

ROLE OF THE SALESPERSON IN “TOTAL DESIGN”

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Abstract

Sales Management has known, during the last decades, a fulminating increase in the degree of complexity, enriching itself with new relationship strategies among the different components of the management system. These aim at new perspectives on the relationship between production and sale, between factory and market, and finally on the relationship between manufacturer and salesperson. The traditional view on designing a product is improved by means of the “Total Design” system, which targets a more ample perspective of the product and its fields of reference, in the sense that it gives greater importance to marketing and the requests of customers in the production design. And in this respect, the salesperson as a main link between the two economic spheres, gains a fundamental role.

Keywords: *management, Total Design, market research, marginal rate of substitution, sale.*

Introduction

This study refers to the role of the salesperson in the management system of product manufacturing. The complexity of the relational systems during the contemporary crisis period imperatively imposes the starting of revalorization strategies of the income-expense relationship, which results in labor reorganization and even in the reorganization of the economic system. In this regard, large organizations – companies that manufacture services or supply products – have in their operation politics permanent innovative systems of selling their own products, which equals in permanently “reinventing” sales marketing. The fact in itself may be achieved mainly under the favorable conditions of a so-called “total design” process, which is described in the latest scientific researches in the field of management. Going beyond the traditional vision of designing a product, corroborating the specific requirements in different fields (from engineering and technological components to aesthetic aspects), which blends into the image of the product, “total design” targets an ampler perspective regarding the product and its fields of reference. Marketing and the requests of the customers have a great importance in this regard. The salesperson has the first contact with these requests through his market prospecting and qualification activities. Thus, the concept of “Total Design” becomes one of the secrets of success, reliability, finally, one of the imperatively needed pillars in economy.

Our study aims to demonstrate, calling on practical field research from within two auto brand agencies, the multifaceted role of the salesperson not only in sales management, but also in product manufacturing, the salesperson thus becoming an

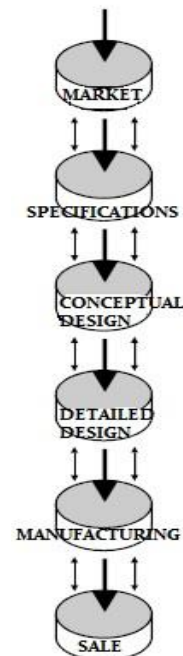
integrating element in the global system of total design. The research is part of an ampler study of different innovative sales strategies in the automotive field, largely elaborated based on own experience, but not without a serious documentation of specialty literature.

Actual content

The concept of “Total Design” was first brought up by Pugh in 1991: “Total Design is the systematic activity necessary, from the identification of the market/user need, to the selling of the successful product to satisfy that need – an activity that encompasses product, process, people and organization.”¹

Total Design starts from the **sales market**, from the analysis of the market as a decisive factor in the development of the product, followed then by different stages connected to **specifications, conceptualization, detailed design or manufacturing**. The general stages of such a design can be found in the attached image (Image 1), which highlights the fact that the market dictates the evolution of the product.

This is why the salesperson is, in this process of “Total Design”, a key element. As the vector of bonding in the sale-purchase process, he/she starts and insures the flow of the “Total Design” system, first of all by being given certain functions of



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¹ John Clarkson, Claudia Eckernert - Design Process Improvement: A review of current practice – Springer Science & Business Media, 2005.

prospecting the needs that occur on the market, of their qualification according to the needs of the market, in order to subsequently finalize the act of selling under optimum conditions.

Market research from the perspective of Total Design

Most specialty studies find that a project is born from a need that must be solved, thus giving a meaning to the utility of the product. Even more, this utility has great chance of being solved, creating its own market. But before reaching this objective, the salesperson has to go through certain stages of prospecting, promoting, identifying the needs, presentation-negotiation, stages that are equal, at least in the initial phase, with the classical sale technique, especially known as "Sales Steps". This means the identification of the customers' requests, by means of different stages of market diagnosis (for example, by questioning or collecting information), stage in which the salesperson registers the "gross requests" of the prospects, which will then be taken over to the next stages of the total design. The categorizing of the customers will be taken into consideration according to the fields of activity in which they operate, thus specialty salesman will be called on for each field.

The market is continuously transforming and evolving and its requests and particularly its claims change from day to day. If, for instance, in 2003 a car was sold by means of a used, almost destroyed flyer and despite this, the customer created an exaggerated impression about the car he wanted, as the particular information about the products was not available for everyone and the variety of the products was poor, but today the salespersons are confronted with the reverse relationship of the image of the customer related to the product. However the market, today, offers a large range of products and multiple leverages of knowing these products, by means of mass-media, websites, and targeted exhibitions. Furthermore, the technological development in the last decades brings forth the need of having certain products that offer a maximum level of comfort, which corresponds to the digital modernism, a fact that reverberates in the industrial design of the product. As a result, the market gave birth to the informed and exigent customer, who is difficult to influence, who has complex needs and is able to make the choice. In this case we cannot use old sales or presentation strategies of the finished product. Today's customer is a click away from information, and this click is often in his hands by means of different hand or pocket gadgets (Smartphone, tablet, laptop etc.). The salesperson, after market research, captures the information needed for the development of the products that are about to satisfy the needs of the customers,

information underlying the process of "Total Design". From this arises one of the fundamental roles of the salesperson in creating a dynamic market.

Total design involves also techniques and strategies of verifying the manner, in which a salesperson protects and treats the market, so that the collected information influences in an optimal manner the development of the products. Thus, in the new managerial activities one introduces the principle of feedback, achieving a permanent connection between the work of the salespersons and of the manufacturers, a sort of a continuous flow, which supports the quality of the sale and the prosperity of the market. In this respect, the practice of evaluation was developed by means of the "Mystery Shopper" procedure. Theoretically, this means sending certain false customers in order to evaluate the approved salesperson. The questions asked represent standard questionnaires, specialized on the field of the salesperson's competence, elaborated by the manufacturer. These are analyzed in terms of certain hypothetical questions addressed to the "false customers" after contacting the salesperson.

For example, here is a questionnaire of a Mystery Shopper, within the evaluation of a sales representative in the automotive industry:

- *After telling him what you wish, the sales advisor immediately started asking you questions in order to determine your needs?*
- *How many questions were you asked by the advisor in order to find out your needs, from the list below?*
 - *Did the sales advisor ask you whether you replace a current car or not?*
 - *Did the sales advisor ask you what elements lacked from the cars you drove so far?*
 - *Did the sales advisor ask you if there are any aspects/performances that should not be missing from the car you wish to buy?*
 - *Did he ask you any questions related to the needs of you family in terms of the car?*
 - *Did the sales advisor ask you how many members your family has?*
 - *Did the sales advisor ask you how many kilometers would you cover during a year?*
 - *Did the advisor ask you if you use the car more inside the city or more for longer trips?*
 - *Did the sales advisor ask you if you have a set budget for this acquisition?*
 - *Did the sales advisor ask you about the payment methods preferred by you (own resources or financing)?*
 - *Did the sales advisor ask you how long are you willing to wait for the delivery of the car or when you wish to have it?*
 - *What other questions did the advisor ask you in order to find out your needs?*

– *Did the sales advisor confirm your main needs, thus making sure that both of you have an agreement on the needs? (For example: “from what we discussed, I understand that you are interested in the price, fuel consumption ... is that right?”).*

Thus the truthfulness of the information is insured, which corresponds to the needs of the market and, as a result, the good operation of the total design cycle. So here's the capitalization of the information reversibility through a "back-loop": the information goes through a clear rout from the salesperson to the producer and from the producer to the salesperson.

Case study for highlighting the role of salesperson in total design

To test the effectiveness of the concept of “total design”, a thorough research of the sales process was used, by reference to the market needs, within a vehicle distributor in a continuously changing market in Northern Romania, but a market with a modest financial power. We speak about the market of Ford in 2006, in Satu-Mare County.

It was found that car sales in that period was in its infancy, the market not having yet a pronounced dynamic of well defined networks of distribution of new products on the market (the market was focused mainly on the segment of used vehicles, second-hand cars, and furthermore the stores for new vehicles were located in unsuitable locations, which were not standardized according to Western market). In this arid context, the sales were difficult to achieve, thus any leverage, essentially strategic, was welcomed. Here is an example, the case of a customer with a considerable financial power in the local market, a case that reflects the effective the role of the salesperson in “Total Design”:

One of the large auto parts manufacturers in the Satu Mare market wanted to buy a batch of cars with a certain configuration. The problem occurred when the customer wanted for the first equipment level of the Ford Focus sedan the following: *Climatronic air conditioning*. In this case the attempt to substitute this need was not possible, the customer arguing that if this system is not available as requested then he would switch to another car manufacturer. To resolve the issue he followed a process of feedback from the sole importer in Romania at that time, SC Romcar SRL. This first step was left without positive results, as the decision maker in this case was not the importer, but the manufacturer Ford Europe itself. Thus, the product manufacturer was contacted directly. After an analysis of several days and understanding the need for satisfying the customer - the manufacturer has approved to introduce on the lists of optional the “Climatronic Air Conditioning System” equipment for the Trendline equipment level, so for our case the situation was remedied and

the result of Total Design, i.e. finished product delivery to the end customer, according to his/her requirements, proved to be a real success.

We observe the essence of approaching a behavior in the terms of Total Design versus Classic Design. For the design of the finished product, in addition to requirements imposed by the market in general, the specific needs were also taken into consideration, needs of the end customer. In this case, the finished product, the Ford Focus at the Trendline equipment level and with the optional "automatic air conditioning system", has found its place in the market. In the case of Classic Design the final product would have been segmented into pieces that are not necessarily interrelated and the back-loops would not have worked in a customer-oriented manner. (Image 1)

Understanding the importance of Total Design will lead us toward a clearer view of the sales process, a process to which any product designed at a moment in time is subjected to or should be subjected to. The value of the design is specifically given by the capitalization of the finished product. In this regard, we must eliminate any barriers (e.g. shortcomings of the product) and they must be sent towards decision makers of the design and construction of that product.

Another case targets the stage of setting the requests of the customer, according to the “Total Design” system, this time within the Volkswagen market, in Maramures, in the year 2014.

It was found that the process of establishing the customer's requests does not necessarily come from the customer verbalizing his/her desire. A specialist sees beyond the initial desire.

Customer X originally asked for a Volkswagen Tiguan equipped with a 2.0 L engine with power of 140 hp - and a manual gearbox. During the process of determining customer's needs, the salesperson noticed that for the customer a diesel engine with superior power (170 hp) and an automatic gearbox would be more suitable. The deduction made after assessing the customer's profile: he used to drive an Opel Antara with a 150 hp engine and he mentioned certain situations where, due to motorisation, he was forced to cancel his intentions to pass cars in traffic. In the same time he motivates his initial choice with the desire not to exceed a certain threshold of financial investment. The solution of the problem was found in giving up some additional equipment features (for instance panoramic sunroof) and equipping the car with motorization adequate for the level of the client's needs. This process of replacing certain features with other more convenient ones, is the subject of what is known, in technical terms, as *an indifference curve*. In specialty papers, such as Engineering and Management of Production Systems, this situation is determined by the flexibility of the customer within the benefits that are

about to be acquired. We speak about the so-called “*marginal rate of substitution*.”² A customer’s consumer program or consumer recipe represents the specification of different quantities of various goods (or part of the same good), thus ensuring his/her satisfaction regarding that need. This recipe can be made up of various components that can be interchanged or can be quantitative. This consumer program is influenced by social status and family situation, by the phenomenon of “inducing” orientation needs through mass-media, advertising, publicity consumption.³ By analogy one can say that in the given situation, the customer stayed in the comfort zone of request satisfaction, of favored utility, giving up some features that will be compensated by stronger motorization. Thus, by inducing an idea of compensation between features, this customer X has ordered and received the car that was later proved to be the sum of all components and configurations that satisfied his needs in this area.

The process of determining the customer’s needs in correlation with the sales process is necessarily made by means of the principle of interdependence between *feature - advantage - benefit*. Ultimately the customer’s need translates customer into a benefit resulting from the advantage created by a certain some characteristic of the product. This benefit is what the customer buys. In our case the exchange rate will not be money for the car, but money for the amount of benefits given by the purchased product. An example in this regard is the question in the questionnaire: “How many kilometers will be covered annually?” Thus to a customer who covers 30,000 km / year will be given the explanation that a diesel engine will have a lower operation cost, costs coming from lower fuel consumption and engine reliability. These are features. The benefits bought by the final user are: lower running costs per kilometer, greater autonomy of the car, rarer refueling, diminished devaluation compared to gasoline engines.

Returning to the process of identifying customer needs, we see that the many parameters that corroborate in achieving verbalized needs can often be substituted. Thus the loop and branching theory in Total Design is verified. Even if a product has already been designed and it is not “initially” completely in agreement with the customer's request, this product can be converted into the desired shape through the *indifference curves* and the *marginal rate of substitution*.

Thus it is observed that “Total Design” involves the shaping of sales strategies focused on customer needs, strategies that are based on the “*confidence climate*”, about which Geroge Butunoiu⁴ accurately speaks in his study in sales process. The author mentions that this principle must be fully assumed by the salesperson, especially since one can see in the salesperson-customer communication the persistence of doubts regarding the exacerbated interests of the salesperson to sell his merchandise. Hence the increasing need to offer the customer the safety of a well operating work ethics.

Forming *the trusting climate* targets above all the confidence in the salesperson as a representative of the company, but the quoted expert stresses the fact that “*we speak about the customer's trust in the one he talks to, first of all as a person and then as a representative of the company*” and this in the virtue of the fact that “*a sale is a concrete, interpersonal act, between two people, not an abstract one, between two abstract entities such as companies*.”⁵ In this respect, certain communication methods are thORIZED, which are applied more as “psychological tricks”: “the technique of the limping duck”⁶ (consisting in giving the customer advise, which apparently brings disadvantage to the salesperson, sometimes exaggerated by means of the “honesty crisis”⁷, a technique through which the salesperson turns the customer away from his/her initial requests, arguing his decision by correctling setting the customer’s needs and by recapitalizing the selection criteria of the products. Under this aspect, the interior motive of “Total Design” is limited to the eloquent assertion of the same author, according to which “*a good salesperson does not sell only a product, he sells a solution*”⁸

Conclusions

The role of the salesperson in the Total Design system is generated by the salesperson’s ability to find solutions for the customers’ requests, by discovering and applying “cooperative strategies”⁹, based on positive influence tactics (recommendations, promises, concessions). Furthermore, by means of these strategies, the customer’s trust is earned, which a fundamental goal in the salesperson-customer relationship that basically determines the company’s ownership. The trust sought by the customer is based on the belief in the effectiveness of the desired product, but most

² Ioan Abrudan, Ioan Candea – Engineering and Management of Production Systems, Publishing House Dacia 2002, pages 84-85.

³ Ibidem.

⁴ George Butunoiu, *Sale Techniques*, Publishing House All Eduațional, Bucharest, 1995, page48.

⁵ ibidem, page 49.

⁶ ibidem, page 50.

⁷ Ibidem.

⁸ ibidem, page54.

⁹ Ștefan Pruteanu, *Negotiation and Transaction Analysis*, Publishing House Sagitarius, Iași, 1996, page179.

often, it is reflected on the person who mediates the achievement of the product. And this, in view of the fact that, in general, the customer needs, even if unconsciously, to trust the salesperson, first as a person, since as George Pruteanu states, “*a sale is a concrete, interpersonal act, between two people, not*

an abstract one, between two abstract entities.”¹⁰ Of course this author’s vision today seems overcome by technological developments and online transactions, but even in this context, confidence in the company's representative does not deny its fundamental role in winning over customers.

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¹⁰ apud. George Butunoiu, *Sale Techniques*, Publishing House All Educațional, Bucharest, 1995, page 49.