

Weighing the Case for University Sales Competitions: Significant Commitment and Rewards

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Experiencing rapid growth over the past decade, university sales competitions provide a high impact learning opportunity through which the pedagogical utility of role-plays can be effectively and efficiently scaled. Sales competitions also showcase university sales programs and provide companies with attractive recruiting forums. However, sales competitions require a great deal of administrative support, involve a relatively small percentage of students, and do not provide relevant training across all phases of the sales cycle. The current paper defines and describes sales competitions before discussing the pros and cons associated with competitions. The paper concludes by providing a generic competition development template.

Building on the pedagogical utility of sales role-plays, university sales competitions have exploded in size and scope over the past decade. More than 100 U.S. universities compete in internal and/or external sales competitions each year, and the country's oldest competition has grown from 12 competing universities in 1999 to over 60 today (Loe and Chonko, 2000; NCSC, 2016). However, researchers have not yet defined or circumspectly described university sales competitions.

In response to Cummins, Peltier, Erffmeyer, and Whalen's (2013) call for research that highlights successful sales pedagogy, the current paper defines, describes, and categorizes university sales competitions in order to provide a foundation for future sales competition research. Competitions pros and cons, along with a competition development template, are also provided.

The paper begins with an overview of the pedagogical models undergirding sales role-plays and competitions. Next, a brief methodological overview is provided before sales competitions are defined and described. The definition and description are based upon a

review of the sales competitions listed in the Sales Education Foundation's sales competition list (SEF, 2016) or operated by universities associated with the University Sales Center Alliance (USCA). Included within the description is an historical overview of competition development and a categorization of current competitions. Next, sales competition pros and cons are discussed. Specific issues for students, sales programs, and recruiting companies are presented. Finally, a competition development template is provided for parties seeking to launch or organize a sales competition.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

Rather than being born, good salespeople are generally made (Bragg, 1988). Sales managers consider sales training to be a critical factor driving sales success, and the development of the University Sales Center Alliance (USCA) indicates that universities are beginning to take sales training seriously (Dubinsky, 1996; Kelly, 1993). Within USCA schools, sales training (including role-plays and sales competitions) is usually built on several pedagogical models (social learning theory and active learning/high impact experiences). The current section highlights these theoretical perspectives in order to provide an understanding of the foundation upon which role-plays and sales competitions are built.

Social Learning Theory

Handy, Gordon, Gow, and Randlesome (1988) encouraged business educators to provide students with practical opportunities for applying theoretical constructs. Likewise, students prefer practical instruction

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versus theoretical lectures that are devoid of practical implications (Kellie, 2004). Therefore, educators must provide forums for practical application, especially in skill-based disciplines such as sales (Rogers, 2011).

Application-based learning is grounded on social learning theory. First proposed by Bandura (1977) and later modified by Manz and Sims (1981), social learning theory suggests that learning is built upon the interaction of 1) a person's pre-existing behavior base, 2) the external environment, and 3) the person's cognitions. The theory posits that individuals learn via direct experience (i.e. experiential learning), observation (i.e. vicarious learning), and cognitive review. Attention, retention, social reinforcement, and transfer training are considered learning sub-processes. The concept of *social reinforcement* involves the receipt of external feedback regarding behaviors. *Transfer training* involves the set of procedures that are utilized to transfer learned behaviors across external situations.

Social learning theory implies that effective behavioral learning will not take place unless the conveyed information is explicitly related to the learner's pre-existing observations or experiences. Second, social learning theory suggests that vicarious learning is frequently preferable to experiential learning since the former carries lower failure costs and is often faster (Bandura, 1977). Third, social learning theory posits that vicarious learning is strongest when targeted behaviors are modeled and then rehearsed by learners (Bandura, 1986).

Active/Passive Learning and High Impact Experiences

Today's academicians often utilize both active and passive learning approaches. Traditional methods such as lecturing and reading textbooks are passive learning approaches (Wright, Bitner, and Zeithaml, 1994). Passive approaches generally restrict learners to a preset learning domain. Conversely, active learning involves two-way communication regarding learning domains that are not exclusively pre-selected by instructors. Active approaches frequently enable stronger long-term learning retrieval since they couple information acquisition with direct practice (Sogunro, 2004). Thus, active learning approaches lead the list of pedagogical methods preferred by sales instructors and managers (Hunter, 2010; Parker, Pettijohn, and Luke, 1996).

In recent years, high-impact learning experiences have received significant attention. High-impact experiences often take active learning methodologies beyond traditional classroom walls. Kuh (2008) operationalized and tested a 2007 AAC&U report regarding high-impact learning experiences and found a varying range of positive educational effects associated with high impact experiences. Examined experiences included, among others, first year experiences, learning communities, service learning, and capstone courses/experiences.

Role-Playing and Sales Competitions

The primary application of social learning theory, active learning methodologies, and high-impact experiences in sales pedagogy involves the utilization of sales role-plays and competitions. A role-play is a "learning activity in which participants act out a set of defined role behaviors or positions with a view to acquiring desired experiences" (Sogunro, 2004, p. 356).

Role-plays offer both positive and negative pedagogical utility. On the positive side, both sales professors and practitioners agree that role-plays and associated presentations are an effective pedagogical tool (Parker, Pettijohn, and Luke, 1996). Role-plays exert impact though directly engaging learners and are, therefore, used extensively in many skill-based disciplines (Eitington, 1989). Apart from on-the-job experience, role-plays are considered to be a top sales training tools (Hughes, Ginnett, and Curphy, 1993). The effectiveness of role-plays has been confirmed across a wide range of additional fields (Buchan, 1972; Cranton, 1989; Harari and Cofington, 1981; Harris, 1985; Hershey, 1985). As Ments (1989) suggests, "no matter how much reading and observing the student undertakes, the only way to develop these skills fully is by using them in actual interpersonal situations" (p. 24).

On the negative side, role-plays are not an active learning panacea. Apart from taking a great deal of instructor time, role-plays are often ineffective if uncoupled from associated lecture instruction. Uncoupling role-plays from traditional instructional methods reduces both the relevance and transferable utility of role-plays (DeNeve and Heppner, 1997). Likewise, although positive outcomes have been associated with high-impact learning experiences (Kuh, 2008; Kuh and

O'Donnell, 2013), capstone experiences (which share many similarities with sales role-play competitions) have generated lower positive outcome levels than other high-impact approaches (Kilgo, Sheets, and Pascarel, 2015).

In summary, role-plays and their associated use within university sales competitions are built upon a strong pedagogical foundation. However, to comprehensively maximize pedagogical utility, role-plays and associated sales competitions should be utilized along with traditional educational approaches.

METHODOLOGY

The current research utilizes a literature review, web analysis, surveys, and depth interviews to review current university sales competitions. The purpose of the review is to provide a baseline description of sales competitions from which future studies can specifically measure competition effectiveness and efficiency.

Additionally, the review provides prospective sales competition organizers a circumspect picture of the pros and cons associated with sales competitions. Methodologically, the current study reviewed the websites of 31 sales competitions listed in the Sales Education Foundation's sales competition list (SEF, 2016) or operated by universities associated with the USCA. See Table 1 for a list of competitions. Next, surveys were administered to USCA sales program directors. Twenty-four usable USCA program director surveys were completed and returned (56% response rate). Responding schools enjoyed average yearly sales program enrollment of 143 students (SD: 91.91; range: 20-396). Depth interviews were conducted with a small subset of program directors. Additionally, open-ended surveys were administered to 109 students (from 19 universities) and 20 faculty coaches who competed in at least one sales competition during the last two years. Thirty-two usable student surveys and 12 faculty

Table 1. Sales Competition List

| Competition name | Hosting Organization | Location |
|---|--------------------------|---------------------|
| Arizona Collegiate Sales Competition | Arizona State University | Tempe, AZ |
| Ball State Regional Sales Competition | Ball State University | Muncie, IN |
| Baylor Business Development | Baylor University | Waco, TX |
| Baylor Business Selling-Outside | Baylor University | Waco, TX |
| European Sales Competition | Haaga-Helia University | Various |
| Global Bilingual Sales Competition | Florida Intl. University | Miami, FL |
| International Collegiate Conference | American Mktg. Assoc. | Various |
| International Collegiate Sales Competition | Florida State University | Orlando, FL |
| Liberty Mutual Southwest Collegiate Sales Competition | University of Houston | Houston, TX |
| National Collegiate Sales Competition | Kennesaw State | Kennesaw, GA |
| National Team Selling Competition | Indiana University | Bloomington, IN |
| Northeast Intercollegiate Sales Competition | Bryant University | Smithfield, RI |
| PSE Pro-Am Sell-A-Thon | Pi Sigma Epsilon | Various |
| RBI National Sales Challenge | William Patterson U. | Wayne, NJ |
| Schlumberger Sales Competition | Kansas State Univ. | Manhattan, KS |
| SLC Titan Sales Competition | Cal State U., Fullerton | Fullerton, CA |
| Spring 12 Sales Competition | Cal State U., Chico | Chico, CA |
| Spring Sales Competition | Indiana University | Bloomington, IN |
| Sweet 16 Sales Challenge | Cal State U., Chico | Chico, CA |
| Terry Professional Sales Competition | University of Georgia | Athens, GA |
| Terry Sweet 16 Sales Competition | University of Georgia | Athens, GA |
| Texas A&M Collegiate Sales Competition | Texas A&M University | College Station, TX |
| Textron Sales Competition | Kansas State University | Manhattan, KS |
| The Great Northwoods Sales Warm-Up | Univ. of WI-Eau Claire | Eau Claire, WI |
| The Pitch Contest | Univ. of AR, Little Rock | Little Rock, AR |
| UNA ProSales Fall Competition | Univ. of N. Alabama | Florence, AL |
| University of Toledo Invitational Sales Competition | University of Toledo | Toledo, OH |
| University-Wide Sales Competition | Univ. of WI, Whitewater | Whitewater, WI |
| UTD Pro Sales Challenge | Univ. of Texas, Dallas | Richardson, TX |
| West Virginia University Regional Sales Competition | West Virginia University | Morgantown, WV |
| Western States Collegiate Sales Competition | Cal State U., Chico | Chico, CA |

coach surveys, representing a 29% and 60% response rate, were returned. Open-ended surveys were also administered to 32 companies (38% response rate) who sponsored and participated in sales competitions over the past two years. Results were content analyzed utilizing Neuendorf's (2002) methodological recommendations. Conceptualization and operationalization included a preliminary literature review, web content review, and survey/depth interview response review to develop a list of categorical items (centered on competition utility and development). Next, a "by-utterance" coding scheme (codes assigned to interviewee mentions of specific topics/issues) was used to develop a comprehensive response list which was then qualitatively factored by two independent researchers to develop a final list of relevant topics and guidelines which were used to define and describe university sales competitions.

UNIVERSITY SALES COMPETITION DEFINITION AND DESCRIPTION

The current section begins by defining university sales competitions. Next, an historical overview of competition growth is presented. Finally, a general description of sales competitions and a categorization of current competitions is provided.

Definition

A university sales competition is an academic contest, usually hosted by a university with a recognized sales program, designed to model a salesperson's preparation for and experience of specific elements of the personal sales process. Competitions primarily emphasize the sales call (via role-plays), but associated elements of the sales process may also be modeled. Participating students prepare for competitions by analyzing pre-assigned sales cases before "role-playing" an actual sales call and being judged on the call's efficacy according to a set of pre-established judging criteria. Most sales competitions offer monetary awards to winning students.

The current study's review of websites and content analysis of USCA sales program director responses found that the purpose and utility of most university sales competitions is to a) educate and prepare students for "real world" selling environments, b) provide increased visibility for the hosting university's sales program, and

c) offer corporate recruiters an efficient and effective means by which to recruit top sales talent. Almost 50% of responding directors mentioned student education as a primary goal of sales competitions. Program visibility and corporate recruiting were mentioned as secondary benefits by 36% of respondents.

Historical Growth

University sales competitions have experienced explosive growth in the last decade. Of the surveyed competitions, almost 60% have been founded since 2006. Only three of the remaining competitions were founded prior to 2000. A majority of surveyed universities (55%) began sending students to competitions after 2006, and only one university sent students to competitions prior to the year 2000. Today, over 100 U.S. universities participate in internal and/or external sales competitions each year.

Description

A review of the sales competitions listed by the Sales Education Foundation (SEF, 2016) or hosted by USCA universities (See Table 1) indicates that sales competitions generally include the following distinct stages:

- Preparation Phase – students review assigned sales cases to uncover buyer needs, understand seller offerings, and craft solution strategies. Students are generally assisted in this stage by a faculty or staff coach. Many competitions also offer students the opportunity to receive preparation assistance from sponsoring companies.
- Participation Phase – students compete in live role-plays with corporate or trained buyers. Role-plays may be non-synchronous during a portion of this stage, but most competitions include a final live event in which the top competitors synchronously compete in a single location. Final events generally range from one to four days. Final event judging is often live, with judges observing role-plays via streamed video or one-way mirrors. Judges are frequently drawn from corporate partners, competition administrators, or faculty members.
- Post-factum Phase – students win prizes and receive role-play performance feedback from competition judges, faculty, and/or administrators.

During each stage, students engage in a host of activities ranging from business case analysis to self-reflection. Students often experience intense pressure during the Participation Phase in which they must build rapport with the buyer, conduct a thorough needs assessment, jointly craft solutions, handle objections, close the deal, and map out next steps (within a time frame of 20 minutes or less).

Five categories of individuals are typically involved in sales competitions. These categories and their respective roles are as follows:

- **Student Competitors** – Among sales competitions open to multiple universities, survey results indicate a mean competition size of 94.85 students ($SD = 68.48$; range: 24-220). Most competitions allow competing universities to field teams of 2 to 4 students. Survey results indicate that approximately 40% of universities rely on faculty members to individually select competing students. Students are also chosen based on internal sales competitions (33%), class play-offs (8%), and student organization selection (8%).
- **Student Volunteers** – Non-competing students are frequently used for a wide-variety of competition-related activities, including corporate participant hosting, role-play room management, and event coordination. Several competitions utilize student organizations such as Pi Sigma Epsilon or Delta Sigma Pi (national coed professional sales/marketing and general business fraternities) to staff competition volunteer positions. Survey results indicate that over 90% of sales competitions utilize student volunteers. Excluding one outlier involving 200+ student volunteers, competitions use a mean of 15.4 student volunteers ($SD = 10.78$; range: 5-35).
- **Coaches** – Most universities utilize faculty members to coach student competitors and act as “chaperones” at the live event. The primary means of coaching are a) non-classroom faculty coaching, b) team coaching, and c) competition class coaching. Survey results indicate that 47% of universities utilize an individual faculty or staff coach who coaches the student team outside a formal class. Approximately 29% of schools utilize a team of

faculty, staff, and alums to provide coaching. In this approach, alumni coaches may provide “on-ground” coaching at competitions which the main faculty coach is unable to attend. Almost 15% of schools coach via a formal, for-credit competition class in which an instructor may coach multiple student teams attending multiple competitions.

- **Companies** – Corporate partners provide a large portion of the funding for university sales competitions. Survey results indicate that corporate partnerships fund over 75% of the budgets of all surveyed sales competitions. Additionally, partner companies may provide role-play cases, competitor training, and competition judging. Companies may also send recruiters to the final competition event.
- **Administrators** – Sales program directors and their respective administrative assistants manage most sales competitions. Among competitions open to other universities (and excluding one outlier which utilized 20+ staff members), survey results indicate that hosting universities employ a mean of 2.45 staff members to plan and manage competitions ($SD = 1.12$; range: 1-5). Duties include corporate partnership solicitation and management, budget development, competition promotion and registration, facility procurement and coordination, role-play development and buyer training, travel and lodging oversight, event management, and post-event follow-up.

Sales Competition Categorization

From a macro perspective, sales competitions can be broadly categorized as internal or external. Internal competitions are only open to students from the hosting school or organization, while external competitions are open to students from multiple universities. Approximately 60% of reviewed competitions were internal. Competitions may also be categorized according to competitor types (teams vs. individuals), role-play procedures (live vs. pre-recorded), judging structure (play-offs vs. average scores), judging personnel (professors, companies, or peers), and size (small, medium, or large). Please see Table 2 for a categorical overview of university sales competitions.

Table 2. Sales Compensation Categorization

| Sales & Business Competition Categorization | | | Event Timing | | Competitors | | Role Plays | | Structure | | Judging | | Size | | | | |
|---|--|-----------------------|-------------------|---------------------|----------------------|----------------------|------------|-------------|-----------|--------------|-----------|----------------|------------|--------------------|--------------|-----------------|---------------|
| Competition Name | Hosting Organization | Participating Schools | Cumulative Format | Single Event Format | External Competition | Internal Competition | Teams | Individuals | Live | Pre-Recorded | Play-Offs | Average Scores | Professors | Corporate Sponsors | <35 Students | 35-100 Students | >100 Students |
| Arizona Collegiate Sales Competition | Arizona State University | | | X | | X | | X | X | | X | | | X | | X | |
| Ball State Regional Sales Competition | Ball State University | 10+ Universities | | X | X | | X | | X | | X | | | X | | | X |
| Baylor Business Development Competition | Baylor University | | | X | | X | | X | X | | | X | | X | | X | |
| Baylor Business Selling Outside Competition | Baylor University | | | X | | X | | X | X | | | X | | X | | X | |
| European Sales Competition | Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences | 2+ Universities | | X | X | | | X | X | | X | | | X | X | | |
| Spring 12 Sales Challenge | Cal State University-Chico | | | X | | | | | X | | | | | X | | X | |
| Sweet Sixteen Sales Competition | Cal State University-Chico | | X | X | | X | | X | X | | | X | X | X | | | X |
| Western Collegiate Sales Competition | Cal State University-Chico | 15+ Universities | | X | | | X | X | X | | | X | | X | | X | |
| International Collegiate Sales Competition | Florida State University | 68+ Universities | | X | X | | | X | X | | | X | | X | | | X |
| Liberty Mutual Southwest Collegiate Sales Competition | University of Houston | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| National Team Selling Competition | Indiana State University | 20+ Universities | | X | X | | X | | X | | | X | | X | | | X |
| PSE Pro-Am Sell-a-Thon | Pi Sigma Epsilon | 50+ Universities | X | | X | | | X | X | X | | X | X | X | | | X |
| RBI National Sales Challenge | William Paterson University | 35+ Universities | | X | X | X | | X | X | | X | | X | X | | | X |
| Schlumberger Sales Competition | Kansas State University | | X | | | X | X | | X | | | X | | X | | X | |
| SLC Titan Sales Competition | California State University, Fullerton | | | X | | X | X | | X | | | X | | X | | X | |
| Terry Sweet 16 Sales Competition | University of Georgia | | | X | | X | | X | X | | X | | | X | X | | |
| Terry Professional Sales Competition | University of Georgia | | | X | | X | | X | X | | X | | | X | X | | |
| Textron Sales Competition | Kansas State University | | | X | | X | | X | X | | | X | | X | | X | |
| The Great Northwoods Sales Warm-Up | University of WI, Eau Claire | 21+ Universities | | X | X | | | X | X | | X | | | X | | | X |
| The Pitch Contest | University of Arkansas at Little Rock | | | X | | X | | X | X | | X | | X | X | X | | |
| UNA ProSales Fall Competition | University of North Alabama | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| University of Toledo Invitational Sales Competition | University of Toledo | 30 + Universities | | X | X | | X | | X | | | X | X | X | | | X |
| UTD Pro Sales Challenge | University of Texas, Dallas | | | X | | X | | X | X | | X | | | X | X | | |

Note. "External Competition" defined: Sales Competition registration open for participation from universities outside of host university. "Internal Competition" defined: Registration open for hosting university enrolled students only.

SALES COMPETITION UTILITY

A balanced overview of sales competitions recognizes both the positives and negatives associated with competitions. The current section utilizes a literature review, surveys, and depth interviews to uncover specific pros and cons for students, sales programs, and corporate partners. Results may be useful for faculty members, administrators, or interested organizations (e.g. corporate recruiters, professional student associations, etc.) who are considering hosting or sending students to a sales competition. All surveyed/ interviewed parties participated in at least one sales competition between 2014 and 2016. Responses were analyzed via content analysis.

Student Utility

Positive student responses regarding the benefits of sales competitions generally support the extant literature's findings concerning role-play utility. A literature review and content analysis of student comments highlighted the following five areas in which sales competitions particularly benefit students.

Learning by doing. As Fogel, Hoffmeister, Rocco, and Strunk (2012) demonstrated, salespeople learn by doing. Sales competition role-plays offer an ultimate "learning-by-doing" experience. Many student respondents suggested that sales competition role-plays enabled them to viscerally understand the personal selling process in a way that sales lectures do not allow. A typical response suggested that the hands-on learning opportunities offered by sales competitions "can't be recreated" in any other collegiate sales setting.

Realism. To be effective, role-plays should be realistic (Moncrief and Shipp, 1994; Schaefer and Haytko, 2014). Surveyed and interviewed students consistently referenced the "realism" of sales competitions as being one of the main benefits associated with sales competitions. Not only do students appreciate the realistic nature of the cases, but they also appreciate the realistic live scenarios in which they must sell. As one student highlighted, "I loved solving a real life situation."

Pressure. Another frequent student response was, "The competition made me think on my feet." Students uniformly used this phrase in a positive manner and

thereby echoed the finding that students favorably assess the pressure associated with competitions (Drea, Tripp, and Stuenkel, 2005).

Peer networking. Approximately fifty-percent of student respondents mentioned networking with like-minded peers as being a benefit of sales competitions. Surprisingly, this benefit was mentioned more frequently than corporate networking, even though the mixers at most sales competitions primarily focus on establishing student-company relationships. Typical student responses can be summarized by the student who stated, "The competition was a great way to meet many talented peers who share the same passion for sales."

Corporate networking and recruiting. Of the top five benefits uncovered in the current study's content analysis of qualitative student responses, corporate networking and recruiting was the least frequently mentioned (approximately 20% of responses explicitly mentioned corporate networking as a benefit). If corporate networking was mentioned, it was usually mentioned in conjunction with peer networking. An example is the respondent who stated, "I am very thankful to have had the opportunity to compete with other students and network with great companies."

From a negative perspective, student/faculty/administrator comments and the extant literature highlight several concerns related to students and sales competitions. Concerns include access, competitive vs. collaborative learning environments, and curricular focus.

Access. Both administrators and students complained that while sales competitions are beneficial for competing students, access to competitions is generally limited to a small number of competitors. Though the number of sales competitions has grown in recent years, there is still an insufficient number of competitions to enable widespread student involvement. As one faculty coach highlighted, "I'm happy for the students who get to compete, but they represent a small portion of our student population." Another coach stated, "It's hard to figure out what to do when one student (or small group of students) wins all the tryouts for multiple competitions. How do we involve more students without penalizing the exceptional students?"

Competitive vs. collaborative learning. Kilgo, Sheets, and Pascarel (2015) highlighted that collaborative learning is one of the most beneficial pedagogical approaches within high impact learning environments. Although a small subset of competitions utilize team selling role-plays, the majority of reviewed competitions utilize individual role-plays or presentations. Therefore, faculty coaches can find it difficult to develop collaborative training environments since students are reticent to “collaborate” with potential competitors. Many universities utilize tryouts to determine final competition teams, and one faculty coach responded that although her students didn’t explicitly attempt to “stab one another in the back,” she still had to spend a good deal of time “addressing competitive infighting.”

Curricular focus. Loe and Inks (2014) highlight that although face-to-face interactions are an important component of the sales process, they are not always central to sales success. Sales competitions tend to place heightened emphasis on face-to-face interactions and may unwittingly decrease students’ visceral understanding of the importance of other sales dimensions such as research, prospecting/lead qualification, and follow-up.

In summary, despite multiple negatives, sales competitions still earn high marks from involved students. The current study’s responses indicate that competing students, even those who were not top performers, uniformly praise the benefits of sales competitions, utilizing terms such as “second-to-none,” “challenging,” “rewarding,” and “full of opportunity” to describe their overall assessment of the sales competitions in which they personally competed. It should also be noted that student volunteers (who assist with competition operations but do not compete) share similar viewpoints regarding competition utility.

Program Utility

Depth interviews and open-ended surveys to sales program directors and faculty coaches indicate that sales competitions benefit sales programs in two primary ways. The first is student learning, and the second is program visibility.

Student learning. One responding faculty coach succinctly highlighted the pedagogical utility of sales competitions when she stated, “I have NEVER (original

emphasis) seen our students so engaged, thoroughly prepared, and focused.” As Drea et al. (2005) suggested, competitions encourage students to actively participate in the learning process, and this self-regulated learning facilitates cognitive engagement and life-long learning (Bandura, 1993; Corno, 1986). Faculty coach responses consistently confirmed this finding and help explain the growing popularity of competitions.

Sales program visibility. Sales competitions provide sales programs with both internal and external visibility. Depth interviews with sales program directors indicate that sales competitions bring positive departmental, college, and university-level visibility. Specific examples include university public relations (PR) departments and development departments. PR departments seek activities or initiatives to showcase to relevant stakeholders, and university advancement departments appreciate specific, value-added events which can be used to anchor donation requests. Interviewees additionally emphasized that sales competitions provide a wide range of unexpected internal benefits such as employee morale development and leadership opportunities, student recruitment assistance, student organizational involvement, and healthy cross-departmental “role modeling.” Regarding the latter, a dean from an interviewed university suggested that her school’s sales competition served to encourage other college departments to pursue similar initiatives.

Apart from internal visibility, sales competitions can increase external visibility and may open the door to corporate partnership dollars. One interviewed program director indicated that his program’s sales competition provided the foundation for a corporate partnership group that now boasts over 25 members. Recruiters are quick to see the recruiting opportunities associated with sales competitions, and companies often vie with one another for competition visibility. Over 77% of surveyed USCA sales program directors indicated that competition hosting has made it easier to attract corporate partners. Additionally, sales programs with sales competitions have a significantly larger number of corporate partners than programs that do not host competitions [$t(20) = 1.73, p < .05$]. Schools with competitions enjoy a mean of 25.8 corporate partners versus a mean of 15.5 corporate partners for programs that do not host competitions.

Finally, interviewees suggested that competitions can enhance a program's external prestige among other institutions of higher learning.

The positive programmatic effects of sales program do not come without a cost. Depth interviews with faculty/administrators from three hosting universities indicated that sales competitions require extensive resource commitments and the juggling of conflicting participant objectives.

Resource commitment. Sales competitions require a great deal of time, treasure, and talent. The average surveyed sales competition required 2.45 full-time staff members. Managing and coordinating students, faculty, coaches, corporate sponsors/judges, facilities, technology, catering, and marketing communications can be overwhelming. One interviewee, who has managed a competition for the past 6 years, responded that although he loves the way in which the competition benefits others, he still "dreads the competition each and every year."

Conflicting objectives. A common concern voiced by interviewed faculty and administrators is the difficulty associated with managing the often conflicting objectives of students, faculty, and corporate sponsors. Involved parties frequently find themselves at odds with one another regarding role-play content, relative emphasis, and judging criteria. Competing university teams often find themselves at odds with other universities who are perceived to have unfair advantages via either competition hosting or relational ties to corporate partners. Corporate partners find themselves at odds with administrators who alter role-play cases, and administrators become frustrated with corporate partners for failing to understand academic constraints. As one respondent summarized, "It's impossible to make everyone happy. Everyone has a different opinion of how long the networking should take place, how much time should be devoted to role-plays, whether or not buyers in different rooms are consistent, what type of food should be served, and whether or not students from different schools should stay in the same double-occupancy hotel room. It's really quite overwhelming."

In summary, though the overall tenor of both surveyed responses and depth interviews was positive, there

are programmatic costs to be counted. Organizations should not launch a sales competition without a realistic understanding of the significant time, treasure, and talent that will be required.

Corporate Utility

Corporate survey responses indicate that sales competitions offer companies two distinct sets of benefits. First, competitions offer companies attractive recruiting opportunities, and second, competitions offer valuable public relations opportunities.

Recruiting. Sales competitions offer companies both effective and efficient recruiting opportunities. Regarding *effectiveness*, O'Connell, Hattrup, Doverspike, and Cober (2002) highlighted that role-play scores are accurate predictors of subsequent sales performance. Therefore, sales recruiters can improve the quality of their hires through recruiting at sales competitions (to which universities send their top role-play talent). One recruiter aptly summarized the recruiting benefit by stating that, "Watching students pitch, build rapport and close, made it easy for me to see which candidates had the skills to be extremely successful in my organization."

Companies can likewise increase recruiting *efficiency* through attending sales competitions. Unlike generic university career fairs across the country, competitions offer recruiters a pool of sales-specific students in a single geographic locale. The implications for recruiting efficiency are self-evident.

As a cautionary note, companies should not isolate their competition recruiting efforts from ongoing involvement with target campuses. A small subset of corporate respondents indicated that they were disappointed by the proportion of students who had accepted job offers before the competition even began. One company indicated that they changed their recruiting approach after attending their first competition. Rather than solely relying on the competition for recruits, they began to engage with sales students on the target campus before the competition.

Public relations. Sales competitions assist corporate PR efforts through building goodwill. Student comments indicate that students appreciate the support of attending

companies. Additionally, students appreciate learning about the companies who sponsor competition role-play cases. For example, one student respondent stated that he “enjoyed the X Company role-play” and how it enabled him to “learn about the company’s products and how to sell them.” Future research is required to determine if corporate involvement genuinely improves student attitudes toward participating companies, but qualitative anecdotes from the current study point in that direction. Anecdotes also suggest that faculty members develop positive relationships with companies. The general sentiment can be summarized by a corporate responder who stated that she, “Came away from a recent sales competition with new candidates, and relationships with new schools and future business partners.”

To summarize, competitions offer utility to students, sales programs, and companies. However, to realize this utility, all parties must contribute. Students must study and prepare, programs must expertly design and manage events, and companies must meaningfully and holistically participate.

SALES COMPETITION DEVELOPMENT TEMPLATE

Having sampled positive and negatives associated with sales competitions, the current paper now presents a sales competition template for organizations seeking to develop a competition or operationally benchmark their own competition(s). The template is drawn from a review of the administrative operations manuals of three sales competitions. Additionally, the authors have developed and managed two annual sales competitions for the past eight years. Reviewed competitions include local (all competitors attend the hosting university), regional (competitors hail from various schools in a specific geographic area), and national (competitors hail from across the nation) sales competitions. The template can be found in the Appendix. Specific event management guidelines are not included given the range and diversity of actual competition events.

LIMITATIONS, FUTURE RESEARCH, AND CONCLUSION

Limitations of the current paper center on the largely qualitative nature of the collected data, and the resulting

lack of generalizability. Though the pedagogical utility of role-plays has been examined and assessed by past researchers, a comprehensive assessment of sales competition utility remains outstanding. Future researchers are encouraged to build upon the current study’s baseline description through conducting assessment studies of the general and specific utility associated with sales competitions and their variant designs and/or components. Assessment scales should be developed (for students, programs, and companies), and these scales should then be used to assess competition categories and the unique approaches within each category. Practical pedagogical recommendations for the inclusion of sales competitions within specific sales courses is also needed. For example, several universities conduct internal sales competitions within the confines of their personal selling classes. However, the approach requires extensive faculty time commitment and may not be sustainable.

Sales positions continue to rank in the *Top Ten Most Difficult Positions to Fill* (ManpowerGroup, 2016), thus signaling the critical need for university sales training. The ranking may help explain the growing popularity of university sales competitions. Though requiring significant resource commitments, competitions are becoming a programmatic hallmark of university sales education thanks to their ability to train students, showcase hosting organizations, and provide companies with effective, efficient recruiting forums. The current paper offered a candid description of the pros and cons associated with sales competitions and provided a generic competition development template. Additionally, via defining, describing, and categorizing sales competitions, the paper provided a baseline for future sales competition research. Sales researchers must now begin to examine specific competition categories and components in order to develop an understanding of the relative effectiveness and merits of varying approaches.

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APPENDIX

Sales Competition Development Template

Appendix: Sales Competition Development Template

a. Budgets

| Activity | Timeline | Notes |
|---|---|--|
| Total budget | 6 months prior to event or after sponsors are secured | Budgets are primarily funded by corporate partners, with additional funds provided by registration fees or miscellaneous college gifts. |
| Catering budget | 3-6 months prior to event | Most competitions provide a continental breakfast, lunch, snacks, dinner (sometimes) and associated beverages for participants and volunteers. |
| Facilities budget | 3-6 months prior to event | Universities may charge for use of particular facilities...or competitions may use off-site facilities. |
| Lodging/transportation reimbursement policy | 3-6 months prior to event | Few competitions provide transportation assistance, but several competitions provide lodging assistance. |
| Personnel & overtime budget | 3-6 months prior to event | Many competitions include evening or weekend hours. |
| Prize amounts | 3-6 months prior to event | Most competitions offer a monetary award to winning competitors. |
| Technology budget | 3-6 months prior to event | Additional cameras, computers, and associated gear often need to be rented or procured. |
| Volunteer & training budget | 3-6 months prior to event | Some competitions include "donations" to volunteering student organizations. Miscellaneous training funds (food for training sessions, etc.) may also be required. |
| Promotion & publicity budget | 3-6 months prior to event | Promotion and marketing may range from advertising to signage to web development/maintenance. |

b. Collateral materials

| Activity | Timeline | Notes |
|---|------------------------------------|--|
| Create signage | 2 weeks to 3 months prior to event | Directional and associated signage can be prepared with relatively little lead time. Banners and promotional signage highlighting corporate partners and competing universities often require longer lead times. |
| Produce folders and information packets | 2 weeks to 1 month prior to event | Folders and information packets are usually prepared for participants and corporate attendees. Contents often include name tags, schedules, role play information, maps, etc. |
| Prepare & disseminate resume packets | 3 to 4 weeks prior to event | Student competitor resumes are usually collected, collated, and distributed electronically or in hard copy books to corporate partners. |
| Procure and test technology | 1 week to 3 months prior to event | Competition technology (e.g. cameras, tripods, computers, projectors, etc.) may need to be purchased or rented and tested for the event. |
| Prepare event presentation slides | 2 to 3 weeks prior to event | Slides are often used during opening ceremonies, mixers, awards banquets, etc. |
| Prepare and produce all printed materials or required files | 2 weeks to 3 months prior to event | Examples include role plays, schedules, judging sheets, grading spreadsheets, position description sheets, volunteer sign-up & training sheets, buyer training sheets, award certificates/plaques, etc. |

c. Corporate partnerships

| Activity | Timeline | Notes |
|--------------------------------------|---|---|
| Secure corporate partners | Before start of AY | Most competitions have various levels of partnerships and reserve role play cases for top sponsors. |
| Modify or co-develop role-plays | 3 to 6 months prior to competition | Many sponsors have pre-developed role plays. These must often be modified to suit the competition. New partners often do not have role plays. In these cases, role plays are usually co-developed. |
| Obtain role play contact person(s) | 3 to 6 months prior to competition | A corporate person(s) should be designated to handle technical or miscellaneous role play questions. |
| Obtain and train role play buyers | 1 month prior to competition | Corporate salespersons, recruiters, or sales managers are usually used for the buyer role. Buyers must be trained so that difficulty level, objections, and buyer "personalities" are uniform and consistent with competition guidelines. |
| Obtain and train corporate judges | 1 month prior to competition | Secure the requisite number of corporate judges from sponsoring organizations, confirm attendance, and provide judging materials and guidelines. |
| Coordinate corporate mixer materials | 1 month prior to competition | If the competition includes a corporate mixer, logistics coordination is required for corporate displays, promotional materials, etc. |
| Communicate logistics information | 2 weeks to 1 month prior to competition | Provide attending companies with all pertinent logistics information (schedules, maps, accommodations, parking, etc.). |
| Provide student resumes | 2 weeks prior to competition | Provide sponsors with copies of competing students' resumes. |
| Provide event packets/folders | Event | Typical packets/folders include name tags, schedules, role plays, judging materials, resumes, etc. |
| Provide on-site assistance | Event | Utilize student ambassadors or program staff to provide on-site assistance, direction, and coordination for corporate buyers, judges, and attendees. |
| Communicate competition results | Post event | Provide sponsors with competition results, access to competition videos, etc. |

d. Facilities

| Activity | Timeline | Notes |
|------------------------------|---------------------------------------|---|
| Reserve requisite facilities | 3 months to 1 year prior to event | Typical facilities include mixer/ceremony space, role play rooms, judging rooms, administrative rooms, dining space, informal gathering space, etc. |
| Reserve miscellaneous items | 3 months prior to event | Examples include additional tables, chairs, desks, etc. |
| Design facility space | 1 week to 3 months prior to event | Meet with facility personnel to insure proper layouts, HVAC requirements, technology utilization, etc. |
| "Set-up" facilities | 1 week prior to event to day of event | Utilize volunteers or facility services to set up event. |
| "Tear-down" facilities | After event | Utilize volunteers or facility services to "tear down" event. |

e. Participant communications

| Activity | Timeline | Notes |
|---|----------------------------------|--|
| Notify interested universities | 6 month to 1 year prior to event | Apart from placement in USCA and SEF publications, competition administrators also frequently email and/or verbally announce (USCA meetings) upcoming competitions. The USCA and SEF university sales program lists can be used to develop an email list. |
| Manage email, social media, and web communications | Ongoing | Well-managed competitions often use a combination of web/social media sites and personal emails to notify participants of deadlines, answer questions, manage registration, and provide miscellaneous information. |
| Procure participant resumes | 3 to 4 weeks prior to event | Participant resumes are often provided to corporate partners. Procurement often requires multiple solicitations directed to both faculty coaches and participating students. |
| Finalize participants and role play schedules, etc. | 2 to 4 weeks prior to event | Last minute participant changes frequently occur. Actively managed email communications are necessary to ensure accurate final student participant lists and schedules. |
| Disseminate event standings, feedback, video instructions, etc. | After event | Most competitions provide official standings, judge feedback, competition videos, and other miscellaneous items after the event. The information is often emailed to faculty coaches and/or students. It may also be posted on a password-protected website. |
| Disseminate prize money | During or after event | Prize money may be awarded during or after event. If larger sums are involved, competitions usually mail checks after the event. |

f. Personnel

| Activity | Timeline | Notes |
|---|------------------------------------|--|
| Identify required personnel | 6 months to 1 year prior to event | Competitions utilize full time sales program administrators and staff members, along with student interns, and volunteers. Competitions may also receive additional support from general college staff (e.g. Dean's Office, departmental offices, etc.) |
| Develop job descriptions and/or task lists for personnel/functional needs | 6 months to 1 year prior to event | Typical personnel needs include overall event management, staff support, volunteer support (student ambassadors, role play and judge room assistants, etc.), technical support, buyers, corporate judges, master of ceremonies, photographers/videographers, etc. |
| Procure required staff and volunteers | 1 month to 6 months prior to event | More volunteers than necessary should be solicited to ensure the requisite number of volunteers at the final event. Many competitions use pre-existing student organizations and thereby benefit from pre-established relationships and communication standards. Release for non-program staff should also be secured. |
| Train staff and volunteers | 1 month to 2 weeks prior to event | Specific volunteer roles should be developed. Training should be specifically designed and provided for each role. |
| Provide key staff with operations manual | 6 months to 1 year prior to event | Operations manual often include multi-worksheet spreadsheets with individual tabs for overall tasks, participating universities, corporate partners, lodging & transportation, volunteers, technology, judging, schedules, etc. |
| Thank personnel/volunteers | After event | Some competitions host thank you dinners for staff and volunteers and/or provide monetary donations to volunteering organizations. |

g. Promotion & Publicity

| Activity | Timeline | Notes |
|---|--|--|
| Notify USCA and SEF of competition dates | 6 month to 1 year prior to event | Both the University Sales Center Alliance and Sales Education Foundation publish lists of university sales competitions. These lists are used by competing universities and by corporate recruiters. |
| Notify campus PR and Development Offices | 3 to 6 months prior to event | Campus PR and/or Development office will publicize competitions and also often provide photographers or video assistance for promotional or development purposes. |
| Issue press releases | 3 weeks prior to event and after event | Campus PR departments often provide assistance. Publicity is usually generated before and after the event. |
| Secure photographers and/or videographers | 1 month to 6 months prior to event | Many campus departments provide free/low-cost professional or student photographic and videography services. |
| Advertise competition | 6 month to 1 year prior to event | The Sales Education Foundation publishes a yearly magazine highlighting top university sales programs. The magazine accepts competition advertising. Competitions can also be verbally advertised at annual USCA meetings. |
| Create competition website and/or social media site | 6 month to 1 year prior to event | Target audiences include participating universities and recruiting companies. Websites may include everything from registration material to role plays to videos to schedules to transportation and logistics information. |

h. Travel & Lodging

| Activity | Timeline | Notes |
|--|-----------------------------------|--|
| Reserve hotel rooms or secure alternate accommodations | 6 months to 1 year prior to event | Most large, external competitions offer complimentary lodging. Faculty coaches are provided a private room, and competing students usually share rooms (two students per room). Some competitions handle reservations and room assignments, while others require faculty coaches to make arrangements. |
| Determine transportation policy and make transportation arrangements | 1 to 6 months prior to event | Most competitions do not offer complimentary travel assistance. However, some competitions offer complimentary vans from airports to hotel and/or competition venues. |
| Provide competition welcome packets | 2 days prior to event | Many competitions provide welcome packets that include pertinent information and name tags. These packets are often dropped off at the hotel for dissemination during check-in. |