

Sales and salesmanship in geophysics

LAWRENCE M. GOCHIOCO, GX Technology Corporation, Houston, U.S.

Over the past 20 years, TLE has covered pioneers, wildcatters, innovators, etc. who played key roles in transforming the energy business through the development and employment of advanced geophysical technologies. However, one group of professionals that gets little respect are the salespeople. They provide an important link between the developers and end-users. Service companies have always had to stay ahead of the technology curve to remain in business. Thus, these companies relied on their sales staff to be on the front line to sell technical services to the independents and major oil companies.

Today, a growing percentage of the sales staff working for these service companies are former geophysicists (trained by E&P companies). Most of them have very interesting stories to share, as they struggled to make the transition from their former technical roles to sales positions. When the energy industry went through down business cycles, they too experienced the pains.

The more seasoned veterans of this profession like to talk about themselves as being peddlers (just to be funny). Thus, I selected a "peddler" who has been in the business for more than 40 years for an interview and to solicit his viewpoint. At age 71, Gene R. Lindsay is a remarkable person who is well-known and respected in the oil industry. He is a rare breed for he is still very active in the business and has kept up with the rapid technology advances. After spending 16 years in computer sales (including five years at IBM), he entered the oil patch business in 1980, and has been marketing and selling geophysical services since.

Most people I know are retired at 71, what keeps you motivated to continue working?

When I started my first sales job 40+ years ago, an old friend gave me some advice, "You may not always get to do what you like, but you should always like what you do." There is a big difference in that statement and that is one factor why I continue to peddle. We don't live in a perfect world, or else, I would have been a song stylist, like Frank Sinatra. My initial career was in data processing (operations). As a result of my good interpersonal skills, I was advised to apply for the elite IBM sales force. I did in 1964, and have been selling hardware and software products ever since.

I believe no one is a natural-born salesperson. You need to have certain basic skills or aptitude. Then, you work at it to become better. For example, you need to have a certain amount of aptitude for solving complex equations to become a good mathematician. If you don't have these basic skills, then you need to select another profession that may provide a better match to your capabilities.

A career in sales can be challenging and is not as easy as most people think, especially when you are trying to acquire new clients. For example, there is the normal adversarial role played between the client and salesperson. The client normally has a set of things he/she wants and protects, and the salesperson has to have those things in order to carry to the next level. When their common interests

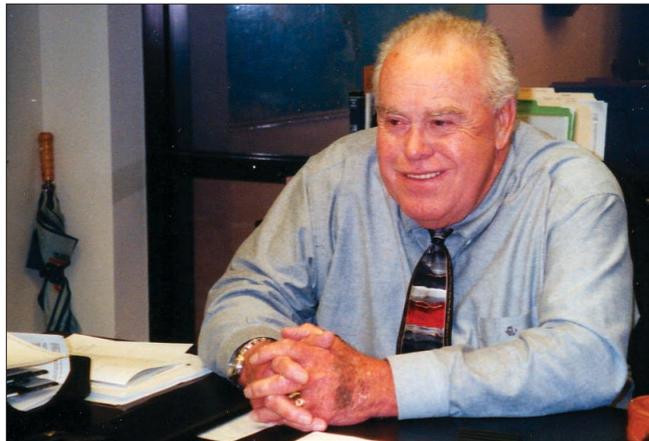


Figure 1. Gene Lindsay has been selling geophysical services since 1980.

overlap, then a sale or agreement is achievable. Otherwise, you move on to the next prospect. Sales can also offer an ultimate rush of gratification after a deal is closed. Measuring success can be objective because your success is directly proportional to the number of deals or volume you closed.

Very successful salespeople are associated with good companies that have the right products or technologies that clients want and need. The products or services have to add value to their business bottom line. Therefore, it is important to be associated with a company or organization that will give you the right opportunities and will not be overwhelmed by your success.

What factors made you decide to become a salesperson for the energy industry?

I entered the oil patch business through an invitation from a former IBM friend who wanted me to join him at Seiscom Delta in 1980. Because I had been successful in selling IBM hardware and software products to a broad market, he wanted me to join him at the time when the oil industry was booming. The oil industry is remarkable in the sense that it is the only place (I know) where you can close \$1 million+ deals with a handshake.

As you know, the energy business is global. As such, it provided me the grand opportunity to travel around the world to peddle geophysical hardware and software products. I never had a chance to go abroad when I worked for IBM. Since entering the energy business I've done a lot of international traveling and I love it, despite the jetlags and some inconveniences encountered at airports. It was still worth it, though. My house is filled with souvenirs from around the world, collected over 20 years.

I was (and still am) impressed with the high-caliber professionals who work for the oil industry. Their advanced education and training are soundly complemented with pragmatism. Thus, it can be very challenging to develop the proper selling strategies for each independent or major oil company, because their needs reflect different E&P goals. Proper selling strategies require that you fully understand

their needs and what solutions you can offer. Once you make a sale and continue to consistently deliver superior results, you will ultimately find that you made good friends of your clients. They return to you on a regular basis and you eventually participate in their E&P program. That is very exciting and gratifying. That is why I don't see myself ever retiring.

Do you have any embarrassing moments or funny incidents during your career that you want to share with readers?

When I was still with IBM, I closed a big contract with Houston Light & Power (HL&P) to supply them with the latest mainframe computers (circa 1970s) to be used for data processing. Because the computer equipment was large in size in those days, HL&P had to knock a wall out of its high-security building. As a result, IBM and HL&P had to precisely coordinate the logistics and timing. Engineers would begin knocking the wall down only when the equipment had been loaded on the plane in California. The day finally came, and I received a phone call from our California office that the equipment was on the plane and on its way. The plane arrived on time, and key IBM and HL&P staff members were at the airport. When the cargo bay doors opened, our jaws dropped—no computers were on the plane, but strawberries. The HL&P manager was furious and cursed for two hours because he had a big hole in his high-security building. I quickly made frantic calls to our California office to find out what happened. We later learned that the air transport company switched the load at the last minute (without notifying us) because the strawberries were perishable. Four hours later, the computer hardware arrived safely on another plane. After the delivery and installation were completed later that evening, we all took a break at a restaurant and laughed at the incident, including the HL&P manager.

As I mentioned earlier, joining the oil patch business provided me the opportunity to do a lot of international travel. I can vividly recall a trip in Asia (1986) where my secretary had already arranged client meetings. On the last leg of my connecting flight, I had the common sense to call ahead to confirm the meetings. The secretary on the other side warned me not to come because there was a "people power revolution" going on to topple a dictator. They could not guarantee my safety. Imagine that, if I didn't know about the revolution and arrived at the airport, as scheduled, I would have thought the large boisterous crowd might be there to "welcome me."

Taxi rides usually provide interesting stories and experiences. I also found them to be a good barometer of the local economy. In one of my South American trips requiring me to visit several countries, foreign language became a major challenge. In one incident, a coworker and I arrived in Bogotá and we took a checker taxi to go to our hotel. The local traffic jam was horrible. The driver turned around and spoke Spanish to us. Trying to be polite, I nodded my head. Apparently, I gave the driver permission to take the "shortcut." The driver then drove the taxi off the road onto the sidewalks and open grounds. Wearing seat belts was not the norm then in the early 1980s, and we were tossed around the back seat. The ride was like the typical Hollywood car chases where cars would be flying off the pavement. To slow the driver down, I quickly said a few Spanish words I know, "Señor, tres cerveza frias por favor." The driver then pulled over to a corner store where we stopped to have three cold beers. The break also served to chill my nerves down.

Immigration rules differ in other countries. In another trip, my travel agent had to send me a new packet of plane

tickets and documents because of a change in itinerary. When I arrived at the next airport, I failed to properly show the required visa at immigration. As a result, I was detained in this holding cell with a big burly armed guard. Hours later, a female immigration officer walked in and began questioning me. I told her that I thought the visa was included (or stamped) on my passport, but she said it wasn't. After more minutes of continued interrogations, the female immigration officer then asked for the entire packet of travel documents my travel agent sent me. Behold! Inside the packet was the visa. I was released thereafter. Lesson: It pays to do your homework, especially if you don't want to spend the night with the big burly armed guard.

Then, there are bloopers associated with client presentations. It took me weeks or months trying to build a cordial relationship with some clients, convincing them that they should give me a chance to present our technology and geophysical services that may improve their bottom line. After countless hours of preparations, it never fails that either the hardware or software system would break down or malfunction during the presentation. It happened to me more than a dozen times, and it was very embarrassing to say the least.

Motto: No matter how well you plan and organize, expect Murphy's Law to occasionally surface. If it happens, just keep a straight face and develop a good sense of humor.

From your point of view, what major milestone events transformed the geophysical industry?

I believe the CDP method provided the impetus that transformed the geophysical service industry. Whoever came out with the simple CDP concept was brilliant. It permitted the collection of multiple subsurface reflection points, resulting in higher fold data, where more seismic traces can be stacked together to improve the signal-to-noise ratio. In addition, electronic design advances allowed the manufacturing of smaller and more sensitive sensors. This allowed service companies to build larger and longer receiver lines or arrays, which eventually led to more acquisition of 2D, then 3D seismic data. Computer hardware and software algorithms improved significantly in the last 20 years ... to the point that 3D prestack time and depth migration projects are now routinely conducted. The clustered PC-based supercomputers provide a tremendous price/performance ratio cost advantage, whereby companies are beginning to employ 3D wave equation prestack depth migration more efficiently. Overall, it was the convergence of various technologies that brought us where we are now, and geophysicists played key roles in making it happen.

What do you think the future will be for this profession, and any advice for the younger peddlers?

Unlike product selling where one-time sales are common, the geophysical service business requires building sound relationships with your clients so that you don't have to resell the same product every month. The secret is simple: find out what their problems/challenges are and provide them the solutions. Once you accomplish this, they become repeat customers.

The E&P business is high risk. To address this issue, E&P companies formed multidisciplinary teams to maximize employees' productivity. This concept proved to be successful. Likewise, geophysical service companies need to utilize a team effort in sales to become successful. Why? Because it is becoming apparent that the decision-making process involves a committee (composed of geophysicists, geologists, and even petroleum engineers) which makes the final rec-

ommendation. You need to win the support of everyone to get a chance of being awarded the project. In addition, the geophysical technology has become technically complex. As such, you need to have expert technologists on your team to help analyze their challenges, provide appropriate solutions, and/or thoroughly answer their technical questions.

In closing, most of us don't realize that the successful pioneers, wildcatters, and innovators of the energy business also did some "hard selling" early in their respective careers and businesses. They became successful largely because they possess a certain amount of aptitude and fine tuned their skills. Just like the current geophysicists who had to constantly "sell" his/her interpretation of a hot prospect to convince upper management to drill it. Other geophysicists seek financial support for ideas or concepts that would provide them the means to apply leading-edge technologies. These various types of internal selling go on every day in our business. Moreover, current career counselors strongly recommend to their clients to develop and maintain marketable skills in order to minimize the impact of being laid off or downsized. Their common advice is, "Learn how to market/sell your skills and talent to any prospective employer."

In some way, all of us are practicing some form of salesmanship. [T|E](#)

Corresponding author: lgochioco@gxt.com