

## THE CERTIFIED SALES PROFESSIONAL: HAS THE TIME FINALLY ARRIVED?

*By Neil Rackham*

It's not a new idea. For more than a century there have been voices crying in the wilderness saying that the time has finally come for sales to be a profession; time for salespeople to have recognized standards and qualifications like lawyers, accountants and other professionals. I'm a professor, so forgive me a brief history lesson here. The earliest reference I know to professional selling comes from the Society of Commercial Travelers in the mid 1880s:

*"If we do not strive for the professional respect accorded to other occupations of substance and worth, then the world shall judge us no better than peddlers and rogues".<sup>1</sup>*

In keeping with its time, the concern here was more about character than competence. Many societies and associations were established in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to promote the sales profession, both in the United States and Europe. Most of these, such as the Order of United Commercial Travelers, stressed moral character and temperance in keeping with the values of the Victorian era. (Their initials, U.C.T., doubled on their Order badges and buttons for Unity, Charity and Temperance). The only one of these societies to have escaped oblivion is the Gideon's, of hotel bible fame. I was fascinated to find that it was originally founded to "eliminate drinking, gambling, dirty jokes, Sunday trading

and other 'forms of temptation peculiar to traveling [sales]men'".<sup>2</sup> I bet that's one piece of sales history you didn't know. But a profession is more than upright morals and temperance. In the age of Enron, we understand all too well that while competence can be measured, certified, tested and assured, certification of integrity is another matter entirely. As a result, these early attempts did little to genuinely advance the standing of professional selling.

### The First Sales Certifications

A new approach to professionalism based on demonstrated competence was introduced in 1893 by John Patterson, founder of National Cash Register. He certified his growing sales force based on their knowledge and application of *The NCR Primer* and its companion volume, *The Book of Arguments*. These remarkable sales manuals included every tiny detail of the sales process, down to the smallest gesture of a finger. Patterson held certification camps where his salespeople had to demonstrate their mastery of every item. Those that failed to meet his exacting standards, however good their sales figures, found themselves looking for work elsewhere.

Despite the efforts of Patterson and others like him, the idea of professional selling in the early part of the twentieth century was little more than hope and good intentions. The problem was that certification was based on

<sup>1</sup>*'Commercial Travelers' Magazine*, Autumn 1884

<sup>2</sup>Spears, *100 Years on the Road: The Traveling Salesman in American Culture*, Yale University Press, 1995

rigid scripts and prescriptions. There was no evidence that a certified salesperson was more effective as a result of the effort. Indeed, Patterson fired high performers who didn't conform to his theories.

### **Slow Progress**

But, with each passing year, the field of sales was making some progress. In 1932 Russell and Beach<sup>3</sup> wrote:

*Even though salesmanship may not have attained the status of an exact science, it is steadily approaching the idea of a profession. . . . Some enthusiastic proponents claim that it is the greatest profession of them all, on the grounds that it requires the real salesman to be as carefully and broadly trained as any who claim professional status. This is doubtless an exaggeration as yet. Many progressive employers and trainers of salesmen are working towards the goal of establishing a definite course of study which, when completed satisfactorily, will place the graduate on the same plane as the holder of a Certified Public Accountant's certificate."*

### **A Recurring Theme**

It's now 75 years since these words were written. I'm horrified to confess that for half of that time I've been studying sales for a living. During my career, the idea of professional certification for salespeople has come up over and over again with predictable regularity. Approximately every five years it

erupts like the Old Faithful geyser in Yellowstone Park. There's a gush of interest, a lot of noise and steam and then everything goes dormant until the next eruption. By my calculation, the next plume of quinquennial enthusiasm is due very soon. Will it be different this time? Is the certified sales professional an idea whose time has finally come? I think so, and here's why.

### **A Perfect Storm**

Selling has become significantly more sophisticated during the last ten years. It wasn't so long ago that I would fall down laughing when people talked of "sales strategy", knowing that what they really meant was simple tactics ruthlessly executed. That's not the case today. The wrong sales strategy – or a lack of strategy – can lose an account or even sink a business. It's a pity that we still use the word "selling" to describe what it takes to manage today's relationships with key customers. Key account selling has become a complex and demanding professional process.

But it's not just the natural evolution of high-end selling that makes me believe that we need to take a fresh look at the idea of certified sales professionals. We're caught in a perfect storm – at the intersection of three significant business trends that are changing the world of selling.

### **The Focus on Organic Growth**

The first of these trends is the new top management attention to sales growth. Ten years ago it was still possible to succeed as a CEO through cost-cutting and improving efficiency. You could install new systems,

<sup>3</sup>Russell and Beach, *Textbook of Salesmanship* Second Edition, McGraw-Hill, 1932

introduce better processes or outsource non-core areas of your business. All these things would improve the bottom line and please your shareholders. But, in most companies today, these efficiencies have already been achieved. So where does the CEO look for profit growth? Acquisitions perhaps? Many of today's most successful business leaders grew their companies by mergers and acquisitions. The problem they face now, after the flurry of mergers in the last decade, is that most of the attractive targets have already been taken. Those that remain are generally less attractive or overpriced. So what's a poor CEO to do, now that the two traditional avenues for profit improvement and growth are drying up? The answer is to grow the revenue – to focus on the top line.

With this in mind, CEO's across the world are taking a new interest in organic growth. They are looking closely at their sales forces and asking some tough questions about whether or not they have the level of professionalism and competence needed to sustain ambitious growth plans. They are coming to realize that a good sales force is just as important a sustainable competitive advantage as a good product stream. And, with that realization, comes nagging quality assurance questions about the level and caliber of their salespeople.

### **The Internet**

The second component of the perfect storm is the internet. It has swept away millions of sales jobs around the world. Before the internet, if you wanted to know about a product or service, your best option was to

meet with a salesperson. An important part of the sales job was to communicate to customers the details of the seller's mousetrap and what made it superior. Put less kindly, many salespeople were nothing more than expensive talking brochures. With the easy access to information provided by increasingly user-friendly web sites, the need for this type of product based selling has dwindled and all but disappeared. Buyers don't want these talking brochures and companies can't afford them. As a result, there are fewer sales jobs but the ones that remain are higher level, more demanding and – incidentally -- much better paid. Ten years ago, it was hard to take professional selling seriously when anyone off the street, with a minimum of product training, could be a successful talking brochure. Today such people are failing in droves. The bar has been raised. The demand from employers and customers is for salespeople whose expertise, competence and problem solving ability creates value. In other words, the market now wants professional salespeople.

### **The Professionalization of Purchasing**

The final trend is the professionalization of purchasing. A mere ten years ago, you could find people in the purchasing function whose chief qualification was that they were honest company citizens. While doing research into purchasing decision making in 1989, I recall being told by the Chief Operating Officer of a public company in the United States that his purchasing people were loyal but didn't have the talent to be successful in line functions. "We don't pay them much," he told me, "but we let vendors take them out to lunch from time to time as a reward."

Those days have gone forever. Purchasing, together with its rapidly growing offspring Supply Chain Management, has become one of the most important and strategic functions in the company. Armed with tools like Vendor Segmentation Strategies, or Lifetime Value Analysis, the new breed of purchaser is professional, competent and – yes – professionally certified. The new purchasing function expects much more from salespeople. They want business acumen and they want expertise. In short, they expect a new and exacting professional level of competence from those who hope to do business with them.

The professionalization of purchasing has been enormously helped by the clarity of the purchasing task. In any organization, you can define the fundamental role of purchasing as the acquisition of the right products and services on the optimum terms. Try coming up with a similarly clear and simple definition for sales and you run into the immediate difficulty that selling roles are more fragmented. The label “sales” includes everything from the simple retail transaction to the strategic global account. It’s hard to set professional standards when there isn’t a clean definition of the role. Nevertheless, purchasing professionals have seen how their own roles have been transformed by a disciplined professional approach and they rightly expect the same from sales.

### **So What Happens Next?**

Unlike the earlier attempts to create a sales profession, the business drivers needed for change are now in place. Many of the instruments of success are in place too and

there are roadmaps to follow – albeit that many of them are from outside the United States. The UK, for example, has extensively researched and internationally benchmarked National Occupational Standards for Sales ([www.msssb.org](http://www.msssb.org)), which are proving very useful beyond its borders. These standards define the purpose of sales as **“to create, build and sustain mutually beneficial and profitable relationships through personal and organizational contact.”** This definition is broad enough to encompass most B2B sales. Within this framework are detailed competencies required by the professional salesperson. In addition to the usual suspects, such as selling skills, time management and presentation skills, these standards cover wider competencies such as finance, forecasting, working with other functions, marketing, leadership and ethics. A number of global companies in Europe, including Xerox, are structuring their internal training and development using these national standards frameworks.

There are also professional institutes for sales, such as the Strategic Account Management Association, the United Professional Sales Association, and the Institute for Sales and Marketing Management. The latter has a UK government-accredited qualifications framework. In the United States there are eleven business schools (all members of the University Sales Center Alliance) as well as a number of schools in Europe with excellent academic sales programs that turn out highly employable graduates. The University Sales Education Foundation is dedicated to increasing sales professionalism. These are encouraging developments. So what’s still missing?

There are advocates and evangelists for sales professionalism, but the sparks have yet to set fire to salespeople. The jury is still out on whether they want to see themselves as sales *professionals* who deserve the same investment in skills as accountants, lawyers and engineers. Are they reluctant to take that step because of a macho culture in selling that the School of Hard Knocks is all you need to succeed?

There's a delicious word for what's now needed, and that word is *entelechy*. The Oxford English Dictionary defines entelechy as "the condition in which a potentiality becomes an actuality." I've also seen it defined as "turning the potential into the actual". That's what we need here – some entelechy. There are advocates and evangelists for sales professionalism who are ready and able to take the potential of selling standards and turn them into the practice of a true profession. But, set against them, there's the inertia of millions of salespeople who have yet to see themselves as sales *professionals*. But here's a comforting thought: the previous waves of enthusiasm for sales qualification and standards – enthusiasms that fizzled out – were initiated by experienced salespeople who complained that new entrants needed to be more professional. Today I hear the opposite. It's the young, successful entrants who are asking why there aren't qualifications. They are the ones who want to see selling become a recognized profession. They deserve our help and support.

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