NLP Techniques for Salespeople

We don't always realize it, but frequently we use neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) concepts when trying to persuade others. Some of the most innovative sales training is focusing on NLP concepts and translating them into solid skill objectives.

By H. STANLEY CONNELL III

During the past 25 years, many theories of communication and persuasion have come to light. While often overlooked by sales trainers who prefer to teach tried and true skills, the new techniques glimmer with potential for sales training application.

Neuro-linguistic programming (NLP), developed by Richard Bandler and John Grinder, is an example of a new theory with sales training applications. Grinder and Bandler used their expertise in linguistics, psychology and cybernetics to describe the strategies used by master communicators engaged in selling, training and facilitating personal change. Salespeople who learn what NLP is and how to use it show improvement in their sales.

Of the many neuro-linguistic principles and techniques that are useful for influencing others, mirroring, verbal marking and reinforcing the prospect's representation system are the three explained in this article.

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For years, sales trainers have been saying that salespersons need to develop a rapport with the customer in the early stages of a sales call, and that in order to do this, the salesperson needs to "wear the other's shoes" and "speak the customer's language." Being able to do these things improves the chances of closing a sale. Yet, most sales training programs do not define what is meant by customer rapport, and most don't offer concrete methods to enable salespeople to establish the relationship. Neuro-linguistic concepts build on the body of selling skills with which we are familiar by offering some concrete, trainable skills that help salespeople. NLP techniques enable salespeople to align themselves with customers' perceptions so they are willing to listen and be receptive to a sales presentation.

Mirroring

Mirroring is an excellent NLP skill for developing and maintaining rapport. Mirroring is used to match certain behaviors. A customer's voice tone, voice tempo, words, body posture, gestures and to a lesser extent, breathing rate, are all things that salespeople easily can learn to match. If a customer speaks in a soft tone and at a moderate pace with long pauses, the salesperson can speak at that tone and
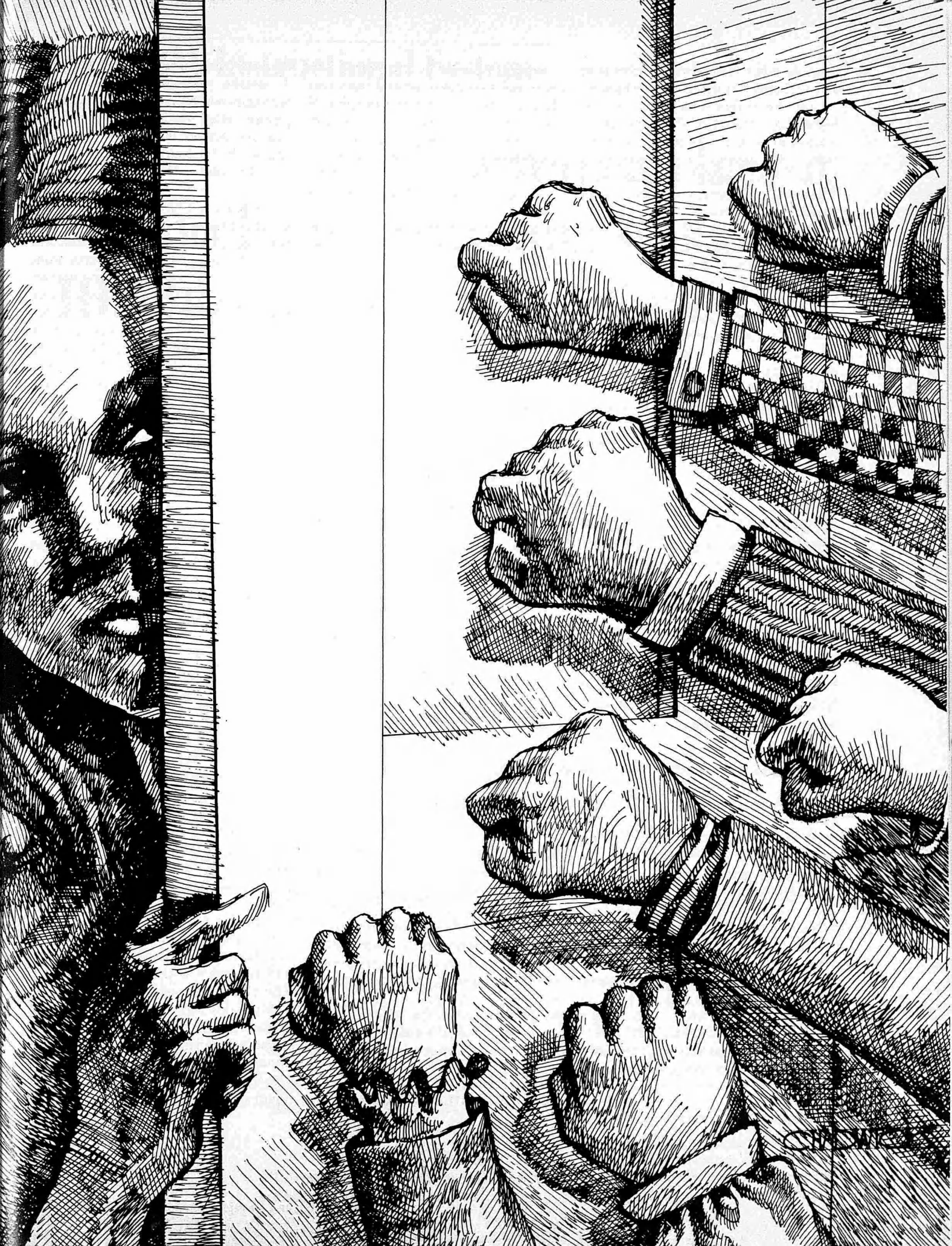
pace. An adjustment of voice rather than an exact match is the proper technique.

Customers often favor certain words. Salespeople trained in NLP notice these words and use them in their own conversations. For example, a customer might say the word "certainly" several times. The trained salesperson would mirror the customer by using that word when appropriate.

Mirroring a customer's posture and gestures is a nonverbal skill that also is easy to develop. We tell salespeople that a sales prospect should be receptive before an attempt is made to uncover needs or present a product. Behavioral mirroring is a fast, accurate way to establish rapport.

There are ways to verify that rapport has been established. After mirroring a customer's posture for several minutes, the salesperson should change posture. If the customer makes a similar change, it is a clue that rapport has been established. This technique is called leading, and can be applied verbally by using appropriate closed probes or questions. "Based on our discussion, does it seem our product will give you what you want?" or "How close do we come to meeting your needs?" are two examples of leading.

is a means of using the customer's subconscious to yield a desired response. Here are some common examples of anchoring: an old movie is shown on television and as you watch, you remember that special person who was with you the first time you saw it; an old song is played on the radio and you recall those good times when you first heard it; a person you meet has a certain demeanor that reminds you of a former schoolmate. The movie, the song and the demeanor were anchors to pleasant experiences. Any experience, positive or negative, can be anchored through sounds, smells, words, touch or situation.

In verbal anchoring, the salesperson emphasizes certain words or phrases either by the tone, pitch, rate or volume of the voice.

When important customer needs are anchored, the salesperson has a better chance of making the sale. The anchors are triggered as each product benefit is linked to the stated needs by using the same tone, pitch, rate or volume of voice used by the customer to describe the needs. For example, suppose a customer says "Fast repair service is vital for us." The salesperson might say "You need fast repair service?" The words *fast repair ser-*

systems: visual, auditory or kinesthetic. A person with a dominant visual representation system might say "Can you picture what we have in mind?" An auditory person would say "Should I amplify this for you?" or a kinesthetic person, "Do you understand the impact of this?"

For years, we have encouraged salespeople to speak the customer's language but often have not provided concrete ways of doing it. Choosing words from the customer's dominant representation system is one way. Understanding representation systems also provides clues on how to present a product. A visual person will want to read a brochure and look the product over. An auditory person will want ot hear about the product and how it works. Kinesthetic people want to try it and get the feel of it. The following are three ways of saying the same thing, but the customer will have a greater understanding and acceptance if the message is in accordance with his or her dominant representation system. "Does this look like it will get this job done?", "Does it sound like it will get this job done?", and "Do you feel that it will get this job done?" address a customer's visual, auditory and kinesthetic representation systems, respectively.

Choosing words from the customer's representation system helps establish rapport and determines the best way to present a product.

Any question that asks the customer to make a favorable comment or draw a favorable conclusion is leading. "Are we on target so far?" or "Since this seems to fill your needs shall we talk about delivery?" are more examples of leading. Questions like "Don't you agree?" or "Isn't it true?" which ask for general agreement but don't provide information or narrow down that to which the customer is being asked to agree, are not appropriate in sales.

Mirroring and leading often occur naturally at a subconscious level. However, when a salesperson consciously controls these behaviors, greater rapport can result.

Anchoring

When a customer's needs are uncovered, the salesperson wants to link them to the product benefits. Anchoring

vice are marked by changing the tone of voice slightly. Later, when the salesperson is relating product benefits, he or she would say "Our company guarantees *fast repair service* by having an emergency number for you to call when there is a problem. We will respond to your call within four hours on any business day." This same anchor should again be triggered when summarizing needs and benefits to close the sale. In fact, that same tone, pitch, rate or volume of voice should be used when requesting the order. This makes a subconscious link between the customer's expressed needs and the benefits of buying.

Representation systems

Another skill for developing rapport is to match the customer's representation system. People tend to describe past experience in one of three representation

Training the trainer

It is necessary for the trainer to learn and practice NLP techniques before integrating them into training programs. Once trainers are familiar with how the skills work in a variety of settings, they will feel they have acquired powerful tools for improving communication.

Since rapport is always important in training situations, training programs are ideal opportunities for sales trainers to practice NLP skills. Listening to determine each participant's representation system, then responding to each person using his or her preferred system is one way to practice. Observe the reaction of others and listen to any changes that occur as a result of using each technique. Obviously, the results of practicing NLP skills in this manner will be determined by how aware the participants are of the trainer's intentions. Once a trainer is comfortable using NLP techniques and sees the results, it is relatively easy to teach them in sales training programs.