

# A Rhetorical Discursive Action Analysis Of How A "Business Presentation" Is Not A "Sales Pitch"

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### Abstract

Discourse analysis was performed on how an e-commerce business opportunity was presented to new people (or, "prospects") interested in the business. A "business presentation" was audio and video-tape recorded in the United Kingdom and transcribed. The rhetorical discursive action analytic approach used in this article is informed by action-implicative discourse analysis (Tracy, 1995) and a discursive action approach (Edwards & Potter, 1992). An action-implicative analysis is committed to "identifying problems of a communicative practice (from multiple participants' viewpoints), conversational techniques for managing the problems, and participants' beliefs about how conduct in this practice ought to proceed" (Tracy & Anderson, 1999, p. 206). A discursive action approach emphasizes how discourse is organized and the social actions accomplished by various descriptions and rhetorical versions of events, people, the world, etc. The primary research question focused the analysis on how the speaker performed certain actions associated with a "sales pitch" (such as overcoming the customer's objections) while simultaneously managing how the "business presentation" was not a "sales pitch." The paper concludes by arguing for the advantages of analyzing actual interaction over the use of abstract, hypothetical examples in certain trade books on business communication.

## Introduction

Multilevel marketing organizations (MLM; also called network marketing organizations, direct selling organizations, or pyramid schemes) rely on networks of individual distributors and sales representatives to promote and sell products through face-to-face interaction. Sales presentations, or presentations of the business opportunity (depending on how they are described), are one way to recruit new people into the business so that current business owners can increase the size of their network, and thus increase their potential income.

People involved in a multi-level marketing business confront a practical problem when trying to promote their business to new people, or "prospects," in business presentations. This problem concerns how to present the opportunities of the business, while not having their talk undermined as a "sales pitch." The purpose of this paper is to show how current business owners construct their discourse as a "presentation of a business opportunity" while simultaneously undermining that their discourse constitutes a "sales pitch."

The impetus for this research project grows out of a theoretical approach called discourse analysis (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Edwards & Potter, 1992; Potter, 1996; Tracy & Anderson, 2000). Research conducted within this tradition has been concerned with how versions of self, others, the world, etc., are constructed as factual and real, as well as how people position themselves in relation to other people, groups, ideas, objects, etc. While many sites have been studied for these concerns, such as news reports, academic discussions, emergency phone calls to the police, etc., none have focused yet on presentations of an e-commerce and multi-level marketing (MLM) business.

To carry out this study, an actual business plan presentation in the United Kingdom was audio and video-tape recorded, transcribed in detail, and then analyzed according to a rhetorical discursive action (RDA) approach. The RDA approach brings together a commitment to how practical communication problems and issues are dealt with by the participants themselves (Tracy, 1995; Tracy & Anderson, 2000), with an approach that argues language is pervasively rhetorical and is used to manage a range of issues and accomplish various kinds of actions (Edwards & Potter, 1992; Potter, 1996).

After providing a brief discussion of the rhetorical discursive action approach, reviewing the literature leading up to the research question for this project, and supplying some background on the multi-level marketing industry, excerpts of the business plan presentation will be analyzed. The paper concludes by arguing for the advantages of analyzing actual interaction over the use of abstract, hypothetical examples in certain trade books on business communication.

### Rhetorical Discursive Action Approach

A rhetorical discursive action (RDA) combines insights from action-implicative discourse analysis (Tracy, 1995) and a discursive action approach (Edwards & Potter, 1992). An action-implicative analysis is committed to “identifying problems of a communicative practice (from multiple participants’ viewpoints), conversational techniques for managing the problems, and participants’ beliefs about how conduct in this practice ought to proceed” (Tracy & Anderson, 1999, p. 206). A discursive action approach emphasizes how discourse is organized and the social actions accomplished by various descriptions and rhetorical versions of events, people, the world, etc. The RDA approach argues that discourse is a)

situated within sequences of interaction, b) action-oriented, c) constructed, d) pervasively rhetorical, and e) a site to manage accountability and identity issues (for a fuller discussion of each point, see Edwards & Potter, forthcoming; Carl, 2001).

Research within the RDA tradition has focused on number of issues, two of which include fact construction (Wooffitt, 1992; Potter, 1996) and positioning strategies (discussed below; Tracy, 1997; Tracy & Anderson, 1999). "Fact construction" refers to how versions of the world are assembled together and stabilized as factual and independent of the discourse producer, and often to manage issues of "stake" (Potter, 1996). The term "stake" does not refer to one's inner, psychological motivations that get expressed through talk, as if these concerns exist extrinsic to discourse and that a function of talk was to serve as a conduit for them (Hopper, 1992). Rather, matters of interest and stake are salient issues that people build up, undermine, and attend to in their talk as part of doing particular interactive business (Edwards & Potter, 1992).

In their study of citizen calls to the police, Tracy & Anderson (1999) argued that callers faced a dilemma of reporting problems about another person with whom they have a close relational connection. The authors discussed several conversational practices "that people employ to solidify their version of an event and undermine the explicated (or understood) alternatives" (p. 204). Two of these conversational practices, for example, include 1) the use of extreme case formulations (e.g., "astronomical opportunity" and "incredible potential"; Pomerantz, 1986) which function to mark intensity and highlight the need for action as self-evident, and 2) ostensibly "simple situation descriptions" which imply accusations and deflection of blame (Drew, 1992).

Tracy and Anderson (1999) also identified a range of "relational positioning" strategies, or practices, that people used in their descriptions to minimize the relational distance between themselves and the complained-about other (e.g., former spouses, partners, friends, etc), (e.g., by using generic reference terms, the adaptable descriptor "friend," "ex"-prefaces such as "ex-wife," and describing the problem in an agent-less manner). They specifically noted that callers' descriptions of the problem and the complained about other varied during the course of the call (e.g., callers started to identify the complained-about other in a generic way as "a person" and later, after probing by the call-taker, more specific descriptions emerged that implied a closer relational connection).

Tracy (1997) identified another kind of positioning strategy in her analysis of identity issues at stake for academic colloquium presenters. Colloquium presenters could align themselves closer to, or further from, the research that they were presenting, which managed various issues of identity and accountability for the presenters. By presenters not aligning themselves closely with their work (e.g., by stating that the work is "in process" rather than discussing how much time and energy they have worked on the project and that it will soon be coming out as a book, etc.), they implicitly grant themselves license to change their ideas and not have to defend their work as extensively as if it were a "finished product" (see pp. 40-41).

### Brief Review of Literature and Statement of Research Question

Potter (1996) and Tracy and Anderson (1999) argue that the use of descriptions in fact construction, as well as positioning practices, are pervasive in many kinds of interaction. However, while fact construction and positioning practices have been investigated in sitter-

medium discourse (Wooffitt, 1992), news reports and interviews (Potter & Reicher, 1987), academic colloquium talk (Tracy, 1997), as well as calls to the police (Tracy & Anderson, 1999), research has not been extended to the business realm in general, or multi-level marketing (MLM) business presentations in particular.

MLM organizations have been the topic of previous academic study, though not from a RDA approach. In her ethnographic study, Biggart (1989) documented the economic history of American direct selling organizations, and analyzed their social and economic structure. Other researchers have also employed participant-observation and interviewing methods to study the use of evangelical metaphors and emotions in MLM rallies (Höpfl and Maddrell, 1996), to develop a typology of discursive strategies used by MLM distributors (Benoit, 1997), and to theorize the process of organizational identification between distributors and the MLM organization (Pratt, 2000).

More generally, research has also been conducted on the process of selling. In another ethnographic study, inspired by a symbolic interactionist framework that views selling as a joint activity involving a process of constructing meaning and managing impressions, Prus (1989) documented a range of topics relevant to sales interactions, such as how trust was generated between salesperson and customer, how resistance was neutralized, and how commitments were obtained. Other sociologists have conducted conversation analytic studies about the selling process (e.g., Clark & Pinch, 1988). These researchers see selling as a locally managed interactional achievement whose success or failure depends on exploiting the normative features which ground and regulate interaction.

Given that fact construction and positioning practices have not been studied in a MLM business context, the primary research question for this paper concerns exploring *how*

*do such practices as employing alternative descriptions of events and using various positioning practices indicate that a problem or issue is being managed by participants in multi-level marketing business presentations.*

### Brief Background on the Multilevel Marketing Business

To help understand the business presentations that will be analyzed in this project, it will be helpful to briefly discuss the multilevel marketing industry and the specific business with which the presenters are affiliated.

Multilevel marketing organizations (MLM; also called network marketing or direct selling organizations or "pyramid schemes") comprise an industry that generates billions of dollars in revenues each year (for a history of this industry, see Biggart, 1989). Most of the larger MLM companies rely on networks of individual distributors and sales representatives who promote and sell products through face-to-face interactions. The distributors or salespeople are not actually employees of the larger company, but are independent contractors (in the case of salespeople) or engage in a legal franchising relationship with the MLM company (in the case of distributors). Both salespeople and distributors earn their income by buying products wholesale from the company and then selling them at retail prices to the customer (income can also be earned through certain performance bonuses made by the company). In certain organizations, distributors and sales people can also sponsor other people to become involved in the business. In sponsoring others, individual distributors or sales representatives earn credit for the sales revenue, or business volume, generated by those in their "network" (Biggart, 1989).

The emergence of the internet, however, has transformed the way MLM companies and individual distributors operate (Berman, 1999; Byrnes, 2000). For example, MLM companies have set up "virtual malls" that link their company's products with other companies' products, thus allowing the distributors to "surf and earn," or buy products over the internet while generating business volume (a process similar to accumulating frequent flyer miles; Buechner, 1999). Further, the individual distributor is no longer responsible for placing the order for the customer and spending hours dealing with the paperwork, since this can all be handled electronically. Thus, "bricks and mortar" businesses are replaced, or transformed, into "bricks and clicks" businesses.

The MLM e-business being promoted by the presenters in this project is called Traquix (which is a pseudonym). At the time of data collection, Traquix was an independent business that was affiliated with Apex (pseudonym), a traditional MLM business that relies on purchasing directly through distributors and/or catalogs (at the time of this writing, both companies have been folded under a larger corporate umbrella). In short, Traquix combines business ownership, member benefits, as well as personalized shopping at a "virtual mall" (also called a "web portal" since it allows access to other stores while still generating credit). "Independent business owners," (the new term for "distributors"), still earn income based on their own purchasing and those of the people in their network, and still seek to grow this network in order to generate the potential for more income.

There are large, international associations that the business owners (sometimes over a million in number) belong to as a result of being sponsored by a particular person. The business owner who sponsors a prospect is considered the "up-line," while the prospect is considered "down-line" in relation to the person who sponsored him or her. If the business

owner is part of the larger association, then the new business owner is as well. All of the presenters/business owners belong to the same large association, called Tripp Worldwide (also a pseudonym). As a large association, Tripp Worldwide, and not Traquix, is responsible for conducting the business plan presentations used to recruit new people into the business, as well as training sessions for the people already involved in the business. Additionally, Tripp Worldwide produces books and audio tapes as part of the training process (though these were not analyzed in this project). While there is relative consistency in terms of the business plan presentations and the training sessions, there is no formula that each presenter necessarily has to follow in their presentations.

Before the actual presentation discourse is analyzed, it is important to make a distinction between the "business plan" and a "presentation of the business plan." The business plan is a printed, legal document, produced by the Traquix corporation. The formal business plan explains the structure of the business (i.e., how one business owner sponsors another, forming a group or network of business owners), how business owners generate income (i.e., through sales revenue, a percentage of the total volume of products sold to others and/or purchased by oneself and one's business network, along with a number of performance bonuses and incentives), and the average income amount earned by business owners. By law, it is required that the formal business plan be distributed by current business owners to new prospects.

In contrast, the presentations of the business plan that will be analyzed in this paper are prepared by individual business owners themselves. Many individual business owners are part of larger international associations of business owners who are affiliated with, though not employees of, the supplier corporation, Traquix, and who share business support

and training materials. The speakers in the extracts below are affiliated with the same international association of business owners (called "Tripp Worldwide"). According to one business owner (personal communication, October 2000), the purpose of the presentations is to explain or interpret the legal business plan to a lay audience towards the end of "prospecting," or promoting the business to new people. While it is legal to promote the business by making presentations of the business plan, the presentations are only a "teaching tool" (which is itself a description that privileges certain interpretations over others) and do not constitute the business plan itself. One speaker stated during the presentation of a business plan that its purpose is to give prospects 'an impression of what's possible.'

#### Analysis of the Business Presentations

This section analyzes a portion of the Traquix business plan presentation to "prospects," or new people involved in the business. When making a presentation of the business plan to new prospects, speakers are faced with a number of complex issues that need to be managed. One of these recurring issues concerns what the business and the business presentation is, and importantly, is not, about. For example, after being introduced by another business owner, one presenter emphasized how this presentation is not about making a sales pitch to the audience.

#### **Extract 1      BP040600:81-85:WJC**

081    M:    and (.) um: (1.0) all I >really want you to do is< relax (0.6)  
082            I'm not trying to sell you an idea (0.8)  
083            I'm not trying to rope people in to anything  
084            or anything like that (1.0) >you know< (0.4)  
085            at the end of the day (0.6) I'm just gonna give you an overview (0.4)

The issue of selling, or not selling, is frequently oriented to, both implicitly and explicitly, by the speakers. The purpose of this section is to show the various ways that speakers counter the notion that the e-commerce business and the business presentation is about making sales or giving a sales pitch, and then to discuss how the speakers construct alternate versions of what the business is about and position the audience as people who would not fall prey to a sales pitch. The point of this analysis is not to prove that selling is, or is not, taking place in the presentations. Rather, the goal is to analyze how accounts for "what is (not) going on" are constructed and to see what social actions are being accomplished through these accounts.

The rest of this section will be organized according to the chronological sequence of a business plan presentation to about 50 people, made in hotel conference room in the UK. This presentation occurred during a "pre-launch" or "transition" phase, which refers to a time before the pan-European e-commerce web site was launched, though the U.S. site had already been launched by this time. The sequential pattern for the presentation can be organized as follows: being introduced by the emcee; the speaker's opening turns and orienting to concerns of the audience; affiliating himself with Tripp Worldwide; explaining characteristics of successful internet sites; discussing different ways of making money (having a job, being self-employed, having investments, owning a business system such as a franchise); jointly constructing a problem or need with the prospects; presenting the Traquix business system as the answer to this problem and as a way to fulfill the needs; explaining how the Traquix business system works in terms of creating turnover and sponsoring others; asking the audience if they can do this business; establishing the urgency of becoming involved with this business. Due to the length of the entire presentation (about 45 minutes), only a few extracts of the presentation will be analyzed (for a fuller treatment of this data, see Carl, 2001). These extracts include: the

speaker's opening turns, and describing Tripp Worldwide, the association of independent business owners with which the speaker is affiliated.

### The Speaker's Opening Turns

Before the primary speaker begins his talk, he is introduced by another business owner, Aaron, who: asks the audience members to turn off their mobile phones; establishes rapport with the audience; introduces the audience to the main speaker and, in turn, establishes the main speaker's credibility; and asks the audience to hold their questions to the end.

After applause that lasts for five seconds, the main speaker walks up to the front of the room, shakes hands with the emcee, and is handed the microphone.

#### **Extract 2      BP040600:52-80:WJC**

052            Applause (5 seconds)  
053  
054    M:      Thank you  
055  
056            [[lines omitted where the emcee almost trips over microphone wire]]  
          ...  
068            uhm: I'm just going ta () >very quickly<  
069            try and run over (.) t-onight (.)  
070            an overview of a business idea  
071            which is transitioning on to the internet (1.6)  
072            a:nd >I don't know if it will suit you or it w↓on't< (1.0)  
073            um:: it's an interesting ide:a (1.4)  
074            with the existing idea >my wife and I have been very successful  
075            and very many other people like Aaron  
076            have been very successful as we↓ll< (1.0)  
077            but the internet has just introduced  
078            a whole new dimension to it (1.0)  
079            .hh and that's what- I'm going to be talking about how all that works tonight  
080            and I- what's happening in the transition period

After acknowledging Aaron's introduction and the audience's applause, the speaker begins his talk by stating that he 'is just going to' 'very quickly' 'try and run over' an 'overview of a business idea which is transitioning on to the internet.' These phrases suggest a sensitivity to time issues, and that the presentation will not be an in-depth rendering of the issues, but rather a broad brush stroke to get a sense of what the 'business idea' is about.

In lines 72-73, the speaker offers that he does not know if the idea will suit the audience or if it will not, but that it is an interesting idea nonetheless. By offering this version, the speaker provides a resource that could be used to subsequently account for what is going on in the presentation. That is, if a prospect does not like the business idea, then the prospect and/or the speaker can account for this by attributing this outcome to individual preferences (whether it 'suits' a particular individual or not). Additionally, the 'I don't know if it will suit you or if it won't' also constructs the speaker's identity as non-threatening to the prospects and not as one to impose or push his views. Again, it can just be an 'interesting idea' (line 73). The speaker then marks another contrast between the existing business idea (line 74) that he and others have been successful with, and the new e-commerce business idea, suggesting that there is even more potential for success.

#### Making a Request and Orienting To Potential Audience Concerns

After identifying that the internet is what he will be talking about tonight, he makes a request of the audience (Craig, Tracy, and Spisak, 1986).

**Extract 3 BP040600:81-105:WJC**

081 M: and (.) um: (1.0) all I >really want you to do is< relax (0.6)  
 082 I'm not trying to sell you an idea (0.8)  
 083 I'm not trying to rope people in to anything  
 084 or anything like that (1.0) >you know< (0.4)  
 085 at the end of the day (0.6) I'm just gonna give you an overview (0.4)  
 086 .hh then you can go away (0.8) think about it if you want to (1.0)  
 087 get back together with the person whose a:sked you:: (0.2)  
 088 and they can answer your questions or (.) find out anything  
 089 th- that's missing from the thing (0.6) and talk about what  
 090 to do at the next stage if you're interested in taking it any further (1.0)  
 091 .hh um so that's all there is to it (1.0)  
 092 some people are very worried about uh (.) you know (.)  
 093 am I trying to sell you something get some money off you  
 094 or anything like that (0.8)  
 095 I don't make any money out of trying to get registration fees  
 096 or anything like that (0.8) .hh you would need to register on a computer system  
 097 at some point (.) which will end up costing you about eighty quid↓ (1.6)  
 098 and I'll explain a bit more about that later↓ (1.0)  
 099 but that is (0.2) you know (.) your basic investment  
 100 so you can now relax (1.0)  
 101 I'm not talking about capital investment (1.0)  
 102 and that's basically it (0.4) so you just relax and- (0.4)  
 103 >take a look at the business idea< (0.8)  
 104 and then we can see what's interesting (1.4)  
 105 .hh N:OW (0.6) um: internet

Requesting for the audience to relax

In lines 81-91, the speaker presents a version of what will take place tonight as calm and low pressure ('all I really want you to do is relax'), non-threatening ('just gonna give you an overview'), rational ('you can go away and think about it if you want to'), that the matter is not yet settled ('find out anything that's missing'), and that decisions are under the prospects' control ('talk about what to do at the next stage if you're interested in taking it any further'). This version is explicitly set in contrast to a unilateral, controlling, and high pressure version depicted in lines 82-83 ('sell you an idea' and 'rope people in'). Thus, the talk about 'selling' and 'roping' occurs

sequentially after the request for the audience to relax, thereby providing an account for why the audience should relax.

There is a risk, however, in making the request to 'relax' (and its repetition in lines 100 and 102) in that the speaker assumes that the story he voices for the audience is 1) what the audience is oriented to at the moment, and 2) that he has successfully allayed their fears relevant to the audience by telling the story. One of the ways the speaker seems to manage the sensitivity of the request is by the use of 'some people are very worried.' This formulation is a softer alternative to 'you may be thinking,' and which is less presumptuous than another alternative, such as, 'I know what you are thinking.'

#### Managing stake and orienting to potential concerns of the audience

After providing a recognizable transition marker (so that's all there is to it,' line 91), the speaker supplements the first version of what is not going to happen with another version that ranges from lines 92-104. By employing the phrase 'some people are very concerned about,' the speaker is able to voice a concern that the audience members may have. By making this concern about selling a topic of the talk (line 93) and by displaying that he has limited stake in the matter ('I don't make any money out of trying to get registration fees...'), the speaker is able to counter the notion that he is engaging in selling and that he is less motivated by personal, subjective interests. Further, he states what the audience's 'investment' would be up front (in this case, £80), which works against a notion that he may be attempting to conceal information from the audience until he has "hooked them in," as if this were a sales pitch.

Interestingly, selling is constructed on this occasion as something that is negative. There are other versions of selling equally available, one of which suggests that selling is simply a way

for the supplier to get products and services to customers or clients who then use these products for various ends. To bring up selling at this point constitutes the issue of "selling versus not selling" as a salient issue for the presentation. By making selling the topic, especially without any explicit indication from the audience that selling was going on, it may suggest that the speaker is orienting to a topic that may have come up in other presentations, or it displays an assumption that the speaker makes about the audience. Relatedly, the speaker raises the issue about 'capital investment' in line 101. By raising this issue, the speaker orients to this being another possible concern or objection the audience members may have.

#### Positioning the Audience as Reflective, Intelligent and Discerning

However, the talk about selling also seems to perform other interactional business. The inferences associated with 'selling' and 'roping' (lines 82-83) suggest, as mentioned above, a unilateral process wherein one person does something to another, and where the speaker is 'other' and not aligned with the audience. By offering 'selling' and 'roping' as an example of what is not going on, he is able to provide an account for an alternative version of events in which there is a shared, participatory process of looking at something together with the audience, in a spirit of mutual exploration and curiosity. In lines 103-104, for example, the speaker has dispelled any negative connotations of the presentation, in order to 'take a look at the business idea' and then positions himself with the audience so that 'we can see what is interesting.' By using the phrase 'and then we can see what is interesting,' the speaker constructs a process of discovery where the business idea has qualities intrinsic to it, rather than any crafty manipulation or subjective intention on the part of the speaker that may be associated with 'selling' or 'roping.'

The use of 'looking at a business idea' and not 'selling' or 'roping' positions the audience members not as unreflective dupes who will be the on the gullible end of a sales pitch. Rather, the audience is positioned as intelligent, reflective thinkers who can come to their own conclusions after thoughtfully listening to an idea. In this way, the speaker grants a certain respect to the audience, an issue that will be managed throughout the rest of this communicative event<sup>1</sup>.

In this excerpt, then, 'I'm not trying to sell you an idea () I'm not trying to rope people in to anything' are used as contrast versions to what may happen in other contexts or what others might do to someone. Importantly, the speakers constructs a version of events where selling is not what he is doing in this presentation or what this business is about. Further, the speaker's talk casts the audience as reflective, intelligent people who autonomously makes their own decisions about the presentation that is being placed before them.

Invoking an Institutional Identity as a Positioning Practice and  
Descriptions of Tripp Worldwide

The short in-breath and 'NOW...internet' (line 106) marks another transition point, suggesting that certain business has been sufficiently addressed, and that the speaker can move on to the next item of business. Before the speaker gets to the internet, however, he positions himself in relation to a larger association that is responsible for this business presentation. Note especially lines 111-115 where the speaker describes the association as a marketing group and then repairs this description and offers an alternative description.

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<sup>1</sup> The phrase "communicative event" is used at times since how the discourse is framed (i.e., as a "business presentation" or a "sales pitch") is what the analysis is about.

**Extract 4 BP040600:106-117:WJC**

106 M: .hh N:OW (.2) um: internet (1.0)  
 107 um: (0.8) we are part (0.2) probabl- to start off very >quickly<  
 108 we're part of Tripp Worldwide (1.4)  
 109 you saw the name as you came in (4.2)  
 110 ((writes Tripp Worldwide on the whiteboard))  
 111 → <Tripp Worldwide (.) ar::e (.) a large> (1.2) ahem ((cough))  
 112 → marketing group (1.0) I mean we're a large group of loosely-  
 113 → a loose group of entrepreneur:s (1.0)  
 114 → who are experts in marketing and training (0.8)  
 115 → and we are very good at getting people getting their own businesses going (1.0)  
 116 → .hh and been around for thirty ↓years (1.0)  
 117 and we have um:: (.) representation in many many countries around the world

In line 107, the speaker begins to invoke a collective, institutional identity ('we are part'). Since the speaker, however, has already suggested in line 106 that he will move on to the internet, he offers an account ('to start off very quickly') that will permit him to discuss the organization of which he is a part. After providing himself with an interactional slot, he re-starts his first identification with 'Tripp Worldwide,' reminding the audience that he is not providing new information ('you saw the name as you came in') and emphasizing the significance of the name (by writing the name of the organization on the whiteboard). At line 111, the speaker offers the first version of what Tripp Worldwide is: 'a large marketing group.' The speaker, however, treats this version as not accurate or sufficient, and begins a repair (line 112): 'I mean we're a large group of loosely-.' This second version, however, is also treated as inadequate, and thus a third version is offered: 'a loose group of entrepreneurs who are experts in marketing and training and we are very good at getting people getting their own businesses going.'

This positioning practice and formulation of who the organization is and what they are about deserves commentary. First, the speaker has positioned himself to speak on behalf of a group of business owners, rather than just himself as an individual, by invoking 'we' two times

before this formulation (lines 107-108). By being in the position to speak on behalf of a large, international organization, and not just as an individual, it is more consequential to provide an appropriate and adequate characterization of the organization. Second, the speaker provides three different characterizations, each of which makes available different inferences for the audience. The inferences or connotations at stake in each version can be analyzed based on the variability among the different versions (Potter & Wetherell, 1987).

- Version 1: 'Tripp Worldwide are [sic] a large marketing group'
- Version 2: 'I mean we're a large group of loosely-'
- Version 3: 'a loose group of entrepreneurs who are experts in marketing and training and we are very good at getting people getting their own businesses going.'

Version 1 contains three key words: 'large,' 'marketing,' and 'group.' Version 2 keeps 'large' and 'group,' deletes 'marketing,' and adds 'loosely.' Based on the differences between these two versions, the speaker treats the characterization 'marketing group' as problematic in some way, suggesting that 'marketing' is not significant enough to primarily characterize what the group is about. Additionally, 'large...group' in Version 1 may suggest rigidity, formality, or high control, which is then modified in Version 2 by adding 'loosely.' In Version 3, however, the emphasis is removed from the organization being 'large,' and the emphasis is placed upon 'a loose group of entrepreneurs' which suggests flexibility and relative autonomy. The speaker treats the issue of first using the phrase 'marketing group' (in Version 1) as something to orient to and account for, since he returns to the issue in Version 3. This time, however, the 'loose group' is made up first and foremost as 'entrepreneurs' who are 'experts in marketing' and also 'training.' Further, the speaker adds that what this group is 'very good at' is 'getting people getting their own businesses going,' which emphasizes that the organization is about training issues ('getting

people getting their own...') and entrepreneurial activities of starting independent businesses ('getting their own businesses going'). This last added characterization (lines 113-115) has the effect of downplaying the marketing aspects, though still acknowledging them, and accentuating the independent business aspects.

The various repairs are also interesting for two other reasons concerning how informality is managed (Atkinson, 1982). First, the repairs show that the interaction is not scripted, but is being actively worked up by the speaker in the moment. Of course, this doing "not scripted" may not be the same as "actually" being "not scripted." Second, by displaying that he is working up this version of Tripp Worldwide as he goes along, the speaker communicates to the audience that he is orienting to concerns that may be relevant to them, as recipients. By constructing the talk to orient to their concerns, he treats their concerns as important and unique to this interaction, rather than being pre-planned in advance.

Throughout his presentation, the speaker alternately describes Tripp Worldwide to manage a range of issues (see Carl, 2001 for analysis of these excerpts). This extract is sufficient, however, to show how the speaker positions or situates himself within a larger association of other business owners. By invoking this institutional identity, he is able to establish his credibility as a legitimate member of a loosely structured group that trains people to start their own independent businesses, rather than being a part of a rigidly structured group of marketers.

### Discussion of the Analysis

In the previous section, excerpts of a business plan presentation have been analyzed to demonstrate how the speaker manages what the business (and its presentation in a business plan) is and is not about. One of the primary issues oriented to concerns that the business and

presentation are not about selling. Instead, the communicative event is about getting their own businesses started and being entrepreneurs. Further, the speaker's discourse positioned the audience as knowledgeable, rational individuals who valued independence and autonomy who would not be taken by a sales pitch.

Due to space constraints, the full presentation was not able to be analyzed (though see Carl, 2001, for more details). However, as discussed above in more detail, the organizational sequence of the business plan presentation was as follows. First, the speaker oriented to potential concerns of the audience and then framed the presentation as one that did not involve selling or roping people into anything. Next, he jointly established with the prospects that they had unfulfilled needs. After this, he presented the Traquix business system as a way to fulfill these needs, while countering that this business was about selling (and instead about buying and making referrals). To close his presentation, the speaker presented the prospects with a choice of becoming a client, member, or individual business owner (which are different levels of participation in the business). He then engaged in another question-answer sequence in which the prospects said they wanted to become business owners. At the very end, the speaker established the urgency of getting involved now by invoking the metaphor of the band wagon.

#### What's Going On Here? Managing The "Sales Pitch" Versus "Business Presentation" Distinction

Interestingly, the sequence of the "e-commerce business presentation" follows a standard organizational pattern that characterizes a "sales pitch." Jeff Scott Cook (1989) argues that a standard formula for a "sales pitch" involves the following steps<sup>2</sup>:

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<sup>2</sup> Wilson (1988) argues that there are six steps, or "known selling techniques," that are essential for selling a product or idea: 1. Attract attention; 2. Excite, arouse interest and desire; 3.

- Step 1. Make the customer aware that he or she has an immediate problem or unfulfilled need.
- Step 2. Present the customer with a way to solve the problem or satisfy the need.
- Step 3. Overcome the customer's stated or unstated objections to the solutions you propose.
- Step 4. Establish (or reinforce) the urgency of the problem.
- Step 5. Ask the customer for the order (signature on purchase order, shipping approval, verbal acceptance of the solution, or whatever). (pp. 26-27)

The speaker's "business presentation" contains all of the features of a "sales pitch" as identified by Cook (see Carl, 2001 for the complete presentation). For example,

- The speaker asks the audience members if they are getting paid enough or have enough money saved for retirement to raise the audience's awareness of having an immediate problem or unfulfilled need;
- The speaker presents owning one's own business with a proven business strategy as a way to satisfy the audience's needs;
- The speaker overcomes the audience's stated or unstated objectives to this solution by stating that the business does not require a lot of capital investment up front, that he does not make money off of registration fees, that the audience does not need to know a lot about running one's own business since there is a large network of other business owners to support those less experienced, etc.;
- The speaker establishes the urgency of the problem by using extreme case formulations about getting in on the ground floor and not missing the bandwagon;
- The speaker asks the audience to make a choice regarding the business by asking them if they want to be a business owner, member, or client.

The point of making the comparison to Cook's definition of a "sales pitch" is not to claim that Michael and the prospects were really participating in a business presentation or a sales

pitch. Rather, the point is to show an alternative version that the speaker orients to throughout the communicative event. That is, whether this communicative event is a "business presentation" or a "sales pitch" is one of the key features of this discourse. Throughout, the speaker rhetorically builds up that this is indeed a "business presentation" while simultaneously undermining that it is a "sales pitch." The rhetorical discursive action approach used in the analysis points out the devices employed to accomplish this effect by:

- managing informality;
- framing the event as an "overview of a business idea";
- positioning the audience and speaker as mutually engaged in an activity;
- casting the audience as intelligent and reflective people who would not fall prey to a sales pitch and who value the autonomy and control of being an entrepreneur;
- highlighting how the business is not about selling but about buying and referral (i.e., what everyone can do); and
- invoking an institutional affiliation with a group of associates whose purpose is to help people start their own businesses, a business that does not involve selling but is a way to fulfill the audience's needs.

### Conclusion

Certain trade books and text books provide tips and organizational structures for how to give a business presentation (Stroh, 1966; Wilson, 1988; Cook, 1989). Often times, these books make use of idealized examples of a presentation, and/or suggest abstract pointers on how to make a successful presentation (Riemer, 1975; see Cameron, 1999 for a critique of this practice). Looking at actual, interactive data of a business plan presentation, however, presents at least two advantages in relation to idealized examples and abstract pointers.

As mentioned above, in Cook's (1989) discussion of a how to do a "sales pitch," the first "step" is to "make the customer aware that he or she has an immediate problem or unfulfilled need." However, in this presentation, the speaker first oriented to potential concerns of the

audience as a way to manage what the communicative event is, and importantly, is not about.

Thus, not only did Michael not follow Cook's sequence, Cook takes-for-granted that the communicative event is a "sales pitch" when much of the speaker's discourse actually went to undermine this description of what is going on.

Second, the analysis of actual interaction reveals a number of issues that are being managed simultaneously that might have otherwise gone unnoticed. For example, in "overcoming the customer's objections" (Cook's, 1989, third step), Michael also managed the issue of stake, as well as how the communicative event is not about selling. Thus, the speaker is simultaneously building up a version of what kind of communicative event is going on, while attempting to undermine what kind is not taking place. Nothing in Cook's framework, for example, discusses the issue of "what is (not) going on here" is framed throughout the communicative event.

Granted, it takes a great deal of time and energy to record and transcribe an actual business presentation, probably more than it does to formulate abstract points about how to do the presentation. However, analyzing actual transcribed interaction allows presenters a way to more completely understand how the actual "steps" of a presentation are accomplished on an interactive basis, as well as the complexity of issues that are being managed during the process.

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**Appendix 1 -- Transcription Conventions (adapted from Atkinson & Heritage, 1984)**

(.)	The shortest hearable pause, less than about (.2) of a second
(0.3) (1.0)	Timed pauses, in this case 3/10 of a second and 1 second
.hhh, hhh	Speaker's in-breath, and out-breath respectively
huh huh	Laughter syllables
A(h)re	(h) denotes 'laughter' within words
cu-	A dash designates a sharp cut-off of a prior word or sound
So:::	Colons show that the speaker is extending a word or sound, with more colons representing longer sounds
run= =on	'Equals' signs link material that runs on
↑my ↓door	Arrows indicate rising or falling intonational shifts
?	Indicates a rising tone
.	Indicates a 'natural' ending
<u>Without</u>	Underlining indicates emphasis
THAT	Capital letters indicate speech noticeable louder than that surrounding it
>fast<	'Greater than' and 'less than' signs indicate the talk they encompass <slow> was produced noticeably quicker or slower than surround talk
over[lap [over	Square brackets between adjacent lines of concurrent speech denote the start and ending points of overlapping talk
→	Side arrow indicates a point of special interest addressed in the text
[...]	Indicates that material has been left out of the extract
[material]	Material in square brackets indicates transcriber's commentary