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**CONDUCTING PERSONAL SALE'S ACTIVITIES
ON B2B MARKETS IN CONDITIONS OF CORONAVIRUS
PANDEMIC – SELECTED ASPECTS**

**WYBRANE ASPEKTY PROWADZENIA DZIAŁAŃ
Z ZAKRESU SPRZEDAŻY OSOBISTEJ NA RYNKACH
B2B W WARUNKACH PANDEMII KORONAWIRUSA**

Summary: Integrated marketing communication can be used to sufficiently increase demand for goods and services that are provided by a company on b2b market. Promotional activities can effectively influence decisions of potential institutional buyers by providing information, arguments, promises and prompting to buy or use promoted products and services. Promotional messages are also used to create a positive opinion about an enterprise or institution. One of the classic instruments of integrated communication is personal selling. It seems that in the conditions of the spread of the pathogen causing COVID-19 disease, the possibilities of using this tool are limited. In the article, however, the author presents a model whose implication can allow the benefits of the tool while maintaining security standards. The basis for consideration was a systematic review of the literature as well as an interview conducted using indirect communication with managers of companies that use the promotional tool characterized in the article on a daily basis.

Keywords: personal selling, coronavirus, COVID-19, model, business to business market

Streszczenie: Zintegrowana komunikacja marketingowa może być z powodzeniem wykorzystywana do zwiększenia popytu na towary i usługi oferowane przez firmę na rynku przemysłowym. Działania promocyjne mogą skutecznie wpływać na decyzje potencjalnych nabywców instytucjonalnych, dostarczając informacji, argumentów, obietnic i zachęcając do zakupu lub korzystania z promowanych produktów i usług. Komunikaty promocyjne służą także do tworzenia pozytywnej opinii o przedsiębiorstwie lub instytucji. Jednym z klasycznych instrumentów zintegrowanej komunikacji jest sprzedaż osobista. Wydaje się, że w warunkach rozprzestrzeniania się patogenu wywołującego chorobę COVID-19 możliwości zastosowania tego narzędzia są ograniczone. W artykule autor przedstawia jednak model, którego implikacja może pozwolić na osiągnięcie korzyści płynących z wykorzystania narzędzia przy jednoczesnym zachowaniu standardów bezpieczeństwa. Podstawą do rozważań był systematyczny przegląd literatury oraz wywiad przeprowadzony z wykorzystaniem komunikacji pośredniej z menedżerami firm, które na co dzień stosują scharakteryzowane w artykule narzędzie promocyjne.

Słowa kluczowe: sprzedaż osobista, koronawirus, COVID-19, model, rynek przemysłowy

Introduction

Personal selling, also often referred to as canvassing, is a component of promotional instrumentation aimed at influencing the target market. Apart from advertising, public relations and sales promotion, it is one of the tactical measures aimed at strengthening company's and its products position as well as increasing the sales volume. One of the considered instrument's distinguishing feature from the oth-

er components, of so-called: promotional mix¹ is directness². This means that it is a form of dyadic communication that enables the parties to communicate directly³. Usually it takes place through personal contact between the seller and the customer, during which the former tries to persuade the interlocutor to make a purchase. Therefore, it takes place in all locations where the salesman has direct contact with the buyer. As researchers note, personal sale can be manifested, for example, "as a seller's advice in a retail store, as an incentive to purchase goods by a customer or as an agent or solicitor's activities on the market of production means"⁴.

Researchers emphasize that this feature is of particular importance on the market of consumer goods targeted at a narrow group of buyers as well as on business to business markets⁵. As P. Kotler emphasizes, this results from the fact that customers on the market of production goods often expect suppliers to adjust their offer to special, individual needs⁶. Meeting such requirements is not possible, however without intensified face-to-face contact between the customer and the salesman, when the former one can clearly define his expectations and the seller may adjust or modify the offer on an ongoing basis in order to meet the requirements of the interlocutor.

At the same time, however, it should be emphasized that in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, the use of personal selling is associated with the risk of facilitated transmission of the pathogen. The awareness of this fact became the starting point for the evaluation of the research problem⁷. It was formulated as follows: is it possible to safely conduct canvass-

¹ Promotion is a composition of specific instruments influencing the audience, therefore it should be correctly referred to as: promotion-mix. It is a set of interconnected means of communication influencing the environment, through which the organization achieves its marketing goals. At the same time, however, the internal structure of promotion-mix is not clearly identified. The promotion system is defined in various ways, but at the same time its basic elements can be distinguished – those that are repeated in most studies. See more: J.W. Wiktor, *Promocja. System komunikacji przedsiębiorstwa z rynkiem*, PWN, Warszawa 2001, p. 53; A. Pabian, *Promocja. Nowoczesne środki i formy*, Difin, Warszawa 2008, p. 29.

² Researchers emphasize that this is the feature that primarily determines the effectiveness of the tool being described. First of all, direct contact allows flexibility in conducting trade negotiations. This feature allows to adapt to the situation or to the particular client as well as immediately react to his possible reservations or doubts. Compare: J. Altkorn, *Podstawy marketingu*, Instytut Marketingu, Kraków 2000, p. 327; M. Molęda-Zdziech, *Komunikowanie w perspektywie ekonomicznej i społecznej*, Oficyna Wydawnicza Szkoły Głównej Handlowej, Warszawa 2001, p. 94.

³ Compare: M.C. Cant, C. H. van Heerden, *Personal Selling*, Juta Academic 2006, p. 4

⁴ H. Mruk, B. Pilarczyk, B. Sojkin, H. Szulce, *Podstawy marketingu*, Wydawnictwo Akademii Ekonomicznej w Poznaniu, Poznań 1996, p. 231.

⁵ See: A. Kochaniec, *Instrumenty wprowadzania marki na rynek*, [in:] A. Grzegorzczak (ed.), *Instrumenty kształtowania marki*, Wyższa Szkoła Promocji, Warszawa 2005, p. 12.

⁶ See: P. Kotler, *Marketing*, Dom Wydawniczy REBIS, Poznań 2005, p. 216.

⁷ Authors conclude that all the research should begin with the formulation of a research problem understood as a matter "that is a subject of research efforts, or simply what orientates our cognitive endeavours". A research problem is as much as a certain question (or set of questions) to which the research should provide answers. Compare: J. Błachut, *Problemy związane z pomiarem przestępczości*, Oficyna a Wolters Kluwer business, Warszawa 2007, p. 67; J. Sztumski, *Wstęp do metod i technik badań społecznych*, Wydawnictwo Śląsk, Katowice 1995, p. 38.

ing in the era of the development of modern information exchange means and how should it be done? In the article, the author decided to try to answer these questions. Introduction to the considerations is an introduction to the basic conceptual apparatus in the field of personal sale. This chapter has been created with the usage of non-reactive method: systematic review of the literature. In the empirical part, the author also uses the results of research conducted in the form of an interview, conducted using remote communication with managers of companies that use the promotional tool characterized in the article on a daily basis. It was seven people coming from 5 companies. Due to the ongoing pandemic caused by the COVID-19 coronavirus, the classic face to face, in-depth interview has been replaced by a computer based and telephone interview. This form of communication provided the respondents with full freedom of their thoughts' expression. Conversation in such a way also allowed to obtain objectives necessary from the research aims' point of view. The interview participants were selected using the "snowball sampling" method, which involves the non-random selection of respondents to the studied sample. After the completion of each subsequent interview, the moderator asked the respondent to indicate an acquaintance who could also be interviewed on the same topic. In order to reach first respondents, the author's private contacts network was used.

1. Personal sales as an effective promotion tool also in the pandemic period

Personal sale is defined in a variety of ways. For example, T. Taranko describes it in terms of a direct form of communication with buyers, in which the seller demonstrates the product and encourages potential customers to buy it⁸. Similarly, G. E. Belch and M. A. Belch define it as a form of interpersonal communication in which the seller makes efforts to assist in making a decision and persuade a potential buyer to purchase a product or service⁹. R. D. Hisrich and R. W. Jackson claim that it means paid and formalized, personal presentation of aspects of the enterprise to individual or group recipients¹⁰. A slightly expanded definition of the term is presented by M. Sławińska, who describes it as the process of satisfying customers' needs after they have been identified and made aware to the buyer. According to the author, in its essence "it is a personal and direct presentation of a product, service or idea by the seller to a potential buyer in order to finalize a transaction. The condition for the successful completion of the purchase is a positive customer's assessment of the benefits package that he acquires (subjective value) compared to the costs he has to bear"¹¹.

⁸ Compare: T. Taranko, *Komunikacja marketingowa. Istota, uwarunkowania, efekty*, Wydawnictwo Nieoczywiste, Warszawa 2018, p. 54.

⁹ See more: G.E. Belch, M.A. Belch, *Advertising and promotion. An integrated marketing communications perspective*, McGraw-Hill Irwin, New York 2010, p. 25.

¹⁰ See: R.D. Hisrich, R.W. Jackson, *Selling and sales management. Emphasizing practical problem solving and day-to-day operating details*, Barron's Educational Series 1995, p. 12.

¹¹ M. Sławińska, *Kompendium wiedzy o handlu*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 2008, p. 150.

Although individual of the quoted phrases differ in their details, the common feature of acquisition, emphasized in almost all of the definitions, is the interpersonal nature of contact between salesman and the potential buyer. Directness is widely recognized as one of the main features distinguishing personal sales from other promotion instruments¹². In this context, it may seem a tool of little usage in the conditions of the coronavirus pandemic, when there are in force regulations regarding such issues as, for example: the need to maintain social distance or the need to cover the mouth and nose. Such restrictions make it difficult to conduct personal sale's conversation. Also, restrictions on spatial movement can effectively hinder canvassing. In extreme cases (e.g. having to travel abroad), they may even make it impossible to reach the customer.

Though it is true that acquisition usually takes place through direct meetings between the seller and customers, in the era of the development of modern information exchange technologies, it no longer requires physical presence of the parties in the same place. As J. Wiktor notes, nowadays canvassing can successfully take the form of both face-to-face communication as well as the so-called: indirect, which does not require a physical meeting between the parties involved in the business¹³.

Dialogue with potential and current buyers as well as personal transmission of information in order to make a sale¹⁴ may take place in a different way than just in the form of an interpersonal meeting, e.g. at the buyer's premise or at a fair. The seller can successfully contact potential buyers, for example via telephone. He can also use so-called: mailing. In this case, the contact tool is not the telephone, but mail. Instead of calling potential customers, the seller first sends them a written offer. In this method, both traditional and electronic mail can be used. At the same time, however, due to the limitations of the selected method (e.g. the inability to present all the details of the offer in an exhaustive manner), it still requires further contact by phone. Finally, the tenderer can make use of videoconferencing. A lot of free tools for this type of communication are nowadays available on the Internet. As emphasized by C. Futrell, making usage of one (or a specific combination) of presented solutions, in addition to the obvious advantage of eliminating the risk of spreading the virus, often also leads to savings. In many cases it allows reaching customers in a much cheaper way than it would be possible through direct, face-to-face contacts¹⁵.

¹² See more: A. Pabian, *Akwizycja sposobem kształtowania relacji między jednostkami kultury a ich klientami na rynku przemysłowym*, [in:] B. Reformat, A. Kwiecień (ed.), *Biznes w kulturze- kultura w biznesie. Kierunki rozwoju relacji jednostek kultury z otoczeniem*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Ekonomicznego w Katowicach, Katowice 2018, p. 169.

¹³ See more: J.W. Wiktor, *Promocja...*, p. 55.

¹⁴ Compare: J.J. Lamin, *Strategiczne zarządzanie marketingowe*, PWN, Warszawa 2001, p. 546.

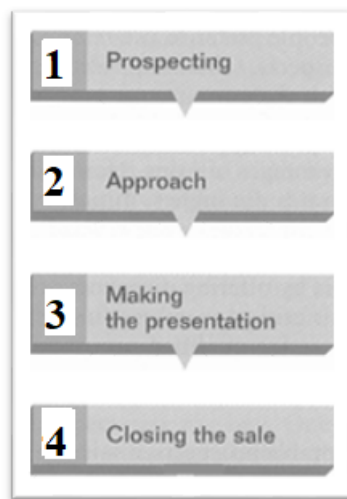
¹⁵ See more: C. Futrell, *Nowoczesne techniki sprzedaży. Metody prezentacji, profesjonalna obsługa, relacje z klientami*, Oficyna Ekonomiczna, Kraków 2004, p. 243.

2. Model for conducting personal sale on b2b tourist market in the era of coronavirus

Conducting personal sale in the era of coronavirus remotely, does not release the salesman from the need to follow a certain sequence of actions aimed at persuading the buyer to take the desired actions. Among the key stages of canvassing that measurably increase the chance of achieving success in sales, the following should be mentioned: prospecting, approach, making the presentation as well as closing the sale (figure 1). The effective manner in which these phases should be implemented has been currently conditioned by the realities of the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Figure 1. General steps in the personal selling process during the pandemic

Rysunek 1. Ogólne etapy procesu sprzedaży osobistej podczas pandemii



Source: own elaboration based on: W.M. Pride, O.C. Ferrell, *Marketing*, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, New York 2008, p. 547.

The first phase of personal sale should be the search for potential customers. Company is forced to constantly look for them in order to increase sales and attract new customers. Candidates from which actual potential customers can be distinguished through qualification process, company can search in many ways. In the era of COVID-19 however, methods that do not require intensified interpersonal contacts are gaining in importance. These include, for example Internet searches. Nowadays, most companies have their own websites where the seller can find important information that allows him to determine whether a given company can become his potential customer. There are also databases of companies and digitized telephone books on the Internet, which allow search for contacts based on given criteria. There are also spe-

cialized virtual tools that make it easier for salespeople to find contacts and potential customers. For example, the Salesgenie.com website allows sellers to access an extensive database of information about individual and institutional customers¹⁶.

Another method of searching for clients recommended in times of pandemic is to make so-called: blind calls. "This method is based on large numbers method. For example, if a salesperson knows from his experience that out of 10 people he has contacted, one has bought his product, then he can expect 50 calls to lead to no less than 5 transactions"¹⁷. Otherwise, this method can be called as random recruitment of new clients. The seller contacts on the phone, the largest possible number of people or organizations selected spontaneously, hoping that at least a small percentage of them will become his customers. As K. Przybyłowski et al. emphasizes, although in the case of using this method the percentage of negative reactions is usually high, in many cases it may be proved to be an effective method¹⁸.

When the seller finds a promising customer (and then makes an appointment with him remotely), he should start preparing for conversation. This type of activity constitutes the next stage of the personal selling process, referred to as: the approach. This phase is extremely important from the final success of the entire sales project point of view. As the researchers note: the success of the salesperson's activities is „directly proportional to the time and effort put into preparing them”¹⁹. Traditionally, this phase should include activities such as:

- defining the purpose of the conversation. The seller must determine exactly what he intends to achieve by contacting the customer. T. Buzan and R. Israel conclude that "setting goals is the first step on the way to achieve them"²⁰. It should be remembered that when defining the purpose of the visit, "one have to think very specifically about the results he want to achieve"²¹. Only clearly specifying the purpose of the conversation with the customer, will make it easier for the seller to focus on efforts aimed at achieving it.

- Developing a customer profile. It is about gathering as much information about him as possible. The seller must know exactly to whom he intends to sell his product in order to be able to develop an appropriate communication strategy with him.

- Obtaining a benefit plan. This step involves developing information that the salesperson will want to convey to the customer during the presentation. At this stage, it is necessary to: select the features and benefits of the product that will be commu-

¹⁶ Compare: Internet service of the company: <https://www.salesgenie.com/> [reading: 20.08.2020].

¹⁷ C. Futrell, *Nowoczesne techniki sprzedaży...*, p. 235.

¹⁸ See more: K. Przybyłowski, S.W. Hartley, R.A. Kerin, W. Rudelius, *Marketing. Pierwsza Polska Edycja*, Dom Wydawniczy ABC, Warszawa 1998, p. 542.

¹⁹ D. Mc Corman, *Sztuka sprzedaży*, Wydawnictwo ASTRUM, Wrocław 1997, p. 106.

²⁰ Compare: T. Buzan, R. Izrael, *Sprzedaż z głową*, Oficyna Ekonomiczna, Kraków 2001, p. 197.

²¹ G. Schenk, *Profesjonalny sprzedawca. Jak budować trwałe więzi z klientami*, Oficyna Ekonomiczna, Kraków 2001, p. 120.

nicated to the buyer during the talk²², develop a marketing plan as well as transaction proposal containing such elements as: product price, margin, profitability and other quantitative indicators characterizing the purchase from the customer's point of view.

In the era of COVID-19, the list presented above should be supplemented with preparing and sending of materials about the offered product to the customer in advance. In non-pandemic conditions, the salesman made available to the client resources such as folders, catalogues, brochures, technical specifications, manuals, videos about the product etc. during a face-to-face meeting. However, the potential for easy spread of the virus has led to the need to provide such material to the client in advance, preferably via traditional or electronic mail. At the same time, it is necessary to ensure that the materials being prepared are visually attractive because many customers are visual learners. Nowadays, however, this not seem to be a problem. For example, the development of typography has resulted in the fact that printed materials are now characterized by a very good quality of reproduction, they are not extremely expensive and their production process is simple and short. So canvasser can prepare, for example an attractive offer catalogue, and then provide it to the client to look through one week before the set date of presentation.

The stage of presenting the offered product is of key importance in personal sale. It is understood as a conversation between the seller and the customer about the product²³. It means a meeting during which the seller tries to convince the customer to purchase the product. In the period of COVID-19, similarly to the previous stages, such a meeting should take place through the use of remote communication tools. However, using a telephone or instant messenger limits the possibilities of mutual interaction. At the same time, even in such conditions it is possible to make the presentation interesting for the client. Despite the existence of certain restrictions, the solicitor must take care to interest client and keep up his attention. He should not limit himself to speak only. Contrary, should enrich his presentation with elements that can make it more interesting for the recipient²⁴. Preparing an interesting presentation in the era of coronavirus is facilitated by the latest solutions in the field of technology. Nowadays salespeople can take advantage of many tools that can effectively diversify their presentation. A rich and interesting presentation can be prepared, for example, with the use of widely available and easy-to-use Power Point program. Slides created in it, which may contain such content as photos, charts, tables, and even videos can be displayed during an on-line conversation. This functionality is today offered by many of the instant messaging services available on the market.

²² Compare: C. Futrell, *Nowoczesne techniki sprzedaży...*, p. 274.

²³ See more: P.D. Bennett, *Marketing*, McGraw Hill, International edition 1992, p. 605.

²⁴ See: L.E. Boćkowski, *Reguła powrotu. Podręcznik skutecznego sprzedawania*, Wydawnictwo Profesjonalnej Szkoły Biznesu, Kraków 1997, pp. 84-85.

Equally important as the previous one is the closing phase in which the seller asks the customer to buy the offered product. This is not an easy stage as the solicitor has to determine when the potential recipient is ready to make a purchase. In the case of a conversation conducted using remote means of communication, certain indications sent by the client may be signals for him, such as asking characteristic questions (for example: „how much does it cost?“, „when could you deliver the goods?“) or expressing enthusiastic opinions, e.g.: „this device should reduce our costs“.

When the seller is almost 100% convinced that the client wants to buy a product from him, he can use one of the contract closing techniques. These include:

- asking a direct question. This is the simplest possible solution and probably also one of the most effective in the case of a telephone or instant messaging conversation. “It consists in asking directly about the possibility of concluding a contract”²⁵.

- Alternative. It consists in the fact that the seller does not directly ask for consent to conclude an agreement, but goes a step further and asks the interlocutor to make decision on the next level, for example: “do you prefer green or yellow?”, “we are to deliver it in this week or could it be next one?”. Choosing one of the presented alternatives by the questioned one is tantamount to the fact that he has accepted the transaction.

- Summary of the benefits. In this case, the request for an order is preceded by a recalculation and summary of the benefits that the offered product may bring to the customer. Reminding the client at the closing stage that the offered product meets his most important needs is a good tactic. Such behaviour makes the customer feel positive about the product.

It should be emphasized, that there is also a tactical detail related to the conduct of closure in remote communication conditions that may be important to its eventual success. The seller must remember to remain silent after he has asked the customer to place an order (no matter which of the aforementioned techniques he uses for this purpose). He shouldn't say anything, because every word he says increases the risk of a sales failure. C. Futrell emphasizes that when closing a sale, one must put the client in a situation in which on his own, responding to seller's request, must make a decision and be the first to speak. If canvasser says something, then he will reduce the pressure on the client. In such a situation, “the potential customer no longer has to make decision. He has time to consider the arguments against the purchase. However, if the seller remains silent for a few seconds, the customer cannot avoid making a decision anymore”²⁶.

²⁵ K. Bargiel-Matusiewicz, *Negocjacje i mediacje*, PWE, Warszawa 2007, p. 67.

²⁶ C. Futrell, *Nowoczesne techniki sprzedaży...*, p. 436.

Conclusion

Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered coronavirus. Its pandemic should be considered in terms of defining global health crisis of our time and the greatest challenge that we have faced since World War Two. Since its emergence in Asia late last year, the virus has spread rapidly worldwide, causing specific problems and challenges for inhabitants of every continent except Antarctica. Apart from other, often tragic consequences, the pandemic has also forced companies to change the way they perform. This also applies to the methods of their promotion on the industrial markets. For example, some of the companies assume that in the era of COVID-19 it makes less sense to use the tool of personal sale. Due to its features, specified in the article, its effective management may seem difficult in conditions of raging plague. Meanwhile, the recent dynamic development of telephone and Internet means of information exchange has led to a situation in which the implementation of subsequent phases of personal sale can be successfully performed remotely. However, it requires to know a specific conceptual apparatus from seller as well as have an appropriate skills.

At the same time, the author is aware of the fact that the subject matter discussed in the article does not fully exhaust the issues related to the model way of conducting personal sales on industrial market in conditions of pandemic. It can be a successful starting point for further studies and research, however. The subject of further activities should be, for example a development of case studies that can illustrate in a practical manner the course of procedure related to the model being presented in the article. However, the author decided to devote a separate work to this subject.

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