

# The Relevance Of Personal Selling In Today's Marketing Scenario - A Theoretical Perspective

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## INTRODUCTION

Personal selling is one of the oldest forms of promotion. Promotion, as part of the marketing mix, increases company sales by communicating product information to potential customers. The four basic parts of a firm's promotional effort are personal selling, advertising, public relations, and sales promotion. Personal selling can be defined as personal communication of information to persuade a prospective customer to buy something a good, service, idea, or whatever that satisfies an individual's needs. It is the personal selling process that allows marketers the greatest freedom to adjust a message to satisfy customers' information needs. Personal selling allows the marketer or seller to communicate directly with the prospect or customer and listen to his or her concerns, answer specific questions, provide additional information, inform, persuade, and possibly even recommend other products or services.

## OBJECTIVES

This paper focuses on the following objectives.

- 1) To understand the field of personal selling.
- 2) To study the importance of personal selling in marketing strategies.
- 3) To study the relevance of personal selling in today's marketing scenario.

## PERSONAL SELLING

Personal selling means delivery of a specially designed message to a prospect by a seller, usually in the form of face-to-face communication, personal correspondence, or a personal telephone conversation. Unlike advertising, a personal sales message can be more specifically targeted to individual prospects and easily altered if the desired behavior does not occur. Personal selling, however, is far more costly than advertising and is generally used only when its high expenditure can be justified. For example, the marketing of a sophisticated computer system may require the use of personal selling, while the introduction of a new product to millions of consumers would not. Two other forms of personal selling that are not used with high-end products are door-to-door selling and home demonstration parties. These two personal selling methods are primarily used for personal care products, cosmetics, cookware, encyclopedias, books, toys, food, and other items of special interest to homemakers. Ideally, personal selling should be supported by advertising to strengthen its impact.

## WHEN TO USE PERSONAL SELLING

In general, if a product has a high unit value and requires a demonstration of its benefits, it is well suited for personal sales. For example, an encyclopedia is a high-priced item and most people do not feel they need one. After a demonstration, however, most people agree it would be a useful item to have. Therefore, encyclopedias are well suited to a promotion mix that emphasizes personal selling. Highly technical products, such as computers and copiers, are also primarily sold through personal sales methods. Products that involve a trade-in, like automobiles, are usually handled through personal selling to help facilitate the trade-in process. Finally, a company that cannot afford a mass-advertising campaign might consider personal selling as an alternative to advertising. Since sales force compensation is largely based on actual sales, personal selling may require less money up front than other parts of the promotion mix.

## TYPES OF SALES PERSONS

### ORDER TAKERS

Seek repeat sales, make certain that customers have sufficient product quantities where and when they need it. Do not require extensive sales effort. Arrange displays, restock them, and answer phone calls. Low compensation; little training required, high turnover of personnel. Order takers are of 2 types:

- **Inside Order Takers** receive orders by mail/phone, sales person in a retail store.
- **Field Order Takers** travel to customers. Use laptop computers to improve tracking of inventory and orders etc.

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## ORDER GETTERS

Sell to new customers and increase sales to present customers, sometimes called creative selling. Generate customer leads, provide information, persuade customers and close sales. Required for high priced, complex and/or new products. High pressure requires expensive, time consuming training.

## SUPPORT PERSONNEL

Facilitate the selling function, primarily business to business products.

- **Missionary Salespeople** - Distribute information regarding new goods or services, describe attributes and leave materials; do not close sales. Assist producers' customers in selling to their own customers. IE call on retailers and persuade them to carry the product. Pharmaceuticals may go to doctors' offices and persuade them to carry their products.

- **Trade Salespeople** - May perform order taking function as well. Spend much time helping customers, especially retail stores, to promote the product. Restock the shelves, set up displays. Technical Salespersons Offer technical assistance to current customers. Usually trained engineers etc.

- **Service Salespeople** - interacts with customers after a sale is complete.

## THE PERSONAL SELLING PROCESS CONSISTS OF THE FOLLOWING STEPS

### 1) Prospecting

Prospecting refers to identifying and developing a list of potential clients. Sales people can seek the names of prospects from a variety of sources including trade shows, commercially-available databases or mail lists, company sales records and in-house databases, website registrations, public records, referrals, directories and a wide variety of other sources. Prospecting activities should be structured so that they identify only potential clients who fit the profile and are able, willing and authorized to buy the product or service.

This activity is greatly enhanced today using websites with specially-coded pages optimized with key words so that prospects may easily find you when they search the web for certain key words related to your offering. Once prospecting is underway, it then is upto the sales professional to *qualify* those prospects to further identify likely customers and screen out poor leads. Modern websites can go a long way in not only identifying potential prospects but also starting this qualification process.

### 2) Pre-approach

Before engaging in the actual personal selling process, sales professionals first analyze all the information they have available to them about a prospect to understand as much about the prospect as possible. During the Pre-approach phase of the personal selling process, sales professionals try to understand the prospect's current needs, current use of brands and feelings about all available brands, as well as identify key decision makers, review account histories (if any), assess product needs, plan/create a sales presentation to address the identified and likely concerns of the prospect, and set call objectives. The sales professional also develops a preliminary overall strategy for the sales process during this phase, keeping in mind that the strategy may have to be refined as he or she learns more about the prospect.

### 3) Approach

The approach is the actual contact the sales professional has with the prospect. This is the point of the selling process where the sales professional meets and greets the prospect, provides an introduction, establishes rapport that sets the foundation of the relationship, and asks open-ended questions to learn more about the prospect and his or her needs.

### 4) Making the Presentation

During the presentation portion of the selling process, the sales professional tells the product "story" in a way that speaks directly to the identified needs and wants of the prospect. A highly customized presentation is the key component of this step. At this point in the process, prospects are often allowed to hold and/or inspect the product and the sales professional may also actually demonstrate the product. Audio visual presentations and/or slide presentations may be incorporated at this stage and this is usually when sales brochures or booklets are presented to the prospect. Sales professionals should strive to let the prospect do most of the talking during the presentation and address the needs of the prospect as fully as possible by showing that he or she truly understands and cares about the needs of the prospect. There are three types of presentations.

**Prepared sales presentation** - The salesperson does almost all of the talking. Usually, the entire sales pitch is "canned," i.e., the salesperson memorizes what s/he has to say. This approach is used by many telemarketers who are trying to sell an inexpensive product (e.g., home delivery of a paper or a warranty extension) and untrained

people are used for this type of selling. The entire training consists of reading a script. This is a selling approach used by telemarketers who sell relatively inexpensive and uncomplicated products or services (e.g., home delivery of a newspaper). The telemarketers are not trained, other than being given a script to memorize, and have a very high turnover. The pay is quite low and high school students are often used. If you were ever called by a telemarketer trying to convince you to use a particular long distance service, you know what we are talking about. The telemarketers do virtually all the talking and have no interest in understanding (or satisfying) your needs.

**Need satisfaction approach** - The customer does most of the talking and the salesperson attempts to understand the customer's needs. A problem solving approach is used. This approach is good for complicated and expensive products. Salespeople need extensive training for this approach. In fact, firms using the need satisfaction approach to selling may require a six-month training period for their salespeople. If you get a job as a salesperson for IBM or Xerox selling high-technology products, this is the approach that you will be taught.

**Selling formula approach** - This is in between the first two approaches. Salespeople are trained to use an approach similar to AIDA (Attention - Interest - Desire -Action). The salesperson does most of the talking in the beginning of the selling pitch. Afterwards, the customer is brought into the discussion to help clarify his/her needs. The training is not as extensive as with the need satisfaction approach.

### 5) Overcoming Objections

Professional sales people seek out prospects' objections in order to try to address and overcome them. When prospects offer objections, it often signals that they need and want to hear more in order to make a fully-informed decision. If objections are not uncovered and identified, then sales professionals cannot effectively manage them. Uncovering objections, asking clarifying questions, and overcoming objections is a critical part of training for professional sellers and is a skill area that must be continually developed because there will always be objections. Trust me when I tell you that as soon as a sales professional finds a way to successfully handle "all" his or her prospects' objections, some prospect will find a new, unanticipated objection-- if for no other reason than to test the mettle of the sales person.

### 6) Closing the Sale

Although technically "closing" a sale happens when products or services are delivered to the customer's satisfaction and payment is received, for the purposes of our discussion, we will define closing as asking for the order and adequately addressing any final objections or obstacles. There are many closing techniques as well as many ways to ask trial closing questions. A trail question might take the form of, "Now that I've addressed your concerns, what other questions do you have that might impact your decision to purchase?" Closing does not always mean that the sales professional literally asks for the order, it could be asking the prospect how many they would like, what color they would prefer, when they would like to take delivery, etc. Too many sales professions are either weak or too aggressive when it comes to closing. If you are closing a sale, be sure to ask for the order. If the prospect gives an answer other than "yes", it may be a good opportunity to identify new objections and continue selling.

### 7) Follow-up

Follow-up is an often overlooked but important part of the selling process. After an order is received, it is in the best interest of everyone involved for the sales person to follow-up with the prospect to make sure the product was received in the proper condition, at the right time, installed properly, proper training delivered, and that the entire process was acceptable to the customer. This is a critical step in creating customer satisfaction and building long-term relationships with customers. If the customer experienced any problems whatsoever, the sales professional can intervene and become a customer advocate to ensure 100% satisfaction. Diligent follow-up can also lead to uncovering new needs, additional purchases, and also referrals and testimonials which can be used as sales tools.

## IMPORTANCE OF PERSONAL SELLING IN MARKETING STRATEGIES

Personal selling is unique because it involves personal contact. It is the two-way marketing communications tool. It follows the **AIDA model**, which defines a good message and the stages a receiver should go through. The steps in AIDA are to gain the receiver's **attention**, to create and hold the receiver's **interest**, to arouse **desire**, and to motivate a desired **action** (purchase). Marketers manage satisfaction by targeting the customers who are most likely to appreciate the organization's distinctive competence. A personal sales call is expensive. It is most appropriately used in situations where the target market is concentrated, where products are high in value or orders are large, when the product is technically complex, or when the differential advantage is difficult to explain.

Personal selling is one part of a company's promotion mix, along with advertising, sales promotion, and public

relations. Advertising is any form of paid sales presentation that is not done face-to-face. Television and radio commercials, newspaper and magazine advertisements, and direct mail inserts are well-known forms of advertising. Sales promotion is the use of incentives such as coupons, discounts, rebates, contests, or special displays to entice a customer to buy a product or service. Public relations is the act of building up a company's image in the eyes of the community in the hopes of translating the feelings of goodwill into sales. An example of public relations might include a company sponsoring a charity event.

Personal selling is a promotional method in which one party (e.g., salesperson) uses skills and techniques for building personal relationships with another party (e.g., those involved in a purchase decision) that results in both parties obtaining value. In most cases, the "value" for the salesperson is realized through the financial rewards of the sale while the customer's "value" is realized from the benefits obtained by consuming the product. However, getting a customer to purchase a product is not always the objective of personal selling. For instance, selling may be used for the purpose of simply delivering information.

Because selling involves personal contact, this promotional method often occurs through face-to-face meetings or via a telephone conversation, though newer technologies allow contact to take place over the Internet including using video conferencing or text messages. Sales promotion, advertising, and publicity move the prospect toward an exchange decision. Yet, personal selling is the tool that most often brings the buying decision process to a satisfactory conclusion for both buyer and seller. The strength of personal selling is that it is flexible and provides immediate feedback. The prospect can relate concerns and the salesperson can address those concerns. The salesperson can ask questions to determine the prospect's level of interest and react quickly to the prospect's wants. The sales presentation can be personalized based upon those wants. Many customers don't know what they want, and part of the salesperson's responsibility is to help them find out how the product can solve their problems or satisfy their wants.

In the industrial sector, personal selling has a significant role in marketing the products to the customers. In comparison with the distributors, manufacturer's representatives have some advantages. Representatives are more likely to develop new markets and applications through a combination of persuasive selling skills and technical competence. Customer contacts, negotiations, and follow-ups can well be handled by the representatives. When dealing with industrial products, customer service is very important. This can effectively be implemented by sales representatives because the key to customer service is understanding the customer and the customer's perceptions. Customer service is presumed to be a means by which companies attempt to differentiate their product, keep customers loyal, increase sales, and/or increase profits.

A firm selling in the industrial market has the choice of using its own sales force, manufacturer's representatives, distributors, or dealers. Whatever choice is made will depend on the nature and composition of the market, the types of products marketed, and the company's objectives and financial capabilities. Regardless of the method chosen, personal selling, whether by the manufacturer, the distributor, or the dealer, is the principal means by which the industrial marketers reach organizational customers. It is the industrial salesperson who is the "company" (provides the company image), who communicates the company's product/service capability from the customer's point of view, and who handles the lengthy transactions characteristic of industrial marketing. Two primary reasons account for this heavy reliance on personal selling.

- 1) Compared to the consumer market, the number of potential customers in the industrial market is relatively small, easily identified and located, and the rupee value of sales is very large.

- 2) Many purchasing agents prefer to buy from salespeople who have direct access to individuals within the vendor organization and who can secure immediate solutions to their problems. Industrial problems are often complex, require technical solutions, and must be supported by pre and post sales service.

One common problem in marketing management is the lack of integration between a firm's marketing department and its sales function. The marketing department typically develops a firm's overall marketing strategy, which includes decisions about how to promote, distribute, and price the product line. The salespeople ultimately determine success or failure of the strategy, because they have the responsibility of implementing it in the field. Thus, integration between the activities of the marketing and the sales functions is critical to the success of the firm.

Personal selling offers entrepreneurs both advantages and disadvantages in comparison with the other elements of the promotion mix. On the positive side, personal selling allows the salesperson to target the message specifically to the audience and receive immediate feedback. In this way, it is more precise than other forms of promotion and often has a greater persuasive impact. Conversely, personal selling cannot reach as many potential customers as



advertising, plus the cost of each contact is much higher. Another advantage is that personal selling can be an important source of marketing information. Salespeople may learn about competitors' products, for example, or about emerging customer needs that may lead to the development of a new product. If the sales force is well trained-acting as problem solvers and advisors for customers rather than using hard-sell tactics-personal selling may help a small business build loyal, long-term relationships with customers.

### **RELEVANCE OF PERSONAL SELLING IN TODAY'S MARKETING SCENARIOS**

The focus of marketing is to do such an excellent job of developing, pricing, promoting, and distributing a product to customers that the product practically sells itself. In the past, the focus of marketing was on finding new customers to make the sale. Organizations have begun to realize that it is a lot cheaper to retain current customers than to attract new ones. This has led to a focus on relationship marketing that involves working closely with customers to build lasting relationships over time. Personal selling is the essence of developing relationships because it is directed toward achieving mutually satisfying results between buyer and seller, which sustain and enhance future interactions. The main functions of personal selling are to generate revenue and to provide service to help satisfy customers. These build relationships and are the keys to success in today's competitive marketplace.

In the face of intense competition, companies today are trying to improve their performance in every dimension of their operations. As a result, companies expect more from their suppliers. Salespeople who represent these suppliers are expected to make a contribution to their customer's success. At the same time, companies are finding it harder to develop or sustain product-based competitive advantages. Most product-based advantages are soon copied by competitors. Hence companies must focus on strengthening the value-added components of their offerings. Value-added components are those that augment the product itself, such as information and service. To understand customer needs and to provide customers with value-added solutions to their problems, salespeople can effectively be used provided they develop close long-term relationships with their customers.

Relationships are built upon trust. According to Stephen X. Doyle and George Thomas Roth, there are five characteristics of trust-building in salespeople.

- **Customer Orientation** means that the salesperson places as much emphasis on the customer's interests as on the salesperson's interests. Presentations balance the pros and cons. The salesperson doesn't push a product that the buyer doesn't need.
- **Competence** includes the salesperson's ability, knowledge, and resources to meet customer expectations. The salesperson displays technical command of products and applications.
- **Dependability** is the predictability of the salesperson's actions. His or her words and actions are consistent with a professional image.
- **Candor** is the honesty of the spoken word. The proof used to support claims is credible. Subsequent events prove the salesperson's statements to be true.
- **Likeability** is rooted in each party's perception of "having something in common" with the other. This is an emotional factor, yet a powerful force in buyer and seller relationships.

In large sectors like pharmaceutical industry, insurance and automobile industry, personal selling plays a very important role not only to market the products but also to build customer relationships. Personal selling finds application in many other sectors like retail selling (Salespeople provide the day-to-day contact with the consuming public and the impression made and image presented will shape the store's image. **Their actions and attitude speak louder than words**), selling of consumer products like encyclopedias and hence personal selling finds a prominent place at some point of any business.

### **THE SALESPERSON REPRESENTS THE BUSINESS**

A salesperson represents the business to the customer in the following ways:

*As an information source* - being knowledgeable about the store's merchandise and policies.

*As a fashion and value counselor* - to assist the customer with value comparisons with items in the store or possibly competing brands.

*As a public relations representative* - the salesperson represents the business to the public or to customers.

*As a mover of stock* - to assist in turning over or selling the inventory which is the primary objective of the business.

*As a seller* - to assist the customer in making a decision to purchase the store's merchandise.

## **GLOBAL SALES ORGANIZATION TRENDS**

There is a growing consensus that building strong relationships with customers is a high priority for companies around the world. Salespeople play a pivotal role in building these relationships. Expenditures for the compensation and management of business-to-business, international salespeople represent an ever-growing portion of many companies' operating budgets. Aggressive globalization coupled with the challenges of gaining a strong competitive edge underline the importance of sales management strategies and their consequences around the world. Multi-national firms such as Nestlé S.A., Novartis, and Caterpillar Inc. have recently been cited for their successful global sales management systems.

Increasingly, the top managements of many global enterprises are developing the distinct capabilities of their sales forces. The outsourcing of production, human resource management, and other functions may result in the sales force accounting for a very large proportion of a firm's total employees. Moreover, executives recognize the important role of the sales force in the effective performance of the three core business processes: customer relationship management, supply chain management, and product development management. Indeed, in some sectors facing the challenge of product commoditization, the sales force may increasingly provide a critical source of competitive differentiation. SAP AG recently implemented a global incentive program in 50 countries that replaced a locally based program, in order to take advantage of economies of scale and foster a global culture. SAP and other firms are learning that similarities across countries are making the old way of regional or local management control less effective in today's global business environment.

Further, the importance of major global customers to a large number of suppliers has led to growth in the adoption of global account management (GAM). While global account managers may negotiate transnational deals centrally, they are also likely to require consistent sales relationships across their geographically diverse locations. One challenge in implementing GAM is translating central decisions into the operations of decentralized sales organizations. Significantly, convergence of global sales management practices requires proactive steps to alter prior country-based practices.

Hewlett-Packard Co. provides an interesting example of the challenges of globalizing the sales organization. In response to increasing evidence of convergence of global sales management practices, H-P's management is examining the adequacy of its multinational customer relationship strategies. H-P's new chief executive officer (CEO) launched major initiatives in 2005 to globalize the firm's corporate sales strategy. Country-focused sales organizations were realigned to serve multinational customers.

## **THE INTERNET AND PERSONAL SELLING**

Predictions that the Internet will cause the imminent demise of personal selling litter the landscape in management literature. None of those we have seen has a solid theoretical or conceptual foundation. In most instances, bits and pieces of research that seem relevant to making one's case for personal selling's limited viability are amalgamated to support this point of view. The predictions are either so general as to be untestable or so tautological as to be valueless. The tendency of these "futurists" is to see the Internet annihilating systematically a spectrum of existing business methodologies and professions. This is so even when a profession such as personal selling is hardy, vigorous and progressive.

The amount of business conducted over the Internet in Europe has risen in recent years but not nearly enough to see it as a potential threat to personal selling's survival. According to a survey conducted by the Confederation of British Industry and Pricewaterhouse Coopers whose results were reported on April 2, 2002 in Nua Internet Surveys: "The proportion of firms doing more than one percent of their business online (in the U.K.) rose from 72 percent in January to 85 percent in March. However, only four percent of companies do more than 31 percent of their business online." Further, among some of the most robust economies overseas, according to a survey by Cap Gemini Ernst and Young and reported in Nua Internet Surveys on April 25, 2002, less than 10 percent of Internet users in Italy, France and Spain buy online. In Germany, the figure is 18 percent. Sweden, at 31 percent, is the biggest on-line shopping nation in Europe. The word "buy" does not connote exclusiveness; it means only more than trial purchases were made. More frequent is "window shopping" on the Internet. Finland and the Netherlands boast the highest number of on-line window shoppers in Europe, registering 28 percent each. Norway and Spain are at 22 percent and 16 percent, respectively. Figures like these reduce to a "heroic assumption" the prediction the Internet will obliterate the personal selling profession in the near future.

## **CONCLUSION**

In today's marketing scenario of cut throat competition in almost all fields, personal selling can play a good role in building long term customer relationships which is essential for success of any business. Especially in industrial

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marketing where customer is in constant touch with the supplier, personal service is very much significant. Organizations need a good personal-selling effort to compete in today's market place. Salespeople help make companies successful. The purpose of all marketing effort is to create a satisfied customer and the sales rep is ultimately responsible for the degree of customer satisfaction. From any viewpoint, in our total economy or in an individual organization, personal selling and consequently its management is tremendously important. As Red Motley, a noted sales trainer and writer once said, "Nothing happens until somebody sells something".

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