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"SINCE IT IS PEOPLE WHO HAVE PROBLEMS, THE ART OF SELLING IS BECOMING THE ART OF PROBLEM SOLVING."

# THE IMPACT OF CONSULTATIVE SELLING

BY GENE  
SOKOL

Sound battle strategy has always been based on three elements — adequate training of the troops, backup support and intelligence or information for strategic and tactical decisions.

The battle for sales is no exception. Adequate training of the sales force, management support via commitment of material, energy, time and money and current information on client needs and competitor products are prerequisites for successful sales operations.

Although these strategic elements remain important today, the tactical elements have changed. Uniqueness and image were once the weapons that determined the competitive edge of one product over another. For highly regulated industries, however, prices have become the major factor as differences between product lines diminish.

The pharmaceutical industry is a good case in point. Quality control regulations have forced product

adherence to certain "standards." Cost-control regulations have prompted a squeeze play by generic drugs over brand-name products. As a result of these controls, new drugs are being introduced less frequently, and when they are, these products are viewed as being increasingly similar, in the physicians' eyes, to products that are already on the market. Meanwhile, promotional pressures from manufacturers continue to increase.

These changes have driven the intensity of competition to heights previously unknown. Industries are scrambling for new sales ammunition in order to survive. Manufacturers have come to understand that as less differentiation exists between products within a product line, the more they must rely on associated services or superior sales personnel to provide the incremental difference or competitive edge. The new sales tools being forged, understandably, are more people-oriented than product-oriented.

Since it is people who have problems, the art of selling is becoming

the art of problem-solving. The trend is toward "consultative selling" rather than product-presentation selling. Gone are the days when a sales representative can leave product samples on a customer's desk to sell themselves. With consultative selling, new relationships between the sales representative and customer, as well as between sales personnel and management, must evolve.

The salesperson's role changes to helping customers solve problems through the aid of the company's products or services. The salesperson must be concerned with the customer's total needs and be able to anticipate how these needs can be met most satisfactorily and efficiently.

Product presentation still is a viable mode for consumer sales where the advertising medium provides the impetus for consumer demand for a product. In consultative selling, however, the salesperson creates demand through innovative and interactive processes. As a member of a problem-solving team, the successful sales representative often initiates and

maintains dialogue with the customer, determines what obstacles the customer perceives as being in the way, and suggests the means, products or services that may help the customer overcome these obstacles.

The degree to which consultative selling is taking hold in the health-care field can be seen by the level of interaction between scientist and sales representative at the annual meeting of the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology (FASEB). More and more, one can see a scientist enter the exhibit area of certain manufacturers, be greeted by a salesperson, and then led to a seat in a corner away from the crowd for a problem-expression session. No initial effort is made to steer the scientists toward any particular piece of equipment on display. Only after 10 to 20 minutes of consultation is there a suggestion to examine a product to see if it could provide a solution to the problem at hand.

Consultative selling demands a great deal of flexibility in approach on the part of salespersonnel. Everybody has different problems, and even when a common problem does exist, there may be different preferences for solution. All this precludes the traditional stock and rehearsed product "line" or "pitch." Thus, consultative selling requires not only verbal communication skills and in-depth knowledge of products or services, but also a certain sense of self-confidence that enables the salesperson to participate in a problem-solving mode.

#### **Management and Training Staff Roles**

Needless to say, such independent activity on the part of the sales representative raises some important questions regarding the means by which the salesperson is most effectively trained. Given the fair amount of autonomy which the salesperson is expected to achieve, who is most responsible for performance of the representatives in the field, the district manager; the corporate training staff; or a combination of the two?

Stated another way, who is

more qualified to guide newly hired representatives in acquiring selling skills than the trainer who has gone to great pains to develop and perfect the training program? Or, is the "hands-on" experience of the district manager more valuable to the representative?

Every company has experienced the frustration of implementing a training or development program that instills a high degree of enthusiasm in participants at its conclusion, only to see this enthusiasm wilt in the field for lack of adequate follow-up and reinforcement. For most industries facing this situation, the working relationship between field management and corporate training often becomes an exercise in detente. Both seek a highly motivated and performance-oriented sales force, but the strategies to reach this goal often are at odds. When the end result is positive, both field management and training will take the credit. If the end result is anything less, both have each other to blame.

This was the situation facing Penwalt Pharmaceuticals until the company implemented a new training program in 1976 which provided a harmonious single strategy that allowed flexibility in the field and training functions. The program objective is to increase the judgmental ability of the representative in analyzing each individual selling situation, and to utilize the most appropriate selling skill to move the customer to a buying decision.

Bob Granik, district manager for the Rx division of Penwalt Pharmaceutical, in the Los Angeles metropolitan region and Hawaii, states that the program actually places primary responsibility for the sales representative's performance squarely on the shoulder of each individual with the help and support of the training staff and district manager.

"After a one-week training session with the district manager, our new hires spend their first three to four months in the field," Granik said, "without the benefits of our



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formal sales-skills training program. This break-in period allows trainees with no previous experience in the industry to receive a kind of hands-on experience which enables the trainees to better relate to the sales-skills training they receive in the home office. During this three to four-month period, the new representatives have passed comprehensive product-knowledge tests on our major products. At this time, our new representatives are ready to go to our Rochester, New York headquarters. In Rochester, Gene Sokol, who is Penwalt's Rx Division manager of training and education, teaches them selling skills in using the Systematic Selling Techniques (SST) program. The SST program features sales skills which the representatives will need to become successful in this industry."

While I appreciate Mr. Granik's point of view, I don't personally find that sales representatives become successful just by learning these skills. I not only teach the SST program, but spend at least half the time in the training session on implementation of the skills in actual sales situations. We accomplish this by discussion, problem solving and skill practice.

By the end of the training session, the sales representatives have demonstrated that they have not only learned the new skills but can also implement them. After this training session, the sales representatives return to the field where the district manager takes over the critical role of follow-up and support. Although I'm not sure all managers realize it, the successful implementation of the SST skills depends primarily on the district manager.

For example, one of the methods I use to gauge the ongoing use of SST skills is the use of questionnaires. At the conclusion of the training program, representatives indicate that their confidence and comfort levels are very high. The response to the questionnaires that are sent out three to four months after the SST training reveal that some representatives are disregarding certain of the skills and in isolated cases using very

few of the newly learned skills. In general, skills not being used are those which required the greatest change in behavior. This is why the role of the district manager is so critical. Unless the district manager provides effective follow-up and support, some representatives fall back on old habits, particularly "canned" presentations.

"Personally, I spend at least 50 to 60 per cent of my time in coaching and support activities basically for Systematic Selling Techniques (SST), rather than product-knowledge skills," noted Granik. "Part of the reason for this is the geographic nature of my territory — a largely mobile, expanding, urban population mandating an increased need for well-trained representatives. However, because of my commitment to the SST program, which I used in the field for two years before becoming a district manager, I think coaching is vitally important regardless of territorial differences.

"I have seen it work effectively for many types of salespeople. But I do feel that after the formal training period there is increased nervousness in all the representatives with whom I have worked. This has relatively little to do with the style or type of training, but a lot to do with the imposition of a structure of a sales call, requiring behavioral changes on the part of some representatives.

"This psychological impact sometimes creates a monster out of a very fine educational tool," Granik noted. "Some representatives are so concerned about implementing all the skills, that they forget the major purpose of the call, to convince the physicians to prescribe our products. The representatives end up winning the battle and losing the war.

"After a period of what I call 'unmolding', the representative becomes confident enough to mold the SST program to the physicians' needs and not feel encumbered by the structure. I agree with Mr. Sokol's comments about the confidence and comfort levels since I've observed their effect on a representative's performance in the field. Follow-up coaching is the

key.

"In order to regain the spontaneity most representatives develop in the first three months, without training, I encourage them to concentrate on what I consider the two skills which most influence the success of the sales call — positioning statements and exploratory probes. Then I have them blend in the other skills as they feel confident to do so. I'd say it takes about an average of six months for most people to comfortably implement all the SST skills. I don't expect salespersons to completely mesh them together before then."

Not only that, but I am interested in constantly improving sales skills rather than perfection in some arbitrary time period. We consider improvements in sales skills and other areas as an ongoing process.

This is particularly important for experienced representatives. Over the years, a once outstanding salesperson may fall further and further behind because they don't

believe a sales skills program can "teach an old dog new tricks." Actually, we are finding that the SST program may rekindle some of the interest in skills and approaches they have unconsciously stopped using.

"In Penwalt recruitment efforts, when the sales-training program is described to potential new hires, their interest in joining the company heightens," according to Granik. "Even those who apply with some non-pharmaceutical selling experience are encouraged to find that top-management does not consider SST a minor investment of the individual's time. Company commitment to the improvement of sales skills and the feeling you are not out there alone, selling in a vacuum, are especially important to selling success."

When do representatives reach their highest selling potential? Neither Mr. Granik nor I can agree on an answer, and we question whether it is possible to answer.

"After all," said Granik, "selling in the pharmaceutical business is a dynamic process due to changing physician needs and interests, and to the introduction or application of new and existing products. But I've told my people that when they can go through an entire day without worrying about using SST skills, they have positively integrated them into their selling activity. And every day without a worry represents an improvement in their confidence in using the skills."

For Penwalt Pharmaceuticals, the SST program has been very rewarding. It appears to extend the adage, "chance favors the prepared mind," to a corollary, "sales favor systematic skills."

Gene Sokol is manager of Training and Education for the Rx division of Penwalt Pharmaceuticals in Rochester, NY. Previously, he was a salesperson and district sales manager before being promoted to his current position.

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