

The Sales Rep and His Old Coin

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I am 26 years old and am what you doctors call a medical sales representative. This is my first job.

HOW IT ALL STARTED

To be honest, I am not quite ready to start working. Many of my friends are still living comfortably with their parents. I am not *kiasu* and I don't feel the need to have a head start over them. But my parents had turned down my request to continue my education overseas. I told my father, "Dad, learning is a life long process. Many of my friends are improving their minds doing MBA and other courses."

He mentioned something about neurons and that our family does not have a record of scholastic achievements, and from what he had observed so far of me, he said I am unlikely to change that record. It is better, he said, that I go and learn a trade, and who knows, with some help from the government, I may even own a successful SME one day. He also mumbled about his mortgages. At that time, I had no idea what they were all about, except they were something timid and old-fashioned people were scared of. The above, briefly summarises the circumstances that led me to look for a job.

So I had to decide on what kind of work I wanted to do. Nowadays, life sciences are hot – the government, the universities and even my nephew in primary school are all into it. I gathered therefore that jobs connected to the life sciences would stand the best chance of success in the future. I had two job interviews.

The first was for a lab technician in a bio-lab. While waiting for the interview, I saw someone in a white

overall carrying a tray of test tubes. "Good morning," I said, "Are you a lab technician?" He replied, "Yes I am and my name is Louis Pasteur." "What do you do mainly?" I asked. "Washing test tubes," he replied. He didn't look too happy and passionate about his job. I skipped the interview.

GOOD PROSPECTS

The second job interview was for a sales position in a pharmaceutical company. From what I have observed, I believe selling medicine has very good prospects.



Many of the people I know are taking medicine regularly for all sorts of complaints. For many years now, my parents, grandparents and many uncles and aunts have been taking medicine at least three times a day. Medical experts and specialists have been reminding us almost on a daily basis in the media how fragile our bodies and minds are, but luckily there are drugs to help us.

There appears to be so many sick people around. Our many beautiful hospitals testify to this fact. More new ones I heard are in the pipeline. The polyclinics have opened night clinics and increasingly more private ones are serving patients around the clock. Pharmacies and Chinese drug stores are

everywhere. The foot reflexologists are doing a roaring business helping our population stay healthy. There will also be a big increase in the enrolment of medical students, which means more business in the future.

The pharmaceutical company is quite impressive. The office is very modern and its staff very businesslike. However, I was very surprised that the boss asked me only one question, "Have you completed your full-time NS?" He hired me straightaway when I said yes. I don't know why he chose me, as there were other interviewees. Maybe it is because I am healthy and quite good-looking.

I intend to work hard because another sales representative told me that the company will give interest free car loans for the top performers. After 10 days of intensive product and marketing training, I began my field work. Before I left the office for my first assignment, I was reminded by my supervisor that all successful sales people possess three important traits: patience, aggression and thick skin, the thicker the better. These, he emphasised, are a must and if I do not have them, I must quickly acquire some or else I may as well quit right away.

MY FIRST DAY

I would like to share my first experience as a medical sales representative with you. For obvious reasons, I have to use pseudonyms. My first call was at "Modern Health Restorer Clinic". I gave the receptionist my call card – "Alex Beng, Medical Sales Representative and Product Specialist, Five A's Pharmaceutical Co Pte Ltd". Ms Ho was charming. "We haven't

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seen you before. You must be new. Please take a seat,” she said and gave me a pleasant smile. What a great start! “Ah Beng,” I said to myself, “you lucky guy. You are in the right profession.”

MHR was a busy clinic. There was a steady stream of patients. One hour later, I was still waiting. I asked Ms Ho when it would be my turn to see the doctor. “You must be patient,” she said kindly, “Those who are sick have priority.” She was right. It was only logical that the sick who were suffering were to be attended to first. Furthermore, I had been forewarned to be patient. I shifted my seat so that I could have a better view of Ms Ho, a sweet and captivating girl with a pair of dimples. It was another forty minutes before I got to see the doctor.

I would be lying to say that I was not apprehensive, this being my very first time on the job. However, judging from the many patients the doctor had, I reckoned that he must be a kind, gentle and understanding person. I knocked at his door and went into his consultation room. “Good morning Dr Chin, thank you for sparing me a few minutes of your precious time. I am Alex Beng from 5 A’s Pharmaceutical. I am here to service you.”

“Good morning, young man. You are new,” he said, “Why are you doing this?”

I was surprised he asked me this question. I replied, “Doctor, I am interested in the life sciences. I hope to play a part in improving the health of people by selling medicine. Our company is called 5 A’s. The first A is for antibiotics, the second for analgesics, the third for anabolics, the fourth for antacids and the fifth for anti-hypertensives. These are our major A’s. We also have five minor A’s, antispasmodics, antiasthmatics, antirhematics, antitussives and antiemetics. Please take a look at

our price list.” I spoke with a lot of enthusiasm and quite aggressively too, as instructed by my supervisor.

“Straight A’s, 5 big and 5 small, that reminds me to buy my 4-D later. Are those your ‘O’ Level results too?” the doctor asked.

“No, doctor, my grades are mainly C’s. In Singapore, C’s are sought after,” I tried to act cute and added a little humour to our conversation. The doctor gave me a grin. I felt that we were getting along quite nicely.

“Young man, do you think taking drugs will solve our health problems?” he asked.

I was again surprised by his question but remembering to be aggressive, I replied, “Antibiotics kill germs, analgesics kill pain, anabolics build strength, antacids cure ulcers and anti hypertensives control blood pressure.”

“Do they make you any healthier?”

“I don’t understand, doc.”

“Health exists only when our physical, mental and spiritual self are in equilibrium...never mind, you will discover this by and by.”

I was confused but I had to get a hold on myself. My primary aim was to sell drugs to doctors, the more the better, so that I can qualify for the interest-free car loan. My supervisor told me that it doesn’t matter whether the doctor is young or old, male or female, fat or thin, tall or short, quiet or talkative, gentle or abrasive, just get on with the task of making him or her buy.

“I agree with you, doc,” I nodded, although I had no idea what he was talking about and what I was agreeing with. I remembered my boss had also instructed me never to disagree with the doctors during my visits because they are an egoistic lot. Anyway, I just wanted to concentrate on selling him medicine.

“Doctor, this antibiotic is very effective both for gram positive and gram negative bacterial infection. It also works against some anaerobes. Our product is very reasonably priced. The bonus is five plus one.”

The doctor gazed at me. I was afraid that he might ask me to elaborate on the gram thing, which I have no idea about other than that for some reason that is unknown to me, some bacteria are positive and some are negative, in a gram sort of way. I felt very much relieved when he did not ask. He shook his head instead. Maybe he still had some stock left. I was told that the government had sent out some guidelines regarding the use of antibiotics. My supervisor said that this might have some effect on the prescribing habits of some doctors. “Be thick-skinned and never give up”, the supervisor’s words were still ringing in my ears, so I said to myself, “OK, if the doctor is not interested in antibiotics, I will try to sell him analgesics.”

“Doctor, our range of analgesics is very popular. They are good and cheap. The promotional bonus is four plus one, across the board from the humble aspirin to tramadol. These are bread and butter items, I believe. We offer the best deal in town.”

“Young man,” the doctor said, “To me, price is not the most important consideration.” This was something of a surprise because my supervisor told me that doctors are extremely price conscious. I could not make this doctor out.

“What else doctor, please let me know?” I asked.

“Among other things, it depends on whether I like you or not,” he said.

“How can I make you like me?” I asked sincerely.

“For a start, do not be so aggressive in your sales approach. Just retail your

products simply and truthfully. No need to exaggerate and never mislead. The favourite buzzword nowadays is “transparency”, no matter whether you are selling drugs or the President of the United States. People are a lot smarter and perceptive than some people around us would like to believe. A good example is the uncovering of those disgusting American CEOs who pocketed undeserving millions.”

On thinking back, I suspect the doctor might have more in mind than purchasing drugs, but at that time, I was only thinking of making a sale. Before I left the house in the morning, my mother had said to me anxiously, “Son, this is your first day. Make sure you succeed in making a sale. The amount does not matter. It is bad luck to fail. Put this old coin in your pocket, it is a talisman handed down from your ancestors.” It was superstition no doubt,

but I felt the pressure. I had to make a sale not only for myself but also for my entire family, living or dead.

Seeing that Dr Chin was also not interested in my analgesics, I proceeded to market my other A’s. He did not stop me but there was no response either, and all the time, I was getting more and more anxious. My palms started to sweat and I spoke faster and faster, and my voice became louder and louder. I could hear my heart thumping against my chest. Dr Chin continued to remain silent.

Finally, I finished. I could not have continued even if I had some more to say, because I was emotionally drained. I didn’t expect my first attempt at selling drugs could be so exhausting. I rose to take my leave, crestfallen. I had not only failed myself but also my company, my family and my ancestors as well.

“Sit down, young man,” Dr Chin

said, “What a display of sympathetic release and adrenal hormonal surge.”

“I beg your pardon, doctor.”

“Don’t worry, it only means you are *kancheong*,” he said, “And what may I ask are you fiddling with in your pocket?”

This doctor was sharp as a needle. He did not miss anything. I decided to tell him the story of my mother and the old coin. There was a moment of silence, and then he said, “Young man, I like your forthrightness, and I am superstitious too. OK, send me one lot of the antibiotic and don’t forget the bonus.”

“Really doctor, you don’t have to...”

“Get out before I change my mind.”

Readers can now understand why Dr Chin is my favourite doctor. There is however one other reason why I love to hang out at MHR Clinic – Ms Ho. We are now an item. The next time you see a sales representative with a pendant consisting of an old coin hanging from his neck, that person could be me. ■