

TRAIN YOUR SALESPEOPLE TO BE SKILLED ACTORS: A MANTRA FOR SUCCESS

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The purpose of this study is to explore some of the basic principles of acting which can be used both by novice as well as “experienced” actors in the business field. The first section of the study deals with taking an inventory of salespersons’ personal resources or instruments. The main objective of this section is to show how to identify, and if possible, to eliminate the defects in those resources. The second section is concerned with preparations necessary before going to the stage of selling. The third section deals with acting on the stage of selling. The last section discusses self-evaluation of the selling acts and recommendations for the programs dealing with salesforce training. In order to narrow the scope of discussion and provide concrete examples of a specific act and actor, the focus is on the acting role of salespeople.

INTRODUCTION

The oldest profession in the world, contrary to the old belief, is not prostitution, it is acting. This comparison is not meant to be derogatory in anyway. All of us use acting techniques during our lifetime to achieve whatever ends we seek. No one has elucidated this better than William Shakespeare in *As You Like It*: “All the world’s a stage, And all the men and women merely players...” In all “seven ages” of life, whether it is “Mewling Infant..., Sighing Lover ..., Lean and Slipper’d Pantaloon...,” we play these roles-- if not in the same way Shakespeare described them; but we never really leave an “age” behind (Barton 2009, pp. 2-3).

Marketing literature is replete with references to various facets of a customer such as the customer role specialization: user, payer, buyer, information gatherer, influencer, and decision maker (Sheth and Mittal 2004, pp.13-14 and Assael 2004, p. 443); customer as having multiple selves (i.e., understanding that a single consumer is likely to act quite differently with different people and in different situations) (Schiffman and Kanuk 2007, p. 138); customers as actors on the market stage (i.e., as in a play each consumer has lines,

props, and costumes necessary to put on a good performance (Solomon 2002, p. 7); and categorization of people by the social roles in which they are seen, for example, categorization of salespeople based on their role as a salesperson rather than their hidden role as a neighbor (Robertson and Kassarian 1991, pp. 289-290). Although the repertoire of role both from theoretical (Ostlund 1973) and practical perspectives occupies a dominant position in the marketing literature, there is a lack of studies which can be used as guidelines for the actors on the business stage. Two reasons may be attributed to this shortcoming in the literature. First, if all the world is acting, then why study it? Second, the belief that acting cannot be taught. These lines of reasoning are false for the following reasons: acting does not necessarily mean acting well. Second, there are literally thousands of colleges, conservatories, workshops, and professional studios teaching acting in the United States alone. Therefore, acting can be taught.

The purpose of this study is to explore some of the basic principles of acting which can be used both by novice as well as “experienced” actors in the business field. These guidelines are based on insights from famous acting teachers such as Constantine Stanislavski, Uta Hagen, Sanford Meisner, Lee Strasberg, Michael Chekhov, and Stella Adler, with a touch of Carl Jung’s theories for tapping the unconscious. In this paper acting is viewed as a

process. This process entails a series of steps to be taken by the salespeople in order to perform their roles effectively. These steps are: self-exploration, preparation before entering the stage of selling, on-stage performance, and self-evaluation.

Although the guidelines discussed in this study can be used by all actors on the business stage, in order to narrow the scope of discussion and provide concrete examples of a specific act and actor, we have selected the acting role of salespeople.

THE PRESENT APPROACHES TO PREPARE AN ACTOR SALESPERSON

Sometimes the novice enters the stage of selling by carrying a “spear” and, in this way, slowly learns his or her craft in the “school of hard knocks.”¹ A somewhat improved approach to training may be setting up classes on the company premises to familiarize the trainees with the company and its products, customer and competitors’ characteristics, and field procedures and responsibilities. The only training activity remotely resembling acting is the makeshift demonstration of sales presentations to the fellow students or instructors. Overall, the job training of novices outside academia is not very impressive. The median training period is twelve weeks in service companies and four in consumer-product companies (Kotler 2003 p. 644-645). In academic circles, the bulk of students’ time is spent in classrooms listening to the lectures on effective selling. Occasionally, students are provided an opportunity to perform the role of salespeople by selling items such as T-shirts to fellow students or advertising space in the local newspaper to the local businesses. If a business college is fortunate enough to have a sales lab, students’ sales presentations to the make-believe customers (very often to their faculty members, fellow students or, a graduate assistant) are taped and evaluated by their instructors. Because of the labor and capital intensive nature of running sales labs, students’ sales presentations are taped once or twice only in the capstone courses. Based on our study of

several sales programs in the United States, we did not find a single college which includes principles of acting in its course syllabi for training students as salespeople.

While there is no agreed upon approach to actor training, nevertheless most programs follow a sequence of principles. In the following sections we will outline these sequences of ideas and practices. The first section deals with taking an inventory of sales persons’ personal resources or instruments. The main objective of this section is to show how to identify, and if possible, to eliminate the defects in those resources. The second section is concerned with preparations necessary before going to the stage of selling. The third section deals with acting on the stage of selling. The last section discusses self-evaluation of the selling acts and recommendations for the programs dealing with sales force training.

SELF-EXPLORATION: TAKING INVENTORY OF PERSONAL RESOURCES

Those who choose selling as a career may express a genuine desire for the profession and have a strong conviction that they can “sell” and will become good, if not, excellent salespersons. Desire for the profession usually masks the crippling problems that make the realization of the intended goal difficult, if not impossible. Therefore, the first step in becoming a skilled performer of salesperson’s role is to take an inventory of personal resources. As inventory management is essential for a successful operation of the business, it is also vital for salespersons to be aware of and able to control the personal resources or instruments they possess, i.e., their body, voice, and mind.

The Body

Body as a resource includes two over-lapping categories of habits and cultural binding.

Habits refer to the ways of behaving so ingrained in an individual that they are done

without a conscious thought. Habits can be active in a sense that individuals display the behavior almost on a daily bases, such as biting the nails, cracking the knuckles, and moving parts of the body (e.g., foot tapping). Active habits also include the way an individual's body speaks the "silent language" of space. Each individual has a "bubble of space" in which he or she feels comfortable. The domain of this bubble varies from person to person and from culture to culture. Some react with horror if their personal space is invaded.

Habits can also be still in a sense that an individual displays the behavior on certain occasions, such as eye twitching in a stressful situation, or having "chicken neck" when certain words are spoken.

Cultural inclinations or bindings refer to the impact of culture on an individual's daily life.² Cultural inclinations will become a problem if salespeople bring them to the act of selling when they are either irrelevant to the act (talking about local customs and traditions) or detrimental to the act (the unconscious reference to ones' own cultural values in comparison to other culture; Self-Reference Criterion).

Admittedly, changing habits and cultural bindings are difficult but this does not mean that they cannot be adjusted. Salespeople have to recognize their own bindings and adjust them without losing their cultural heritage. Habits can also be changed or adjusted. Studying self and asking other people who have been around the individual for a while are the starting points. Identifying personal habits and cultural bindings can be viewed as a research project. This research project does not need a library; an individual is the library.

The Voice

For the majority of people voice is an unknown object and they have no idea how they sound. The unknown nature of voice is primarily because we see and feel our body, but not our voice. "The world is full of women who spend

many daily hours working to look breathtaking but they sound like Bambi ... and men who pump enough iron to look like warrior chiefs, but talk like Thumper" (Barton 2009, p. 91.) Adjusting voice habits is difficult but not impossible. Work on voice habits should include the quality (tone and texture), tempo, articulation, pronunciation, pitch, volume, and word choice. Another area usually overlooked is the non-verbals such as sigh or tiny laugh). "Non-verbals add color and interest to vocal life" (ibid p. 93).

The Mind

If the voice is less tangible than the body, the mind is even more elusive than the voice. It is not uncommon to see salespeople who act like robots in presenting their sales presentation and forgetting to tap from their vast reservoir of memories, ideas, and imagination. Salespeople, who forget themselves on the selling stage, forget the audience and lose themselves in the part. Skilled salespeople on the selling stage forget their anxieties, inhibitions, and any other mental limitations they may have by concentrating on the role of selling. The main task of the salespeople is to create a character who behaves logically and truthfully in a given sales circumstance. This truthful behavior emanates from within and is externalized through external resources of voice and body. The study of this psychophysical process should be regarded as the most important groundwork for building a successful selling act.

Personal Resources

A record of personal resources should not be confused with a daily diary or a record to be presented to a psychiatrist. It should list the shortcomings of each resource and progress toward improving each shortcoming. A point to keep in mind is that this record will not be shared with others. Therefore, salespeople should be honest in preparing the record and avoid the temptation of minimizing their limitations and exaggerating their progress.

PREPARATION BEFORE ENTERING THE STAGE OF SELLING

Circumstances

Circumstance is a well-known term in the lexicon of acting. In real life we know the place we are in (the bus, the library or the office). Salespeople usually feel abandoned when they meet their clients for the first time in a place foreign to them (different country, city, or office). Unfamiliarity of the circumstances creates tension, and as a result, the first thing salespeople do is go to the words, i.e., a memorized sales presentations. Words alone are not sufficient; a complete absorption of the salesperson in the given circumstances of their stage is a must. Salespeople must build larger circumstances by asking questions such as:

Where does the action take place?

- What country? The United States
- What city/town? Indianapolis, Indiana
- What location? Restaurant/bar, client's office

When does the action take place?

- What Season? Spring
- What time of the day? 9:30 A.M.

What are the sequences of action?

What persons are in the circumstance?

- Client or clients, sales team members, etc.

For each circumstance there is also a related mood (mood of business talks in a bar versus in an office). Salespeople must understand these moods and adjust their act accordingly. A careful study of given sales circumstances will provide raw material for adjusting a salesperson's personal resources mentioned previously in the paper to a given circumstance.

Establishing Objectives

A good definition of a circumstance will usually answer the questions of "where," "when," "what," and "who." All actions on the sales stage must have a purpose (in acting literature also called intention, goal, desire, motivation, or intended victory³). Therefore, another question should be added to the above

four questions, i.e., why the action is taking place? Answering the question of "why" will give the salespeople reasons for carrying out their physical actions. Any action performed by salespersons without a compelling reason will not hold the interest of their audience. Knowing the purpose behind the actions provides a principal means for communicating the story to the target audience.

In order to move the audience toward the intended objective, it is necessary to offer them some justification. For example, if the intended objective is to sell a dishwasher, a justification can be its quietness or high quality. Sometimes salespeople are tempted to expand on the justification by saying, "I'm recommending this dishwasher because it is quiet and many of my family members use it." The expansion of the justification, i.e., quietness, by introducing family members is unnecessary. Family members have been brought into the scene where they do not belong (fake plotting).

Overcoming the Obstacles

Anything that stands in the way of salesperson's accomplishment of their objective should be viewed as an obstacle. The obstacle may be internal or external. Internal obstacles develop from salespeople's own personality traits (e.g., self-consciousness, inhibition, and shyness), habits, obsessions, physical impediments or disabilities and mental or emotional disabilities. External obstacles are things that salespeople cannot control and come from a variety of sources such as competition, economic condition, or even from natural phenomenal such as the weather and the time of a day. Obstacles, whether they are physical or psychological, should stimulate salespersons' selected actions. Salespeople should make a personal commitment to overcome the obstacle (s) and accomplish their objectives. They must feel the challenge physically as well as intellectually. As in a sport event, an athlete does not win a race by wishing or feeling victorious. Objectives are accomplished through conquering obstacles.

Strategies

Strategy is defined as the art and science of adapting and coordinating resources (individual or organization) for the attainment of an objective. Strategy is about the choice which affects the outcomes. After the salespeople understand what they are doing and why they are doing it, they must answer the essential sixth question, i.e., how they are going to do it. Objectives may be related to handling grievances of customers, resolving conflict between dealers, settling disagreement, ending relationships with customers, and so on. For each objective a clear strategy should be envisioned. Not only do different objectives demand different strategies, the same objective for different circumstances may require different strategies. Salespeople should handle (play) each strategy as if it were occurring for the first time. Salespeople cannot be clairvoyant. Therefore, strategies must be adapted to new circumstances.

Tactics

Tactics are active ingredients of dynamic interactions. They deal with detailed maneuvers to achieve objectives set by strategy. Tactics may be planned or ad hoc activities dealing with the demand of the circumstances. Our everyday life tactics are usually simple, benign, and spontaneous. For example, we smile to encourage agreement and tolerance or raise the level of our voice to encourage compliance. Salespeople should learn how to apply tactics on demand in the course of communication with the target audience. Consider the following scenarios:

Salesperson dealing with complete rejection, acceptance, stalling, ambiguous response, or a logical response from customers. For each scenario salespeople should be able to apply tactics of body language, tone of voice, gesture, facial expression, and so on. A successful salesperson usually mixes tactics, i.e., alternating them quickly.

Relaxation

Salespeople must be focused on the selling stage. It is true that, in the performance of our life, focus comes suddenly and perhaps accidentally. A skilled salesperson is able to achieve this state deliberately. The best way to achieve focus intentionally is to learn how to warm up the body and mind. In warming up for the stage of selling, a balance should be maintained between indifference (too much relaxation) and anxiety (too much readiness). Since salespeople are not automatically blessed with the cat's perfect energy state (loose yet alert), they should attempt to attain the "relaxed readiness" state by practice.

Mental Relaxation

Mental relaxation is a matter of putting out of mind the day-to-day affairs of life and concentrating on the problem of the selling circumstances. Relaxation techniques such as deep breathing, visualization, meditation, and yoga can help salespeople to activate relaxation response, i.e., the body's natural and powerful antidote to stress.⁴ When practiced regularly, these activities lead to a reduction in everyday stress levels. The best way to start and maintain a relaxation practice is by incorporating it into the daily routine. A set time either once or twice a day for the practice, should be scheduled. Usually it is easier to stick with the practice of relaxation if it is done first thing in the morning before other tasks and responsibilities get in the way.

Physical Relaxation

A common avoidable mistake, is to perform a given role when the body as well as the mind are completely fatigued. Evidence of this mental fatigue is such things as puffy eyes or the non-stop yawning during the presentation by the salespeople who have been on the road the night before; mistakes made during their sales demonstration; or constantly losing lines of communication with their customers. It is a common problem among both novice sales people as well as the "old-hands."

Developing the Character

Character may be viewed as attributes or features that make up and distinguish a person in terms their looks, feelings, and actions. In our daily life we play characters in such a unique way that a deviation from our usual character may surprise others and prompt them to say “you’re not yourself today.” Salespeople must develop the physical and psychological traits of the character of their profession. In acting jargon they must become the character. The character has distinctive internal thoughts, images, desires, impulses and point of view. Information about the character can be derived from salespeople’s imagination and personal history including everything they have experienced, felt, read, or observed in life or fiction. Therefore, an important part of the salespeople’s training should be to show them how to develop the skill of observation, i.e., zooming at both the ordinary and unusual events in their everyday life.

Salespeople must learn to observe familiar things as if they had never seen them before, and must retain what they observe. Observations will produce inner images, which will reside in salespeople subconscious. These images, a polite or rude encounter with a bank teller, a boring or an interesting sales presentation heard from other colleagues, will help the salespeople to refine the attributes or features of their character. Collected information about the character may be much more than needed in a given scenario. The salespersons’ job then becomes one of artistic selectivity, i.e., selecting important aspects of the character and effectively communicating them to the audience.

PERFORMING ON THE SELLING STAGE

In life, a salesperson can be boring. On stage he cannot afford to be boring, even for one instant. Boring sales presentations work as a soothing lullaby. A salesperson may have to present a new product to many different groups of customers. Typically, this requires 50 to 70

presentations over a period of two to three weeks, often four to six presentations in any given day. Under these circumstances, it is difficult to keep the presentation fresh and vital. Repetition makes it difficult to have the same sense of enthusiasm, spontaneity, and excitement as the first time. Regardless of how many times a salesperson has told the story of his product, he has to create “the Illusion of the First Time.”⁵ This common phrase in the acting jargon refers to the ability of an actor to create the illusion that what he says, and the gestures and facial expression he uses or movements he makes are as though he or she is doing them for the first time. Outstanding salespeople create this response, no matter how many times they repeat what they have done previously.

Another important point to keep in mind is that there is a difference between real time and stage time. Salespeople should act like a skilled teacher who not only delivers an exciting lecture, but also knows how to finish it just before the class time is over. What is done on the sales stage needs a certain economy. Actors call it “smartening up the action,” i.e., the technique of making real time fit into stage time. For example, if the salesperson wants to show something on his laptop computer, the computer should already be on the standby mode. Preplanning is a prerequisite for “smartening up the action.”

Props

Usually salespeople use samples (sales aids) or actual products (“props” in acting jargon) in their presentation. As actors, they must understand every detail of the props and the actions involved in using them. If there are minimal or no props available (for example, it is impossible to carry real firearms), this handicap can be overcome by a combination of the salesperson’s knowledge of the history of the product, how it is used, and his or her imagination. Once Luther Adler, famous theatre actor, had to pick up a gun and shoot a man without having access to gun. His knowledge of the gun and how it is used convinced the audience that the gun had been fired and the

man was dead (Adler 1998, p. 58). In addition to knowledge of the product and imagination, practice is also a key requirement. We show our students actions involved in sewing a button to a shirt (cutting the thread by teeth, picking up the needle, wetting the thread and several attempt to thread the line, etc.). We also plan an accident such as a finger being poked by the needle and how the pain is expressed by words and facial expression.⁶ We require students to play the act without any props. Students with minors in home economics, due to their experience with sewing, perform this act almost to perfection. Performance of marketing majors, with some exceptions, is hilarious to say the least.

A simple prop can also be used to explain abstract concepts. For example, in order to explain the concepts of “selective perception,” “categorization,” “perception and physical reality,” We wear a white robe in our consumer behavior class and ask students to tell us what the robe is for. Among the frequently mentioned answers are: lab uniform, religious gown, KKK robe, and hospital uniform. The robe (a gift from a friend from Middle East) not only engages students in the topic of perception, but also makes it easy for me to explain the abstract concepts related to perception.

Costume

To the keen eyes of the customers, what a salesperson wears speaks in a silent language a great deal about his or her education, income and personality. According to Stella Adler (1988, p. 64), there is a class difference between a shawl and muff; the shawl identifying the working-class woman who does not care about herself or her appearance, and the muff signifying the elegance of the upper-class lady. Salespeople must maintain their appearances. This does not mean that they always have to dress either like funeral directors (black or dark blue) or present themselves as a Rush Limbaugh-style conservative. Salespersons should be comfortable in their “costum.” The custom

should fit them rather than attempting to fit the salespersons to the custom. It is not uncommon to see saleswomen carrying their high heel shoes in the convention halls, young salesmen struggling to tie their neckties in the washrooms, or “old hands” wearing wrinkled suits with unmatched colors. Practice, careful selection, and seeking advice from a fashion expert will correct the above mentioned problems.

Reflection on the following questions may also help in the selection of the right “costume” for the occasion:

- Does it look like the salesperson gave some thought and preparation to how he looks today?
- Does his look suit the person? Does it seem to fit who he is?
- Is it the human being we are looking at or are we seeing clothes and hair style?
- Is the attire in any way fighting with the salesperson for attention?
- Is there a balance between stiffly dressed up and so casual that the salesperson does not seem to respect the occasion?
- Does any part of the outfit indicate a lack of self-awareness?

Play the Character not the Stereotypes

Stereotypes and generalizations are oversimplifications. Examples include calling all Italians great lovers, or asserting that the white men can’t jump and black men can jump and have good rhythm. Prejudices are based on stereotyping and lead to categorizing people as a whole rather than individually. Salespeople tend to stereotype their customers when they are dealing with, say, police officers, physicians or members of ethnic groups. Although stereotyping simplifies the massive amount of information salespeople are faced with in their profession, they also inhibit salespeople to see the customers as unique individuals. When a customer is seen as an unchangeable block of characteristic, the stereotype will dictate the performance and performance will be mediocre.

Therefore, salespeople should play the character not the stereotypes.

Communicating with the Audience: Learning the Vocabulary of the Action

What a salesperson is called upon to do on the selling stage is diverse. Hence, the range of actions he should have at his command must be diverse as well. A salesperson must be trained to handle the vocabulary of actions such as: 1) to advise, 2) to teach, 3) to explain, 4) to take care of, 5) to argue, and 6) to discuss. These are among the more important and frequently encountered actions by salespeople but there are, of course, many more. The above actions will change depending on a given circumstance, but the general approach will remain the same. The nature of information related to the use of a laptop computer is different from the air conditioner, but the teaching method may not change very much. No matter what action salespersons are called upon to handle, they must be able to communicate their ideas to the target audience. At a minimum, salespeople should be able to recognize the basic building blocks of a sentence, their relationship to each other, and their relative importance.

SELF-EVALUATION

Are we aware of our strengths and faults?; do we exaggerate our virtues and dismiss our shortcomings?, and whether we are better off by knowing what we really are or by embellishing ourselves; were among the questions examined by Taylor and Brown in 1988. One of the conclusions reached by the authors was that most people do not hold accurate views of themselves; instead they inflate their virtues and exaggerate their abilities. Salespeople, especially the young ones, should avoid entering the magic circle of self-deception. Once in the circle, it is difficult to escape the mendacity. Self-assessment is a learned skill. Beginning with the first training class, salespeople must make an honest appraisal of their own work and welcome brutal words of teachers or colleagues concerning the shortcomings of their performance. In the

commercial world, managers expect salespeople to “deliver a product.” Companies are not hiring salespeople for their potential; rather they contract their skill. Therefore, it is necessary for salespeople, to look objectively at their skill and continually work on improving their weaknesses.

CONCLUSION

Why isn't acting one of the most important classes taught at any school and one required of all students? Despite its importance the administrators and curriculum committees have been slow to recognize its importance particularly in business schools. Of course taking an acting class is not going to solve students' life problems, but it would challenge them to come up with any other course that offers them as much help for their future choices.

There are relatively inexpensive and easy alternatives available for business schools to provide opportunities for their students to learn the fundamentals of acting. Among these alternatives are:

- 1) Universities with theatre departments may offer a course or a minor in acting designed for students majoring in sales.
- 2) Business schools may provide special or sabbatical leave opportunities for business faculty for the purpose of training in principles of acting.
- 3) There is a vast reservoir of knowledge related to the principle of acting. A special package can be put together and incorporated in the targeted courses in business curriculum.
- 4) Business organizations can provide opportunities for their salespeople to take courses in acting either in the community colleges or on the internet.
- 5) Business organization may also invite guest speakers from the theatre departments of their community colleges or universities to lecture on the principles of acting.

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- ¹The term was first coined by American columnist George Ade in 1912.
- ²For a detailed discussion of cultural binding, see Barton 2009, pp. 76-79.
- ³Stanislavski called the objective zadacha, which translates as problem, while Uta Hagen stated it as a question "What are you fighting for?" Adler uses the term justification for doing an action on the stage (Adler 1988, Chapter 6).
- ⁴Methods of mental relaxation are not discussed in this paper because there are numerous books and articles available to the interested readers on the methods of mental relaxation such as yoga, meditation and the others.
- ⁵This phrase is attributed to William Gillette, actor, playwright and director, 1853-1937.
- ⁶Accidents must be planned or arranged beforehand and practiced several times to be sure that every time they will come about in the same way.