

90-Second Selling – An Exercise in Communicating Value and Persuading

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The focus of the 90-Second Selling exercise is to communicate product value using the tools of sales and persuasion. In small groups, participants receive information about a novel consumer product of limited value. Over 90 seconds, students must determine the information worth presenting, create a pitch, and determine what rhetorical tools they will use; they then have 90 seconds to pitch the product to an audience of their peers. The exercise requires little pre-work and is highly adaptable to course conditions. It has proven effective in providing students with more confidence and clarity in pitching ideas.

Keywords: teaching exercise, sales, persuasion

INTRODUCTION

90-Second Selling is an exercise in identifying and communicating the immediate values of a novel idea to an audience. Participants in the exercise are provided information on a product that is (a) completely new to them and (b) of limited apparent value. In 90 seconds, participants must determine the information worth presenting, create a pitch for the product, and determine what rhetorical tools they will use. They then have 90 seconds to pitch the product. The audience (made up of fellow participants) and the instructor provide feedback on individual differences, the types of persuasive elements employed, and on the overall strength of the sales pitch. The class then reflects on the different persuasive styles and value proposition structures employed by each salesperson, and on how individual differences translate into effective sales pitches.

This exercise was originally designed for entry-level undergraduate entrepreneurship students as a way of simulating the pressure and challenge of pitching a novel idea to an audience and to facilitate a conversation about the challenges of selling ideas to others. Over the last ten years, additional opportunities have emerged to employ 90-Second Selling in other classes and non-classroom settings, and the exercise has shown itself to be flexible and applicable to undergraduate and graduate classrooms, useful across a range of management disciplines, and relevant and valuable as a teaching tool for professionals.

While the exercise requires no pre-defined curricular structure or pre- or post-work to function effectively, multiple opportunities exist to tie the exercise to a deeper discussion of persuasive speaking, the structure of the value propositions, and the role of salespeople in creating value in markets.

UNDERSTANDING THE EXERCISE

Background

90-Second Selling was originally created as a response to a classroom challenge. While everyone engages in persuasive selling daily in their personal lives, the idea of selling a product or service is entirely foreign to most students and often well outside of their comfort zones. 90-Second Selling was created as a way of bridging that gap – of providing practical persuasive selling experience, in a limited time frame, in a structure that allowed students to recognize their own contributions and abilities while observing the talents and techniques of others.

Theoretical Foundations

A key challenge to evaluating opportunities is the extent to which students can understand the opportunity's value proposition – how does the opportunity address a problem or solve a need, and for whom is that need or problem most apparent? Closely linked with an understanding of the value proposition is the ability to understand how to connect to the market that appreciates that value – developing a market orientation. Building on the work of Narver and Slater (1990), who demonstrated a link between market orientation and business performance, scholars have connected market orientation to greater venture performance in corporate entrepreneurship (Covin & Miles, 1999; Zahra, 1991), increased product innovation (Atuahene-Gima & Ko, 2001), the development of distinctive competencies (Smart & Conant, 1994), and the ability to balance entrepreneurial action with market awareness (Bhuian, Menguc & Bell, 2005). Therefore, the goal in this exercise was to create an opportunity for students to explore how opportunity and customer intersect.

The pioneering work of David Kolb first focused attention on the value that experiential learning can have in business education. Kolb (1984) proposed and later refined (Kolb & Kolb, 2005) a four-stage model of learning that combines engaging in concrete experiences, actively experimenting with new ideas, absorbing new theoretical frameworks, and engaging in reflection on individual learning activities and the activities of others. Kolb argued that for learning to be at its most effective, these four forms of learning must be in some sense of equilibrium, so that students are balancing the applied with the theoretical, and the active with the reflective. 90-Second Selling combines all of these types of participation into one exercise that allows students to understand the functional elements of attractive value propositions (abstract conceptualization), develop a value proposition for an existing product (active experimentation), pitch the idea to others (concrete experience), and reflect on what they see both in themselves and in the work of others (reflective observation).

The Audience

While initial efforts with 90-Second Selling focused on entry-level undergraduate entrepreneurship students, it quickly became apparent that other students could benefit from this experience. 90-Second Selling has been employed in several scenarios, including:

- in junior and senior-year undergraduate entrepreneurship courses to focus on communication, value and the key elements of a value proposition,
- in freshman-level introduction to business classes as a way of demonstrating sales and persuasive speaking,
- in junior-level engineering courses that focus on designing innovations with the customer in mind,
- in MBA-level entrepreneurship courses to introduce the concept of value and developing customer profiles,
- in undergraduate and MBA-level courses on sales and persuasion, focusing on rhetorical tools and styles, and
- in consulting engagements with organizational teams where the focus was storytelling and engagement with the customer.

In each of these scenarios, 90-Second Selling has proven itself flexible and reliable. It has the potential to be applied in nearly any situation where the goals are to provide more comfort and familiarity with sales and persuasion, to focus on the structure of value and the role of the customer in recognizing value, or to focus on the role of storytelling and message to convey an idea.

HOW THE EXERCISE WORKS

The Exercise

In a typical 75-minute class comprised of 25-30 students, 90-Second Selling proceeds as follows:

1. The class is divided into five roughly equal groups.
2. All participants are briefed on the rules and structure of the exercise via three slides (please see Appendix A for an example)
3. Group 1 is led into the hallway or another room separated from the classroom. The remaining students in the classroom will serve as the audience and evaluators for this round of pitches.
 - a. The group members count off their presentation order. They are instructed to remain silent while in the hallway and not to collaborate or discuss the exercise. Presenter 1 (P1) is given an information sheet (please see Appendix B for an example). The sheet contains a limited amount of potentially valuable product information:
 - b. Upon being handed the information sheet, P1 is on the “learning clock,” and has 90 seconds to review the sheet and craft a pitch for the product in their head. No notes are allowed in the classroom when the pitches are delivered.
 - c. After 90 seconds on the “learning clock,” P1 is admitted to the classroom. As they enter the classroom, P1 shifts to the “selling clock,” and they now have 90 seconds to sell their product to the audience. In the classroom, an additional selling aid – a single slide containing images of the product in use – is projected on the screen and available to the presenter should they desire to use it (please see Appendix C for an example of a product slide). The presenters are informed about the existence of these slides but are not allowed to see them before they present.
 - d. As P1 enters the room to present, she hands the information sheet to Presenter 2 (P2), who is now on the “learning clock”.
 - e. The instructor (or a timekeeper) manages both the learning and the selling clocks to ensure that they are kept to a strict 90-second limit.
 - f. Presenters must own their “selling clock” and must stand in the designated presenting space for the entire 90 seconds assigned to them, regardless of how much time they use in their actual pitch. It is up to the presenter to decide what they will do with any additional time when they have finished their prepared remarks. Presenters are not shown a time prompt or a countdown; they are informed when their time expires and are asked to sit down.
 - g. As P1 is dismissed, P2 is summoned to the room to begin their “selling clock” and turns the information sheet over to Presenter 3 (P3).
 - h. The last speaker in Group 1 is alone in the hallway until summoned into the room by the instructor. That individual turns in the information sheet as they enter the room, and they in turn are on the “selling clock”.
4. After the last speaker in a group has been dismissed, the instructor prompts the audience to finish their notes, record any comments that they will share during the class debrief, and (when applicable) rank-order the presenters. No specific criteria are provided on how to judge the best presenter – audience members are given the prompt to judge “who had the best pitch?”
5. Once all scoring is complete for Group 1, Group 2 is asked to move out into the hallway. They follow the procedure outlined in steps 3a through 3h, utilizing a new information sheet with a new product and a new supporting slide with product images.

6. The process continues until all the product groups have completed their pitches and comments and grades have been recorded by the audience.
7. The instructor requests that the audience members summarize their notes and conclude their scoring.
8. The instructor then engages the class in a debrief of what they just witnessed. Depending on the focus of the exercise within the course, discussion questions may vary, but some comment discussions starters are as follows:
 - a. What were the unique approaches demonstrated by the sellers?
 - b. Which approaches resonated with you and why?
 - c. Where was the focus during the speaker's presentation – on the product or the audience? Why might the presenter's focus impact the message or its persuasiveness?
 - d. Good stories often stick in our memories because of the ideas we introduce, the characters we create, and the images we foster. What particularly "sticky" elements did you hear in the pitches of your colleagues? What purpose did those sticky elements serve? What did they do to your understanding of the product, the value it provided, or your interest in it?
 - e. What does it mean to be authentic in selling and persuading others? Did you notice elements of authenticity (or inauthenticity) in some of the pitches? What role did they play in how you engaged with the product or the idea?
 - f. What did you learn from this exercise about the power of storytelling, particularly when the idea may not be so novel or so exciting?
 - g. How does what you observed inform how you think about explaining new ideas to others?

Setup and Timing

The time required for the exercise varies depending on the size of the course and the amount of time allocated for debrief and discussion. The exercise can be executed in the 75-minute, 25-30 person courses that are common at many institutions. In such a class, the time requirements for the exercise are as follows:

- Group division and pre-brief (steps 1 and 2): 10 minutes
- Group presentation and scoring: 50-60 minutes (10 minutes per five-person product group)
- Class de-brief and observations: 15-25 minutes

While 90-Second Selling can be conducted in a single class period, the exercise is most effective when a substantial amount of post-exercise class time can be devoted to a debrief of the exercise and a discussion of the key concepts. In most instances, one 75-minute class period is devoted to the exercise itself, and a second class period to a debrief of the participants and a discussion of what was observed, relying on the discussion questions noted in 8a-g.

Assignments

The typical post-exercise assessment of 90-Second Selling is a reflection paper. The reflection is typically a two to three-page document in which students respond to the following reflection questions:

- What did you learn about persuasion and sales from this exercise?
- At the start of the session, I suggested that we were focusing on three areas – your ability to communicate persuasively, your ability to effectively communicate with an audience, and your ability to use time effectively. How did these areas work their way in to your pitch and to the pitches that you observed? Which of these three areas caused you the most challenge and why? In which area did you feel you performed best and why?
- When you consider the pitches delivered by your colleagues, what behaviors, techniques, or approaches stood out? What behaviors, ideas, or actions positively impacted your receptivity

to the product? Were there behaviors, ideas, or actions that negatively impacted your receptivity to the product? Why do you think that they had the influence that they did?

- Based on what you observed today, what is the one behavior or approach that you saw from your colleagues that you would like to try to develop or add to your persuasive repertoire? Based on what you learned today, are there behaviors or approaches you currently rely on that you will try to eliminate? If so, why?

Supporting Texts

90-Second Selling began as a stand-alone element without supporting texts. Over time, two texts have been added to bookend the 90-Second Selling experience. Typically, we cover these texts concurrently with the 90-Second Selling experience, reviewing one text prior to the exercise, and the other immediately after the exercise in an attempt to channel that new content.

Made to Stick, by Chip and Dan Heath, typically serves as our lead reading. In *Made to Stick*, the Heath brothers focus on “sticky” stories – stories that convey ideas simply and lastingly through the application of six core elements – simplicity, concreteness, credibility, unexpectedness, emotion, and storytelling (Heath & Heath, 2009). In class prior to the exercise, we break down each of these six elements and discuss that element’s value in storytelling and persuasion. During the debrief that follows 90-Second Selling, we refer back to *Made to Stick* with these prompting questions:

- “What particularly “sticky” elements did you hear in the pitches of your colleagues?
- What purpose did those sticky elements serve?
- What did they do to your understanding of the product, the value it provided, or your interest in it?”

In situations where the class has already read and discussed *Made to Stick*, we increase our investment in the material by exploring specific moments when presenters demonstrated:

- ideas that were simple to understand or that simplified the product,
- unexpected benefits or scenarios,
- statements that made benefits and value concrete and easy to reconcile,
- credible sources for validating claims or performance,
- emotional connections to the product or service, and/or
- stories that placed the audience with the product or in the customer pool.

In most cases, the second text - *To Sell is Human* by Daniel Pink – is introduced as a reading immediately following the 90-Second Selling exercise, and ideally prior to our debrief and discussion. In *To Sell is Human*, Pink identifies three key dimensions of effective persuasion and selling – Attunement, Buoyancy, and Clarity (Pink, 2012). *Attunement* is the ability to understand the audience and shape the message to key drivers of interest and engagement. Our post-exercise discussion of attunement focuses on establishing credibility with an audience, identifying the key drivers of value and belief among that audience, and aligning the goals of a pitch with the goals the audience has for itself. *Buoyancy*, or the ability to adjust to changing circumstances and to face challenges, is crucial for overcoming disbelief and uncertainty on the part of the customer. In our discussions, we focus on how buoyant persuaders can take challenging circumstances (and challenging products) and identify meaningful value in those moments. When discussing *clarity* – the ability to provide a clear benefit and plan of action for the customer – we focus our discussion on the ways in which benefits of products and services can be made clear, and how persuasive individuals are able to package value in a form that the intended customer can appreciate, apply, and engage with.

Both texts have enough rich information for the participants that, when practical, they should be included as part of the 90-Second Selling exercise. When class time or reading volume does not allow us to include these texts in the instruction plan, summaries of both texts are provided after the exercise, and students are encouraged to read both texts with their experiences from 90-Second Selling in mind.

The Role of Grading

The modularity of 90-Second Selling provides the instructor with a great deal of flexibility when it comes to grading and assessment. The simplest way to grade the exercise is pass/fail, based on whether the participant made a good faith effort in their pitch. The addition of a reflection paper provides an opportunity for the instructor to assess the participant based on what they learned from the exercise and allows a deeper discussion of their technique and contributions.

In the initial iterations of this exercise, audience members were asked to rank-order presenters for each product, and that rank-order value was factored in as part of the exercise grade, so that “better” pitchers received a higher grade on the exercise. Over time, it became clear that the competitive element emerged regardless of whether it was included as part of the grading process. Presently, audience members are asked to rank order presenters for each product, and the aggregate rankings are sometimes shared with the participants as a way of facilitating more conversation about differences that mattered.

Regardless of the grading approach used, the objective of this exercise to make it clear to participants that there is no “right way” to present value, but instead ways that are more effective and less effective.

Source Material

The products used in 90-Second Selling are based on products previously featured on Quirky.com, a New York-based firm founded by Ben Kaufman in 2009 that focused on “social product development.” Inventions hosted on Quirky’s web site received feedback from a potential user community, and products that received enough backing from users were marketed, developed, retailed, and distributed by Quirky in return for assignment of the intellectual property behind the invention and a cut of the revenue. Quirky filed for bankruptcy in 2015 but has subsequently re-organized in a slightly different form and with a significantly smaller stable of products. Some of its products can be found on its web site or at retail outlets, but the original products used for this exercise are no longer featured by Quirky or in its retail channels.

The product descriptions, taglines, and prices used in the 90-Second Selling exercise were taken verbatim from the 2009 descriptions of each of the five featured products on Quirky.com. The images used for each product in the support slide for each product were sourced from Quirky.com and other news outlets. Each of the five products picked for this exercise were seen by the author as minor innovations in a crowded landscape (i.e. silicone device pads for gloves, a minor improvement in dustpan design, and a silicone-coated drinking spoon). The products were chosen to reinforce the idea that potential value can be found in even the most mundane of product designs, and to focus participants’ attention on a relatively concise and understandable series of potential value contributions.

OBSERVATIONS

The Role of Time in Selling and Persuading

The 90-Second Selling exercise offers a number of potential take-aways for student participants (i.e., how to identify and structure a value proposition, the importance of connecting with an audience and understanding their needs, and the effective use of limited information to sell an idea), but perhaps the single most important contribution of this exercise, at least in the opinions of student participants – is what it does for their appreciation of time. Initially, most participants are flummoxed by the limited amount of time they are given to learn and share. The ninety-second time limit appears to be an arbitrary boundary when contrasted with the thirty or sixty seconds that many of us associate with commercials or the longer time frames often accorded to students for formal pitches or sales presentations. The time limit also strikes many participants as being far too strict a limit for them to communicate any real value regarding their product.

Of course, this is by design, and that quickly becomes apparent once the exercise is underway. Participants witness a great deal of variability among the pitches when it comes to the use of time – some participants are buzzed out of their pitches in mid-sentence, while others have 45 seconds of dead time to contemplate (and sometimes fill with additional information).

Requiring students to “own their time” and stand in the presenting space, even when they have shared all they wish to, is an attempt to communicate exactly how much time ninety seconds can be when the presenter has a clear sense of what they want to communicate, focuses on a core set of value identifiers, and connects with the audience around a shared idea. Often, students’ initial reflections on the exercise will focus on how much time they had relative to their expectation of what ninety seconds would feel like. In most classes, a significant portion of debrief time is devoted to a discussion on the role of time, how to use time effectively to communicate ideas, and the variations often required on a product or service pitch (i.e., 30-second elevator, two-minute video, 10-minute business model canvas) to communicate different levels of detail and match changing audience expectations.

The Role of the Instructor

This exercise is designed to function without significant preamble or pre-work, and practice has suggested that 90-Second Selling is best applied in this format. Participants provide the most authentic and valuable performances – both for themselves and for others – when there is very little pre-event coaching. The lack of defined models and advice, coupled with the trepidation many students feel when placed in the position of selling a new idea to their peers, tends to elicit quite different performances from individual to individual and product to product, while the lack of a clear template allows students to deliver a performance that feels genuine to them without seeking the “correct” response.

The most valuable role that the instructor can play in this exercise is as a spotter of hidden strategies, missed actions, and other activity on the part of the participants that might have gone unnoticed by their colleagues – especially in the early rounds of the activity where everyone is learning and observing without many benchmarks. Examples of hidden strategies include:

- The use of speech and delivery skills (e.g., tone, timbre, silence, eye contact, and gestures) to craft a memorable pitch.
- The application of different strategies (e.g., listing the value components of a product vs. telling a customer-driven story) to inform and persuade the audience.
- The use of rhetorical tools (e.g., audience polling, connecting with the audience, or associating the product with other groups or products) to build a rapport with the audience.

A great deal of value can be added to the exercise if the instructor keeps a note of these different contributions and makes a point of sharing them with the class during the debrief.

Selling Trivial Value

The trivial nature of the products used in 90-Second Selling is often critical to the success of the exercise, and instructors should endeavor to give equal weight in the debrief and subsequent assignments to pull out student observations about those products, about the value propositions they provide, and, most importantly, about how students’ ability to persuade others was in no small part a function of the product’s value in itself. The example products featured in this exercise are generally easy to understand, of low cost, offer few opportunities for differentiation, and as a result offer limited value, even to those who “get them”. In other words, they look a great deal like a great many of the products and services that crowd our economic landscape.

90-Second Selling emphasizes the challenging nature of these products as an opportunity – a “if you can sell this thing, imagine what you can do with a product or service with a clear value proposition, a defined customer, and an overall idea that you care about” lesson. Typically, our conversations about value, the value of these products, the audience they are intended for, and how to build value into products eclipses our initial focus on individual differences in style and substance. This is the intended result of the exercise, but it sometimes requires the instructor to initiate this part of the conversation.

Expected Outcomes

Instructors should expect 90-Second Selling to provide valuable opportunities for students to learn three key lessons:

1. The exercise will improve students' understanding of the concept of value, both in terms of how value is perceived by the customer and in how value can be communicated to potential customers.
2. The exercise will increase students' familiarity with the process of persuasive selling – in particular the importance and application of the concepts of attunement, buoyancy, and clarity that are essential tools in the persuasive speaker's toolbox.
3. The exercise will provide students with a focused opportunity to identify the rhetorical tools that are most effective for themselves and others when they are called upon to persuade and inform.

While the exercise was designed with these primary outcomes and a primary audience of undergraduate entrepreneurship students in mind, it has demonstrated opportunities in additional areas.

- Using the exercise as an icebreaker in courses on sales and persuasion to effectively frame the challenges individuals face in persuading others to action.
- Leveraging the exercise in preparation for idea, pitch, and business plan competitions – regular features of many entrepreneurship programs and business school co-curricular activities – as a tool to catalyze how to deliver a succinct and focused pitch on key ideas and value drivers.
- Using the exercise as a tool to introduce early-stage engineering students to the concept of consumer-driven value and explore the challenges engineers and technically focused individuals often have in separating technical advancement from value the customer can see and is willing to pay for.
- Engaging MBA students and professionals in an examination of what it takes to persuade and sell others, on how to engage with sales professionals in their organizations and organizations they work with, and how to create more opportunities within their organizations for persuasive selling practice and skill-building.
- The exercise has proven to be quite malleable to a variety of situations where the intent of the instructor is to focus on the concepts of value, persuasion, communication with customers, and/or an appreciation for the role of the sales function in communicating value.

Repeated Applications of the Exercise

While most applications of 90-Second Selling have focused on a single session of idea pitches, in some courses the exercise has been used in a pre-test and post-test capacity, with one series of pitches taking place before the introduction of key content in value creation, sales, and persuasion, followed by a re-introduction of the exercise after that content has been covered, to explore how the content introduced or the techniques used change and how the pitch is received. This approach has proven particularly helpful in two masters-level courses. In the first course, an MBA class on sales and persuasion, this two-session approach has allowed students an opportunity to experience their increased proficiency with personal selling techniques and demonstrate some of the tools that we cover throughout the semester. In the other – a first-year law school course on entrepreneurship and leadership, the dual application of 90-Second Selling has allowed us to introduce the concept of value in ideas (and selling value) early in the semester, and then focus on pitching ideas to potential customers later in the semester, when the focus moves from an understanding of entrepreneurship as a discipline to an exploration of techniques in practice. Few modifications are required in this pre- and post-test approach beyond (a) a sufficient delay between the two experiences and (b) a shuffling of products so that presenters must explore a new value proposition from the one they previously pitched.

CONCLUSION

The 90-Second Selling exercise has shown itself to be a simple, versatile, and effective exercise for understanding how value is determined and communicated, how to persuade others to action, and how to connect with a potential customer. The immediate value many participants gain from seeing how their peers wrestle with the challenges of communicating value, establishing personal connections, and persuading others to act motivates conversation and focuses their energies on subsequent discussion of the tools of sales and persuasion. The exercise has greatly enhanced students' ability to learn together about how ideas turn into value and value into opportunities.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A INTRODUCTORY SLIDES

Background: At the start of the exercise, I spend approximately five minutes introducing the exercise and framing some of the concepts for the participants. These points are not elaborated on. I have found that less pre-instruction provided by the instructor results in a better process on the part of the participants. I spend perhaps one minute on each slide, and then allow students a minute or two to ready themselves for the exercise.

Slide 1 – Purpose of Today’s Exercise

- Communicate ideas and persuade
- Establish a connection with the audience
- Use your time effectively

Slide 2 – Structure of the Exercise

- 90 seconds to learn
- 90 seconds to share
- The audience notes key elements and [when used] grades competitively

Teaching note: I typically explain to the students that when they are in the audience their job is to take note of differences, of particularly valuable or relevant presentations, and of times when the presenter makes a connection with regarding an idea or an emotion. In effect, to “write it down when it stands out”.

Slide 3 – Tips for Participants

- Focus on three big ideas or less
- Use your time effectively
- Connect with the audience in your own way

APPENDIX B PRODUCT INFORMATION SHEET

Background: Participants in 90-Second Selling are provided with a single sheet of paper with approximately two paragraphs of information on their product. The information included was sourced verbatim from the product information posted to the product's Quirky.com page (created by original inventor of the product and Quirky.com staff). Participants have ninety seconds to craft a sales pitch based on this information. While each product sheet varies based on the product in use, common elements are noted in the example below:

90-Second Selling

Digits ← Product Name
Stay Warm, Stay Connected ← Product Tagline
\$11.99 for a four pack ← Product Pricing

Don't let the cold keep you from your connections! Digits are mini conductive pins that attach to the gloves you already love so you can use electronic touch screen devices, like smartphones and MP3 players, even when it's below zero.

How to use Digits:

- Place the back side of the digit (with post) inside the fingertip of the glove and push through.
- Twist the other side of the digit onto the post
- Attach digits to as many fingers on the glove(s) as desired.

Features:

- Made of conductive silicone, with a metal pin on the back for attaching to your glove.
- Color: black.

Digits come in packs of four so you can use them on multiple sets of gloves or give a set to a friend.

Product Details
(explanation of the product,
how to use the product,
specific features, and color
options (if applicable))

APPENDIX C PRODUCT SLIDE

Background: Participants in 90-Second Selling are also provided with a single presentation slide containing images of their product in use. These images were sourced directly from the product information posted to the product's Quirky.com page and, where applicable, from other cited sources on the Internet. Participants are not aware of the images on this slide until they begin their presentation§.



Digits

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