

A Brief History of Selling and Sales Management

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Abstract

A review of the evolution and development of selling and sales management provides an important perspective on marketing history. Perhaps no other area within the marketing profession has such a long history and rich tradition (Beckman *et al.*, 1957, p. 427). Unlike many other aspects of marketing, selling in one form or another has existed since the early development of civilization (Butler, 1918, pp. 44-45). There are several aspects of selling and sales management that are discussed in the paper. These include sales professionalism, organizational issues, and the use of technology. The literature that is reviewed is based on three primary sources: general historical works, books and articles from the popular business press, and the academic marketing literature. In order to cover the evolution of selling and sales management, the paper is divided into four sections that reflect the development of this topic. The first section, *Selling Through the Millennia* examines selling activities in the ancient and classical world through the Industrial Revolution. The second section, *The Emergence of Modern Sales and Sales Management* begins with the developments spawned by the Industrial Revolution leading to the modern era of selling at the dawn of the 20th century. This is followed by an overview of the rapid growth of selling through the 1920s and the effects of the Great Depression. *The Continued Development of the Field* discusses how the mobilization in World War II influenced the practice of selling and sales management. Lastly *Conclusions and Looking Ahead* examines the major influences on sales activities in the latter part of the 20th and early 21st centuries.

Personal selling is considered to be the oldest form of marketing activity (Beckman *et al.*, 1957, p. 427). The earliest known form of personal selling is that of a "peddler" who encompassed the selling and inventory-holding function of a modern merchant. They appeared at the same time as the limited manufacture of goods began its initial development. The peddler, also referred to as an "itinerant merchant," can be considered the originator of retail merchandising. The discovery of the new world and the development of trade with the colonies expanded commerce to new levels. The later development of steam power, iron construction, and the screw propeller led to a further increase in international trade (Clough and Cole, 1946, pp. 465-467). A second type of salesperson appeared in the early half of the eighteenth century was a greeter or 'drummer' employed by suppliers and manufacturers. Drummers were given this name because of their use of drums to generate attention as they greeted arriving retail buyers at train stations, ship docks, or hotels (Christ and Anderson, 2011).

The selling profession saw numerous developments in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The overall profession of business was changing with ever larger firms creating product differentiation, brand identities, and expanded direct sales networks (Harris, 2008; Koehn, 1999). Large manufacturers of branded consumer goods desired closer control over their sales forces, resulting in formal sales organizations that included the use of sales managers (French and Popp, 2008). The professional salesperson soon replaced wholesale drummers as formally trained salespeople. Both college and non-college courses on sales instruction was developed to aid in this effort. Education through correspondence schools played a major role in this process. In some cases sales education by correspondence was such a large business that it spawned such enterprises like the Sheldon School founded by A.F. Sheldon. The changes that were occurring in the U.S. had parallels throughout the world. The development of sales techniques was not limited to the U.S. Research has found that there were books written in Polish for U.S. Polish speaking individuals who wanted to learn selling methods. Not only did these books contain sophisticated business skills, but also served to further the acculturation of immigrants into the U.S. business environment (Witkowski, 2012). Efforts in other countries were also made to increase the professionalism of selling through training and education. England saw the development of a Sales Managers' Association in 1911, as well as the publication of

Sales Promotion in 1928 (Walker and Child, 1979). The sales literature of this period was rich in ideas and procedures, many of which are still practical today. These include supervisory practices by sales managers (Deupree, 1924), the importance of sales knowledge of products, and the characteristics of successful salespeople (Hoyt, 1927).

Although the dominant character and practice of the sales profession had largely developed by this time there were numerous events in the second half of the 20th century that would continue to evolve the science of selling. During this time, sales and sales management activities were now considered to be more aligned with the overall strategy and goals of the organization (Lazer, 1971). As with the advent of radio advertising in the 1920s, television advertising had an even greater impact on selling in the 1950s. Advances in communication and data processing in the early 21st century have driven many new practices that include customer relationship and supply chain management. These activities involve the selling function and expand selling's reach into other areas of the business. They have created a proliferation of media, channel, and customer contact points. The ability to communicate electronically via numerous new methods and technologies have created and facilitated numerous changes and advancements to the selling process, with many more likely to occur. Countless salespeople now work from home offices and are members of virtual teams. These individuals and processes are a great distance in time and method from the classic peddler and drummer, however, they remain the key to matching supply with demand between buyer and seller.

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