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"I am Quite a Genuine Person": Sales Training and the Limits of Moulding Instrumentality

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"I AM QUITE A GENUINE PERSON": SALES TRAINING AND THE LIMITS OF MOULDING INSTRUMENTALITY

ABSTRACT

Sales work is a key feature of the contemporary service economy which has prompted considerable academic debate. This has centred on the processes of standardization exemplified by sales routines and scripts. It is frequently suggested that these management devices are unproblematically embraced by workers who share a mutual interest with management in controlling customer behaviour and masking the contradictions of simultaneously displaying empathy while 'closing the deal'. In these accounts, sales workers are denied agency. This paper questions this assumption by presenting empirical evidence from a case study of sales advisors in a large chain of private fitness clubs whose job is to sell annual memberships. The research involved eight interviews with trainers and managers at head office. We were also able to tape record and participate in a five day training course that all newly appointed sales advisors have to attend. We carried out interviews with all eight trainees a couple of months after the end of the course. This allowed us to follow the path of newly appointed sales advisors by hearing, seeing and experiencing the training they receive, and then gathering data on the extent to which the training is followed on the ground. The data show that although the training course placed strong emphasis on routines designed to control customers and maximize the commission received by sales advisors, once back on 'home' territory advisors often chose to approach customers with less instrumentality. This contrast is explained by reference to the advisors' past dispositions and experiences, and to the specific local conditions in which sales take place.

“I AM QUITE A GENUINE PERSON”: SALES TRAINING AND THE LIMITS OF MOULDING INSTRUMENTALITY

INTRODUCTION

Sales work, as a key facet of the contemporary service economy, its logic and contradictions have constituted the focus of a significant amount of research in sociology (Oakes 1990, Leidner 1993), labour process and organization theory (Knights and Morgan 1991, Korczynski 2005). A sub-theme featured prominently in these debates is the standardization of sales work in the form of scripts.

In the managerial literature on personal sales, scripts are defined as representing “a sales approach considered to be appropriate for a specific sales situation” (Leigh 1987, p. 40) and their importance in enhancing the performance of sales people is often discussed (Leigh and McGraw 1989, Leong et al. 1989, Shepherd and Rentz 1990, Hubbert et al. 1994). On the other hand, critical research on the logic of personal sales, has stressed the role of scripts in concealing the relation of instrumental empathy that exists between firms and their customers. In other words, an organization − as represented by the sales workers − has to appear as having the customer’s interests at heart while disguising the fact that the interest is “not so much on the customer per se but rather in obtaining the customer’s money” (Korczynski 2005, p.73). To mask this contradiction sales scripts are designed to promote the myth of customer sovereignty, while at the same time giving the salesperson the tools to successfully close the sale.

Training programmes constitute the key medium through which sales scripts are taught (Leigh 1987). Oakes (1990) has also argued that such programmes tend to conceive the sales process in paradoxical terms, as they simultaneously employ two conflicting idioms: the commercial and the service idiom. According to the former, the customer is a means to an end and sales is strictly about securing the maximum commission. According to the service idiom, however, the customer is entitled to service with the sales person putting the customer’s needs first. Although managerial discourse tends to relieve this tension by stressing the interdependence of the two idioms, training programmes place priority, via the sales scripts, on the commercial dimension of the sales process.

Following on these observations, previous research has argued that in the context of sales work, scripts are embraced – rather than resisted – by workers, as they share an interest with managers in controlling the prospects' (potential clients) behaviour (Leidner 1993). Although this argument has some substance in that it stresses the contradictions on which the sales process rest, it tends, however, to deny the sales workers any significant degree of agency. For the most part, it is implied that they will unavoidably resort to techniques (dictated by management) of enchantment in order to mask instrumentalism towards the customer.

Recent research by Turley and Geiger (2006) on sales people learning within client relationships has indicated that this need not be the case. Their evidence, focusing on business to business salespeople, shows that in their attempts to maintain a long − term relationship, sales workers often genuinely empathised with their clients, thus transgressing managerial expectations regulating their work. Although the context of business to business sales might require the building and maintenance of long − term relationships to a greater degree than is the case in "one-off" interactions where sales people sell to the personal needs of individuals, Turley and Geiger's (2006) point echoes research in organisation and labour process theory (Thompson and Ackroyd 1995, Knights and McCabe 2000). This suggests that there are limits to managerial control over employee subjectivity. This is underemphasized by previous research on the role of scripts and routines in personal sales. This paper seeks to address this limitation by answering the following questions: how do sales workers themselves view their role? Does their view differ from what management expects of them? How are norms and routines deriving from the commercial idiom (and indicative of instrumental empathy) enacted in sales interactions? Is there a contrast between what is taught in training programmes and the way sales staff learn to approach their work in practice?

To answer these questions, the paper presents empirical evidence from a case study of sales advisors in a large chain of private fitness clubs. The next section provides information on the case organisation and the methods used in the study. Following this discussion we present evidence stemming from our observation of the training course. The evidence confirms the fact that training is the key medium through which sales workers familiarise themselves with the norms and formal expectations of their role. It also shows that techniques related to customer enchantment and instrumental empathy (thus placing priority on the commercial paradigm) constitute a significant part of what is taught in the classroom. The following section, focusing on the application of sales scripts in everyday work practice, provides a contrasting picture to our observation findings. More specifically, interviews with the trainees show that they did not apply these norms/routines unreflectively in everyday practice. Moreover, in some cases the way they chose to approach customers at the point of sale differed from managerial expectations. Finally, certain elements of a framework developed by Tsoukas (1996) in his work on the firm as a distributed knowledge system are drawn upon to explain the contrast between what management advocates in formal training and how this is enacted in practice by sales workers. A focus on individual dispositions, on the one hand and the local context where sales work take place, on the other, serves to emphasize the fact that in learning to perform their jobs, sales workers are "more than passive recipients of knowledge that is external to them", that is codified knowledge in the format of sales scripts (Smith 2006, p.291).

METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

Fieldwork took place at The Gym (a pseudonym), a chain of private fitness clubs, from early May to July 2006. The company emerged as a result of the decision of its founders to jointly manage their individual clubs to create a network of gyms, thus aiming at a larger share in the UK heath and fitness market. The Gym was firmly established as a brand in 1996 and a year later it joined the top ten health and fitness club operators. Early in 2006, The Gym acquired a smaller chain of fitness clubs and currently it has more than 88 clubs and over a quarter of a million members. Eight preliminary interviews with some of the trainers and managers of The Gym, indicated that this was a sales driven company. In other words the focus was exclusively on bringing in as many new members as possible every month, with the retention of older members not being considered a high priority. The emphasis of the senior executive team on the maximization of sales revenue and the minimization of costs as criteria for assessing and rewarding the club managers' performance would reflect on the operational standards of the clubs, something that only reinforced the membership retention problems. Given this strong sales orientation, The Gym emerged as a very appropriate setting for research.

One of the methods used for the collection of data was participant observation, by two members of the research team, of a training course for newly appointed sales advisors whose job is to sell annual gym membership to the public. The course lasted for 5 days and ended with an exam at the final day. It constituted the main medium of socialising the new recruits into the company's climate and sales approach. With the exception of Leidner (1993), the use of participant observation is not common in previous research focusing on sales work. In this case, it enabled the authors to get a first hand experience of how the sales process was conceived and presented to the sales force and it provided a clear picture of the objectives of the case organization with regard to the use of sales scripts by the sales advisors. Additionally, participation in the course also provided a glimpse into how the sales advisors' performance was assessed and controlled. While in the classroom, the two research team members took detailed notes which they subsequently wrote up during the evenings, producing a research diary of 19.000 words. The entire course was also tape recorded (apart from individual role plays) and various documents, including the course workbook, exercises, slides and the exam questions, were collected. Additionally, eight interviews were conducted with the trainer (before the commencement of the course) as well as with the trainees at their individual clubs, once the course had been completed. The course and interview transcripts were analysed using the Atlas.TI qualitative software to identify key themes.

BEING TRAINED TO FOLLOW THE CORPORATE SCRIPT

As mentioned above, the Sales Foundation Course (as it was called) was the first one of a series of training programmes designed for The Gym's sales advisors. It sought to socialise new recruits with little or no experience of sales in the fitness sector into the company's culture and teach them the basics of the sales process as conceived by management. In the light of the suggestion that "what constitutes sales, what qualifies as success and failure in the execution of the sales process, and what it means to be a salesperson are all determined by the principles of the training programs" (Oakes 1990, p.2), our participant observation of the course gave us valuable insights into the making of a Membership Sales Advisor (MSA).

Training for membership sales advisors took place off-the-job and the emphasis was on the transmission of knowledge from the trainer to the novice sales people in classroom fashion. The frequency with which the sales foundation course run in the Gym was high, mirroring the fact that labour turnover among sales advisors was in excess of 100%. As will be shown later one of the key factors accounting for such a high rate of turnover was low pay. The course we attended took place in one of the company's residential clubs and the participants (8 in total) were drawn from clubs throughout the UK, covering areas in both the South and North of the country.

The first day of the course began with an introduction to the company's mission and key values, and how they related to the sales advisor role. Given that trainees had only been with the company for a short time (ranging from 5 days to 4 months) there was a short discussion on the product sold (gym membership) and its characteristics (as the delegate workbook read, "our product is intangible but is life-changing"). A definition of sales, was provided and a significant amount of time was spent on describing and discussing the various stages of the sales process as designed by the sales management of the company. These were: prospecting (various ways of identifying potential customers), meet and greet (a prospect who visits the club), needs analysis (identifying what the prospects want to achieve by joining the club), target tour (touring the prospect in the areas of the club related to his/her needs), price presentation and close, objection handling, second attempt at closing, referrals (names given by new member to contact) and follow up. From that point of view, the sales process, as conceived by The Gym, conformed to the generic format of selling often outlined in the prescriptive literature on sales (e.g. Jobber and Lancaster 2000, Fohlke 2006). At the same time as presenting selling as a nine stage process, buying gym membership was conceived as consisting of the following 5 steps: pre-contemplation, contemplation, action, retention and end stage.

Each one of the stages in the sales process provided the material for the next three days of the course. Scripts related to the different tasks in the process were laid out by the trainer and practised in role plays by the trainees. Other items covered during the first day of the course were a focus on building rapport, with the trainer stressing the importance of body language and the use of skills such as listening and questioning. Finally, a significant amount of time was spent on familiarising the sales advisors with the key performance indicators that they had to meet on a daily basis: these included contacts (any contact/conversation with a person), new contacts (contact with full name, 2 telephone numbers and/or email address and an interest in joining), appointments, tours, sales and referrals. A definition was provided for each one of these key performance indicators (KPIs) by the trainer not only to turn the delegates' attention to the importance of meeting their targets but also to discourage, early on, any phenomena of misconduct in the workplace (for example, ghosting appointments and holding or recycling calls). In addition, towards the end of the first day the trainees were introduced to formulas which were used by local management to calculate their daily performance. Individual as well as group exercises were used to further familiarise the advisors with the ratios as they were expected to learn them by heart for the end-of-course exam. Overall, almost a full day of the course was spent on working on the ratios, which indicated where the focus of the company really lay.

Throughout the course, the trainer referred to the role of the trainees as professionals whose efforts were important in helping people meet their fitness objectives. However, it became clear early on that references to customers and their needs were not as genuine as they first seemed to be, at least from an outsiders' perspective. More specifically, the delegates were taught to enchant the customer in order to shape their behaviour to close the sale rather than truly addressing their needs.

Learning to Enchant

One of the first examples indicative of the focus on "enchanting" the customer, relates to the emphasis the trainer placed, early on in the course, on "matching and mirroring" the prospects' image (DeCormier and Jackson 1998) in order to build rapport:

> "It really will help build rapport, you know, the way someone carries themselves as well. If someone's very up straight then you would need to match and mirror that also, someone's kind of a bit more relaxed and they kind of use their shoulders a bit more and they talk down here, then you

> would tend to want to try and do that as well, because on an unconscious level, if you can actually physically match and mirror them, that will build even more rapport than just asking questions and using their same language as well. Really very interesting thing that whole concept, cause we all kind of know what rapport feels like, yet so many people find it difficult in describing how do we get to rapport". [trainer addressing the delegates]

Questioning skills were presented as another aspect of rapport building while it was stressed that "matching and mirroring" − which could be characterised as surface acting (Hochschild 1983) − should be used not only during the "meet and greet" stage of the sales process but also during the "needs analysis". This was the stage where the MSA tries to identify why the prospect is thinking of joining the club and what their needs are in terms of personal fitness. Thus, matching and mirroring the prospect, while asking them what they would like to achieve from their membership helps to project empathy at the same time as allowing the sales advisor to go on with their sales chatter and "close" the sale.

Another technique to control the customers in order to "close them" was that of "hurt and rescue". According to the trainer, at the needs analysis stage, a sales advisor has to bring into the surface any personal problems or emotional issues which may have made the prospect think about their fitness. Once aired, these reasons are repeated in order to "hurt" the prospect. From this low point, prospects are gradually "rescued" by presenting the product − gym membership − as the solution to their ills. The trainer, interviewed prior to our attendance of the course, summarises the rationale for using the concept in the following terms:

> "the needs analysis is ultimately about bringing the emotion on why this person has walked into the club. So it's referred to as "hurt and rescue process for sales prospects". So I need to hurt you to really get you to understand why you've walked into my club and what your needs are. And quite often with a number of prospects it can be quite an emotional thing. And then I'm going to rescue you by showing our product. How we can help you achieve the goals that you want to achieve. So that's the hurt and rescue concept. The needs analysis is to hurt them to get the emotion out and for them to understand that they really need to do this and then the rescue is the tour, the price presentation, the closing and the continuation of membership".

The above quote clearly illustrates that the reference to customer needs is far from genuine, as the real concern of the salesperson is to create a sense of urgency, by hurting the prospect, in order to make them join the club. In this case, the focus on meeting the demands of the commercial idiom (closing the prospect) is disguised through an emphasis on the role of advisors as experts who "help" the prospects to identify their fitness needs. When presented at the course, though, the concept of "hurting" was devoid of any links to customer needs:

> Trainer: What I'd like to just talk you through first though is the concept of hurt and rescue. Now you may have heard about this previously. What we tend to do, is a needs analysis needs to be on the emotional side, so the emotive reasons why someone has come in to join a health club. And in order to bring that emotion to the forefront or to the surface, we need to hurt the prospects. Okay?
>
> Delegate: Someone's burst into tears before.
>
> Trainer: Yeah. And you know, you may have people cry. And if they cry you kind of know that you've got to the right level with them, okay? Because for a lot of these, for some people that come into your club, they might have been carrying round an awful lot of baggage for a long period of time, things that they don't like about themselves or it might be emotional reason why they don't exercise or the emotion that comes with weight gain, whether it be after pregnancy or menopause or I don't feel sexy enough and all of those other things that have the knock on effect to that.

Objection handling offered another example of customer enchantment. It was conceived by management at The Gym as a stage in the sales process, following price presentation and a first attempt at closing the sale. The trainee's workbook summarised the recommended approach in the acronym: LAPAC (Listen, Acknowledge, Probe, Answer, Close). The "listen" and "acknowledge" parts related to the need for the sales advisor to *appear* as empathetic to the customer. By probing the advisor is encouraged to get more information about the prospect's objection. Following that, in the "answer" part, they are taught to be subtly dismissive of the reasons given, reminding the prospect of their personal need to exercise. Finally, they used the technique known as the "presumptive" or "assumptive" close (also mentioned in Leidner 1993, and Korzcynski 2005), i.e. carrying on as if the prospect had already given their consent for joining. The workbook made two points:

> "This is a great way of transitioning – 'so you see it is only 40 pence per work out, you don't really want to let that stand in your way of achieving

> your fitness goals do you? BY THE WAY [original], how do you want to pay today, cash, cheque, or credit card?'
>
> "Ask for the money again, if you again receive a no, or objection, use this process [LAPAC] to again deal with it".

All the above techniques provided strong indications that what was taught in the course was instrumental empathy (Korczynski 2005). However, it was on the fourth day of the course − when the trainer was covering the "price presentation" stage of the sales process − that the instrumentality with which sales advisors were to approach their prospects became even more evident. The Gym were offering four types of gym membership: Red, Blue, Yellow and Green (for the various features of those memberships see tables 1 and 2 below). The standard format for the price presentation was that the MSAs should only present a prospect with the two most expensive types of memberships because those secured higher commissions, regardless of the prospects' needs.

Table 1: Types of Gym Membership

	Membership Category			
	Red	Blue	Yellow	Green
Price pcm	£69.95-£62.95	£59.95-£52.95	£42.95-£40.95	£32.95-£29.95
Administration & joining fee	£100-£25	£100-£25	£55-£25	£55-£25
MSA Commission on Sign-Up	£12-£10	£8-£7	£6-£5	£5-£4

Table 2: Benefits per Membership Category

Membership Category / Benefits	Red	Blue	Yellow	Green
Access to All Other Clubs at Any Time	√	X	X	X
Access to All Other Clubs at Off-Peak Times	√	√	X	X
Access to 'Own' Club at Any Time	√	√	√	X
Access to 'Own' Club only at Off-Peak Times	√	√	√	√
Towel	√	√	X	X
Four 121 Training Sessions	√	√	√	X

The course trainer, in an interview before the course, elaborates on the use of this "recipe":

> "So we get them [the sales advisors] to present the Red membership and the Blue membership which are our two most expensive memberships. So we present those two and we use the 'some' people chose the Blue membership but our 'most' popular membership is the Red membership, which naturally instigates the person into thinking they take the top price membership. So that's our standard price presentation. There's a number of different ways

> you can do it but that's how we try and train everyone to deliver it. It's a very successful price presentation. So after they've done the price presentation they then learn how to ask for the business and then stay silent".

Apart from the use of the comparison schema "some" and "most" (relating to customers), trainees were told that in their attempt to sell the top price membership they should be "silent" about the fact that the Blue and Yellow memberships shared some of the features of the Red one (e.g. 1-2-1 training sessions). Additionally, another "recommendation" was that advisors try to inflate the joining fee. The "rule" was that the joining fee should always cover the administration fee (£25) and the sale of what was called the "key kit bag" which cost £30 and contained products that the customers would supposedly need in the gym, e.g. sweat towels, water bottles etc. Once the initial figure of £55 was covered, the sales advisors were encouraged to go above that and charge anything between £100-£200 as a joining fee, depending on the type of the club (residential or city centre, as these two types of club would attract different clientelle). Thus, the cynicism and instrumentality towards the customer was threefold: firstly, the customer had no choice over which membership they would sign for; secondly, they were ultimately sold the kit bag without ever giving their consent (as its cost was incorporated into the joining fee and presented to them as a "gift"); and thirdly, they could end up paying an outrageously high joining fee, thinking that this was the norm. For The Gym, the focus was definitely on the hard sale (commercial idiom) and references to "customer needs" and "service" (service idiom) were only used as the means to facilitate getting and maximising sales.

Measuring Performance

As mentioned earlier, the training course featured a detailed discussion on what constituted successful performance, clarifying the minimum targets for each day of work. Every day an advisor was expected to: generate 35 contacts daily, 15 of which should be new (as noted previously, these would be contacts with full name, 2 telephone numbers and/or email address and an interest in joining), book 10 appointments (mutually agreeable time and date) for people to come and visit the club, give at least 5 tours (meeting and showing the club to prospects), close 3 sales and generate 6 referrals (names given by new members to contact) at point of sale.

Generating new contacts could be done either within the physical surroundings of the club (in-reach) or outside the club (out-reach). In the latter case, sales advisors would visit such places as the nearest train stations, supermarkets or corporate offices trying to deliver leaflets and chatting with people in an effort to generate contacts who they would call later with an invitation to visit the club. However, in most of our interviews with trainees, the common view was that this was not a very effective way of prospecting. Interviewees pointed to the limitations of ending up in the same places and/or not being able to constantly come up with new ideas of how to approach the public. That meant that advisors were mostly relying on “walk-ins” (people visiting the club on their own) to meet the targets and make sales. Therefore, the daily targets were quite high and most of the interviewees stressed how challenging it was to be able to close 3 sales on a daily basis.

Additionally, the performance ratios (see Table 3) on which a significant amount of time was dedicated during the course and the exam, were not used at all by the advisors themselves as interviews revealed. Instead, they were a tool club managers used in order to: 1) control the performance of their staff; and 2) set up daily tasks. Nevertheless, it served to make MSAs aware of how their performance was managed and controlled. In addition to the use of the performance ratios, in almost every club we visited, in the sales advisors’ office there was a grid drawn on a white-board featuring the names of MSAs and how well they were faring against each one of the aforementioned KPIs. Another white-board would typically be used to show the amount of sales generated by the club against its daily target. All this meant that sales advisors could not escape the gaze of management.

Table 3: Performance Ratios

Measure	**Ratio**
Contact to appointment	0.3
Appointment set to appointment show	0.5
Appointment show to sale	0.6

As one of the sales advisor put it:

> "And it never, you know this job never stops, you can never have a bad day, and if you do you're questioned on your role and how good you are".

Under conditions of strict control and constant pressure to "deliver", it is all the more remarkable that almost none of the MSAs interviewed, actively used the techniques of instrumental empathy taught on the course, once back on "home territory". It is to this issue that we now turn.

USING AND ABUSING THE CORPORATE SCRIPT

This section focuses on the extent to which the membership sales advisors drew on the concepts taught at the course in their everyday work. The evidence shows that once back on "home territory" MSAs approached prospects with less instrumentality than they had been taught to use. Their rejection of the managerial scripts were based on *ethical* and, in some cases, *pragmatic* grounds. However, before presenting the interview data, it should be noted that even during the course, the above mentioned methods of closing the sale were contested by the trainees. The following quote provides an example of what we would call an *ethically* based rejection of instrumental empathy. It features an exchange between the trainer and one of the participants who criticised the decision of putting forward the most expensive membership, when at the same time the promotions team were distributing leaflets suggesting that membership can cost only £29.95 per month.

> Delegate: Okay, well why do we hand out leaflets saying you can get a membership for £29.95?
>
> Trainer: In answer to that, that's why you will start seeing marketing going forward with no or higher price points on it.
>
> Delegate: So when do you expect us to start trying to sell that membership [top-price] if someone comes in with a leaflet with that price on there?
>
> Trainer: Okay, so does that leaflet match absolutely everyone's needs?
>
> Delegate: No, I know that, I'm not saying that, but if someone comes in with a leaflet saying £29.95, then I try and sell them a £99.95 or a £59, well for me it would be £42.95, they would be like, well what's this then

> [meaning the leaflet]. I think that it's quite false advertising then and then it's definitely on our part with us advertising. At the end of the day, I know we are a business and everything but I just feel that…

To these objections, the trainer would reply that "this is all about you", meaning that her reason for suggesting these methods of price presentation is that she wanted the sales advisors to "work smart", as she would put it, and earn the maximum commission possible. Of course, at one point she added:

> "The more money that you bring in to this business as a membership sales advisor, the more Kudos you're going to have, because we need to be profitable and it means that your club will have a better profit and loss account. We are in the business to make money. If we don't make money as a business we ain't going to survive, it's what it comes down to".

Despite the trainer's many admonitions, interviews with the trainees showed that they did not always take her advice to heart when it came to displaying instrumental empathy and play the part of ruthless sales people once they returned to their workplace.

As mentioned above, a lot of the training course focused on the use of scripts: from the "meet and greet" to the "needs analysis" and from "objection handling" to "price presentation" there was a standard format according to which the advisors were supposed to approach the prospect and the sales process. However, when asked which elements of the course they found the most relevant or helpful for their work, none of the interviewees referred to the routines indicative of managerial instrumentality. Instead, given their short tenure with the company – which necessitated a self-directed effort to learn about the product – most of them mentioned perhaps the least "commercially" minded aspect of the course: touring. The focus on touring equipped them, as they saw it, to get to know the product better and be able to speak more confidently about the features of the club. The finding that the advisors seemed to think that product knowledge would serve them better than "customer enchantment" scripts, does not sit well with accounts such as the one featured in Leidner (1993) who has argued that sales people often embrace routines which allow them to control the customer and thus perform their job better.

From that point of view, interviews with the MSAs offered many more examples of ethical objection to instrumental empathy. More specifically, several of the advisors were critical of techniques that sought to manipulate the prospect. An example is given by their comments on the "match and mirror" concept:

> "I think I'm quite a genuine person, I'm not a false person at all and I will be honest with them [the customers] and I think it's important, there's a lot of salespeople who are very crafty and very sort of secretive and very smart in that way, but I think there's no, it just wouldn't be me. I'm personally not like that at all, I couldn't be like that in my job role".

Another employee suggested that in relating to the customers she would mostly rely on what Bolton and Boyd (2003, p.297) call "presentational emotion management" − informed by "a lifetime's social training" − rather than surface acting as was demonstrated in the "matching and mirroring" techniques:

> "I think if you're good at reading other people you'll be fine at doing this [relating to prospects], you've got no worries, like you just react to them how they react to you. It's quite easy it's not hard. That's probably the, like one thing that is most important".

Some were openly dismissive of the "hurt and rescue" technique:

> "I didn't really like all that, like that hurt and rescue stuff, you know. Like to ask or to repeat back when someone's told you something that's personal to them, you know, they don't really want you to go and shove that back in their face at the end just so they sign a piece of paper. I just don't think that's right. I think if they're going to do it, they'll do it. Yeah, I think she was a bit too much like very, very hard sell on that point, really a hard sell".

Similarly, the price presentation routines did not fare better among the sales advisors. Some of them dismissed them, indicating that they are influenced in their role by rules of professional conduct which stress the provision of service and do not treat it merely as a technique for customer control. This becomes clear in the following quotes:

> "I don't think I'm trying to just sell them something, because I think I'm genuinely trying to help them out as well and make their life better. I don't

> really just go for the money end. I don't sell them anything just because it's going to make me money, I sell them what's suitable for them, otherwise I'm in the wrong and they're not going to be happy and they're going to leave anyway, so I look after their needs as opposed to just my needs".

> "When she was saying about, you know, putting forward the most expensive price and things like that, I didn't agree with that at all cause I don't feel that someone's come in and said they want gym membership, I'm not going to go and tell them that they've got to pay £50 when it's not necessarily as expensive as that… It's just not good practice I don't think, I don't agree with that. That's why I left [a major clearing bank] cause they're like that".

In some cases, socialisation in different working environments prompts a leaning towards the service paradigm:

> "What's the point in selling them a membership that means they can use other clubs if they never leave Billericay. That's, that to me is mean selling I mean I just wouldn't do it, you know, that's your choice if that's how you want to play it then you can but I just, I don't, I disagree with that… I've worked in a beauty salon and I was selling products. I worked for a different bank for two years before I worked for [major clearing bank] and, you know, I've just always been in that customer service really. So it's not like you're offering them something that is bad for them. You're offering them something that's really good for them so you should feel that that's fine. But I just don't agree with doing things that don't really benefit them that much, which might put them off, you know, doing something that's going to make them feel better".

Others, though leaning more towards the commercial idiom, acknowledge that local conditions (e.g. size of club, type of clientele) did not favour the use of price presentation routines. So, in these cases, the objection was based on *pragmatic* circumstances:

> "I mean for a business, you know, you should always go the highest no matter what, anyone would know that, but you need to understand on what location you're in, you know, in a city environment I know that not everyone that walks in here could you know, buy a [Red] membership at £63 a month".

> "If it's possible I've tried, the people have walked straight out because this club is not worth £62.95 a month in people's eyes, but I mean I'll be honest, with the city centre and Birmingham, you get people that are mainly on benefits that all come to this club because even if you're on benefits you can

afford to come here. No way can I sell a [Red] in this club [laughs], we're not getting that type of clientele. London yes, London will get that clientele, Birmingham no".

Apart from being critical towards the training they had received, most of the advisors were very aware of the fact that the conditions of their work were not ideal. For the amount of effort they had to put into their work, the lack of autonomy and repetitious nature of tasks, rewards (monetary or otherwise) were low. The annual salary was £12.000 and individual commission rates ranged between £4-£8 on average (see table 1). Additionally, all advisors confirmed that it was impossible to achieve the monthly sales team target, something that would double their commission:

"Yeah I think it's these targets that are very hard to do, like three heads everyday. If I did three heads everyday and all the members in my team did three heads everyday, there would be no space in this club for all the people that we would be taking on. That is just ridiculous that I have to take on nine new people everyday. You're talking, I mean it's just crazy. What's nine times 360? A lot, yeah, a lot. So it's just not, it's just not feasible".

"I don't feel like coming to work anymore. It's the same thing day-in, day-out, you know what to expect, you're going to come in, you're going to make the calls, you're going to see people, show them round and sign them up. It's quite routine and I'll be honest I'm looking for more. I don't want to be an MSA for the rest of my life. Because there's not enough money in it. I'm not here to make my basic, you know the basic wage is so low that they give you commission on top to build on. We get individual commissions but they're very low, very low. The commission scheme looks amazing, if you can hit target [meaning the team target] you can make a lot of money. But cause we don't hit target there's not a lot of money, yeah".

CONCLUSION

Previous research on the nature of sales work has tended to underemphasize the agency of sales agents by assuming that they unproblematically adopt managerial norms and prescriptions on how to approach the customer. To stress the importance of viewing the sales workers as active agents, one of the questions posed at the introduction of this paper was how sales people themselves view their role: do they necessarily see it as a contradictory one, i.e. simultaneously having to display empathy while “closing” the deal?

Oakes (1990) addresses this question by arguing that the contradictions between the commercial and the service idioms enacted within the sales process are concealed from the sales agents as management develops linkages between them so that the attainment of the goals of the former appears to rest on the latter. In the context of life insurance sales, this is achieved by stressing the role of the salespeople as professionals whose sales efforts are crucial in guiding and assisting prospects to prioritise their financial security needs and select a feasible plan.

Based on the case study presented here, we would argue that the MSAs did not see their role as a paradoxical one; that is entailing the tasks of projecting empathy, while concentrating on “closing” the prospect by whatever means necessary. However, this was not the result of ignorance of the contradictions of the sales process as taught on in the training course. Though on several occasions the trainer stressed their role as professionals who help prospects identify their fitness needs, it would be hard to ignore the discrepancy in the company’s talk about service and their unwillingness to invest in club maintenance. This served to underline the point that any reference to the service paradigm was used only as a tool for “duping” the customers into paying for the highest priced membership. Indeed, for management at The Gym, “working smarter” meant pushing the “commercial paradigm” to the extreme of almost deceiving the customer about their options. Thus, in seeking to explain why the sales advisors tended to discard the “sneaky” sales techniques − presented on the training course − in their daily work practice, we have to look elsewhere.

Since, the principles and techniques of sales training are enacted in divergent local contexts, elements of Tsoukas' (1996) work on the firm as distributed knowledge system are of relevance here. The starting point in Tsoukas' argument is that since within firms individuals are faced with significantly different circumstances, propositional knowledge (i.e. codified/prescriptive knowledge) cannot address the various conditions of local contexts. He argues (p.17) that social practices, and consequently an individual's stock of knowledge consist of three dimensions: normative expectations associated with performing a role, past dispositions (acquired in a variety of contexts) and the interactive-situational dimension, i.e. the specific context within which normative expectations and dispositions are enacted.

To relate this framework to our evidence, it could be argued that the training course presented the principal expectations deriving from the sales advisor role, by outlining performance targets and prescribing how the workers should approach each one of the stages of the sales process. However, as mentioned previously, part of the reason why these prescriptions/routines were not applied "in the field" is that in certain cases they were rendered irrelevant by the local conditions in the various clubs where the MSAs are employed. Thus, in learning their role they saw as necessary the re-contextualisation of the training course knowledge. This was particularly the case with regard to the price presentation techniques: interviewees implied that the use of such scripts could even be detrimental to them achieving their targets, given that it was all but impossible to try and up-sell small sized clubs based in city centre areas as if they were based in higher middle class suburbs. The necessity for improvisation in order to make sale routines relevant to local context contingencies is a theme that has also been addressed to a certain extent by Leidner (1993). However, in her account, while sales workers might slightly alter certain features of the script, they did not question the occupational necessity of controlling the customer.

According to our evidence, techniques rooted in the "commercial paradigm" were not simply altered but were discarded entirely by MSAs. An aspect that has been underemphasized in previous literature on sales work, is the influence of past dispositions on the way individuals learn to approach their work role (Billet and Somerville 2004, Hodkinson and Hodkinson 2004). The data presented here show that managerially invented routines of "instrumental empathy" were rejected by sales advisors on the basis of rules of professional conduct (indicative of a more genuine identification with the "service idiom") acquired elsewhere. This was not the case only with the price presentation routine, but also with the concept of "hurting" and "rescuing" prospects. Similarly the "matching and mirroring" concept was rejected in favour of rules related to the presentation of one's self in everyday life (Goffman 1959). Overall, if we are to view learning as the interaction between individual dispositions and the affordances and the contextual requirements of the workplace (Billet 2004), the data support the agentic role of the MSAs in making decisions about how they learn their role and what kind of knowledge is relevant in performing their work (Smith 2006). It is through participation in practice that the MSAs learned to reject managerial expectations regarding their work.

Finally, the explanation for the advisors' critical stance towards managerial techniques of customer control as taught in the classroom should also incorporate the issue of performance control. As seen earlier, this was achieved by setting key performance indicators, tying successful performance to the achievement of specific numbers, in terms of daily targets, and subsequently visualising and individualising the advisors' performance through the use of grids. From this point of view, The Gym was no different to other workplaces featured in previous studies of sales work, mainly concentrating on life insurance sales (Oakes 1990, Knights and Morgan 1991). However, as these studies have illustrated, in life insurance sales, the imposition of targets as a means of control is usually accompanied by an array of rewards, both material (high commission rates, prizes) and social (company conventions, reference of high achievers in company newsletter etc). Consequently, what has been argued is that identification with and competition for the attainment of these rewards can transform the sales agents "into subjects who are guaranteed to discipline themselves to a far greater degree than could be established through more direct controls" (Knights and Morgan 1991, p. 217).

In contrast, in conditions of low pay and lack of social recognition, as was the case was at The Gym, performance targets as control devices can only be "negative and constraining" rather than "positive and productive" (Knights and Morgan 1991, p. 226). The issue of rewards, financial or otherwise, has to be taken into consideration in analyses revolving around the concept of employee subjectivity (Gabriel 1999, p.188). In the case of the advisors, the nature of the labour in combination to the lack of rewards could be argued to have caused a sense of "detachment" from the role. Subsequently, and from the point of view of self-interest, the links that managerial discourse tries to establish between applying the routines and being a successful salesperson, are rejected since success is not translated into personal gain.

Overall, the paper has shown that in the case of The Gym, the limits to "training instrumental empathy" are related to two factors. First, the ability of sales workers to enact past dispositions leading to an approach to work that is at odds with managerial expectations. Second, "universal techniques" presented on the course were filtered through local knowledge and expertise which cautioned against their application in specific contexts. Furthermore, the MSAs' critical (and in cases cynical) views of their role were further reinforced by the absence of sufficiently high incentives to promote "buy-in" to a managerial discourse which unashamedly stressed customer exploitation and the maximization of sales at all costs.

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