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BOOK REVIEW

David Dorsey, *The Force: They Sell for a Living, and What Drives Them to the Top Can Push Them to the Edge*, New York: Random House, 1994. 315 pages. $23.00

David Dorsey's *The Force* is an ethically depressing personal account of one year in the life of Fred Thomas, one of Xerox's top salespeople, and his Cleveland sales team. Dorsey, with the blessing of corporate headquarters, shadowed Thomas during sales calls, staff meetings, meals with the family, and vacation. His original intent, to praise a great salesman employed by a great sales firm, evolved into a broad scale condemnation of capitalist heaven. In this heaven, successful salespeople who meet their December 31st sales goals are spiritually dead by Christmas only to be resurrected on January 1 to pursue the new year's higher quota.

This book should be of particular interest to business and society professors. Many of our students will initially seek their fortunes in sales, are likely to envy Thomas' success, may not think his methods are unethical, and will want to mimic his sales "force," despite his lack of integrity. On a more macro level, after documenting the unethical games employed by Xerox's top salesperson, this article discusses options for placing moral limits on the unethical tendencies of this occupation.

One research methodology concern about this book must be recognized upfront: how did Dorsey know what was said in apparently private conversations between Thomas and his wife or his clients? The text is written as though either Thomas was walking around with a microphone attached to his shirt or Dorsey was a fly on the wall. The questionable authenticity of direct quotes of very private matters haunts the reading of this book.

Xerox's Top Salesperson

Fred Thomas, the book's obvious tragic hero and corporate martyr, likes to think of himself as an honest man. He has sold 120% of his yearly sales quota each of the past nine years and was honored as Xerox's most successful sales manager three years prior to the events in this book. He

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has become Mr. Xerox, to the benefit of his company and immediate boss but to the detriment of his wife, family, friends, customers, and himself. Xerox's sales messiah appears generally to be a nice man who, because of twenty years of reacting to organizational incentives, has evolved into a morally corrupt individual who lacks a moral compass independent of his sales quota and boss. For Thomas, what is "good" is that which contributes to surpassing his sales quota and benefits his boss. According to Thomas, he differs from other salespeople because he is honest and decent. But, based on the stories documented in this book, he is obviously deceiving himself. He is very dishonest.

A handsome, 41 year-old salesperson with a winning smile from a successful middle-class Lebanese family, Thomas has been with Xerox since the early 1970s. He, Kathy, and their three school-aged children live in an expensive suburban home. His annual salary is $90,000. Thomas manages the Cleveland district's major accounts team. He does not want to move up the organization's managerial hierarchy, but dreams of being transferred to a different sales position for a change of pace. He rises at 5 a.m., arrives early to work, and leaves late, driving his Mazda RX-7 1 hour each way. He typically arrives home after dinner, jogs five miles, watches the business news, chaperons his kids to their respective nightly activities, and eventually goes to sleep around midnight, after first leaving voice-mail messages for all his reps.

Frank Pacetta is the Cleveland district manager and Thomas' immediate boss. Pacetta reads passages from *Leadership Secrets of Attila the Hun* and fondly paraphrases rock lyrics from the 1960s to inspire his eight team sales force. Full of hype and insincerity, Pacetta pantomimes masturbation in front of his employees to demonstrate his disrespect for a telephone call from corporate headquarters. It is Pacetta who inspires absolute loyalty, and fraudulent sales, from Thomas.

The book is organized around Thomas' quest to make 120% of his sales quota in order to make President's Club, a three day, all-expense paid vacation to Palm Springs. The book begins around June, half-way through the sales year, when salespeople begin the big push to meet and exceed that year's quota. Prior to understanding the ethics of manipulative games Xerox salespeople use to sell their products, it is first essential to understand the moral degeneracy that seems to dominate the world of sales.

The Moral Degeneracy of Salespeople

For salespeople such as Thomas, the primary criterion for determining right and wrong is the effect an action has on obtaining a sales quota.

Thomas never appeals to a sense of justice, universal moral principles, human rights, the idea of the greatest good for the greatest number of people, or even the law to determine what action he should take. At times there is a sense that he does care about the well-being of his sales reps, his boss, and his wife, but this is all a facade, a sales job. He pleases these people because "what goes around comes around." According to his utility calculations, pleasing his sales reps will help him meet his sales quota, pleasing his boss will enable him to gain the internal career shift he desperately wants, and pleasing his wife will result in a happier home life for him. This is egoism, pure and simple.

Thomas' moral degeneracy is a function of the nature of commission-based sales with high quotas and monthly deadlines. He lives in a sea of moral confusion on a daily basis, lying to himself and others about what he is doing. Customers want to purchase the best quality product at the lowest possible cost from Thomas whereas Xerox wants Thomas to sell at the highest possible mark-up. In the competitive copy machine market, Thomas devises financial deals that make potential buyers feel as though they have an advantage by offering price reductions that are "baked" into the product price. If a buyer doesn't negotiate the price, then Xerox earns the additional add-ons that were never subtracted.

Thomas' moral confusion is reinforced by his company, boss, peers, and subordinates. The end result is self-deception that is only recognized during fits of anger with his wife. For instance, he claims to love his job because he is being paid to make friends, *but* his days are filled with customer rejections and he consistently looks for employment elsewhere. He wants to turn potential customers into friends, and friends into potential customers, *but* his customers and friends hide from him and buy from him despite their dislike for him. A few long-term customers seek his friendship when they have a personal problem, *but* Thomas is too busy wondering how to turn this moment of weakness into a sale. As exemplified by company sponsored golf outings, he wants to turn fun into business and business into fun, *but* the most obvious outcome of these events is an excessive amount of alcohol consumption.

These paradoxes extend to life at home. Thomas purposely chose not to live in the neighborhood where most of the other Xerox employees lived to keep his home life separate from his work life, *but* he was rarely home because of excessive work hours. When he does come home he talks and thinks about work. He wants his wife to work to earn additional income *but* he doesn't want her to become independent of him even though they have constant money worries and overspend by about $7,000 a year. He labors at Xerox day and night for the good of the family, *but* his marriage is crumbling and empty.

Thomas handles his constant state of moral uncertainty in two ways. He sells a lot of Xerox copiers at high prices and drinks heavily at lunch. This moral degeneracy is exacerbated by the war-like corporate culture that exists at the Cleveland district office.

War-Like Corporate Culture

Foremost at Xerox, even after winning the Malcolm Baldridge TQM award, the customer is the enemy. Xerox salespeople are engaged in a war for increased market share. This belief is deep in the corporate culture. The atmosphere is set by Pacetta, Thomas's favorite district manager. According to Dorsey (p. 36):

> When (Pacetta) arrived in Cleveland four years earlier, people were so frightened of him, one rep refused to come into the office and had to be fired by certified mail. He needed to be the drill sergeant. It was the way business was done now. Business was an act of war. You didn't earn your wings until you proved how close to the edge you could push your people. When he held a kickoff meeting one year, he showed slides of Pearl Harbor. This week we go to war! Put your helmets on! Yet he kept pushing his act over the edge, pushing reality into a dream, turning the drill formation into a session of slam-dancing. By the end of that meeting, a food fight broke out, with projectile ribs and chicken wings and egg rolls, and some hapless fellow came on stage and told everybody they would have to leave if the air didn't clear of food immediately.

Pacetta and Thomas believe that internal conflict, competition, and theatrics on the personal level and among peers develops the "force" that ultimately persuades hesitant customers to purchase Xerox copiers. The key to being a successful sales manager is to push and tease employees to the edge and then reconcile with them at the end of a particularly tense day, month, or year over excessive amounts of alcohol. Thomas hounds his sales reps, interrogating them every day about new and old leads. He is proud to tell the story of how one of his former sales reps seriously threatened to shoot him. Most sales reps simply try to avoid him at all costs, seeking shelter in the rest room when they hear him approaching their desks.

Other institutionally acceptable theatrics include the endless competitive games established by corporate headquarters and district managers. The Cleveland district has ten sales contests going on simultaneously. In one contest, a face photo of each sales rep is glued to a race horse that

moves closer to the finish line as sales are made. The highly paid sales reps even compete for a free turkey at Thanksgiving. To win means everything.

Lying to Customers

Sissela Bok (1978), in her classic philosophical book titled *Lying*, defines a lie as "an intentionally deceptive message in the form of a statement"(p. 15). There are at least nine overlapping outright lies made by Thomas and other Xerox salespeople in this book. They include:

The "I'm Your Good Friend" Game: Thomas uses the customer's first name as much as possible, finds common experiences, is sympathetic to all their problems, and then sells.

The "I'm Lost, Oh, Is This the Copy Room?" Game: Thomas purposely gets lost in the customer's building, mysteriously ends up in the copy room, befriends the employees, and then sells.

The "I Need My Boss's Permission for this Unique Deal I'm Offering You" Game: Thomas lies to a customer about needing his boss's permission to offer a free trial on a Xerox machine so the customer feels like she or he is receiving a special favor. For Xerox, one month's free use informs salespeople of a firm's copier habits and thus provides them with data to push future sales.

The "I'm Going to Offer You Special Credits" Game: Thomas offers customers special price reductions, usually in terms of free supplies or monthly leasing, which are already baked into Thomas' original asking price.

The "Let's Wine and Dine Them" Game: Thomas and some of his customers enjoy a $15,000 day of golfing with 100 other customers paid for by the district office so that salespeople can obtain key information (such as how much money is spent on outside publications). As part of a two-day product demonstration trip, customer entertainment also includes all-nighters at topless and bottomless bars, where women perform a special encore solely for the Xerox salesmen and their customers. These costs are built into the price of machines.

The "TQM" Game: Thomas offers customers all-expenses paid trips to Xerox headquarters for Total Quality Management (TQM) training sessions that are coupled with product demonstrations. If this sales approach doesn't work, Thomas appeals to the customer's guilt for accepting the free trip and training session. Naturally, these costs are included in product costs.

The "Leasing" Game: Xerox salespeople prefer customers to lease their machines rather than buy them so that customers develop a habit for budgeting a specific monthly amount for new copier machines. When the lease is about to expire, Thomas offers a new copier at lower monthly payments, but only for the first year.

The "Churning" Game: An extension of the leasing game, Thomas misleads customers into believing that when they lease a new Xerox copier, the debt for the old copy machine will be written off, but in actuality the amount is baked into the total cost of the new machine. According to Thomas, as long as a customer agrees to the monthly fee, it is reasonable to assume that the customer agrees to all of the costs baked into the fee schedule.

Customers are not innocent bystanders or victims in these games. They (a) accept free 3-month trials, although they have no intention of leasing the machine when the trial period is over, (b) get salespeople to reduce their offer to use as leverage against salespeople from other companies, (c) hint that other dealers pay them under the table to close a deal, and (d) stall until the end of December, when the pressure is greatest on salespeople to make deals to meet their yearly quotas.

Unlike Sissela Bok, some managers and business scholars may not want to classify these sales games as lies. Instead, they are merely acts of deception, fibs, or exaggerations that all salespeople engage in. Naturally, Thomas would want to maintain that only in very rare circumstances does he lie; after all, he perceives himself to be an honest man. Following in the tradition of Aquinas, he would distinguish among his lies based on consequences, categorizing most of his lying activities as harmless "white lies," thus denying the much stronger Augustinian and Kantian claims that all lies are wrong, regardless of situational consequences, because they assault human dignity (Bok, 1978). Importantly, classifying Thomas' activities as deceptions, rather than lies, does not necessarily decrease their blameworthiness because society still condemns deceptions that lead to deaths (Carson, Wokutch, and Cox, 1985). Certainly, if all else is equal, moral condemnation is higher for liars, but rarely are other factors equal. The central ethics factor in Thomas's defense is consequentialism, not labels.

Obtaining Entry into the President's Club

Specifically, how did one of Xerox's top salespeople make the President's Club for the tenth consecutive year? It all boiled down to the following four December deals:

Deal #1: Thomas learns that a potential customer's pregnant wife is scheduled to have labor induced the following day so he shows up unannounced in the customer's office to close the deal. Thomas tells the customer that Xerox would send the firm a check to pay off what the customer still owes on its recently purchased Kodak copy machine. Thomas doesn't tell the customer that the signed contract states that this amount will be added to the total bill from Xerox. The customer buys.

Deal #2: Diane, one of Thomas' sales reps, has become best friends with Libby, one of her customers. Thomas is uncomfortable with this relationship because Diane is reluctant to force Libby to approve a subsidiary's purchase of a Xerox copier that is of questionable value to the firm. Thomas unsuccessfully offers Libby a secret $10,000 credit for approving the subsidiary's purchase. In December, Libby aids Diane by ordering ten Xerox copiers for her firm, which are of equivalent value to the one Xerox copier Thomas wants to sell the subsidiary. This sale puts Diane at 120% of budget, thus making President's Club. As a result of Thomas' continual sales pressure, Libby ends her friendship with Diane and Thomas takes her off the account.

Deal #3: After some wining, dining, and free TQM training, Thomas offers a customer credit for $130,000 of free supplies, which are already baked into the price. When asked if these supplies are "totally free," Thomas reassures the customer that they are. When days pass without any final decision, Thomas offers an additional $40,000 in credits, which are also baked into the price. The customer buys.

Deal #4: Thomas and a sales rep wine, dine, and beg Nick, a 15-year customer, to obtain the final deal that will put Thomas into the President's Club. Because Nick is in a deep holiday depression and seriously considering a career change, Thomas believes Nick may be tempted to make a large purchase just to get even with his own firm. After significant alcohol consumption, Nick agrees to purchase enough to put Thomas into the President's Club if Xerox will pay for the first two months, a cost that has already been backed into the price. Thomas pushes for installation by the end of the year so that Pacetta will receive credit toward his bonus. When Nick refuses to accept a year-end delivery, Thomas obtains permission from his superiors to sign papers that, in the name of customer satisfaction (TQM), the copy machines would be temporarily delivered to another site until after the new year. This contract breaks a company policy aimed at preventing unethical sales—customers should only pay for products they have already received.

The book ends on a they-all-lived-happily-ever-after note. Thomas goes to Palm Springs with Kathy for three days of partying with the other Presidential Club winners. Though Xerox planned to offer someone else a new sales position with greater responsibilities in the Cleveland district, Thomas accepts the promotion after Pacetta threatens to work against the person headquarters was considering. Thomas's new job consists of more reasonable hours and he gets home before dinner.

The Prevalence of Deceptions and Lies

Thomas is not any fly-by-night salesperson. He is employed by a company well-respected for having a high-quality sales staff, has been a Xerox salesperson for 20 years, has made the distinguished President's Club 10 consecutive years, was honored as Xerox's top salesperson, manages other sales reps, and was promoted to a sales position with greater responsibility. He, like all human beings, is a creature of habit. He, unlike many other human beings, is a habitual deceiver and liar. Xerox rewards him for having these attributes.

Do all salespeople deceive and lie? Of course, some rarely and some often, but all at some point or other. Everyone deceives and lies. This is part of the human predicament. There are an infinite number of cases of government officials lying to citizens, doctors lying to patients, lawyers lying on behalf of clients, teachers lying to students, parents lying to children, and so on. Indeed, parents work hard to discourage what appears to come so naturally to their children—lying. My son lied to me as soon as he could talk: "Did you go to the bathroom in your diaper?" I asked, as the obvious aroma filled the room. "No, daddy," said my 2-year-old son, who would rather sit in a soiled diaper than have his dad take him away from what he is doing to change the diaper.

Do people employed in the occupation of sales lie more often than people engaged in other work occupations? The American public seems to think so. According to a 1990 Gallup Poll, the four occupations that the public perceived as having the worst ethics were car salesmen, advertising practitioners, insurance salesmen, and stockbrokers—all sales occupations. The typical sales commission incentive system significantly increases the temptation to act unethically (Kurland, 1991).

As a point of self-disclosure, I worked in sales for a religious organization. Every day we went door-to-door selling a variety of products to help fund our missionary activities. Although these were among the most exciting years of my life, I freely admit that we lied as often as needed about the quality of the product ("yes sir, it is top of the line stuff") or how the money would be spent ("tell me what you think is a good cause and I am sure that is exactly where the money will be spent"). Most of us had little reservation about committing these lies because they were done for the good of the cause. The existence of deadlines (we need X amount of product sold by day Y) and commissions (if you accomplish this you will receive Z), whether monetary or heavenly, fosters lying.

Significantly, the tendency for those employed as salespeople to deceive and lie is not bounded by national borders, historical time periods, religious affiliations, political systems, or economic systems. From a Judeo-Christian historical perspective, the Old Testament (Genesis 25.29-25.34) story of Jacob selling bread and pottage to his brother Esau in exchange for his birthright foreshadows many unethical selling exchanges.

What Is To Be Done About Sales Deceptions and Lies?

Each of the systems or isms noted above provides a different answer to the question of what to do about salespeople who deceive and lie. Sometimes, salespeople who lie in the United States go to jail whereas those who lie in China must make public confessions. Democracies prefer trials whereas some dictators execute people who lie or cut out their tongues. Some Christians may forgive the person lying whereas other Christians demand repentance. Capitalist societies rely on law enforcement and market mechanisms whereas communist nations rely on re-education and the elimination of private property.

All of these solutions have failed. As exemplified by this book, 100 years of capitalism in the United States had not even come close to eliminating lies. Nor did 70 years of communism in the former Soviet Union. While ruled by communists, political and business leaders continually lied to citizens and consumers. Once freed of communism, the Russian marketplace is now filled with product lies. Nonetheless, we continue to try to either eradicate or minimize lies.

In considering the problem of Fred Thomas and Xerox, a reasonable list of solutions would include ethics training, top-management leadership against lying, industry-wide sanctions, enforcement and development of laws, and consumer boycotts. However, this usual list of solutions is likely to fall far short of the intended Kantian goal and vision—a sales force of high integrity—when examined in terms of data in this book.

Ethics training at the Cleveland district was a joke. There is a wonderful anecdote in *The Force* where a woman from headquarters conducts an ethics workshop. Pacetta, the district manager, leads a prank where everyone inches his or her seat closer to the workshop coordinator each time she turns her back on the audience, until she realizes that some prank is taking place. The ethics training had no apparent effect on the salespeople. Reliance upon some individual personal enlightenment, although a worthwhile effort, will not obtain the desired result across the occupation.

Maybe what is missing from this scenario is corporate leadership. Top-management did try. They initiated the ethics workshop and developed a policy stating that customers should only pay for products they have received. But this policy was flagrantly manipulated by Thomas with the aid of other managers. Even corporate headquarters' push toward TQM was interpreted by salespeople as the latest in manipulative methods. One "people-person" sales rep who wants to do things the Kantian way is forewarned that all those who have tried this approach to sales have failed.

A major problem with these two solutions is that they rely on individual enlightenment. Reformists are limited to waiting for each manager and every firm to reach this understanding. The other solutions provide a broader attack on this occupational problem by appealing to industry associations, the law, and consumers, but each of these three scenarios have major flaws.

First, industry leaders are certainly aware of these unethical behaviors. However, aside from rhetorical flourishes, their impact on changing behaviors appears minimal at best. Second, salespeople such as Fred Thomas feel invincible from law enforcement efforts. New laws developed to restrain their behaviors are fair game for creatively discovering ways around the law. For instance, if "haggle-free" prices became the legal norm, Thomas would devise another unethical strategy to win customers from his competitors. Third, as demonstrated by the 1990 Gallup Poll, the public is very sensitive to the problem of ethics in sales-related occupations but there is no apparent public outcry that action be taken. In addition, many of Thomas's customers purchased machines from him despite his lies and deceptions.

Of course business and society professors should continue to point out this problem and encourage ethics training, top-management leadership, consumer boycotts, industry-wide sanctions, public support for high integrity firms, enforcement of existing laws, and development of new laws. It is socially desirable for society to maximize truth and minimize lies, and we play an important role in encouraging society to evolve along these lines. To argue that Thomas is, relatively speaking, not so bad is a sorry statement on the moral rectitude of salespeople with whom he is being compared. His actions must be condemned, not accepted, rationalized, or justified.

Is there any hope for eradicating this universal problem of salespeople lying? Realistically, we should not expect the problem to go away, or should we? Making a depressing situation possibly worse, similar despicable behaviors can be seen at top financial institutions such as Salomon Brothers (Collins, 1992) and among both early and modern capitalists (Collins, 1994). Does it all actually come down to the spiritual concept of sin? These are just some of the many questions and areas of thought that this book raises for business and society professors.

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