THE MORAL DILEMMA OF SALESMANSHIP:
SOURCES, MODES AND MORAL HIERARCHIES
OF PURPOSEFUL COMMUNICATION

SYNOPSIS

The moral dilemma of salesmanship extends to the roots of our economic system. In any competitive economic system customers must be persuaded to buy. Where does persuasion end? Where does manipulation and coercion begin? This paper attempts to identify the fine line that separates information from persuasion and manipulation from coercion. Most decisions, indeed, involve moral implications. A model of egoistic and group-related values provides examples of the conflict of different moral hierarchies. At the end a few pointers describe ways of how creative selling can be made more effective and ethically responsible.

Footnote:
The thoughts presented in this paper are an outgrowth of the Panel Discussion in Personal Selling at the 1978 Conference of the Academy of Marketing Science in Chicago. The author is, in particular, indebted to a discourse on these issues by Harold W. Berkman in his letter to David Lill in preparation for the 1979 AMS Conference.

THE ALL-PERVASIVE ROLE OF MARKETING

Though the ability to communicate is the most important skill in management and marketing, it is surprising that no one has clearly investigated the relationships between what constitutes informative persuasive manipulative and coercive communication in selling and salesmanship. Yet for moral, legal and long-range business implications, a clear understanding of each of these four modes of the communication process is of vital importance. Also, these issues go beyond selling and salesmanship. Virtually all managerial activities in business and non-profit operations—-in procurement and marketing as well as production, finance and personnel administration are affected.

People communicate principally in two ways:

(1) by means of audible or visual symbols--words, pictures, numbers

and

(2) through body movements and physical touch--a smile, a nod of the head, a pat on the back.

Effective salesmanship employs both means--verbal and non-verbal communication. It also takes advantage of the two-way process of personal interaction. The skilled salesperson observes the prospect's personality, motivations, likes and dislikes, specific behavior patterns, and reasons for participating in the communication. Accordingly he adjusts his reasoning in each individual situation.
Communication is the principal tool of personal selling. Personal selling, according to the American Marketing Association (1960), is "oral presentation in a conversation with one or more prospective purchasers for the purpose of making sales."

In many organizations, the job of creative selling involves many forms of communication: travelling, prospecting, gathering of information, generating latent needs and wants, solving customers' problems, servicing existing accounts, finding new accounts, arranging displays, coordinating customers' delivery requests with company's inventory and logistic planning, computing the sales price, arranging financing or collecting the sales price, expediting property transfer and warranty documents, playing the intermediary in case of disagreements. The most important and most difficult phase of selling, however, is making the presentation itself.

A good sales presentation may start with (1) the audience or prospect analysis. (2) The objectives which are to be achieved by the presentation must be defined. (3) The content, (4) form and strategy of the presentation are then given careful thoughts. In general, a presentation begins with (5) an attention-getting opening which leads into (6) its phase of cognitive and affective reasoning. (7) Overcoming objections is the crucial phase of the presentation in which customer feedback is anticipated and dealt with carefully. A successful presentation finally leads into the conative phase of (8) closing and making the sale. In many businesses the sales process has not ended here. The salesperson finally gets involved in (9) the post-sale follow-up.

INFORMATION, PERSUASION, MANIPULATION, COERCION

The chief reason we study the communication process of selling is to learn something about how it achieves effects. We want to know what different selling techniques do to people. Given a certain communication message, we should be able to predict what effect that presentation will have on the prospective customer and how personal selling can be made ethically more responsible and at the same time more effective and efficient.

What specifically makes selling more effective? By more fully and clearly disclosing relevant information about the product, service or idea we wish to sell? By applying the power of persuasion? By misleading the prospect about some of the characteristics of our product or terms of the sales agreement? By threatening him with physical or moral harm or by appealing to his fear of losing his job or the love of his wife and children?

Depending on the industry and competitive market condition, today's creative selling does tend to utilize all the above techniques of persuasion, manipulation and coercion.

Can modern selling, on the other hand, take place without persuasion, manipulation or coercion? In response to this question, let us explore some functions of selling that indeed can be performed without these negative aspects of selling.

(1) A sales person can provide comprehensive and truthful information without embellishment and without hiding the weak points of his offer.