

1. THE FRAMEWORK OF THE SALE

The sale as a sequence of interrelated and logical steps

Selling is the art of communication for persuasion. It is something we all try to do whether we are selling a load of bread rolls or a motorway project to a prospective customer, persuading the financial director to accept our divisional budget, or just breaking a date with the mother-in-law for the weekend without upsetting her. In every case, the rules of persuasion are the same. Too often we fail simply because we do not know them well enough to follow them.



The rules of persuasion are no more than a sequence of clearly defined and interrelated steps. They form a logical framework. Their purpose is to ensure that every point relevant to the negotiation is adequately covered. Furthermore, they provide the dynamic force that will move our prospective customer towards a decision.

If the salesman operates within this framework, he has his greatest chance of success. If he fully understands the framework, he knows exactly where he is in the sale at any one time, and what he must do next. If he neglects any one part, he knows the risk. And if he finally fails to achieve his objective, he knows exactly why.

Selling never has been a matter of being a nice chap, persisting long enough, and relying on the other person to do what is best for himself. For one thing, there are relatively few decisions that are so simple that they offer no alternatives. On the contrary, the salesman must know exactly what he wants to achieve before he starts, must understand what he has to do to achieve it, must go through the rules step by step, and must finally obtain a decision from the person he is seeking to persuade. Obviously, if there are any gaps in his presentation, the sale can slip through and escape. The result then is failure; and the customer, in accepting the alternative, could well have made the wrong decision.



Most salesmen follow most of the steps that are included in the framework most of the time. They have learned early in life how to go about getting their own way, and this learning is modified through the years by experience. Unfortunately, however, they don't follow some of the steps well and, of course, they don't follow some of them at all. Consequently, what they can do is often made ineffective by what they don't do. And because they themselves do not see the sale as a sequence of logical steps, they rely on luck and gut feeling to guide them. Admittedly, they can be quite successful. On the other hand, it is more effective to know than to feel: to know exactly what you want to achieve, how to set out for it, and what to do next. Then, where you have failed, you have a standard against which your presentation can be compared and adjusted for improvement next time. Otherwise, the method is without control and the presentation progressively collapses. Selling must always be the problem of the one that gets away.

The steps in the sale

The steps in the framework of the sale are really self-explanatory

PRE-CALL

Planning to sell
Identifying the customer

THE SALE - 'Does he want it?'

Stage 1

Opening the interview
Getting information
Establishing the customer's criteria for ordering
Prehandling objections
Handling competition
Summarising for agreement (and for trial close)



Stage 2 - 'Does he want it from you?'

Selling benefits

Overcoming objections

Summarising prior to closing the sale

Stage 3- 'How can he have it?'

Closing the sale

Keeping the customer sold

Clearly, for some products, some of the steps are not so important nor so difficult to achieve as for others. However, simple or not, the ground must be covered and the salesman must check that he has successfully achieved each step before going on to the next. Otherwise he will be brought to a halt later with queries he should have covered earlier. As these queries tend to open whole new lines of thought, it might be impossible for him to go back without destroying the structure of his original presentation and, therefore, the dynamics that are moving the prospective customer towards a decision. Once the salesman loses this control, he loses the initiative. The customer in turn might just feel that he has spent enough time on the subject and that there is no further need for him to reconsider his decision. Bang. Out of the window goes another sale just because not enough care was taken at the right place and at the right time.

Stage 1 of the framework first requires the salesman to identify the man he must sell to. No amount of talking will sell to the wrong man and, if he finds he has the wrong man, the salesman must stop what he is doing and start his approach again; and the second time it will be that much more difficult. Only when he has found his way to the decision maker can he open the interview.

Opening the interview requires the salesman to create the level of interest and the physical situation in which business can be discussed. Again, the best salesman in the world will never sell unless he can overcome the problems involved in opening the interview.



When he has opened the interview, he must obtain sufficient information through questioning to discover whether the prospective customer is in the market for the exact specification of product or service he is offering. If the customer is in the market, the salesman can proceed. If not, he can only check his findings again, and leave.

Having decided that it is worthwhile to continue with the sale, the salesman must establish the specific conditions under which the prospective customer would be prepared to make a change. **Does he want it?** As the prospective customer will be looking for the best possible solution to his problem, he will inevitably be prepared to make a series of compromises within the broad specification of his requirement. The salesman now has the opportunity to influence these decision criteria, showing that a small increase in expenditure, for example, will bring a valuable increase in quality. In this way, he can and must match his customer's requirements closely to the product he has to offer. If he fails in this, he will fail in the sale and there is therefore no point in going further.

Once this is achieved, he must obtain agreement that these are in fact the only criteria that need to be satisfied in the decision. If they are not, he must go back again, adding and modifying criteria until he has the complete picture of the benefits the customer is seeking from the new product or service. Any omissions now will disrupt and possibly destroy the sale at a later stage.

After reaching agreement on decision criteria, the salesman must handle competition: that is, the alternative courses of action the customer can take, from choosing a competitor's product to simply doing nothing. This he does by confirming the importance of the criteria they have agreed — which match his product — and by showing how important it is that the decision is made.

He must now pre-empt the objections that he knows from experience will give the prospective customer the opportunity of avoiding a decision. To do this, he identifies objections one by one with the customer and agrees that they will not constitute obstacles at the time of the final decision.

Now, all he has to do to complete **Stage 1** of the sale is to summarise again the agreements they have made between them, and ***trial close*** —



Salesman: **‘You have agreed 1 ... 2 ... 3 ... If I can provide the product that will satisfy these criteria, will you place your order with me?’**

The customer can hardly say NO. After all, it was he who listed the criteria in the first place.

During **Stage 1**, discussion is centred on the customer’s problem. This creates the basis on which the sale is made. The product or service on offer is barely mentioned. **Stage 2**, however, now shows how the customer’s requirements are satisfied within the specification and resultant benefits of your product. It answers the question: **Does he want it from you?**

In selling benefits, the salesman shows that the benefits his product offers match exactly the benefits or requirements the customer is seeking. This is usually a question of evidence, substantiated by visual aids, third party references and demonstration.

Once the customer can agree that the product does satisfy his requirements, the salesman must now overcome his outstanding objections. As most of the objections to taking action have already prehandled, the objections at this stage will be largely concerned with the operation of introducing the change and with price. The operational objections will be covered by the salesman through his market knowledge and the physical characteristics and purchase conditions of his product. Price he will discount, hopefully, not in finance terms but by showing the correspondingly greater value of the benefits the customer will receive in the future. Obviously the better he can show value, the less he will have to reduce price. Now all he has to do is resummarise the conclusions they agreed during benefit selling, prior to closing the sale.

Stage 3, or the close, is the logical conclusion to the negotiation. The customer has outlined what he wants. The salesman has shown that his product satisfies these requirements and, together, they have agreed that there is no reason why the decision should not be taken immediately. The salesman therefore asks for the decision and, if he covered the ground properly, the customer can only say YES. Agreements are reached on how the new arrangements will be put in place and answer the question - **How can he have it?** The contract, if there is one, is signed.



Now, with the order in his pocket, the salesman's remaining problem is to keep his customer sold. This basically means keeping him happy with his original decision and introducing new products to him throughout the years of their association. Otherwise, competition will gain a foothold; and it is a truism in selling that it is much more difficult to win back a lost customer than to find a new one.

Outside his direct contact with the customer, there are all the pre-call activities in which a good salesman must involve himself. This is the salesman's constant business, preparing himself and improving his presentation so that he does not make obvious mistakes, planning his territory both geographically and in terms of types of customer so that time is used effectively, and identifying and redefining specific sales objectives so that no opportunity is lost. This is the hard work behind every sale and, without it, the salesman cannot be successful.

The use of questions in selling

The number one rule of human communication is: *people prefer talking to listening*. Look at it from your own experience. Who is the more interesting person to talk with at a party, the one who talks endlessly about himself while you listen, or the one who asks you a number of intelligent questions and listens to what you have to say? There is no doubt about it, is there? Even listening to intelligent conversation about a number of different subjects has its limitations. There is no greater interest than oneself and that applies to just about everyone. So use it.

The ability to ask questions is the *sine qua non* of successful selling. Without questions you can never find out what the prospective customer wants to buy, or even if he wants to buy anything. It is for want of good questions that poor salesmen find their presentations falling a mile wide of the mark. So, what are the real advantages of questions?

Questions allow you to retain the initiative in the discussion. Obviously, if you are asking the questions, you hold the right to establish the subject under discussion. Similarly, the conversation will continue along the lines indicated by your questioning.

Questions give you control of the conversation. Just as you can influence the lines along which the conversation develops, so you can change the subject under discussion the moment you feel the conversation heading in the wrong



direction. Then, if you want the person to stop talking altogether, all you need do is ask a question that expects a YES or NO answer. Even interrupting to ask this question will cause no upset. Try it.

Questioning makes you appear a pleasant and interesting person on the principle that people prefer talking to listening. If you have enough questions, they will go on talking all day. As night falls and you manage to escape to another destination, they will still have the energy to say: ‘What a nice person that was and what an interesting conversation.’ Try it and see for yourself!

Questions allow you to adapt your conversation and modes of expression to the characteristics of the man to whom you are talking. To sell well you do not have to try to change your class or status, or to be an actor. You just have to ask the right questions, listen to the way he expresses himself, and reply using the same terms. It is when you talk rather than listen, and use terms of expression that are unfamiliar to the customer, that misunderstanding occurs and communication is lost.

Questions also clarify and elucidate. Few people can express an idea fully in one or two sentences. Most people in conversation leave a lot to the imagination of their listener. (Remember this next time someone tries to describe a marvellous film or a television programme they have seen.) No good salesman can take the risk of misunderstanding from incomplete information; so he must constantly check the meaning with questions. Questions beginning **HOW, WHY, WHEN, WHERE, WHAT and WHO** require a qualifying response. It is these questions that clarify meaning and establish understanding.

Questions can be used to establish commitment. Obviously every salesman, like every great lover, seeks to commit his prospective customer to a favourable decision. The technique he uses is based on the conditional sentence:

Salesman: ‘If I can. . . will you. . .?’

In selling it is known as the **trial close**. It is a key question in any sale. Basically it says:



Salesman: 'If we can agree what you want, and I show you that I can give it to you, will you make a decision in my favour?'

As it is vital in the sale to obtain commitment, so it is important in any form of persuasion that seeks to modify behaviour whatever your profession or occupation.

We can see therefore that questions are as essential to the sale as they are to every other form of persuasion. If you want to learn to sell, and you don't know where to start, this is the place: learn to ask questions. There is only one way to do it; and that is by doing it.

Try an evening at home making no statements but only asking questions. Your family or friends will probably not even notice the difference, except perhaps to think you have become a nicer person. Try it. Then try it again. It will become progressively easier. See for yourself how well you can make yourself understood by using questions in place of statements. There is not a statement that cannot be expressed as a question, even if all you can do is put the words 'isn't it' at the end of the sentence or 'surely' at the beginning. If you have the will to do this, you will quickly learn to restructure the way you communicate with people. And, even while you do it, you will notice the change in their response to you. You will become a better persuader.

A topflight salesman can carry through a sale from beginning to end making no statements and using only questions. Can you do the same? You will only really know how to ask questions if you can. Remember Kipling:

**I keep six honest serving-men (They taught me all I knew);
their names are WHAT and WHY and WHEN and HOW and WHERE and WHO.**

The Elephant's Child': Just-So Stories



Selling as a logical process to achieve an emotional objective

How many times have you tried to persuade a husband, sister, wife or friend to drop some course of action they are planning? You have proved to them conclusively that what they intend to do can end only in disaster. Try as you may, they show little interest in your arguments and go ahead with their plan. All the disasters you foretold come about — yet even then they are unrepentant.

The basic problems you had in persuading lay in your approach. You assumed that logical arguments would prevail so you piled them up in your support. The result was that you did not persuade them to change their action. Instead you probably compounded their resolve to carry on with it. You achieved this because what you really succeeded in proving was that you thought they were wrong; and the more you proved they were wrong, the less chance you gave them of saving face and accepting your solution.

Few people are prepared to admit openly that they are just plain wrong. Most people will, however, accept that there is an alternative possibility; and they will even be persuaded by it if they feel the arguments support it. In this example we can see the sale is determined by emotional rather than logical criteria. Logic is used in the marshalling and presentation of the substantive evidence. The decision to make a new decision, however, is very much emotionally based.

The purpose of treating the sale within a methodical framework is to allow the persuader to present countervailing views without meeting this blind resistance. It achieves this through a questioning technique, which asks the respondent — the prospective customer — first to define his problem in his own words and then to list the criteria that he feels must be satisfied in its solution. This puts the respondent at ease. It is his problem that is being discussed and it is his opinion that is being invited. He does most of the talking. It also puts the questioner psychologically on the side of the respondent by indicating his interest and his willingness to assist.

This is how the respondent sees the situation. In fact, it is the questioner who controls the content of the conversation by controlling the questions that are asked. Through these questions, he can begin to influence the respondent by



introducing the other factors that he thinks are relevant to the decision. Soon, it is not difficult for him to agree with the respondent a schedule that will have the alternative action as the solution to the respondent's problem.

A second example of the way the sale is influenced by the emotional rather than the logical is at the point of decision itself. No one likes making decisions. They take away the choice of alternative action and, particularly in the business world, they tend to cost money. Remember from your own experience how difficult and upsetting it is sometimes to write cheques to pay simple bills — even when you have the money! So it is with most decisions. If possible, people prefer to leave them until tomorrow.

On the other hand, few people like decisions hanging over them. Most decision makers have many decisions to make every day. A good decision taken brings with it a sense of relief because it puts one of the problems to bed. It is frustrating to discuss a problem with somebody at length without reaching a conclusion. It is even more frustrating to discuss a problem with a would-be solver only to find he presents other related problems you did not know about and choices which also require decisions. It becomes less exhausting just to forget about it.

Whatever the form of persuasion, no decision is ever made unless it is explicitly demanded and given. If you leave without actually asking for the decision, the chances are that your respondent has emotionally avoided making one. Even when he says, “He would really like to go ahead,” he has not finally made the decision until he says **YES**. This usually requires the salesman to ask, “**Are you happy to go ahead?**”

