

## THE PSYCHOLOGY (AND PSYCHOPATHOLOGY) OF SALESMANSHIP

© *Alistair Mant*

### *The Mystery of Successful Selling*

On the surface, selling and buying are straightforward activities. The “prospect” or “mark” (the prospective buyer) has a need and scans the environment for a solution. There is a communication system on hand (from advertising to word-of-mouth) to help him find the solution. He scans the options, assesses the prices and then makes a choice, bearing in mind the risks attendant. Nothing could be simpler or more rational. Speaking as a sometime ex-salesman, I offer a view of the underlying psychology of this volatile activity – in the hope of improving best practice.

Anybody who studies the marketing and sales field knows that the most successful selling is intuitive and rather mysterious. The best salespersons (those who over-achieve year after year) operate in highly inventive and frequently counter-intuitive ways. Many of them don’t understand fully how their results are achieved because they operate according to “feel” rather than cold logic. But if we could understand what the best sales people do a little better, we might be able to spread their pixie-dust more widely amongst sales forces. The best of them tend to be quite superstitious about their gifts – sometimes believing that if they submit their practice to logical analysis they run the risk of destroying the magic.

The classic study in the field is Andrew Pettigrew’s *The Politics of Organisational Decision Making* (republished by Routledge in 2001) – which demonstrated how even a very big and complex computer system purchasing decision was determined far more by emotional, political and psychological factors than by cold logic. This was a technically complicated and expensive purchasing decision but the principle is the same for all kinds of selling – if the salesperson is able to create a certain plausible ambiance as the *context* for the sales pitch, he or she may well triumph over much better argued, and cheaper, competing bids.

Indeed, the most creative sales activity mirrors the black arts of the theatre director. Consider the experience of the playgoer. At the logical level, he or she sits in a theatre somewhere or other and may be grumpy about the price of the tickets and may even have been dragged unwillingly to the play in the first place. The skill of the director is to transmute that theatre-goer to Illyria or Messina or Elsinore or some other fantastical place. When the magic of theatre works, the playgoer “loses” himself in the unfolding events of the drama. He may revert to the role of rational critic at the bar in the interval but by then he is hooked; he has to know how things turn out.

### *The World of “As If”*

Good salespeople are often thought of as good actors – along with other such salespeople as barristers and politicians – but the best of them are masters of the “as if” world of theatre direction. I may be engaged in selling you a typewriter but together we can behave *as if* we were in some other more exotic place engaged in some more exciting pursuit. As it happens, the best salesman this writer ever worked with was an old Etonian typewriter salesman banished to Australia for some inglorious reason or other.

Prior to this assignment, he had been selling *ships* in the Greek islands for one of the main billionaire owners. It’s possible his extraordinary success with the (often female) punters in Sydney was based on the shared fantasy that the humble typewriter in the foreground was in fact a glorious liner rocking gently at its berth in Piraeus. It’s hard to say for sure why and how he was so relentlessly successful. One theory was that he almost always succeeded in recasting the sales call as a kind of formal lesson in correct etiquette. The socially insecure prospect found herself/himself in a social dilemma – not knowing the correct form for the occasion. The right thing to do in the interests of good manners was, of course, to sign the contract.

### *Binary and Ternary Interaction*

A good way to understand this phenomenon is to contrast the two main ways we human beings deal with each other – which can be described as the “binary” and the “ternary”. (see *Intelligent Leadership*, Alistair Mant, Allen & Unwin 2001). At the simplest level, every human engagement is interpersonal – one person communicates with and deals with another person. In the interpersonal mode, one of those people will usually dominate or “wear the trousers” – perhaps in very subtle and unimportant ways. We call this level of relationship binary because there are but two options – dominance or submission. The traditional view of the salesman is that he persuades or cajoles the punter into buying something as a result of his interpersonal dominance – sometimes to the point of bullying. In fact, the huge success of sales by internet for female buyers is attributed to their need to escape from “high pressure salesmanship”.

The other mode of interaction is called “ternary”. In this case the two individuals interact on the basis of their separate *roles*. They are still individual persons behind those roles but now each has a measure of control over the interpersonal power and potential risk – conferred by the role and in the context of a shared task or understanding. A boss, for example, potentially wields all the power over a subordinate but if the relationship is governed by proper formal rules, that power is converted into a more manageable *authority* relationship. The great social anthropologist Gregory Bateson invented the ternary idea because he was fascinated by certain roles in society – such as nannies or NCOs in the army – which carry with them great influence without much formal authority. The nanny and the NCO are empowered to act “as if” they were very powerful indeed.

This is no more mysterious than the distinction between two people living together for as long as it suits them, and the same two people deciding to marry. When that happens, they are transported from a binary interpersonal relationship between free parties to a

ternary *role* relationship between husband and wife – in the context of the *institution* of marriage. Any marriage guidance counsellor will tell you that the successful marriage is not free from conflict, but the fights which do take place tend to be “high class” fights – disagreements where both parties can ask and answer the question: “why are we having this fight?” and “what does tell us about the state of our marriage?”

When human beings relate in the binary mode, the dominant question for the individual is “will I win/lose?” In the ternary mode, the dominant question is “what’s it for?” – a more intelligent and dignified question. But which is likely to be the more appropriate in the selling situation? The answer is, it depends on the situation.

Most of the traditional sales manuals cast the act of selling in the binary mode. After all, the salesman may be trying to get others to do something they may not necessarily want to do – or to buy something they may not necessarily need. At the very least, this sounds like seduction – a very binary activity indeed. Indeed, some classic studies of salesmanship draw the specific link with the world’s oldest profession – on the basis that both activities (selling and soliciting) are promiscuous. That is, they require the practitioner to simulate a depth of interpersonal feeling in each professional engagement – for just long enough to get the job done – and then to move in a disciplined way on to the next simulation. This is the world of “as if” with a vengeance.

Social scientists tell us that habitués of “table-dancing” clubs understand this phenomenon well. The dancing girls who make most of the money are the svelte Oxbridge graduates who succeed in recasting the activity in the foreground – a sexy dance for a fee – as a kind of philosophy tutorial. The dance has to be good enough and the girl pretty enough but the big bucks go with the fantasy social relationship between equals. The client wants (maybe needs) more from the encounter than the surface transaction – and is prepared to pay accordingly. If the punter is an intelligent young man slumming it as a City trader, he may require social validation from a very superior performer.

### *The Importance of Versatility in Sales*

In practice, the binary/ternary idea is a godsend for sales training because it offers a way of reframing the sales activity to suit almost any situation. The successful salesperson is, above all, *versatile* – able to adapt to the local conditions; not bound to a rigid technique. The great satirist Stephen Potter once depicted the sales situation by showing a picture of an assertive looking standing figure looming over a diffident-seeming seated figure. Here is Potter’s reframing of the picture:

*On the left is a figure full of the confidence of a man who knows his job and knows it is well done. The Salesman. On the right is the prospective client, the “Prospect”, his eagerness to buy only matched by his astonished admiration of this fine and courageous personality who is hypnotising him into a deal which his reason abhors. This is the implied interpretation. But...the roles must be reversed. The sitting figure on the right is the salesman, trained by us in that bungling diffidence which alone can infuse confidence*

*into the buyer and fill him with certainty that this feeble sap before him couldn't get the better of a milk pudding.*

This is meant to be satire but it brilliantly makes the point that consistently successful sales work demands versatility. Many quite successful sales people can only operate in the binary (fight/flight or seduction) mode. But this works only if the prospect can be drawn into a binary relationship – and thus bullied or seduced. As the psychologists say – every victim requires a murderer – there must be psychological reciprocity between seller and sold. The truly versatile salesperson learns how to oscillate between binary and ternary as the occasion demands.

Happily, most sales situations work at a more or less rational level – a well-marshalled argument will usually triumph over a shallow or shoddily-prepared sales pitch. But when the arguments are evenly-matched, as they frequently are in complex, highly technical fields, the effective salesperson always remains aware of the emotional and impressionistic “music” playing beneath the rational “words”. He then aligns his behaviour with that underlying tenor.

The most versatile salespeople, in other words, operate from the ternary position, able mentally to stand back from the action in order to “direct” the proceedings. If the “mark” is irrevocably stuck in the binary mode, then the salesperson has to follow into that emotional space and play the enforcer or the seducer – for as long as it takes. The non-versatile salesperson may play the binary game brilliantly (that may be why he/she was attracted to sales work in the first place) but has no recourse to ternary subtlety. Most sales people have the capacity to broaden their range, but they need to grasp the binary/ternary and related principles first.

### *The Psychology of Sales Support*

The sales support field is also surprisingly fertile ground for the operation of theatrical “as if” logic. The author was once asked to help the “marketing services” department of Company X to improve its lamentable performance record. Everybody was agreed that the department was reliably ineffective – the advertising was frequently wrong – the sales literature was inaccurate and generally unhelpful – and the response system to support the salesmen in the field clueless and unsympathetic. The first step in getting to the bottom of the problem was to bring together the twenty-five members of the marketing services team for a review and analysis of performance data and any other information likely to be helpful.

The first discovery of interest was that, apart from the manager, no-one in the department had been in post for as long as two years. This meant that there was no possibility of corporate memory or incremental learning. At the very moment the salesmen on assignment to marketing services began to get the hang of the complexities of their jobs, they would be reassigned to the field, to be replaced by other salesmen on assignment. It looked as if the department really existed to house salesmen having a “bad patch” and in need of respite. This meant it was required to behave *as if* it was a proper marketing

services department. There were clever individuals in the department but the totality was *stupid as a system*.

If the department had behaved rationally and insisted on the continuity it needed to do its “day job” properly it would have been unable to fulfil its true function – to serve as a casualty-clearing station for shell-shocked salesmen. In this “as if” world, the true function could not be acknowledged because it might expose the extreme pressure under which sales people worked in Company X. A similar “as if” logic sometimes applies to the very highest level of selling – selling so important and grand in scale that it cannot be performed by a salesperson – only over dinner by the chairman - or possibly the Minister.

Within six months of the first meeting of the Company X marketing services team, everyone was agreed the department had been transformed. But the truth is that nothing had actually changed – except that each member of the team now shared a sophisticated understanding of the system’s dual role. One member, who happened to race stock-cars in his leisure hours, grasped the principle with his observation – “I know! – we’re a shock absorber!” He then proceeded to explain how a car’s shock absorber takes in the shock, modifies it and feeds it back in a manageable state.

Not only was the department managing psychological “shell-shock” as before, it was now responding to phone calls from the field with courtesy and empathy, on the understanding that the salesman in the field was likely calling in panic from the client’s office in order to create the impression of a well-oiled and expert HQ system (instead of the disorganised shambles of reality). It was in the interests of everybody concerned to collude in the fantasy that marketing services was a terrific outfit. And so, in time, it seemed to become. The salesmen on assignment to marketing services, buoyed up and amused by their new understanding of systems psychology, began to enjoy their work.

Now the reader will be aware that the sales activity covers a huge array of situations, from infuriating telephone cold-calling to very carefully-structured assessment of competitive bidding documents. Even at the sober end of this spectrum, there is a certain magic to be found in the capacity of some bid-writers to succeed where others (equally eloquent and well-briefed) fail. Again, it is hard to say why this is the case. The author generally advises clients not to bother about why or how some people know how to write submissions – just to mobilise them on a consistent and sole-authorship basis. Somehow, these gifted people know how to write the “music” as well as the words.

It is the same with selection of sales personnel. In one organisation, it turned out that just two branch managers had a near-perfect track record in their selection of young sales people over a period of nearly ten years. These two men weren’t outstanding branch managers but they were outstanding judges of horseflesh. They weren’t even playing safe because they repeatedly chose apparently oddball candidates who surprised everybody by performing brilliantly. It might have been interesting to find out what these two men were doing right but it wasn’t very important. The important thing was to deploy them whenever recruitment was required.

### *The Sales Context and the Arrival of Marketing*

We can't say who the first salesman was. No doubt there are biblical references which fit the bill. There usually are. But we can say that as soon as human societies began to cluster in towns and to produce agricultural surpluses, then the process of trading began in earnest. Once trading developed to the point of bona fide international markets in commodities, then some process of persuasion must have entered the scene. The salesman was thus born (the sales woman is a much more recent phenomenon).

But the predicament of sales in the modern world, and especially the challenge to the trainer of salespeople, arrived on the scene with the invention of "marketing" in the USA in the 1920s and 1930s. It's no surprise that this coincided with a period of unparalleled prosperity and manufacturing productivity in the USA. Needless to say, the benefits of marketing were not vouchsafed to the developing world – not yet anyway. The point is that for the first time in history large numbers of people had arrived at a state of satiety – in future, they were likely to be purchasing many goods and services on the basis of want rather than need.

Alfred P. Sloan of General Motors is commonly regarded as the prime mover of modern marketing, aided and abetted by prominent academics like Professor Theodore Levitt of Harvard. It was Sloan who first developed "badge engineering" on a big scale – the selling of basically similar motor cars under different brand names, each designed to appeal to a different and distinctive "life style". Arthur Miller wrote *Death of a Salesman* (regarded by many as *the* great American play) in 1949 – just as this new materialist culture began to overwhelm the old Puritan ethic of the founding fathers. Miller understood that materialism, driven by salesmanship, was the way of the future but it would not work unless it could be presented and accepted as a normal, taken-for-granted activity – "as if" it were respectable. Levitt did more than anybody to make marketing respectable in the halls of academe.

### *The Age of Scepticism*

Then in 1976, and again from Harvard, came Fred Hirsch's seminal book *The Social Limits to Growth*, in which he argued that as marketing took hold of everyday life, the intrinsic value of things began to be overwhelmed by their "positional" value. He pointed out that when the value of a good becomes positional, those who want it end up jockeying for position and spending more and more money in a fruitless (binary) social competition – fruitless because one person's success in getting their hands on it automatically diminishes the chances of everybody else. The net effect is isolation of the individual, an isolation created by the "freedom" to consume and the illusion of "choice". Rich people were getting more things but they weren't getting any happier.

Now we rely on professional philosophers like Professor Harry Frankfurt of Princeton to help us understand how far we have come in the eighty years since marketing first reared its head. In his seminal monograph *On Bullshit*, he explains how our old disapproval of telling lies has survived from our Puritan past, to be complemented by a new wave of

public relations, “spin”, market positioning, attitude research and all the other appurtenances of modern bullshit. Prof Frankfurt believes that though we mostly still disapprove of outright lying we are curiously tolerant of modern bullshit, possibly because we want to believe that the new product or service we intend to buy really will improve our quality of life.

Prof. Frankfurt has a sneaking respect for the liar because he at least has the capacity to apprehend the truth (in order to subvert it). The “bullshit artist”, by contrast, has no respect for the truth whatsoever. His aim is to create a certain impression about something or other, including (in the case of the politician) himself. If the truth serves that end, so be it. It’s no surprise that people have become so cynical about the sales pitches of political parties and major corporations – they have learned that the messages have been processed through a kind of impression-making machine – what the cynic might describe as a bullshit-generator.

We also now have serious scholars examining the record of achievement of modern corporations in “putting the customer first” – the avowed aim of all sales activity. Jim Maxmin and Shoshanna Zuboff (of the new generation of Harvard academics), in their important book *The Support Economy* – offer a devastating critique of the way that big corporations have sold the *idea* of customer satisfaction and “customer relationship management”. The reality, they argue, has frequently been a severe diminution in actual value-added to the consumer, especially in the service sector. But continuous technological advance has kept the cash registers ringing as new and ever more sophisticated products have emerged and progressively penetrated the less saturated global markets.

All this scepticism and scorn can make life difficult for the professional salesperson. Cultural commentators like Naomi Klein (*No Logo*), Thomas Frank (of *The Baffler*), Kalle Lasn (of *Adbusters*) and, perhaps best known of all, Scott Adams (of *Dilbert* fame) have weighed in to make the whole business/marketing proposition seem absurd. What does all this mean for the sales profession? How are sales people to be motivated to do their best whilst surrounded by all this “noise”?

### *Standing up for the Salesman and Saleswoman*

There is still a bona fide job to be done by people in the “field” in drawing new and better solutions to problems to the attention of decision-makers – sometimes despite the bullshit generators of their employers. It’s true that some sales activity promotes sub-standard goods and services in ways that exploit vulnerable consumers, but the vast majority of sales people around the world really do depend on the creation of a relationship of trust with their customer and client base. That relationship cannot be created overnight. Anybody who has worked in sales will attest to the fact that the work itself can be extraordinarily, and addictively, exciting and satisfying. There is nothing quite like it. Why is this?

### *Creativity and Excitement*

Selling is creative work. If it is true that the successful sales person shares the skill-set of the theatre director, then it is certainly true that any sale arises from creation of a certain *milieu* (it takes a French word to express the atmosphere which surrounds the clinching moment). The point is that the salesperson has, single-handedly, created that milieu. This is not only clever, it is exciting. Peter Senge's (et al) book *Presence* (SOL, 2004) points out that true leadership requires the ability to move boldly into uncharted territory, relying mainly on intuition. Sales work is exciting precisely because it relies on that kind of boldness. It is why successful sales persons have "presence" in the old-fashioned sense – just like a persuasive actor on a stage.

It's true that the most successful international firms have developed exceedingly sophisticated web-based sales support tools for sales people out in the field. All these tools rely on someone or other anticipating all the possible circumstances which might arise in the course of the sales process. Such tools are invaluable for the new and inexperienced sales person – they make up for what isn't yet known or understood – but they don't replicate the intuitive sensing capacity of the best people. Such people often only understand after the event, if they take a little time out for reflection, why a particular sales pitch succeeded – sometimes against the odds. The web-based sales support system is necessary but not sufficient to understand, or to share with others, this deeper level of performance.

Selling, as opposed to "marketing", is also realistic. The best sales people are motivated by the finality and the essential honesty of the interaction with the client. There is something irrevocable about a signature on the contract – or not. If not, somebody else has got the sale and the spoils. There is no referee to argue with. An auditor may do his work more or less well, but there is no moment of truth in his work (unless he happens to miss a glaring inconsistency in the accounts) so there is no real excitement because no risk of total success or utter defeat. In a world governed by "risk management" only the true entrepreneur (and the sales person) engages with the true uncertainty of the world and discovers what is possible, or not. It is the same in the theatre – either the customers will come and pay their money – or they won't. If things go really badly, they might throw rotten fruit at you.

These two factors – creativity and reality – go some way to explain the peculiar charm of the sales life. So there will always be creative risk-takers who enjoy forging relationships skilfully. Such people are drawn naturally to sales work for its challenges and satisfactions. But to sustain the work at a professional level they need proper support. First, and most obviously, a range of goods and services to sell which is genuinely competitive in the marketplace and properly supported by after-sales and technical resources (selling a Toyota is a breeze). This should go without saying but most of us know of rigged markets, substandard products and unacceptable practices. Sales people are rarely stupid; it is their responsibility to avoid the shoddy and the exploitative.

Secondly, the salesperson needs an internal "map" of the territory – not the geographical patch but the whole activity system surrounding the point-of-sale. In the long-run, the

professional sales person with a “ternary” view of the activity always has the “best tunes” - the versatility to respond creatively to each opportunity. What this means is that the best sales people are not just persuasive (we take that for granted) – they are also “systems thinkers”. From the ternary standpoint, the sales person (in his role as professional advisor) might well advise the customer to buy, just this once, from the competition, thus cementing a reputation for honesty and trustworthiness. That, if you think about it, is the clever use of ternary logic to achieve a binary aim (hooking the client).

In the end, sales work is exciting and satisfying because it always calls forth bravery, creativity and cleverness. How many jobs routinely draw on these fundamental human capabilities? The vast armies of “professional” marketers and spin-doctors may even look down on the humble salesperson but they cannot take away the essential honesty of the sales position. Arthur Miller understood this.

*Alistair Mant is Chairman of the UK-based Socio-technical Strategy Group and Performance1 ([www.performance-1.co.uk](http://www.performance-1.co.uk)). He is also author of Intelligent Leadership (Allen & Unwin).*

*He can be contacted via email: [amant@performance-1.co.uk](mailto:amant@performance-1.co.uk)*