

# *The Knack of Selling*: scientific salesmanship, relational themes and military metaphors in early marketing thought

*The Knack of Selling*

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Received 2 October 2019  
Revised 10 January 2020  
Accepted 10 January 2020

## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to provide an historical analysis of an important early contribution to the history of marketing thought literature – the six-book series titled *The Knack of Selling* – which was published in 1913 and intended as an early training course for salesmanship.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This research utilized a close, systematic reading of *The Knack of Selling* series and places it in the professional and intellectual context of the early twentieth century. Books published about marketing are primary source materials for any study of the history of marketing thought. In this case, *The Knack* series constitutes significant primary source material for a study of early thinking about personal selling.

**Findings** – Echoing A.W. Shaw, Watson offers a more sophisticated interpretation of the “one best way” approach associated with Frederick Taylor. Watson’s advice did not entail the repetition of canned sales talks to each customer. His vision of practice was more complicated. Sales presentations were temporally and locationally relative. They were subject to ongoing evolution. As the marketplace changed, as customer needs and interests shifted, so did organizational and salesperson performances. To keep sales talks relevant to the consumer, personnel were encouraged to undertake rudimentary ethnographic research and interviews. Unusually, there is oscillation in the way power relations between marketer and customer were described. While relational themes are present, so are military metaphors.

**Originality/value** – This is the first systematic reading of *The Knack of Selling* that has been produced. It is an important contribution to the literature inasmuch as this book set is not in wide circulation. The material itself was significant as an input into scholarship subsequently hailed as seminal within sales management.

**Keywords** Marketing, Marketing Theory, Sales, Salesmanship, Power

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Studying the history of marketing and history of marketing thought is a fascinating enterprise. Wandering the stacks of libraries, speaking to knowledgeable librarians and colleagues, can sometimes lead us to unearth academic gems that have long since been forgotten. As Ron Fullerton (1994) has noted, serendipity takes the historian in new and novel directions. Of course, much historical research involves patient and painstaking study as well. But, with the growth of the internet, and access to book catalogues that past generations of scholars could scarcely have imagined, we are probably more likely than ever to chance upon interesting material that would otherwise have ended up unloved, unread



and ignored. Serendipity is exactly what led us to the book set that forms the focus of this paper.

Bored on a wet and windy British springtime, the first author was browsing the internet looking for something to occupy his mind. *The Knack of Selling*, the title of a series of small books intended to help train new salesmen, appeared on his intellectual horizon. As far as we can determine it is not widely cited. But, it might have had at one time a fairly large readership, connecting with the needs of (usually) neophyte salesworkers. In an advertisement for the various books published by the Arch W. Shaw Company that appeared in the pages of *The Business Philosopher*, it was described in the following way:

A new six-book training-course in selling – based on the actual experiences of successful salesmen and sales managers. Careful analysis of the best plans and methods of these men has brought out a certain, definite best way in which to start a canvass – appeal to the right motive – use the right arguments – hold the interest – convince the prospect – arouse the buying motive and get the order. A well-planned series of charts shows specific steps in the process of a sale – and shows how to correct the mistakes that are commonly made. It is [a] thorough, clean-cut, concise course in practical salesmanship – one that can be applied to any line. . . Price, with a yearly subscription to *System*, the Magazine of Business, transportation charges fully prepaid, \$5 (Canada \$5.50; Foreign \$6) (*Business Publications of the Arch W. Shaw Company*, 1913, p. 405).

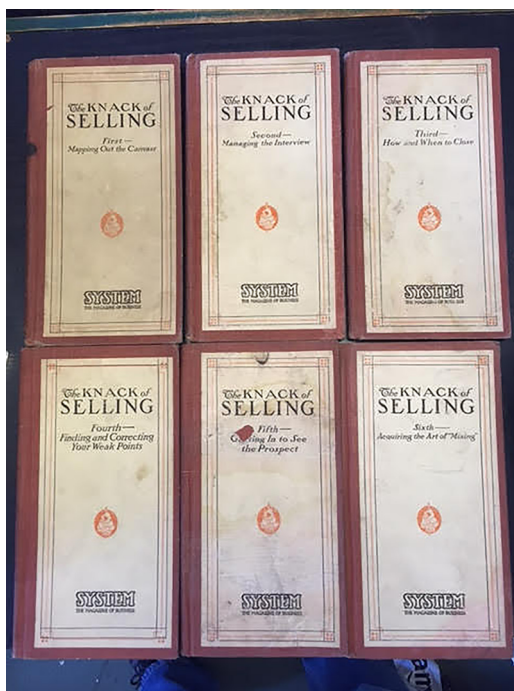
Importantly, the book set does seem to have met with a receptive audience. A Company President explained to Charles Hoyt – one of the pioneers of scientific sales management (Strong and d'Amico, 1991) – that he subscribed to numerous periodicals (e.g. *System*, *Printers' Ink*), purchased the Alexander Hamilton course, and “publications like *The Knack of Selling*” (in Hoyt, 1929, p. 230). By 1920, advertisements were claiming that “More than 50,000 sets of “*The Knack of Selling*” are in use today” (*System*, 1920, p. 148). To press home the point that successful salespeople and major organizations were using these resources “in quantities”, the advert lists, among others:

The Ford Motor Company, The Belting Company, Cleveland, Morgan Sash and Door Company, Chicago, Idaho State Life Insurance Company, Boise, The Packard Company, Fort Wayne, The Green & Green Company, Dayton, Dalton Adding Machine Company, Poplar Bluff, Mo, Addressograph Company, Chicago, Jewel Tea Company, St. Louis, The American Sales Book Company, Elmira, N.Y. Diamond Match Company, St. Louis, Hart, Schaffner & Marx Company, Chicago, The J.I. Case Company (*System*, 1920, p. 148).

In order, the texts in the “Knack” series cover the following topics (see Figure 1). Firstly, developing the sales strategy; secondly, dealing with the customer and managing interactional dynamics; thirdly, determining how and when to close a selling talk and leave the patron satisfied; fourthly, identifying the strengths and weaknesses of individual salesman; fifthly, securing access to the customer by appropriately enrolling and negotiating gatekeepers; and finally, how to “mix”, that is, how to ensure that a sales talk is commensurate with the interests of the client and likely to garner their attention, interest and action. Each of these books is thin in quantitative terms (circa 30 pages per volume). They do not cite contemporary material either within marketing or outside of it.

Although we are being slightly speculative given the very limited reference points to support our contention, they appear to be based on the practical experience of Arch W. Shaw and Herbert Watson, in particular. That said, we must appreciate that a publication promoting *System* and Arch Shaw's organization more generally, stressed that their:

Advisory Staff consists of a group of business men and economists, from whom the editors receive comment and criticism of the publications, and to whom they submit for the test of



**Figure 1.**  
*The Knack of Selling*  
(six book series  
published in 1913)

theory and practice, special articles which are to appear in SYSTEM, FACTORY and our Business Books. The Advisory Staff has 263 members, including men in all lines of business in every section of the United States, economists in the leading universities and special investigators in different lines (*The Arguments that Influence Advertisers*, 1913, p. 3; emphasis in original).

So, these books could have had the input of many different individuals. Nevertheless, as contemporary commentators have argued, the insights they present are of value because they help us grasp “the scope of marketing practice” (Dibb and Simões, 2014, p. 380).

What makes them fascinating is that they add flesh to the abstract conceptual bones of the “theories of selling” (Strong, 1925a) that are still mainstays in our textbooks today. All too often, it seems, our textbooks claim that early scholars and practitioners had deterministic views of advertising effects. People produce advertising and it affects the consumer in simple and straightforward ways. Among the many things that historical research in marketing has demonstrated is that practitioners were not naïve. They frequently displayed a tempered view of the role of marketing and advertising on the customer such that arguments about “strong” theories of advertising influence are undermined by the brute empirical evidence that early academic and practitioner accounts base themselves upon (Tadajewski, 2016). This is what we think is one of the worthwhile messages that are relayed by the books we want to consider in this manuscript. They highlight the interest of the marketer in structuring and directing sales talks, signal the importance of preparation, planning and on-going observation of the customer, and often register the co-produced nature of sales presentations and the possibility of reversals of power and control.

**Arch W. Shaw and *System***

The six slim volumes reviewed in this paper were distributed by *System: The Magazine of Business* which was operated by Arch W. Shaw, one of the founding fathers of our discipline and a major contributor – but not the sole developer (Jones and Tadajewski, 2018, p. 67) – of the functional school of thought in the early twentieth century. As the owner of a firm, the publisher of periodicals, and with extensive first-hand knowledge of business operations (Usui, 2008), Shaw was well situated to identify the needs of his fellow practitioners for research and information about best practice. His business acumen was utilized effectively by the Harvard Business School who sought Shaw's skills as a teacher and his financial wherewithal for the support of organized research activities (i.e. the founding of Harvard's Bureau of Business Research in 1911) (Jones and Tadajewski, 2018, pp. 144-145).

Shaw's "*System*" journal, like this set of books, was meant to distribute knowledge about better business and marketing practice in order to increase the efficiency of the economic system. As Shaw [1] expounds, "Idea Interchange has been the most constructive influence in the betterment of business since 1900" (Shaw, 1924, p. 6). Writing against the backdrop of calls for greater cooperation among firms (Eddy, 1912/1915), the advocacy of reciprocity (The Aimesbury Company, 1924), awareness of "patronage motives" (Copeland, 1924) and the sharing of knowledge and insights through the periodical literature (Tadajewski and Jones, 2012), he makes a case that we are seeing a "commercial revolution".

Science, business cooperation, and mutual learning were, Shaw avers, the way forward. These are the generative mechanisms underwriting societal progress. With the application of relevant knowledge, came efficiency, with efficiency, profit. And, profit as many commentators underlined, was central to the continued operation of the business and capitalist system more broadly (Cherington, 1935; Tadajewski and Jones, 2016). The book set that is the focus of this paper was not, however, authored by Shaw, but by Herbert Watson, a prolific writer on business matters in the early twentieth century who turned the materials produced by the A.W. Shaw Company into correspondence course-type books (i.e. in this case, short, and easily digestible). This is certainly not to say that Shaw's epistemological fingerprints cannot be found in this work. Shaw, for example, was notably influenced by and sought to extend Frederick Taylor's (1911/1998) writings on scientific management.

In this research we follow Fullerton's (2011) methodological advice about the need for good writing, a critical reading of the content under scrutiny, and the importance of context, interpretation, and explanation which are the essence of historical analysis. With this in mind, the purpose of the current article is to interpret Watson's (1913) series on *The Knack of Selling* in the context of early twentieth century writing and thinking about scientific management and the psychology of consumer behavior.

By way of context, we begin by describing the influence of scientific management and Arch W. Shaw, a major contributor to early marketing thought, as well as publisher and promoter of Watson's books. Shaw's ideas on scientific management provide an essential parallel to those in Watson's texts. We then delineate a rigorous interpretation of the latter's thoughts about consumer motives, temporal and locational relativity – that is, the requirement for salespeople to be sensitive to context, competition and customers' needs – and the use and dynamics of power in selling. A critical reading of source material in this case includes consideration of a critique of Watson's writing published by one of his contemporaries (Strong, 1922).

## Frederick Taylor, Scientific Management and Shaw's interpretation of this work

Taylor sought to scientifically manage the workforce, increasing productivity, time management, and redistribute power away from the employee towards management. The former had previously developed their own strategies and skills for working effectively and this could hamper organizational productivity should the worker desire to slow their pace (because management had no clear benchmark of what was possible by each worker) or leave their current employment.

To increase efficiency management traditionally used what was called "initiative and incentive" approaches, basically providing the worker with income on a piece-rate basis. The problem with this payment method can be linked back to the lack of trust between employee and employer. The former was deservedly suspicious about the motives of management as there was a tendency for piece-rates to be restricted or reduced should it suit managerial purposes (i.e. if the wage bill was becoming too high). Naturally, this exacerbated the tensions between these two groups. In response, Taylor devised his "scientific" approach to production management, outlining four key principles: "First. The development of a true science. Second. The scientific selection of the workman. Third. His scientific education and development. Fourth. Intimate friendly cooperation between the management and men" (Taylor, 1911/1998, p. 68n1). The last point here was emblematic of the "mental revolution" that Taylor wanted to stimulate whereby the tensions between management and labor evaporated through better cooperation that was supposed to be beneficial for all parties. Management earned the profit required to satisfy shareholders and workers were meant to receive higher incomes.

In developing his "science", Taylor wanted to identify the "one best way" to undertake any task (cf. Jones, 1916, p. 138, 143). Typically, this was achieved by monitoring workers, timing them with a stopwatch and recording their movements, with the intention of minimizing extraneous activity thereby increasing efficiency. When this was determined, management would codify this knowledge, communicating it to workers as appropriate. Management's role, here, was to allocate work to those employees who could undertake it effectively and efficiently, rewarding them with greater remuneration for meeting and exceeding performance expectations. Importantly, while Taylor expressed the view that scientific management had major implications for management and employees, these were not the only groups that needed to be considered. In this move, he says focusing on the "workers and their employers" means "We overlook the third great party, the whole people – the consumers, who buy the product of the first two and who ultimately pay both the wages of the workmen and the profits of the employers" (Taylor, 1911/1998, p. 71). This focus on the customer and their satisfaction would form part of the "mental revolution" that marketing would earmark as its axiology.

These ideas were translated into marketing by a variety of practitioners including Arch Shaw (1915), Charles Hoyt (1929), Percival White (1927), and Stuart Cowan (1924). Within marketing, Shaw, for instance, is heralded as one of the "key individuals" who helped flesh out "the principles of scientific marketing management" (Scully, 1996, p. 73). Like Taylor in production management, Shaw wanted to make marketing and salesmanship more scientific (see also Powers, Koehler and Martin, 1988, p. 15) and he is explicit that many of the ideas that Taylor articulates can be transferred to the marketing domain (Shaw, 1915, p. 14), with research-facilitated standardization and the pursuit of profit being key features of his analysis of the distribution system. Guesswork about advertising or sales talks was simply not appropriate. The "rule-of-thumb" approach, he submits, results in an "appalling waste of money, effort and merchandise due to this lack of standardization in the materials



of demand creation as well as the other factors bearing on the efficiency of our marketing system” (Shaw, 1915, p. 16).

As Shaw (1915, p. 1) opined, “there is a general healthy feeling. . . that the business man should approach his problems in the scientific spirit and should have exact information to guide him in meeting and settling them” (cf. Lockley, 1950, p. 734; White, 1938, p. 163). He encouraged practitioners to question existing customs and practices, studying their activities carefully, undertake appropriate research (e.g. studying advertising effects, the efficiency of various channels of distribution, the desirability of market contours and product differentiation versus standardization), set their prices to ensure they earned a profit and maximize their chances of successfully engaging in “demand creation” (Shaw, 1915, p. 43). This was by no means an easy task given the diversity of the marketplace (see also Doubman, 1924; Muir, 1924).

Consumer wants, he maintains, “are as varied as their purchasing power. Environment, education, social custom, individual habits, and all the variations in body and mind tend to render human wants diverse” (Shaw, 1915, p. 45). His analysis is remarkably complex in fact, pointing out that people can possess “expressed conscious demands”, “unexpressed conscious demands”, and “subconscious demand” – all of which compound the difficulties of selling (Shaw, 1915, p. 96; see also Tosdal, 1936, pp. 195, 199-200). Nonetheless, attention to the customer is important and marketing concept related ideas come to the fore in Shaw’s early work (see also Jones and Richardson, 2007; Kleindl, 2007; Tadjewski, 2008). Significantly, production efficiency and cost reduction are not the complete and overriding focus. He registers that value is *subjective* – defined in the eyes of the customer – not the manufacturer (Shaw, 1915, p. 82).

Being attentive to the individual customer, therefore, necessitates that salespeople register the diversity of human nature, their interests and appreciate that the person we are selling to is not always driven by “purely economic grounds”. A salesman must be attentive to the needs of the individual they are confronting when they enter a retail establishment or when they are trying to sell to the ultimate consumer. Shaw is abundantly clear that totally canned sales canvasses are not what he seeks to encourage in the name of efficiency. He links marketing concept practices, a knowledge of human variability, with carefully undertaken market and customer research. As he puts it:

The business man faces a body of possible purchasers, widely distributed geographically, and showing wide extremes of purchasing patterns and felt needs. The effective demand of the individual consumer depends not alone upon his purchasing power but also upon his needs, conscious or latent, resulting from his education, character, habits, and economic and social environment. The market, therefore, splits up into economic and social strata (Shaw, 1915, p. 100).

The types of selling methods that work in one area, might not be as successful elsewhere. To deal with these issues, Shaw recommends “systematically test[ing] the ideas to be conveyed” (Shaw, 1915, p. 99), stressing that the complete standardization of sales activities is not necessarily efficient. Rather, he suggests that some element of structure and spontaneity is essential given the variability of the consumer base:

The more progressive business men today train the salesmen in a certain basic “selling talk.” That is, certain ideas, arranged in a certain order and expressed in certain forms are impressed upon them as likely to build up a demand for an article on the part of possible purchasers. The basic “selling talk” is not, of course, repeated parrot-like by the salesman, but it does serve as a foundation for his talks to possible buyers (Shaw, 1915, p. 116).

Adaptability, “the opportunity to use the mood of the customer and all the various human factors. . . add to the salesman’s effectiveness” (Shaw, 1915, p. 89). Effectiveness,

importantly, was not merely determined by sales volume. Profit was the aim for business (Watson, 1913b, p. 16). This was generated by providing appropriate service and creating satisfied customers (Watson, 1913c, p. 11, 1913f, p. 30; White, 1927, p. 97-100, 105, 183). Percival White makes the case that this focus on satisfaction was the “mental revolution” that was rippling through marketing practice:

[. . .] the conception of salesmanship itself has been undergoing profound changes. The emphasis has been shifted from *caveat emptor* to *caveat vendor*. The influence of the consumer, inchoate as it is, has made itself felt. Enterprisers are slowly starting to realize that his [*sic.*] is the dominating influence in the marketing structure. The measure of a salesman is getting to be not merely his sales volume, but rather the satisfaction of his customers. . . Experts have been employed to break down into the component parts the work of selling (White, 1929, p. 2).

*The Knack of Selling* was marketed on the basis that it contained the ideas that would generate the performance levels that successful businesspeople wanted to achieve.

Watson and Shaw had business history together. The former’s background was in: “selling and business correspondence. Mr. Watson was formerly in charge of the mail sales departments of the A.W. Shaw Company, has been similarly connected with other concerns, and has for a number of years maintained, in New York, offices as [an] advertising and sales specialist” (Zimmerman in Watson, 1922, p. v). Advertising materials for this book set somewhat hyperbolically underlined his experience, knowledge and success, with the volumes described as:

[. . .] the result of years of successful sales analyses. Herbert Watson, the author, not only has spent practically all his life as a salesman and sales manager, but has taken scores of men who have never sold a dollar’s worth of goods and by careful coaching shaped them into a sales organization that shattered all past records (System, 1920, p. 148).

Rather than examine each volume step-by-step, it would seem to make sense to identify the threads that span the collection. In some respects, the material is quite contemporary feeling – in terms of being advanced for the time of writing – and keys into topical areas today. There is attention to the needs, motives and symbolic desires of consumers; a focus on non-rational behavior and the emotional manipulation of the consumer and references to cumulative value theory (a contested area of debate regarding the value derived from repeated advertising exposure and the desirability of repetitive advertising placements (cf. Lewis, 1914, p. 16)).

### ***The Knack of Selling***

This series of books is based on what was labelled a “mentalist” concept of the consumer (Kuna, 1976). Basically, this was the idea that the customer had to be moved through a series of steps in the buying process from interest to purchase and ending up satisfied with the product and/or service. As Strong (1925a, p. 75) points out, these were “conscious states” that had to be “successively experienced”.

The invocation of satisfaction within this book collection is suggestive of adherence to a theory of selling consistent with Arthur Frederick Sheldon’s writing (Strong, 1925a, 1925b). Sheldon extended the Awareness-Interest-Desire-Action (AIDA) model to take account of the desirability of fostering long-term successful business relations between firms and their customer base (Strong, 1925a, 1925b; Tadajewski, 2011).

In Watson’s hands, the selling process is one in which both parties are active forces (this differentiates it from the traditional view of AIDA) and where the personal and familial interests of the sales prospect are drawn upon to help the salesman achieve his volume and profit objectives. In this connection, the salesperson is a channel: they help guide the

prospect through the stream of thoughts that render them amenable to the offer being made (Watson, 1913a). The Sheldonian logic underwriting Watson's exposition of selling practice is unmistakable in the following quote:

Personal salesmanship is entirely a matter of arousing certain thoughts in the other man's mind, directing those thoughts along the lines that will make him willing to buy, and leaving those thoughts in such active shape that he will be satisfied at HAVING bought (Watson, 1913f, p. 31; emphasis in original).

For E.K. Strong, this understanding and interpretation of the buying process was widely acknowledged. Many of the reflections on AIDA focused their initial references on the importance of securing appropriate awareness and interest. What Strong (1925a, 1925b) found problematic with such a strategy is that it is too oriented around the seller. If advertisers and sales practitioners focused on the buyer and their needs, wants and desires, offering solutions to the problems that consumers faced, then attention and interest would never be a problem. We are all, Strong argues, naturally interested in those products and services that hold out the promise of remedying some deficiency or providing a desired attribute in our lives. As he puts it:

Whenever one of a prospect's wants is called to his mind, his attention and interest are automatically secured, and are essentially relevant. Consequently, the terms "attention" and "interest" can be eliminated from the selling and advertising literature (Strong, 1925b, p. 358).

Notwithstanding these minor quibbles, the book series is part of a wider movement to make sales management practice more scientific. Watson does not subscribe to the idea that salesmen are born. In his hands, they are made. People can train themselves to be expert salespeople through careful study, reflection and attention to the motives that drive human behavior in the marketplace (Watson, 1913f). At its core, his variant of scientific salesmanship involved planning all interactions with the customer. In its more advanced forms, this often took considerable prior research, which was intended to understand the personal needs, wants, desires and fears of the individual, reading these against the backdrop of their family relationships, social networks, and ideal self-concept.

### Motive lists

Watson's writing is an early attempt to encourage more psychologically sensitive sales activities. He explicates the motives that, in his opinion, structure all human activities. In the early part of the twentieth century, the generic, apparently universal lists of generalizable motives were subject to considerable criticism at the hands of E.K. Strong (1922) among others (Tadajewski, 2006). At base, these types of motive lists were meant to help sales employees determine the appeals that would generate action, that is, lead to the sale.

Their invocation and widespread diffusion – Strong (1925b, p. 361), for example, points out that the motives/appeals list provided by Watson was "quoted extensively" – was evidence that practitioners were interested in appreciating the psychological nuances of their target market, in anticipation of rendering their selling activities more efficient. Nonetheless, Watson registers that our buying behavior is often a reflection of a combination of motives. Generally, though, there will be a dominant influence structuring our marketplace practice.

*A priori* generated motive lists thus had considerable appeal. They were ready-made and sometimes chimed with personal experience. They were cheap and did not require in-house research skills or the services of paid marketing counsellors. Relevant motives simply



needed to be chosen from the selection available in book sets like *The Knack of Selling*. This made them popular. For Watson, the key motives driving human decision-making include:

1. Gain of Money [e.g. buying cheaply in quantity to sell for a profit].
2. Gain of Utility [e.g. the pleasure from food, drinking and consumption more generally].
3. Satisfaction of Pride [e.g. the symbolic nature of property ownership – this connected with issues of vanity and social competition].
4. Satisfaction of Caution [e.g. buying insurance to reduce risk in future].
5. Yielding to Weakness [e.g. giving in to salesperson persuasion] (Watson, 1913a, p. 5).

These motives guided the formulation of sales presentations. They were intended as a prism to focus salesperson attention, encouraging them to recognize which motives were likely to be most influential in their target market and develop a sales talk around them. It was held that selecting the correct motive would smooth the persuasion process and any engagements with the customer that did not go to plan had to be noted in the hope of determining, much like Frederick Taylor (1911/1998) attempted with production and manpower processes, “the ONE BEST WAY TO MAKE HIS CANVASS” (Watson, 1913b, p. 11; emphasis in original).

Interestingly, the example Watson provides to illuminate the complexities of our consumption behavior, is consistent with a Veblenian (1899/1994) focus on the symbolic nature of consumption. Motive three, most notably, ties in with ideas about the importance of product symbolism. We do not buy products simply for their functional utility (an argument that Sidney Levy reinforced and Consumer Culture Theory academics have fleshed out in many different ways), but because they buttress our sense of self, our desirability to potential partners, and provide a means to differentiate our identity from the general crowd. As Watson reflects, “Why do some men buy \$5 hats when a \$3 hat, as far as they can see, is just as serviceable? To enjoy the sensation of wearing expensive things, and to enjoy having others see the label of a \$5 hat on the inside, when visiting or in a private office” (1913a, p. 6).

Acknowledging the emerging research practices of some forward-thinking companies and the niche being carved out for psychologically oriented marketing and advertising research via order of merit experiments, interviews, questionnaires, and related approaches, it was still true that empirical research was not widely undertaken, particularly in the first twenty years of the twentieth century (Strong, 1925b). Obviously, there is some plasticity regarding the definition of empirical research at this juncture. It might refer to studying the product being sold, trying to determine those appeals likely to be most convincing to the target market. This was a practice many companies and books encouraged among sales workers. Alternatively, speaking to wholesalers, retailers and “personal friends” could yield valuable insights into the forces impelling the consumer to buy.

Unsurprisingly, an illuminating approach was speaking to people, Strong refers to them as “bona fide customers”, who had or were potential candidates for a firm’s offering to better understand what could make a successful buying appeal or approach. This research appears to have been ethnographically oriented. Consistent with anecdotal references from this time period (Arvidsson, 2006) and brief statements in other prominent texts (Hoyt, 1929), Watson encourages the sales worker to adopt an ethnographic stance when seeking to engage with their target market. They had to do this before they contacted them, as well as

during the time they are with them, using this information and knowledge to reflect on the canvass, its successes and failures, after the interaction (Watson, 1913b, p. 13). In a common refrain from the literature of this period (Tadajewski and Saren, 2009), salesmen had to: "Put yourself in the prospect's place" (Watson, 1913d, p. 23) and appreciate "other people's interest" (Watson, 1913f, p. 25) using this to orient their presentational stance and methods of closure.

The salesman had to be attuned to the customer whether the focus of their attention is another marketplace intermediary (e.g. a shop owner) or the eventual consumer (e.g. "the average woman") (Watson, 1913b, p. 12). What we need to appreciate is that the focus is analytically distinct from advertising theories like AIDA where attempts are made to move the audience from little prior interest in a product through to full-blown desire and subsequent purchase. To be sure, *The Knack of Selling* is intended to skew the power dynamic in favor of the sales practitioner and they are encouraged to use reason, emotions, and careful interpersonal manipulation to secure the sale (Watson, 1913c).

Watson operates within the liminal space between AIDA (i.e. encouraging people to think about their desires in marketer induced ways) and later theories of selling that took the dynamic subject and their *largely* pre-existing interests, wants and needs into account (Strong, 1922, 1925a). His vision for selling practice wants to channel customer behavior and thought in certain directions, that is, those congruent with profit needs, yet Watson realizes that people need to have some prior reason for their interest in a sales talk. As such, his writing is replete with references to "pushing" the customer through the sales encounter, sometimes combining this with emotional blackmail (Watson, 1913c, pp. 4-5), while ensuring that this is undertaken "quietly and politely" (Watson, 1913c, p. 7; cf. Watson, 1913f, pp. 22-23).

It is a tightrope walk that treads between assumptions of marketer power over the consumer (discussed below), at the same time as underscoring that there are personal interests, biographical and class-based structures that mediate the buying process. To determine the topics likely to attract the customer, therefore, the marketing professional is tasked with obtaining whatever sources of information are available. They have to determine what time of day for a meeting is likely to be acceptable to the client as well as consistent with their own performance levels (e.g. avoiding "the morning's rush") (Watson, 1913d, p. 26). Once again, this knowledge was generated via a form of rudimentary ethnographic observation:

A salesman for Stove Polish. . . begins OBSERVING the minute he gets in sight of the dealer's store. He notes the arrangement of goods outside, the windows, and signs, as he approaches; as he goes in, he notes what everyone is doing; he sizes up the arrangement and cleanliness of the store; tries to locate the proprietor and see what HE is doing. From these observations, he invariably hits on some point that appears to interest the grocer most actively. And he makes a remark on this subject even before he attempts to introduce himself (Watson, 1913b, p. 8; emphasis in original).

As E.K. Strong appreciates, there were limitations to a combined interviewing and ethnographic methodological strategy:

Seemingly the easiest and most direct method is to get into personal contact with customers as they buy, and so ascertain what motives have influenced them. Actually this is not easy to do. It requires that the seller shall postpone performing his regular duties for a time while he occupies *an observer's post*. Few have the patience or inclination to do this (Strong, 1925b, p. 360; emphasis added).

In the early twentieth century the benefits of research were, then, appreciated. Even so, the problems and difficulties that accompanied it were equally salient. Certainly, empirical

research might not actually generate insights given the poor recollection of the consumer. As [Strong \(1925b, p. 363\)](#) tells his readership:

Because the average person cannot explain accurately why he uses or does not use a particular commodity, and because the average seller in quizzing others finds just about what he is looking for, it is extremely important that a selling organization should from time to time make a thoroughgoing, systematic analysis of the motives which influence its customers. Otherwise it is quite likely that effective appeals will be overlooked and emphasis be placed improperly.

### **One-size does not necessarily fit all: temporal and locational relativity**

The Taylorite inflexion to Watson's work is therefore more complex than we might initially suppose. This critical posture regarding Taylor's axiology and view of human nature might, we speculate, be influenced by A.W. Shaw's equal willingness to adopt elements of Taylor's approach, while modifying others ([Jones and Tadajewski, 2018](#)). For starters, Watson argued against adhering to one sales-talk irrespective of where business was being conducted. For Watson, presentations were not universally generalizable. They had to be delivered in a manner sensitive to context, competition, and customer needs. In other words, they were temporally and locationally relative. They were also subject to ongoing evolution. As the marketplace changed, as consumer interests shifted, so did organizational and salesperson performances. This means that in certain respects, Watson goes against a Taylorite logic that pursued standardization. But, on the other hand, there was a profoundly Taylorite concern with finding the best ways in which commercial activity can be conducted ([Watson, 1913d](#)). This efficiency drive had to permeate all company activities and hinged on scientific management techniques (i.e. record keeping through what was termed the "score card" system) and attentiveness to costs and profits (cf. [Tadajewski and Jones, 2016](#)).

Having determined the target customer, whether this is the retailer, buyer or ultimate consumer, Watson encourages the sales practitioner to diverge slightly from the theoretical path of Frederick [Taylor \(1911/1998\)](#). Broadly speaking, Watson's ideas key into those found in the writings of Harry Tosdal, Percival White and other advocates of scientific sales and marketing management ([Tadajewski and Jones, 2012](#)). He departs from Taylor in the sense that selling was different to production in that it dealt with human beings who were outside the gaze of management. Unlike their production colleagues, sales workers were not confined to the factory floor. They operated with a degree of independence in the field. Moreover, scientific sales management was implemented with a combination of employee and customer management in mind. Neither of these groups were homogenous. Employees had different needs, skills and incentive structures; patrons had a plurality of interests and desires. The latter may have shared generic motives for action and there may be cultural and class-based similarities, but this did not translate into the salesman being able to adopt a canned selling talk that would appeal to all groups irrespective of socio- or cultural difference.

Clearly, some firms did require their sales force to use corporately devised and sanctioned selling talks that had demonstrated their utility in the past. The National Cash Register Company being an exemplar (cf. [Friedman, 1998](#); [Henry, 1913](#)). The problem was that unless the employee was somewhat gifted as an actor, deploying a "theatrical self" ([Spears, 1995](#)), performing the routine in a way that sparkled with vitality, there was a tendency for rote learning to sound "mechanical", almost robotic ([Watson, 1913d, p. 14](#)). This, naturally, did not stimulate the customer, lead them to pay attention, or think especially highly of a company whose employees failed to articulate an interest in the product line paying their wages. To work against these tendencies, Watson maintained, in a

Goffmanesque (1959/1990) manner, that salespeople needed to view themselves as actors, with the selling occasion as their stage:

[...] ALL salesmen ought to be more or less actors. Follow the good actor's lead, and learn your lines and then throw your feelings into them. Learn the places to get enthusiastic, the places to get solemn, the places to bang your fists on the prospect's desk, the places to keep your mouth shut and keep quiet (Watson, 1913f, p. 20; emphasis in original).

The modern salesperson, Watson underscores, had to be attentive to their audience. This is a function of the growing national and international market. As companies targeted markets which were further afield, sending their sales forces into distant corners of the United States, their customer base would fragment and their competitors multiply. In one of the examples that Watson provides, canned sales talks were out of the question if selling efficiency was desired. In this company:

[...] men work in such radically different parts of the country that no set rules can be laid down by the home office to govern their canvasses. And, besides, the firm makes such a wide variety of grades, at various prices, to meet the different kinds of competition the salesman runs up against, that it is almost impossible for the manager to tell his men how their canvasses should be handled (Watson, 1913d, p. 5).

Not only did sales workers have to be actors, they were also conceptualized as fishermen. In this case, it means being prepared, approaching the client with relevant information and anecdotes to keep the sales talk alive, combined with contemporary business knowledge that resonates with the client's industry or business practice. This has the benefit of conveying experience and insight, as well as generating interest in what the salesman is saying (Watson, 1913f). As such, they are not novice fishermen, using whatever tackle they had to hand. But contextually sensitive predators who alter their bait depending on the individual differences that confront them. Taking an anthropocentric sidestep for a moment, he talks about the sales worker "mixing" with the customer, literally trying to "blend" their interests to advance the objectives of both parties (Watson, 1913f). These interests are registered, documented and invoked when it serves some function. They could be used to generate short term interaction benefits (i.e. a sale) or to cement friendly, personal relations and goodwill much like relationship marketing (Keep, Hollander and Dickinson, 1998; Tadjewski, 2009):

The sales-manager for an importing lingerie house in New York has trained all his men to carry out this idea of scientific "mixing." Each man keeps track of every prospect's peculiarities or foibles, not only for use in personal interviews, but for holding interest and friendship between calls – as each salesman sees his prospects only twice a year. For instance, the Western Coast man had a prospect who was an enthusiastic Airedale dog fancier. One day he noticed an item in the newspaper telling of an Airedale's saving a little girl from a runaway team [of horses], but being itself run over and killed. He clipped the item and mailed it to his customer with a few words of praise for Airedales in general. The customer gets a feeling of MUTUAL interest with such a salesman that does more than any cigars or luncheons another salesman may buy (Watson, 1913f, pp. 15-16; emphasis in original).

When approaching a customer, the salesperson had to be attuned to their cognitive and emotional requirements: a canvass needs to have "the RIGHT SHARPNESS" to overcome their disinterest, reluctance to engage and even dislike of sales practitioners (Watson, 1913e). They have to know in advance whether a customer has an extant interest in a product or service and whether it is commensurate with their personal or business activities (Watson, 1913e). If their response is likely to be affirmative, then it simplifies the approach. Watson asserts that salespeople can usually just engage the prospect politely and commence the talk

without prior warning. On the other hand, if the product or service is not likely to be familiar to the customer, then it makes more sense to link the offering to an ongoing interest, highlighting this connection in written form which can be communicated prior to a meeting (Watson, 1913e). What generally (but not always) needs to be avoided is any form of misrepresentation or deceit:

Some salesmen use freak methods of getting in to see the prospect – tricks, subterfuges, bluffs. And other salesmen will tell you such methods are wrong. . . If your proposition is CLOSE to the prospect's immediate interest, the good salesman can make the prospect completely forget or overlook any trick method of getting in that he may have used – for the prospect quickly gets interested in the proposition. But if the proposition is NOT of close, immediate interest, the prospect almost invariably resents any deceit or trickery in gaining his attention (Watson, 1913e, p. 27, emphasis in original).

If the customer feels tricked, they will probably stop the meeting and eject the salesman quickly. And this greatly limits the possibility of future interactions and exchanges between the house and purchaser. So, even though his exchange scenarios are generally tilted towards the sales employee in terms of power dynamics, he nevertheless cautions the neophyte operative that the customer should not feel like they are being railroaded into a decision. In effect, he posits that the procurer must feel agentic. People, put simply, do not like to be coerced into any decision, even if it is in their best interest (Watson, 1913f, p. 9; cf. Tadajewski, 2011).

What the salesman needs to do is cultivate a sense of openness to the opinions of others, appreciating when the selling talk is failing and modifying it to account for personal idiosyncrasies. This is the royal road to success. It is a reflexive version of Taylor's "one best way" applied to salesmanship:

[...] the salesman who doggedly sticks to one SET TALK – one ironclad canvass – is as improperly equipped to do the biggest amount of business as is the fisherman who goes into the northern lake region with only one style of hook and one kind of bait. The expert fisherman tries out the fish – if one kind of BAIT doesn't get the strike, he changes. And if one kind of hook doesn't LAND them, he changes HOOKS. So, the good salesman, though he has a complete canvass worked out that SEEMS right, tries it out on his prospects; and if one kind of argument doesn't get a rise, he changes. And if one method of PRESENTING his canvass doesn't land the order, he changes methods (Watson, 1913d, p. 3; emphasis in original).

This strategic reflexivity is an ongoing exercise. It reflects the growing knowledge of the sales worker, their engagement with the customer, and appreciation of what has worked in the past:

With a good salesman, his canvass is the result of constant evolution – he adds to it, or takes something out of it every now and then. The more he uses it, the more suggestions he gets for it from his prospects. New points of appeal become apparent and better ways of presenting the old. The prospect is a never-failing source of information and inspiration to the salesman who realizes that his canvass is only begun when he finishes writing it at his desk (Watson, 1913d, pp. 16-17).

### **Disciplinary techniques, statistical and discursive webs**

In Watson's discussion there is evidence of the use of disciplinary power (Foucault, 1977/1991). The score card system, most notably, entailed recording performance levels for comparison against similar organizations or sales workers. Referring to "a grocer in New England who was losing trade – and losing money", Watson outlined how a scientific approach to business management helped turn around a failing operation (Watson, 1913d, p. 29). What we see here



is the quantification of the firm – an approach encouraged by an early pioneer of marketing, E.D. Jones (Jacques, 1996) – which involved the collection of data on salesperson performance, the popularity of product lines and costs of service provision that effectively created a “statistical reality” that provided an overview of firm and employee practices (Jacques, 1996). This data was used to monitor, control, praise and discipline those operating outside the gaze of management, namely, travelling sales workers (see also Crowther, 1924; cf. Hoyt, 1929, p. 45). In addition, it is worth appreciating the concern with profits in the quote below – an interest that should be largely absent if the production-sales-marketing eras framework (Keith, 1960) had much empirical realism. The grocer:

[...] began KEEPING TRACK. He carefully kept a daily record of what each class of business cost him, what it paid him, or what it lost for him. He kept it even down to lines of goods. And from it he learned that certain lines of goods lost money for him – lines he had always thought profitable. Extensive delivery service lost money for him. Credit business lost money for him. He cut out his Special Delivery system and found his profits increased. He cut out credit business – and found profits increased. He cut out certain lines of meats and canned goods – and profits increased. He TREBLED his business – by KEEPING TRACK (Watson, 1913d, p. 29; emphasis in original).

Watson provides an example of a record keeping card on which scores were added about whether the sales presentation generated interest or not (1 for yes, 0 for no). As he explains:

The salesman is required to keep a record of each approach he makes; whether or not he succeeded in getting the prospect's attention; whether he succeeded in getting him interested in the PROPOSITION after his attention was secured; whether he got a chance to put in his Close on the prospect and whether he secured the order. . . At the end of the day or week, the salesman has a pretty good history of just what progress he has made on each prospect. This would be interesting in itself. But more than that, he has the figures which will show exactly WHERE his canvass has been weak (Watson, 1913d, pp. 5, 7; emphasis in original).

Accurately completed, this material is a mirror of performance. By being transparent about their field-based activities, they are given points of comparison for benchmarking and improvement (Watson, 1913d, p. 22). Notably these disciplinary procedures were woven into everyday life, an expected move given that business owners and prominent advertising figures encouraged commercial travellers to adopt Lincoln's axiology of “Work, work, work is the main thing” (in Barton, 1921, p. 105). As Bruce Barton continues, “Every salesman ought, by precept and example, to drive that homily home” (in Barton, 1921, p. 105). Those travelling continuously and away from the prying eyes of their employers were quick to express their chagrin about such monitoring and the additional workload entailed in producing reports for the home office. As E. St. Elmo Lewis recalled,

The average daily report from a salesman is. . . one of the be-damned duties of his busy day, and he wants to side-step it if he possibly can. He sees in it only a desire on the part of management to keep track of what he is doing. He resents it as an imposition, as a covert insinuation that he is not giving the house the time it is paying for. Now, the thing to do is to get him from this wrong attitude of mind into a right one. It can be done. Put a premium on his reporting fully and regularly. Put a premium on his doing it for his own sake, not for yours (Lewis, 1914, p. 38).

Salespeople were encouraged to complete appropriate documentation after their day's work and management used it to determine normal and abnormal performance levels (see also Searles, 1904; Selz, 1904). A sales manager for an “independent telephone company”, as a case in point, explains that he uses these records to assist his workforce, reduce turnover, and consequently save the company opportunity costs: “I make all our men use score cards and bring them in to me as soon as [they are] filled. . . And from their scores I pick out the

trouble and rehearse the man on that point until I have him right. I have seldom lose [*sic.*] a man" (Watson, 1913d, pp. 20-21).

### Power dynamics

What is notable in the Watson volumes is that the power dynamics between the sales professional and customer repeatedly shift. We are provided with refrains speaking to a consumer orientation (Watson, 1913c, p. 10), with the buyer presented as a dominating figure. Reversing this position, the book series is peppered with comments that stress the powerful role of the sales actor (Watson, 1913b, p. 20) who manipulates the purchaser by using a quiet tone to focus attention on the selling pitch (Watson, 1913b, p. 30).

To add further complexity, Watson depicts the relationship between the salesman and customer in vivid, battle-like terms. Not quite as frequently as found in texts like *Ginger Talks* (Holman, 1905, pp. 14, 49, 86, 115-116, 120), but as often as the comments found in material by Arthur Frederick Sheldon, Charles W. Hoyt, E.D. Jones, E.K. Strong and many others who drew upon military metaphors to describe marketing interactions which continue to be articulated today (Deighton, 2002; Fischer and Bristol, 1994; Hackley, 2003; Knight, 2018):

You can't sell goods while flying the White Flag of surrender. You can't let a prospect domineer over you and expect ever to get an order from him. It is better to lose your sale in a good clean battle for the management of the interview than to lose it in the end by being out-generalled. You'll feel more fit for the next prospect – have more fighting blood – and keener wits for the battle (Watson, 1913b, p. 32).

These oscillating power relations are present throughout the sales pitch [2]. Sales employees should strike the appropriate "respectful" tone to secure the customer's attention (Watson, 1913b, p. 8), foregrounding their knowledge and appreciation of likely purchasing motives as a central plank in "scientific" salesmanship. All elements of the selling process had to be planned to prevent the prospect from becoming "bored" and showing the salesperson the door (Watson, 1913b, p. 3). But, in an unusual, but not completely atypical fashion, Watson's references to the consumer and their thinking processes invoke similar tropes such as "moulding" and "channelling" the mind of the consumer that were common in scholarship from the cusp of the twentieth century through to the 1950s (Tadajewski *et al.*, 2014). He even seems to go beyond models like AIDA and stray into the psychic realm. By being able to determine what frame of mind the patron had to occupy to progress from desire to action, the sales worker could mentally chart the likely thought processes the customer was negotiating. This would enable them to counterpoint any objections, remedy misconceptions, and was a "scientific" means of controlling the discussion.

Although Watson's logic is not entirely clear, he suggests that this sensitivity to the client, their motives, and patterns of thought, provides the salesman with the opportunity to apply their high-level interpretive skills. We are not within the domain of any version of abnormal psychology or psychoanalysis here (Tadajewski, 2019), as Watson does not cite any pertinent sources, but there is *some* evidence of a family resemblance to the epistemology underpinning motivation research (i.e. where respondent articulations were not taken at face value). As he elucidates:

For when you have in your own mind a clear idea of what mental attitude your prospect must be given, you will find that you naturally keep intelligent track on his thoughts. You will find that when he makes a remark you won't take his words literally as you do now, and answer only his words. But you will see at once from his words WHAT IS REALLY GOING ON IN HIS MIND – and you will answer his THOUGHTS and work them into the channels you want them. . . . When

you acquire the knack of going back of the prospect's WORDS and reading his THOUGHTS and when you have the knack of answering in a way to CHANGE HIS THOUGHTS if against you, or ENCOURAGE them if for you, you will have that knack of COMMANDING the interview, that marks the star salesman (Watson, 1913a, p. 28; emphasis in original).

However, as Watson appreciates, it was sometimes easy to misdiagnose the main motives underpinning the discussion. For instance, in an example dealing with selling a piano, a salesman attempted to encourage a client to buy a cheaper, but equally satisfactory model, to a more expensive offering available from a different outlet (Watson, 1913a, pp. 18-19). This customer was buying into the symbolic currency and cultural capital associated with a specific piano brand (i.e. the motive Watson calls: "satisfaction or pride"). To convince the individual to purchase his cheaper brand, the salesperson had to distinguish which constellation of motives could be used to structure their behavior. His strategy was ingenious. To appeal to the pride of the individual and their need for social approval, he suggests that with the saving the customer could obtain via purchasing his item, she could use the money to purchase piano lessons with a prestigious and in demand teacher. This was the tipping point, linking the "utility" of better training for the ultimate user of the piano (her daughter), with financial savings (Watson, 1913a, p. 19) and the symbolic value of being able to insert the teacher's name into conversations with peers (i.e. "satisfaction of pride").

Moving the consumer to purchase in this way required knowledge and inter-personal skill. If, heaven forbid, the canvass degenerated into an argument, the salesman had to defuse the situation. Disagreements – however tempting – were not the way to the patron's wallet. Conciliation was the path to career success, getting the customer to sign on the dotted line, and to pocket their commission. The salesperson had to find a way to ensure his ideas and proposals could be melded with those of the consumer, their thoughts had to connect like "cogs in unison" (Watson, 1913f, p. 16), otherwise the client would decline the proposition. Watson stresses this in unequivocal terms:

If there have been any points in dispute that he [the salesperson] can yield on, and give the prospect his way on them, he does so. In other words, he seeks to make the prospect as pleased with himself as possible, and tries to make him feel that he is RECEIVING a good deal. And then he quickly comes back to the real basis of his Close. The normal man likes to "give tit for tat" – when he has been GRANTED concessions, unless he is unusually selfish, he has a tendency to be willing to GIVE a little in return. So the salesman has him in a fine state of mind for pushing to a Close (Watson, 1913c, p. 23; emphasis in original).

According to Watson, one of the most influential motives at the end of the sales talk is "yielding to weakness". Put differently, he seems to suggest that an employee can wear down the prospect through the provision of reasons, emotional manipulation, and persistence. As he puts it, persistency must be combined with "diplomacy" and "tact" (Watson, 1913c, p. 25). These are among the essential character traits of the successful salesperson (Crowther, 1924).

Despite his oscillating emphases in discussing the power relations between marketer and consumer, it is apparent, Watson understands, that those trying to sell their products and services do not have the ability to foster desire in the face of overwhelming odds. That is, when they face a person who has no need, interest or lacks the financial ability to buy the item being sold. This is where he differs from AIDA and related conceptual frameworks that hinge on the idea of the super-salesman generating interest, desire and action where there was disinterest previously. From the start of the sales talk to its conclusion, the practitioner is like a stoker on a train. They have to determine what is likely to generate interest, highlight it, and continually reiterate it as a priority against the many other competing

demands that can distract the prospect (e.g. the need to continue with pressing business, interruptions from secretaries, employees and so forth).

The neophyte salesman is thus encouraged to negotiate recalcitrance. They must handle influential gatekeepers and justify taking up the precious time of prominent buyers (Watson, 1913e). If sales personnel are ultimately able to undertake their canvass, they need to maintain professionalism, persuasiveness and “polite” persistence right to the very end (see also Crowther, 1924, p. 127; Strong, 1925b, p. 45):

[. . .] be persistent. . . BUT DON'T MAKE A BORE OF YOUR PERSISTENCY. Apply it in such a manner that your prospect will not look upon it as persistency. This in itself will kill his interest quicker than anything else. . . And as long as his interest remains alive, you are safe in “sticking around.” You have watched a wood-fire as it burns. As long as it has some unburned fuel to feed on, you can poke it and get more flame. But when the fuel is exhausted, you must either put on more wood or quit poking. And it's the same with an interview. If there is a spark of interest left in the prospect, and a bit of selling-fuel for it to feed on, poke it up and try to make heat enough for a Close. But when all the selling-points you have heaped on are exhausted and the flame of interest dies down – either bring up some FRESH fuel or quit. Don't poke at a dead fire (Watson, 1913c, p. 29; emphasis in original).

E.K. Strong offered a slightly more relational orientation in his – quite amusing – discussion of persistency (see also Cowan, 1931). “Never say die”, he writes, admittedly with certain provisos:

A salesman should always strive to close the deal and not give up until it is clear that the prospect will not buy. “Never say die” does not mean, however, that the salesman should stay with the prospect until one or the other “passes out.” When a prospect has said, “No” and it is clear that he really means it, then the time to go has come. This “No” does not signify that the prospect will not say “Yes” to the same salesman selling the same article at another time (Strong, 1938, p. 344).

Apparently, this erosion of intransigence via a scientifically oriented persistency (Watson, 1913c, p. 27), that is, a persistency generated for valid reasons (i.e. having an offer that the customer will appreciate if only they take the time to listen) allegedly accounts for the overwhelming reason for people agreeing to buy whatever is being promoted (Watson, 1913c, p. 24).

### **E.K. Strong's critique of *The Knack of Selling***

Strong (1922) did use Watson's set as a foil for advancing his own ideas about the relationship between instincts, interests and motivation. Watson's work was flagged up as overly simplistic in terms of its level of conceptual clarification and the motives that were elucidated as useful for selling were questioned. Notably Strong doubted whether general motives were of great utility when selling specialist items like insurance which tended to be bought (or avoided) as a result of mixed motives on the part of the purchaser.

Strong often suggested combining instincts, personal interests and multiple motives. As we remarked above, Watson did stress that motives were often complex and multi-faceted. Still, it is fair to say that Strong's analysis of the sales situation and buying process was more complex and reasonably so, as the research base had developed considerably over the decade than would have been available to Watson when he was penning *The Knack of Selling*. As Strong remarked:

“Satisfaction of caution” as described in [The] Knack of Selling is illustrated in the buying of summer clothes before cold weather is over, “because the best styles or fabrics may be sold out before warm weather;” or in the buying of accident insurance because one may be run over next week. On analysis of these or similar cases the motive will be found a decidedly mixed one. Unless

one takes pride in one's appearance the appeal to buy the choice style is meaningless. Unless one has a dread of a city hospital or of being dependent on one's relatives, an accident insurance policy has no great charm. Caution, then, is not a definite motive for buying, as it covers many different motives which may differ with different prospects (Strong, 1922, pp. 250-251).

Further questioning the five motives outlined by Watson, Strong makes the case that some of the motives listed as primary motives – as core driving forces – are secondary motives derived from more fundamental concerns. His focus – pre-empting later motivation researchers – was on why people were buying the items they were consuming. This knowledge was likely to be more complex and informative for the salesman than an abstract motive.

Gaining money and utility while assuredly factors in business and consumer purchasing (Maxwell, 1913) still remained by-products of purchasing the goods and services that promised to yield satisfaction; although, he emphasizes, gaining money and utility were likely to be fairly significant motives for the business practitioner or purchasing agent who had to prove their value to an organization (see also Newcomb, 1911, p. 256). Even household purchasing could not be reductively viewed as motivated by the pursuit of utility in a narrow sense; the sales worker had to try to appreciate the “why” of consumption in more contextually and sociologically sensitive terms. As Strong submits in a somewhat misogynist manner regarding utility as a motive:

The absence of utility devices in the average kitchen illustrates also how inferior this motive is with women as regards saving them work. They would rather cook in the old familiar way and spend money on something that makes a show (to win approval) than change and thereby shorten their cooking labors and not have the dress, hat, etc., for themselves or family (Strong, 1922, p. 250).

Encouraging the readers of *The Knack of Selling* to look elsewhere for advice about consumer motives, he calls attention to the *Principles of Salesmanship* (Whitehead, 1917/1923) and the motives that are outlined in the latter text. While an exposition of them is not necessary for the purposes of this paper, what is notable is the extent to which the discussion that surrounds them supports the ongoing investigation of marketing theory and practice for racism, racist themes and assumptions (e.g. Davis, 2018; Jones and Tadajewski, 2018; Tadajewski, 2012). One of Whitehead's motives is the “desire for gain”. This, he believes, is a singularly powerful motive and deeply impactful on human life, whether we are talking about individuals or business firms. Strong (1922) concurs to some extent, indicating that he does not view the desire for gain as a primary motive, but secondary to those including motives for affection, imitation, praise and possession. Yet, the desire for gain remains likely to shape the behavior of owners and the labors of employees. It is with respect to the latter group that Strong strays firmly into racist territory:

It may be pointed out in this connection that although all men work for the sake of what they can make, they do not all work for all that they can make. In the South a negro cook will prefer to work half a day and live in a squalid hut rather than work all day and enjoy a decent habitation. So, also, most salesmen do far less work than they are capable of because further gain does not appeal to them (Strong, 1922, p. 253).

### Conclusion

In this paper, we have undertaken a close reading of a long-forgotten set of texts, *The Knack of Selling*. These books dealt with the development of sales strategy, handling the customer, controlling interactional dynamics, determining and modifying the weaknesses of the sales



force, highlighting how to secure access to key influencers, manage the power dynamics of the canvass and secure a sale.

We began by outlining the Taylorite influences upon Arch Shaw's reflections on the market, marketing and salesmanship, focusing upon the nature of the sales canvass. Shaw was quick to underscore that sales talks should have a definite foundation, ideally one which had undergone some form of market testing, and subject to refinement depending upon the client. Similarly, Watson (who the reader will remember had a history of business connections with Shaw) calls for practitioners to undertake appropriate preparation before they visit a customer. Unusually, he recommends various forms of research including interviews and – most notably – ethnographic investigation (cf. [Oschrin, 1918](#), p. 150). This material was used as an input into sales presentations, helping tailor content to the individual target, thereby hopefully ensuring their interest in the offering. All of which would enhance the chances that the salesperson would leave the store or office with an order slip.

The views of both Shaw and Watson continued to echo throughout the sales literatures. Of course, suggestions about best practice are not always implemented and there were many critiques of salesmanship training ([Bader, 1934](#)), but nonetheless commentators continued to advocate for “greater efficiency in marketing” with “Scientific management in this field. . . vitally necessary” ([Bader, 1934](#), p. 216). In a refrain that echoes Shaw and Watson, with a degree of greater relativism injected, McKinney pointed out that the “sales presentation” often had a “fluid, elusive nature” ([McKinney, 1937](#), p. 280). Still, preparation, planning and modification of delivery remained essential to commercial success ([Spiro, Perreault and Reynolds, 1977](#)):

The sales talk... is usually addressed to one buyer, is highly variable in that the salesman deviates from his general presentation to meet present contingencies, is a temporal pattern with no permanent counterpart, and finally, is almost impossible to divorce from its medium – the salesman presenting the argument, his general appearance and behavior ([McKinney, 1937](#), p. 280).

By arguing that salesmen had to: “Put yourself in the prospect's place” ([Watson, 1913d](#), p. 23), Watson was not only articulating ideas that were in fairly common circulation, he was pre-empting later discussions of the empathetic sales worker ([Shaw, 1961](#), p. 51) who united their sensitivity to the customer with the latest tools, concepts and techniques from the behavioral sciences ([Dawson, 1970](#)). These “help him to better recognize and cope with the personal need patterns of prospective buyers” ([Dawson, 1970](#), p. 35). By being able to respond to the client in this way, it was anticipated that sales employees would be able to cultivate long-term relationships with their customer base, thereby enhancing the profit potential of these interactions ([Tadajewski, 2019](#), p. 455).

By underlining the need to know about their product, service offering and consumer needs, Watson's advice chimes with contemporary discussions of the marketing concept and relationship marketing. This links him to more recent work on “relationship selling” ([Moncrief and Marshall, 2005](#)) which focuses on the development of long-term relations with customers in anticipation of securing a larger stream of income understood through the prism of customer lifetime value. When we read these kinds of publications, it is hard not to see similarities with material that appeared in the early twentieth century. Watson effectively walked his reader through the “seven steps of selling” that is “one of the oldest and most widely accepted paradigms in the sales discipline” ([Moncrief and Marshall, 2005](#), p. 13). These are: prospecting, preapproach, approach, presentation, overcoming objections, close and follow-up.

Admittedly, Watson often used a slightly different vocabulary, but he still referred to undertaking appropriate prior research, studying and then approaching the customer after navigating key gatekeepers; producing appeals that were likely to resonate with their interests; channelling the sales interview; explaining various ways when and how to close the sale. Even with terminological divergence, epistemologically there was certainly some commensurability between Watson's advice and the content of recent studies.

But, in equal measure, there is a degree of ambiguity to his reflections that cannot be ignored. Despite sometimes couching his comments in "relational" terms (O'Malley, 2014), he also frequently invokes military metaphors. This means that *The Knack of Selling* operates in a liminal space in the early development of marketing and salesmanship. It is not consistent with a clear-cut transactional orientation, that is, it does not encourage travelling salespeople to engage in hard-selling activities in the expectation of never returning to the same customer twice. But nor is it totally consistent with the stream of published research that highlights more substantive commitments to relational tenets either.

This ambiguous positioning is apparent throughout the volumes of the book series. Whether we are talking about mentalist conceptions of the consumer or AIDA, Watson's analysis always slightly diverges from traditional accounts. Sometimes this means he underlines more interactive relations between the practitioner and customer which might undercut our most widely circulated theory of selling. At other times, his almost psychic assumption grounds suggests a commitment to an extreme mentalist perspective that implies the sales worker has extrasensory skills that they can tap into when seeking to understand and manipulate client behavior.

To conclude, in spite of these books being quantitatively thin, they are rich in terms of the content they provide. When *The Knack of Selling* was published they certainly attracted the attention of influential early pioneers of sales and advertising and, as such, they deserve the close analysis and discussion they have received in this manuscript. We can only wonder what other gems await the close attention of our intellectual community.

### Notes

1. The attribution of this publication to Arch Shaw is guesswork on our behalf. The copy that the first author possesses is not attributed to any author. It is signed by Shaw, however, and presumably he will have had editorial sign-off and agreed with the sentiment expressed within it.
2. For example, to ensure the customer is paying attention and not merely performing their interest and attentiveness, Watson suggests pitching comments designed to test the patron's skills of recollection; tests that can result in "embarrassment" (Watson, 1913b, p. 15). As one sales person recalled, "No matter how interested a man LOOKS to be, I manage to throw in a question every now and then so I can judge from the prospect's answer or his WAY of answering, how much he has grasped of what I have said" (Watson, 1913b, p. 14; emphasis in original). Similarly, the salesperson can dominate the conversation, playing upon the motives of the consumer to manage the discussion (Watson, 1913b, pp. 6-7).

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