts, the firm has not established a national or key account marketing program and may therefore be considered to be a traditional sales organization.

Finding Prospects

Few articles or texts that discuss personal selling are strongly concerned with the function of *finding prospects*. Instead, the assumption is that business or household buyers are patiently waiting to be contacted by salespeople who will be greeted with little or no resistance. Contrarily, *finding prospects* may

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be the most difficult function of selling. RS-oriented salespeople such as Chris believe that finding prospects with identified needs is much more feasible and acceptable than attempting to create new needs by aggressiveness and persuasion. Although Chris would be delighted if his firm were able to hand him a fistful of qualified inquiries (*Non-effort* leads) each day, he recognizes that relatively few companies have this capability. And so he is compelled to use customer referrals, networking, and other *effort* lead-getting methods including some forms of cold-calling in person or usually by telephone to arrange the first meeting.

Although many industrial buyers welcome unsolicited sales contacts, numerous business and household decision-makers view cold call contacts as annoying, overly persuasive, pushy, high-pressure, or even invasions of privacy. Obviously, cold contacts create more buyer resistance than straight or modified rebuys by key accounts or other voluntary inquiries. It is this resistance that leads to behaviors by salespeople that result in irritating and even deceptive selling methods and attendant tension, rejection, and stigma.

The widespread need for a steady flow of easily obtainable effort leads has triggered a search for prospecting methods that will be appealing to *both* prospects and salespeople. The traditional salesperson's objective is to acquire a substantial number of low cost qualified prospects while encountering minimal resistance and unpleasantness. Compliance researchers (Cialdini 1984) and professional sales leaders have developed a number of unique but simple methods that have made these demanding results attainable.

This article describes one model of the interpersonal influence process and discusses its application to outbound telephone prospecting. The model introduces three distinct flows of influence—disarming, liking, and distinctiveness (Jolson 1987).

Disarming Although this term connotes the need for the seller to remove weapons from the prospect, a state of warfare is not implied. It is more accurate to say that many industrial, commercial, and residential buyers are predisposed to view selling as an interpersonal struggle calling for them to

defend against the "pitch." For example, at the first sign of a solicitation by telephone, the muscles in the prospect's arm are already straining to slam the phone into its cradle.

Many students of salesmanship cannot understand why a person with needs will be less than receptive to someone who is capable of reducing the intensity of those needs. Clearly, the responsiveness of the prospective buyer is not always related to the perceived product benefits, price, and value (Value=benefits minus costs).

Instead, the buyer/seller climate is often a consequence of the interpersonal dynamics that are established between the prospect and the salesperson. Given that when we are exposed to a salesperson, we are usually intent on preserving and protecting our sense of self because the "other guy" wants to control us, it is not surprising that much has been said about that vexation of all sales professionals, sales *resistance*, which typically results from the natural fallout of the competition for psychological control at the outset and during the selling encounter. For example, the prospect has a natural desire for power and may prefer to buy at his/her own convenience rather than when and how the salesperson prefers (Foster and Wunderlin 1980).

Accordingly, the disarming process seeks to omit any signs of power or control on the part of the seller. All indications of pressure and manipulation must be absent. Building an early relationship calls for the salesperson to be humble, laid back, non-threatening, loose, and soft spoken. The prospective client must see his/her compliance as an action of natural forces rather than due to the efforts of the seller who benefits from that compliance.

Liking Many sales managers say, "You must sell yourself before you can sell your product." This isn't easy to do when Chris has phoned a total stranger whose only utterance has been "hello." He responds softly... "Is this Mr. Day?" (prospect). "Yes it is," (salesman). "My name is Chris Graham and I called to introduce myself" (pause). (Prospect), "Hello, Mr. Graham. How can I help you?" and the ball is in Chris's possession. There isn't a lot of time to

Figure 3 Marketing Lesson

Comparison of Relationship Selling to a Marital Sequence

- Relationship selling is like a marriage. To make it work, you must work at it.
- Awareness, credibility, trust, and chemistry govern the relationship. The importance of each must be emphasized continuously.
- Be prepared to deliver on every promise. If you don't deliver, be prepared for divorce.

<i>Selling Sequence</i>	<i>Marital Sequence</i>
Finding prospects	Getting acquainted
Contacting prospects & establishing rapport	Dating
Probing for needs	The courtship
Responding to needs; the presentation	Falling in love
Closing the sale/ the commitment	Wedding bells
Maintaining customer satisfaction	Til death do us part

Source: Adapted from Professional Best, *Marketing News* (1996)

seek out some common ground in order to establish mutual interests. We tend to like people who are similar to ourselves—in looks, personality, ideas, education, occupation, interests, or lifestyle.

So, how do we establish rapport and trigger a relationship with this stranger? Chris' best strategy is to have no strategy. He should just make up his mind to be warm and friendly to whomever answers the phone. Small talk is encouraged but remarks that could be construed as insincere should be avoided. It is probably even advisable to avoid saying, "How are you today?" Why? Because the seller doesn't really care any more than the prospect does when he/she responds with, "I'm fine. How are you?"

It is usually wise to introduce sincerity, recognition, and some suggestions of friendship into the sales setting. Remember that the prospect has probably been flooded by a sea of phone calls and direct mail, most of which has been unsolicited and quite impersonal. A contact during the prospecting phase

should possess a from-me-to-you quality with a warm and neighborly tone.

Distinctiveness This refers to the degree to which the seller's approach differs from others to which the prospects have been exposed. The telephone prospecting method should be viewed from the prospect's perspective. For example, as Chris gets to know his prospects better, he will be able to learn what they liked and disliked about his competitors' approaches.

But he should remember that prospects may be objecting to his competitors' *styles* not the *content* of competitors' messages. For example, canned phone talks attempting to make appointments may be getting stale to the point that hang-ups and signs of disinterest are becoming more frequent. But this does not mean that standard telephone scripts that do not sound like standard scripts are ineffective.

One example of a creative telephone prospecting method that employs the three described flows of influences (disarming, liking, and distinctiveness)

as a highly successful telephone prospecting methodology is the Foot-in-the-Door technique introduced more than 10 years ago (Jolson 1986) and fully described in the cited reference. The method also illustrates a unique way of building trust, lowering the rate of rejection, and minimizing time spent with disinterested subjects.

Meeting with Prospects and Building Rapport

The phone conversation between Chris and his prospective client (Tom Day) generated enough interest for both parties to agree to an in-person meeting. As he enters Mr. Day's office, Chris alertly spots a photo of Tom and two small children, an overloaded waste paper basket, and a golf putter in the corner of the room. Chris' handshake is firm as his 230-pound-figure and his slightly bulging tummy makes him look massive next to diminutive Tom. Chris chuckles as he picks up the golf club, puts his brief case on a chair and assumes a putting pose that signals the presence of a low handicap player.

Chris: "I'd love to be using this one day soon."

Tom: "Where do you play, Chris?"

Chris: "I tear up the course at Suburban Club, Mr. Day."

Tom: "Please don't be so formal. Call me Tom."

Chris: "Okay Tom! Thanks! Say Tom, would you mind if I move this chair so that you'll be able to see how the digital key pads operate?"

Tom: "Not at all. Let me help you."

It appears that a favorable communications climate has been established on the telephone and thus far in person. The *neutralizing* (small talk without flattery or compliments) went off pretty well and Chris *set the stage* smoothly. Both men seem to be relaxed and capable of creating a pleasant relationship.

Probing for Needs

Prospective buyers typically have *two* sets of needs. The primary group refers to the wants, desires, and problems of the organization or household that the prospect represents. The salesperson's objective is to identify these needs and hopefully

assemble a product/service package that will be capable of satisfying them or at least reducing their intensity. According to Maslow, unsatisfied needs produce symptoms such as anxiety, tension, or other forms of discomfort. When a need is satisfied, the disequilibrium is removed or lessened and a feeling of well-being prevails. Another group of needs has to do with the personal relationship between the potential client and the salesperson, most importantly the salesperson's understanding of the communication styles and personalities of the buyer.

Salespeople who have done their precontact homework and have warmed up the atmosphere via the telephone introduction and the face-to-face rapport building have at least thought about some broad plans for responding to needs uncovered to date. But now that the prospect is in a receptive mood, relationship selling calls for some skillful probing to determine whether the prospect's needs differ from those that were anticipated. Some needs are quite active, and they are perched right on the top of the prospect's tongue. Others are latent or dormant, but once aroused during the probing process, they are immediately converted into "now" needs. Relationship salesmanship also recognizes the strange phenomenon that some prospects may not even be sure of their own needs and requirements.

To establish the specifics of a need, problem, or requirement, it may be necessary for the salesperson to elicit information beyond that volunteered or extracted by questioning. For example, inspection tours, interviews of others, and studying of written materials may be advisable. Getting the prospect involved in problem definition often does much to capture the prospect's confidence and trust even before the sales presentation begins.

Understanding the Prospect's Behavioral Patterns

A crucial requirement for building trust is the salesperson's ability to interpret the client's behavioral style (Alessandra, Wexler, and Dean 1979). The most popular methods of measuring behavioral style/personality are the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Carlyn 1977), which classifies individuals in terms of four dichotomous dimensions: Extroversion-Introversion, Sensing-Intuition, Thinking-Feeling, Judgment-Perception, and by measuring a subject's behavior in terms of high or low responsiveness and assertiveness.

The Questioning Plan

The salesperson should try to avoid asking yes or no questions. He/she should dig deeply, allow the prospect to deliver detailed answers, and get deeply involved in expressing his/her needs.

Chris might take the following approach:

Chris: "You indicated on the phone that when you moved into this building nearly 10 years ago, your security system was already about 8 years old, you had several service calls each year, and the system was rather ugly looking, correct?"

Tom: "Yes.... That about wraps it up."

Chris: "Can you take me on a quick tour of your plant?" (*Rises slowly and takes out a large pad. Tom follows.*) "Let's start in the basement since that's the typical intruder's favorite target. Stop me when we come to a part of the system that you think is ugly or required a service call." (*Chris takes numerous notes and Tom contributes at least 75% of the conversation and Chris is a dedicated listener. They return to Tom's office and take their original seats.*)

Chris: "You surely have a lot of glass in here. I counted 40 windows. How soon do you need the installation?"

Tom: "We're not in a big hurry. We've had our system for several years, so I guess we can sweat it out for a little while longer. We've just started to interview alarm companies. You're only the third company we've seen so far."

Chris: "I think you're going about it in the right way. I'm a bit curious. You've seen two companies already. What were some of the appealing features and benefits that you've seen so far? Tell me about them. Also, of equal importance, did the other firms show you anything that turned you off?"

"May I ask who the other companies are or will be?"

"Do you have a budget for the project?"

"Will this be your decision to make or will I be talking to some of the other decision-makers?"

Tom: "What kind of a system do you recommend?"

Chris: "Why don't I take a few minutes to sketch out the highlights of a system that will consider all of your requirements. That should be a good starting point. Then you can review it with your colleagues while I smooth out the loose ends.

We can meet again in about a week with your staff, make the needed changes, and then take the next step. Is that okay?"

Responding to Needs: The Presentation

In discussing the component parts of persuasion in selling, Mortimer Adler (1983) emphasizes the overwhelming importance of *ethos* (e.g., the early establishment of the salesperson's credibility and credentials, the identifying of his/her respectable and admirable character, and the building of trust). The persuasive phase of the personal selling sequence calls for the salesperson to be adaptive, informative, and competitive.

Adaptive Selling The strength of the relationship between seller and buyer develops as the salesperson converts the probe for needs and other questioning into a tactical adjustment to the demands of the current situation. The salesperson must commit to interpersonal flexibility as he builds the product, service, and communication offering to correspond precisely with the preferences of the prospective customer. The persuasive dimension of the presentation is *not* related to the rhetoric used by the seller. Instead, it can be attributed to seller/buyer collaboration on each major attribute of the final offering. The customer should feel like a major contributor to the design of the final product, in this case, a somewhat complex security system.

Informative Selling

The presentation should be explicitly tied to the prospect's expressed needs. The prospect should be involved in the presentation by being encouraged to use demonstrators, if available, or by exposure to computer exercises, telephone tests, slides, video or audio equipment, flipcharts, photographs, and so on. In the case of the explanation of a security system, the location of keypads, motion detectors, and glass-break sensors should be pointed out. The operation of the keypads should be clearly demonstrated and the prospect should be assured that following the installation, a detailed walk-through will take place.

At various intervals during the presentation, the prospect's pulse should be tested by questioning such as, "Am I going too quickly? Is everything clear? Shall I back up?"

Although the salesperson should be well prepared, he/she should not appear to be picture perfect. Observers indicate that if the delivery of the presentation is very smooth or potent, they smell a rat. Customers focus on the solution, not the presentation of the solution. If the salesperson is too perfect or too slick, prospects are less likely to believe or value the solution. Accordingly, the salesperson's delivery should be natural, humble, honest, and genuine (Plank and Reid 1996).

Concern for Competition and Pricing

The distinctive competence and competitive advantages of the seller's company should be emphasized and supported with hard facts. However, if the prospect is not convinced of the uniqueness and superiority of the seller's product and services, especially the likely level of post purchase care and attention, he/she will likely focus on price comparisons. Few quality-minded firms strive to achieve a competitive advantage by building a reputation of a low price look alike product (Alessandra and Barrera 1993). One well regarded company in the security industry includes a page in the sales kit that reads "The Bitterness of an inappropriate product lasts far longer than the sweetness of a giveaway price." Salespeople are trained not to stop and show or read this page to prospects but merely to turn the pages slowly enough (without comment) to allow the prospect to catch a glimpse of the statement.

Most sales messages are one-sided in that the salesperson touts his/her company's products as being superior to those of competitors in every regard. However, some firms use an occasional two-sided message, e.g., the salesperson admits that his/her company has a competitive shortcoming (usually of a minor nature). A number of studies have shown that this practice and other forms of "reverse selling" may enhance a company's credibility (Hunt and Smith 1987).

The Close

Ideally, the sales presentation has produced an offering including a product and broad range of value-added services that respond precisely to the prospect's needs. The final transactional step is the "closing of the sale" which is an attempt to trigger the prospect's favorable buying decision.

A Time of Stress

Assuming the presentation has been based on a careful and systematic uncovering of the prospect's needs and problems, the transition from the presentation to the closing phase should be smooth and devoid of anxiety. Conversely, closing time is often a moment of tension and anxiety-provoking event for the salesperson. The reason is a fear of rejection and a concomitant lost opportunity and a blow to the self-esteem. The salesperson's stress reaction typically calls for either *fight* (the use of a barrage of hard sell rebuttals) or *flight* (failure to ask for the order) tactics.

Returning to the CRIMPCO example, Chris should close with a question, a declaration, or an action (Marks 1997). How about just asking for the order with one of the following?

The Direct Close

1. Take out order pad; remove cap from pen and say: "With your permission, Tom, I need to jot down some information so I can open an account for you. "Okay?"
2. "May I assume you'd like to become a member of the CRIMPCO family?"
3. "Would it be okay for me to arrange an installation date for you?"
4. "Is it time for us to shake hands on the deal?"
5. "Are you convinced enough of the value of the program to give me the green light?"
6. "Assuming there are no objections on your part, I'd like to put the wheels in motion. Will that be okay?"
7. "I guess the only thing left to do is to write up your order. Okay?"

Direct closes should be quite suitable *if* the seller and buyer have conducted quite a bit of previous business together and have established a reasonably close relationship.

However, if this is a first time or rare buying situation wherein the buyer and salesperson are not completely comfortable with each other as yet, the buyer's likely response to the direct close will likely be, "I'd like to think about this." This response could mean a lot of things such as:

"I must consult with my associates."

"I'd like to compare your system design to others."

. . . building customer relationships, customer satisfaction, and customer commitment are no longer luxuries . . .

"I want to shop around for price."

"I do not fully trust you or your company."

"I sleep on everything."

"The price is higher than I thought it would be.
Do I need it enough to spend that much money?"

Selected Additional Closes

Many traditional sales leaders are convinced that a "think-it-over request (often called a "be-back") is the equivalent of a "no." Accordingly, the closing methods listed in Figure 4 (and numerous others) are available to salespeople who seek to avoid procrastinators. Much of the criticism of traditional salespeople is tied to their strong attempts to close sales on the first call.

Although most of the methods in Figure 4 still work, they are considered by some to be dated, pushy, manipulative, non-professional and surely inappropriate for creating relationships with potential customers. On the other hand, *silence* during the closing stage is not advisable. Few prospects are going to interrupt the silence with voluntary statements such as "I'll take it. Write up an order."

A Suggestive Closing Technique

Continuing with the CRIMPCO example, Chris could initiate the closing session with the following question:

"Well Tom, we've had a number of interesting exchange sessions addressing the issues you shared with me. Can you think of anything you and I have missed in developing a package that responds to your situation?" Hopefully Tom will say "No! I believe we've touched all the bases."

CRIMPCO's technique is considered to be a polar opposite to some of the closing methods that have been mentioned. During the critical silence mentioned before, the salesperson relaxes the prospect by "closing up the shop," that is by gathering up the presentation brochures, pens, photographs, putting everything back in the brief case, and relaxing the prospect by feigning a departure. CRIMPCO and other highly regarded sales organizations have found the following illustrative remarks to be a very professional and effective "reverse selling" method of closing.

Salesperson: "Tom, would you mind a suggestion?"

Prospect: "No. What is it?" (This is almost always the response)

Salesperson: "I suggest that you take a few days to go over our proposal with your staff before giving us your final "yes" or "no." We want you to have high expectations and be sure there will be no surprises or disappointments. When you have finished, I'll be available to answer any remaining questions. Does that sound reasonable?"

Maintaining Customer Satisfaction

There is considerable evidence in the sales literature that building customer relationships, customer satisfaction, and customer commitment are no longer luxuries; they are conditions necessary for business success (Ulrich 1989). In fact, salesforce members whose firms practice relationship selling don't have to be reminded of the value of each customer. They recognize that satisfied customers are pleased that their needs have been addressed but creating complete customer commitment goes beyond pleasing customers. Commitment means total loyalty and dedication between seller and buyer.

Figure 4
Selected Methods of Closing Sales

IMPENDING EVENT—A scheduled price rise requires that the prospect places the order without delay.

T-ACCOUNT—The salesperson draws a large T on a sheet of paper. Reasons for buying are shown on the left side of the T. Reasons for not buying are listed on the right side of the T.

ASSUMPTIVE—The salesperson assumes the order, writes it up, and submits it to the decision-maker for signature.

CHOICE OF TWO YESES—"Our delivery truck is in this area on Mondays and Fridays. Which day is most convenient for you?"

TAKE AWAY—"I do have one piece of bad news. We've had to disappoint a few buyers who were anxious to qualify for this offer but were unable to do so because of credit problems. How is your credit, may I ask?" The buyer's defense of his/her company's credit record is the equivalent of a positive buying signal.

TRIAL ORDER—The salesperson offers to deliver a small quantity of the product or free usage of the equipment so the customer can try the product without charge for 30 days. Then the customer can submit a final "yes or no."

PRICE REDUCTION OR FREE ADD-ON—In exchange for an immediate order, the customer is offered a price reduction or a free accessory.

Comparing Apples and Oranges

National Account Management

Although major account management and modern traditional selling come from different orientations, their approaches to developing relationships are worthy of comparison. This article has touted Key Account or major account selling as a strong relationship builder although it focuses heavily on maintaining rather than acquiring and developing clients. In fact, one source (Wotruba and Castleberry 1993) suggests that KAS is "substantially different than *regular* selling." Perhaps, KAS is not really "selling" at all. Perhaps the people handling these accounts should be called "account managers" rather than salespeople.

Despite the merits of national account marketing and selling, it is surely not appropriate in all in all circumstances (Ekberg). Accordingly, we dare not bid farewell to traditional selling.

Traditional Selling and Traditional Salespeople

Even though the traditional salesperson must typically manage more accounts than the key ac-

count salesperson does, promises and commitments to clients will require sustained post sale attention by salespeople if customers are to remain satisfied and/or committed.

Our observations of Chris Graham have carried the reader through all stages of the personal selling sequence with the buyer-seller relationship building like a snowball traveling downhill. The strengthening of the relationship at each stage of the sequence was aimed at a single sale, a valuable single sale that can earn referrals, enhance the seller's reputation, build sales volume and profits, and create residual income in the form of annual alarm monitoring fees and maintenance services.

Traditional salespeople such as Chris display a genuine delight with the rich benefits they feel their companies are offering and the effect is infectious. A healthy feeling seems to prevail. A salesperson can be *both* transaction-oriented and relationship-minded.

We recognize the pressures facing the salesperson who is expected to find new prospects every day... to bring in new orders every day... to build new relationships every step of the way. This is not as cozy as serving a few large accounts who reorder periodically and automatically. In either case, it's relationship selling, even though Chris and other

quality salespeople must build the relationship brick by brick, function by function ... from finding the prospect to closing the sale and servicing the account... to enjoying the fruits of the relationship he constructed. As the earlier discussion suggested, a large number of traditional sales organizations are not being built subject to consistent quality philosophies. Time proven hard sell methods are still bringing in sales for some firms that show little interest in building long term relationships with customers. Key account selling lends itself to an emphasis on retaining large, very profitable accounts and a corresponding soft sell.

Conversely, developmental stages introduce challenges which some salespeople try to avoid or overcome by use of gimmicks misrepresentations, high pressure, manipulations, scams, poor taste, insincerity, misquotes, neglect, non-professional behavior, and other irregularities. Some of these circumstances encourage dishonesty or unethical behavior, while others bring on ineffective selling tactics or strategies. Some examples of questionable or unacceptable selling behavior at each stage of the selling process follow:

Finding Prospects

- Feels he/she can sell everyone and tries to.
- Misrepresents the salesperson's role... "I'm taking a survey."
- Ignores the need to research potential prospects.

Contacting Prospects and Building Rapport

- Overwhelms the prospect with hubbub, hoopla, and razzle dazzle.
- Fails to set the stage (e.g., insincerity, false flattery).
- Doesn't take "no" for an answer.

Probing for Needs

- Feels that the salesperson is the best judge of the buyer's needs.
- Accepts prospect's problem definition. Probing is weak.

Presenting the Solutions

- Fails to adapt to each prospect's needs and personal style.
- Is guilty of too much talking...Not enough listening.
- Oversells product features and benefits.
- Promises services that are difficult or impossible to deliver.

Closing

- Fails to ask for the order.
- Applies pressure for the one call close.
- Creates illegitimate price comparisons.
- Disparages the competition.

Maintenance

- The relationship ends when the sale is made.
- Fails to deliver what is promised when it's promised.
- Assumes that customer dissatisfaction is preceded by a complaint.

Looking for the Cure

Nearly 20 years ago, Schneider (1980) noted that researchers and practitioners had concentrated far more on how to attract customers than on how to keep them. The reversal of that emphasis and the growing popularity of relationship selling have prompted this article.

Major (or national or key) account marketing or selling or whatever we want to call it has already proved to be an enduring contributor to relationship building in many industries. Traditional selling has been stuck in a rut as evidenced by the stigma that refuses to go away. However, the CRIMPCO example suggests that successful traditional selling is very much alive and does not require hard sell practices that have created the ugly image of the salesperson.

Benighted offenders whose selling techniques have been in a state of intellectual and moral darkness for years will have to listen and observe carefully, display open minds, and follow the leads that established sales leaders will be obliged to provide.

The most difficult group consists of those who know they are violators but don't care. Many willful offenders do not believe that salespeople can achieve success without the use of unethical statements and other irregularities.

Some violators of good selling practice don't realize they are violators. They may be eager to introduce salutary action, but they need guidance and direction.

Instead of more critics, we need sales mentors, teachers, leaders, and experts who are capable of telling, showing, and teaching the how and why of relationship selling across *all* developmental and maintenance functions of selling. The solution will not emerge solely from more research, essays, and

journal articles. Practitioners should be encouraged to share their knowledge once it is determined that the content is worth sharing. Instructional vehicles can include action-oriented books (Alessandra and Barrera 1993; Hersey 1988), articles that include proven field selling techniques, seminars, selected video and audio tapes, consultation with experienced sales analysts and consultants, video conferencing, and other sales development media and personnel. Obviously, the identification and selection of the ideal sales training and education resources are easier said than done. The project will take time, but the year 2000 appears to be a reasonable target date.

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