

Belief Creates Reality

By Charles P. Clark

While CutCo Cutlery Corp. manufactures knives, Vector Marketing Corp. sells them. Opting not to market the popular brand of cutlery in retail outlets, Vector instead employs thousands of college students across the country as sales representatives (also called “reps”) who directly visit customers’ homes for live demonstrations. Being one of those employees, I began my summer with Vector in the same way that a foreigner visits a new country. I learned the jargon, the procedures and the ideology. Soon, I was fully integrated into the Bellevue office, along with some twenty others. As I came in for training, I received a regular dose of motivation from the constantly positive managerial staff, endlessly encouraged to think “poz” and to think big. The business moved fast—it was a continuous cycle of phone calls, appointments, paperwork, more phone calls—until the Vector marketing machine abruptly came to a halt for one day each month. During that day, sales reps of the North-Pacific region convened in Bellevue for awards, recognition, and learning. However, the most substantial portion of any given conference was the personal sales countdown, which determined who among us had the most sales for the two previous weeks. It is during the countdown when the Vector employees’ philosophy of optimism, motivation, and individual empowerment reaches its pinnacle. Through this process we can see what many of the sales reps do not: that ambitious optimism, when taken to the extreme, becomes delusion.

At first glance, the personal sales competition seems like a simple contest, but it is actually the focal point of intense preparation and involvement among the sales reps. The waving of morale-boosting signs, the cheering for officemates, and the weeks of preparation amount to a lively competition that resembles Clifford Geertz’s concept of “deep play” (*Deep Play* 363). The stakes are high, as we will see, and the emotional involvement is intense. The inspiration for the employees’ deep play is the belief that *anyone* can achieve *any* level of success depending upon one’s investment of determination and enthusiasm. This philosophy reverses the magical aura of success that is comparable to John Berger’s concept of “mystification” (110). Presumably, the individual is empowered by this realization, but a new mystification – a new illusion – arises in the form of inflated goals and disproportionate expectations. The sales reps in turn carry these expectations to the countdown, becoming what Walker Percy calls “consumers” of a prepared experience (604). As a result, deep play transforms the countdown, a mere game, into a major cultural event. To understand this process, we can approach the personal sales countdown as a symbolic representation of the employees’ corporate culture, using Geertz’s model of “drawing conclusions from small, but very densely textured facts” (*Thick* 28).

The deep play that ensues during a conference actually begins weeks in advance in offices all over the country. Every week, managers try to outdo the others by setting a goal for their office and promoting it enthusiastically, holding to the theory that belief creates reality. Take for instance a conversation between two assistant managers standing amid paperwork and ringing phones. “I think \$50,000 is too much,” one remarked, commenting on the office goal. The other responded with complete confidence, “We can do it. It’s just a matter of promoting it enough. If we

believe it'll happen, it *will* happen. Now, do you want to do fifty this week or what?" The other looked up and answered, "I want to do seventy-five." The attitude that "belief creates reality" is passed along to the sales reps, each of whom is encouraged to set a goal and to commit to it with unrelenting confidence. Whether an employee takes the advice is his or her own decision.

For a sales rep, personal sales can either be a shallow or a deep affair, depending on one's commitment to a goal. Similarities can be drawn to Balinese cockfights. According to Geertz, money in shallow cockfights is a "synonym for utility and disutility, in the ordinary, expanded sense" (*Deep Play* 363). In other words, the only involvement in shallow games is related to the rudimentary concept of profit. Likewise, for a sales representative who is driven only by money, as many are at first, the result is shallow. He or she will do two appointments in a day and remark with a shrug, "Okay, so I made \$28 for two hours of work." In Bali, for example, such an attitude would only be suitable for the "mindless, sheer-chance type gambling games" that honorable cockfighting men look down upon (*Deep Play* 365). However, for a sales rep who is deeply involved in his or her success, money becomes far more than a mere object. As Geertz puts it, "much more is at stake than material gain" (*Deep Play* 363). In this case, personal sales represent status within one's office community, especially because promotions are awarded to those who reach certain amounts. Of course, with each promotion comes a higher commission rate, but the truly important thing is being able to stand before one's peers and being recognized by the managers. Higher promotions also include additional perks, such as eventually becoming an assistant manager or simply being admired and emulated by newer, inexperienced reps. Additionally, friendly rivalries tend to develop between the experienced reps, further supporting the theory that

personal sales represent social status. This sense of social achievement is finally solidified during the Summer Conferences, when the most successful sales reps are the only ones left standing on stage.

With that in mind, a sales rep has much at stake during the weeks prior to a sales conference. Borrowing rhetoric from the management's promotion of the office goal, sales reps are inclined to think, "I *will* reach my goal," as if it is a matter of fact. They monitor their personal sales on a daily basis, eager to add more sales, and they see every successful transaction as one of many rungs on the ladder to their ambitions. As the day of the regional sales conference approaches, sales reps become increasingly goal-oriented. The possibility of failure is so detestable that the only way to avoid it is to raise the level of one's enthusiasm and confidence to the point where it is *impossible* to fail, where sufficient effort will ensure victory. This raises the stakes even further, making failure all the more disadvantageous. That is deep play. The sales reps are comparable to the Balinese cockfighting men, who Geertz says are "in over their heads" because what they stand to lose exceeds what they stand to win (*Deep Play* 363).

Alternatively, the personal sales of one sales rep can quickly become a group affair during the conference countdown. Rivalries between officemates dissolve once one of them is on stage and competing with a member from another office. This is reminiscent of Geertz's rule for Balinese cockfighting: "If an outsider cock is fighting any cock from your village, you will tend to support the local one" (*Deep Play* 367). In Bali, local disputes disappear as the villagers unite against the outsider. The same is true for the offices in a Vector Summer Conference, as seen in the way that offices display strong loyalties to their teammates. Such

camaraderie allows a sales rep to experience the success and ambition of his or her co-workers on stage.

During a countdown, every sales rep has the opportunity to address the audience via microphone. For example, a sales rep will state her name, her sales amount, and her office motto, which in Bellevue's case was, "I coulda been flipping burgers this summer but instead I was saved by the..." followed by the rest of our office responding in unison, "Belle-vue Team!" By shouting a slogan, the sales rep on stage pledges her loyalty to her office, and vice-versa, in the same way that Balinese men place bets on cocks in order to "express their allegiance to their kinsman" (*Deep Play* 367). Also, similar to the Balinese custom of offending a rival by betting against him, office slogans are used to facetiously insult other teams. For instance, the slogan from South King County office during the June convention was, "My name is so-and-so, and I sold \$5,000," to which the office members replied, as if speaking to the rest of us, "How do you like *them* apples?" In response, a member from my office later said in his address: "I'm Cesar, I sold \$7,000... and I coulda gotten a lame job selling apples but instead I was saved by the" And just as a deep match in cockfighting inexorably draws in more frenzied betting (*Deep Play* 360), our office responded with a much louder and more zealous "BELLE-VUE TEAM!" A countdown continues in this fashion until the top ten remain, at which point the chants become louder as the game between offices intensifies and deepens. At this point, the sales rep standing on stage symbolizes the office as a whole, just as a cock represents its owner in Bali (*Deep Play* 370).

Through this experience, even a novice sales rep can watch a superior co-worker on stage and still get involved in the cheering, thus gaining a sense of victory or defeat through that representative of the team. Further, inexperienced sales reps begin

to see the possibility of personal success embodied in their co-worker on stage. Often, success is seen as something that is out of one's reach, or as something special that belongs to those who already have it. This is analogous to what John Berger describes as the "mystification" process of art (110). People perceive art museums, he contends, as "full of holy relics which refer to a mystery which excludes them" (121) and original paintings by famous artists are "enveloped in an air of entirely bogus religiosity" (119). As a result, "works of art are made unnecessarily remote" (110). In this sense, success is also mystified as many people are convinced that they are not able to achieve it. For sales reps, however, seeing their co-workers on stage de-mystifies the exclusivity of success and reveals capitalism's most alluring concept, that with effort and determination, anyone can climb to the top.

The credo of Vector Marketing is individual empowerment. Sales reps are technically self-employed contractors, so they work only as much as they want to. Technically, they do not *have* to go to work, but they choose to do so. Therefore, it is the managers' job to encourage and motivate, to make success a tangible goal for each sales rep so he or she will choose to sell. In the weeks prior to a sales conference, my manager often declared, "We're all starting at zero now. It doesn't matter if you've been here for a year or for one week. Anybody can get on stage. It's just a matter of wanting it badly enough." Then he would step down, allowing a veteran sales rep to address us all. Beaming with confidence, she quickly fills the whiteboard with simple equations, telling us, "Say you want to do a \$6,000 week; and say you have a \$200 average order, which is ridiculously low, of course, because you have higher averages than that, don't you? All you have to do is set up six appointments per day and sell on

four. That's totally do-able. There's no reason why anyone can't do this." On other occasions, we sat down as an audience around a television and watched taped speeches delivered by CutCo legends whose sales totals exceed those of entire offices. They, too, reiterate the theme that success is possible, that they are no better than anyone else, that anyone can attain legend status.

In the days before a conference, the air seems to crackle with the electricity of an imminent lightning bolt—something great will happen. Sales reps set their goals and quickly enter deep play, where victory is demystified, attainable, and perhaps even inevitable. They become convinced that belief creates reality. However, this process, while seeming to be a dramatic realization, is in actuality another form of mystification. This new illusion obfuscates success by turning it into destiny instead of futility. The possibility of defeat is stricken from one's mind. Additionally, sales reps tend to set rather high goals, aiming for the legend status that is attained by so few. Granted, a goal is not worth pursuing if it is easy to achieve. On the other hand, simple equations from veterans and motivational speeches from managers only translate onto a whiteboard and into words, which are merely abstract interpretations of realistic possibilities.

Thus, sales reps arrive at the sales conferences with their own expectations, goals, and doses of optimistic delusion. They enter this massive cultural event in search of "it," the experience that they have built up in their minds. They follow the mindset of the travelers in Walker Percy's essay, "The Loss of the Creature," in that they have limited control over their own experience at the conference, becoming "consumers" of a planned event (Percy 610). Novices look to their co-workers in order to authenticate the experience, just as an American couple will seek the approval of an ethnologist after discovering a remote Mexican village (Percy 610).

They listen to the speeches, watch the videos, and run through the countdown, experiencing the event in terms of what they had already conceived beforehand. Even those preconceptions derive from the training and motivation from managers, veteran sales reps, and legends. In this way, the employees' beliefs do create reality, but only in a subjective sense. Caught up in the excitement, novice sales reps are similar to the tourists who witness the Grand Canyon and exclaim, "Why, it is every bit as beautiful as a picture postcard!" (Percy 598). The sales reps absorb the media rather than the message contained within; in fact, the things I most vividly remember from the conferences were the music and the speakers' personalities. Faced with these presentations, sales reps either internalize and mimic this mystified notion of success, or try to salvage the experience from its "symbolic packaging" (Percy 606). If one chooses the latter option, then he or she may have a chance at grasping the concept of success in more realistic terms.

The problem is not in setting high goals, nor is it in the dogged pursuit of one's ambitions. Success requires a certain level of resilience, confidence, and optimism. Indeed, many Vector sales reps are skilled at their jobs and become quite profitable. However, novice sales reps are trained to yearn for an image of success that is just that, an image. Perhaps the optimistic mystification is preferable to the negative, but it still props up unrealistic hopes and expectations. The challenge, then, is to find the road between both extremes. To do this, a sales rep must be willing to struggle for his or her own definition of success. Rather than absorbing the hype of a sales conference, the insightful sales rep must pursue his or her ambitions while carefully analyzing the promises of the Vector culture. Above all, perhaps the most

important tool for de-mystification is self-awareness, a recognition of one's expectations and how they are formed.

Works Cited

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