Social Selling Index Score:
Using LinkedIn to Build Social Selling Skills in the Classroom

By Howard F. Dover and Robert M. Peterson

The importance of social selling has been bantered about in popular press as the next generation of sales strategy. Yet, teaching this approach or measuring the outcomes has been elusive until just recently. Using LinkedIn's Social Selling Index, a classroom exercise and the results are shared demonstrating how to use this measure while students engage in social selling. The outcomes reveal that students can learn the nuances of social selling, some can become proficient at it, and all can be evaluated with a standard measure on the LinkedIn platform.

INTRODUCTION

Sales representatives, using social media, appear to be more effective than their counterparts, who do not use this new tool in the selling process (Guesalaga 2016; Moore et al. 2015; Marshall et al. 2012; Rodriguez, Peterson, and Krishnan 2012). Recent survey results show that over 70% of sales people and over 90% of top sales people use social selling tools, making these tools the most widely used technology tools in use currently (LinkedIn 2016). Previously, LinkedIn found evidence that social sellers using LinkedIn are 50% more likely to obtain quota (LinkedIn 2013). These findings show that sales people are using new methods to respond to the view that buyers are 57% through the decision process before they contact a company (Dixon and Adamson 2011) and that complex buying decisions involve, on average, 5.4 buyers in today's world (Adamson et al. 2015).

If social selling provides such a positive impact on sales performance and is widely used in practice, we have the following simple questions: Do simple LinkedIn exercises, provided in the literature (Peterson and Dover 2014; Dover, Peterson and Selden 2015), help our students develop measurable social selling skills? Do our existing networking efforts and advanced sales

experiential projects develop measureable social selling skills? Most importantly, how can we measure the degree to which students are developing social selling skills?

In this paper, we show how two universities used a new measurement, called the Social Selling Index (SSI), to measure the degree to which these programs are effectively developing social selling skills using the LinkedIn platform. Using this SSI measurement, the programs were able to show substantial growth in SSI scores for their students, as they progressed through their programs. Additionally, the SSI score provides an objective benchmark for classroom pedagogy exercises, where the students and faculty can measure precisely the students' input activity and empirical outcomes.

EXISTING CURRICULUM AND SOCIAL SELLING INDEX

Some feel that "Higher education is painfully far behind, when it comes to preparing students for living in a 21st century world of hyper-connectivity, professional networks, technology and a new business sensibility that includes social enterprise and social mission" (McKenna 2015). However, there are many sales programs that use experiential exercises to teach their sales students and provide substantial networking opportunities for corporate partners to interact with them. Examples of these experiential lessons might include the use of sales role plays (Taute, Heiser, and McArthur 2011), evaluation of sales representatives (Howlett and Newman 2015), and ethical scenarios (Dingus and Milovic 2015). In fact, Peterson and Dover (2014) outlined how to specifically use LinkedIn in an introductory sales class to get students started using the world's largest social media platform

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for business-to-business professionals. Another article describes how students can use LinkedIn to develop their professional network and obtain informational interviews and mentors (Dover et al. 2015), as they build their social media presence.

Social media has been defined as *digital content* and *network based interactions* developed between people (Cohen 2011). Using this medium, one can "participate in social networks, which enabled them to create and share content, communicate with one another, and build relationships" (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2010, p. 312). Social selling is emerging as a convergence of social media marketing and selling for both the firm and the firms' sales professionals. Social sellers augment the firm's social strategy by developing and disseminating content and engaging in professional conversations in the social ecosystem to develop and leverage their personal and corporate brand. Furthermore, social sellers use social media platforms to identify, research, engage, and deepen professional ties with other professionals, especially customers and prospects. Clearly, different segments of the consumer and professional markets exist with regards to their social media platform preferences and behaviors, with Facebook and Instagram popular with consumers and Twitter and LinkedIn with business professionals.

LinkedIn has recently developed an index that can be used to measure the degree to which an individual is using social selling on their platform. The "Social Selling Index" provides each LinkedIn.com user with a unique score based on four (4) equal components worth 25 points per component. Half of the components measure the degree of social marketing, as shown in Table 1, and include the 'Create a Professional Brand' and the 'Engage with Insights' components. The other half of the score is more related to traditional sales functions, including 'Find the Right People' and 'Build Relationships.' The SSI score ranges from zero to one hundred, and is dynamically determined on regular intervals via LinkedIn.com's private algorithm. If you have a LinkedIn account, you can do a web search for: "How to find my Social Selling Index Score," and you will find the site provided by LinkedIn for SSI scores.

Table 1

Social Selling Index (SSI) Components

Create a professional brand	Complete your profile with the customer in mind
	Become a thought leader by publishing meaningful posts
Find the right people	Identify better prospects in less time using efficient search and research tools
Engage with Insights	Discover and share conversation-worthy updates to create and grow relationships
Build Relationships	Strengthen your network by finding and establishing trust with decision makers

Source: Linked.com Social Selling Index page

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

To address our questions about the usefulness of the SSI, we collected SSI measurements

from three distinct groups of sales students at various stages of their sales curriculum at a southern U.S. university. The first group included 60 introductory sales students, who completed the network development project described in Dover et al. (2015). The second group included 30 advanced sales students, who participated in various networking and experiential exercises with corporate partners. The third group was a small account management team, who were given access to Enterprise Sales Navigator accounts, as they managed corporate relationships for the university's professional sales center.

The first group of 60 introductory sales students were from two classes. Students were asked to provide their SSI score at the start and end of the Spring 2016 semester. The students were asked to complete the network development project described in Dover et al. (2015). In short, they were asked to search and identify possible prospects from two selected industries, using their existing or newly created LinkedIn account. Their objective was to develop stronger network ties with these prospects by requesting informational interviews with the stretch goal to obtain mentors in their preferred industry (Dover et al. 2015). These activities, listed in Dover et al. 2015, directly line up with the sales prospecting component of SSI and, therefore, we would expect to see measureable improvement of SSI scores by completing this activity.

While these introductory class students experienced an end of semester networking event, their SSI scores were collected prior to this event. It is also important to note many of the students in these classes did not have a LinkedIn.com account at the start of the semester and, therefore, would have had an effective SSI score of zero. However, the start of the semester scores were collected after the students had created their accounts and started connecting with fellow students and other professionals.

The advanced sales class students were asked to report their start of semester and end of semester SSI scores. These students were involved in several corporate networking events and a class project that required them to contact, communicate, and close corporate clients to attend an end of semester event. During an average semester, students in this class will meet from fifty to seventy corporate contacts through their networking opportunities. While students are encouraged to connect with industry contacts who they meet through networking and coursework activities, the class does not explicitly grade their LinkedIn activity. Once again, these activities provide opportunities for students to exhibit measureable growth in their SSI scores via the sales components by finding the right people and deepening their relationships. The students are also encouraged to share content about events and the program as part of their project in the class, thus leading to potential increases in the SSI's sharing relevant content component.

The third group of students worked with the leads provided by the advanced sales class and the university's sales center on developing various sponsorships for the program. This group was given semester long access to the Sales Navigator Enterprise account, a LinkedIn product. Since these students were advanced students the previous semester, only their end of semester SSI's were reported. The Sales Navigator account provides enhanced tools that allow students to identify and search with advanced features. It also allows students the ability to send special e-mail via LinkedIn, called In Mail, to professionals who are not directly connected to their profile. Since these students have a quota and active accounts to work, we would expect to see increased SSI components in finding people, sharing content, and building relationships.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Our purpose was to use the SSI tool to measure the degree to which we could find evidence of social selling behaviors within existing experiential activities and specifically test how well LinkedIn exercises in the literature (Dover et al. 2015, Peterson and Dover 2014) increased measureable social selling skills. The results are very encouraging and show that the existing program is indeed developing measureable social selling behavior, as evidenced by increased SSI scores at different stages of the sales curriculum.

The results appear to show that the Dover et al. (2015) project assisted students in moving from an average SSI score of 11.9 to 23.2. We note that a second university reported similar increases in SSI from Peterson and Dover (2014) exercises. While both of these papers indicate that students obtain significant job prospects from completing simple LinkedIn exercises, we are able to show that the activities in these papers help students develop skills that are just below the U.S. national average SSI score of 27.3 (Derezin 2015).
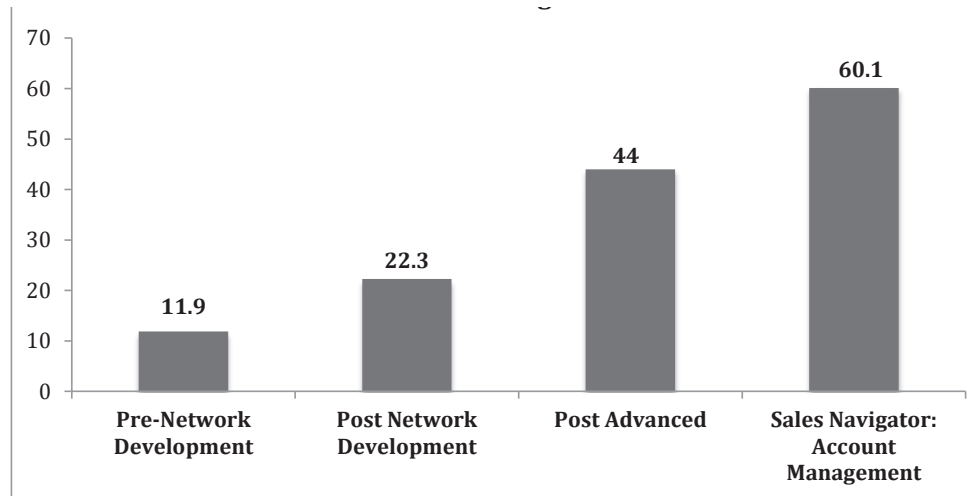
Figure 2
25th to 75th Quartile SSI Scores
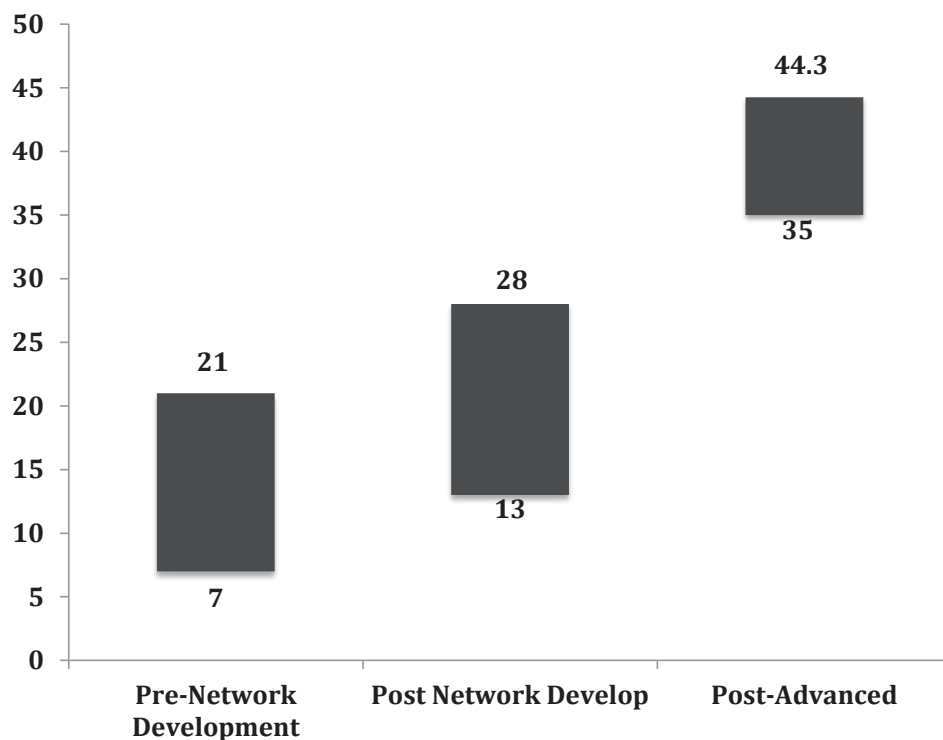
Over seventy-five percent of the second group of students have a score over 35 (Figure 2), which substantially exceeds both the national average of 27.3 and the starting average score of just 23.2. With an average score of 44 (Figure 1), it is clear the existing advanced sales exercises create measureable social selling skills of prospecting and developing connections via the LinkedIn platform. It is important to note that the advanced students were not explicitly assigned tasks on the LinkedIn platform. While they were encouraged to connect with people they met during the semester, they were not asked to specifically report their connections and communications from LinkedIn. com to the professor.

The activities performed by the third group provide a substantial increase in SSI score from 40 to 60 (Figure 1). This is not surprising as this group was responsible for sharing content about the program, as well as connecting and communicating with accounts in the program, which appears to have had a direct impact on their SSI scores. The Sales Navigator Enterprise account not only shows the students their SSI score but also shows a team leaderboard, which showed the top team members' SSI scores. The additional features of the Sales Navigator tool could also be part of the reason these students engaged more with the tool and, thereby, improved their scores.

With these three groups, we are able to clearly observe that the Social Selling Index score provides an empirical measure that shows how students increase their social selling activities on the LinkedIn platform, as they progress through the focal program. Given the emphasis practitioners give social selling and social selling tools, this paper shows that sales programs and business schools can use the SSI tool as a useful curriculum metric. The value of this metric goes beyond benchmarking a student's skills to their own class or school, as it provides a metric that is calibrated worldwide!

For those programs that are not using LinkedIn currently in their program, we are able to show that using the simple exercise in Peterson and Dover (2014) or the network development project in Dover et al. (2015) will give a program a foundational start to developing social selling in their curriculum. It also appears that advanced sales classes that provide networking and live selling opportunities should see evidence of improved social selling skills.

LinkedIn's SSI score shows us the degree to which our students are engaging in social selling behaviors. These measures can then be used more intentionally to teach specific social selling activities and encourage students to measure their social selling score over time. When the Sales Navigator Enterprise edition is used, students and professors are able to consistently measure student SSI scores in comparison to their peers.

The purpose of this paper is to share how a sales program can use the new SSI measure as a tool in their class, sales program, or business school to measure how well students are using LinkedIn as a social selling tool to develop social selling skills. Like most learning exercises in a college classroom there will be variability and a chance for professors to determine on what they wish to focus. It can be merely a learning exercise or a part of a grade. We note that one student finished the introductory sales class with a score of 7 and after completing the advanced sales course the student attained a score of 9. Meanwhile, another student attained a score of 62. Clearly different outcomes and disparate learning levels were achieved, but this mirrors marketplace realities, as well as where decisions will be made that will affect all stakeholders. However, professors can use these scores to enhance the student experience in classes and in their overall program.

One can take a passive or an aggressive learning stance on what is to be expected from the student, as it regards social selling outcomes. One can merely inform the students that SSI scores do exist and their future job may certainly call upon them to have a "reputable" score. Or, a professor could post the self-reported SSI scores to the class and let natural competitive tendencies take it from there. An assignment might even include a precise minimum score tied to a certain percentage of the student's grade. Much of this is determined by the objectives set in a particular course and the approach the professor wishes to deploy. The procedure used in this case was somewhat passive for several reasons including, the SSI scoring offering was brand new to the marketplace; the current objectives of the courses

were set before a definitive measure was offered by LinkedIn; and a desire not to be too heavy handed given most students are new to more professionally oriented social media.

LIMITATIONS, EXTENSIONS, AND CONCLUSION

The Social Selling Index score provided by LinkedIn. com is only a measure of a student's activity on the LinkedIn platform and does not measure other social media outlets, such as Twitter, that could also be used in social selling. Not only is this a single platform measure, without the Sales Navigator Enterprise product the professor is reliant upon the student to self-report their number. The current website functionality allows users to 'share' their SSI score and send it to the professor, which reduces the concerns inherent in students' self-reporting their scores. We are also very reliant upon LinkedIn's algorithm to define the measurement of social selling. This reliance possesses two concerns: First, we are not able to explicitly understand the algorithm that computes SSI. Second, we are dependent on LinkedIn keeping the SSI score as a free service to its users. The basic LinkedIn account is free, but the Sales Navigator, which allows for much more sophisticated social selling capabilities, has a fee attached and it might be cost prohibitive for some classroom purposes.

SSI could be used in many sales and marketing courses to encourage social selling and social prospecting. Professors would have a potentially valuable measure of the degree to which students are engaging in assignments, as well as corporate networking. Again, the instructor could decide the level and intensity that any social selling exercise would entail. The SSI measure would allow the student, the professor, and the sales program to evaluate how refined the students' social selling skills are and what future curriculum adjustments might be useful when having students engage in these needed sales skills on the LinkedIn.com platform. This new tool gives professors a quantifiable measure of each student's progress in developing social selling skills, which should provide students with a competitive advantage in the marketplace.

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