



Changing methods of sales



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My fascination for sales training began in 1975 when I was asked, along with my other duties as a regional engineer for Airco Welding Products, to train our distributor sales reps. To jump start this initiative I attended an IBM program entitled “Practice of Professional Selling (POPS),” where I learned the latest nuances in sales techniques. Working with that information, I scheduled weekly, two-day training for 20 distributors over the course of a year.

Sales methods have since changed and their evolution has been greatly accelerated by the advent of digital technology. Let’s explore the history and current application of sales roles so we can better understand **what’s happening in sales now.**

Persuasive – In the past, the successful salesperson was a persuader, a featured expert in a market where customers had limited availability to product information and the purchasing channel. Customers were eager to buy new ideas. The central part of the sales cycle was to get a product in front of the customer, cover its features and benefits, and press hard for a close. I refer to this as the shotgun approach — shoot them with enough products and see what sticks. No wonder customers developed the salesmen avoidance syndrome and used oft-repeated phrases like, “I’m happy with my current supplier,” “call later” or, “I’m too busy to see you

now.” Customers did not want to waste valuable hours listening to presentations of products they neither wanted nor needed. Calls were often ended quickly.

Relational – As traditional persuasive techniques became more and more ineffective, new sales methods were introduced. In the late 20th century there was a move towards making sales by building strong relationships with the customer; sales professionals spent more hours with customers talking about everything from where you grew up, to sports, to vacations in order to build trust. This led to confidence in a company and then to sales. Like being persuasive, establishing a good relationship with your

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customers remains important. However, once trust is proven by consistent follow-up, storytelling should only occur only if the customer is leading the conversation.


Transactional – With the advent of the internet and e-commerce, the sales game really changed — it became transactional. With many products described and purchased online, the need for sales support is now limited. A customer can watch a YouTube video to be introduced to a product and to figure out how it works. This has resulted in lower pricing (10% less than full-service). The sales

model is now more like the self-service gas stations that evolved in the mid-70s.

Consultive – With B2B e-commerce growing at a 7% compound annual growth rate, transactional selling is replacing and transforming traditional face-to-face sales techniques. Now we are witnessing the development of two types of consultive selling: process and product.

Process sellers are experts at a business process, using it to reduce interactive costs with the customer. Common roles are inventory management services, onboarding e-commerce and digital relationships, joint go-to-market efforts, and more. Product consultants are experts in a product-based process. These consultants are good at value actuation, and line automation. Both consulting roles can manage an ongoing pipeline of projects and, ideally, their efforts are billed separately from product sales to the account. In the case where their services are not billable, incremental sales at the account base should be measured.

Value proposition – Value proposition selling is consultive, with a spin towards proving the value to the customer in advance of the sale. A value proposition is a clear statement of the tangible results a customer gets from your products or services. A strong value proposition is specific, often citing numbers or percentages. It may include a quick synopsis of your work with similar customers as proof and a demonstration of your capability. It always identifies clear, measurable, and demonstrable benefits consumers get when buying a product or service.

So, what sales advice do I offer now? It can be summed in these words: focus on professionalism, business sense, versatility, and ongoing education. And to stay ahead in today’s rapidly changing sales environment, plan to diligently perfect evolving sales techniques. 

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