

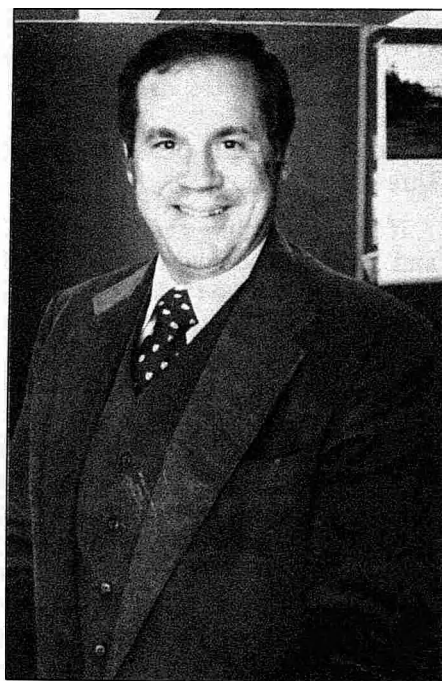
SPEAKING FROM EXPERIENCE

"BACK TO BASIC SALES TRAINING"

Guest Commentary
BY DONALD L. KNIGHT

In the celebrated film "Second Effort," with the late Vince Lombardi, a point is made that football players must go through the fundamentals each year to be able to maintain their status as a pro. The actor, Ron Masak, responds that most veterel salespeople feel fundamentals are for rookies. Statements such as these cause those connected with the sales profession to flinch and wonder why we go so far afield with our training programs. Today, we have a new term used for sales training . . . "behavioral science." Some programs teach very little, some programs dwell on the subject to great lengths. The cost of training programs and updating of sales personnel yearly is enormous. Basic training programs are a dichotomy with sales techniques on one side and product knowledge on the other. Programs range anywhere from a couple of days in a room with the manager to several months or even years on a formalized program.

After having gone through three programs, working with others and hearing tales of others, I'm convinced that better steps could be taken to put the basics of salesmanship back into sales. The learning of basic salesmanship techniques could help increase productivity for the company and develop an air of professionalism in sales. This is not to say that behavioral science does not have its place in sales but the initial emphasis



Donald L. Knight

should be in other areas.

For many years it seemed that the sales profession was in need of some improved training at the college level. Several programs were tried but all ended in failure for the school for a variety of reasons. Still, vast amounts of money and time are invested by businesses in helping new sales employees to be better salespeople when they are placed in the field. Colleges and universities could provide a tremendous service by providing more extensive basic skills training common to all salespeople.

Most graduates of programs today have majors in marketing but a high percentage start in the sales

area. These graduates only use sales as a stepping stone to management positions they envision in the future. The writer does not quarrel with this ambitious pursuit, but while an employee is selling why not be better able to excel?

Colleges and universities generally have a course or two in sales but never anything further. A curriculum could be developed that would provide the student with better sales skills — basic knowledge that could lead to more numerous employment opportunities. A quick glance at the classified advertisements in almost every local paper shows separate columns for help-wanted sales, an indication of the need for people. These programs could also assist industry by cutting costs of training programs and decreasing time for the new employee to get from initial employment to the field and increased productivity.

In 1976, I decided to conduct a local study with the goals as follows: (1) a personal crusade to correct the poor impression people have of salespersons; and (2) the need to upgrade sales training received prior to employment, for which colleges have primary responsibility. More specifically, this investigation attempted to: (1) gather input from business, industry and education to determine the types of courses that should be included in a curriculum such as sales; and (2) develop a one-year

and two-year program of instruction leading to the Certificate of Achievement and the Associate Degree, respectively. Many people only come in contact with salespeople on the retail level who are, oftentimes, ill-trained and do not care about the job they perform. When people see the trifling attitudes these salespeople have, they are quick to categorize all salespeople into the same group. They are not afforded the opportunity to see professionals at work.

Task one involved an intensive review of the literature to determine if any sales training programs were in existence and to learn how business education is a part of college curricula. Some background was needed to learn the basis of curriculum development so that a meaningful course of instruction could be designed. The one idea that was perpetuated by most of the authors was the need to use business and industry to their fullest capacity for design,

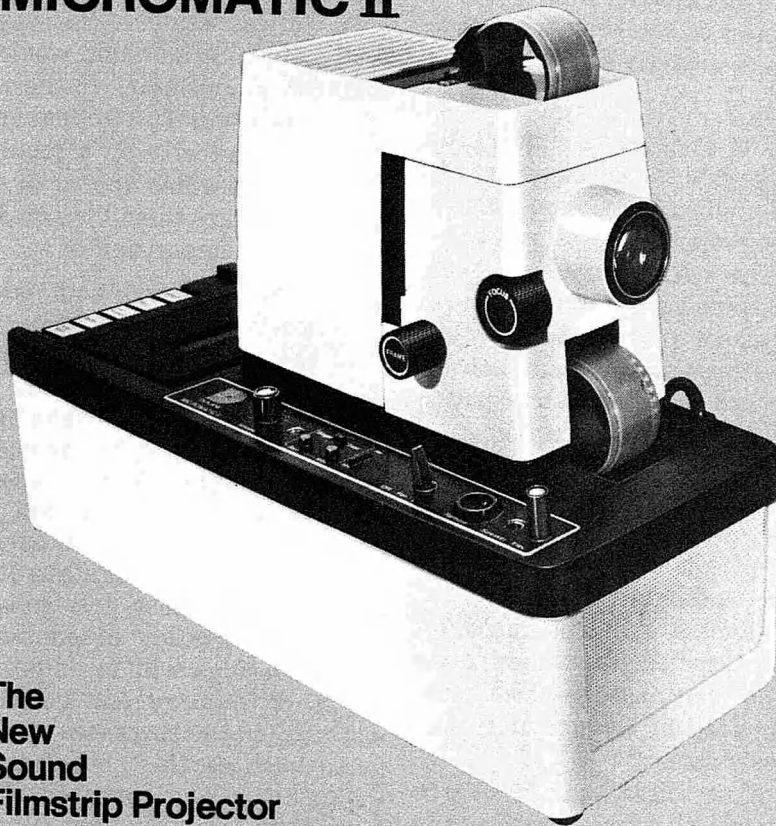
implementation and participation in a program. The rationale was to build a program that would meet state and college educational needs and requirements but also be realistic so the student learns what the "real world" is actually like. It is the process of putting business back in the curriculum.

The second task was then started which covered several areas. First, one determines the population and then determines how to obtain a sample that will provide varied and meaningful information. For this particular survey it was determined that all colleges and universities within the state of Michigan that had business departments would be included to ascertain an educational viewpoint. Business and industry would necessarily provide the largest sample and, therefore, would be limited in scope due to funds available. There were more than 6,700 businesses that had sales departments of five or more employees and were eligible for inclusion in the sample. This was further limited to those closest to the mid-Michigan community of Lansing. Over 1,000 businesses were selected and address labels produced.

The next task was the questionnaire that would be sent to the selected sample, collecting the necessary data to design a curriculum. The basic research instrument was a composite of several courses that could be included in a sales program, and the questionnaire also provided space for additional courses and comments that the respondents wished to make. Attached to these items was a short synopsis of each course so the reader could easily understand what the course would include. A cover letter was planned to explain the reasons for the survey and to earnestly enlist help and support in this endeavor. There was an attempt to keep the survey form as short as possible so not to take an excessive amount of the reader's time and, thereby, hopefully obtain a better return.

The data was then mailed to all 1,116 addresses in May 1976 and a two-month period was set as the time limit for returns. There were

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316 replies returned before the deadline. A reminder card was mailed after one month to spur additional people to complete the survey. The data was then put into the college's IBM 370 computer for quick and easy analysis of the responses. Thus, data was analyzed and a course of instruction was developed. The results culminated in a proposed Associate Degree program in sales, general and specialized, and a one-year Certificate of Achievement.

To further involve business and education in the design of a new curriculum, a second form was decided upon. This survey was to outline the program as proposed and offer another opportunity for respondents to make changes if they felt changes were needed. The only people receiving second questionnaires were those who had responded initially. A time limit of two months was again used. At the time-limit expiration, 52 returns were in and the changes from the

proposal were minimal. The survey form also included additional-comments' sections and a space to indicate if a copy of the abstract was requested.

The results of the study provided the necessary rationale for the program proposal to be submitted to the college's business council for approval in order to implement the program in September 1977. Approval was gained in April 1977. The program was publicly announced during the summer of 1977, nationally, statewide and locally.

Conclusions

The conclusions of this report are based on the review of literature and analysis of the data obtained.

1. The sales curriculum should contribute to the development of a broadly educated person, competent to perform professional sales.

2. The sales curriculum should offer a wide variety of experiences with school and community businesses through orientation, observation and leadership participation plus actual on-the-job training.

3. The proposed curriculum is designed to develop competencies in the various program areas and yet to permit specialization insofar as time and interests permit.

4. There is a definite need for more intensified preparation in the skills of salesmanship which could be provided by a community college curriculum.

5. A certificate and a degree program with a major emphasis in sales and behavioral science should be developed to help provide business and industry with better-qualified entry-level sales personnel.

6. Various courses were recommended for inclusion based on the respondent's needs, with emphasis on specific areas.

7. Curriculum-development activities in the area of employment preparation, primarily for entry-level positions, should be an integral part of a degree program.

8. Business and industry executives expressed enthusiastic sup-

port for such a program and suggested they were glad to participate in the development. The sincere commitment by business people to help with practical application phases eliminated any apprehensions about achieving full implementation of a curriculum.

9. An almost unanimous response from business, industry and education indicated the need for some practical field experience, including actual selling.

10. Although the concerns were minor, the education respondents stressed the importance of determining the possibility of transfer of credit to four-year institutions.

11. It was evident that opportunities upon graduation would be available to graduates in the mid-Michigan area. The preparation they would receive as a result of this program would appear to adequately prepare them for excellent employment opportunities.

Business/industry and educational partnerships should be used at all costs to develop a more realistic education for students. The community seems to always be interested and willing to become involved if asked. There may be many changes as a program progresses as the result of ongoing evaluation. With constant feedback from business and industry and the evaluation of educators, these offerings will be improved. Together industry and educators can build on the successes of a program such as this to enrich the educational environment of the students.

In the fall of 1977, Lansing Community College began an Associate Degree in Sales program that has been of keen interest to students. The program so far has been a success. Demonstration of employability in the future is the only concern that remains. — *Donald L. Knight.*

Donald L. Knight is assistant professor of Sales Management and Marketing, Lansing Community College, Lansing, Mich. He received the Ph.D. in Business Administration from California Western University, Santa Ana.

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