

THE PERSONAL SELLING COURSE: AN EXPERIENTIAL APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

This paper details the applied or "experiential" approach to teaching the personal selling course. The approach encourages student participation and involvement starting with the syllabus and carries through into the class format and the written and verbal assignments. It presents a ten-step "hands-on" selling project that parallels what students can expect in a sales career.

INTRODUCTION

Professors of personal selling must contend with instruction at both the cognitive and behavioral levels. The cognitive, of course, deals with knowledge and the behavioral deals with personal experiences. Both approaches are relevant to sales but may not necessarily be present, i.e., a salesperson can be very knowledgeable but encounter limited success because he/she could not apply the knowledge during the sales interview. (Calcich and Weilbaker 1992).

Particularly during this period of budget constraints and demand for increased faculty productivity, it would be easier to schedule larger sections of classes and to more efficiently present the theories (cognitive approach) of selling to larger groups of students via a series of lectures throughout the term. We, however, persistently refuse that route and choose to follow the "road less traveled," i.e. the application (behavioral approach) of the theory. This does necessitate hearing the complaints of students that "the workload is excessive and unreasonable." We, however, find that the time required to evaluate the written assignments and in providing constructive

feedback for improving their performance is quite effective.

Business is seeking graduates who possess more than an awareness of the techniques of selling--that they, in addition, have an ability to apply their knowledge. Companies are interested in sales training primarily to increase sales, productivity, and profits; those of us in academia have the responsibility to provide learning that develops job-related attitudes, knowledge, and skills that result in improved performance (Futrell et al. 1984). It is our experience that companies favor students (and the campuses of those students) that are better able to step into a productive role more quickly. Part of the companies' positive response to these students is based upon their skill level but, to a degree, it is also partially due to the selection process, i.e., the successful students pursue, with a commitment, a career in selling.

The experiential approach has been shown to enhance the effectiveness of the educational experience by increasing the students' involvement in the learning process (Mortimer et al. 1984) and Wynd (1989) states that it provides excitement, practical application, and enhanced retention. Mortimer et al. (1984) present two primary principles which are prerequisites to educational excellence: (1) the amount of student learning and personal development associated with any educational program is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement in the program, and (2) the effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase student involvement in learning. Goretsky (1984) portrays the continuousness of the experiential

approach by stating that it not only gives the student an entry into the business world but that it can provide a relevant learning experience useful to students as they progress through their careers.

The experiential approach is not a new methodology in marketing education (Czepiec 1983, Henke 1985, de los Santos and Jenson 1985, Conant and Mokwa 1967, Gaidis and Andrew 1990, Goretsky 1984) in a variety of courses including research, advertising, international marketing, distribution, consumer behavior, sales, and marketing information systems.

It is for these reasons that we continue our commitment to smaller sections and an experiential approach. Thus, we share our experiences (much of it gained by painful, ineffective, and inefficient trials) in striving to develop a course that would meet these needs. It is not our intent to even suggest that this is the only approach, the best approach, nor even the approach that will work for you. It is hoped, however, that there may be an idea or two that you may find contributing.

THE SYLLABUS

Similar to planning a trip, we find it advantageous to plan the course with significant detail. This prompts our adherence and self discipline in achieving the scheduled topics and assignments in what hopefully appears to be an organized manner. It also conveys a similar message to the students as well by providing a more complete overview of the course and an indication of expectations. Our experience reveals that this is an important step in establishing a desirable environment for meaningful learning.

Historically, students will purposely skip the first class period perceiving it a "a redundant explanation of the syllabus" or, if in attendance, they quickly become bored and, again, perceive the syllabus as "unimportant." To offset this attitude, we merely distribute the syllabus and make an immediate assignment: Study the syllabus and text and prepare a written report which is due the next (all assignments are due at the beginning of class) class session. The assignment requires them to 1) critique the syllabus and text (yes, you generally need to teach

how that differs from the usual "summary"), 2) present two "sincere and relevant questions that they do want answered, and 3) a brief introduction of themselves. By not covering such elementary material in class it sets the tone for the semester--it is their responsibility to study ahead of time and to come to class prepared and ready for meaningful participation. Among other things, we find that students gain a better understanding and appreciation of the course--including the course objectives. We then follow through by prefacing each assignment and/or "experiential" exercise with specific objectives (or purpose) and how it relates to the course. It is imperative that you follow through by responding to the questions that they have presented.

Part of the first class period is used for self introductions which includes information such as hometown, major, graduation date, career goal(s), work experience, and personal interests. While this may sound rather trivial at first, this is a significant step in establishing trust and confidence among students. It reduces the fear and reservations that students generally bring into most classes. This also has been helpful in developing a friendly bases which enhances role-playing exercises throughout the term.

THE CLASS FORMAT

The tone of the class as being experiential is established during the very first meeting as noted earlier. This is continued with a focus upon student participation, supplemental learning opportunities, and with role playing. Participation is enhanced with alternating applications of written and verbal quizzes which cover the assigned topic for that class period. By forcing the students to be better prepared, there is opportunity to expand their involvement with the use of discussion questions and/or assigned end-of-chapter questions which are prepared in advance and occasionally clarified in class. Out-of-class exercises are also utilized. For example, to apply their newly acquired knowledge on the topic of "Psychology of Selling" they are required to complete a "Personality Style Assessment" of themselves and of two other class members. Another exercise associated with "Prospecting" requires them to "Explore The Sales World" which includes their interviewing salespeople regarding prospecting methods and precall planning and a

buyer interview regarding the strengths and weaknesses of salespeople. Immediately upon the completion of a class period, students are evaluated for what they say and for what they don't say based upon a scale of 0-4. Emphasis is placed upon quality. There are two keys to the success of this method: One, you must complete the evaluation immediately after class and, two, you must learn the identity of students early. To enhance this latter challenge, we use a seating arrangement which also permits completion of an attendance check in less than a minute.

Regardless of the text selected for the course, we have found it necessary to supplement topics that are not included in the text and/or are not adequately covered. The current text is quite encompassing; yet, we find it desirable to supplement, e.g., "Neurolinguistic Programming" is added to the study of "Communication and Persuasion." Application exercises are utilized following such presentations. We have found the use of "short" videos to be helpful for the students. One, it is application of "a picture is worth a thousand words" and secondly it seems to add a benchmark or reference for them to start their own roleplaying more easily.

The students are introduced to roleplaying early in the term. With the use of videos and end-of-chapter cases which often show the dialogue between buyer and seller, students are able to ease into roleplaying of their own. The introduction is further eased by taking a mini approach, i.e., they develop the approach to a sales interview, a series of need-development questions (often using the SPIN approach), overcoming an objection, using a trial dose, etc. This mild but effective introduction of roleplaying sets the stage for the "meat" of the course - the semester project which develops the sales interview.

THE SALES PROJECT

This assignment provides the students an opportunity to apply all of the principles of personal selling and persuasive communications studied throughout the entire semester. Each class member is required to complete each of the ten steps with the sales interview being near the end. The student role plays the seller and the instructor role plays the buyer. The interview is

approximately 15 minutes in length and takes place in the instructor's office.

The scenario is based upon an outside sale such as a business-to-business sale. The students are encouraged to consider the sale of services (as services equal nearly three-fourths of U.S. GDP). They are encouraged to practice role playing in advance with other class members which also includes video taping. The classroom has hours reserved for use as a sales lab. The sales project requires the satisfactory completion of the following steps.

- Step 1. Company (Service or Goods) Selection, Application Letter, and Resume (20 points)
- Step 2. Describe the Scenario (10 points)
- Step 3. The Company Report (20 points)
- Step 4. FAB Development (10 points)
- Step 5. The Prospecting Letter (20 points)
- Step 6. The Competitive Update (20 points)
- Step 7. The Telephone Call. (10 points)
- Step 8. Video Tape and Critique. (20 points)
- Step 9. The Sales Interview. (100 points)
- Step 10. The Follow-up. (20 points)

CONCLUSION

The key to this "experiential approach" lies in the semester sales project. It is very realistic and very challenging but also very rewarding. While students may grumble a bit as they stumble through the learning, they usually reveal a more mature attitude and appreciation after completion of the course. Students often reflect that it was one of the most valuable and rewarding classes in their entire college program. They recommend it highly; the multiple sections are usually filled early and often include students from other majors such as finance, real estate, computer information systems, horticulture, agriculture, etc.

While it may be unworkable or even undesirable

for you to attempt using this experiential approach in its entirety, there may be components or ideas that you will find satisfactory and/or helpful as you continuously modify and update your present course. That is, in fact, how we have built success into this course--a little at a time with much trial and error. We have found as the quote states:

"It is a great mistake to implant the idea that learning can be steadily exciting, or that excitement is a good frame of mind for acquiring knowledge and overcoming difficulties. Developing a genuine interest in a subject comes only after some drudgery, and only when the learner gets to the point of seeing how it hangs together - its order and continuity, not its unrelated peaks of excitement" (Barzun 1987).

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