

"Traditional sales training programs have produced more 'losers' than winners."

Teaching the Sales Force to Fail

BY LAURA L'HERISSON

Traditional Goals

The objective of any sales training program is to teach participants how to sell or how to sell better. To meet that objective, most programs are divided into two parts. The first part addresses product knowledge or technical expertise. The second part addresses sales skills, including the sales presentation and how to relate to a prospective buyer. Most of us would agree that product knowledge is essential in selling, but it alone does not guarantee success. What seems to contribute most to successful selling (apart from motivation) is the expertise or sales skill of the seller. One of its most crucial components is self-awareness.

Traditional sales training programs have been generally effective in teaching factual information on products or services; they have been somewhat less effective in developing sales skills. In fact, traditional sales training programs have produced more "losers" than "winners." The explanation given for this phenomenon—and the core of traditional sales training—is that successful sellers have a special kind of personality and a particular flair for selling. The personalities pegged as successful are usually replicas of institutions' leading sellers. The implication is that if sales training can develop particular personality profiles, trainees will be successful. It is al-

most as though the goal of traditional sales training is to produce superseller clones.

The problem in trying to produce superseller clones is that it just doesn't work. One of the best examples I've encountered in trying to clone a superseller was provided by a mid-sized insurance company. In an attempt to promote a new product, the company's most productive agent was asked to develop a sales presentation. The agent was a fast-paced, quick-witted, distinctively New York, New Yorker. He wrote a presentation which was distributed at a national sales training seminar to other insurance agents who were instructed to "learn it" (i.e., memorize it).

At the end of the seminar, the agents delivered the presentation in

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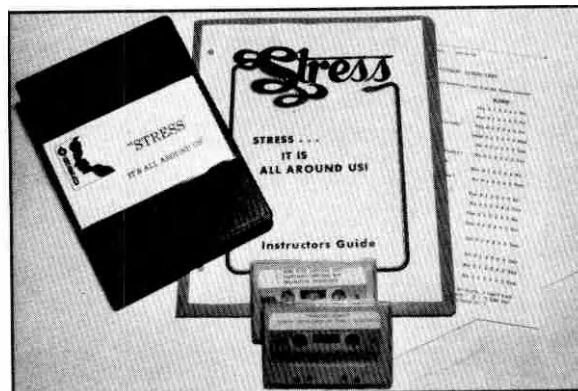
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role-play sessions in front of the entire group. Two-thirds of them were from the Deep South or the Midwest. Their memorized presentations were akin to a comic's impersonations, humorous but not totally believable. They lacked credibility because the script they used ignored their regional, cultural and especially, personal differences.

The point I'm trying to make with this example is that each of us has a different personality and style which is ingrained and practiced since birth (geneticists would argue since conception). Although we are remarkably adept at being ourselves, we make abysmal copies of each other. Furthermore, common sense, experience and research have demonstrated not one, but many, successful selling styles, all comparably effective. In short, the problem with traditional sales training is not with diversity but with trying to limit it!

How can sales trainers teach sales skills if not by providing a model for trainees to follow? The solution is to teach trainees to develop their own personal style of selling which reflects their personality and feels con-

gruent with their self-image.

The School of Life Insurance Marketing (abbreviated SLIM, formerly called the Institute of Insurance Marketing), was a pioneer in training sellers to develop individualized selling styles. As part of the SLIM staff, I participated in a sales seminar which focused on developing personal selling styles and on understanding buyer/seller interactions. Data I collected before and after the seminar demonstrated that sales presentations improved significantly and that the improvement was visible to professionals and laymen who observed the presentations. Field data were also positive. Seminar participants increased their personal sales by 42.3 percent in the nine-week period following the seminar when the data was collected. Also, the proportion of agents who stayed with their original company increased dramatically over a three-year period (up 67 percent when compared to industry norms).¹

The success of the SLIM sales seminar was due to the fact that the training was based on sound behavioral principles. The principles were

drawn from extensive psychological research on such things as habit formation, personality development, behavior rehearsal, perception and learning theory, to name a few. The principles were converted into everyday applications which are equally beneficial in any sales training program. In practice, they involve teaching sales trainees the basic phases of a sales presentation and the interpersonal elements which influence each phase and ultimately affect the purchasing decision. After learning the basic components of the sales presentation and the related interpersonal elements, trainees write their own sales presentation by outlining the concepts they want to cover. That is, trainees are given a basic framework which they fill in with their own words, phrases, illustrations, or jokes. Trainees experiment with their presentations and receive critiques throughout the training.

Sales Presentation Phases

There are three sequential phases in a sales presentation. They are: the approach, data exchange, and the



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close. Each phase has specific characteristics which supplement the presentation of technical product information. A basic understanding of them and of the buyer/seller relationship during each phase helps a seller feel more confident and in control of a sales situation. Consequently, these topics should be included in any sales training program.

The Approach

The first 1 to 3 minutes of contact set the stage for the entire sales relationship. Therefore, it is essential for sellers to recognize their initial impact. The impact is frequently experienced by prospective buyers as "full-time professional sellers versus part-time amateur buyers."

Sellers can minimize negative or defensive buyer reactions by establishing conditions wherein buyers and sellers relate to each other as equals. Equal relationships are characterized by honest, direct, two-way communication. Sellers are the ones who initiate mutual exchanges by stating their purposes and their goals.

For example, I was recently phoned by a broker who wanted me to invest in a money market. He introduced himself and explained: "The reason I phoned you was to find out if you might be interested in investing in our money market. To open an account requires ... (product description) ... and it's a good deal. I've been with this company for six months. My first year's performance depends on the number of accounts I open, not on the balances maintained in them ..." Not only was the broker direct, but he explained how both of us would benefit from my investment. His honesty generated trust, plus a few additional names for him to contact.

Another way sellers can minimize negative reactions is to be aware of their vocabulary and terminology. Sellers should never use words that buyers cannot understand, such as highly technical jargon specific to their product or services. Sellers who use technical, complicated words the buyer cannot follow set up an unequal pro versus amateur relationship.

I'll never forget the reaction a computer sales representative got

when he told a medical director, "What you need is a CPU that has a 64,000 byte capacity with a CRT and a hard copy output." The medical director's reply was, "Yeah, yeah, but can it record my diagnoses, medications, LOS, CBC and other lab findings and run discharge summaries?" The computer representative and the physician played "one-up-man-ship," wasting their time and energy. Neither achieved what they wanted out of the relationship.

During the approach and throughout the presentation, sellers must be alert and sensitive to implied but unstated messages. There are times when things left unsaid significantly affect the final decision whether to buy.

I once watched a series of three proposals delivered by different consulting groups. The proposals were for crisis intervention programs for employees of a major corporation. In the question and answer session following the presentations, one of the corporate executives asked: "Are your counselors board certified or licensed psychiatrists, psychologists, or social workers?" One of the consulting representatives replied, "No. We don't feel that our counselors need that kind of background for this kind of work." He did not realize that the executive who asked the question was a licensed psychologist. That consulting group was the first to be eliminated.

The best indications of unstated but implied messages are nonverbal. They are the pauses and punctuation marks that accompany our speech, posture and tone of voice. Nonverbal elements related to selling are mentioned later in this article, but they have been discussed in greater detail in a previous article.²

Data Exchange

The seller's goal in the data exchange phase of the sales presentation is to collaborate with the buyer on defining the problem or need. Sellers must remember that buyers are always the *experts* on their own needs. Sellers can seek clarification of buyers' needs. They can point to ideas buyers may not have considered. They can even challenge buyers' erroneous assumptions, *but* buyers are *always* the experts on their needs, and sellers should dem-

onstrate they respect that status.

After the buyer and seller mutually define the buyer's needs, the seller's goal is to work with the buyer in designing a solution. This can be as simple as locating a shirt to go with a particular suit, or as complicated as designing an urban housing complex. In either case, sellers must be sure that buyers are involved in the process and that they are responding to what the buyers want. Sellers are experts in designing solutions, but they must be aware that all buyers have different personalities and needs, and that solutions must be designed with a particular buyer in mind.

The Close

The seller's role in the close is to present the solution designed during data exchange and to facilitate the buyer's decision. There are several things sellers can do to help in prospective buyer's decision processes. First, sellers should summarize the positive and negative elements related to products or services. This helps buyers review how they feel and maintains buyer/seller equality. Sellers should also try to clarify prospective buyers' ambivalences. Sometimes, negative impressions and feelings surface during the close; sellers should try to understand those negatives by asking questions which will help buyers understand them as well. Finally, sellers should be aware of prospective buyers' cues and use them to initiate the final decision.

An important part of any sales training program should be to help sellers understand the decision process itself. Decision-making requires energy; in fact, it requires more energy than any other mental process. It is frustrating work, especially when large ticket items are involved. By its very nature, decision-making implies choices and alternatives. Since we're unable to accept and evaluate two conflicting solutions simultaneously (e.g., whether to buy or not to buy), vascillation between alternatives is inevitable. That's why prospective buyers must object in order to make a decision, and that's why almost all sales manuals instruct sellers to clarify what "no" means.

The decision process can be pic-

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tured as a pendulum swinging back and forth. Larger priced items or services generate a minimum of five swings. Those swings are work for the prospective buyer, who is trying to reach a decision, and for the seller, who must seek clarification with each swing.

Sellers must also be aware of the role underlying emotions play in the decision process. As J. P. Morgan said: "A man generally has two reasons for doing a thing (or not doing it)—one that sounds good, and the real one." Sellers should try to help prospective buyers clarify those reasons and determine if they are relevant in the decision process.

The close is the real challenge for sellers. It tests their insight and interpersonal skills more than any other phase of the sales presentation, and it is a real test of their personal styles of selling. The close must be harmonious with the rest of a sales presentation and it must demonstrate sellers' confidence and their respect for buyers opinions, regardless of the final decision.

Practice Makes Perfect

The most effective way to develop a personal style of selling is to practice and experiment with different concepts and illustrations, words and phrases, until they work. Videotape simplifies the process. It lets trainees see and hear themselves and evaluate their performance as outside observers would, a rare and invaluable experience. They can check out how they phrase questions, their tone of voice and their nervous mannerisms. It also lets them find out if other individuals see and hear the same thing; that is, it confirms or challenges their self-appraisals.

An important aspect of using videotape in developing personalized selling styles is that it lets trainees evaluate their nonverbal messages. Many a sale has been lost when a prospective buyer sensed a disparity between verbal and nonverbal messages. If the body or vocal tone is different than the stated message, the prospect will doubt the credibil-

ity of the seller, even if the prospect cannot verbalize why. The prospect might explain it to an acquaintance as: "He sounded OK; he made sense, but something wasn't right. I just don't know, maybe he had shifty eyes or something, but I don't trust him." Any time sellers and buyers meet, it is crucial that sellers do not undercut themselves by having verbal and nonverbal disparities. The whole package has to work; if it doesn't, the seller will lack credibility.

Developing Styles

There are three reasons why one of the main focuses of sales training should be on developing individualized selling styles.

- At least 50 percent of a sale depends on buying the seller; how can anyone buy from someone they do not believe in? Buying the seller is like believing in the individual who is, after all, the only original him or herself. Why would anyone want to buy a copy when they can have the original for the same price?

- The easiest and most comfortable thing in the world is to be yourself. Self-acceptance generates confidence, and confidence is the cornerstone in successful selling. It makes life a lot easier for sellers when they feel free to be themselves; their energy can be directed toward understanding and dealing with a prospective buyer rather than trying to be like someone else.

- The value in developing personalized selling styles for the company is that it works; it increases sales and it reduces turnover. A happy and prosperous seller is unlikely to leave and the company and the seller reap the benefits.

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