

TEACHING BENEFIT SELLING: CONCEPTS AND ACTIONS
Robert Zimmer
Cliff Scott
Both of California State University, Fullerton

INTRODUCTION

Benefit selling is one of the most central tools of professional selling. The power of this approach is rooted in the simple fact that customers buy the benefits, not the features, of a product. Benefits represent the personal profit buyers receive from purchasing the product. If we simply assume that customers will behave so as to serve their own interests, then the benefits approach may be said to underlie all of why people buy what they buy.

The pervasiveness of this concept is demonstrated by the fact that benefit selling is discussed in virtually every Principles of Selling text the current authors have ever seen (See, for example Pederson, Weight and Weitz 1988, pp. 307-8; Russell, Beach and Buskirk 1988, pp. 104-6; Wendel and Gorman 1988, pp. 315). Despite the importance of this concept, it is often not grasped fully by the student, or, if grasped, is not applied, or is misapplied. This is to say, after the concept of benefit selling has been taught, often the practice has not been adopted. For example, one exercise in the current authors' Sales Management course allows students to debate the relative merits of various sales force candidates. Invariably, each participant will couch his/her support for a candidate in terms of that candidate's features, rather than in terms of the benefits s/he might bring to the current members of the selling organization.

We submit that this inability to apply is the direct result of certain shortcomings in the way benefit selling has been taught. It has been our experience that students can learn to apply this concept via sequence of pedagogical exercises, conducted both in and out of the classroom. Accordingly, the purpose of this paper is to specify a methodology for the teaching of benefit selling. To this end, we will discuss four topics: 1) Operating Definitions of Benefits and Features, 2) Teaching the Benefit/Feature Distinction, 3) Teaching Coordinated Benefit/Feature Presentation, and 4) Extending Benefit Selling To Selling Oneself - The Final Frontier.

OPERATING DEFINITIONS OF BENEFITS AND FEATURES

The starting point for teaching the practice of benefit selling is providing clear definitions of "benefit" and "feature;" definitions which are suited for the practical task of distinguishing between the two. Our two definitions are:

BENEFIT: A favorable result or effect that promotes welfare, advantage or gain from using the product. A Benefit is what the product will do for the buyer: i.e., a favorable effect to satisfy a need/problem.

FEATURE: Any characteristic or part of a product, plan or service that provides the user with a favorable result (benefit). Anything built into the product such as quality, delivery, design, workmanship, construction, etc., is a feature. Features are the sources of benefits. They exist whether or not the product offer is used.

The most important thing to note here is that a benefit is not an aspect of the product and neither is it an aspect of the buyer. It is an emergent property of the merging of customer and product - the definition indicates that the benefit do not exist until AFTER the product has been purchased. Thus, this definition leads us to two conclusions: 1) the buyer is motivated by the promise of gains to come, and 2) as these gains are a result of an interaction, not all customers will yield the same benefits when combined with the same product, and not all benefits are critical for each consumer. This is the basis of situational selling.

TEACHING THE BENEFIT/FEATURE DISTINCTION

Now we wish to pass these insights on to the class, and in a fashion which they may find to be practical. In the course of class discussion of the above definitions, the class will usually conclude that features are "things you can point to on the product," whereas benefits are "things that happen." Blending in the above situational selling orientation will often produce the refinement that benefits are "things that happen to some buyer in particular." When the class reaches this conclusion, they are ready for the first exercise.

The instructor asks one of the students in the class for a #2 pencil. S/he then says, "We are going to see if we are able to differentiate between features and benefits for a #2 pencil." Handing the pencil to one student, the instructor continues, "This student will state a benefit of the pencil, and then hand the pencil to the next student. The challenge to the second student will be to state a benefit which might be associated with that feature. The challenge to the third student will be to name a new feature, and so on."

The beauty of this exercise is in its simplicity. It is so quickly comprehended by the students that the instructor may systematically "ratchet up" the task by introducing refinements to the definition of "benefit." Naturally, it is most effective to do this in a praising fashion. For example, one might wait for a comment such as, "A benefit of this pencil is that it will allow

the freedom to improve your thoughts - the erasure feature provides for this." The instructor can now point out that the student has used the sales tactic of stating in the positive. This tactic is important as the other way to phrase this benefit, "it won't stick you with a mistake," lacks the direct tie to the favorable result, "freedom." As the favorable result is at the core of the benefit concept, such a tie is of paramount importance.

Having explained this refinement, the instructor may write it on the board, and include it as part of the working definition of a "selling benefit" - a benefit statement phrased for a selling situation. The challenge to all subsequent student participants has now been altered to include this new parameter. In similar fashion, the instructor may continue to refine the definition, and thus elevate the challenge and the learning task, by the inclusion of three more points. In addition to being stated positively, the selling benefit should be 1) stated clearly, 2) stated persuasively, and 3) expressed as a complete thought.

This exercise may continue until the class has exhausted its ability to generate new features or new benefits. In the authors' experience, this usually occurs after approximately ten features. Even obtaining ten will usually require some encouragement on the part of the instructor; encouragement to think creatively, to take the third and fourth looks at this very familiar object. Having the student actually hold the pencil is almost invariably helpful.

When the instructor is satisfied that the list is truly exhausted, the instructor congratulates the class on their mastery of the feature/benefit distinction, as well as their creativity. s/he then produces a list of twenty-seven features and benefits of a pencil (Appendix A). The lessons here are obvious. First, when everyone agrees that every possible benefit has been considered, the task may be only started. Secondly, if such a mundane product has such a number of features and benefits, how many must be hidden in a product of only moderate complexity?

There are five fundamental objectives to be served by this exercise. 1) Most importantly, to teach the student to distinguish between features and benefits. 2) To learn to state a "selling benefit," one that is stated positively, clearly, persuasively and in a complete thought. 3) To practice thinking on their feet. 4) To develop analytical skills by examining a product and attempting to attempt to reduce it to its component features and their associated benefits. 5) To engender class cohesiveness via meeting a challenge as a group.

OUT OF CLASS EXERCISE ONE: COORDINATING BENEFIT/FEATURE PRESENTATION

This first exercise should have driven home the first of our two conclusions derived from the definition of a benefit: the buyer is motivated by the promise of gains to come. Further, they will have practiced the action of phrasing benefits in a selling fashion. They are now ready for the second point, that the benefits of the same product may be different for different customers. This second exercise is designed to teach this point. When presenting benefits and features it is imperative that the student be in the habit of presenting the benefit first, and then support it with features. In promotion, this is often referred to as stating the promise, then supporting the promise (Schultz and Martin 1979, p. 11).

If one leads with features, the customer is being invited to conjure their own outcomes for these features. Such a set of circumstances is very hazardous due to two simple facts that we know about people: they resist change, and they think more quickly than we can talk. Since purchasing the product often means that something within the consumer's world will change, this truism may be translated as: customers are looking for reasons to not buy. Further, they will be able to think of these non-buy reasons far more quickly than we will be able to counter them; on average, people think at about four to five times the words-per-minute rate that they talk. This means that for every feature the salesperson mentions, the customer has time to think of four or five results of that feature. Even if the customer is favorably predisposed to both the product and the salesperson, there would be no reason to believe that all of these imagined results would be positive ones. If we think that the customer may be seeking not-buy reasons, it is possible that few or none of the imagined results may be positive. The salesperson must guide the customer's thinking by leading with benefits.

The assignment designed to teach coordinated benefit/feature presentation involves a complete feature/benefit analysis for the product of the student's choosing. The student is to list each feature of the product, and then the benefit, or often, benefits, associated with this feature. This is best presented in a balance sheet format, with features on one side of the page and associated benefits on the other.

The student will now select two target audiences which might have an interest in the product at hand. The student will now construct a benefit/feature presentation for each target group. The students are encouraged to select groups which are as dissimilar as possible: a portion of the grades rests upon the contrast between their two presentations. This exercise serves three

purposes. 1) It provides practice in learning to lead with benefits, and support with features, 2) It illustrates the point that benefits are as much a function of the buyer as they are the product, and 3) It encourages creative thinking. Forcing the students to think in terms of more than one consumer base expands the number of benefits they are able to see.

OUT OF CLASS EXERCISE TWO: SELF ANALYSIS

Extending the concepts of benefit selling to include the selling of oneself appears to be most unnatural, even for the student who has mastered the concepts of benefit selling.

We sometimes conduct mock interviews in our sales classes. Even the best students regress to feature-oriented selling in such a situation. The tendency is to make comments such as: "I have a degree in Marketing with a 3.4 GPA," or "I have experience in sales," or "I love meeting new people." All of these are, of course, features. Showing the student a better approach to the interview situation is the purpose of this last exercise.

Each student conducts a feature/benefit analysis of themselves. They begin with a listing of all their features: education, work experiences, extra curricular experiences, personality traits, and so on. The challenge then becomes associating benefits with each of these features. This is presented in the same fashion as the above exercise: in a balance sheet format, and with separate analyses for two separate career alternatives. This exercise serves three purposes. 1) It drives home the point of benefit-oriented selling. This is an extremely high-involvement exercise for the student. After taking a benefits approach to this product, they are far more willing to do it with others. 2) It is an exercise in self-knowledge, and there are few topics most of us are more interested in. While the student is often reluctant to begin, it is usually a memorable assignment. 3) It is a practical exercise, in that it helps the student prepare for their upcoming interviews. Perhaps the most important aspect of this preparation is not the memorization of a list of benefits-of-me, but rather the back-to-basics marketing activity of having considered the interview from the other person's point of view.

CONCLUSIONS

Benefit selling is one of the most central concepts of professional selling, and therefore one of the concepts most central to any sales course. Yet it is an elusive concept for the student, particularly in application. It is incumbent upon the instructor to create student experiences which will result in making the benefit approach to selling feel natural. This is not a simple task, and probably cannot be accomplished in a single assignment or classroom exercise. Rather, a sequence of related activities are required.

The authors feel that the logical approach is to begin with definitions of "feature" and "benefit," and devote one classroom exercise solely to communicating this distinction. Next the student needs to understand how to present features and benefits in tandem, using the features to support the benefits. At this point the student is prepared for the exercise which seems to help all the lessons "sink in:" the self assessment.

REFERENCES

- Pederson, Carlton A., Milburn D. Wright and Barton A. Weitz, (1988), Selling: Principles and Methods, Richard D. Irwin, Inc., Homewood, IL.
- Russell, Frederic A., Frank H. Beach and Richard H. Buskirk, (1988), Selling: Principles and Practices, McGraw-Hill, New York, New York.
- Schultz, Don E. and Dennis G. Martin, (1979), Strategic Advertising Campaigns, Crain Books, Chicago, Ill.
- Wendel, Richard F. and Walter Gorman, (1988), Selling, 3E, Random House, New York, New York.