

EXPANDING INTERNATIONAL SALES EDUCATION: REPORTING ON AN EU-US WORKSHOP AND INTRODUCING THE GLOBAL SALES SCIENCE INSTITUTE

*By Richard E. Buehrer, Elina Oksanen-Ylikoski,
Nikolaos G. Panagopoulos and Ellen Bolman Pullins*

A first-of-its-kind international sales workshop was held in Helsinki Finland in May 2007. The “State of Sales Research & Education in the European Union” Workshop brought together fifty-six sales and sales management faculty from ten countries to explore sales research and curriculum currently happening in the European Union. Attendees at the conference identified important trends and needs in the practice, teaching, and research of professional sales and sales management and initiated a new organization: the Global Sales Science Institute, which will sponsor the to-be-annual workshop event, as well as explore ways to further international relationships and collaboration in the area. This article summarizes the key findings of the workshop and offers important implications for the sales community. We also introduce the Global Sales Science Institute (GSSI).

INTRODUCTION

The inaugural workshop of the Global Sales Science Institute (GSSI) was held in Helsinki, Finland from May 2-4, 2007 at HAAGA-HELIA University of Applied Science. In attendance during this two and one-half day intensive workshop were 56 university sales and marketing faculty, representing twenty-three universities and ten separate countries.

The workshop was organized and jointly sponsored by the Edward H. Schmidt School of Professional Sales at The University of Toledo, Toledo Ohio and HAAGA-HELIA University of Applied Sciences in Helsinki, Finland. There were three primary goals outlined for this workshop by Drs. Ellen Pullins and Elina Oksanen-Ylikoski, co-chairs. First, the workshop was intended to bring together academics across the United States (US) and the European Union (EU) to determine what is the current state of sales education and research. The second objective was to develop a network, as well as individual relationships, focused on a common end goal of further development of sales

education and research. Finally, the workshop organizers hoped to elevate the professionalization of the career of personal selling and sales management. To accomplish these objectives eight separate workshop sessions were conducted (agenda attached). Following is a summary of results and key findings from the workshop, as well as future directions for the newly organized global sales science institute.

KEY FINDING ONE - International Partnering

Throughout the workshop a key theme that emerged was that international cooperation is desirable and even necessary to advance the field. Specifically, there is a high need for international cooperation among universities teaching professional sales education to share sales curriculum, and sales research ideas. For example, Nick Lee of Ashton University discussed recent efforts in England to bring together researchers in the sales area and build strong research collaborations. The need to move toward building a community of scholars globally has been also emphasized in the latest New Horizons conference (Marshall, 2007).

From panelists and through discussion the idea that the individual faculty member is the principle driver for international cooperation strongly emerged. Generally, participants felt that we must start out slowly with informal teaching and research relationships. It will be personal relationships between faculty that will drive sales education and the sharing of ideas on the world stage.

Dan Weilbaker, Northern Illinois University, led a discussion on some of the exchange programs related to sales that he has been involved in. It was evident from ensuing discussion that there is a strong desire to build international sales student and faculty exchanges among a large number of the participants.

KEY FINDING TWO –Prevalence of Sales Stereotypes

Many participants were surprised to find an overall negative perception in the general population of salespeople that persisted in both Europe and the United States. This is in line with the negative portrayal of the salesperson is found in many movies and television shows (Hartman, 2006). Many EU colleagues thought that the sales career would be much more positively viewed in the US than in their own countries. However, throughout all attendees, there was a clear view that sales is not a career parents want their children to pursue, and that it is critically important that we change this image of the profession. Indeed, both published (e.g., Sojka, Gupta, and Hartman, 2000) and anecdotal (e.g., Nisolle, 2006) research highlights the negative image of the sales job across countries. There was a clear consensus

that anything we can do to upgrade these broad images, and break stereotypes would be beneficial to businesses and to the profession. The sales area is becoming much more strategic and professional in business (cf. Ingram, LaForge, and Leigh, 2002; Leigh and Marshall, 2001; Weitz and Bradford, 1999) and this needs to be reflected in education and in research.

KEY FINDING THREE- Similarities and Differences in Teaching Sales

A third theme was uncovering similarities and differences in various approaches to teaching sales coursework (selling skills, sales management, account management, customer relationship management, and so on). It was realized quickly that most of the EU schools did not teach basic sales, but they were rather focused on sales management. There were major differences between US and EU schools in philosophy of sales education. US schools have taken a very skill and competency based approach to sales curriculum. EU schools do not teach basic sales competencies, but rather focus on sales management and strategy as well as customer relationship management. It was widely agreed that current EU practice seemed to reflect where US sales curriculum was about ten years ago. Movement of sales education in Europe towards some very preliminary overtures to do sales skill-based coursework and early consideration of developing sales centers was viewed as both promising that they would follow US directions, and as necessary for the field.

It was also agreed that EU sales coursework seemed to have a much stronger international

focus, a trend which has been identified in a prior study comparing European and American business schools (Antunes and Thomas, 2007). For example, many EU schools have developed short (1 – 2 week) programs that focus on specific cultures; how to conduct sales negotiations in different cultures. While not unheard of in the US, the US universities seemed to feel that overall the US was behind on this particular dimension of coursework and that venues like this would be helpful in achieving more internationalization in US sales curriculum.

KEY FINDING FOUR – Sales Centers and Engaged Businesses

A fourth key finding revolved around the US trend of developing sales centers, institutes and endowed schools. Much of the discussion centered on the necessity for US schools to raise their own funding while schools in the EU vary in degree of need, with many completely funded by the government. The extent of EU schools government funding highlights the differing perceptions associated with developing a sales center and the idea of securing beneficial funding from the corporate world.

Much of the EU hesitancy in moving in this direction might be perceptual however. As the consideration of the issue evolved, Dan Bellenger of Georgia State University mentioned the predominance of US universities doing training for European companies and in European locations. While not a clear consensus was achieved, there were definitely scholars on both sides of the Atlantic who felt that companies might be very supportive of efforts to initiate sales

centers/institutes and develop more sales curriculum with engaged business support. It was also pointed out that the business support does not only cover financial aspects, but also the exchange of most up-to-date knowledge and genuine interaction between the practicing community and future sales professionals. It was suggested that new models on combining work experience in the sales curriculum are needed. While sales students benefit from applying their theoretical skills into practical contexts, businesses benefit from receiving direct contact with new recruits and opportunity to influence at the highest levels of sales education (Stevens and Stevens, 2007).

KEY FINDING FIVE – Business Sales Challenges

On the topic of engaged businesses, the workshop also highlighted business input, including key notes by Howard Stevens, Chief Executive Officer of the HR Chally Group, an international consulting company with offices in 33 countries worldwide; and by Mirva Antila, a Nordic region Sales Executive with IBM Europe. A panel that included six businesspeople also addressed recruiter needs from universities in developing and hiring sales personnel.

Key challenges facing business in the sales area included:

- Controlling for commoditization. The increasing difficulty in differentiating products and services has been identified as one of the most dramatic changes occurring in modern selling (Brown and Jones, 2005).

- Making sales a core part of the organization competencies. In the academic literature, the need to examine the broadened contribution of the sales function to firm performance has been an issue of heightened importance (Marshall, 2007).
- Managing the product life cycle and associated sales process. The need to match business life cycle to sales processes has been also reflected in recent discussions (Evans, 2007; Zoltners, Sinha, and Lorimer, 2006).
- Building/retaining customer loyalty. The salesperson holds a prominent position within the company. As a consequence, customer loyalty to the salesperson is a key driver of a seller's financial outcomes (Palmatier, Scheer, and Steekamp, 2007).
- Increased global competition. Early sales management research has identified the globalization of markets as one of the most important behavioral forces reshaping the world of sales (Anderson, 1996).
- Finding, training and retaining sales talent. Selecting, developing and retaining effective salespeople are recognized as top priorities for contemporary sales organizations (Leigh and Marshall, 2001).
- Making sure that sales hires direct from university are genuinely interested in sales careers (Stevens and Stevens, 2007).

KEY FINDING(s) SIX – Most Important Issues in Sales Research

Finally, another topic that was explored was major research needs. There was a strong feeling that if we want to enhance sales as an academic discipline, we must publish quality research. Indeed, there have been growing concerns regarding the respect of published sales research within the wider marketing academia (Marshall, 2007). For instance, one recent study revealed that published sales articles receive the fewest citations over the course of time (Stremersch, Verbiere, and Verhoef, 2007). A panel and open discussion revealed some of the most critical issues today for academic research on sales include:

- We need to topically explore cross-cultural cooperation within and between organizations. While there has been some work on salesperson's intracompany cooperation (Yilmaz and Hunt, 2001), knowledge regarding cross-cultural intercompany cooperation is rather sparse.
- Sales research must ultimately be able to be applied by businesses, and we need to do a better job communicating it. There are serious concerns over the applicability and relevance of marketing academia's research results for practicing managers (Stremersch, Verbiere, and Verhoef, 2007).
- Performance measurement at all levels within the company is critically important.
- Sales performance issues, turnover, and sales effectiveness are still not well understood.

- Content is the key to sales research. We operate from a substantive perspective as opposed to theoretical or methodological.
- The relationship (interaction) between sales manager and salesperson needs more attention. This need is elevated by the relatively small number of studies examining supervision and leadership issues (Williams and Plouffe, 2006).
- What taxonomy of sales will drive sales research over the next ten years? From an academic perspective, the work by Moncrief, Marshall and Lassk (2006) provides a contemporary taxonomy of sales jobs. From a practitioner perspective, the Chally initiative has identified fourteen major professional sales specialties (Stevens and Stevens, 2007). Undoubtedly, the sales community will have to bridge these different perspectives into a unified taxonomy that will advance future research.
- What does the customer expect from a sales person? Work carried out by Chally (Stevens and Stevens, 2007) provides an interesting guide for future research efforts as it identifies three primary skills of professional salespeople.
- We need more research on contextual/moderating influences. Do our research findings generalize across all selling jobs and situations? For instance, one recent study provides evidence that mixing heterogeneous sales populations into an aggregate sample may lead to erroneous conclusions (Avlonitis and Panagopoulos, 2006).
- There is a growing need to focus on customers and their perceptions as to what constitutes an effective salesperson/sales organization. An important first step toward this end has been made by Stevens and Kinni (2006).
- We also need to focus on cross-functional cooperation between sales and other organizational functions (e.g., marketing, supply chain). There has been a lot of discussion lately on the issue of marketing-sales integration, and several studies have provided important insights (e.g. Homburg and Ove, 2007). Yet, cooperation between sales and other organizational functions, such as operations and customer service is still not well understood.
- At this point we have very little knowledge on how selling is conducted in emerging countries (e.g., India, China). Most of our research has been conducted in the US and the EU (Richardson, Swann, and McInnis-Bowers, 1994), thereby limiting our knowledge on the peculiarities of sales & sales management in other parts of the world.
- From a methodological perspective, how can we enhance company participation, thereby increasing response rates? There have several calls for initiating research projects that are relevant to practitioners' needs, thereby increasing response rates (e.g., Evans, 2007; Ingram, LaForge, and Leigh, 2002).
- There is a need to explore what constitutes great sales organizations. An important first step has been made by Cravens and his colleagues (e.g., Cravens et al. 1993). However, there is an urgent need to update this work and develop a blueprint of successful sales organizations.

KEY FINDING SEVEN – How to Move these Efforts Forward

The workshop concluded with a wrap-up session focused on next steps. What emerged from the discussion was the need to ‘brand’ the workshop and to continue and plan for subsequent follow-up workshops. The faculty in attendance determined that in the future they should be called “The Global Sales Science Institute (GSSI)” and that annual workshops should and will occur. Next year’s workshop will take place in Athens, Greece and will be co-hosted by the William Paterson University and the Athens University of Economics & Business (AUEB). The co-chairs will be Nikolaos Panagopoulos and Rob Peterson.

Moving toward the end of establishing the GSSI, a 9 member steering committee has been developed and specific sub-committees are addressing:

- Mission, strategic planning, and organizational structure,
- Conference planning,
- Corporate research database,
- Network communication, and
- Expanding membership.

For more information on getting involved with the Global Sales Science Institute as an academic member, contact any one of the authors. For corporate sponsorship or research participation, the GSSI steering committee contact would be Dr. Ellen Pullins at the University of Toledo.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS:

During the past two decades, several paradigmatic changes have been discussed in the academic marketing literature. These changes include a shift from transaction-focused selling to relationship-based marketing, a shift from hierarchic organizations to networks of co-operative actors, and finally, a shift from passive, receiving customers to active co-participants (Wotruba 1991; Anderson 1996; Walter 1999; Weitz & Bradford 1999; Yilmaz & Hunt 2001). Among others, these changes have direct effects on sales organizations, on professional selling jobs, and ultimately on occupational competencies which are required from sales people.

The global impact of these changes has resulted in an ever demanding marketplace. Most major corporations have gone global (Johnston and Marshall, 2006). As more and more firms expand from a regional or national focus into the world-wide marketplace the need for sales talent grows increasingly more important. Increased global competition is reshaping the world of sales (Anderson, 1996). Global companies now realize that selecting, developing and training sales-ready talent has become more difficult.

In the US alone the growth in the number of non-retail salespeople is expected to grow at a rate of 7%-19% through 2014, faster than any other sector (U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics 2006). In addition, top-end Baby Boomers (those born between 1946 and 1964) are turning 61 years of age and are racing towards retirement at a rate of 7,918 per day (Administration on Aging/

Department of Health and Human Services 2006). The estimated 53 million members of the Millennial generation, born between 1981 and 2002 (Bartlett 2005), are the prime replacement sales targets and are not large and geographically disperse enough to fill the needs of the retiring workforce.

Consequently, sales managers are more and more often faced with the challenge of implementing a relational selling effort among their sales force on a global front (Keillor et al. 1999) with an ever shrinking talent pool. Instead of viewing selling as a series of struggles that the salesperson must win from a steady stream of prospects and customers of all sizes and shapes, the idea of relationship selling or partnering has focused on the building of mutual trust within the buyer/seller dyad with a delivery of anticipated, long-term, value-added benefits to buyers (Jolson 1997). For this reason it is imperative that sales managers hire the very best educated and trained salespeople they can, and that these salespeople are able to operate in a truly global environment.

In order to overcome the above mentioned challenges, leading sales organizations in the EU area have long been forerunners in developing and adopting latest technological innovations and CRM applications to support their organization's sales function and to provide improved customer knowledge to their sales force. Simultaneously, these companies have started to argue for higher level education on personal selling and sales management to ensure their future 'sales competence capital' in more and more complex competitive environment.

Thus, a persistent demand to establish BBA- and MBA-level degree programs of professional sales stems from employers, who are more and more aware of the prevailing and ever increasing lack of educated and competent professionals with the right attitude for professional selling positions. These demands have been recognized by the governments in several EU countries as pointed out in the Helsinki workshop, and more and more universities have started to work on the new degree programs, study modules or courses on personal selling and sales management.

The ability to manage the internal business cycle with a shorting product life cycle will require a higher level of skill for entering salespeople. Sales managers who recruit sales talent from those universities, both in the US and the EU, that focus on teaching their students about professional sales and the sales process will have a strong advantage in the global marketplace. To the extent that the formation of the GSSI and its corresponding conference is successful, businesses can benefit, both by the enhanced professionalism of a relationship selling model and the diminishment of the negative stereotype associated with sales, as well as the introduction of more sales programs to increase the supply of talent needed in the field. Further, the internationalization of the sales curriculum will enhance that talent pool's ability to cope in an international arena.

CONCLUSION

The first GSSI workshop highlighted some major differences and similarities in sales education and research between US and EU

schools. In particular, EU schools have not paid much attention in building selling competencies, while US schools have lagged on bringing in international dimensions. Moreover, **in spite of the fact that most major corporations have gone global (Johnston and Marshall, 2006, pp. 7-8), sales education & research has clearly lagged behind in both the EU and US.** It is our contention that sales educators should focus their attention at developing salespersons that will possess the critical set of knowledge, skills, and abilities (competencies) to succeed in the international arena.

Related to this, sales scholars are faced with a challenging opportunity. On the one hand, they should strive to produce usable research, by conducting not only cross-country research but also by focusing on real problems that modern sales organizations face. Participating companies emphasized the need for readable and relevant research that can be readily applicable in enhancing sales organization effectiveness. Importantly, companies are not aware of our research results; thus we need to increase awareness of our efforts to the practicing community. On the other hand, sales researchers should produce rigorous, theoretically sound research that will enhance the diminishing image of sales research within the wider marketing academia.

Finally, with regard to the professionalization of sales education, participants stressed the issue of sales accreditation and certification (Anderson, 1996). Despite its importance, however, there are important impediments to this process. First and foremost, in contrast to other professional groups (e.g., lawyers,

accountants), it is rather difficult to identify the critical selling competencies needed for professional salespersons (Stevens and Kinni, 2006). Second, not all sales jobs require the same set of competencies (Stevens and Stevens, 2007); we, therefore, need to identify the critical set needed for each type of selling job.

These are the types of issues that an organization like the Global Sales Science Institute will need to address if we want to strive to continue the trend towards the professionalization of the sales degree and the legitimization of sales and sales management as an academic pursuit for both education and scholarly research. The Global Sales Science Institute, and its annual workshop, is ready to take on these issues.

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Richard E. Buehrer, Ph.D., is the Director & Professor of the Edward H. Schmidt School of Professional Sales in the College of Business Administration at The University of Toledo. His publications have appeared in the *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management*, *Journal of Business and Industrial Management*, *Industrial Marketing Management*, *HR Advisor* and *HR International*.

Elina Oksanen-Ylikoski, Ph.D., (Helsinki School of Economics) is currently Principal Lecturer, HAAGA-HELLA University of Applied Sciences. She has worked as Marketing Manager at the Finnish Direct Marketing Association.

Nikolaos G. Panagopoulos, Ph.D., is Research Associate, Department of Marketing and communication, Athens University of Economics and Business. npanag@aueb.gr.

Ellen Bolman Pullins is an Associate Professor of Marketing and the Schmidt Research Professor of Sales & Sales Management at the University of Toledo. Ellen.pullins@utoledo.edu.