



SUCCESSFUL PATTERNS IN AGRIBUSINESS SELLING

During this past summer, I had the rare (at least to the academician) opportunity to personally visit and travel with over 30 agribusiness salesmen throughout much of the American Southwest. I accompanied many of these “mobilized merchants” on their customer service calls. I rode along with these “practicing scientists” in their pickup trucks as they checked their clients’ operations for agronomic irregularities. And, I sat alongside these “agricultural diplomats” as we sipped coffee and socialized with growers in such seemingly unknown places as Sanger, Reedley, and Five Points in California, and Buckeye, Marana, and Somerton in Arizona.

Needless to say, driving across an Arizona desert in a pickup in mid-August is not my idea of a restful vacation. In fact, my travels in this area were designed to observe the activities of agribusiness salesmen “on the job” in their own environment. As such, I watched, listened, and asked a lot of questions in an attempt to identify those factors which have an impact on the success or failure of a selling effort. As you may suspect, I began these visits with numerous preconceived ideas about what an agribusiness salesman does and how he acts. Some of these ideas were shattered after my first visit, and others were confirmed with each consecutive visit.

With very few exceptions, I was impressed with the overall accomplishments of the

salesmen with whom I traveled. The market environment confronted by these men is an extremely challenging one. Competition is intense, the hours are generally long and hard, the demands of their job are broad in scope, and, most of all, there does appear to be noticeable patterns of sales conduct, some of which appear to be more successful than others. The objective of this paper shall be to share with you the results of my summer observations and transform some of those experiences into a description of successful selling patterns. Some of these patterns will have a more general application, while others are peculiar to the uniqueness of agribusiness itself.

A Preface

Before launching off into a rather prescription-like listing of successful selling patterns, it would seem desirable to preface such remarks with support for my claim that such patterns do exist. Do selling patterns exist or does each salesman approach each sale in a distinctively different manner? This question is more than just academic. In fact, hundreds of sales training programs are initiated and thousands of dollars are spent every year in the agribusiness industry based on the single assertion that such patterns not only exist, but that they are always subject to improvement.

Jim Hoffman is the director of such a sales program.* With his kind permission, I will

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use his own words to describe the development of sales patterns (he prefers to use the term “habits”). Jim states:

“We are all controlled to a great degree by the habits we have formed, both mental, (as represented by our attitudes) and physical (as represented by our actions), that we make over and over in our business pursuits. In agribusiness sales, our habits not only determine what we do, but also determine indirectly what that all-important person, our customer will do. Our attitudes and actions almost invariably control the responses that we receive from the customer. In every agribusiness sales situation, we sell people, in the end. Our product, service, price, etc. is submitted, and the final result hangs on the response of a person. Consistently bringing that result to the surface is the direct result of the selling habits formed.

“In my opinion, most agribusiness sales programs are prone to overlook the rewards of establishing good selling habits and rely instead on the more temporary methods by obtaining the “desired result” from their field salesmen. Numerous meetings are held, bulletins are issued profusely, incentives are promised, audio-visual presentations are made. These things appeal to the salesman’s reason, but it has been my observation that they have little or no lasting effect on how he goes about his job of selling day in and day out. We are all really dominated by habit rather than reason.

“In my work I have found that within the average agribusiness salesman, there is already a pool of reason sufficient to supply him with the

potential power for success. Granted, he often will not use this power.

However, this is because he has not formed a package of selling habits that capitalize on his natural abilities.

“Most agribusiness salesmen have not formed good selling habits with relation to the following job elements: (1) planning their selling time, (2) establishing target accounts, (3) conducting solid sales presentations, and (4) closing the sale.

“As stated, most agribusiness salesmen want to do better. In general, they will learn most rapidly from their own successes. Good selling habits bring on these successes most rapidly and a beneficial cycle has then been started.”

My Observations

Let’s now return to my summer activities and begin our consideration of critical elements of a successful sales pattern in the agribusiness industry. I would first like to deal with those sales pattern elements which are somewhat peculiar to the agribusiness industry. Later, we will consider those elements of a more general nature.

Appeal to customer’s self-interest. It should come as no great surprise to hear that the human race is plagued with a chronic case of selfishness. Benevolence has its aesthetic appeal, but as individuals, we are somewhat self-centered in our interests. Our most ardent concerns are our own. Hence, if the salesman is to adapt his sales pattern to the needs of his customers, those needs (even be they selfish) should become the focal point around which all salesman-customer discussions revolve. In the agribusiness industry, this particular characteristic is accentuated by the fact that most customers

are independent businessmen. For example, it is almost impossible to discuss with a farmer the success or failure of his farming operation apart from his own personal fortunes. This would suggest that the agribusiness salesman be especially cognizant of the need to direct his efforts towards the self-interests of his customers. It would suggest that prime reference be given to the customers' problems and secondary reference be given your market, the total economy, and other items which have no direct impact on his business (and personal) fortunes.

Give him the facts. If you still harbor the image of an average farmer as the "uneducated hayseed in overalls with manure on his shoes and no better way to make a living," you better find an occupation other than that as an agribusiness salesman! I'm not sure the stereotype just described was ever a valid one. Yet if it once was, it no longer is -- and any good salesman can tell you why. The farmer, rancher, or dairyman of contemporary times is no dupe. He generally reaches his purchasing decisions only after considerable thought. Moreover, as a prospective customer, he is interested in facts. He has no interest in fantasies or fairy tales and can rapidly distinguish between that which has validity and that which is based on speculation and wishful thinking. A sales pattern based on an appeal to the buyer's "emotions" may prove successful to the encyclopedia salesman, but it will generally prove disastrous to the man selling fertilizer, feed, petroleum, or general farm supplies. From my summer observations, it became increasingly clear that the more successful salesman was the man who relied on well-established facts and figures to provide the validating base to his sales pattern. He did not talk about hoped for results. Instead, he referred to actual past results, test data, or proven specifications.

Insist on economic references. As a youngster in Illinois, I recall that attainment of success for the beginning farmer was his first recorded yield of 100 bushels of corn to the acre for a minimum of a 40-acre plot. Many beginning farmers would strive for this production goal even if it meant expending money and time beyond that dictated by the financial rewards. It was not long, however, before the young grower learned that economic concerns soon superseded his desires for mere production records.

The agribusiness industry is well permeated with a series of quantitative measurements. Bushels per acre, acres per hour, feed conversion, pounds of gain per day, acre-feet of water, etc., are all common quantitative measures of performance. Agribusiness salesmen are often surprised to discover how heavily they rely on such measures of performance to sell their products. Unfortunately, some are so reliant on these traditional measures they completely overlook the ultimate measure of performance; i.e., the economic success of the customer. What really concerns the grower-customer is how much economic profit he will generate from his operation. Too many agribusiness salesmen stress the relationship between their product and its effect on a physical measure of productive performance and forget to extend this relationship into what ultimately determines the success of their customers; i.e., the enhancement of their economic well-being.

Relate to the desire to experiment. If you can, take but a moment to recall the progress that has occurred in American agriculture since the turn of the century. In your opinion, what single activity has contributed most to this so-called "green revolution"? Many will probably agree with my assertion that the single activity of "experimentation" has contributed most to some seven decades of

agricultural progress. Experimentation, as practiced by private industry, our land grant institutions, and various government agencies, has increased the food-producing capabilities and the economic well-being of our nation's farmers to record levels. After seventy years of proven success via experimentation, there should be little doubt as to why farmers everywhere are attracted to the activity. Farmers have an almost uncontrollable desire to experiment!

There is more involved in a tractor-pulling contest than just the spirit of competition. The same is true for the animal-judging competition which is or was such an established part of our state and county fairs. The contest, itself, is the end product of the farmer's desire to experiment with a new mechanical tool, a new breed of animal, or a new fertilization program, and then compare his results with those of his neighbors. The smart agribusiness salesman should develop a sales pattern which capitalizes on it. For example, test plots and demonstration rides become a standard pattern for the fertilizer and farm machinery salesman, respectively. It gives the potential buyer the opportunity to actively involve himself in the experimental process; i.e., testing the product and comparing the results with his expectations and his neighbors' experiences.

More General Elements

As noted earlier, not all elements to a successful sales pattern are unique to the agribusiness industry. Many have a more general application and would appear to be as relevant to the sale of women's lingerie as to the sale of a new variety of grass seed. Take for example, the following items, some of which evolve from my summer activities and others which appear in the literature:

Try to be concise. Nothing is likely to irritate an agribusiness customer more than to be

“bothered” by a salesman during the middle of planting or harvest time. During such periods, the customer's time is in terribly short supply and the wise agribusiness salesman soon learns to keep his message brief and concise, or delay it until a more opportune time.

Be sincere. Rare, indeed, is the successful salesman who does not personally believe in the merits of the product he sells. Displaying a sincere interest in your products and the problems of your customers (see the self-interest element noted earlier) will add immeasurably to your relationship with customers. Sincerity cannot be acquired and only rarely “acted out.” Instead, I would suggest that you make a determined effort to learn everything possible about the product you're selling, i.e., its production, its content, its engineering specifications, etc. A sense of individual pride will soon develop as you begin to relay this information to the customer. As you sense the pride, the customer will sense the sincerity.

Sell visually. Don't stop by telling the prospect about your product; show him! The effective use of visual demonstrations or illustrations cannot be overemphasized. In many cases, the greatest sales aid is the product itself. Its design, appearance, or actual performance could likely produce more sales than hours and hours of verbal dialogue. As a whole, of course, the agribusiness industry has much to learn in this area. Only recently have tractor manufacturers recognized that visual appearance may swing the deal between two competing models of like mechanical abilities. It is not unusual, for example, for a farmer to be as concerned with the appearance of his equipment as he is with a suit of clothes.

Orient toward the problem. Don't attempt to dazzle the sales prospect with meaningless

statistics. Instead, orient your presentation toward his particular problem and boil down your commentary to that which will generate, directly or indirectly, a solution. The product may have many- attributes which are valuable in themselves, but have little relevance to the prospect's specific dilemma. If this is the case, forget those many attributes and concentrate only on those which are of concern to the prospective customer. For example, if a grower wishes to fertilize his wheat crop, don't try to sell your product to him with the argument that it has been shown to have doubled the yield of alfalfa.

Foster integrity. I know of no industry in the U.S., other than agriculture, wherein more deals are made, more money exchanged, or more promises sealed with a spoken word and a handshake. Business integrity is particularly important to the agribusiness industry because a written document does not always accompany a sale. Perhaps it's a foolish tradition, or perhaps it's a necessary, functional shortcut, but regardless, over half of a farmer's total supplies are still purchased with a handshake or a telephone over which price, quantity, quality, time, etc., have been only verbally agreed upon. A reputation for honesty, dependability, and fairness are valuable assets to the agribusiness salesman. His sales pattern must be consistent with fostering such a reputation.

Don't argue. I know very few agribusiness salesmen who succeed through a process of argumentation. As a sales pattern, argumentation is simply not a process conducive to making new sales. In many cases, the talented salesman is one who is particularly skilled at avoiding arguments with his prospective customers. He compliments the prospect on his judgment and opinions; then skillfully suggests that his product is specifically designed for someone with such tastes. Customer goodwill -- which

creates most new sales -- never was won in argument. If in the process of a new customer contact, an argument appears impending, then tactfully break off the conversation and try another day. Yes, it's difficult at times to accept the need to back away from an inviting confrontation. But your self-control in these situations will likely be rewarded, many times over, with a larger and more amenable clientele.

Don't knock the competition. This guideline is well-known throughout numerous industries, but not always practiced by all of them. The goal of the agribusiness salesman is to sell a product and satisfy his customers' needs. Attacking the competition in an attempt to achieve this sales goal is actually a contradiction in terms. The two activities are mutually exclusive. To knock the competition implies that your own product lacks those characteristics which would assist in its sale. To knock the competition implies that you, as a salesman, are unwilling to stand behind your own product, except as it is professed to be the lesser of many evils. Instead, develop a sales pattern based on the special merits you and your product have to offer. If you find yourself forced to render a judgment of the competition, compare the positives of yours and their product, or restrain your remarks to physical features, such as chemical composition, engineering specifications, or unbiased test results.

Keep some records. As my thoughts return to my past summer travels, one sales pattern deficiency appears with alarming frequency. Most agribusiness salesmen are "walking encyclopedias" in the sense that their minds are filled with valuable information on the character of their product, the nature of their customer's operation, his peculiar needs, biases, and personality. Yet rarely does the salesman bother to write down this information and organize it into a customer

file. Nothing impresses a customer less than a salesman who repeatedly pronounces the customer's name incorrectly or repeatedly asks him what his agricultural operation is like. The salesman should know the name of his sales prospect, he should know how to pronounce it, and he should know something about the man's farming operation even before meeting him for the first time. Following this sales pattern can only be accomplished by writing down all relevant market and customer information and storing it in a meaningful file. Having done this, the salesman need no longer rely on his memory. He can prepare himself in advance of a sales contact by quickly referring to his continually updated file. The task of maintaining such a customer file is not that great. One salesman I traveled with this summer carried a shirt pocket full of plain, 3x5 note cards. After every customer contact, he jotted on a note card an abbreviated summary of his discussion, e.g., topic of discussion, customer's product needs, customer's personal interests, and other miscellaneous information such as his customer's children's names. Every evening, these 3x5 cards were then added to the customer's ever-growing service file carried in the salesman's pickup truck. Prior to contacting this customer the next time, the salesman would review his file to refresh his memory and, thereby, be better able to show that customer that his account is an important one.

Early in this paper, I referred to the agribusiness salesman as a "mobilized merchant," a "practicing scientist," and an "agricultural diplomat." No doubt he is all these things, and many more, as his job is both challenging and demanding of a high level of proficiency. This sales proficiency cannot be rapidly acquired, but must accumulate as a result of the implementation of a successful sales pattern. This paper was designed to identify and describe those sales patterns which, based on my own observations and opinions, appear to contribute most to the ultimate success of the agribusiness salesman. Those patterns include: (1) an appeal to a customer's self-interest, (2) stick to the facts, (3) relate to economics, (4) encourage the desire to experiment, and those more general elements, such as (5) be concise, (6) be sincere, (7) keep it visual, (8) relate to the problem, (9) foster integrity, (10) don't argue, (11) don't knock the competition, and (12) keep some records.

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