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A Behavioral Science Approach to Effective Sales Presentations

Thomas T. Ivy, Ph.D. and Louis E. Boone, Ph.D.

University of Southern Mississippi

The University of Tulsa

During the early stages of the initial contact the salesman must accomplish two essential tasks. First, he must differentiate himself from the mass of salesmen by establishing a mutually satisfying personal relationship with the prospect. This relationship should be characterized by the salesman's sincere concern for the welfare of the prospect, empathetic understanding of the client's goals and business situation, and a problem solving orientation. Second, he must encourage the prospect to discuss his business situation, plans, and problems candidly. Such participation not only creates a readiness for the prospect to hear information about the salesman's proposal, but also provides the salesman with the information he needs to discuss his product in a manner which the prospect will see as directly relevant to his situation. It also enables him to verify information he has obtained through prospecting activities.

ACCOMPLISHING SALES OBJECTIVES: What the Typical Sales Training Program Teaches

The typical sales training program stresses the use of a series of questions to accomplish these objectives. Thompson identifies the four basic types of questions the salesman should use in the initial contact as permissive, verification, developmental, and evaluative.¹ While these questions are quite useful, many salesmen tend to overuse them. This is especially true of neophyte salesmen. And, unfortunately, the overuse of questions has several disadvantages: (1) it lends to a feeling of being interrogated in the prospect; (2) it often results in premature termination of the sales

interview since the prospect is likely to feel intimidated; (3) it minimizes chances of a mutually satisfying working relationship with the prospect; and (4) the salesman cannot possibly think of all the questions he should ask.

WHAT SHOULD THE SALESMAN SAY:

An Alternate View

The verbal behaviors presented in this paper are offered as possible alternatives to the continuous use of questions. They are more likely to encourage the prospect to discuss his business situation, communicate the salesman's empathetic understanding of the prospect's situation, and demonstrate the salesman's sincere concern for the welfare of the prospect. The description of these behaviors is based on research in the social sciences which has identified the verbal behaviors characteristic of effective interviewing procedures. Although these verbal behaviors are presented from the context of their use in the initial contact between a salesman and a prospect, they are an important part of the salesman's behavior throughout the sales interview.

VERBAL BEHAVIORS OF THE SALESMAN:

Their Meaning and Use

The following discussion includes a definition of the behaviors which can be used in the initial contact. A description of the situations where the behavior may be appropriately used and examples of its use in the sales situation are also included. Criteria for judging a trainee's attempt to use the behavior in a role playing situation are provided.

Verification Questions

- A. **Definition.** A verification question is a question designed to validate prior knowledge, assumptions, or impressions which the salesman has formed from either the prospect's previous statements or other sources of information.
- B. **When to Use.** A verification question is used when the salesman has formulated impressions or assumptions which the salesman considers important that he and the prospect focus on to either verify or correct.

C. Example.

Prospect: Uh, yeah, I've sort of been looking for a new text, uh, one that includes, ah, some things I think should be in a consumer text. There's, uh, . . . math models, but they're perhaps too complex for undergraduate students and a . . . (pause).

Salesman: Am I correct in thinking that you want a text which includes at least some math models at the undergraduate level?

D. Criteria for Judging.

- (1) The question is stated tentatively with expression of confusion and asks for verification of impressions about events, ideas, or feelings.
- (2) It is characterized by possibly being answered with a "yes" or "no" question.
- (3) A verification question may be related to an immediately preceding prospect statement or to matters only indirectly related to what is being said but is necessary for the salesman's understanding.
- (4) The salesman is asking the prospect to help him understand.

Developmental Questions

A. Definition. Developmental questions are open-ended questions which cannot be answered by "yes" or "no". They are designed to elicit discussion by the prospect about ideas, feelings, or events which have been introduced by the prospect or ones which the salesman feels are important. They may also be an open invitation to talk.

B. When to Use. They are used when the salesman wishes to refocus the direction of rambling or tangential prospect discussion to more relevant areas, structure the direction of an interview at its beginning, or elicit prospect talking behavior at the beginning of an interview or during hiatus periods.

C. Example.

Prospect: I've thought about what we talked about last time; some of your suggestions make sense, but I don't know how I'd feel doing them.

Salesman: How do you feel about those suggestions?
How have things been since our last interview?

D. Criteria for Judging.

- (1) The question cannot be answered by "yes" or "no".
- (2) It introduces a topic or asks about a large segment of information or feelings.
- (3) It states a topical area unless it is used as an open invitation to talk.
- (4) It should be followed by prospect talk about the area indicated by the question.

Evaluative Questions

A. Definition. Evaluative questions ask the prospect for feedback concerning ideas or information provided by the salesman.

B. When to Use. They often follow interpretations of product characteristics, summarization, or other information given by the salesman.

C. Example.

Salesman: Have I made that clear?
Have I omitted anything?
Is that an accurate statement of what you have been feeling?
How does that strike you?

D. Criteria for Judging.

- (1) The burden of prospect understanding rests with the salesman.
- (2) It follows salesman's information giving or interpretation.
- (3) It may be a response to nonverbal questioning behavior by the prospect.

Minimal Social Stimuli

A. Definition. Minimal social stimuli are minimal verbal behaviors which do not respond directly to the content of a prospect statement or question. They are nonspecific reinforcers which communicate that the salesman is in effect listening and wishes the prospect to continue. Examples of these behaviors are mmmh, uh huh, yes, I see, and oh.²

B. When to Use. Minimal social stimuli are exhibited when the prospect's verbal behavior is part of an unusually lengthy train of thought, or during a brief pause in prospect talking behavior where the salesman wishes to reinforce the prospect's talking behavior without influencing either the content or manner in which the following material will be stated.

C. Example.

Prospect: . . .I've thought a lot about it recently and I can't decide what I'm going to do, you see there are so many things. . . things to think about and ways to look at it (Salesman: mmh.) that it's hard to know. I thought for a while that I would like. . .

D. Criteria for Judging.

- (1) It is not in response to a prospect question and does not imply agreement or disagreement.
- (2) It is not an habitual, unconscious behavior of the salesman.
- (3) The prospect continues to talk and does not change content direction.

Repetition of Final Word or Phase

A. Definition. The salesman repeats exactly the last word or phrase of the immediately preceding prospect statement. It is a nonspecific, non-selective reinforcer of prospect talking behavior.

B. When to Use. It is used after a prospect statement containing content which the salesman wishes the prospect to continue talking about, but does not want to influence subsequent content.

C. Example.

Prospect: I'm a worrier. Well, I can't ever seem to be satisfied with a solution. The answer, uh, just can't be that simple. I'm exaggerating. . . a little, but I can't be sure. . .

Salesman: Just can't be sure. . .

D. Criteria for Judging.

- (1) The salesman uses exact same words as prospect and adds nothing to the prospect's statement.
- (2) The last word or phase of the prospect's statement is repeated.
- (3) The prospect continues talking in the same direction as before salesman response.

Restatement of Content

A. Definition. The salesman restates the cognitive content of prospect's preceding statement using exactly the same or nearly the same words as the prospect. It is a selective reinforcer of prospect talking behavior about specific topical areas.³

B. When to Use. Restatement of content usually follows a prospect statement which includes ideas or expressed feeling which the sales-

man wishes the prospect to know that he has heard. In cases where several ideas or feelings have been expressed and the salesman considers certain ideas or feeling statements important, he may restate these selectively.

C. Example.

Prospect: We are in the process of reorganization, and reorientation of our company. Everything is rather uncertain at present.

Salesman: Your reorganization makes future needs uncertain

D. Criteria for Judging.

- (1) The salesman's statement repeats ideas which the prospect has stated without adding anything.
- (2) The salesman uses the same or nearly the same words as the prospect.
- (3) The prospect continues talking about the ideas the salesman has repeated.

Paraphrasing

A. Definition. The salesman expresses the essence of the ideas which have just been expressed by the prospect. In paraphrasing, the salesman's aim is to state ideas more concisely, focus the prospect's attention on these ideas, and to check the salesman's perception to ensure that he understands exactly what the prospect is saying. The salesman's expression of these ideas back to the prospect uses fresh words.⁴

B. When to Use. Paraphrasing follows a prospect statement or series of statements in which ideas have been directly stated or implied which the salesman considers important.

C. Example.

Prospect: At present we don't know exactly what benefits package we're going to offer in negotiations, but we're sure that this is going to be where employee demands are going to concentrate. Health care, vacation pay, and sick leave are some of the things we expect to include.

Salesman: Employee demands are still unclear, but health care will be one aspect of the benefits package.

D. Criteria for Judging.

- (1) The salesman's statement contains synonyms for the ideas expressed or implied by the prospect.

- (2) The salesman's statement is brief and refers only to important ideas already expressed or implied.
- (3) Paraphrasing may involve some recognition of the prospect's feelings but focus is on idea content.

Reflection of Feeling

- A. Definition. The salesman verbalizes the emotion apparent in the prospect's preceding statements accurately and succinctly using synonyms for those which are labeled by the prospect. The choice of words by the salesman is determined by the intensity of the emotion expressed directly or implied.
- B. When to Use. Reflection of feeling follows a prospect expression of feeling or nonverbal expression of feeling which the salesman considers important, but which he feels that the prospect may not be aware of its true nature, which he wishes to check his own perception of, or wants to communicate understanding of.
- C. Example.

Prospect: We're losing money right and left on our government contracts because of inflation. We still have to supply the meat at the same price even though our costs are increasing 3 percent a month. It's a stupid way to do business; but that's where we are.

Salesman: You feel helpless, squeezed, and angry about your present pricing conditions.
- D. Criteria for Judging.
 - (1) The focus of the salesman's statement is on the expressed or implied emotion of the prospect's preceding statement.
 - (2) The salesman uses synonyms for references to emotion consonant with intensity level of emotion, or uses most appropriate word to describe un verbalized emotion.
 - (3) Reflection of feeling should result in prospect's continuing to elaborate on emotion experienced or correcting the salesman's statement.
 - (4) Reflection of feeling often results in prospect's statement that the salesman's expression is accurate.

Summarization

- A. Definition. Summarization is a salesman response which attempts to

summarize both ideas and emotional expressions which the prospect has expressed over an extended period of discussion. It contains material that has been previously reflected or paraphrased over several prospect statements.

B. When to Use. Summarization follows a period of discussion in which the prospect has discussed several ideas and expressed emotional reactions which may be confusing, lengthy, or rambling; when the salesman wishes to structure the beginning of a session; when the prospect has seemingly expressed everything of importance to him on a particular topic; or to accent what has been discussed at the end of a sales interview. It serves the functions of integrating and making more coherent for the prospect what he has been saying, a stimulus for further exploration, to resolve incongruities, and as a perception check for the salesman.

C. Example.

Salesman: So far, Mr. Bond, if I've followed what you've been saying is that the cost of raw materials has been increased 3 percent, competition does not allow you to raise prices, and sales have remained stable so that your profits are lowered.

D. Criteria for Judging.

- (1) Summarization must bring important feelings and ideas which have been expressed into close temporal and spatial contiguity.
- (2) It does not add new ideas or draw conclusions but may use different words for prospect's expressions.
- (3) It does not introduce new concepts of causality or other relationships which have not been expressed by the prospect.
- (4) Summarization should be succinct and include only essentials.
- (5) It should include a statement of tentativeness so that prospect can feel free to correct, elaborate, or further explore the subject area.

Tacting Response Leads

A. Definition. Tacting response leads are salesman responses which in effect ask the prospect to discuss more specifically in greater detail, or other occasions when something has occurred which has just been introduced by prospect in a vague or ambiguous manner. They may take one of three forms: an imperative sentence directing the client,

- feigning ignorance, or a direct question.⁵
- B. **When to Use.** This response is exhibited by the salesman following ambiguously defined or generalized prospect statements about events which have occurred, present or past feelings, or thoughts which the salesman considers important but cannot understand without further elaboration. The prospect's statements may result from the words used by the prospect, the prospect's own confusion about the nature of his experiences, or lack of trust in the salesman.
- C. **Example.**
 Prospect: We've tried adding consumer convenience goods, but it has been a big flop.
 Salesman: Tell me exactly what goods you tried? (Imperative sentence) I'm not sure I understand what you mean by consumer convenience goods in your situation? (Feigning ignorance) How were they a flop? (Direct question)
- D. **Criteria for Judging.**
- (1) In feigning ignorance, the burden of responsibility for understanding is the salesman's not the prospect's.
 - (2) It comes after an ambiguous or generalized statement.
 - (3) It should elicit concrete descriptions, details of events, or other occasions when something has occurred.
 - (4) It should force the prospect to define more specifically those words which he has just introduced.
 - (5) If question form is used, it does not imply that prospect cannot discuss further.

Suggesting Alternatives

- A. **Definition.** The salesman introduces alternatives for prospect's consideration in addition to those which prospect has stated.
- B. **When to Use.** Usually occurs when the prospect is discussing possible alternative courses of action or ways of looking at a problem situation. It is used especially when prospect sees situation as "either-or" when in fact several more desirable courses of action are possible than those being considered.
- C. **Example.**
 Prospect: It's the only way out of this mess. We'll just have to get along with what we've got . . . , uh, nothing else we can do but sit tight.
 Salesman: Financially, the only alternative seems to be to minimize

expenses. I wonder if long-term financing of a deferred payment plan could be used?

D. Criteria for Judging.

- (1) The salesman's statement increases the prospect's awareness of alternatives by introducing some which have not been previously considered.
- (2) The alternatives suggested are within the range of possibility for the situation.
- (3) Salesman suggests, but leaves final decision to prospect.
- (4) The suggestions are characterized by "could," "can," or "might."

SUMMARY

This paper has identified and briefly described a number of verbal behaviors which the salesman can use in the initial contact phase of the sales interview. The initial contact phase of selling is made more effective by using a combination of the responses described in the literature of the behavioral sciences. Experienced and neophyte salesmen can learn these behaviors with brief training using the materials presented here in a role playing situation. Such training should increase their effectiveness in the selling situation.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Joseph Thompson. *Personal Selling: A Managerial & Behavioral Science Analysis*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973).

² J.M. Zimmer, L.E. Wrightman, and D.L. McArthur. *Categories of Counselor Behavior as Defined From Cross Validated Factor Structures*. Final report USOE No.9-A003. (Amhurst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts, 1970).

³ J. Petti, *An Instructional Method for Increasing Counselor Responses to Client Feeling*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Arizona State University, 1966.

⁴ A.E. Ivey, C. Normington, C.D. Miller, and W.H. Morrill. "Microcounseling and Attending Behavior: An Approach to Prepracticum Counselor Training," *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, Vol. 15 (1968).

⁵ D.J. Delaney, "Simulation Techniques in Counselor Education: Proposal of a Unique Approach," *Counselor Education & Supervision*, Vol. 8 (1969), p. 183.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

THOMAS T. IVY is Associate Professor of Marketing at the University of Southern Mississippi where he teaches consumer behavior and sales. He is

presently co-authoring a principles of marketing text and conducting further research in sales. Memberships include Southern Marketing, Southwest Marketing, and Mississippi Association of Counseling Psychologists. He received his masters degree from the University of Arkansas and his doctorate from Arizona State University.

LOUIS E. BOONE is Professor of Marketing and Chairman of the Division of Management and Marketing at The University of Tulsa. He is co-author of a number of leading textbooks including *Contemporary Marketing*, *Foundations of Marketing*, *Marketing Channels*, *Management Perspectives in Marketing*, *Classics in Consumer Behavior*, *Marketing Strategy*, *The Sales Management Game*, and *Contemporary Business*. His book *Contemporary Marketing* has been translated into French and was awarded the 1975 European Book Prize. Boone's four dozen articles have appeared in such journals as the *Journal of Marketing*, *MSU Business Topics*, *Business Horizons*, *Journal of Business of the University of Chicago*, *Journal of Psychology*, *Journal of Retailing*, and *Journal of Purchasing and Materials Management*. Boone is 1976 recipient of the Sir Ian Potter Distinguished Fellowship in Marketing. He is also Vice President - Research and Publications of the Southern Marketing Association. He has lectured in Australia, Greece, and the United Kingdom.