

Breaking the Rules

by Dr. Jean Norris

Like many of you, I grew up in the higher education industry and have enjoyed amazing opportunities and meeting wonderful people, but there is still one person I'm dying to talk with. Maybe you know this person—the one who made all the rules on how to recruit students. I have a couple of questions for this person:

- Why can't we send information to a prospective student who requests it?
- Remind me again why prospective students need to meet with the admissions rep face-to-face?
- And, oh yeah...why isn't the way we were taught to sell working as well as it used to?

In a recent article by a sales "expert," he claims, "...we are fresh out of silver bullets. Pretty much everything in one-on-one selling has already been tried" (Stein, 2007). I wonder if anyone noticed that the book this author references was written in the 1970s. Perhaps he missed a few advancements over the years on how people buy, including the Home Shopping Club (QVC) and the Internet (Ebay). Not only do we have new avenues to receive information, but also in how we experience a product or service. What about the now commonplace cell phone, email, text messaging, and online communities, which are so integral in communication

today? None of these things existed in the 1970s.

Now I know the learned sales practices we've used for years are sacred to our industry. These methods have brought much success (if not predictability). When I see the gap that exists between how we sell and how people buy today, I can't help but wonder, how will we know when it's time to do something different? Or, maybe the reality is we do know it's time, but we just don't know what to do. Perhaps we're just afraid of the mess that will be created by changing the status quo.

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One of my favorite moments in grad school was when we were studying change management. Dr. Curtis Ames (personal communication, 2003) helped us visualize the impact change has on an organization by comparing it to pond scum. You see, when change enters an organization, it's similar to dropping a pebble into a pond of water. The result is a series of rings that form around the place the pebble was dropped. Some rings are closer to the pebble, while others move away from the center towards the very edge; this is where pond scum forms.

Think about a change in your organization, good or bad. The people

who fight for change and embrace it are representative of the first ring around the pebble in the pond. These are your soldiers who are strong and resilient. They work toward integrating change into the company. The naysayers are those rings moving away from the change, ultimately sitting on the edge waiting for the change to fail. These people are your organizational pond scum. They will work to pollute the water (organization) and do everything in their power to make the change fail.

So why do I bring up the visual of pond scum and change management? Mainly because we, in the for-profit sector, have to take a hard look at how

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we operate and determine what ring in the pond we represent. In other words, are we ready to lead with the necessary changes to bring this sector forward? The ability of a school to transi-

tion to doing something different goes beyond the knowledge that what is in place isn't working. It's funny how we expect our students to change their lives and go to school, yet we aren't examples of bringing change into our

own environments, especially when it comes to how we sell.

For example, I've been hearing from admissions reps across the country how conventional sales training no longer works as well as it use to. Some reps are using consultative selling, while others focus on needs-based counseling or relationship selling. No matter what the label, all these selling methods have a long history of success, until recently. While reps are typically excellent at forming relationships, uncovering obstacles, giving information, using trial closes, and effectively closing the sale, they realize something is missing. Admissions reps have gotten better and better at these skills, but leads aren't converting, and meeting enrollment goals has become a struggle.

In response, administrators have built failure into their admissions funnel. Some believe the decline in lead conversion is a result of new lead sources (especially Internet leads). I hear how reps don't like to work these leads, so they don't put in the same amount of effort. Other schools comment on how their reps prefer to work adult leads and abandon the high school leads (seems they take too long to convert, I guess). So administrators build a model that includes lower



DR. JEAN NORRIS began her own educational quest in a 10-month medical assisting diploma program. She credits the career college sector with providing her the motivation to continue her own education. Today, she serves as managing partner of Norton Norris, Inc., and leads the training

and research division. Jean is one of the leading advocates of the admissions profession and has dedicated her professional career to serving those in this role. Just this year, she became the exclusive licensee to train *Facilitating Buying Decisions*, which is the new, ethical way to sell in

higher ed, to admissions reps in the U.S. Jean began her career as a high school rep nearly 20 years ago. She has served in a variety of roles in both for-profit and not-for-profit education including Robert Morris College, Argosy Education Group, the University of St. Francis, and Rasmussen College.

Contact Information:

Dr. Jean Norris
 Norton Norris, Inc.
 8940 W. 192nd St., Suite M
 Mokena, IL 60448
 Phone: 708-478-1144, Ext. 221
 Fax: 708-478-1199
 E-mail: jean@nortonnorris.com
 Web site: www.nortonnorris.com

conversion rates. Is this really the answer, or is this because we simply don't know how to fix it?

Since beginning my research on ethics in admissions in 2003 (Norris, 2004), admissions professionals from across the country echoed the same message: "Please give us more tools to be successful." They have the desire to be the best, love their school, are excellent communicators, and they live to help students find a better life. So what's missing? Simply put, it's not your reps or your school. ***People just don't buy the same way they use to***, and our sales methods have only ever focused on one element of the buying decision—the sales side.

For the most part, people I've met agree with this statement. With technological advances and new ways of getting information, the role of the admissions rep is no longer to provide information or help prospects find out what is missing in their lives. Many prospective students use the Internet to find out about several schools, do searches for programs, e-mail for more information, and chat with others about their thoughts on going to college, etc. In fact, there are a growing number of students who look for a school online, apply and get accepted, and take classes online without ever stepping foot on a campus. This has been going on for years. The key, no matter what the medium, is to allow for meaningful human interaction (Future Now, 2000).

When I was VP of marketing and enrollment management at the University of St. Francis (USF), we had nine online degree programs and over 100 off-site locations. Our team of admissions reps worked with students over the phone and enrolled them in a program with tuitions typically exceeding \$40,000. These students never saw their admissions rep or the school

until they graduated two years later. Visiting the school wasn't part of their personal buying criteria, so why would we push it? The students would come on campus for the graduation ceremony and touch the tower of the main building, the same tower they saw in so many promotional materials. I guess it gave them some connection to the pictures they had seen in print, and the school was real after all.

Beyond how we sell, we have to consider what happens after the student leaves our office or hangs up the phone. Yes, they may have others try to talk them out

of going to college, but it's much bigger than that. Each and every person goes through a process to determine how

to fit the change into his/her life (Morgen, 2003). The impact on other people is only one of these elements. As much as admissions reps think they can understand what a prospect's life must be like, they really can't. The prospect is the expert on his life, and the rep is the expert on his school.

Given that the way people buy has changed, shouldn't the role of the admissions rep change along with it? How do we now meet the needs of prospective students? Some schools elect to change nothing and refuse to send information. They won't give out information over the phone and require students to come on campus (did someone say pond scum?). From here, they pitch and close using a common sales methodology. Some schools struggle to make the old model work, and reps are forced to focus on making enrollment goals over relationship building. These are the schools that end up in the newspapers and in court fighting consumer fraud

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allegations. The brave, innovative schools (the ring closest to the pebble) have elected to meet the students on their terms and sell the way the students want to buy. Let's take a look at what is involved in this philosophy:

1. Provide information in the form the student wants it, not how you choose to deliver it.
2. Don't be afraid to send information, put details on your Web site, and give out information over the phone.
3. Sell the way they want to buy; i.e., why do they need to come on campus initially?
4. Focus on adding new skills to the admissions interview that teach the prospect how to bring change into his/her life successfully.

I think Morgen (2007) sums it up best: "The culture, rules, and environment that we currently live or work within is the result of many decisions that have been made, over a protracted time period, that continually create and maintain the status quo," and if we are willing to make a change, "...no matter how small, before we're ready to shift our status quo, we need to know that

the change must match the criteria of what it's replacing, or the new element will be rejected...."

So if you happen to see the person who made up all those old rules on how to recruit students, please tell him I have a few questions. I wonder what position he occupies in the pond?

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Evolution of Sales Methodologies in Higher Ed 1980s – 2007

Prepared by Dr. Jean Norris, Norton Norris, Inc. and
Michael J. Cooney, *Career Education Review*

Timeline	Sales Approach & General Features	Influential/ Environmental Factors	Issues/ Governmental Intervention	Well-Known Higher Ed Trainers
Early 1980s	<p>One-Off Selling</p> <p>First sales system based on door-to-door product selling was introduced to career schools</p> <p>Later became known as manipulation selling</p> <p>Characterized by structured approaches to objections and closing</p>	<p>Openness to in-home selling</p> <p>Somewhat unsophisticated buyers</p>	<p>Some for-profit colleges cited for abusing student aid programs by using high-pressure sales tactics to enroll students under false pretenses</p>	<p>John Benanti</p>
1988–1993	<p>Script-Based Selling Reverse (Negative) Selling</p> <p>Still manipulative selling but new techniques to “turn up the volume on the pain”</p> <p>Business sales practices in college language</p> <p>Highly structured – Uses elements of Xerox corporate sales techniques, i.e. “probing”</p>	<p>Relationships important but secondary to meeting enrollment goals</p> <p>Consumer concerns and lack of trust</p> <p>More women entering admissions positions</p>	<p>Schools abuse the process by hiring commissioned agents to generate leads and enroll students in welfare and employment lines</p>	<p>David Bull</p> <p>Michael McKinney</p>

Timeline	Sales Approach & General Features	Influential/ Environmental Factors	Issues/ Governmental Intervention	Well-Known Higher Ed Trainers
1992 – ?	<p>Customer-Centered Selling Consultative Selling Needs-Based Counseling Relationship Selling</p> <p>Uses Dale Carnegie concepts</p> <p>More empathy and prospect-centric</p> <p>Questions deliberately used to determine problems and plant “seeds” to solve</p>	<p>Reauthorization of Higher Ed</p> <p>Dissatisfaction since the solution may not really solve the prospect’s problem</p> <p>Delivery of “service” may not meet student expectations as sold</p> <p>New sales mediums introduced (home shopping club, Ebay)</p> <p>Women now make up the majority of admissions representatives & seeking alternate sales approaches that “fit”</p>	<p>1992 – Congress enacts a ban, under the Higher Education Act, on paying commissions to admissions personnel</p> <p>Numerous Federal & State investigations</p> <p>Negative media reports</p> <p>2000 – Millennials enter college with high expectations & helicopter parents</p> <p>2002 – Congress loosens ban on commission pay</p> <p>2002 – NACAC votes to NOT allow for-profit admissions rep membership</p> <p>2004–2005 – Several lawsuits against for-profit providers</p>	<p>Nancy Rogers</p> <p>Richard Ashley</p> <p>Various Others</p>
2005 – ?	<p>High Probability Selling</p> <p>Disqualification to minimize wasted sales time</p> <p>More direct method</p> <p>Assumes “more fish in the sea” but not effective method for prospects needing extra attention</p>	<p>Prospects more savvy; seek customer-oriented approach</p> <p>Admissions reps seek new approach that is less “salesy” and improves performance</p>	<p>2005–2006 – Several lawsuits against for-profit providers</p> <p>Numerous Federal & State investigations</p> <p>Congress failed to reauthorize Higher Ed Act & 90/10 rule and 50% rule eliminated</p> <p>Ban on incentive compensation still in place but thought to be meaningless</p> <p>News reports on possible violations of incentive ban continue, which may lead to strict reinforcement or penalties in 2007</p>	

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2007 – ?	<p>Buying Facilitation®</p> <p>First model to look at the buying decision vs. just selling</p> <p>Highly ethical</p> <p>Does not require face-to-face meeting</p> <p>Method precedes and envelopes consultative selling approaches</p>	<p>Closing techniques experienced for decades – manipulation in selling not tolerated</p> <p>Online education</p> <p>Prospects buying without face-to-face visits</p> <p>Admissions reps “forcing” former models that don’t align with how people buy (lower conversions, rep turnover, increased student problems)</p>		

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