



## *The Science of Selling*

*Salesmanship has often been described as an art — and maybe it was in simpler times when a salesman could get along with more talent than knowledge. Not any more: The age of expertise demands a thoroughly professional approach . . .*

□ According to at least one definition of the word "sell," everybody does it. The dictionary says that to sell is to inform people of the value of something and to inspire them with a desire to accept it or to agree to it. That, surely, is what all of us do every time we try to make a good impression or express an opinion. We are selling our personalities or our points of view.

This type of selling is vital to our society. Men and women come together to form families because they have made themselves mutually desirable and agreeable. Workers have jobs because they have "sold" their employers on hiring them. Politicians must sell their policies and abilities to the electorate. In their efforts to spread honesty and decency among the population, clergymen use sales techniques to persuade us to be good.

Selling is also the dynamo of the economy. Everything that is produced, from a huge paper-making machine to a paper-clip, is intended to be sold. If a product is not sold, it is wasted. Waste makes for unemployment, low productivity, and less overall national wealth.

Salesmanship plays a decisive role in every stage of the economic process. Take the paper-clip mentioned above. It begins as iron ore which has been sold to a steel company. The steel made from the ore is sold to a paper-clip manufacturer. The

manufacturer sells it to an office supplier, who sells the finished product to the user. It may very well be used to attach a letter to a brochure aimed at selling something else.

Various other goods and services have been sold along the line to expedite that tiny product to its destination. The iron ore may be carried on a ship whose services have been sold to the steel mill. The manufacturer buys boxes in which to pack his product and trucks in which to deliver it. From the miner who blasts the ore out of the ground to the stenographer who clips the brochure and letter together, people throughout the whole chain of events owe their jobs to the fact that things are being sold.

It is the salesperson who links the chain together. If, in this example, all the links had not been made, the ore might as well have stayed in the ground. Until something has been sold, then, nothing happens in the economy. Except in cases of outright fraud, every sale has a purpose in the broad economic scheme of things.

One definition of selling is "the process of persuading people to buy wanted or needed goods or services." The salesperson is thus in the position of helping the buyer to fill his wants and needs. It might be thought that if a person really needs something, it takes no persuasion to lead him to



buy it. But in our type of economy, a great deal of salesmanship comes into play in providing the necessities of life.

When people go to buy food, for instance, they are presented with a variety of products. The choices they make among the items on the shelves are influenced by advertising, packaging, pricing and displays.

Though they buy what they *need* in the general category of food, they buy what they *want* when they pick one product over another. It is salesmanship — in its fancy dress of marketing — that has turned their general needs into specific wants.

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### *Why spend money of Product X in preference to Product Y?*

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And that is the job of the salesperson — to stimulate a want for a particular product in the minds of prospective customers. It is not an easy task, since the item he or she has to sell is almost always faced with competition from other items of similar design, quality and price.

The supplier's reputation and brand name exerts a strong influence on the buyer's decision. But that reputation is only part of a total "value package" which includes all the other merits of the product or service. All things being equal, the salesman who can cite more merits for his product than his competitor gets more signatures on his order forms.

This is especially so in the selling that goes on before a product reaches the retail level. Professional purchasing agents, merchants and industrial managers want to know all the features and benefits of an item in fine detail before they commit their company's money to Product X in preference to Product Y.

So supporting the case for a product or service with complete and exact information about it is essential to successful selling. That being so, it is remarkable how many salespeople do not have all the pertinent facts at their fingertips.

In his recently-published book *The Big Sell*, John R. Rushmore of Sales Research Associates in West Chester, Pa., writes about a survey he conducted among buyers for large U.S. industrial companies. Most of them expressed the opinion that less than 20 per cent of the salesmen who called on them had a complete knowledge of the products they had come to sell.

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### *Selling has never been given the recognition it deserves*

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This signals a lack of professionalism — indeed of competence — in the sales field. How could such a lack exist at a time when competition is so intense?

One answer may be that, despite the pivotal function it fulfils in the economy, selling has never been accorded the recognition that is due to it. In a society that does not take selling seriously, there is little encouragement for the people doing it to take a serious, professional approach to their work.

Even companies that employ salesmen often place a low value on their services. It is not uncommon for a company to tell a new recruit: "We'll stick you in sales for a couple of years until you're ready for promotion." The message is there for all to see: The company does not regard selling as a first-class, permanent career.

Then there is the public attitude towards salesmen, which is reflected in all too many corny jokes. It is coloured by the mythology of the past. Books, movies and at least one musical show (*The Music Man*) have all depicted the salesman as a flashy, fast-talking individual who is long on guile and short on scruples and good taste.



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The image may have been exaggerated, but there is an element of truth in it. In the past, some salesmen really did wear loud suits, tell dirty jokes, chomp cheap cigars and murder the language. Some did resort to trickery. They were not well-educated, but there was no need for them to be. They dealt with purchasers who were very much like themselves.

Times have changed. In the old days, a salesman had no difficulty knowing his products, because they were reasonably simple. Let us say he sold machine tools. The lathes and power drills in his catalogue had probably not changed significantly in 30 years.

Contrast that with today, when machine tools run on computerized controls and other automated features. The purchasing agent with whom the salesman deals is likely to be a mechanical engineer, a computer expert, or both. Rapidly-advancing technology is likely to alter the design of a machine radically from one year to the next. Competitors are turning out new models with new capabilities all the time.

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### *The high-pressure approach is increasingly ineffective*

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The complexity of products, the dazzling pace of development, the expertise of buyers — all these are rendering the old catch-as-catch-can sales methods less and less effective. As Frank Brennan put it in his textbook, *Personal Selling — A Professional Approach*: “The back-slapping, glad-handing, high-pressure salesman . . . has gone the way of the corner shoeshine stand. The new breed of professionals who have replaced him are more than just salespeople. They are experts in their field.”

According to Brennan, sales professionals have three attributes in common: They put the customer's welfare first, possess superior product

knowledge, and use responsible sales techniques. They do not go in for one-shot sales with the object of making a quick killing. They think primarily of establishing a lasting buyer-seller relationship. They realize that the only really worthwhile business deal is one that benefits both sides.

In other words, they do not try to manipulate a prospect for the sake of making sales. “Manipulators,” writes Brennan, “are salespeople who: exploit rather than help other people for their own gain; try to get customers to buy something they don't need; take unfair advantage of social or business relationships; use high-pressure selling tactics that usually involve untruths or degrading motivations.”

Like practitioners of other professions, sales professionals must adhere to strict ethical standards. And like other professionals, they must keep abreast with developments. They are more likely to be found at home of an evening browsing through the latest trade journals than out wining and dining a client.

Professionalism also entails constant efforts to enhance one's skills. Sales course directors agree that one class of skills in which there is a general need for improvement is communications. Salespeople who aspire to professionalism should take conscious steps to learn how to speak, listen, and write letters and reports effectively.

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### *Selling is partly a matter of making it easy to buy*

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Psychology is another subject which salespeople are well-advised to study. Making up one's mind to buy or not to buy is a psychological act. Buying decisions are made in different ways by different types of personalities. Some prospects are impulsive, some deliberate, some analytical, some emotional. Salespeople with training in psychology are able to “read” these types, and adjust their presentations accordingly.



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The five-and-dime store king F.W. Woolworth once said that he did not sell, but he made it easy to buy. Salespeople with a knowledge of motivation are in the same position. It is well-known that people are motivated by psychological needs, such as the need for society, for self-esteem and self-fulfilment. The person who understands these motivators can make sales and satisfy the client's needs at the same time.

This is not to say that a busy salesman or saleswoman must become a full-fledged psychologist. But a grasp of the elements of the subject, which can be obtained through continuing education courses or library books, is a prerequisite of the professional approach.

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### *Rejection is a normal part of a salesperson's life*

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If it is important for salespeople to know their contacts' personalities, it is even more important for them to know their own personalities. The most successful among them are every bit as conscious of their personal strengths, weaknesses and quirks as they are of those of their products, their competitors' products, and their clients.

Through uncompromising self-analysis, salespeople can identify and subdue the psychological tendencies within them that stand in the way of sewing up orders. For example, a naturally argumentative person who does not refrain from talking back to potential customers can expect few sales.

Self-knowledge is needed more in sales than in most occupations because of the psychological wear and tear inherent in the business. Salespeople must learn to deal with rejection, which is a normal part of selling life. People who do not closely monitor their mental state may sink unawares into profound discouragement after a series of turn-downs, feeling that the rejections represent a personal failure. The more discouraged they become, the less they work; the less they work,

the less they succeed; the less they succeed, the more discouraged they become.

When the danger-signs of discouragement begin to show, the self-knowledgeable person will call on the old-fashioned salesman's virtue of persistence. "Persistent people begin their success where others end in failure," wrote Edward Eggleston. The truth of this statement is verified over and over again in the records of successful sales careers.

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### *A career in sales means working harder than most*

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The fact that sales representatives work largely on their own is another reason for psychological self-vigilance. The most common psychological flaws lead to procrastination and idleness, simply because it is easier in the short term to do nothing than to face up to reality.

To work alone or in the field without a boss looking over your shoulder calls for an unusual degree of self-discipline. And self-discipline calls for self-awareness — for knowing the soft spots in your personality and reinforcing them from your reserves of inner strength.

"The art of winning business is in working hard," wrote Elbert Hubbard. Self-discipline is necessary in the everyday course of sales life, because to succeed, salespeople must work harder than their neighbours. In many cases, they must not only work long hours, but odd hours by the standards of the rest of society. More than most people, they must be willing to make personal sacrifices for the sake of their careers.

A career in sales, then, is like a career in any profession. It demands dedication, continuing study, and a high degree of integrity. Selling offers both financial and spiritual rewards, but these days, it is not for everyone. It is for those who see it as their life's work and adopt it as a profession, with all that is implied by the word.