Sales Training for Students:
A Ten Step Approach

An Honors Thesis (10 499)
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This paper discusses the need for a course in professional selling at all universities that teach marketing. A few projects are reviewed that have been used at other universities to give students some practical sales experience. Potential shortcomings of these projects are discussed and an improved method for gaining sales experience in the classroom is presented. This method enables students to obtain actual sales training. The method incorporates classroom lectures, role playing, prospecting, sales preparation, and actual sales calls. The method presented emphasizes the importance of the entire sales process instead of just the sales presentation itself.

Introduction

Twenty universities in the north, south, east, and mid-west United States participated in an informal telephone survey conducted by the authors. It was found that only 10 of the 20 universities surveyed have a personal selling course and only 11 of the 20 teach sales management. Two of the universities surveyed do not teach either personal selling or sales management, and only 8 of the universities teach both personal selling and sales management. One university indicated that they would be dropping the personal selling course at the end of the current school year. Also, one of the interviewees stated they did not feel that personal selling was "very academic." The schools that teach only sales management indicated that they would normally take only one week or two weeks at the most to cover personal selling.
These findings are very surprising in light of the fact that a majority of marketing graduates will start out, be in, or end up in sales at some point in their careers. One possible explanation for these results could be a lack of demand for the personal selling course. It could be deduced that a lack of demand stems from a poor attitude toward sales as a "profession." This has been well documented in the literature (Sales Management 1962, 1965; Mason 1965; Birtz 1967; and Thompson 1972). A more recent study indicated that attitudes toward sales were improving (Danner and Johnson 1979). A study by Stevenson and Paksoy (1983) indicated that business students continue to have negative attitudes toward sales careers, particularly when compared to other "business" careers; however, they concluded that attitudes could be improved in the classroom.

Also, information obtained in the telephone interviews by the authors indicates that student attitudes towards sales careers are improving. For example, one of the universities interviewed indicated a desire to drop their personal selling course, but student demand was much too high. Another university indicated that they have two professors teaching 3 to 5 sections of personal selling each semester and demand for the course is so high that they are considering using another professor and increasing the number of sections offered each semester.

Coinciding with this potential improvement in attitudes toward sales as a career are the improving opportunities in sales. According to the Occupational Outlook Handbook (1985),
employment opportunities in sales are expected to continue to rise into the mid-1990s. With more potential jobs available in the sales area, employers will be even more concerned about hiring the most qualified individuals to help combat the ever-growing problem of high turnover. Some companies report turnover rates as high as 50 percent for employees in their first two to three years of selling (Futrell and Parasuraman 1981; Still, Cundiff, and Govoni 1976), while others report rates of almost 80 percent (Bowers and Summey 1983). Two factors contributing to these high turnover rates are:

1) poor company training programs and 2) inadequate academic training. Employers are increasingly complaining about how new college graduates must be trained or "retrained" after they are hired (Macroll 1985). To better serve both the students and their potential employers, marketing educators need to provide students with a personal selling course as well as providing some practical sales training within the educational framework. In the long run, this may help reduce high turnover rates for two reasons:

1) the number of employees who leave sales jobs due to inaccurate expectations of sales may be reduced through actual sales training in the classroom, and

2) companies will be able to hire better qualified sales candidates who have actual sales experience.

This paper reviews some projects that have been somewhat successful at improving students' attitudes toward sales careers and/or providing the students with practical sales experience.
The authors then present a more indepth sales training program for the classroom that will overcome problems encountered in the reviewed projects.

Review of Projects

Stevenson and Faksoy (1983) found that students' attitudes toward sales as a career could be altered through a program of reading and in-class discussions. They concluded that descriptive nouns such as diagnostecian, problem identifier, and prescriber helped to alleviate the negative salesman stereotype. This would be a very good tool to use in a marketing principles class and/or an introductory business course to help generate interest in the sales profession. However, this is not enough to prepare a student for sales and neither is a simple lecture course on personal selling.

To properly learn, students need to do more than "memorize" the textbook and lecture notes (Joyce 1985). Educational psychologists have concluded that learning occurs more effectively when there has been an attempt to simulate actual situations (Ellis 1965 and Madden 1983). In other words, for students to adequately learn about personal selling, they need some actual sales simulations or training.

Bowers and Summer (1983) provide information useful for setting up a workshop in personal selling skills. They discuss some of the topical items that need to be covered in the workshop; however, they do not provide any structure for preparation and implementation of the workshop. One main point
they make (and a very good one) is that personal selling should be taught separately from sales management. One advantage to the workshop is that it should provide students with a better understanding of the facets of a sales job; however, a big drawback is that the students do not get any actual sales experience except for occasional role-playing exercises.

Stevenson (1987) devised a way for sales students to gain actual sales experience by developing an actual "field exercise" for his professional selling classes. He calls it the "sales blitz". First of all, Dr. Stevenson should be highly commended for his development and implementation of the sales blitz program. Its main advantage is the actual sales experience obtained by the students who participate in the program. It not only gives students a "sample" of real world sales, but it should also provide potential employers with more qualified sales candidates. This could hopefully lead to a reduction of salesforce turnover.

The blitz program does have some potential drawbacks:

- The sales blitz is an optional project. It seems that this would make it difficult to grade all students in the class equitably.

- The professor sometimes uses a screening device (such as perfect attendance or a minimum GPA) to help ensure quality participants. This is not really fair to the other students in the class who do not have the opportunity to participate in the program.

- The program is a two and one-half day full-time commitment during either spring break or fall break to avoid conflict with other classes. This is an inconvenience to students and may actually prohibit some students from being able to participate in the program.
The students only have one-half day to learn product knowledge and roleplay with the company's sales force to become comfortable talking about the product they will sell. This could end up giving some students a bad impression of sales that they may not get if they had been better informed.

-Students are told what to say during the sales interview from opening remarks to concluding comments. This does not allow for student creativity and may come across as a canned presentation.

-Usually the student's main objective is to identify and qualify prospects for later visits from the company's sales force. This seems to put an emphasis on prospecting rather than the entire selling process.

-Grading is done solely on a written summary and critique that is submitted at the end of the project. There is no real grading on the sales preparation stage (pre-approach) or on the actual sales calls themselves. It seems that it would be difficult to determine whether or not the students actually made the sales calls.

The following section of this paper presents a format for incorporating actual sales projects for professional selling courses that overcome many of the difficulties of the projects discussed above. The advantages and potential problems associated with this format are also discussed.

Ten Step Approach to Training Students for Sales

The authors of this ten step approach have successfully used the format for over three and one-half years in their professional sales courses offered through the marketing department at a state university in the midwestern United States. The sales project can be easily adapted for both a quarter or a semester system, and the students being trained are normally juniors and seniors interested in personal selling.

The sales course incorporates classroom lectures, a great
deal of role playing, prospecting, sales preparation, and actual sales calls. Although most personal selling textbooks are not arranged in this order, it is highly recommended that course lectures cover the sales process (i.e., prospecting, pre-approach, approach, presentation, handling objections, closing, and follow-up) at the very beginning of the term. This will enable students to begin role playing in class early so that they will have the opportunity to practice their selling techniques several times prior to making actual sales calls. It also gives them the opportunity to improve their techniques by watching other students perform in the role playing sessions. In-class role playing should begin the first week of classes and continue throughout the term as often as possible. Lectures over other material (e.g., buyer behavior, ethics, careers, retail selling, etc.) should follow the lectures over the sales process. Two or three exams are given over the textbook and lecture material to ensure that students keep up with the material.

Students are also required to participate in a sales project in conjunction with a local business or organization. This project requires students to prospect, to prepare for sales calls, to call on local business establishments, and to complete and submit sales call reports for all their accounts, i.e., the student receives actual sales experience. A ten step approach for preparing students for a career in sales is summarized in Table 1 and discussed below in more detail.
Step 1. Students are divided into groups of no more than five and no less than three. Through trial and error the authors found that groups of four generally work best.

Step 2. The organization participating with the sales class on the project is brought in to give a presentation describing the organization and what the students will sell.

Step 3. Based on step 2, each group is instructed to develop a prospecting list and a sales portfolio. Each student group is assigned the task of developing a list of local companies that would qualify as potential prospects for the project. The students are given one week to complete the prospect list. The group prospect lists are then collected and combined so that the professor has one overall list of potential customers. These customers are allocated to the groups at a later time, thus preventing students from making calls on customers until they are fully prepared.

The sales portfolios developed by each group contains the organization's background information, a list of the features and benefits of the "product", and any other pertinent sales information or tools, (e.g. pricing discounts, sales contracts, etc.). These portfolios will be used as visual aids to help each student give a more structured sales presentation. The students obtain the information needed for the portfolio from the presentation mentioned above or by contacting the organization on
an individual group basis. Students are given 3-4 weeks to complete this task.

Note: Steps 1-3 should begin as early as possible in the term. This allows students to get more practice role playing with the actual product they will be selling and gives the students more time to complete the various steps of the project.

Step 4. The sales portfolios are collected, evaluated, and returned with suggestions for improvements. The students have one week to make corrections to improve their portfolio scores. Portfolios deemed unacceptable must be improved or the group will not be allowed to complete the project.

Step 5. Each individual "sales trainee" is required to prepare a sales call plan. The format for the sales call plan (as well as the sales techniques taught throughout the course) was obtained by the authors from sales training programs of two major sales organizations; however, appropriate call plans and techniques can be found in many of the personal selling textbooks. The students are given one week to develop their sales call plans.

Step 6. The sales call plans are evaluated and returned, and "accounts" from the master prospect list are allocated to each group. The groups then divide the potential customers among the members. This usually results in each student having anywhere from 5-10 sales calls to complete.
Step 7. Students take turns using their group's portfolio to make sales calls. They must fill out sales call reports for each call completed and the report must have the signature or card of the person contacted. This helps ensure that the student makes the sales call.

Step 8. Each student is required to give a one-on-one videotaped presentation selling the organization's "product". This is done in a lab room which is set up to resemble an office setting. The professor plays the role of the buyer. The presentation lasts approximately 10 minutes and each student is given the opportunity to review the videotape with the professor. This provides the student with very important feedback on how they have progressed through the sales training project. The student also has the option of bringing their own VHS videotape so that they can keep a copy of the actual presentation. If the presentation goes well, the videotape could later be shown to potential employers. The videotaping occurs during regular class meeting times at the end of the term. The professor needs to allow for 2-3 weeks of videotaping depending on the size of the class and the length of the class meetings.

Step 9. Each group is required to submit a final report summarizing the various experiences encountered by each member while making sales calls and expressing their overall feelings about the sales training program. These are turned in and
discussed at the final class meeting so that students can share their sales experiences.

Step 10. Evaluations of group members are completed at the final class meeting to help ensure that all group members "pulled their weight" throughout the sales project.

Project Examples

Several projects have been used over the past three and one-half years to provide students with actual sales experience. Four of these projects are briefly discussed below.

A recent project had two sales classes selling advertising space on a calendar sponsored by the University's Selling & Sales Management Club. The calendar was a fundraising project for the club. The two classes were able to generate over $3,000 in advertisements from local businesses, completely covering the cost of producing the calendars. It turned out to be the organization's most profitable fundraiser.

Another project was described to the class as a chance to call on fast food restaurants and businesses in the area to sell advertising for the University's women's volleyball team. The advertising was in the form of $100 cash contributions to the team and food donations to be given away during the volleyball matches to attract larger crowds. Companies making a $100 or more cash contribution had a banner made indicating their support of women's volleyball. The banner would be displayed at each
volleyball match. After all was said and done, two sales classes generated $2,000 in cash and $1,000 in food giveaways for an overall $6,000 to support women's volleyball at the university.

A third project was in conjunction with the local branch of the Better Business Bureau. The objective was to acquire new business members for the Bureau. One sales class was able to sign four new memberships in this community in a four week period. That was twice the number of memberships the Better Business Bureau had generated in the previous two months in this area.

Finally, a fourth sales training project enabled students to call on local businesses to generate revenue to help support a local semi-professional baseball organization. Here again, the results were very positive. The students were able to generate over $4,000 in cash selling advertising space in a baseball program.

Advantages of Sales Training Projects

The sales training projects offer advantages not only to the students, but to the University, the community, the professor, and potential employers. The students benefit by obtaining sales experience in the classroom. This gives them a better understanding of selling and may help them make better career choices.

The sales experience also makes the student much more marketable in the eyes of potential employers. Providing
students actual sales training gives employers more qualified applicants and may also help weed out students who had unrealistic expectations of a sales career. Students and employer comments regarding the student sales project are presented in Table 2. The authors do not mean to imply that these sales training projects are indicative of all sales career opportunities, but that a better understanding of sales, in general, can be obtained using these or similar sales training projects.

The University prospers by keeping its name out in front of the business community through the constant contact with students. The students approach these businesses in a very professional manner which reflects positively upon the University. By supporting local organizations like the Better Business Bureau and the local semi-pro baseball team, the University becomes involved in community activities thus improving community relations. These sales projects have also helped organizations within the University itself, such as the Selling and Sales Management Club and the women's volleyball program.

The sales training projects also provide benefits for the professor involved. The projects tend to generate more student interest in the course, thus enhancing lectures and other class related activities. The professor can also gain satisfaction from watching the students steadily progress by applying what they are learning in the classroom to an actual real-life sales
experience.

Potential Drawbacks

Despite the many advantages of the sales training projects, there are possible problems. One problem arises when you get students who simply do not want to participate in the project. Just like the "fudging" of expense accounts, students can find their way around participation in activities; however, as discussed earlier, the students must have signed sales call reports and each student will be evaluated by group members. At the same time, you can't make a student enthusiastic if they do not want to be: thus, the quality of some calls may be less than desired.

Transportation can sometimes become a problem for those students who do not have cars on campus; however, working in groups many times will alleviate this problem because one of the group members generally volunteers to provide the needed transportation. Another occasional complaint regarding transportation is the gas money spent to make the sales calls. These complaints normally come from those students who are not really very interested in the project. It is sometimes difficult to convince these students that the benefits they obtain from the sales training will far outweigh the few pennies they spend on gas.

One last problem involves the size of the class participating in the sales training project. These projects are
ideal for class sizes in the mid-thirties and below, and workable for class sizes in the forties; however, because of the videotaping and grading of projects, the ten step program (as presented) would not be feasible for classes of 50 students or more.

Conclusion

The sales training experience can be a very positive experience for both the students and potential recruiters. The need for better trained students is becoming more and more of a concern for employers because of the high turnover rates associated with many sales jobs. With improving attitudes towards sales as a career and with the growing number of employment opportunities in sales, the educators need to better prepare the students for careers in sales. Although the ten step sales training process presented in this paper is not without its potential problems, the benefits obtained by the students, the recruiters, the University, the professor, and possibly the community make it well worth the effort needed to incorporate it into the classroom.
TABLE 1
TEN STEP APPROACH

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STEP</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>STEP 1</td>
<td>Divide Class into Three to Five Person Groups</td>
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<tr>
<td>STEP 2</td>
<td>Presentation to Class Concerning Organization and/or Product</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STEP 3</td>
<td>Students Develop Prospecting Lists and Sales Portfolios</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STEP 4</td>
<td>Professor Evaluates and Suggests Improvements for Portfolios</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STEP 5</td>
<td>Individual Students Develop Sales Call Plans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STEP 6</td>
<td>Professor Evaluates Sales Call Plans and Assigns Prospects to Groups</td>
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<tr>
<td>STEP 7</td>
<td>Students Conduct Actual Sales Calls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STEP 8</td>
<td>Videotape Individual Mock Sales Presentations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STEP 9</td>
<td>Students Turn in Final Report of Sales Experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STEP 10</td>
<td>Students Evaluate Fellow Group Members</td>
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### TABLE 2
STUDENT AND EMPLOYER COMMENTS ON SALES TRAINING

**Student Comments**

1. "It's great making calls on businesses in the community, rejection in the book and rejection in the field are two different things!"

2. "A great learning experience, I really had no plans to go into sales until after I had worked on the field sales project."

3. "The course was very demanding, but the practical sales experience made it very worthwhile."

4. "The sales project was a great practical learning tool."

5. "A course that causes you to think and also provides valuable sales experience."

6. "Role playing is a great idea, it really helps you become better at selling and makes you more comfortable in front of people."

**Employer/Recruiter Comments**

1. "Great hands on experience, a good way to get the student's feet wet."

2. "Our company requires experience, any kind of experience, students selling $1000 in advertising is experience in my book."

3. "Most college grads have only had a course in personal selling that emphasized the book and lectures. It's great to see a course that gets students in the field and also has a videotaped presentation."

4. "Your personal selling projects and videotaping are very similar to what our company does to train sales recruits."

5. "We are very impressed with the sales experience the students at your University are getting."

6. "Selling advertising by cold calling on businesses is a very difficult type of selling, it's great experience for your students."
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"Youth Continues to Shun Selling." Sales Management. (Jan 1965): 69.