

GEN-Y STUDENT DISPOSITION TOWARD SALES AS A CAREER

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Abstract

This study of Principles of Marketing students determined that even though Gen-Y students may have different motivations from previous generations, their attitude toward sales jobs remain unchanged from studies of earlier generations. An experimental condition that gave positive information on sales careers was added to some surveys, with no effect noted. Female students and younger students exhibited more positive attitude toward sales. Other hypotheses that were unconfirmed included differences in disposition towards a sales career due to student's majors, and differences in disposition towards a sales career between student ethnic groups.

Introduction

College students continue to have negative attitudes toward sales as a career. This trend has continued for almost 50 years and is not limited to students in the United States. Sales career preferences were generally negative in a study that encompassed students from the United States, New Zealand, and the Philippines. While the job market for sales people grows each year, companies experience increased difficulty in filling open sales positions. Less than 50% of college graduates will have a job offer when graduating. Yet, 90% of graduates from collegiate sales programs will have at least one offer. Furthermore, it is estimated that 70% of business school graduates will work in sales. 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.

Method

This 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. Data were collected from 138 undergraduate students at a large college in the west. Instructors teaching these classes were asked to give their students a short survey (taking 10-15 minutes to complete) sometime during their classes early in the semester. The survey was given at the beginning of the semester to

assure minimal exposure to marketing principles that had the potential to bias them in any way towards the variables included in the survey. The items on the survey included respondent demographics and a multiple-item measure to assess respondent disposition towards a sales career. Demographics assessed in this study are age, gender, major, and ethnicity. Student respondents ranged from 20 to 47 years old. There were 80 males and 58 females in the sample, with an average age of 25.54. Majors represented in the sample are Marketing, Management, Finance, Accounting, Economics, Computer Information Systems (CIS), and Non-business. The ethnic groups represented in the sample are White/Caucasian, Hispanic descent, Asian descent, African/Black descent, Native American, and Middle Eastern descent.

Results and Discussion

It is likely that the ongoing efforts of many organizations toward a more customer-oriented sales approach are starting to have a favorable impact on people's attitudes toward sales, and thus toward a possible career in sales. Older students are more likely to have been exposed to more negative information about unethical salespeople or salespeople who are compensated only by commission giving these salespeople little incentive to develop long-term relationships with customers. Younger students are also likely to still be willing to consider more future job options because they have less career experience.

The proportion of women in sales, though increasing at a slower speed than for other careers, is increasing. Women are likely to be aware of the fact that they can be just as effective as their male counterparts in the sales profession.

The finding that marketing students are actually less positive towards the ideas of a sales career is surprising. One factor contributing to this finding may be that marketing students have paid more attention to possible careers in marketing and they realize that personal selling is not the only option. Because of the negativity still swirling around sales as a career, they may view this option as less positive than other possible careers in marketing.

One of the most interesting results of this study is the fact that the experimental manipulation had little effect on student's dispositions toward a sales career. It appears that the negativity haunting the sales profession is so deeply-rooted, that a short reading about the possible benefits of a sales career is ineffective. It makes sense that after a lifetime of hearing negative things about salespeople and the profession, even younger students will not be significantly impacted by a few facts. It is possible that a stronger experimental manipulation, such as a sampling a sales class, meeting with current sales students, or meeting with industry executives may have a more significant impact.

In the research literature, the only consistent finding over time was the positive influence that attending a sales course had on students' perceptions. Age, gender, ethnicity, income, professionalism, and prestige all had minor influences in various research studies. Even marketing majors were affected by the negative factors.

If sales courses change students' perceptions, then the responsibility to get students into a sales class rests with academic advisors, within the school and the marketing department. Clearly, more research is needed in order to determine how students can be positively influenced to consider sales courses.