A COMMUNICATION PERSPECTIVE ON SALES INTERACTIONS

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Abstract

This thesis explores the professional sales interaction through the lens of interpersonal communication theory. Many sales people lack formalized sales training and are heavily compensated and rewarded for productivity. Sales interactions are often viewed as business transactions with little or no regard to the human aspect of the interaction. By respecting and valuing the human aspect of the interaction, a salesperson will have a foundational value system in which to apply ethics and training. Rather than viewing the sales transaction through traditional techniques, sales interactions are viewed through three interpersonal communication lenses; Aristotle’s Rhetoric, Pearce and Cronen’s Coordinated Management of Meaning, and Michael Thompson’s book *The Congruent Life*. These lenses are meant to provide a new perspective on what is at the heart of each sales interaction, the human spirit and social construct. Sales dialogue is not only meant to generate revenue and profit, it is meant to build a better social world and to positively affect the human spirit of all involved in the transaction.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Importance of Study

Sales professionals face many challenges. First, the sales industry lacks a formal educational structure. This means a sales professional learns on-the-job, through other sales people, through trade articles, or through third-party training programs. In other words, there is little formal training for those desiring to become a salesperson.

Additionally, sales people face many ethical dilemmas in their line of work. “Ethics is particularly relevant to the sales profession because it is recognized that salespeople negotiate many ethical challenges in their line of work, oftentimes unethically” (Valentine, 2009, p. 227). Often times sales people justify their behavior with an “It is only business” attitude. Organizations also tolerate unethical behavior in top producing sales people.

“Salespersons and employees who perform these selling functions can take advantage of self-regulation by “bending the rules to make a sale” or acting outright unethically to “close a deal,” arguably more so than individuals employed in other areas. Further, sales personnel are often compensated (at least partly) on a commission basis, so the motivation to perform questionably on the job can be quite high given the higher stakes involved in earning adequate compensation” (Valentine, 2009, p. 238).

The lack of formalized sales training, managing complex ethical situations, and a disconnect between personal and professional lives create an environment where manipulation can easily occur. With these obstacles, one could conclude that many sales people are setup to fail before they even speak to a prospective prospect or client. How
can sales people be setup to succeed? How can a salesperson apply training and techniques without introducing manipulative behavior? And what belief system do salespeople apply ethics to?

**Statement of Problem**

Many sales training programs and techniques focus on trying to get the prospect to buy the salesperson’s product or service. Why does a prospect buy? What can the salesperson do to make the prospect like him or her? How can a salesperson build stronger rapport? When does a prospect make a decision to buy? Where do buyers get their information to justify their decision? These are questions that have been asked for decades and by viewing the sales process as an integral part of building positive human spirit and social worlds, manipulation and unethical behavior can be minimized and managed effectively during the sales interaction. A central problem with developing a repeatable and trainable sales process is that it involves human interaction, which is unpredictable and uncertain. Sales training tends to try to control or manipulate something that cannot be harnessed, human interaction. However, the human interaction can take on new characteristics with grounding in interpersonal communication theory. When viewing the sales interaction as an enabling scaffold, a way to build social worlds, and as contributing to ones human spirituality; the interaction becomes more than just a business transaction. It is now an integral part of building ones human spirit and making our society a better place. This new way of viewing the sales interaction also provides a basis for applying sales training, communication techniques, and sales ethics.
Definition of Terms

**Commission:** The compensation a sales person receives on the revenue or profit of his or her sales transaction.

**Document Imaging:** The process of saving and indexing scanned documents into the software’s database.

**Implementation:** The process of installing, configuring, and training clients on newly purchased software products.

**Mirroring or Modeling:** A technique of matching ones verbal and non-verbal behaviors.

**Neuro-linguistic programming (NLP):** A branch of psychotherapy developed by Richard Bandler and John Grinder in 1975. “Neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) is a process of modeling the conscious and unconscious patterns that are unique to each of us in such a way that we are continuously moving toward a higher potential” (Knight, 2002, p. 2).

**Sandler selling system:** A selling system created by David H. Sandler in late 1960s and early 1970s.

**Sophists:** Traveling professional teachers that taught a variety of subjects throughout Greece in the 5th century.

Organization of Remaining Chapters

This paper will explore sales interactions as interpersonal communication grounded in communication theory rather than as a professional transaction. The goal is to provide new communication perspective to the sales interaction, and to provide a basis for which ethics and training can be consistently applied. The second chapter includes literature reviews of Aristotle’s work on Rhetoric, Pearce and Cronen’s Coordinated Management of Meaning theory, Michael Thompson’s book *The Congruent Life.*
Literature on sales and sales ethics will be reviewed in the fourth section. The final section of the literature review in chapter 2 will focus on sales techniques and training. Chapter 2 will also include philosophical assumptions, the purpose of the study, and a thesis statement. Chapter 3 will describe the scope and methodology of the thesis. In chapter 4, three scenarios will be reviewed in relation to the selected interpersonal communication theories and concept. Also in chapter 4, the selected three foundational communication theories will be used to 1) explain the importance of the message, 2) discuss the importance of dialogue in relation to building better worlds, and 3) blend ones professional and personal lives to build human spirituality. This conceptual perspective of a sales interaction will provide a different approach to sales methodology, thus creating a new foundation for reduced manipulative behavior and insincerity during the sales process (Figure 1).

Figure 1 (Jesse Miller, 2010).
Chapter 5 will include the limitations of the study along with a section on recommendations for future study and research.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Sales and manipulative behavior seem to go hand-in-hand. Sleazy, slick, underhanded, and dishonest are commonly used words to describe salespeople. “Perhaps more than any other legitimate occupation, sales has long been linked with ‘sleazy’ activities” (Valentine, 2009, p. 227). What is often in the best interest of the prospect is not in the best interest of the salesperson. Another area of conflict can occur between the culture of the salesperson’s organization and the culture of the client’s organization. Each of these misalignments can create imbalance and ethical dilemmas. “Individual sales performance is often most rewarded, yet behavior which occurs in securing additional sales may be counter-productive to organizational ethics and culture” (Caywood & Laczniak, 1986, p. 84). In addition to these conflicts, sales training introduces potentially manipulative techniques like Neuro-linguistic programming or NLP. “Therefore, while NLP is often perceived as a “technology” – a working practice comprising a collection of frameworks, tools and techniques, originally it was developed as a means of understanding how people process information, construct meaning schemas, and perform skills to achieve results” (Tosey and Mathison, 2006, p. 2). When these techniques are used without the proper filters, manipulative behavior can easily occur.

An NLP technique called “mirroring” is commonly used in sales training to build rapport with prospects and clients. “One must consider posture (legs crossed, leaning back, relaxed), voice tone (excited, relaxed, loud, etc.), breathing patterns, gestures (hand movements, smiles, frowns, head movement), and other clues” (Nickels, Everett, and Klein, 1983, p. 3). Techniques like mirroring need to be natural; otherwise they can be
mistaken as condescending or insincere. “Certainly a salesperson should make such matching or “mirroring” as subtle as possible to avoid the impression that he or she is mimicking the customer” (Nickels, et al, 1983, p. 3). This technique suggests that a salesperson should act differently than what is their natural behavior in order to establish rapport. This unnatural behavior leads to insincere interpersonal communication and dialogue.

Literature Review

Aristotle’s Rhetoric

How does a sale occur? This is a question that sales organizations have been trying to answer for a long time. There are numerous studies, articles, and books on how to become successful in the sales industry. (cf. Gitomer, 2005; Mattson, 2010; Nickels, 1983; Valetine, 2009; Ziglar, 2003). Researchers who study sales relationships and sales theories have long understood the importance of building rapport during the sales process. “Salespeople and sales trainers have long recognized the value of establishing rapport with customers. Davis and Silk (1972) reviewed such literature and concluded that customers who purchased products perceived themselves as being more similar to the salesperson than customers who did not buy” (Nickels, et al, 1983, p. 1). The importance of rapport and credibility can even be traced back to Greek philosopher, Aristotle.

Aristotle’s work on rhetoric emphasized the importance of credibility in order to persuade others. “His skepticism is mirrored today in the negative way people use the term mere rhetoric to label the speech of tricky lawyers, mealy-mouthed politicians, spellbinding preachers, and fast-talking salespeople” (Griffin, 2006, p. 319). Aristotle’s work in rhetoric defined two types of arguments, external and internal. The external type
is not part of rhetoric these are arguments such as oaths and witnesses and they are persuasive by nature. However, the internal type of argument is part of rhetoric. Internal arguments must be discovered, this is where art is required to discover the persuasive nature of the speech. Within the internal argument there are also three kinds or proofs.

“(1) the speaker's power of evincing a personal character which will make his speech credible (ethos); (2) his power of stirring the emotions of his hearers (pathos); (3) his power of proving a truth, or an apparent truth, by means of persuasive arguments (logos)” (Honeycutt, 2004, para. 2). These three proofs are critical to the persuasiveness and credibility of one’s message during interpersonal communication such as sales dialogue.

“Logical proof comes from the line of argument in the speech, ethical proof is the way the speaker’s character is revealed through the message, and ethical proof is the feeling the speech draws out of the hearers” (Griffin, 2006, p. 320). Logical proof comes from a statement that makes sense. For example, a speaker promoting the importance of time management may say *time is money*. The general premise is that *time equals money*, the specific premise is that *one wastes time by being disorganized*, and the conclusion would then be that *wasting time is wasting money*. Ethical proof involves the credibility of the speaker. Credibility includes the speaker’s character, expertise, perceived intelligence, and trustworthiness. Emotional proof involves creating an emotional response in the audience. Aristotle explained that a speaker could anticipate emotional responses to the message and craft a speech in a way to invoke a particular emotion. Aristotle established the importance of the message in relation to its effectiveness. Today people demand more from a sales interaction, being persuasive is not enough. Sales
dialogue is more than a simple business interaction, it is an interaction that builds human spirit and creates our social worlds.

*Coordinated Management of Meaning*

For years sales training has focused on building rapport with prospect and clients. One facet is through delivering a logical, ethical, and emotional message. The second facet is found in Barnett Pearce and Vernon Cronen’s theory, Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM). CMM explores the creation of bonds created through interpersonal communication and dialogue. This theory asserts that social worlds are created and developed through acts of communication. “Start with the plural pronoun they and the modifier together. CMM envisions communication acts as doing things and thus as making the events and objects of our social world” (Pearce, 2004, p. 43). This form of communication requires reciprocity that creates the relationship and bonds the conversational participants as they create their experience or world through communication methods.

Pearce recognizes that we are part of a complex social interaction, not just an interaction that occurs and then dissipates. “Realizing that you as a person are made by the same process that you are part of making, be committed to improving existing social worlds, preventing the realization of unwanted social worlds, and calling into being better social worlds” (Pearce, 2004, p. 51). In essence, our relationship, world, and even self-worth are being developed as people dialogue and communicate with one another. With this in mind, Aristotle’s message construct (logos, ethos, and pathos) takes on greater importance, as the communication is having a significant impact on the individuals involved. Not only does the message have to be ethical, the individuals involved in
dialogue and communication must consider ethics as well in order to create stronger relationships.

CMM theorists are also looking at this communicative responsibility as critical to societal well-being and change. “CMM theorists advocate an uncommon form of communication they believe will create a social world where we can live with dignity, honor, joy, and love” (Griffin, 2006, p. 77). This uncommon form communication involves the ability to interact with a range of individuals regardless of personal bias and approach each interaction as an opportunity to create a new world or learn something new. “By recognizing the social nature of communication, dialogic communicators are alerted to recognize openings to invite others into dialogue" (Pearce and Pearce, 2004, p. 51). This concept can be very difficult to embrace as we all bring hidden agendas and personal bias to interpersonal communication. These hidden agendas are prevalent in sales where, no sale equals no income for the salesperson. The need for checks and balances during dialogue and interpersonal communication is essential.

Martin Buber also noticed the importance of the relationship in communication. “In the beginning is the relation, the relation is the cradle of actual life” (Griffin, 2006, p. 241). Buber looked at relationships in two ways—I-It versus I-Thou. “In I-It relationships we treat the other person as a thing to be used, an object to be manipulated. Created by monologue, an I-It relationship lack mutuality” (Griffīn, 2006, p. 241). In Rhetoric, one may be able to operate in an I-It fashion. The Sophists of Aristotle’s time did not have to consider reciprocity as the emphasis was placed on the speaker. In today’s business environment reciprocity is required and expected. One cannot conduct business by talking at someone; they must consider the human beings involved in the interaction.
Buber’s I-Thou relational perspective is more applicable in business dialogue. “Dialogue happens in what Cissna and Anderson call “moments in meaning” in which people respond to others as thou rather than it, using Martin Buber’s terms, and find themselves transformed because the I of I-thou is not the same as the I of I-it” (Pearce and Pearce, 2004, p. 46). This perspective emphasizes the importance of dialogue in interpersonal communication.

“For Buber, dialogue is a synonym for ethical communication. Dialogue is mutuality in conversation that creates the between, the interhuman, the transaction through which we help each other to be more human. Dialogue is not only a morally appropriate act, it is also a way to discover what is ethical in our relationship. It thus requires self-disclosure to, confirmation of, and vulnerability with the other person” (Griffin, 2006, p. 241).

Buber’s dialogic ethics places tremendous importance on the spirit of the dialogue, which involves reciprocity and vulnerability. CMM also views communication and dialogue as critical to human interaction. Aristotle focused on the importance of the message and its credibility. An underlying problem in the sales industry is that salespeople are often trained to separate the personal and professional side of the sale, leading to “I-It” communication. Therefore, one must also seek congruency between the professional and personal aspects of the interpersonal communication.

*The Congruent Life*

Michael Thompson’s book, *The Congruent Life*, provides insight and perspective on integrating one’s personal work with his or her professional work thus creating his or her life’s work. This congruency is critical to integrate into a sales interaction in order to avoid separation between personal and professional ethics. However, obtaining balance in work and life can be difficult. “But our cultural view of work is still largely instrumental (“I owe, I owe, it’s off to work I go”); many of us still conceive of business as somehow
walled off from the rest of life (“It’s just business”); and popular model of business management has evolved only for Dagwood to Dilbert” (Thompson, 2000, p. 1). Cultural and/or organizational support for integrating professional and personal lives may be lacking. However, Thompson contends that avoiding the integration of these two has negative consequences. “For something that consumes so much of our lives and energy to have only the material purposes we ascribe to it is a recipe for illness” (Thompson, 2000, p. 3). The illness as Thompson articulates is lack of meaning in one’s life, lack of purpose, and being unfilled in one’s life work.

Thompson discusses the importance of incorporating spirituality into the business realm in order to reach congruency between one’s personal and professional life. “It is in this context that we will first use that much-misunderstood word spirituality. For as we will use the term, human spirituality is the way in which people connect the activities of their daily lives with their wellsprings of deepest meaning” (Thompson, 2000, p. 52). The concept of spirituality Thompson discusses is similar to Pearce’s CMM theory in that, we develop and build our worlds together through interpersonal communication. Dialogue and interpersonal communication build social worlds and create human spirituality that binds us together as human beings. Therefore, dialogue carries a tremendous amount of responsibility. As Buber stated, “Dialogue is not only a morally appropriate act, it is also a way to discover what is ethical in our relationship” (as cited in Griffin, 2006, p. 241). The concept that, it’s only business, removes the human spirituality from dialogue, thus allowing manipulative behavior in business communication. We cannot respect human spirituality in personal dialogue and dismiss it in business dialogue. Treating these two interpersonal interactions different makes it difficult to apply ethical considerations on a
consistent basis. In other words, it cannot be ethically acceptable to tell a lie in a sales situation because “it’s only business.” While telling the same lie to one’s spouse is unethical and unacceptable. Unfortunately, manipulative sales training and techniques are commonplace in the sales industry.

Sales Training and Behavior

Sales training is very difficult to define. “The results of the most recent ASTD research study, “State of Sales Training,” reveal the absence of a clear, comprehensive definition of many sales training topics that may be contributing to the sales skills gap facing many organizations” (Lambert, 2009, p. 62). This lack of a comprehensive definition leads to confusing messages to a new salesperson. However, the delivery of this message or training is equally confusing. If one wants to become a salesperson, what academic degree do they pursue; marketing, business administration, business management, communications, etc? There is not a clear academic training path for sales professionals. Therefore, many sales people rely on training through books, companies, and third-party providers. The issue is that there is not a uniform message and at times sales training does not align with communication theory and dialogic ethics.

Zig Ziglar has long been regarded as a leader in motivational speaking and sales training. In his book Selling 101 Ziglar states, “The question in the world of sales is: How do you persuade? Answer: You don’t persuade by telling, you persuade by asking” (Ziglar, 2003, p. vii). The central key to Ziglar’s message is that listening is tantamount to sales success. Jeffrey Gitomer is also regarded as an expert in sales training. He states that, “The difference between success and mediocrity is philosophy” (Gitomer, 2005, p. 12). Both Gitomer and Ziglar provide very valuable and useful training tips in these two
bestselling books. However, the key to success varies from expert to expert. Ziglar points to listening whereas Gitomer points to philosophy. Each of these experts provides very useful training information and the point of this paper is not to criticize training methods but to get to the core of the sales message. What is truly important in a sales interaction? The answer to this question creates foundational support for training, ethics, and rapport building. And thus, avoids or minimizes manipulative activities and unethical sales behavior.

In seeking the ultimate answer to sales success some training applies specific techniques for building rapport and bonding with clients. One popular set of techniques is called neuro-linguistic programming or NLP. “Neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) is a process of modeling the conscious and unconscious patterns that are unique to each of us in such a way that we are continuously moving toward a higher potential” (Knight, 2002, p. 2). Within NLP there are several key techniques that are utilized in sales training and interpersonal communication, the most commonly used is modeling or 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” (Connell, 1984, p. 44). Mirroring is not unique to the sales industry; many experts agree that this technique is critical to build rapport with others. In sales mirroring does take on different characteristics. The main difference is that a sales interaction is charged with personal bias and agenda. That is not to say typical interpersonal communication is not charged with personal bias and agenda. However, sales interactions often have significant ramifications if they are unsuccessful. For
example, if a salesperson does not sell, he or she could be fired. These high stakes may
introduce pressures that interpersonal communication does not. In addition to techniques
there are specialized training programs like Sandler’s Selling System.

The lack of formal sales education creates opportunities for leading companies
like Sandler Systems, Inc. to deliver sales training and education. “Among its many
achievements, Entrepreneur Magazine has awarded Sandler its #1 ranking for Training
Programs 8 times since 1994, including 2006, 2007, and 2008” (Smith, 2008, para. 3).
David Sandler’s training system focuses on human behavior rather than features-and-
benefits of one’s product or service. “This phase of his career laid the groundwork for the
training system that bears his name… and produced his most widely quoted
“breakthrough” observation: people make buying decisions emotionally… and they
justify those decisions intellectually” (Mattson, 2009, p. 5). Sandler also based his
training system on the theory of psychology called the Transactional Analysis or T-A.

The T-A theory is similar to Aristotle’s rhetoric theory as it defines three states of
ego, similar to Aristotle’s three proofs. “T-A theory defines three ego states that influence
our behavior – the Parent, the Adult, and the Child” (Mattson, 2009, p. 6). The parent
ego state is the ethical state, similar to Aristotle’s ethos proof. The adult ego state is the
logical state, similar to Aristotle’s logos proof. The child ego state is the emotional state,
similar to Aristotle’s pathos proof. Sandler’s training program was created to address
these three states the prospect exhibits. However, this sales training does not address the
states or proofs of the salesperson. By rooting the message in Aristotle’s three proofs a
salesperson can now speak to and relate to the prospect’s three behavioral states.
Philosophical Assumptions

Within this paper there are several key philosophical assumptions to consider. The first assumption is that sales organizations would support a primary focus on building human spirit or relationship during a sales interaction with the secondary focus being on results. For years, researchers have confirmed that rapport and the underlying relationship in a sale is important. “The frequently stated goal of this rapport building is to establish a relationship with deep-rooted trust (Rousseau et al. 1998), which, as a wealth of research demonstrates, leads to positive outcomes for the relationship” (Wood, 2006, p. 197). However, organizations rarely recognize, reward, or compensate a salespeople based on how many successful relationships they have created.

The second philosophical assumption is that there is a direct correlation between the quality of a relationship and success rate at which sales are made. While the relationship may prove successful the result or success of the sale may not be prove successful. “However, the actual initiating behavioral correlates of rapport building are without theoretical underpinnings and lack empirical support” (Wood, 2006, p. 198). Although many researchers agree that rapport is critical to success in sales, very little evidence directly links the quality of a relationship and the probability of obtaining the sale.

The theoretical basis for this research is that sales training and techniques are applied to salespeople that have not grounded their sales philosophy in communication theory. Therefore, ethics are an afterthought, ethics are considered when something goes wrong or one gets caught doing something unethical. This research will not attempt to answer the unanswerable; the goal is to look at the sales process through the lens of
communication theory. From this perspective one can then apply sales training and
techniques to improve performance and rapport building skills. Additionally, ethical
considerations can be explored, studied, and applied throughout the sales process instead
of applying ethics after unethical behavior has occurred. Furthermore, this research is not
a critique of sales training or techniques. However, the exploration of when to apply sales
training will be researched and discussed.

Summary

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to offer another perspective to salespeople, sales
trainers, buyers, and organizations. Salespeople are often regarded as insincere and
untrustworthy. As Valentine stated, “Perhaps more than any other legitimate occupation,
sales has long been linked with ‘sleazy’ activities” (Valentine, 2009, p. 227). Many sales
training programs discuss ethics, honesty, integrity, and trust. However, organizations
undermine these important characteristics by rewarding unethical behavior. If one is
meeting his or her quota then unethical behavior can be tolerated and even encouraged.
Viewing a sale as an interpersonal relationship which can positively or negatively affect
human spirit and the social worlds we create, may provide a means to improve sales
training, human interaction, and ethical behavior in salespeople.

Thesis Statement

Viewing a sales interaction as building human spirituality--through the lens of
communication and dialogic theory--will provide a foundation for successful sales
training resulting in consistent rapport building and positive ethical behavior in
salespeople.
CHAPTER 3: SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

Scope and Methodology

This study primarily focuses on the interpersonal communication in regards to sales situations. Although all sales situations require a form of bonding and rapport, this study focuses on sales situations where a relationship is critical to the success of the sale. In particular, large complex sales are the main focal point for this study. Conceptually, the principles described and explored in this study could apply to all sales scenarios. However, by focusing on the most complicated sales situations, theoretically, simpler less complicated sales could utilize the concepts contain within this research. The scope of this study will involve the application of sales training methodology with and without considering communication theory. A sales traditional training program will be reviewed and explained. Several sales scenarios and ethical dilemmas will be examined utilizing the traditional sales training approach. Communication theory will then be introduced and the same sales scenarios and ethical dilemmas will be examined through the lens of communication theory.

Methodology of Study

Three real-life scenarios will be discussed from an interpersonal communication perspective. Although the three scenarios are specific to a particular situation, the central themes are broad issues that many sales professionals face in the industry. The sales scenarios will include an analysis without considering communication theory and then the same scenarios will be analyzed through the lens of the following three communication constructs. Aristotle’s work in Rhetoric will be used to analyze the credibility of the message and messenger. Secondly Pearce’s, Coordinated Management
of Meaning, will be applied to the sales scenarios. Third Michael Thompson’s, The Congruent Life, will be considered. Ethical considerations will be grounded in Martin Buber’s Dialogic Ethics. The above communication constructs may not be applied in sequential order to each scenario. However, each scenario will be analyzed with these constructs as a lens to view the scenarios through, in order to review and analyze ethics and rapport building success.

Philosophical considerations will include; sales training, interpersonal communication, and sales ethics. Sales training research will be based on a popular and modern sales approach delivered by various independent companies and consultants. Additionally, specific training techniques such as Sandler sales training, NLP, and sales training articles will be introduced and discussed. The goal of this research is to provide framework in which case studies and sales scenarios can be analyzed. These real-life case studies will be drawn from situations I have personally encountered throughout my eighteen year career and through other sales manager’s experience. The training system, individual names and company names will be changed in order to protect their privacy. The real-life sales situations will include ethical dilemmas and manipulative communication techniques.
CHAPTER 4: THE STUDY

Scenario #1

Background – Front-loading

This scenario discusses a common sales dilemma called front-loading. Many times the salesperson compensation and organizational structure support and encourage front-loading the sale. In this scenario, front-loading occurs when a salesperson sells products or services that are not critical to solve the customer’s immediate need. For example, Matt works for a medium sized software firm. Matt is compensated on the initial sales of products and services. As an outside sales person Matt can hold on to the account for 6 months, and he is compensated for any additional revenue generated for the initial 6 month period. After 6 months the account transfers to an inside sales rep. At that point, any additional sales revenue is commissionable to the inside sales rep, not the outside sales rep.

Janie at company ABC is interested in purchasing the software provided by Matt’s company. When Janie asks for a quotation Matt provides a quote for all products and services required. The quotation is for 12 users and $50,000 for future implementation and training. Matt is only required to collect a $1,500 deposit on implementation and training; the remaining amount will be billed as it is utilized. There is no benefit for Janie’s company to purchase training up front. In fact, front-loading the training causes two major problems. First, it sets up an unrealistic expectation. The implementation and training budget of $50,000 is an estimate. Therefore, the final amount may exceed the budgeted amount. Secondly, Janie’s company is not required to pay for training when they buy the software and front-loading causes Janie’s company to
spend cash before they need to. However, Matt’s fears that he will not get all of the revenue from implementation and training as the training period may extend past the 6 month period he has the account for.

As a salesperson Matt has moderate success. Many companies do not buy into Matt’s front-loaded proposals, including Janie’s. Even when Matt sells a new system the relationship is strained as the customer’s expectations are not properly set with the initial sale. Unfortunately, Matt justifies his actions in two ways. First, he refers to his sales training and justifies the front-loaded sale as a “good-fit”. “A “good-fit” is only a good fit if you can deliver it for the investment the prospect is willing and able to make, and in the manner and timeframe the prospect requires” (Mattson, 2009, p. 130). The fallacy is that the prospect is willing to pay for it therefore they must want to pay for the services up-front. Secondly, the organization compensates Matt for front-loading. Therefore, it must be acceptable. When communication theory is introduced into this scenario Matt’s may think or act different when facing the dilemma of front-loading.

*Communication Theory and Front-loading*

Matt’s decision to front-load starts to change when looking at the scenario through Aristotle’s rhetorical proof. “According to Aristotle, the available means of persuasion are based on three kinds of proof: logical (logos), ethical (ethos), and emotional (pathos)” (Griffin, 2006, p. 320). One could argue that Matt’s front-loading message contains logos, ethos, and pathos. However, one could also argue that front-loading is not logical. In this scenario, a question arises immediately. Why pay for services that will not be rendered for several months? Although there may be a lack of logos in the message, it may not be obvious or blatant enough to derail the sale.
Additionally, the lack of logos could diminish rapport and trust in the message and in future dialogic interactions.

By using the CMM lens in this scenario Matt would consider how front-loading could affect the social world created by their relationship and dialogue. From this perspective, Matt should consider how could front-loading negatively affects our social world and the stories created. “Human beings [are] storytellers, at once immersed in linguistic webs that they did not spin and busily weaving webs in which to immerse [themselves and] others. Whether these “webs” are imprisoning snares or enabling scaffolds, is, of course, a matter of opinion” (Pearce, 2004, p. 68). Matt is weaving a story by communicating the front-loaded quotation. The story is becoming an imprisoning snare as the customer questions the need to pay for everything upfront. Janie and her organization may start to distrust Matt and future interactions spiral downward into this snare. This could, in turn, ensnare the training department and others in their respective organizations during future interactions. For example, Janie’s company may not be fully trained when the $50,000 training budget is exhausted. When Matt’s organization seeks to bill over the budgeted amount, the trainer department is forced to work through an uncomfortable discussion with Janie. Worse yet, Janie does not trust Matt as they may feel ensnared by the front-loading technique. Matt may not mean to manipulate as he is trying to 1) earn his commission and 2) sell his product. However, viewing this scenario through another communication lens, Thompson’s *The Congruent Life*, may offer more insight and direction.

Matt’s front-loading activities do not indicate that Matt is a “bad” person or unethical. In fact, his organization rewards this behavior. However, looking at front-
loading through the first two communication lenses expose some issues with front-
loading. First, front-loading is not completely logical and second, front-loading could
become an ensnaring trap for future dialogue. From a congruency standpoint, front-
loading may not align with Matt’s human spirituality. “For as we will use the term,
human spirituality is the way in which people connect the activities of their daily lives
with their wellsprings of deepest meaning” (Thompson, 2000, p. 52). One may be able to
rationalize his or her actions through the first two communication lenses; it is very
difficult to justify actions that act contrary to ones human spirit. Whether or not one
believes that front-loading is ethical is not the issue. The issue is that manipulating others
for personal gain does not positively contribute to the human spirit or positive
construction of our social worlds. Front-loading, in this scenario, is not in the best interest
of Janie’s organization. Therefore, it is not in the best interest of Matt or Matt’s
organization. The three communication lenses have now changed the view of front-
loading and sales training can now be applied to the situation.

Rather than front-loading, a new technique could be used in this scenario, Matt
could offer Janie the opportunity to spread out the purchase. During the first several
months of implementation, the software is utilized by half the number of final users.
Therefore, 6 users could be initially sold, reducing the cash outlay to Janie’s company by
half. Also, instead of front-loading the training costs Matt could require the minimum
$1,500 training deposit. Therefore, Janie’s company saves hundreds of dollars by
spreading out the purchase, rather than paying for everything up front. This new message
incorporates Aristotle’s rhetorical proof of logos, ethos, and pathos. Janie and her
organization see that Matt is looking out for them and their social interaction is positively
affected. This approach is also congruent with a core belief to treat others the way you
would like to be treated. Rapport is built and a long lasting positive relationship between
Matt and Janie is established, regardless of the sales outcome.

Scenario #2

Background - Overcoming Objections

Objections are a natural part of any sales process. And there are many techniques
to handle and overcome objections. A 2002 article makes the following statement when
dealing with objections, “Do not take the first “no.” Instead, keep trying to close the
client and do not back down until the client has said “no” three or four times. Objections
often open the door to the correct path you need to gain the sale” (Cole and Miner, 2002,
p. 24). Statements and training techniques like this can lead to aggressive sales behavior.
Yet, the sales industry justifies this by labeling it persistence. Instead of trying to close
the deal at all cost, what if this scenario was dealt with through the lenses of
communication theory, as discussed in the first scenario?

The following scenario is taken from the 2002 article previously mentioned. This
scenario was chosen as many salespeople learn the trade through others who have
succeeded before. Since there is very little structured academic training for how one deals
with objections, salespeople rely on articles similar to Cole and Miner’s article.
Furthermore, the current state of the economy has led to this objection more than any
other. “My business is declining. I don’t have enough business” (Cole and Miner, 2002,
p. 27). Cole and Miner continue to offer the following solution to overcome this
objection. “If you avoid taking any risks, your business cannot grow. I have helped many
clients with acceptable, low-risk ways grow their business. Have you considered raising
your prices three or four percent? I helped Pete Benson turn his business around. If I can get Pete on the phone for you right now, will you sign up with my service so I can help you in the same manner?” (Cole and Miner, 2002, p. 27). The idea with using this example is not to criticize Cole and Miner’s approach. However, this ad-hoc training is prevalent in today’s selling industry as “experts” recommend aggressive techniques with little or no regard to communication theory. Using the communication theory lens one can see that objections can be dealt with using a very different approach.

*Communication Theory and Overcoming Objections*

In this section the following objection “My business is declining. I don’t have enough business” (Cole and Miner, 2002, p. 27) will be analyzed using the communication theory lens. In this scenario the client is utilizing Aristotle’s rhetorical proof. My business is declining therefore; I cannot afford your service. This thought pattern contains logic, it is emotional, and the client is acting in an ethical manner by protecting cash flow and avoiding an unnecessary expenditure. The salesperson in this scenario would need to respond with the same proof logos, ethos, and pathos. For example, he or she might say, “I understand your situation and I would also be cautious with a purchase if I was in your situation. If the timing is not right perhaps we should schedule another time to finalize this deal.” This type of response is logical, ethical, and emotional as the sales person is about to concede the sale due to declining business.

Through the lens of CMM, the sales person would recognize that the client is communicating tremendous vulnerability by saying, “…my business is declining.” (Cole and Miner, 2002, p. 27). CMM looks at statements as anecdotal, meaning there may be more to the story. “We teach facilitators to treat any statement as an anecdote rather than
a complete story, and to ask questions inviting the speaker to describe the fuller story, to move among first- and third-person perspectives in telling the story, to probe for untold and unheard stories, to explore differences between stories lived and stories told, and to bring in other voices to tell the story more systematically” (Pearce and Pearce, 2004, p. 47). Using Pearce’s communication concept the response to the initial objection might include a question such as, “When did your business start declining and how far do you anticipate the decline?” A question that relates to the client’s concern shows that the salesperson cares about the client’s statement. There may be more to the story. Cole and Miner suggest an aggressive approach by saying “If you avoid taking any risks, your business cannot grow” (Cole and Miner, 2002, p. 27). A statement like this may not allow the client to open up and share more of his or her story. Additionally, many sales reps may feel uncomfortable with such an aggressive response.

Overcoming the objection through the lens of congruency also allows the sales rep to take his or her response to a deeper, communicative level. “In the real world—that is, the world that exists outside our dualistic frameworks—problems are almost never black and white. In insisting on a solution that satisfies your need for absolutes, you may set yourself up to make a costly mistake” (Thompson, 2000, p. 149). The response offered by Cole and Miner appears to insist on a solution to satisfy the need for an absolute. In other words, as a salesperson an objection is often viewed as an absolute “no”. This may not be the case. Therefore, assuming this is a “no” and being aggressive may erode credibility and rapport. A salesperson’s response using the lens of congruency may include compassion and understanding for the objection the client is giving. Maybe a reduced sale is the answer or a sale when the client’s business reaches a certain level.
Now that the salesperson has viewed the objection through the three communication lenses, he or she is able to utilize suggested training techniques and strategies.

Scenario #3

Background - Asking Questions

Scenario three, similar to scenario one, is also a real-life situation. Steve was a diligent sales person. He followed his Sandler sales training to the letter. In fact, he made the most calls per day at his organization. One of the techniques he learned in sales training is to answer a question with a question. Sandler’s sales book entitled, The Sandler Rules, explains that rule #12 to selling is to “Answer every question with a question. But, behind this rule is a valid concept: Prospects usually don’t ask the real question up-front. Instead, prospects ask “smokescreen” questions that hide the real question and its intent” (Mattson, 2009, p. 59). Steve did a good job of answering questions with questions. He did not sell a single deal in over one year and was terminated. Steve was regarded by his peers as a very personable salesman. He simply could not establish rapport with the prospects and when he answered questions with a question, prospects became agitated and annoyed. Upon his departure colleagues and supervisors debated on whether or not he could have learned to develop rapport when asking questions. However, no one had a way for him to learn to ask questions without agitating or annoying the prospect.

Communication Theory and Asking Questions

There may have been several reasons Steve’s questions did not establish the rapport he was seeking. After listening to hundreds of Steve’s phone conversations one
theory a colleague that sat next to him had was that he was always forcing his agenda. There was very little reciprocity in the conversation.

“Third, CMM insisted that both the substance of these stories and the pattern of reciprocal contextualization are mutable. As Sigman noted, things that happen in a conversation can change a participant’s story about the other participants and what is being done together. But even if the story is not changed, its position within the pattern of which stories are the context for, and which are in the context of, other stories can shift, and this may have important consequences” (Pearce and Pearce, 2004, p. 48).

In one specific scenario a prospect asked, “Do you have document imaging?” Steve reply was, “Good question, you must be asking that for a reason?” This is a microcosm of Steve’s interaction. However, this simple question of a question is significant to this philosophical thesis. Steve’s reply was very short and shallow, it may have contained rhetorical proof; logos, ethos, and pathos. However, the reply left little room to build an enabling scaffold for future interactions and conversation. Steve did not create an environment for sharing and reciprocity.

Pearce discusses creating an environment for sharing in his CMM theory. “If we are able to create a situation in which participants feel respected and confident that their interests will be protected, they often welcome the opportunity to speak more fully than usual about the things that matter most to them, and in this process, both they and those listening to them discover new richness in their stories and find openings to move forward together” (Pearce and Pearce, 2004, p. 47). With CMM in mind Steve may have answered the initial question, “Do you have document imaging?” slightly differently. By
responding in a way that makes the prospect feel respected and confident may lead to rapport and additional conversation. Thompson’s, *The Congruent Life*, also sheds light on creating an environment for sharing and reciprocity.

One issue with Steve’s response was that he was fixated on the response not what the prospect was asking. “Yet research clearly shows that the most critical difference between successful and unsuccessful organizational leaders is in their ability to listen to, hear, and genuinely understand the perspective of others” (Thompson, 2000, p. 180). In this scenario, Steve’s response did not indicate that he genuinely understood the prospects question. By simply rephrasing his questions utilizing communication theory, Steve may have been able to establish rapport and develop environments for sharing. The foundation of dialogic communication theory also allows for future training in question asking techniques.

Results of Scenarios

These are just three scenarios that provide some insight when applying communication theory to sales situations. There is hundreds of complex scenarios sales professionals face in their day to day work. This is not to say that some salespeople do not intuitively establish rapport and sell on a relational basis. However, the basic concept is that communication theory can provide a new way to look at sales situations, scenarios, techniques, and training; a foundation to conduct ones sales work and ultimately operate ethically.

Recommendation

The strategy of viewing sales through a series of communication lens is not to recommend or encourage sales people to ignore traditional sales training or techniques; it
is to simply view the sale as important to the construct of our social world and human spirituality. The sales interaction is important from a human aspect not just a business transaction. People’s lives are affected both positively and negatively during a sale. The three communication lenses do not replace sales training, they ground sales training. The communication lens are not ethics, they provide a belief system in which to apply ethics. The three communication lenses are used as an enabling scaffold. Therefore, one could think about the lens as a perspective in which to conduct one’s self in a manner that he or she contributes positively to human interaction, a perspective that one can apply techniques to in order to avoid manipulative behavior, and a thought process that facilitates ethical behavior.

Discussion

Many times sales techniques are taken literally with little or no regard to the underlying relationship and dialogue being created. Furthermore, manipulative and devious behavior is justified by separating ones professional behavior from his or her personal behavior. By establishing the importance of dialogue, relationships, and human spirituality during the sales process; sales training and ethics can now be consistently applied to sales scenarios. Additionally, the three interpersonal communication lenses allow salespeople who have difficulty establishing rapport to flourish in dialogic interactions thus establishing deeper, more meaningful, rapport.

The separation of one’s personal and professional lives contributes to increased manipulative behavior in sales. Many salespeople would never sell to a family member the way they sell to strangers. For example, a car salesperson might sell a vehicle that has mechanical issues to a stranger that he or she would not sell to his or her family member.
The sales person may even forego a good commission to help a family member out. If the salesperson looked at a sales transaction, regardless of the participants involved, as important to positively contributing to others human spirit and building a better social world; he or she would treat both sales scenarios the same. This is not to suggest that sales people cannot “help-out” or provide special deals to friends or family. However, this does suggest that a salesperson would not sell a faulty or bad product to anyone, even a stranger.
CHAPTER 5: SUMMARIES AND CONCLUSION

Limitations of the Study

There are several limitations to this study to consider. A limitation is the lack of study on formal education systems. Although there may not be a post-graduate degree in sales, there may be academic tracks or degrees that are well suited for a career in sales. Limited research was conducted on what formal programs are available to one seeking a career in sales. A study on the most common degree for sales professionals might provide insight on what experience salespeople start their career with. Another limitation is time. This research was conducted over a sixteen week period. Piloting this thesis in a seminar or training program would provide the ability to solidify and modify the concepts presented in this paper.

Further Study or Recommendations

There are third areas for further study. The first area is in interpersonal communication. A deeper study on what additional theories could add to the positive development of the interpersonal aspect of sales would be beneficial. Furthermore, including additional research within Aristotle, Barnett Pearce, Martin Buber, and Micheal Thompson work, would provide more insight and foundational structure for sales professionals. The second area of further study is sales ethics. There are numerous ethical situations and dilemmas that sales professionals face on a day-to-day basis. Job shadowing salespeople or interviewing sales managers would define sales dilemmas. Trends and similarities could be found and analyzed. The third area is organizational culture and structure. Developing and implementing a sales training strategy within an organization would help define the social, interpersonal, and monetary value of this
thesis. Additional research in these three areas would be valuable in the future
development of this thesis and in developing strategies for even more research and sales
training.

Conclusion

Sales professionals face unique challenges. They are often viewed as sleazy,
derunderhanded, and manipulative even before they ever meet a prospect or client. On the
other hand buyers also face unique challenges. There are people in the world looking to
take a prospects money, even if their product or service fits the prospects needs or
desires. Special consideration must be taken by both the salesperson and prospect when
entering a sales relationship. However, the salesperson is the professional. He or she is
responsible for representing his or her product accurately. Unfortunately, many sales
professionals lack formal sales training. They have learned their craft through trade
magazines, seminars, sales managers, and third-party organizations. They are also
rewarded and compensated for one thing, sales. The lack or formalized training and
reward systems focused on revenue can lead to unethical sales behavior. Many times the
affect a sales person has on the prospects human spirituality or social world in never a
consideration. By viewing the sales interaction through Rhetoric, CMM, and *The
Congruent Life*, as important to the human spirit and our collective social world, a sales
person must consider the relational aspect of the sale. In other words, it is not business as
usual.
REFERENCES


