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Solution-Focused Selling

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CHAPTER I

SELLING TODAY

In order to understand how current sales methods suffice for today's market environment, it is valuable to consider how selling is embedded in marketing organizations and how it typically takes place in the 21st century.

In this section, you will learn about the importance of marketing management and personal selling for companies today. Furthermore, you will also be introduced to the two classical forms of counseling, in order to understand the origin of modern sales methods. The bulk of this chapter describes the most popular sales methods and their instruments and techniques.

Basics of marketing management and personal selling

Sales can be defined as the exchange of goods and services with monetary or non-financial allowances.¹

In traditional business administration, selling represents one of the last stages in the corporate value chain and the ultimate connector between the company and its customers.² In their marketing communications mix, KOTLER ET AL. divide the entirety of sales activities into six fields: advertising, sales promotion, public relations, events and experiences, direct marketing, and personal selling.³ The final term, which denotes the actual one-to-one sales call, is defined as "face-to-face interaction with one or more prospective purchasers for the purpose of making presentations, answering questions, and producing orders."⁴

Personal selling is primarily used for products or services that are complex, require explanation, or have high added value. The purpose of personal selling is to support the client at each stage of the buying process by maintaining direct contact and inducing a positive purchase action.⁵ The seller's goal is to arouse the customer's interest in the product until he/she eventually makes a purchase.⁶

Due to high personnel costs, personal selling is the most expensive marketing activity. It is vital to properly recruit, constantly train, assess, and supervise sales staff. Other crucial factors that determine a sales force's success are structure, size, and compensation.⁷

A brief reflection on counseling

The definitions of counseling are as versatile as its ranges of application. Depending on the specific context, "counseling" has different meanings. Most of these meanings, however, share some common ground: Counseling denotes a form of communication that aims to solve problems or approach solutions.⁸

Despite these commonalities, differences exist when it comes to the manner in which counseling is practiced. In recent years, a distinction between specialist-counseling and process-counseling has developed.⁹ This dichotomy stands for two contrasting approaches that rest on different grounds, use different techniques, and have different characteristics. As KÖNIGSWIESER ET AL. outline:

“Specialist and process-counselors [...] rely on different theoretical models, values and realities. They represent two contradictory schools of thought.”¹⁰

Specialist-counseling

Specialist-counselors are experts who provide recommendations and proposals based on their personal, technical, economic, fiscal, judicial, therapeutic, or other competence. They place the content of a problem in the center of their activities and believe that there is a single objective reality that requires a single best solution.¹¹ They rely on data sets, analyze processes, and justify their measures with hard facts. Specialist-counselors are often employed due to their analytical objectivity, their knowledge of best practices, and their high efficiency.¹²

Process-counseling

Process-counselors view their clients, whether a company, a team, or an individual, as a complex system. They take into account the interconnectedness and interdependencies of the various elements and believe that any change in one element can cause a chain reaction. They also assume that there are multiple realities and usually many good solutions to a problem. They mainly act as change agents and go along with the client in all stages of the counseling process, including implementation.¹³

Process-counselors do not make recommendations or proposals regarding a technical problem. They believe that the client already disposes of the right resources and see their job as empowering the client to uncover and utilize these competences.

Fundamentals of contemporary sales

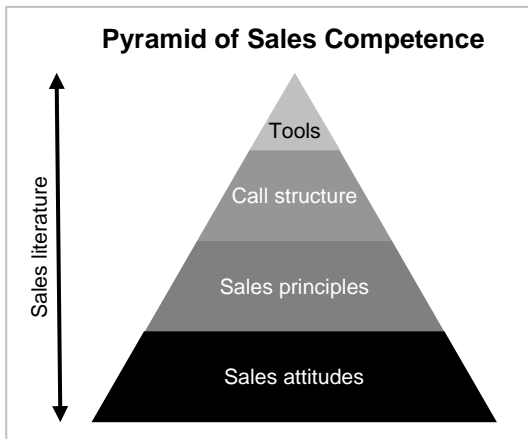


While most practitioners, authors, and instructors agree on the *tasks* of a sales force, there are countless opinions of the manner in which selling should be performed. It is generally accepted that the selection of a method depends on numerous factors such as industry, product range, size

of sales force, customer groups, market saturation, competitors, availability of information, complexity of the matter, and cultural conditions.¹⁴ Additionally, the relationship between seller and buyer also plays a vital role, as GÜTTINGER outlines:

“Depending on the relationship—B2B (Business to Business), B2G (Business to Government), B2C (Business to Consumer) or C2C (Consumer to Consumer)—the sales process relies on different rules and norms and requires a different set of sales techniques and tools.”¹⁵

Each sales relationship is unique. As a result, there is no fixed recipe for acting in sales calls, but a vast variety of different methods, instruments, approaches, attitudes, tools, and techniques.¹⁶ This idea is supported by today’s market for sales literature.



The online shopping platform AMAZON lists an astonishing 35,579 books under the key word *Marketing and Sales*¹⁷, and the Swiss online literature service GETABSTRACT offers 576 abstracts on the same topic, of which 173 focus on personal selling techniques.¹⁸

Of these 173 books, I researched 23 in detail for this book. I selected them randomly, although I paid attention that their titles did not resemble one another too much in order to ensure a broad variety of different emphasis.¹⁹ The contents of

these abstracts and their respective books provided the fundamentals for the upcoming analysis of today’s most common sales practices. This book, however, cannot provide a comprehensive description of all valid and accepted practices, especially because the great variety would make this an impossible task. You will nevertheless get a sense for how selling usually takes place today.

The following points are organized according to the pyramid of sales competence, as illustrated.

The market for sales literature

The market for publications on sales can be divided into two groups. The first is dedicated to marketing and strategic selling, whereas the other group focuses on the field of personal selling and conversation competence. Although articles differ with regard to their content, the following common themes and claims can be identified:

Uniqueness: Many authors believe or allege that their contribution somehow reinvents the art of selling. They see their method as the almost-only valid manner of successful selling and typically claim that it is superior to others. This attitude is especially prevalent with American writers.²⁰

Customer segmentation: Some articles contain clues for segmenting the clientele. They describe how customers think, to which stimuli they respond, and according to what patterns they act. On this basis, they recommend measures and activities that must be adopted by the salesperson in order to be successful. Sometimes, a profile of the “perfect” salesperson is provided.

Sales stages: Most books structure the sales call in distinctive stages. They argue that a client must pass each of these stages and offer aids and tools with which the seller can navigate through the process. The preparation stage and the closing stage are considered to be most important.

Instruments: The instruments described and recommended are usually introduced in the context of their application. Questions are often described with a reference to their outstanding relevance. Other tools usually concern the fields of handling objections, arguing, closing, and emotionally selling.

Do's and Don'ts: Frequently, the do's and don'ts in selling are discussed at length.

Role model: Most sales methods are based on the role models of the expert and the layman. Many authors perceive the salesperson as a convincer and motivator, and to the client they assign the role of a person who wants to be informed. Very little attention is drawn to the customer's resources and maturity, and if so, this is usually done by European writers.²¹

Basic attitudes of traditional selling

Traditional salespeople tend to perceive themselves as technical experts. They often assign their clients to the role of the layman, who seldom possesses the relevant resources to fix a problem and therefore mostly depends on external help. This leads to a hierarchical role definition, where the seller sees himself/herself in the superior and leading position. From this position of superiority, the seller usually tries to lead throughout the sales call and to convince the client that there is a single best solution.

This so-called "expert attitude" builds on the advisor's competence and implies that there is a single right way for the customer to go. Furthermore, the client is implicitly asked to remain passive and to only *receive* information about the product or service. It is only in the final sales stage where the client can engage actively by commenting on the solution and deciding on the next steps.

Many authors, however, emphasize that this superiority must not be conveyed to the client, since dismissive and arrogant mannerisms will not be rewarded by the customer and can be counter-productive. Nevertheless, this does not change the salesperson's inner attitude, which tends to be based on this role definition.

In the past, the traditional customer usually accepted this role definition happily, because it matched his/her experience and complied with common sense: *The salesperson wants to sell something, so let him/her talk!* Moreover, this willingness was supported by a beneficial side effect: The client could behave like a passive consumer and did not have to play an active part, thus saving energy. Furthermore, the client did not have to take responsibility for designing the content of the conversation or its process.

General sales principles

In the expert attitude described beforehand, the traditional salesperson makes decisions on how to design the sales process and what techniques and instruments to apply. He/she bases his/her actions on a set of generally accepted principles that are described as:

Motive theory: Customers act when they have a motive. It is the seller's task to arouse interest for the matter and evoke a positive expectation for success. After this is accomplished, the seller can initiate the customer's purchasing action with suitable incentives. As GEYER writes:

“Salespeople want to convince their clients and motivate them to close the deal.”²²

This statement gives paramount importance to motivating and persuading. For the traditional salesperson, it is crucial to create motives that are relevant to the client in order to persuade him/her to buy.

Cognitive dissonance: Customers are subject to cognitive dissonance. Internal conflicts can arise when new information does not comport with previous thoughts, opinions, views, desires, or intentions. People then try to eliminate these contradictions by adapting either the new or the old information. This leads to phenomena such as selective attention, selective distortion, or selective retention.²³ Thus, people tend to maintain prior decisions. All new information that undermines these decisions is automatically devalued. A person only acts if the dissonance is great enough to cross a certain threshold of tolerance. The seller aims at creating enough contradiction to make the customer act.

Generally accepted communication principles: Most sellers act according to a set of well known communication principles, such as the “anatomy of a message” discussed by SCHULZ VON THUN²⁴ or the four communication axioms by WATZLAWICK²⁵. Additionally, most salespeople are also aware of the practical implications of transaction analysis.²⁶

With the awareness of the findings regarding communication processes, most salespeople have developed a sense for social interactions and derived a set of personal measures for sales calls, which are listed hereafter as do's and don'ts.

Do's: The most important behaviors in sales include: using empathy, evoking feelings, analyzing the customer's needs, noticing body language and applying it consciously, listening carefully, prioritizing the client's wishes, paraphrasing, summarizing, inquiring, maintaining dialogues rather than monologues, giving concentrated information, using the client's language, creating a positive atmosphere, and using a pictographic language.