

A Sales Perspective - Roy Spencer



Roy Spencer

The question is often asked “do salesmen warrant being called professionals”?

I believe that the answer to this lies in two important facts, firstly, in any business ‘nothing happens until a product is sold’ and secondly, ‘no matter how clever the design, how well engineered, packaged or presented no product sells itself’.

It follows therefore that a company’s success and performance are directly related to the effectiveness of its sales team.

Having spent many years in sales I can confirm, from experience, that the most effective sales people are certainly skilled professionals.

My interest in a sales career began in 1961, the last year of my five year apprenticeship with the company.

At this time one of the highlights of the company’s sales calendar was its attendance at the annual A.S.E.E. electrical exhibition held at Earls Court in London. This major event involved the design and provision of a large, purpose built exhibition stand and the organisation of stand manning rotas and support services. Much to my surprise I was asked by Mr. W. Leslie Jones to take responsibility for design of the company’s exhibition stand and all details for attendance at Earls Court, a big responsibility even for a final year apprentice.

Accepting the challenge I set to work on preparation for the exhibition consulting with the three divisional sales managers, George Bland, Jim Robbins and Alan Wild on product detail. These were three of the company’s true gentlemen who despite their own busy schedules gave prompt assistance whenever asked.

As the date of the exhibition approached I made a visit to the stand builders in London to finalize details.

The week of the exhibition duly arrived and in order to ensure that all was ready for the opening I was despatched to Earls Court intending to stay for just two days. Since however work was necessary on a daily basis to replace products “lost” overnight and to maintain product displays in working order my stay was extended to the whole week of the exhibition.

For me this was an exciting time as I met and worked with many of the company’s senior salesmen including amongst others, Reg Taylor, Ted Smith, Jack Howl, David Hammond, Bill Bowley and Phil Belton. As the week progressed I learned from, and started to emulate, these seasoned salesmen becoming involved in discussing products with visitors to the stand and even doing a little selling. Within the space of that week the bug had bitten and I had decided to pursue a career on the commercial side of the company.

Having completed my exhibition assignment I looked for a permanent sales/commercial position.

At this time the newly formed circuit breaker division of the company was expanding as sales of its C50 range of miniature circuit breakers grew rapidly. Circuit breaker products were seen as having great future potential as they were progressively replacing fuses in the UK. Therefore when Jim Robbins offered me a position as contracts engineer within the division I was delighted to accept.

Working under sales office manager John Rickwood I was involved with the preparation of quotations and the engineering design of bespoke circuit breaker equipment for many major projects.

I spent ten happy years working in circuit breaker division, years not totally without



George Bland



Jim Robbins



Alan Wild

incident, one such occurring on the day of Her Majesty the Queen's visit to Lincoln Works in May 1962.

During the early afternoon of the great day all preparations had been completed and an air of expectation hung over the circuit breaker office. Several of the draughtsmen were busy brewing tea by boiling cups of water with a small portable immersion heater. Seeing Jim Robbins come out of his office to talk to me they hurriedly removed the heater from its cup of water and placed it on a pile of drawings completely forgetting to switch it off. It rapidly overheated and the drawings burst into flames.

Jim spotted the flames, shouted "Fire" and dashed along the office to tackle the blaze. The draughtsmen however had beaten him to it and extinguished the flames by dousing with hot tea, leaving a pile of badly charred drawings and a hole burnt in the top of the plan table. When the excitement had subsided and the smoke cleared Jim declared in a nonchalant manner "we could have had the Queen arriving at the front entrance and the Walsall Fire Brigade around the back".

During my time as contracts engineer I made many visits around the country, providing technical support to the local salesmen, and also accompanied Jim on several of his lectures gaining valuable knowledge and the confidence to present my own lectures in the coming years. In 1968 Jim was appointed Company Sales Director, John Rickwood becoming Circuit Breaker Divisional Sales Manager and myself Sales Office Manager a position which I held for three years.

The late 1960s and early 70s was a time of increasing competition in electrical markets and the company decided to strengthen its sales effort by reducing the size of sales areas and increasing the size of the team to give greater sales concentration. Early in 1971 Jim called me into his office and pointing at a large wall map offered me the position of Sales Engineer for the far south west – Devon and Cornwall. This was a wonderful opportunity to gain experience 'at the sharp end' in an area which had been somewhat neglected since the retirement in 1965 of Cyril Summerton, the company's first salesman. Having accepted the position I moved with my family to live in Ivybridge, a small town some ten miles from Plymouth.

In the early days with sparse customer records and little knowledge of the area I was helped greatly by Wally Brook and Les Fowler, two stalwarts who had covered the area from Bristol. Wally Brook subsequently becoming a good personal friend. After a few weeks in the area Jim told me that he had arranged for Cyril Summerton to come out of retirement to spend a week with me calling on some of his old customers. This I very much welcomed and to say that I learned a lot about salesmanship during that week is an understatement. At over 70 years of age at that time, Cyril, a man rather small in stature was a human dynamo as we spent the week making calls. During the week Cyril instilled in me several golden rules of salesmanship which I will never forget.

Working in an area remote from Head Office one gets used to "ploughing a lonely furrow" and a welcome opportunity for discussion with sales colleagues was always provided by the annual sales conference held at a hotel usually in the Midlands. A highlight of sales conferences of the 1960s and early 70s was Jack Crabtree's address to the sales team at the conference dinner. On the occasion of the launch of the new classic socket outlet in the 1960s one of the sales features emphasised was that the terminal screws had a rounded bottom end to enable them to grip the cable without damaging it. Jack Crabtree had a lively sense of humour although most members of



John Rickwood



Wally Brook



Les Fowler



Ted Savage

the sales team had not experienced it and saw him as a rather serious person. They were greatly amused therefore when after dinner, Jack, talking about the new product and the design of the terminal said “I feel that we should lose no opportunity of pointing out to our customers the attraction of a well rounded bottom” a statement which brought great laughter and applause.

In 1973 following the Ever Ready takeover five regional sales managers were appointed Scotland, North, Midlands, South West and London/South East. In the South West Ted Savage took up the position and at the same time the Channel Islands were added to my sales area. For a further two years I worked to build sales and, as with most sales people, from time to time found myself in some rather strange locations these included:-

Spending an afternoon in Dartmoor Prison discussing with the electrical engineer the installation of motor control equipment in the metalwork shop whilst surrounded by warders and “long stay” prisoners. As a salesman I was relieved to close that particular sale and leave. On another occasion a visit to Devonport Naval Base to sell circuit breakers to be ushered into the electrical engineers office in a large department where armourers were busy fitting warheads to rows of torpedoes. I was almost frightened to cough!

In 1975 I attended the annual sales conference in the Midlands, by which time Brian Barham had succeeded Jim Robbins as marketing and sales director. Brian asked me to meet him at Lincoln Works following the end of the conference. Looking to strengthen the head office marketing team he offered me the position of product group manager for the flagship C50 range of circuit breakers based back at Lincoln Works. Having established myself in the South West it was a difficult decision to make since business was building well and I had made many friends and good contacts. With an eye to future prospects however I accepted and moved my family back to the Midlands. For a short time I worked with John Rickwood as C50 product group manager until John joined the technical division becoming company standards engineer and I found myself as product group manager for all of the company’s circuit breaker products, a job which I thoroughly enjoyed.

In 1978 the position of regional sales manager for the Midlands became available. The sales bug was still biting; I applied for the position and was successful. Moving to an office at King Street, Walsall I headed up a team of ten sales engineers working within an area from the Potteries in the north to Oxfordshire in the south and west to east coasts. The King Street building which the Midlands sales team shared with Cedric Sleight and the company’s publicity department proved to be ideally located from a sales operational point of view. The midland sales team were however, sometimes seen as having an unfair advantage in obtaining supplies and assistance from the publicity department, an accusation completely unfounded of course.

Unfortunately, early one morning in August 1980 I received a telephone call to advise me that a major fire overnight had virtually destroyed the King Street building. Following temporary accommodation Midland sales office was relocated to the office block at the new Stockton Close factory mothballed since its completion in 1978.

Following further management changes under Hanson in 1984 I was appointed national sales manager for the north of the UK and in 1986 general sales manager for the whole of the UK including Northern Ireland with a total team of six regional

sales managers and sixty staff including those based at five regional offices. This was a most interesting role with many challenges and even some hazardous situations. At the height of the troubles in Northern Island my sales meeting with a distributor in a hotel just outside Belfast was interrupted by a warning that a “device” had been placed in the building. A hasty exit through the kitchen followed and the meeting was concluded in the car park well away from the building. A short time later following the “all clear” it was announced that a “device” had exploded at a hotel just a short distance away resulting in a massive amount of damage. I made a mental note that repairs to the hotel would of course require the supply of new electrical equipment; it’s an ill wind etc.....

I remained in a national sales role with the company until late 1992 when, following the departure of managing director David Riley and further reorganisation I was advised that my career with the company was at an end. I left after 36 years service, eventually to take up a similar electrical products sales management position with a smaller privately owned company.

Looking back over my years at Crabtree I feel that I was indeed privileged to acquire my training with a company which gave me such diverse experience. I was also privileged to work with so many dedicated, helpful and friendly people, so essential in support of my career as a sales professional.



Mike Pope retires from the company in 1991 seen here with members of sales team at Fairlawns Hotel, Aldridge.



George Denton receives the Regional Sales Trophy on behalf of his Northern Regional Sales Team.