



Role of Interpersonal Communication in Face to Face Selling

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1.0 Introduction

“Everyone lives by selling something”, so said R.L. Stevenson, the English novelist, pointing towards the pervasiveness of transactional processes in human affairs. If we look at our everyday interactions closely, most of them would seem to contain one or the other kind of selling proposition. We sell when we persuade our parents to increase our pocket allowance; we sell when we convince our employer to give us a rise in salary; and, we sell when we try to make ourselves attractive to others. Clearly, whether we are aware or not, we are continually involved in the process of selling. The success or failure of our efforts in life depends largely on our ability to sell. And our ability to sell is mainly manifested in our skills of convincing and influencing people to think and act positively about our selling proposition - be it an idea, a product or a service. In business, however, since profit-making is the prime motive, selling has been generally defined as the process of inducing and assisting a prospective buyer to buy goods or services or to act favourably on an idea that has commercial significance for the seller.

Today businesses operate in a highly competitive and consumer-oriented environment. Business people no longer have the monopolistic market environment which once assured them enormous profits for their products and services. Competition has now become



more rigorous as customers have a vast array of products and services to choose from. The challenge of modern business is to create and sell products and services in such a way that not only the company earns profits but the consumers' needs and desires are also satisfied. This type of thinking has urged business people to become consumer-oriented, to take into account the consumers' needs, wants, desires and moods. Especially for selling expensive luxury items, companies have sought to employ salespersons who can satisfy customers on the material and emotional planes by making appropriate persuasive appeals. Salespersons are thus expected to possess excellent language and interpersonal skills so that they could relate to the customers through effective and credible communication.

Recent consumer-oriented attitude has also resulted in a paradigmatic shift from the narrow concept of selling to the concept of marketing. A leading marketing expert, Phillip Kotler (1986:xix), defines marketing as “an activity which consists of a set of principles for choosing target markets, identifying customers’ needs, developing want-satisfying products and services and delivering value to customers and profit to company”. The concept of marketing differs from selling in the sense that:

Selling focuses on the needs of the seller; marketing on the needs of the buyer. Selling is preoccupied with the seller’s need to convert his product into cash; marketing with the idea of satisfying the needs of the customer by means of the product and whole cluster of things associated with creating, delivering and finally consuming it.

(Levitt 1958 cited in Kotler *ibid.* p.xv).



Selling is thus only a tip of the marketing iceberg. But it is the most important component. The concept of selling can be properly understood in the context of *marketing mix*. In a marketing mix the marketing opportunities and the customers' needs are correctly identified through the application of market research. The findings of the research are interpreted and the product is offered at a suitable price in the desired location. Potential customers are introduced to the product through *promotion mix* which comprises advertising and personal selling.

Commenting on the respective roles of advertising and personal selling in a promotion mix, Cash and Crissy (1981) point out that while advertising is focused on cultivating demand for a product and is significant in the pre-transactional phase of marketing, personal selling is geared towards inducing a purchase and is not focused only on product awareness and demand cultivation. Thus whereas advertising attempts to draw a prospective buyer's attention to the product and stimulate the process of need-formation in him; personal selling is used to reinforce and consolidate the favourable effects rendered by advertising, by completing a sale.

2.0 The role of interpersonal communication in selling

Personal selling, then is a seller-initiated effort which provides prospective buyers with information about the product's benefits, motivating or persuading them to make buying decision in favour of seller's product or service. Indeed, the buyer's decision to purchase would depend on a number of factors such as his need for the product at a given time, his attitude towards the company and product, his penchant for quality, his concern for price, and so on. However, alongside these factors the nature and quality of buyer-seller interaction stands out as



crucial because it is the communication between buyer and seller through which strategic negotiation behaviours are operationalised.

In a way, the whole process of personal selling can be viewed as an interpersonal communication process with an immediate feedback mechanism. The sender (salesperson) transmits a message through a medium (sales presentation) to the receiver (prospective buyer). The resulting interaction provides necessary feedback mechanism and closes the communication system. The process is dynamic and two-way because both the interactants interact, negotiate and respond to each other. Elaborating on the interpersonal dynamics of the sales process, Still et al. (1981:23) comment:

Based on their own needs and expectations each focal person develops a strategy aimed to negotiate a favourable exchange. That strategy may embrace persuasion, ingratiation, communication of facts or offers, friendship and other elements. If the strategies prove compatible, an exchange takes place. Otherwise, the salesperson and the buyer may stop interacting or based on feedback from unsuccessful negotiation, either or both may adapt by altering strategy, attempting to adjust needs and expectations, or modifying role requirements.

From the above discussion it should be clear that selling is an interpersonal persuasion process where a seller initiates a conversation with a buyer primarily to persuade him to buy his (seller's) product or service. Being face to face, both the interactants can see and evaluate each other's verbal expressions, gestures, appearance, facial expressions and other visual clues. To be effective, the salesperson must quickly and correctly diagnose the buyer's needs and viewpoint and adapt his verbal and nonverbal communication accordingly. In other



words, to be successful in sales encounters, a salesperson needs to possess excellent communication and interpersonal skills in order to verbalise his repertoire of selling techniques and persuasive strategies in the most credible manner.

3.0 The changing image of salespersons

Salespersons have often been stereotyped as smooth talkers who are adept in manipulating people into buying things they do not need, the sort never to be believed or trusted. Classic fictional characters such as the tragic Willy Loman in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, Meredith Wilson's cigar-smoking, back-slapping, joke-telling Harold Hill in *The Music Man*, and Hickey in Eugene O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh* have contributed to the image. They have been pictured as people who are out to make fast buck and practice the dictum *Caveat Emptor* ('Let the buyer beware').

In recent times, however, the professional image of salespersons has improved considerably. The present competitive business scenario has compelled the salespersons to practice 'Win-Win' philosophy in which both the buyer and the seller are benefited and satisfied. Now salespersons are seen as a crucial link between their company and the customers. The prominence of the role of personal contacts has been referred to as the life blood of customer-supplier interactions. For instance, Cunningham and House (1984 cited in Zairi and Simintras 1991 p.428) point out:

Personal contacts are the vehicles of communications not only of factual information, but also of ideas, impressions, attitudes, commitment, integrity ... to the trusted and the privileged.



Thus salespersons in the present sales literature have been viewed as the relationship managers who make the two-way communication possible between the buyer and the company. As representatives of their company they inform the buyers about the company's products, schemes and policies and, to the company, they report the feedback elicited from the buyers. Being ambassadors of their company, they spread the company's goodwill and maintain fruitful liaison with customers. In short, they 'assess customer's need for their product, disseminate information, solve customer's problems and offer them guidance regarding the product'. (Allen et al.1987). Their other on-the-job functions include surveillance, communication of resources, distance-reduction, crisis resolution, information gathering, negotiation and social-bonding. These functions are essentially communication-centred and require a salesperson to be an effective communicator. Interpersonal communication thus is the very basis of the profession of selling and the effective use of language in the interpersonal communication is a prerequisite for success in a sales job.

4.0 The role of English in personal selling in India

In a developing economy like India's, most of the business transactions take place in metropolitan cities or other big cities. Besides having a dominant language, these cities often have small pockets of the speakers of minority languages. Especially, the employees of the central government, public sector units, multinational companies, who get transferred all over India, form such pockets. So we find the Indian metropolitan cities offering multicultural and multilingual environment. To work effectively in this divergent linguistic environment,



salespersons need to be proficient in a language, using which they could communicate with their prospective buyers successfully. In the Northwestern parts of India, both the salespersons and the customers find it convenient to communicate in Hindi, Punjabi or English. These languages play their socio-functionally determined roles (Verma 1987) – while Hindi and Punjabi serve the personal and social communicative needs, English is predominantly used for communication in the formal, business and official situations.

English has been traditionally used as a link language by educated Indians to carry out their business and office work and on a limited scale, to interact with the speakers of other languages. With the growth of literacy, urbanity and technological advancement, the scope and intensity of communication in English for intragroup and intergroup contact is getting radically transformed. As Khubchandani (1992:114) points out: “Today the urban milieu provides more opportunities than before for Indians to interact among Indians through a smattering of English or by a frequent shift from an Indian language to English and vice-versa”. Incidentally, a great majority of the three percent Indians who communicate in English hold key positions in the country and are identified with the elite class. Obviously, being a language of the decision makers, English is considered a language of prestige and ‘upward social mobility’.

Most of the companies prefer to use English as a working language because of the prestige and convenience attached to it. Salespersons need to use English for at least two important reasons. First, Indian languages have not yet developed suitable 'sales registers' in which they could communicate effectively with buyers regarding such technical items as



computers, fax machines, copiers, etc. Secondly, it has been generally observed that an English speaking salesperson is accorded more credibility than a salesperson who communicates in a local language. The use of English by a salesperson is assumed to ascertain that he represents a good company and thus it helps him in making a favourable impression on the customers.

5.0 English language competence of Indian salespersons

Although English is an invaluable asset to any candidate aspiring for a sales position, yet not many seem to possess this asset. Companies advertising for sales positions seek candidates who have excellent communication skills in English and a local language so that they could successfully communicate with the linguistically diverse population of buyers. A majority of candidates, however, do not seem to have a good command of spoken English. Generally speaking, their proficiency in English can be plotted on a continuum which progresses from the lower to the higher end of proficiency. At the lower end of the scale, we find candidates with or without a bachelor degree, and at the other end, we have students from professional courses viz. engineering, management, etc.

A cursory glance at the advertisements for sales positions shows that companies see an ideal salesperson in a candidate who possesses excellent selling skills and communication skills in spoken English. However, owing to the unavailability of the ideal candidates, many companies tend to compromise on the issue of the candidates' spoken English. It is assumed that the candidates will pick up English as they go along with their selling assignments. It is true that some of the salespersons benefit from the use of English in real life communication situations,



yet they cannot really become confident users of English. Despite the rich interactive environment for speaking English, many factors such as the inexperience in spoken English due to the grammar-translation based schooling in English, hesitation, fear of ridicule from peer group or buyers, inhibit the development of their spoken English.

The grammar and literature based teaching of English in our schools and colleges is one of the major reasons for the salespersons' underdeveloped proficiency in spoken English. There is no provision for teaching spoken English to the students in the schools and colleges in the Northwestern parts of India. So students rarely get to talk in English throughout their formal education. The knowledge of grammar which they acquire in schools and colleges is of little help because one also needs to know the rules of language use to communicate effectively in real life situations, as Hymes (1972:278) said: "There are rules of use without which rules of grammar would be useless". Jupp and Holdin (1975:7) also point out that in the real world, there is often considerable tolerance of nonstandard linguistic features in pronunciation, syntax, lexis, and this reduces the necessity for complete linguistic accuracy. However, errors involving appropriateness are rarely greeted with the same tolerance. Hence Kapoor (1990) emphasises on the need to shift our attention from grammatical competence to discorsal competence i.e. the ability to organise and communicate ideas in real life situations. It is important therefore, that salespersons, especially, the low-experience salespersons, who in their schools and colleges have been trained in grammatical accuracy, are trained to become expert handlers of conversational discourse so that they can launch themselves confidently into their selling career.



6.0 The sales training programmes for salespersons

Once salespersons are recruited, they need to be taught to perform the sales task in an effective manner in order to achieve the individual, organisational and societal objectives. Organisations therefore, use sales training programmes to develop and improve the selling competence of their sales force. Most of the sales training programmes consist of two phases : initial sales training and refresher sales training. The initial sales training programme places great emphasis on product knowledge, selling techniques, and on learning about the company and its competitors. In such programmes, experienced sales managers help the newcomers learn about the above areas in the classroom as well as on the job. It is however surprising that linguistic skills and language use receive negligible attention in these programmes. It is generally assumed that the newcomers have adequate language competence to interact with customers. Therefore, only a few tips are given about the psychology of buyer-seller interaction and the role of language in communication during sales encounters is ignored altogether. This sales training approach assumes that survival of the fittest is the best form of sales training. Its motto seems to be ‘throw a salesperson into the territory and very quickly he will sink or swim’. “Under such circumstances marginal salesman who could have been trained will give up. Even a number of good salespersons who could have been trained to become outstanding will struggle to be, at best, average producers”. (Stroh 1973:2). The neglect of the study of buyer-seller interaction in terms of language use is unfortunate given the fact that the entire sales training



programme gears salespersons towards this face-to-face encounter with the buyer, and language is the very means through which they implement the selling strategies during sales encounters.

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