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AN EXAMPLE OF A PERSONAL SELLING CASE TRANSFORMED INTO A ROLE PLAY SCENARIO

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ABSTRACT

The experience with a role-play scenario for a personal selling case that was modified to include compromising positions is reported in this paper. The scenario was modified, with prior clearance, to include a situation where one character made sexual advances toward the female salesperson. Student reactions are discussed and some caveats are mentioned.

INTRODUCTION

In order to get the students to apply the material covered in the chapters, most personal selling textbooks include small cases at the end of each chapter for classroom discussion. A former colleague took a case from Marks (1988, pp. 216-17), and transformed it into a role-play scenario for students. One author then made a small addition to her scenario as an aid to help students recognize that professional salespeople may find themselves in compromising positions modified role play scenario and discuss the classroom reactions experienced.

The Role Play Scenario¹

In the case, a copier saleswoman, Peggy Cox, has four prospects to qualify. Brief outlines of the prospects (dentist, purchasing agent, lawyer, and accountant) are provided. In late 1987, a colleague developed three fictitious copier models for Peggy Cox to sell. She also developed additional "tidbits" of information that are given to students playing the prospects, as well as to each student playing Peggy Cox. At the beginning of the role play, each prospect is told the number of copies his office makes per time period (week, month or year) and is reminded that Peggy is to make an initial contact in order to learn more about each prospect. She is not there to close the sale.

EXPERIENCE WITH THE SCENARIO

In 1988, the role-play scenario was used about five to six weeks into the 14-week semester. Two sections, with roughly 30 students in each, were divided into four groups, making sure that there was at least one woman in each group. Four female students were asked to play Peggy Cox. Then the rest of the groups were picked and sent to the Four Corners of the classroom. Each "Peggy" selected one or two people to help her prepare for the scenario. One person in each group volunteered to play a prospective buyer, and received the appropriate "tidbit" sheet of paper. Each "Peggy" received a copy of the model lines information, plus the appropriate "tidbit" sheet on the buyer. Other students assisted the buyers in preparing for the role-play. The groups were given the information on one day and fifteen minutes to prepare. Students were expected to meet between classes to practice if needed.

The next class period (one hour) was devoted to the role play exercise. Groups were given about three to five minutes to review their plans. Each group provided a scribe who'd evaluate both the seller and the prospective buyer. Each group had about ten minutes for the role-play, leaving about five minutes for set up changes between each group.

After consultation with the developer, and a "clearance chat" with the department chairman, the professor used the suggestion that one of the buyers should "come on" to one "Peggy", with the purpose being to demonstrate how a female salesperson may encounter sexual advances on the job, and to generate discussion of how such advances should be handled. In each section, one of the buyers was handed a slip of paper, instructing him to "Come On" to "Peggy". The women were warned ahead of time that a new twist had been added and to not take anything personally.

Overall, the role-plays went well but a little faster than planned. This resulted in more time for discussion of the students' reactions to the scenario. Regarding the sexual advances twist, both women responded very professionally. Each was taken aback briefly, yet recovered quickly and maintained her professional dignity. Discussion afterwards was very positive, as we addressed the particular problems women face in selling, like sexual advances. Both women students were debriefed and were reassured that the twist was part of the role play. The critiques of the scribes were shared with the class as well. In general, the role-play scenario worked well.

CAVEATS

This role play scenario works best after the students have covered the initial stages of the selling process. The instructor should devote two class periods (if each is 60 minutes long) or one class period (if 90 minutes long) to this exercise. Plenty of time should be allowed for adequate preparation and discussion of the exercise experience.

The information on the models may or may not reflect the real market in a given geographic area, and can be adjusted as needed. It was pointed out that the recommended number of copies information may not differentiate each model enough; thus the numbers may be changed to significantly differentiate the models.

It's very important to discuss your proposed plans with your department chairperson ahead of time, in order to protect yourself from any potential student protests. You must also warn your students that this is a role play, and anything that is said is not to be taken seriously once the scenario is over. Female students should be asked ahead of time if they wish to still play the role of "Peggy" or not. They should be debriefed afterwards to make sure that they have not been hurt by the role-plays effects. This exercise may have to be cleared through your university's "use of human subjects" committee.

REFERENCES

Harks, Ronald B. (1988), *Personal Selling: An Interactive Approach*, 3rd ed., Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

¹ The scenario was developed by Mrs. Deborah Senalik of Green Bay, Wisconsin. Model and "tidbit" information is available from the first author.