

"GIRDED WITH FRONT-LINE EXPERIENCE AS A RED CROSS VOLUNTEER, I MARCHED INTO MY FIRST CLASS, ARMED WITH A SURE-FIRE RETORT TO THE 'I REMEMBER WHEN' SYNDROME."

# CONFESSIONS OF A NEW SALES TRAINER

BY BETH  
JONES

Surviving that first workshop seems incredible to me, now that I think about it. To have run *any* training session, especially "Selling Skills," seems like someone's idea of an April Fool's prank — only it was February. Believe me, I was the dark horse in the fifth race — and the track was knee-deep in mud. I'll submit my case and let you decide if you would have played the odds.

Consider the fact that my pre-season billings rated me as the commercial sales expert running a five-star program on selling skills and service knowledge — the hottest thing since negotiable certificates of deposit! To thicken the plot, this was the first commercial-sales training program to be offered in the organization in nearly three years. Naturally, one might conclude that years of selling experience "in the field," or at least years of training experience, would be necessary to fill this position. I had reached these same conclusions and wondered in

amazement what I was doing cast in the leading role.

My skeptical attitude is based on the fact that previous to running my first workshop I had not spent three minutes before a group, large or small, as a trainer. Sure, I had worked with groups facilitating an occasional Friday-afternoon happy hour. But, up until two months before my maiden voyage, t-r-a-i-n-i-n-g brought up word associations like "house training" or "potty training" — anything but "sales training."

Was I an expert on selling skills? Well, I could count on one hand the number of sales calls I've made in my lifetime! If you will permit me to classify as experience peddling Girl Scout cookies and collecting for UNICEF on Halloween, then, I'm surely an expert! (I was especially skillful at collecting candy to feed "the-poor-and-hungry-children" — especially the one doing the collecting!) Years of experience I do not have, and my personal volume of *Famous Calls In My Life* carries a copyright date of 1978. Then as now, my toughest customers were not corporate treasurers

and presidents, but workshop participants!

Drawing this mini-melodrama to a close: The participants of my first 10 workshops were slated to be some of the most "senior" people in my organization! Years of experience is a gross understatement of the time these people had spent in selling situations. What's more, demographically, the participants were many years my senior. In fact, during the second day of my initial workshop, I discovered that one of the senior vice presidents had been my primary grade Sunday School teacher. I was to help these wise, seasoned men and women improve their skills and effectiveness on a sales call? Impossible! Marie Antoinette at least knew her head was on the block!

## The First Workshop

As you may imagine, I approached my first workshop with troubled heart, uncertain as to whether the three days might be more productively spent standing in an unemployment line. It was small consolation to remember

that for all trainers there was that memorable "first time."

Entering the training room in the morning, fearing vandals might have ransacked my carefully constructed domain during the night, I quickly glanced around to find my materials and equipment exactly as I had arranged them. A person can never be "too sure," however, when it comes to crime (point six of the basic bank security training). I proceeded to triple check everything!

Yes, the training notebooks were neatly placed on the table in front of each perfectly aligned chair. A fresh, clean pad of legal-ruled paper was ready for use at each place. At the flip chart I could see that all five marking pens (plenty of spares just in case one goes dry) were close by. The overhead projector was appropriately aimed, and the video tape threaded, ready to roll.

I drew a sigh of relief that the cleaning crew had rearranged little except a layer of dust, when a faint smile suddenly twitched

through the serious mask on my face: There was still chalk in my holder!

In spite of apprehension akin to a 16-year-old's impatience at prom time, I sensed my accomplishment. The planning, the design work and the long hours of production were behind me. I was momentarily buoyant; but the next three days would be sink or swim.

No one having yet arrived, I quickly rushed to read over my introductory notes — one more time. How many times had I rehearsed these lines today? Let's see . . . once over coffee, twice as I drove to work and again while walking from my car to the bank.

I briefly gazed out the window and noted the early-morning mist covering the city. "Oh, to be one of the masses going to work somewhere else," I thought to myself. I recounted how I had spent the previous 24 hours — most of it with my stomach in square knots. My boss had urged me not to waste mental energy worrying about how the workshop would turn out.

Instead he had the previous day advised me to "go home, leisurely sip a glass of wine while enjoying a long, hot bath and get a good night's sleep."

I had spent much of the night, however, delivering oratory performances to bored house plants and indulging a lot in worry. I was rigidly obeying the rule that "practice makes perfect" while ignoring that "all work and no play makes Jill a dull trainer."

It was simply too late to do further worrying as I heard someone entering the room. I looked up to see a strange face — my first participant. I stepped forward to introduce myself, and found that I was able to verbalize my name with a convincing tone. In fact, I actually got my name right. "Now," I thought to myself, "if I can only remember his name — along with the seven others I've memorized."

The room quickly filled with my first class, senior executives from across the state who had traveled three to four hours to attend. Except for an occasional comment like, "I haven't been to work this early since my first week with the bank in '55," most of the early morning chatter centered on problem loans, or the weekend's revised golf scores. No one mentioned the interesting article I'd sent them, or how much they were looking forward to the workshop. "Well," I concluded nervously, "that's O.K. Maybe it slipped their minds exactly *why* they're here. If that's the case, it's still not too late to call the workshop off!"

A glance at my watch showed we were 10 minutes late starting. But we were still short one participant. With a sigh of relief, I refilled my coffee cup, determined to wait the person out. "He won't know what the workshop's about unless he hears my opening remarks," I reasoned.

"There must be a good reason why he's delayed," I thought to myself. Caffeine tremors were starting. The lively discussions had now slowed to a bantering of fair weather fillers. A few cleared throats and sideways glances at watches alerted me it was time to get in or get out. With the confi-

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dence of a first grade teacher beckoning her class from the playground, I meekly announced to the group that we were ready to begin.

At 8:20 a.m. I was still arranging and rearranging my notes. I waited for everyone to find a seat and "settle in." I studied their faces and found an occasional warm smile instead of the penetrating cold stares I had expected. What a pleasant surprise! All eyes finally found me. "Well," I murmured to myself, "this is it."

The voice that began to speak sounded utterly unfamiliar. Thank goodness what I heard it saying sounded reasonable! "I'm glad you could be here this morning . . ."

The spell was broken as the door swung open and the case of the "missing participant" was solved. Hurriedly entering the room, he threw his coat on a nearby couch and briskly walked toward the only remaining chair. "I apologize" he murmured, "but I had an important meeting — *very* important. John," he addressed one of the members of the class, "we need to discuss it as soon as possible." Turning toward me for the first time, he questioned, "When is the next break?"

Next break? He's got to be kidding! We're at the top of the first inning — no runs, no hits — not even one pitch — and he's calling time out?

"Well, actually, uh," I fumbled, "we're just getting started . . . but, if it's that important, maybe we should take a short time out . . . uh, I mean break . . ."

### Delays

Thereafter, it became clear that some participants were unable to experience a workshop for legitimate reasons. On other occasions they were unwilling to experience a workshop for illegitimate excuses. Sorting the reasons from the excuses can be a challenge, particularly, at the beginning of the session.

"This is really a bad week for me," is clearly an excuse. "I have to leave at 4:00," may be a reason. I noticed a pattern developing around the occurrence of these excuses. Strangely enough, role-play

time each day seemed to correlate with at least one urgent meeting, or two troubled customers holding on the phone. Occasionally, someone who had "lost" the sale during a role play would fall into the familiar, "Well, you haven't seen me with a *real* customer — let me tell you about the time . . ." (Can you imagine the impact of exclaiming to a group, "Well, you should see me with a real class . . .!")

Someone from the class could usually be counted on to be called away during discussion of the different skills of handling customer objections. That way, during role plays I would hear, "I can't answer these questions since I wasn't here when we talked about them." I wondered how this person had handled customer objections all those years without a sales-training course!

I was better able to deal with these situations, after I became aware of some of the whys behind the "reasonable" excuses. I realized I needed to focus on their anxiety levels and performance pressure rather than rescheduling breaks and rearranging starting and stopping times. I also had been advised that honesty regarding my own anxiety would "break the ice." I was the most relieved person in the room to finally be able to state my nervousness — as if my sweaty palms and staccato laugh had not already been giveaways.

### "War Stories"

Excuse-making required a marked measure of participation innovation. I was likewise intrigued by the imagination and creativity participants used in formulating "war stories." I had been red-alerted on the importance of these tales of battle by another sales trainer. His advice had been to "be sure and make lots of calls so you can match their stories with your own. Then, they'll be sure to listen to what you're teaching!" With barely two months to prepare for my first workshop, I had found it difficult to schedule enough sales calls to beat the track records I was to encounter. I did, however, manage to construct a few tales of what I felt were bloody skirmishes. Girded with front-line ex-

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perience as a Red Cross volunteer, I marched into my first class, armed with a sure-fire retort to the "I remember when" syndrome.

All of my fears were confirmed. During participant introductions, I got a taste of just how much "firing line" action these people said they had seen. From their mouths came personal sales resumes that would cause even Ross Perot to quake. If participant A said he'd been with the bank 10 years, participant B most assuredly had logged 12. If participant C said he handled large textile accounts for the bank, participant D was the caretaker of the largest accounts . . . et cetera . . . ad nauseam!

It was my turn. Glancing at my watch, I was stunned to see the introductions had taken 30 minutes more than I had allowed in my agenda. I alluded to our pressing schedule. Taking a deep breath, I briefly stated that while I had been with the bank only 24 months and a trainer for only two months, I had studied art history in college. With such a background I was certain

they would find the next three days invaluable in improving skills used on a sales call!

At that point, I had certainly confirmed all their fears about both me and the workshop. I could see question marks scrawled on their faces as they wondered if now was the best time to exit. Or, would it be more considerate to wait until lunch? I could see them figuring and refiguring the equation: eight seasoned veterans in sales plus one inexperienced female in general equals a sales training course?

The next two hours were laced with several rounds of war stories about "difficult customers in my life." In fact, I could hardly get in a word since everyone was so eager to share their tales.

#### Coming Out of Knowledge

One of my biggest worries before that first workshop was remembering "when to say it." Hence, I prepared stacks of notes on cards to occupy my nervous hands with the art of shuffling. I had assumed the memorizing tech-

nique used in school to present term papers would also serve my purposes for remembering the classically critical why, where, when and how. Well, what I didn't remember was that my classmates developed a chronic case of the "shut-eye syndrome." And, forgetting a line, I scared myself to death as I struggled to recover lost words, and (doublebind) I saw the class pale significantly as they strained to help me get back on track!

Several weeks before my first session, I had lunch with two friends who have both spent hours with groups in training sessions.

"How do you actually know what to say?" I asked. "There's so much information. I'll never remember all of it."

One of my friends began talking about "coming out of knowledge rather than memory." "Oh, sure," I thought, "easy for him to say with a Ph.D. in human resource development and years of experience. He certainly doesn't have an appreciation for my situation — a

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female, art-history major with limited time in the training field, facing a group of senior bank executives, all with years of experience in selling."

"Remember," my other friend said, "you can be confident in the fact that you're the expert in that room. You know more about that program than anyone else. You're the one who has spent weeks putting the program together." He repeated, "No one else knows more about that program than you. And, that's what each of those people are there for, willingly or unwillingly . . . to take part in your program."

Those words did little to empower me at the time, except to reassure me that if the program bombed, I could be confident in saying, "I did it all myself!"

Still assured my way was best, I began that first workshop armed with a ream of notes on what I should remember to say. However, after the first morning, I suddenly realized my notes were where I originally had placed them for "quick" referral purposes, neatly tucked under my copy of the workshop notebook in front of me. The surprising thing was that the notes remained untouched! "My Heavens," I thought, "how in the world did I remember what to say?"

Since that day, and many workshops later, I have become increasingly aware of my friend's meaning when he spoke about "coming out of knowledge." I realized that daily I practice operating on knowledge rather than memory, and have done so for years. For example, when asked by someone about a favorite subject or sport, such as snow skiing, I certainly don't run over a memorized list of "things to say about skiing." Instead, I say whatever occurs in my mind about skiing — what seems appropriate at the time. I might even ask this person some questions, such as "Have you ever been skiing before?" to find out how much he or she knows or what he or she wants to learn. It would be inappropriate to talk about skiing moguls or the techniques of weight shifting in deep powder to someone who had

never skied before! I now see that the same principle holds true for a training session.

In preparing for workshops, if I concentrate on knowing what and why my material is, rather than merely memorizing the lines, I more easily internalize it. The material becomes part of me and is not forgotten when the training is over. If I focus on remembering the right words to say, then that is all I will remember, even with good cue cards! But, if my focus is understanding and knowing the material, then the words to express what I "know" flow naturally.

Having confidence that I "know what I know" (and, no more!) and not relying on copious notes to tell me what I should say, I'm free to find out what my class needs to learn. I can occupy myself with getting a feel for what it's like to be sitting in their places and how I can position what I do know so they can best relate to it. It also saves a lot of time when I know I *don't* know something rather than searching through stacks of notes only to conclude that I must have left at home the piece of paper with that answer on it!

#### A Lesson in This Learning

What a field day a clinical psychologist would have interpreting each part of this confession. I think he might conclude, "What we have here is a classic case of resistance."

"Terminal?" I might cautiously ask.

"No," the psychologist would answer reassuringly. "I see this all the time — common in trainers, and their organizations."

"Take your trainer," he would say, pointing a finger toward me. "You got what you resisted most. In your efforts to practice being relaxed and calm before that first workshop, you rehearsed yourself into a frenzy. You didn't want your participants to view you as you viewed you — unqualified and too inexperienced to teach sales training."

"Wait a minute," I objected, straightening in my chair, "I'm not sure I see what you mean. I *was* inexperienced. I'd never taught before; never made any real sales

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calls. You must not have read the first few paragraphs very carefully. Remember, I said . . ."

"Yes, yes, I do remember what you said," the doctor interrupted. "And, it was a very accurate description of how you saw yourself. But, how were the participants to know how unqualified you thought you were, unless they read it in this article or you told them. They were convinced you were anything but an expert by your nervousness over trying to be one! What's worse, you established unreasonable expectations for your expertise."

"Oh," I meekly answered, straightening the fold in my skirt. I was trying hard to resist hearing the doctor's assessment, despite the "good sense" it made.

"One other thing," the psychologist continued, "you must not have listened very well the day your friend spoke of you being the expert on that training workshop. Had anyone else in your organization taught that program?"

"No," I replied, certain I must have stumbled into the suite of a

trial lawyer.

"Did anyone else put as much work as you into developing the workshop?"

"Well, several people helped, but I did spend all of my time working on it . . ."

"Who else in the entire organization, the entire state, knew about teaching that workshop and had better knowledge of your bank's services than you?"

"Well . . . well . . ." (Clutch City!) "Let me see . . . Oh, I guess nobody!"

"So you see," concluded the psychologist, "you were the expert! The workshop wasn't held to talk about the participants' past selling experiences. They should be the experts in their own personal history. But some of the best football coaches have only seen action on the sideline. And, lucky for me, I can be a good psychologist without having ever been insane!"

Unrelenting, this tower of objectivity continued to shrink my resistance.

"Well," I considered, "at \$45 an hour he's got to give me my money's worth, but . . ."

His words interrupted again. "Remember those good reasons you thought of, like not being able to teach a workshop because not everyone had arrived or the attendees were too preoccupied with important business problems? Your excuses served the same purpose as those you complained about from your participants. You both were building a good alibi just in case you turned in a below-average performance. You were so busy trying to prove credentials to each other as professional sales trainer and professional salesperson, that you each did a grand job of resisting learning something that could make you even better at what you were already doing well!"

"Well," I'd answer, "I can clearly see how the participants were continually trying to prove that their way was the best way by telling war stories which always had a happy ending. Now that I think back on it they would always close the sale in their stories. I'm sure there were just as many tales which end with the prospect saying, 'Don't call me, I'll call you,' or 'Let me think it over.' Now I see

that they were anxious about performing well in front of their peers *and me*. All of these things kept them from being receptive to new ideas about selling techniques — especially when they felt they didn't need improvement in the first place! But as for me — what was it I resisted learning? I was the trainer, remember?"

"You've stated several times that you have no experience in sales, right?"

"Yes," I emphatically replied, wondering if his diplomas could have been more prominently displayed.

"Well, here was your golden opportunity to begin getting experience in selling! You had to sell your ideas to your participants just as they sell services to bank customers. Good salespeople don't recite canned pitches — neither do good trainers. Are you following me?"

"Uh-huh . . ." I looked again at the door.

"Your odds were even greater than the average salesperson."

"Oh, how do you mean?"

"Well, usually, a salesperson is one-on-one with the customer. In your class the odds were eight to one! I bet very few salespeople face odds like that week after week! Also, you can learn a great deal from the participants themselves. Did you learn anything from your first class?"

"Certainly! For example, their war stories proved that in selling, as in trapping, there's more than one way to skin a cat. No selling course can teach you everything you always wanted to know . . . not even mine! The point seems to be that one's approach to a customer is a judgment call. Of course, we can all learn some techniques that work better than others (although several participants still resist that thought). But, in the final analysis, the salesperson has to decide what works best for him or her with that particular customer. The sales trainer can only facilitate the learning."

"What else did you learn?" he'd asked, letting a phone ring and cease unanswered.

"Well, I learned that I could effectively let the class answer their own questions — especially when I didn't have an answer! If a partici-

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pant asked me 'What should I do when . . .,' I would, in turn, refer the question to someone in the class by saying, 'Well, Marti, what would you suggest Debbie do in that situation?' The participants could display their knowledge and I could learn from another viewpoint.

"But, Doctor," I would question, "I'm still a little confused on one point. In an organization where the words effectiveness, aggressiveness and innovation are heard day

after day, why is there so much resistance to sales training which can, ultimately, have a direct effect on the company's earnings? You know: increased sales equals increased profits. The bottom line! It seems strange that no training had existed for this audience for three years prior to my program. And, look who they hired to do the training — someone who was a most unlikely candidate."

"Ah, yes. A good observation you've made," the doctor would

doodle on. "I'm sorry to say that resistance is rampant in most organizations. *Sales, effectiveness, bottom line.* Those buzz words certainly sound convincing. The problem seems to occur when everyone is sure they're saying the right words, but nobody bothers to define the meaning. Whenever that happens, I would recommend that the organization admit itself to the clinic for immediate treatment. But, that is just my medical opinion. Anyway, we can explore that point later. Our hour is almost up and I have another appointment waiting. A bad case of trainer paranoia."

I cleared my throat. "Thank you. It's been helpful, despite the bruising."

"I want to ask you one final question," the psychologist said, peering into my eyes. "I'm taking a risk, but tell me, what do you plan to do about all this?"

"Well," I hesitate, caught off guard by such a query, "let me think for a minute."

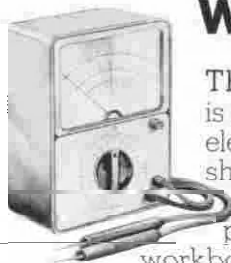
"It seems my biggest problem is resisting. It also seems the participants' biggest problem is resisting. And last, but not least, the organization is showing symptoms of the same. I'm not sure I can single-handedly cure the organization, but one person I can cure is me. If I do less resisting, then, hopefully, my participants will follow suit. That's it! Going forward, if I resist less and have more fun, I can set myself up as a role model for my classes. If they experience me relaxed and open, perhaps they will do the same."

Smiling warmly, he opened the door, and nodded like a dean at commencement. As I left the building, I noted my step was springier, my head lighter. Rounding the corner, I observed the newsstand salesman laughing with a customer as an evening paper was exchanged for a quarter.

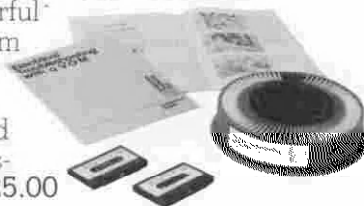
Beth Jones is sales training officer at NCNB Corp., a one-bank holding company headquartered in Charlotte, N.C. Prior to joining NCNB in 1976, she was employed by Vail Associates in Vail, Colo. A graduate of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, she is currently designing a systems approach to bank sales training.

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