

## **Analysis and Lessons Learned From a Student Sales Force**

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Across all disciplines, Universities continually struggle with the role of using real-world elements within a class in the course of completing an undergraduate degree. This study investigates the role of real-world selling in an undergraduate sales course as part of completion of a sales degree. Students at a University were tasked with finding prospects, qualifying them, and conducting face to face sales calls using a business to business product. Students received grades based on the success of their sales calls. Research findings related to their sales success, experiences, and anxiety are presented.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Universities perpetually struggle with the role of education and changing curriculum needs. Recent studies in the general field of marketing higher education have addressed topics ranging from client sponsored projects (Bove and Davies 2009) to student engagement (Taylor et. al, 2011) to students desire to pursue certain careers (Karakaya, Quigley and Bingham 2011). Within the typical college of business, sales education has filled a perplexing role. While the majority of graduating businesses students will find their initial jobs including some sales element, many schools still view sales as vocational in nature. In fact, a scan of most of the nation's 4,000 Colleges and Universities will find very few offering even more than one sales class, with only 28 national universities having a certified sales program ([www.usca.com](http://www.usca.com)). In many ways, universities across the United States might be failing to prepare their students with the necessary skill set needed upon graduation.

In an effort to professionalize the field of sales, the last two decades have seen a few dozen universities develop formal programs to lead sales education initiatives. These programs, housed in organizations such as the University Sales Center Alliance and University Sales Education Foundation, seek to develop University Centers to lead the efforts to improve the perception of sales and sales curriculum. Within these organizations, the role of students selling is continually debated. While most educators can agree that giving students real sales opportunities outside of role plays is a key to sales education, few universities offer, and even fewer require, selling as part of the degree program.

The purpose of this research, therefore, is discuss lessons learned after having a University sales class sell business-to-business product in the field as a required portion of a University course. This experiment was conducted over two semesters using the same product partner. In addition, this research will investigate how elements of sales call anxiety (Verbeke and Bagozzi 2000) impacted students at the time of cold calling and closing business. Finally, using qualitative results, this research will present findings within the area of anxiety, sales career interest, and the impact of sales curriculum on student success.

### **METHOD**

Data gathered for this research was conducted over a 2-semester offering of an advanced sales class at a Midwestern United States public University. This University formed a recognized sales center within the University college of Business in 2007. Through this center, students can complete a bachelor's degree with a sales concentration or a sales minor. Within this sales program, six different sales classes have been offered to include the advanced sales course used in this study.

In a response to administrative and advisory board input, the senior-level role play course was asked to embark upon a trial experiment selling "real" product in the field to "real" buyers. Through a partnership with the University ticket office, students enrolled in the advanced personal selling class were tasked with prospecting business to business clients, qualifying them, and then conducting sales calls to those clients. Each student was tasked to make a total of 8 to 10 sales calls, selling primarily University baseball tickets.

Prospective buyers had to represent a business entity, and students were not allowed to sell to family members as a way to control for skewing ticket sales. The course instructor and a representative of the University athletic office served as sales managers for this process. Students received grades on the assignment based on qualification of prospects, sales call logs, and success of their sales calls (i.e., a student who sold nothing would receive a failing grade for that section, but could still score highly on the call log for that failed sales call).

At the completion of the course requirement, students were asked to complete an extensive quantitative and qualitative survey instruments generating the results found within this research. For the quantitative portion, single item questions were used in lieu of the full scales due to time and the purpose of the overall set of questions, with study goals focusing on the qualitative questions. Six primary research questions emerge from the purpose of this research via this data collection.

1. Will students have success selling in the field?
2. Do students in sales programs that conduct real field sales have a stronger interest in being sales representatives upon graduation?
3. Do students conducting face to face sales calls see a reduction in sales call anxiety when they have gained experienced selling?
4. Do students closing business in front of clients see a reduction of sales call anxiety when they have gained experience closing business?
5. Do student sales representatives feel that other sales course have prepared them for selling?
6. Do students feel that selling product will make them better salespeople when they take their first position?

A total of 38 students participated in the selling process over the course of two academic semesters, with 36 students filling out a complete survey for a response rate of 94.7%. All students received credit for the same course, and all students were taught by the same instructor.

## RESULTS

**Research Question 1: Sales Success:** Will students have success selling in the field?

The students across both semesters conducted sales calls over a six-week period with strong success. A total of 2,862 single game tickets were sold in both semesters, with 88.1% of the tickets being used for baseball games (the primary objective of the ticket office). 29 of the 38 students (76.3%) had success selling the product. The class mean on a 7 scale likert was 5.4/7.0 on their enjoyment of the class project. These results indicate that this is a viable process to have students follow, in which they will see success while finding the process enriching to their overall academic experience.

**Research Question 2: Interest in the selling profession:** Do students in sales programs that conduct real field sales have a stronger interest in being sales representatives upon graduation?

One of the primary goals of this research was to understand if conducting actual sales during a classroom would encourage more students to be interested in the sales profession. Before conducting this process, all students were asked to rate their interest on a 1 to 7 scale on having a sales career upon graduation. Despite having all students completing a degree (major or minor) in sales, only 55 % had an above average interest in taking a sales job upon graduation. After completion of this assignment, 61% indicated they would now seek a sales job. The analysis of their likert scales responses (using a paired t-test) indicates there was not a significant difference between student interest in a selling profession after conducting this process ( $p > .05$ ).

Many of the students felt that the process did not impact their decision to be, or not be, a salesperson.

(F8, Sr.) "I do want to be a salesperson, but not because of this assignment. The assignment was much too frustrating and time consuming when I have a hundred things going on."

Some students lost interest in a sales profession due to the assignment

(F4, Sr.) "I had wanted to do sales and had done an internship before this. I didn't enjoy this. It was easy

but it's not for me. I am good at sales but I don't like driving around all the time or living out of my car or home."

**Research Question 3: Anxiety while conducting first sales call:** Do students conducting face to face sales calls see a reduction in sales call anxiety when they have gained experienced selling?

Another interest of this research was to understand the level of anxiety faced by students when they conducted their first real sales call, and to see if their anxiety was reduced over time. In general, anxiety represents the mental state in which individuals wish to project a particular image when being evaluated but encounter a fear that questions their ability to perform effectively (Clark and Wells 1995). This would be similar to a new student salesperson selling a product, but not feeling comfortable with their knowledge of that product. Specifically within the context of sales as applied within this research, sales call anxiety is defined as the mental anxiety present during a sales calls that serves as a hindrance to sales success (Verbeke and Bagozzi 2000). This sales-specific anxiety most typically occurs during prospecting activities (cold calling) and during closing of business. It has four dimensions: "negative self-evaluations, negative evaluations from customers, awareness of physiological symptoms (e.g., a queasy stomach, shaky voice, blushing), and protective actions (e.g., avoiding eye contact, fiddling with the hands, shunning self-disclosures)" (Verbeke and Bagozzi 2000, p. 88).

In both cold calling and closing business as found in this study and the typical sales setting, the sales representatives' responses are dependent upon the responses of the client; this response, in turn, influences the sales representative's anxiety (Leary 1983). Because sales call anxiety is an anticipatory emotion (e.g., nervousness), as opposed to a reactive emotion (e.g., embarrassment or stress) (Verbeke and Bagozzi 2003; Stanton, Balzer, Smith, Parra and Ironson 2001), sales call anxiety emerges when sales representatives see the sales situation as potentially damaging to themselves (Verbeke and Bagozzi 2003). For a new sales representative within this research study, for instance, their anxiety could be due to their fear of having a negative grade impact if the sales call is unsuccessful.

This anxiety is often most present in new sales representatives in the exploration stage of their sales career (Cron 1984). During this stage, individuals (such as our student sales force) are still trying to figure out the right occupation for their career on both a professional, and personal, level (Cron and Slocum 1986a; Cron and Slocum 1986b).

Given that background, within their first cold sales call, students had above average levels of anxiety (4.6/7.0). These students had been trained in selling and taken at least 2 sales courses, but high levels of anxiety remained:

(F6, Sr.) Before "It reminded me of my mock sales presentation in this class. I was shaking, rambling, and could not get my point across at times. I felt sick to my stomach because I was so nervous. I was so nervous about messing up."

(F9, Sr.) "I was very nervous because I hadn't developed any relationship with any of the clients. I was also nervous that I would mess up or sound like I didn't have knowledge or not knowing the answer to a question they might ask"

(M14, Sr.) "When I made my first sales call I was extremely nervous. I was in a bind because I had know how from the text book but did have any real world experience. I was physically exhausted and my mind was racing 100mph."

The students were then asked to talk about their experiences for their last face to face sales call. First, statistically, we see a significant reduction ( $p < .05$ ) from the anxiety levels of their first sales call versus their last sales call. We also see that reduction within the wording and context of their written responses.

(F6, Sr.) "My last prospect call was done with ease. I felt like I was catching up with a friend. Physically and mentally, I was calm and did not have a care in the world."

(F9, Sr.) "I was still nervous but only because I was afraid of rejection since I wanted to sell for my grade. I was not nervous about knowing what I was doing anymore."

(M14, Sr.) "I was calm and cool. I wasn't stressed about the call. I had done the presentation a few times and had it laid out and was ready to show them different things based on their needs."

This reduction in sales call anxiety during face to face sales calls holds significant importance to sales programs. Universities with sales program consistently indicate to prospective employers that sales majors and minors will be more ready to hit the ground running in their first job since they will have already eliminated many of the negative stressors of new sales people to include anxiety. Preliminary results from this student indicate that students who have completed sales coursework to include selling products in the field could have lower levels of anxiety, potentially leading to reduced job stress and turnover.

**Research Question 4: Anxiety at Closing:** Do students closing business in front of clients see a reduction of in sales call anxiety when they have gained experience closing business?

Similar to our investigation of their anxiety making face to face sales call, this study also investigated the feelings of anxiety felt by student salespeople while closing business. Prior to closing for the first time, students felt similar high feelings of anxiety that they felt during conducting their face to face sales calls.

(F17, Jr.) "the first time I closed I felt nervous and I expected the buyer to say no. My emotions were negative and I expected him to say no and I did not have an confidence in myself."

(M11, Sr.) "I was more nervous to close than I was just selling. I never used a trial close and when I asked the guy to buy he just looked at me. I started sweating, and I never sweat."

(F7, Jr.) "Closing was the worst. I felt like I was trying to sell them a used car even though I knew that it was a good product that their employees would use."

After the completion of their sales calls, students were asked to talk about the last time they closed. Results indicate that, similar to anxiety found within the sales call, closing anxiety is significantly reduced after the student sales force gains experience closing ( $p < .05$ ).

(F17, Jr.) "The last time I closed was simple. [I was] ready to answer any questions they had, and I knew when I was going to make the hard close."

(M11, Sr.) "The last time I sold I knew the person was going to buy before I entered his office. I had found out he was a baseball fan and I was full of positive emotion because I knew this wasn't my first time trying to sell. I started having fun toward the end of my sales calls because I had confidence."

(F7, Jr.) "I was ready to sell and close by the time I met my last person, a woman running a real estate office. I felt prepared and knew what she was going to ask, so all I did was figure out her biggest need and use my sales pitch for that. She bought tickets after just a few minutes.

Once again, this demonstrates that students who are enrolled in sales programs in which they take multiple sales classes and have the opportunity to conduct real selling could have less anxiety.

**Research Question 5: Were you prepared:** Do student sales representatives feel that other sales course have prepared them for selling?

The fifth research objective for this study dealt with the level of preparedness a student felt before selling product in the field based on previous sales classes. At the university used in this study, students complete anywhere from 2 to 5 sales courses in completion of a degree. With the amount of time and energy spent on the curriculum and multiple sales course, this research felt it would be interesting to see if sales majors and minors felt prepared to sell in the field.

Our preliminary findings indicate that our students felt well prepared to sell product, scoring a 5.34/7.0 on the likert scale. In addition, only 5/36 students scored below the mean on the scale, with 8/38 students scoring a 7/7 for their level of preparedness.

(F3, Sr.) "This was the second course I took and I felt prepared for this assignment. The first class gave me the basics of selling and after doing the role plays in this class I was ready to go do it."

(M2, Jr.) "this was my third class so I have heard the steps in the selling process plenty of times. At some

point, there is not much more a professor can do. They teach you the way of going about making the sell and it comes down to us selling."

(M3, Sr.) "the marketing course was a waste of time, but the first sales course was inspiring and taught me not just how to vocally sell but also things like posture and smiling."

**Research Question 6: Future as Salespeople:** Do you think this assignment will make you better salespeople?

The final question asked to the student dealt with their future employment. Throughout the experience during our 2-year sales program, as with other university sales centers, a primary goal is to ensure that our students are prepared for their first real sales job. We want the students to be successful, and we want them to have low turnover. Results indicate that students felt strongly that they would be better salespeople in the future (5.6/7.0), with 31 of 36 students responding at or above the mean. This was the strongest opinion on any question in this survey. These preliminary results indicate our students felt this assignment was worthwhile and, importantly, would assist them once they began their career.

## DISCUSSION

The primary purpose of this two-semester process was to introduce sales to students enrolled in a professional selling curriculum while investigating the impact selling would have on them as exploration stage representatives.

One of the research questions for this study dealt with the use of student sales representatives. Our results indicate that students can have high success with selling, benefiting the students (from learning) and the hosting agency (from sales volume and revenue). However, these results, while preliminary, indicate that the practice of having students perform that role of actual sales people might bring with it sales success (as evidenced by the quantity of product sold), but it does not entice students to become sales professionals. In fact, there is no statistically significant change in desired profession after completing this assignment. This finding goes against conventional beliefs that students will like to become sales representatives once they get over their initial fear of cold calling.

An important finding from this research comes from the reduction in anxiety for students making sales calls. Historically, new sales representatives have had difficulty with sales call anxiety while they are learning their job. This anxiety can cause sales failure and, in many cases, lead to the high turnover that is found in sales organizations. Our results demonstrate that having students sell product in class will reduce their anxiety significantly. This anxiety reduction could, for their hiring employers, lead to higher sales success and lower turnover. Therefore, a benefit to having your students sell product as part of their course curriculum is that it could lead to better performance from your students once they enter the workforce.

Limitations for this study exist. First, due to time length and student response, we chose to use a single item indicator of anxiety rather than the entire scale. This was done out of convenience and future studies should expand their data collection to include all measures of anxiety. Second, this study was conducted within one University using one faculty. Future studies should look to expand this study across multiple campuses and regions. Third, future research should expand the product offerings so that students have the opportunity sell products that interests them, across a variety of B2B settings.

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