Sales people may not recognize why things change, but sometimes innovations in common practice arise from social and cultural shifts. The top performers need to find new ways to adapt to shifts and to perform their work at the convenience of today’s buyer. Consider for instance where and when sales transactions take place. Decades ago you could most likely count on the fact that the prospect worked in an office where you could get access to a private, quiet room such as a conference room to negotiate a deal. You could also count on the fact that the business day mostly happened between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m. Today, that vision of the workplace might or might not be a given as so many people work from a home office, so many offices have open plan seating, and so many people work flexible hours. Since 9/11, there is another layer complicating sales calls. Today, many of today’s offices not just the specialized industry offices are highly secure. It is no longer just the marketing research companies and paper shredding companies that meet with vendors in hallways, waiting areas, and public reception areas.
Complicating the issue, the potential buyer’s offices are not what they used to be either. The seller’s company may or may not offer the necessary amenities for a compelling sales closing. Some sales companies offer modern facilities for hands-on product demonstrations, but many companies do not. Hence, today’s sales professionals usually need to adapt to the current conditions so that they can plan for the right atmosphere to engage in productive talks with buyers.

In this white paper we set out to learn more about how the widespread growth of coffee franchises has impacted the salesperson’s business day. We wanted to know how the innovators used coffee shops to close sales. ¹ We also set out to find out if there are best practices in how to use coffee shops to make the sales staff more productive. What we discovered is that coffee shops have become a cornerstone of selling strategy, and that some salespeople have had spectacular results using coffee shops as a home away from home to accomplish their work.

Why Not Use Other Venues as the Alternative Office?

The first issue that we thought about is that a salesperson has other locations to select from other than a coffee shop. For instance, they could frequent a fast food restaurant, a regular restaurant, a casino coffee shop, a hotel lobby, a library or other places while between appointments. When we talked with our experienced business people, we discovered that some of them do in fact prefer to work in locations such as hotel lobbies. Hotel lobbies can be great places to use a laptop as they have fewer distractions than restaurants and coffee shops. Interestingly, however, our business people seldom mentioned libraries as places that they would want to do paperwork or work on a laptop. Overwhelmingly, when business people started to discuss situations involving sales tasks, they recognized that coffee shops are the best place to network, have initial discussions, and meet informally. They are also superior to other options in their brand image and their appeal to a younger crowd.

While on the road, many business people still work in their cars between appointments. Frequently, salespeople make best use of breaks between appointments by working in coffee shop parking lots before running in to make a purchase. We found that cars can in fact be productive places to make phone calls, to text, and to rehearse upcoming presentations. Some people candidly admitted that cars are great places to go to get a little privacy. For instance, one person mentioned that he sits in his car to “blow off a little steam” where no one can hear him. Several people mentioned that they nap between appointments in the car. Hence we

¹ 18 students had the opportunity to ask respondents open ended questions of their choice. Some students opted to interview 2 people to get more depth. Respondents live in two countries: the United States and Egypt. Respondents were not paid any compensation.
conclude that cars definitely have their use, but they are not the place to meet with clients and have conversations. They are usually a little cramped to work on a laptop computer.

Since salespeople spend so much time driving, salespeople sometimes want the company of strangers. Much of their job is in isolation of coworkers, and even the stranger behind the counter can offer an encouraging smile. Sometimes the long hours of driving leave the salesperson fatigued, and it is a big pick me up to walk into a coffee shop and get energized by the upbeat atmosphere. Even the smell of coffee, not just drinking coffee, makes people feel charged up.

**Sometimes Clients Mention Coffee Shops as the Place They Want to Meet**

There’s no doubt about it. Some clients want to meet in a coffee shop instead of their own offices, and they are likely to suggest establishments such as Starbucks, Awakenings, and Caribou Coffee. Other bakeries and restaurants frequently mentioned by name as offering great coffee are First Watch, Panera Bread, and Dunkin’ Donuts. Business people mentioned that these options all offer the “right image” that they want to project when meeting with a client for the first time, and these locations offer the advantage of being a neutral place to talk and to provide a product demonstration. The coffee shop atmosphere is equally familiar to both parties, and it is far more relaxed and unintimidating to the buyer than a venue such as a trade show. For instance, one sales manager who works in the sports industry landed one of his biggest contracts at a Starbucks. He felt that the supportive atmosphere at Starbucks helped him close the deal because both parties were not intimidated the way they might be in other restaurants.

Coffee shops are not just great for initial meetings and closing deals. They are also conducive for parts of the selling process that benefit from access to a table such as reviewing a software application or seeing a spread pricing options. One respondent suggested that he feels completely comfortable meeting with his clientele in coffee shops to work through spreadsheets. In fact, his primary contacts, realtors, financial planners, and stockbrokers, often request to meet in coffee shops.

**Coffee Shops as a Place to Take Sales New Hires and to Have a Staff Meeting**

A traditional rite of passage from college to the first professional job is having your first supervisor or someone else on staff taking the new hire to lunch. This event often happens within the first few days of starting work, and it is supposed to help make new hires feel more comfortable and more like part of the team. We learned, however, that recent college graduates are likely to feel more comfortable and experience less anxiety if they are taken out for a cup of coffee instead of going to places such as Chili’s, TGI Fridays, or Applebees. Coffee shops are more casual and take less time. Also, new hires may feel that frequent interruptions from the server
at some restaurants are an annoying distraction. In contrast, coffee shops allow the sales manager to have an undisturbed conversation with the new hires.

As noted earlier, today’s sales offices are not what they used to be, and in some situations sales managers may struggle to find a spot to have a productive staff meeting. In some situations, a staff meeting in the home office may disturb other employees because the only space available is in an area designed around open plan seating. In other situations, if a sales manager wants to bring in coffee and donuts for their staff, other employees may feel left out because they do not receive the treat. It is also important to note that some offices have so little privacy, that it may in fact be more appropriate to discuss confidential information in a meeting room away from the office where fewer ears are privy to the information. Finally, having a breakfast meeting in a coffee shop may be perceived by the staff as being an enjoyable change of pace, adding a little zip, energy and to the day.

What Is the Downside of Coffee Shops?

There are at least three notable problems of trying to get work accomplished in a coffee shop. First, it’s going to cost you. Unlike other options such as working at the library, you need to purchase coffee or another beverage that is expensive compared to brewing coffee at home. Also, you should not just purchase one cup of coffee and sit there for very long periods of time. You need to keep purchasing coffee every couple of hours. The coffee guzzling leads to the second problem. If you start to drink a couple of cups of coffee, sooner or later you will need to use the restroom. Assuming that you are working on your own, leaving a table means packing everything up if you want to keep your items secure. There is no guarantee that when you get out of the restroom your same table or any table will still be open. Third, the atmosphere can be loud and distracting depending on what type of work you do. Of the three problems, the third problem is the simplest to address because you can always carry music headphones or headphones designed for noise protection. As one respondent commented, you can always “get in the zone” with your own music headphone.

To Tip Or Not to Tip And Other Hints to Be a Regular That Employees Love

Before this project, some of the students who participated in this research did not realize that some regulars tip at a coffee shop. The students had not been tipping because they were under the assumption that the employees at coffee shops are highly paid. Today, with the changes in the coffee shop industry, the assumption of highly paid employees may or may not be true. The employees appreciate the tips. As a rule of thumb, if you are a regular customer, you ought to tip $1.00 per drink.

In addition to the tipping issue, a great customer is friendly and gets to know the coffee shop staff by first name. Share the coffee shop conveniences rather than hoard the “best tables” so that the coffee shop can continue to attract and serve other paying clients. For instance, if possible, make sure your laptop is charged before you arrive at the coffee shop so that other customers can use the tables nearest the electrical outlets. It’s also important to be courteous to others. Too often, a regular will opt for a large table and then spread out all over that table even when they could get by with the smaller table. Also, a lot of coffee shop patrons do not realize that you should not put your belongings on the
table before you wait in line. Finally, the best patrons clean up after themselves and leave the space as spotless as when they sat down.

**Concluding Thoughts - What’s Next in Coffee Shops**

Coffee shops are a great value, but what could they offer to be an even better place to accomplish work? We feel that the two best options would be to offer a printer on site and to offer a bookable meeting room. The printer would be a wonderful option in some sales situations when a salesperson needs to make a minor change to a contract before getting a signature. Also, there are times when people are working in groups and teams when it is better to share information on the printed page instead of electronically. Also, while many shops currently offer meetings rooms, they are often first come first serve. By having access to a bookable meeting room, a sales manager could plan an event instead of having to hope that no one else has beat them to the accommodations.

We sum up with an insight from Gary Player, the golf champion. His view is that “change is the price of survival.” In other words, no individual or company will survive without change. Today, perhaps the coffee shop’s most important product offer is not on the menu list. The coffee shop fills a void of where to make personal contacts with friends, co-workers, and potential buyers. On the other hand, tomorrow’s optimal venue is still negotiable.

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