



EXPLORATIONS AND INSIGHTS

Lost and found

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Stanley C. Hollander's (1953) *Sales Devices throughout the Ages, from 2500 BC to 1953 AD*

171

Maureen A. Bourassa and William H. Murphy

Edwards School of Business, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, Canada

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to provide an historical review of Stanley C. Hollander's *Sales Devices throughout the Ages, from 2500 BC to 1953 AD*.

Design/methodology/approach – Using the historical review method, the paper examines a monograph with historical importance, summarizing the contents and analyzing it in the context of the author's life. With reference to outside sources, the paper seeks to improve understanding of the monograph within its historical context.

Findings – *Sales Devices throughout the Ages* provides a fascinating journey through 4,000 years of selling history. Analysis of the monograph and of its historical context reveals transformations in the legitimacy of selling, both within marketing and within society as a whole.

Originality/value – This monograph is one of Hollander's earliest works, and as a result, few library copies remain. We are not aware of any other reviews of this monograph, and are therefore pleased it is being brought to the fore in this special issue celebrating Hollander's life and work.

Keywords Marketing, History, Sales

Paper type Research paper

Hollander's (1953) *Sales Devices Throughout the Ages, from 2500 BC to 1953 AD* was published by Joshua Meier Company while Hollander was an instructor at Wharton (University of Pennsylvania) and prior to him receiving a PhD in 1954 from the same institution. This delightful 39 page monograph exemplifies the engaging and instructive style that was evidenced throughout Hollander's storied career.

Sales education was a new concept at the turn of the twentieth century. By 1916, there were limited sales courses offered in Minneapolis, Cincinnati, Cleveland, New York, Boston, and Philadelphia (Hoover, 1916), and sales was introduced into the Harvard Business School curriculum in the 1920s (Tosdal, 1957). Assuming these early sales classes were designed with intent similar to today's, the focus would have been primarily on the here-and-now, with authors referencing sales tools in use while commenting on "best practices." Meanwhile, sales texts were sparse. Some, including Fowler (1911), Hoover (1916), Roth (1949) and Breen *et al.* (1950) made brief reference to the past but did so primarily to contextualize the present. Thus, at the time of writing this sales monograph, Hollander would have been among the first to take an historical look at the field. By chronicling sales devices and using ample references to validate his commentary, Hollander surely gave readers a cause to pause and reflect.

The very crafting of this monograph suggests that Hollander knew his intended readers would appreciate learning that, despite the fairly recent addition of sales to



academic education and debate, the art and science of selling “flourished almost as far back as we can trace civilization” (Hollander, 1953, p. 6). Interestingly, his work has the same effect today. Once exposed to Hollander’s *Sales Devices*, sales educators will be sorely tempted to bring history into the lecture hall. Meanwhile, sales executives will find themselves more attuned to the vibrant history of their profession.

Our purpose is to uncover not only the contents of this monograph, but also to improve understanding of Hollander’s work within an historical framework. First, we summarize the monograph. Then, we consider the monograph in the context of Hollander’s life, in the context of the 1950s sales profession, and finally in the context of other historical perspectives on selling. Our analysis reveals transformations in the legitimacy of selling, both within marketing and within society as a whole.

The monograph

Hollander’s monograph has ten engaging chapters that delve into various sales tools and techniques. What comes immediately to mind is the saying, “the more things change, the more they stay the same.” Every chapter, from “Methods of transportation” (Chapter 2), to “Sales presentations and visual aids” (Chapter 10) remain at the core of training and coaching salespeople today. Even “Tools of protection” (Chapter 3) is an essential training element for today’s sales force, albeit the “arms and armor” (p. 12) of yesteryear have been replaced with modern protective devices including passwords and fingerprint ID sensors, which guard the modern salesperson from intellectual property theft. So, here yet again, history is a guidepost for today.

To begin the book, Hollander takes the important step of putting his readers on a common page, defining sales devices as “tools or methods used by the salesman to help in plying his trade” (p. 5). He then presents the Chapter 2 on “Methods of transportation.” From walking to horseback, from land caravans to sea caravans, and even from trains to automobiles, Hollander walks us through the changes and, more importantly, the reasons and the contextual factors that led sellers to make adjustments in their market coverage techniques. Hollander’s descriptive narrative is complete with quotes and illustrations that bring the stories to life, and his refined sense of humor keeps the reader engaged. For example, Chapter 3 – titled Tools of protection – contains an illustration of a boot store advertisement, in which a salesman is being attacked for his boots and a policeman is holding a knife to the attacker. The salesman ironically appears willing to forgo protection for the sake of the sale as he yells, “Be off, you scoundrel! Go to Crispin’ Boot Store in Peg Alley, and get a pair for yourself for almost nothing! Officer, let him go quick!” (p. 12)

Chapters 4-8 cover “Sales promotion tools,” “Selling ‘Gimmicks’”, “Sales manuals and selling guides,” “Testimonials, and sales demonstrations,” respectively, with each stepping back in time to some of the earliest references of the varied and ever-evolving selling tools suggested by these titles. At times, Hollander gives extra attention to particular individuals who had gained renown for using sales devices in new ways and to great effectiveness. For instance, in Chapter 6 “Sales manuals and selling guides” Hollander references Diamond Jim Brady, a famed salesman who sold railway equipment around the turn of the twentieth century. As Hollander notes, Jim had developed a system for scientific analysis of sales markets that was ahead of his time. This system, along with “his gargantuan appetite, his flashy jewels, his gold-plated gem

encrusted bicycle, his friendship with Lillian Russell, and his Rabelsian parties” (p. 26), led to his fame and selling success.

Hollander draws well from history, referencing writings from as far back as Hammurabi’s Code circa 2100 B.C. (regarding the presence of price systems), and providing numerous quotes, particularly from the 1700s and 1800s. For instance, a fascinating quote from the *Compleat English Tradesman*, 1732, gives even modern salespeople a guide for selling more effectively:

There is a happy medium in these things: The shopkeeper, far from being rude to his customers on one hand, or silent and sullen on the other, may speak handsomely and modestly of his goods what they deserve, and no other; may with truth, and good manners too, set forth his goods as they ought to be set forth, and neither be wanting to the commodity he sells, or run out into a ridiculous extravagance of words, which have neither truth of fact or honesty of design in them (p. 24).

In Chapter 9, Hollander even speaks of the now ubiquitous sample case, whose predecessors were discussed in writings of the 1770s. In the final chapter (Chapter 10), Hollander has an intriguing discussion of the emergence of sales presentations and visual aids. As he explains, the advancement of these tools was made possible by the ability to reproduce catalogues and other sales materials by the mid to late 1800s as technologies, including photography and engraving processes, were mastered. Hollander closes the monograph with anticipation for more exciting changes in the field of selling; he states, “Thus, selling moves into a jet-propelled age” (p. 37).

The monograph in the context of Hollander’s life

Our search for *Sales Devices throughout the Ages* led us to greater appreciation for the depth and breadth of Hollander’s contributions, from his numerous writings, to his vital role in the first North American Workshop on Historical Research in Marketing (1983), to the esteem given to him by his peers as one of the true pioneers in marketing (Jones and Shaw, 2002), along with collective efforts in his name.

Sales Devices throughout the Ages was one of Hollander’s earliest lasting testaments to the value of seeing today through the lens of yesterday. This was written some time before his befriended muse, Clio, was given voice in his writings, although Clio would have been proud of Hollander’s thoughtful reflective glance at the sales profession. Hollander’s monograph provides a rich description of selling history. This descriptive approach is similar to other academic research in marketing at the time (Horn, 1953; Stewart, 1953). However, it stands in contrast to later sales history work by Hollander and by others, who used historical data to make substantial theoretical contributions or to give critical analysis to issues of the times. For instance, Hollander (1964) published a paper on anti-drummer legislation, which he positions as an example of the government’s failed protectionist efforts. As well, Benson (1981) and Church (2008) are illustrative examples of this shift from the descriptive narrative. Benson (1981) critically analyzed issues of class and sex that emerged in department store managers’ attempts to convert shopgirls into skilled saleswomen in the early to mid-1900s. In a similar theoretical spirit, Church (2008) compared the salesman narrative provided by Friedman (2004) to the British selling experience.

The monograph in the context of selling and sales research in the 1950s

Through his historical lens, Hollander’s monograph frequently suggests that the sales profession was difficult, ungratifying, and demeaning – and often seen as the trade of

the unscrupulous. “Unflattering” quotes (p. 10) and discussions of “prohibitive taxes” (p. 14), combined with descriptions of the sales profession as “harsh” and “strenuous” (p. 24), requiring salespeople to carry samples that were “too heavy” and “too bulky” (p. 32), and necessitating “tools of protection” (p. 12) such as armor and guns all suggest that the sales profession was not a glamorous line of work. This depiction of a salesman’s life as unattractive is not surprising. A few short years before Hollander’s monograph, playwright Miller’s (1968) groundbreaking *Death of a Salesman* (written in 1949), whose renown included Pulitzer and Tony Awards along with hundreds of Broadway performances, had introduced to the world the bleak and dismal life of salesman Willy Loman. Hollander even makes witty reference to this play in his monograph. For certain, the life of a salesman was not assumed to be a happy one.

Further, intensifying the unpleasantness of the salesman’s career was the fact that selling was historically perceived as lacking legitimacy. It seemed that trickery was a ready tool in the salesperson’s bag, one that the citizenry had to guard itself against. Hollander takes this view in stride as he titles one of his chapters Selling “Gimmicks” (with “Gimmicks” in quotation marks in the text), a framing that refers to salesmen devising schemes to trick and deceive a skeptical and stubborn customer. Hollander was by no means the first to make record of the aggressive tactics of salespeople. For instance, a sales textbook by Sheldon (1911, p. 85) describes “The tactics of selling:”

All through, from beginning to end, the salesman must be a tactician, arranging beforehand his plan of campaign, leaving nothing to chance; and yet in the battle he must think of nothing else but the victory.

As could be expected, the norm has always been to place the blame for these tactics on salespeople while giving scant attention to the company and family pressures put on salespeople to sell more.

Despite recognition of the salesman’s struggle and the often negative light surrounding the profession, textbook authors from the early to mid-twentieth century took strides toward explicitly legitimizing the selling function. Some authors attempted to establish the sales profession as one to be respected. For example, Jones (1911, p. 9) elaborates on the “Dignity of the Salesman’s Work.” Others, like Hoover (1916, p. 7), worked to differentiate a current, legitimate era of sales from a previously illegitimate one. Hoover suggests that:

There was a time when the object of the salesman was so to hoodwink the prospect as to induce him to take what the salesman had to sell, and to get out of him as large a consideration as possible. In that day the buyer had to watch every word and move of the salesmen lest he should be defrauded in the transaction [. . .] The day of *caveat emptor* and the ethics which encouraged or even tolerated lying and cheating in business has gone by. Tricks are no longer a part of salesmanship.

Roth (1949, p. xi) provides a similar evolutionary view:

Now at long last the sales profession feels that this stigma should be erased and selling given the recognition, as a public service, which it deserves. A trained salesman selling valuable merchandise accused of using “high pressure” should feel the same resentment as a reputable physician who finds himself slandered as a “quack.”

Pederson and Wright (1955, p. 28) delve into some of the reasons for the sequential changes in societal attitudes towards salesmen:

From the days of the Roman Empire to fairly recent times, many people have looked upon the merchants, traders, and salesmen with scorn and suspicion and have regarded them as public parasites. In fact, the churchmen of the Middle Ages thought it was impossible to be a merchant and a Christian at the same time. The sly and dishonest tactics of the Yankee peddlers enhanced this feeling of antagonism toward all types of merchants and salesmen. Not until recent years has society been willing to recognize that economic exchanges can be effective with a lasting profit to both the seller and the buyer.

In order to further legitimize the selling role, around the same time that Hollander published his monograph, other academics worked hard to establish selling as a profession. For example, in a Maynard and Davis' (1957, p. iii) edition of sales textbook, "considerable attention is given to the development of the sales administrator as a professional marketing executive with a vital role in the decision-making process."

Hollander's monograph appeared at the cusp of a turning point in the way in which selling became able to defend its social legitimacy. Shortly after Hollander's monograph, the managerial school of thought emerged in marketing. Following this school of thought, the customer (versus the company) was seen as the focal point of marketing (Keith, 1960). While there is no clear evidence that marketing evolved from a production orientation to a marketing orientation (Fullerton, 1988; Hollander, 1984), there is no doubt that a customer-centric focus became a dominant theme in academic circles of the 1960s. It seems that this theme gave sales authors a way to legitimize the selling function, with sales textbooks thereafter focusing on the role of sales and personal selling within the overall marketing system. It soon became the norm to refer to sales as "a vital subsystem within the greater, market-oriented total of the firm" (Downing, 1969; p. 1), a trend continuing to the present time with sales now accepted as playing "a very important role" in market-oriented companies (Churchill *et al.*, 2000).

Given widespread recognition that marketing efforts should be aimed to meet customers' needs and with sales positioned as a legitimate activity within marketing, in the last few decades of the twentieth century, the selling function seemed poised to lose much of its social stigma. Even so, society continued to have an uncertain and at times uncomfortable relationship with the sales professional. Goodman (1972, p. ix) stated this plainly: "The role of personal selling in a consumeristic economy is not well defined, let alone understood." In addition, sales has been an ever-popular target of writers and filmmakers, forever supplying images of the dreaded used car salesman or even powerful depictions of just how bad sales can be (for just two examples, see 1992 movie *Glengarry Glen Ross* and 1987 movie *Tin Men*). It seems that the sales profession still has a long way to go in overcoming a general discomfort with selling.

Other historical perspectives on sales

It is meaningful to not only consider Hollander's monograph within the context of the sales field at the time, but to also consider the extent to which other sales authors placed their writing in the context of history. Interestingly, Hollander is not alone in his interest of selling history. While some sales textbook writers only briefly allude to the long history of salesmen (Fowler, 1911; Still and Cundiff, 1957), others take care to elaborate on the history of this profession and even use this history to add further legitimacy to the sales function. Breen *et al.*'s (1950) Chapter 2 is titled "The Importance

of the Salesman” and includes a 12-page historical perspective on sales. Pederson and Wright (1955), to make the point that selling matters, discuss the historical context of selling back to America’s independence, which positions selling as an important part of American economic success.

More recently, others have written lengthy tomes (Friedman, 2004; Scull and Fuller, 1967; Spears, 1995 as described in Agnew, 1995) that describe in extensive detail the history of selling in America. In general, however, the history of selling from a business research perspective is not widespread. “Unlike many British business elites and occupational groups ... commercial travelers, or salesmen ... have received little attention from historians” (Church, 2008, p. 695).

Conclusion

It was pleasing to see that this valuable work is not quite lost to time, with a WorldCat search finding it in 13 libraries worldwide and surely many others not registered with this cataloger. For certain, Clio, among many others, must be pleased that Hollander took the time to involve himself in *Sales Devices Throughout the Ages*, giving everyone interested in personal selling and sales management a valuable understanding of the lengthy historic underpinnings of the profession. Certainly, it is impossible to read this monograph without being touched by the wry and thoughtful approach Hollander brings to his 4,000 year journey through the history of sales devices.

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About the authors

Maureen A. Bourassa is an Assistant Professor of Marketing in the Edwards School of Business at the University of Saskatchewan. Her current research focuses on business-to-business marketing relationships (including the role of respect in these relationships), corporate social responsibility, stakeholder engagement, and marketing history. Maureen A. Bourassa is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: bourassa@edwards.usask.ca

William H. Murphy is an Associate Professor of Marketing in the Edwards School of Business at the University of Saskatchewan. His research focuses on sales force motivation, total quality management (TQM), ethics, international marketing (particularly sales and marketing issues in China), and relationship management.