

TEACHING PROFESSIONAL SELLING: A RELATIONSHIP BUILDING PROCESS

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ABSTRACT

Professional selling is a relationship building process and teaching the subject as a relationship building process has proved to be effective. This paper will detail the approach used to convey the tools, concepts, skills, and attitudes required to enter a marketing or sales career through the use of creative teaching methods. This paper is organized as follows: Laying the Foundation: Class One, Knowing and Respecting Each Other, Interpersonal Skills, Attitude, Assignments, Setting Goals, I Love You, Listen, Say Something Nice, Daily Self Assessment, Sales Presentation, A Day with a Sales Representative, Critique of Classmates Sales Presentations, Oral Final Exam, and Wrapping Up: Last Class.

INTRODUCTION

This paper presents the approach used to convey the tools, concepts, skills, and attitudes required in teaching professional selling. Based on the lead authors 35 years experience in the field and as a professor the paper explores the characteristics of a successful class. The paper is organized around class structure, and core aspects of the professional selling process. The university context of this paper operates under a quarter system with class sizes of up to 25 students.

LAYING THE FOUNDATION: CLASS ONE

The academic literature is replete with references to the importance of managing long-term buyer-seller relationships (Weitz, Castleberry, and Tanner 2004; Gronroos 1994; Gummeson 1999). Of equal importance to the effective instruction of these processes is the manner in which student/professor relationships are managed. Learning by discovery and building relationships in a classroom seem to work best when the class is a dialogue, not a monologue (Hair and Tyler 2005). The role of the physical layout of the class should not therefore be underestimated when starting a class on professional selling. One option is to opt for the "U" shaped class over the more traditional row setting. This immediately fosters an environment that is inherently social and one that promotes eye contact and more personal interaction amongst students and faculty. Another activity which comprises a major part of the first class is establishing early relationships between participants through a simple question and answer process. The content of these questions should be aimed at personally identifying information such as hometown, achievements, and ambitions. This lays a good foundation for the discussion that follows and the start of a successful relationship building process. These tech-

niques introduce students to the importance of asking questions and listening to the answers. At this point they are also assigned the Ziglar (1993) selling skills and attitude tests as a pre-test for the course which is repeated in the final session.

KNOWING AND RESPECTING EACH OTHER

Another important aspect of professional selling is knowing and respecting both parties in the professional selling process. This lays the foundation for creating trust which is a core element of achieving and maintaining credibility (Morgan and Hunt 1994; Mitch 2003). Students are expected to learn and use their classmates' names throughout the course, the use of name cards acts as a useful conduit to this process. A class culture is established that makes asking for a colleagues name acceptable and where future dialogue makes use of their names. Students' perceptions of this requirement are positive, particularly as this is done in the very first class. Of particular importance is the instructors use of first names as it helps foster a collegial environment in which relationships can be discussed.

INTERPERSONAL SKILLS

Interpersonal skills are also frequently listed as a critical success factor in professional sales (Caskey 2004). Time is spent in class on the fundamentals of interpersonal skills. Included here are: asking questions and listening to the answers; a firm handshake; eye contact; please and thank you; a smile; and demonstrating a caring attitude. Pointers are provided to help students become more effective listeners (practical examples are provided under the assignments section of this paper). The importance of a firm handshake is also identified as an important relationship building skill. Participants are encouraged to

perfect and receive feedback on their handshaking technique. Good eye contact between parties is a further skill encouraged throughout class and its various assignments (Rankin 1995). Polite interaction is also fostered, the importance of a smile and the use of open body language. A final suggestion in this section is to demonstrate care about the people you interact with throughout your professional career. The importance of the first class in establishing professional relationships with professor and student, and between students is therefore critical.

ATTITUDE

A key focus in the course is the students' attitude. This is widely considered to be fundamental to the relationship building process (Ziglar 1993). It is so important to believe in one's self. Jennings referred to this as having "confidence in your competence" (1997). The importance of maintaining a positive attitude impacts their assignments such as sales presentations, oral finals, and, they report, subsequent job interviews. Students are asked to document in learning diaries strategies for recognizing attitudinal issues and tactics for bringing about change using examples of their practice. This approach has been effective in getting our marketing students to be self reflective and maintain confidence in their competence.

ASSIGNMENTS

Early in the course is the importance of making choices is emphasized. Stephen Covey's 7 Habits of Highly Effective People (1989) is used as a resource whereby students are asked to generate examples of how these habits apply, or could apply to them in their professional lives. To help drive the importance of choice, the students are given a number of innovative assignments over the period of the course. These assignments are to be documented in a working diary that is submitted at the end of the course. They comprise: setting goals, telling someone they love them, listening, say something positive to at least one person each day and daily self assessment of an issue of which they can be proud. These are now explored in more detail.

SETTING GOALS

The students are required to establish goals for themselves. Long-run, short-run, educational, as well as personal matters. They are told they will be given the opportunity to share these with the class. Before they undergo this exercise, we discuss research that shows success is highly correlated with being goal directed. Lou Holtz and his video entitled "Do Right" in which he establishes the personal importance of setting goals has proved to be an effective resource. Over the time of the course, students are given the opportunity to share these and their impact

on their professional development. As part of an oral final exam, students are asked to share three of those goals and discuss means by which they will be obtained.

I LOVE YOU

In discussing Ziglar on Selling (1993), it is pointed out that true professional selling is a transference of feelings. Positive feelings about a product or service and positive feelings about the people with whom you deal are core in building relationships in professional selling. It is important to be able to transfer these feelings to others. As one of the more innovative features of this approach students are told they must tell someone they love them. It is a course requirement and students are encouraged to document and share their results. Of great import, students very often express sincere appreciation for the assignment and the sharing of experience as it helps them articulate the often difficult emotional aspects of relationship building.

LISTEN

Successful professional sales people spend twice as much time listening as they do talking (Ziglar 1993). This, of course, depends on the stage in the long-term sell cycle. After going through pointers on effective listening, they are given the assignment to work on being a better listener and documenting results. As with other assignments students are encouraged to share their findings and in doing so this cements the importance of this understanding in their professional careers. As Covey emphasizes, "Seek first to understand, then to be understood" (1989, p. 235).

SAY SOMETHING NICE

It is so easy to say something nice to someone and mean it. Yet relatively few people actually do it, let alone appreciate the implications this has on professional sales success. We talk about how a sincere compliment makes us feel. We have no control over whether we receive compliments from others, but we have total control over whether we say something nice to someone else. The assignment to say something nice to a least one person each day is noted, and shared.

DAILY SELF ASSESSMENT

A simple but powerful assignment on self awareness encourages students to maintain a daily account of activities of which they were proud. This encourages the development of self esteem which often transfers into successful long-term relationships. Choosing to make good things happen impacts one's ability to be highly effective (Covey 1989) and students are encouraged to share these experiences.

SALES PRESENTATION

The importance of experiential learning is noted in the literature (Hair and Tyler 2005). Each student gives a 25–30 minute sales presentation to a classmate serving as a prospect. To help students prepare for this somewhat daunting assignment, the instructor gives a demonstration sales presentation to one of the students who serves as the prospect. The student selected for this role is one who is seen most likely to give the instructor an intelligent challenge during the presentation. This also assists in increasing a student's comfort level with the assignment which is important given the magnitude of the importance and fear factor of this exercise.

As is required for the students, the instructor hands out a situation sheet describing who each role player is, e.g., what is being sold to whom, how they know each other, important factors for the prospect to consider in evaluating whether to buy and a little background on each party. With rare exceptions, the sales situation is expected to be B2B. A sales call plan worksheet is also handed out at this time. At the completion of the demonstration, the class critiques the presentation using the same form that will be used to give participants their feedback. Techniques performed effectively and opportunities for improvement are discussed openly. The students also receive copies of the materials used in the presentation, e.g., a profit illustration, price list, and a plan-o-gram. As it is often the first sales presentation the students have ever seen, their comfort level with the assignment also improves with this demonstration.

Of particular importance – students' presentations are video recorded and given to the students at the end of the quarter. Some have found it useful as they interview for their chosen career to offer these as direct evidence of their ability in a professional sales context. Students volunteer for the date of their presentation and are assigned a prospect through an arbitrary system. It is made clear that the prospect is expected to be creative, realistic, and provide a challenge being neither too aggressive nor too timid. The sales representative is expected to rehearse, but is not allowed to rehearse with their prospect. At the completion of the presentation, both the representative and the prospect receive their evaluation from the instructor and other class participants. This evaluation is analyzed with the students at that time. Classmates are expected to look directly at the representative, address them by name, and cite things done well and opportunities for improvement. This has proved to be a positive experience with multiple learning outcomes for both those participating directly as well as those observing. This assignment has been found to make the most difference to students' self confidence. As instructors this is also one of the most rewarding aspects of the assignments as you see student learning "in action."

A DAY WITH A SALES REPRESENTATIVE

Each student spends a full day with a sales representative selected by them and approved by the instructor. The students are told to find a representative from a firm or industry in which they would consider pursuing a career. This assignment is therefore designed to help students prepare for a future career in professional selling. It is not uncommon for students to have received job offers at the end of this day's experience and others have been invited to apply for positions upon graduation. A 12–15 page paper is written describing and critiquing the experience. The expectations of the paper are made very clear including covering a chronology of the day's activities; all the stages of the long-term sell cycle in action; employment of the "little things" such as use of names, handshakes, smiles, appearance; use of technology; the "high" and "low" of the day (for the professional) and the value of the day to them in respect of their learning. The students frequently comment how they heard terminology and saw practices just as we had discussed in the classroom (acting as further positive reinforcement). It is also noted, that in many cases, the sales representatives are calling on friends with both parties thoroughly enjoying the visit. It changes many students' perceptions of what a day in the life of a professional sales representative entails. Finally, students are encouraged to send a hand-written thank you note and even a small gift, for example a college pen or a more personalized item. This represents a further chance to make a lasting impression and this point is emphasized.

CRITIQUE OF CLASSMATES' SALES PRESENTATIONS

Each student writes a 10–12 page critique of three classmates' presentations. They use the same form as used for the evaluation of the presentations as the outline for their paper. The exercise gives them wonderful practice in critical observation of the attributes of a sales presentation – both those well done and those representing opportunities for growth. To facilitate this assignment the sales presentation video is made available for their review to permit thoroughness in support of their points. Many students have commented how this assignment has helped them with their own presentation skills. The students receiving detailed critiques find this one of the most rewarding aspects of their assessment.

ORAL FINAL EXAM

A thirty minute one-on-one oral final is given to each student by the instructor. A key element of this exercise is a role play where the student selects a product he/she wants to sell, then tells the instructor who they are in the role of a prospect. The "representative" is then asked to

close, probe, qualify, or open a call. They must show how well they can demonstrate the skill, not just define it. Another factor covered includes discussing the difference in their scores on a selling skills and attitudes test that was taken first at the beginning of the course and then again in the last week. Areas of growth are sought and discussed. Other elements include discussing the two text books critically, their practice of Covey's seven habits, what they heard about themselves in the exercise in the last class (discussed below), the elements of the long term sell cycle, the value they took from the sales representatives who visited the class and the videos shown; and characteristics sought by a firm when interviewing for a sales job and how the firm determines if the prospect is qualified. The exam is completed with the question "Of those things that are important to do well for success in professional selling, where do you feel you personally have the greatest opportunity for growth?" When the student selects something, e.g., listening or organization, they then are asked to state two specific things they will do from that moment forward to help them grow in that particular area. They are then asked to stop by in the near future to let the instructor know how they are doing with this final assignment.

Finally, each of their answers is reviewed with them, they are told what they earned in the oral final and what their final grade is. The oral final is a time intensive practice but this approach seems especially appropriate for the topic of professional selling. This demonstrates their understanding of the tools and techniques developed in the course as well as feedback on their verbal, listening, and presentation skills.

WRAPPING UP – THE LAST CLASS

The last class is designed to demonstrate much of what was learned throughout the course. Each student is required to address other students by name and say something positive about them with sincerity. This exercise has proved particularly effective. Students have put their own personal touch on the exercise including standing in front of the student while they are talking about them. Both students are to make eye contact while talking/being addressed. An additional student is assigned to write verbatim comments made. Especially positive feedback has been received about this method as it illustrates the depth with which relationships have been built.

CONCLUSION

This paper has presented the authors relationship building approach to teaching professional selling at the undergraduate and graduate level. These approaches have proved to be especially effective. Coupled with a heavy focus on experiential learning, key tools and concepts have been anchored in students' approaches toward their professional selling approach. The emphasis on relationships and relational processes is believed to be a novel but worthwhile contribution to the practice of teaching professional selling. Whilst the development of these specific activities and assignments has been perfected over time, they are believed to be readily transferable to others that teach this particular type of course.

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