

GEN-Y STUDENT DISPOSITION TOWARD SALES AS A CAREER: TWO STUDIES

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Abstract

Gen-Y college students continue to have a negative disposition toward sales as a career, in addition to a negative attitude toward sales people. This trend has continued for almost 50 years and has been observed in countries outside of the United States. Sales career preferences were generally negative in studies that encompassed students from the United States, New Zealand, Philippines, and Poland. Yet, sales jobs go unfilled as companies have difficulty in filling open positions in a down economy. While less than 50% of college graduates will have a job offer when graduating, 90% of graduates from collegiate sales programs will have at least one offer. Furthermore, it is estimated that 60% of business school graduates and 80% of marketing graduates will start their career in sales. The first study was conducted to examine the disposition of business students enrolled in a Principles of Marketing course. The course is required for all business majors and minors in addition to several non-business minors. All students completed the same survey, but approximately one-third were given additional information about sales careers prior to completing the survey. The second study examined the attitudes of students currently enrolled in a sales course.

Studies have tested for differences in various student populations (such as gender, geography, ethnicity, education), but the overall perception that sales is not a desirable career still exists. The disposition of students toward a sales career has been studied using many attributes. Several researchers determined students' interest in a sales career was influenced by their perception that sales had low social prestige. Mason (1965) observed that students did not consider a sales career because sales suffered from low occupational prestige. Other studies revealed similar attitudes among students. According to Hayes (1969, 1973) personality needs affect occupational choice and perceptions of occupations can change after students have begun their career. Compared to other white collar occupations, sales lacked both formalized curriculum and educational requirements.

Occupational prestige was linked to specific job titles and to the presence (or absence) of specific behavioral characteristics such as truthfulness, competence, and altruism (Adkins & Swan, 1981-82; Swan & Adkins, 1980-81). Research by Swenson, Swinyard, Langrehr and

Smith (1993) showed that preference for a sales career is a different behavioral response than perceptions of selling as a career. They noted a decline in students' preferences for a sales career occurred from 1980 to 1990. They also found that financial benefits and decision-making power influenced preference for a sales career. Differences in attitude between African-American and Caucasian students also showed that African American students consider sales to be a low prestige career (DeVecchio & Honeycutt, 2000; DeVecchio & Honeycutt, 2002; Kavas, 2003).

Collegiate sales programs have been cited as a means of improving the image of the sale's professional (Castleberry, 1990). In addition to academic certification programs (Sales Education Foundation, 2011; University Sales Center Alliance), professional certification programs have been offered as a means of encouraging professionalism and continuing education (Honeycutt, Attia, & D'Auria, 1996). Other research has shown that the perception of sales as a profession may be dependent upon six criteria. These include a base body of knowledge as provided by university sales programs, autonomy and public confidence evidenced by certification programs, service to society, organizational culture, an ethical code, and the exclusivity of sales skills (Hawes, Rich, & Widmier, 2004).

Dubinsky (1981) suggests that students' negative perceptions might be based on several factors including: stereotypes of sales people in the mass media; negative experiences with salespeople; low prestige and status; and inadequate communication of sales job characteristics by recruiters. In an earlier study he found that a majority of students in introductory and advanced marketing classes had a favorable image of a sales job (Dubinsky, 1980).

The ability of the corporate recruiter to influence student perceptions was the subject of several studies (Weilbacker & Merritt, 1992; Wiles & Spiro, 2004; Wotruba, Simpson, & Reed-Draznik, 1989). However, depending on the recruiter to create a positive spin on a sales job will only occur if the student is willing to interview for a sales position.

How both traditional and new media portray the sales job appears to impact perceptions of students (Waldeck, Pullins, & Houlette, 2010). Their study opens a vast new arena of research for the emergence and credibility of new media sources.

Other studies have examined gender differences in perceptions of personal selling. Muehling and Weeks (1988) found mixed results for male and female attitudes toward sales, but overall,

women viewed personal selling more favorably. However, Cook and Hartman (1986) found female students were less likely to pursue sales than male students.

Based on the Marketing Lens Model developed by Bristow (1998), students who have completed a sales course were more likely to have a favorable view of a sales career (Bristow, Amyx, & Slack, 2006; Bristow, Gulati, Amyx, and Slack, 2006; Kimball, 1993). The course materials and teaching methods used in sales courses also affected students' perception (Deeter-Schmelz & Kennedy, 2011; Stevenson & Paksoy, 1983). Participative learning style classes seemed to improve students' attitudes when compared to lecture based classes (Lagace & Longfellow, 1989). Students who majored in marketing were more likely to have a positive perception of sales jobs in another study (Sojka, Gupta, & Hartman, 2000).

Overall, the research literature consistently shows that, with a few exceptions, students have a predominately negative attitude towards professional selling as a career. In a world of stagnant job growth, sales positions go unfilled. Yet, for over 50 years, students' perceptions remain predominately unchanged unless they have taken a sales course.

While the first study was inconclusive across many of the variables, it is likely that the limited sample size left many of the hypotheses with an inadequate data base even though the overall size met the minimum standards. The increased size of the second study gave statistical significance to many of the hypotheses. The second study demographic results were different from many earlier studies cited regarding age, gender and race. Further research from additional universities covering other regions in the United States and internationally are needed.

The most significant result appears to be that students in sales courses have a more positive disposition toward sales as a career. It may seem intuitive that students taking a sales class would be more inclined to look at a career in sales. However, sales courses at the university where the study took place are currently marketing electives and do not require a special application for admission. Therefore, the sales course contains a mix of students who are actively looking at sales positions after graduation, students who received encouragement from academic advisors to register for the sales course, and students who chose the course because it fit in their schedule and counts as a marketing elective. Gen-Y students appear to have a more positive attitude toward registering for a sales course. Enrollment in the personal selling course has doubled in the last year. Clearly further research is needed to determine pre and post course attitudes of the sales students. If completion of the sales course is the critical factor

in creating a more positive attitude toward a sales career, and if a substantial number of graduates take sales positions upon graduation, then changing the sales course from an elective to a required core course should be considered.

References available upon request