

## **Salespeople Are Amongst the Most Creative Employees But There is Still Plenty of Room for Improvement**

*By Steve Ramocki*

This article suggests that salespeople are required to demonstrate creativity over the regular course of their days. However, there is much more opportunity for salespeople, as well as sales organizations, to be far more creative. Toward these ends, the article discusses the basic concepts necessary to produce creative outputs. A creative model is then presented, including its basic components, which can be utilized to produce creative outputs. Examples of these tactics are presented to demonstrate two creative opportunities: one that could be used by sales people and another that might be developed by the larger sales organization.

### **INTRODUCTION**

My approach to this novel discussion is best begun by providing background information that will help to validate the title of this article as well as establish credibility for much of what it entails. I have been a marketing professor for well over 3 decades. Over this duration, I have taught a wide range of courses within the management-marketing curriculum. These courses range from general management, to general marketing, economics, organizational behavior, operations management, marketing management, personal selling and sales management, statistics, marketing research, consumer behavior, new product development, and marketing creativity which is my favorite. The reason for mentioning all these courses is to communicate a pivotal, embryonic condition for creativity which is that creativity requires interdisciplinary connections. Some people contest this but, regardless of how much one knows in a domain, or discipline, one will not likely be creative unless additional concepts are brought in from outside the discipline. One who does possess a tremendous knowledge base in a discipline may produce highly useful works, but highly useful works are oftentimes not deserving of being labeled creative. This is because useful works also require the novelty dimension in order to qualify as creative. Yes, as you are assimilating this you are probably questioning the definition of creativity and wondering if it is not more than a little bit semantic. We will come back to this later along with additional concepts to reinforce this position.

### **Background on My Creativity Course**

I started to develop my creativity course back in 1993, when I realized that business schools really needed to be turning out more creative graduates. My intuition had always led me to believe that interdisciplinary education was paramount to the enhancement of creative development, and quite soon after I began to read what many psychologists have written about creativity my original intuition was reinforced. Upon further study and reflection, though, I also realized that interdisciplinary education, which is a necessary condition for creativity, is not a sufficient condition for creativity to occur. This is, because it is the interdisciplinary connections that are brought to bear on creative quests that provide the true catalysts for creative thinking. The vast majority of people do not begin to make these connections on their own accord until they receive instruction that this is what must be done. Thus, since 1994 I have been attempting to employ my own interdisciplinary background in pedagogical directions that would be conducive to enabling students to understand and appreciate the thinking tactics that will help them think more creatively. Furthermore, I have been one of the marketing professors attempting to lead the charge that creativity is not just desirable but actually teachable, incidentally a fact that has been known for over fifty years, though unfortunately by insufficient numbers of people, especially educators. Although there is much more that could be elaborated here, it is best to return to the theme of this article.

### **WHY ARE SALESPEOPLE AMONG THE MOST CREATIVE EMPLOYEES?**

Creativity requires a reasonable level of intelligence (interestingly, above this base level there is no correlation whatsoever with creativity), knowledge (both inside and outside the operative domain), an intellectual style of thinking varying from providing one's own structure as opposed to performing within given status quos, personality components (involving tolerance for ambiguity, overcoming obstacles, meeting new challenges, risk, courage of conviction), intrinsic motivation, and supportive environments (Sternberg and Lubart, 1991). Now, just for starters, contemplate what salespeople typically must do. Begin with the personality variables. Tolerance for ambiguity is huge. There are few sure deals when a salesperson begins the research and quest to land a new customer. Even with repeat customers the uncertainty still remains a matter of degree. New challenges are omnipresent, and the salesperson must confront them. This obviously takes risk (psychological as well as financial), and motivation along with self-management are necessary requisites for success. Let us not omit a supportive team and organizational environment. I often employ a football analogy since analogies and metaphors are very important for creative thinking. Who gets most of the credit when a touchdown is scored? Yes, it is typically the quarterback, running back, and/or wide receiver. Now could this be done without the support of the offensive line? Of course it could not. The same line of reasoning holds true for the successful salesperson, who also needs a solid organization from which to navigate. I trust some headway is occurring in my case that salespeople are indeed among the most creative employees. There is another concept that needs broaching though, and that is what exactly constitutes creativity. As mentioned earlier, the definition of creativity is an output that is both useful and novel. As also implied prior, many confuse useful with creative. However, if the novelty component is not present to at least some degree, the output cannot be considered creative. Now it is this 'degree' that must be briefly discussed.

#### **Creativity Is A Matter of Degree**

My own demarcations are creativity with a little c, a Medium c, and a Big C. Clearly, the major creative

breakthroughs with Big C's are in the distinct minority. However, it is entirely possible to live a creative life through the perpetuation of many little c's that not only make life more interesting but also aid in day to day organizational performance. I maintain that salespeople are high on the creative employee list when one considers the small c aspect of creativity. It should be realized that even the integration of the small c's into one's mundane activities requires concerted efforts and practice, and this is something I continually preach to my students. Once again, I strongly suspect that salespeople are constantly implementing the smaller c's of creativity as they go about their work, and probably even accomplishing some outputs that would qualify for Medium c's.

#### **OK – Game Set Match that Salespeople Have Largely Reached Their Creative Potentials?**

I think you know the answer to this. If you have grasped the essence of the critical embryonic concept of interdisciplinary connections, then you must realize that these connections are potentially infinite. It is time to mention another real essential ingredient to creativity, and that is consciously making the decision to employ it on any given task, as it usually does not just randomly occur. This conscious decision is probably best subsumed under the concept of metacognition, which refers to our macro mental planning strategies. I tell my students to think of an eagle soaring overhead sending down instructive strategies on how to begin and go about various operations. One might also regard metacognition as a coach giving instructions to a player. For our purpose here, let it suffice to say that this metacognitive decision: "Self, it's time to be creative on this task," is an absolutely essential step the vast majority of the time. Obviously, one should pick and choose the times to try to be more creative because we would overwhelm ourselves if we were to attempt creativity on too many tasks within a given time span. Also remember that the typical productive and logical thinking may produce a good cake; but it is the creative layer of frosting that oftentimes makes the difference. Salespeople and their organizations clearly will benefit from developing those layers of frosting that will differentiate them from their competition. Once again, knowing when and where to be creative is the key.

### Transfer Is Essential to Creativity

This concept of transfer is critical to creative thinking. Transfer simply means taking what one has learned and applying it to any given task or situation. Sales practitioners will agree that not very much of what is learned in school transfers easily and directly into requisite skills to become an excellent salesperson. What does transfer easily is "low-road transfer," a term provided by Salomon and Perkins (1989). What transfers with more difficulty is what they characterize as "broader-road transfer," and with much difficulty "high-road transfer." Low-road transfer is application of knowledge that becomes spontaneous and automatic. An example would be a salesperson employing good locution while making a presentation. Such transfer is forward-reaching because one does not have to search the brain for solutions to this task. Broader-road transfer, however, is not automatic and spontaneous. It requires a backward-reaching component to survey the brain's reservoir of knowledge to come up with a solution. A salesperson searching for the best way to phrase a letter would be an example.

### High-Road Transfer Triggers Creativity

High-road transfer stimulates creative thought and is pivotal to produce creativity. High-road transfer involves taking a concept from one domain in which the concept is intended and taking it analogously or metaphorically to an application removed from its original purpose. An example would be discovering analogies between the molecular structures and buying centers in organizations. By considering orbiting electrons that form simple and more complex bonds, there is a chance that various customers might be represented by particular molecular structures, with key players represented by various configurations of protons, neutrons, and electrons. It should be apparent that someone with only a fair knowledge of chemistry would be capable of deriving these creative analogies and relationships if this backward-reaching attempt is made. Recalling that creativity is defined as useful and novel, we must realize that most high-road transfers will not result in both novelty and usefulness. However, to get to the winners, one must be willing to generate many losers in the process.

### High-Road Transfer Is Not Really that Difficult

The pity is that high-road transfer with its accompanying backward-reaching mindfulness is not that difficult to employ. This is because one does not need to possess detailed knowledge of a concept in order to transfer it creatively via the high-road. Recall that creativity requires knowledge both inside the domain of focus, and outside the domain of focus. People certainly possess knowledge outside the immediate concern of focus, but most will not consider the integration of such knowledge into their tasks at hand. This is a major reason why more people are not creative, including most experts in their fields.

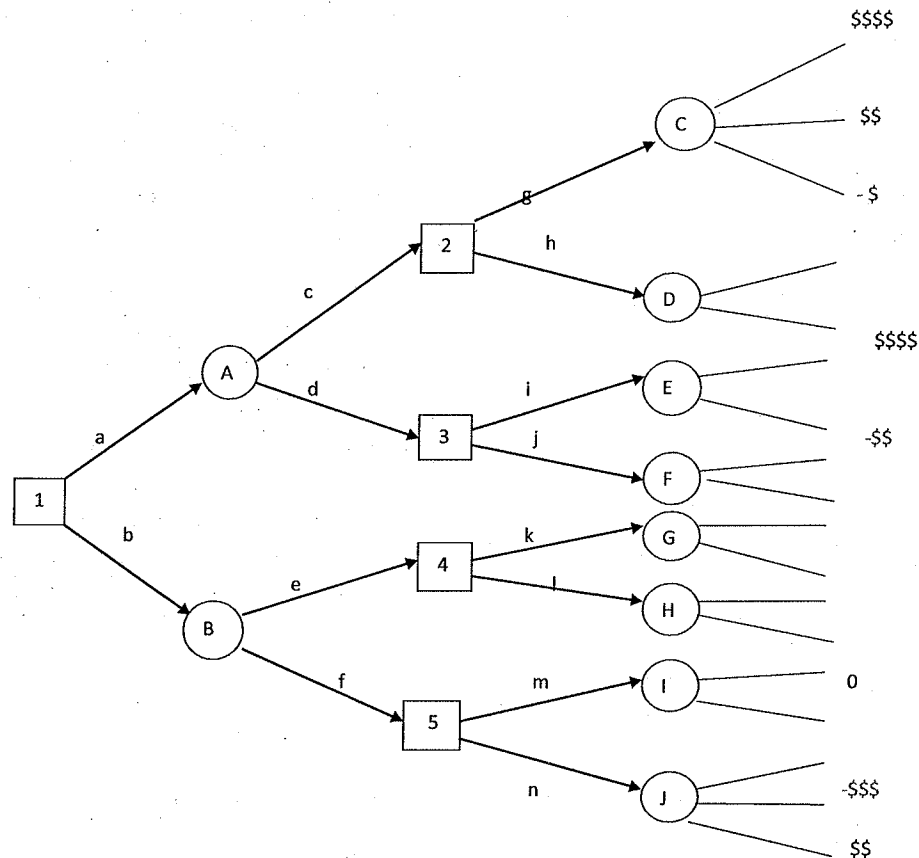
A recent textbook for teaching creativity in marketing and business education discusses various models and creative tactics that work conjunctively along with the concept of high-road transfer (Ramocki 2011). It is a book well worth considering. However, this article is not intended to be a course in creativity, and the reader now should have sufficient perspective to appreciate the tremendous creative potential available to anyone involved with sales. The following sections provide sketches of creative ideas in attempts to further convince the reader of the many ways that creativity with a small c, a Middle c, or a Big C might be conceptualized and implemented.

### EXAMPLES AND APPLICATIONS OF CREATIVITY IN SALES

This first example will demonstrate the concepts of low-road and broader low-road transfer. They will be reviewed following the application. Salespeople must make many decisions when interacting with potential customers. Most business schools place emphasis upon making good decisions and various courses within the curriculum likely present the concepts of decision-making under conditions of certainty, uncertainty, and risk. Since there is little in the world of sales that is certain, the emphasis here will be upon uncertainty and risk. Although there are a number of models that deal with risk and uncertainty, the decision tree is one that salespeople might find very useful. The decision tree attempts to develop a number of possible initial decisions, each one of which will lead to various results with various probabilities. These initial results usually

will lead to additional decision sets that again will be subject to various probabilities that more specific results will unfold. These final results have different expected payoffs or losses attached to them. Before we go too much further, let's observe an example of a simple decision tree that a salesperson might attempt to construct.

Figure 1: Salesperson Decision Tree



**Notation:** a is direct approach; b is indirect approach; outcome c is customer is enthusiastic; outcome d is customer not enthusiastic; outcome e is customer is enthusiastic; outcome f is customer not so enthusiastic; decision g is proceed with tactic g; decision h is proceed with tactic h; decision i is proceed with tactic i; decision j is back off for now; decision k is proceed with tactic k; decision l is proceed with tactic g=tactic i; decision m is proceed with tactic m; decision n is back off for now.

The first thing to realize about the decision tree in Figure I is that the squares with numbers inside represent decision points and the circles with capital letters represent outcome junctures. The small letters represent decisions that might be made stemming from the decision junctures, and also outcomes stemming from the outcome junctures. Time is implied moving from left to right. At the end of the tree some sample outcomes are provided. Each line should have a final assessment but for lack of space only several appear. These assessments obviously do not have to involve revenues or losses. They might be analyzed through more qualitative measures as well. The one major concept not contained in the diagram (for reasons of space and clutter) is that of risk. Each outcome juncture is expected to produce results with probabilities summing to one. From outcome A, for example, the probabilities of outcomes c and d sum to 1. This has to be the case if one is dealing with "bounded uncertainty," which implies that we have considered

all the outcomes that can in fact occur. If the decision tree has not correctly considered all the possible outcomes from any outcome juncture, then we are dealing with "unbounded uncertainty," which is more problematic. Not to elaborate on this latter concept, one can reasonably argue that much of the time in our lives we are in fact dealing with unbounded uncertainty. In any case care should be taken to try to identify all the realistic possibilities resulting from every outcome node in the tree. Referring to the probabilities, the decision maker must consider them because they obviously influence which branches on the tree are more optimally followed. In pure academic instruction of this concept all the probabilities are multiplied by their respective payoffs from right to left, and carried back to square 1 to make the decision as to which initial branch to follow, as the branch with the highest expected value is pursued. Whether or not this analysis becomes this quantitative is not the point. The point is that decision tree analysis can provide a valuable creative tool for salespeople to engage.

### **Breakdown and Analysis of the Decision Tree Example**

It is highly likely that all salespeople, as a result of experience, actually use decision tree models to some degree as they interact with their customers. Thus, they are applying creativity within their daily responsibilities. OK, now for the breakdown and analysis of the creative concepts accompanying this example, not necessarily by order of profundity: (1) the implied salesperson at work here made the conscious decision to (first think of and then) transfer the decision tree concept to the selling task in hopes of being more creative. Recall that this critical metacognitive decision of attempting to be creative is the starting point. (2) To what degree is this transfer creative? It is somewhere between a low-road and broader low-road transfer depending upon the automaticity and spontaneity with which the decision tree was implemented. This example does take a fairly generally framed concept and streamline it toward a quite different specific application. (3) The salesperson's conceptualization of this decision tree model and eventual transfer probably involved some backward-reaching transfer, unless the salesperson had become most practiced and adept

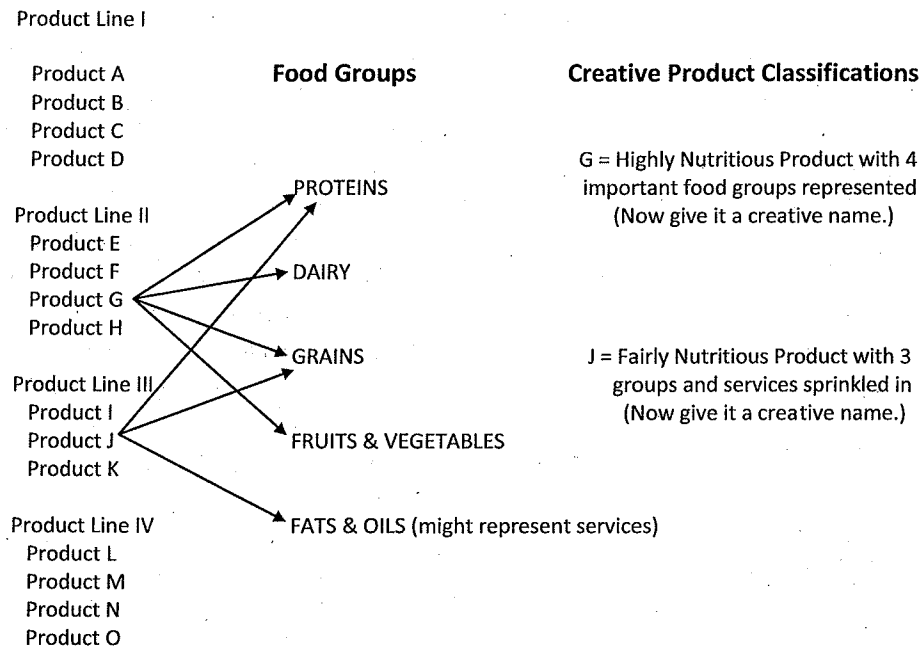
with this approach. (4) The idea of interdisciplinary connection, as it almost always does, deserves mention here. As was carefully stressed earlier, interdisciplinary and creativity go hand in glove. (5) For anything to be considered creative it must be novel and useful. This type of decision model should be useful. How novel is it? Again, there is a subjective element here. Let's give it some creativity with at least a little c and maybe as much as a Middle c. (6) What are the possibilities that might add to this decision tree model's effectiveness? What other concepts might be integrated with it to make it more powerful? For example, could the decision tree be reprogrammed so that the salesperson's own organizational buyers could use it to their advantage? (7) Return to the concept of forward-reaching versus backward-reaching transfer. It should be clear that the initial conceptualization, development, and refinement of the decision tree model involved backward-reaching transfer. However, considering how the model will actually be employed demands revisiting these concepts. Perhaps through training and or experience the decisions along the tree will become quite forward-reaching and spontaneous. Astute students usually raise the question of whether or not today's higher-road transfer becomes tomorrow's lower-road transfer. The answer is probably yes, depending upon one's relative facility with the concepts and the interactive complexity involved with the challenge. (8) Finally this decision tree, despite its fair number of branches, is very simple. The reader will visualize many situations where the decision trees would become extremely complex as one progresses through layers of interactions. Another question thus emerges as to the degree of complexity any given decision tree should ideally possess. Metacognition certainly would also play a role here. Perhaps it is the first few decision junctures that are the most important to define, and from there the salesperson must rely on one's experience and intuition because of the degree of complexity beyond the initial branches.

### **A More Creative Application Involving High-Road Transfer**

The first example is demonstrative of a reasonably creative application of a concept that is probably taught in many business programs. Let's try to beget even more novelty, and thus more creativity, with a different

example. Here we will aim for a high-road transfer involving the product line the salesperson attempts to sell? The high-road transfer is going to be “nutrition” and the various food groups. Various product categories can represent the basic food groups – proteins, dairy, grains, fruits and vegetables, fats and oils. Various products, and possible affiliated services, could be linked within specified food groups. Then nutritious meals could be developed by combining products and services from the various groups. Figure II depicts the basic model.

**Figure II: Transfer of Products to Basic Food Groups to Beget Creative Product Classifications**



After observing Figure II the reader will see that the potential for additional creativity is vast indeed. Different food groups could represent different strengths of the selling organization, the needs of the buying organization, or of the products themselves. The products could contain various percentages of the ideal nutritional recommendations for daily, weekly, etc. nutrition. The figure would become too complicated to try to include all these, but the potential should be apparent. A salesperson might encourage a customer to make purchases from a menu of products and services such to reflect a nutritious (practical and functioning combination of products) diet. Maybe some desserts and beverages could be mixed in as well. When all is completed, the customer might have a unique diet/menu package, or bundle perhaps, with its own creative name.

### **Analysis of the Food Groups Example**

Clearly this one is of a high-road transfer, as one does not expect to see a company's products related to facets of nutrition. The high-road transfer is backward reaching because significant mindfulness and brain inventorying was necessary to construct it. Without reiterating, the reader will also grasp the other analyses that were done with the first example. Final analysis here: is example two creative? Remember, to be creative the output must qualify as both novel and useful. Everyone will agree that there is significant novelty here, but the final analysis must include the usefulness and success of the output. There is a chance that this conceptualization of products related to food groups will end up going nowhere. Actually, most high-road transfers are likely to run into dead ends, as mentioned previously. However,

and this is the underlying profundity, these types of ideas are not likely to be conceptualized without the mental tactical methods we have been discussing; and the creative success lies in the numbers. All salespeople should relate to this analogy. One makes 100 calls to end up with 5 profitable sales. The same logic applies to high-road creative thinking.

## CONCLUSION

A case has been made that the world of sales stands to benefit greatly through the infusion of creativity into its daily operations and domains. As pointed out in the beginning, salespeople are likely among the more creative employees because they are required to think and perform more along the lines of creative thinking than are most other employees. However, if this article has done its job, then it should be clear that salespeople and their organizations have not really scratched the surface of their creative potentials because the potential for high-road interdisciplinary transfer is virtually infinite. Sales organizations stand to benefit greatly not just by encouraging creativity within their sales operations, but also by allocating resources in directions of learning more about the methods and thinking mechanisms that ultimately are responsible for higher levels of creativity. Once again, as stated in the title, there is plenty of room for improvement.

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