From the Practitioner's Desk: A Comment on “What is Direct Selling?—Definition, Perspectives, and Research Agenda”

Denis Sanan

As an active practitioner and consultant in the direct selling industry for the past fifteen years, I read with great interest and satisfaction Professors Robert Peterson and Thomas Wotruba’s article titled “What is Direct Selling?—Definition, Perspectives, and Research” (JPSSM, Fall 1996). I was most delighted to see that this critical marketing approach is at last receiving the attention it so rightly deserves. My commentary offers a practitioner’s perspective on the authors’ excellent work.

I am gratified to see academia recognize direct selling as a meaningful and complex sales and marketing field. Moreover, I fully agree with the authors’ basic premise that, like conventional mass marketing, the essential elements of success in direct selling can be identified and understood by conducting critical and intelligent research. This article is a major step towards that goal. The article includes a meaningful summary of direct selling, and for that reason alone it should capture the interest of industry leaders. The article, though, does much more than simply summarize the direct selling domain.

Definition of Direct Selling

The article immediately gains the reader’s attention by commencing with an attempt to encapsulate a definition of direct selling into a single, concise, meaningful expression. From the outset, the authors challenge the serious practitioner to define direct selling. And I must admit that I found their suggested definition to be more descriptive and more accurate than any other published to date. In fact, the authors’ definition is ingenious and more apt because of its simplicity: “Direct selling is face-to-face selling away from a fixed retail location.”

In their efforts to define direct selling, the authors stimulate an intellectual debate that leads inevitably to the conclusion that enhanced understanding of direct selling is requisite. To accomplish this goal, the authors compellingly argue that much additional research in the direct selling arena is necessary.

Operational, Tactical, and Strategic Perspectives of Direct Selling

After the introductory portions of the article, the authors provide a unique and penetrating analysis of the operational, tactical, and strategic perspectives of direct selling. This explication enables the authors to take the reader through the key elements of the direct selling marketing mix. This essay, then, is both an excellent introduction for non-practitioners and a stimulating and challenging insight for direct sellers, scholars, and researchers.

Operational Perspective

I found the “operational perspective” section of the article to be a good explanation and justification of the direct selling definition proffered earlier in the essay. But I believe that this perspective can be further strengthened by giving additional emphasis to selling. Direct selling is much more about selling than marketing, and it is this focus that sets it apart from direct marketing or retailing. In fact, one might argue that it is the need for a selling situation to execute the selling act that dictates the necessity for the face-to-face meeting, which is the

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key descriptive of direct selling. This accentuation on selling is the essence of direct selling, which I feel gives it a competitive edge over direct marketing and retailing.

Tactical Perspective

The direct seller will show great interest in the "tactical perspective" section of the article. As brilliant salespeople and quick moving entrepreneurs, the successful direct seller will be stimulated by the ten-point tactical discussion the authors provide. These ten characteristics have implications for direct selling firms with respect to both selling and recruiting. This section of the article may be the one that is read with most attention by insiders, as it embodies the major components necessary for competitive advantage in direct selling. The tactics discussed occupy most of the day-to-day management action in a direct selling organization; and, as the authors note, it is a combination of these tactics that differentiates one direct sales organization from another.

The number of tactical combinations is conceivably infinite. So, it is incumbent upon practitioners to understand each tactical element before selecting an optimum direct selling mix. Just as tactical research is carried out assiduously by conventional marketers, direct sellers should subject these tactics to in-depth investigation.

The authors also mention recruitment and training throughout the article and leave no doubt about their significance for direct selling organizations. I believe, however, that they could have given additional prominence to these critical tactics in this crucial tactical section which dissect the makeup of direct selling.

The method of recruitment used by most direct sellers (e.g., who does it and how is it motivated) is critically important. Simply put, successful recruitment in direct selling is synonymous with successful business. Consequently, recruitment deserves, and is given close attention by, direct sellers. It also offers fallow ground for more research and understanding.

Similarly, direct sellers who succeed will likely deploy an increasing number of sales personnel. The logistics of this means, however, that direct selling organizations should unremittently work at developing optimum training tactics that can ensure selling efficiency and effectiveness. How much training to give and by whom it is imparted are important tactical features that have a profound impact on the success and profitability of a direct seller's business.

Strategic Perspective

In the "strategic perspective" section of the article, which examines direct selling as a channel or mode of distribution, the authors address reasons why direct selling is preferred over other methods for gaining access to a consumer market. For example, they make a very convincing case for employing direct selling as the method of choice for reaching consumers in developing countries. Similarly, though, the authors note that success of direct selling in economically advanced nations (e.g., Japan, Germany, and the United States) highlights the superiority of direct selling as a marketing vehicle for many products and services.

Need for Future Research on Direct Selling

In the concluding section of the article, the authors, I believe, provide a great service to the direct selling field by outlining a program of systematic research in the area. The multitude of unanswered questions raised in this section of the essay makes the case powerfully for undertaking both basic and applied research in direct selling. If conducted, the authors’ suggested research program will add immeasurably to the body of knowledge and understanding on the topic. Moreover, any direct selling organization that adopts the authors’ suggestions for such research may well quite quickly realize competitive advantage.

What is somewhat surprising, and disappointing, is that so little in-depth research has been conducted on what clearly is a major field by any yardstick. Thus, many research gaps still exist in this extremely competitive and dynamic field, which is most surprising. Perhaps this situation prevails because of the nature of direct selling, where the seller is also likely to be a consumer of the offerings that he or she sells. Consequently, many direct sellers typically feel that they are extremely close to the consumer and have a uniquely efficient and speedy means of tapping needs and measuring satisfaction of their consumers. Maybe direct selling is also an underresearched topic because many direct salespeople feel that they are consummate sales personnel with an all-powerful belief in their ca-

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pacity to “sell” in any circumstance. But whatever the reasons for the paucity of research in the area, the facts are incontrovertible: Direct selling is in need of enhanced understanding, and the only way to do this is through methodical and comprehensive research.

Professors Peterson and Wotruba have written a most provocative and constructive article. I believe their work is one of the more meaningful treatises on direct selling that has been published in a long time. It has direct appeal to both direct selling practitioners and scholars and is a must-read for anyone in direct selling. Furthermore, it is especially timely for a field that is growing and maturing rapidly. I sincerely hope that the authors’ call to action will not go unheeded but rather spawn abundant interest and subsequent research in a most dynamic field.