

THE 'VAGUELY' RIGHT WAY TO TEACH A PERSONAL SELLING COURSE

Kirby O. Jones, California State University, Sacramento, Sacramento, CA 95819-6088
Craig A. Kelley, California State University, Sacramento, Department of Management,
Sacramento, CA 95819-6088; (916) 278-7199

ABSTRACT

The personal selling course is an important part of the marketing curriculum. Furthermore, there are varied approaches to teaching the course. The purpose of this paper is to outline the process one instructor used to teach a personal selling course.

INTRODUCTION

The personal selling course provides students with an opportunity to gain an in-depth understanding of the promotional component of the marketing mix. Often positioned as skills course, it provides students with a working knowledge of the sales function and an ability to create and execute sales presentations. The personal selling course serves as an opportunity to explore an entry-level sales position for new marketing graduates (Bragg 1988; Thrasher and McNabb 1984) and it has been predicted that more business programs will add sales courses over the next decade (Heckman 1998).

In the fall of 1996 an immensely popular instructor of a personal selling course at the author's school passed away unexpectedly. His passing left the staffing of this important course up-in-the-air. One of the authors reluctantly volunteered to take on the assignment. Over time, however, the instructor embraced the opportunity to teach this extremely valuable course. The purpose of this paper is to outline the process used by the author/instructor to develop and teach a course in personal selling. The paper discusses how the course was modified over time. A major thrust of the paper is on the objectives, content, materials and requirements of the course.

INITIAL COURSE DESIGN

The first step the instructor took to design the personal selling course was to review how the deceased instructor had structured the course. This was not as easy a task since the previous instructor did not believe in distributing a printed syllabus. However, one of the main requirements of the course was that students keep a notebook in which they wrote verbatim everything that went on

in the class. Serendipity struck when one of the better student's notebooks was found when the deceased instructor's office was cleaned out.

Next, the instructor consulted the literature on teaching personal selling. Parker, Pettijohn and Luke (1996) reported sales representatives and sales professors differed somewhat in their view of what should be covered in a personal selling course. Sales professors ranked in descending order of importance the topics; presentation, objections, prospecting, pre-approach, closing, communication, relationship selling and follow-up. Sales representatives also ranked presentation first. However, they then ranked in descending order of importance communication, follow-up, time management, closing, prospecting, negotiating, and ethics. Both groups viewed role playing as the most important method that should be used to teach personal selling skills. Yet the two groups differed in their view of the importance of lecturing and the use of guest speakers. Sales professors rated lecturing nearly as important as role playing, whereas sales representatives ranked lecturing fifth behind role playing, guest speakers, projects and cases. Sales professors ranked guest speakers fourth behind role-playing, lecture and projects.

Using the information discussed above the instructor structured the course in the following way. Requirements included short papers and quizzes, a personal sales notebook, a videotaped sales presentation and an evaluation of six student presentations. The course utilized role playing exercises, lecture, and guest speakers.

COURSE MODIFICATIONS

Almost from the beginning the instructor started to modify the course. These modifications were driven by changes going on in industry. For example, in *Rethinking the Sales Force*, Rackham and De Vincentis (1999) argue the very nature of selling is undergoing a radical change. Their research suggests the salesforce of the future will have to create value for its customers, not just communicate value. If they are correct, professors teaching the personal selling course will need to adapt their pedagogues to reflect the new reality of

selling. More recently, the instructor decided to conduct a content analysis of the syllabi distributed at the Nineteenth American Marketing Association Faculty Consortium on Professional Selling and Sales Management (1999) to find out what other instructors are doing in the course.

Methodology

Nineteen personal selling course syllabi served as the sample for this study. Each syllabus was content analyzed (Weber 1985). The major components identified in the syllabi were course objectives, lecture topics and course requirements. Each of these components was broken into specific elements.

Course Objectives

Seventeen of the syllabi had stated course objectives. Most common among the stated objectives was an understanding of personal selling (n=14). The ability to apply those principles through skill building exercises was also a frequently cited objective (n=12). Other common objectives included understanding the role of personal selling in the marketing mix (n=8), enhancement of communication skills (n=6), knowledge of career opportunities in sales (n=6), understanding the role of sales management (n=2) and application of communication skills to non-selling situations (n=3).

Lecture Topics

Fifteen syllabi explicitly listed lecture topics. Like the course objectives, lecture topics most frequently covered were basic personal selling principles; prospecting and planning the sales call (n=11), elements of the sales presentation (n=12), trial closing and objection handling (n=9), negotiation (n=5) and closing and follow-up (n=11). Thirteen syllabi also included lectures on sales technique (SPIN selling, adaptive selling, relationship building, partnering, etc.). Communication principles (n=11) and buyer behavior (n=8) were frequently cited as lecture topics, as were ethical and legal issues (n=10), time and territory management (n=7), and sales careers (n=9). Among the less frequently listed lecture topics were increasing presentation effectiveness and product demonstration (n=4), selling to resellers (n=3), gathering product information (n=2) review and debriefing (n=2) and sales management functions (n=2). Lecture topics unique to individual syllabi included sales etiquette, selling yourself, handling difficult customers and decision-making models. Seven courses utilized guest speakers and five offered class web sites.

Course Requirements

Most of the course syllabi stated the requirement of active student involvement in the learning process. Eighteen syllabi indicated students were required to prepare and perform a sales presentation. Other student requirements included regular class attendance and discussion participation (n=15), in-class role playing exercise participation (n=12), sales script development (n=8) and peer evaluation reports (n=8). Students were generally required to take exams (n=14) and quizzes (n=7) and turn in written assignments (n=11). Other student activities included watching videos (n=4), doing research (n=3), writing book reports (n=2), creating resumes (n=2), utilizing computer simulations (n=2) and interacting with sales professionals (n=2).

ASSESSMENT

In today's university environment, a major consideration of any teaching selling course is assessment. Martin, Kimball and Bush (1998) provided a foundation for writing course objectives and assessment outcome measures or the personal selling course. Their study uses the SOCO Scale to measure whether students had achieved a customer orientation. Alternatively, the instructor uses Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives as the assessment tool (see Table 1).

DISCUSSION

The development and improvement of any course never really stops. If the trends identified by Rackham and De Vincentis (1999) continue into the future, the personal selling course will have to move away from merely teaching the process of selling and teach how to create value in varied selling situations. Yet the teaching of value was conspicuously absent from the syllabi examined in this study.

The impact of new technologies on the sales process (e.g., the Internet) is another topic that will require more coverage in the future. Sales students may come to think that the Internet is the end-all for getting every job done. However, just as a hammer or screwdriver is not always the right tool for every job, instructors of the personal selling course need to spend greater amounts of time covering when and where emerging technologies have the most effective and efficient use.

TABLE 1
BLOOM'S TAXONOMY, LEARNING OBJECTIVES AND
TEACHING METHOD

Bloom's Taxonomy	Course Learning Objective	Teaching Method
Evaluation - ability to create standards to judge a measure	-Differentiate between effective and ineffective sales presentations	-Evaluation of other students' presentation
Synthesis - moving beyond existing knowledge and providing new insights	-Create innovative solutions to real world selling situations	-Discussion of selling scenarios -Guest speakers
Analysis - solving problems by understanding relationships among elements of a model	-Demonstrate the ability to negotiate in a sale -Conduct a sales account analysis -Identify the elements of an effective sales producing web page	-Negotiation exercises, sales account analysis, techniques for using the Internet to facilitate transactional sales.
Application - discovery of association among concepts	-Develop listening skills -Demonstrate basic elements of the sales process	-Role play, script and videotape a sales presentation, prepare a sales notebook
Comprehension - transformation of data into different symbols	-Understand the selling of benefits with FAB -Uncover objections with trial close	-Short papers and class exercises
Basic Knowledge - retention of facts and definitions	-Know the career path in sales and sales management -learn the vocabulary of professional selling	-Sales notebook, quizzes, guest speakers

CONCLUSION

Personal selling is an important component of the marketing mix. In addition, most students start their professional careers through an entry-level sales position. The intent of this paper was to present how one instructor approached the teaching of this important course.

REFERENCES

Bloom, B., et. al (ed). Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: Handbook I, Cognitive Domain. David McKay, New York, 1956.

Bragg, Arthur (1988), "Personal Selling Goes to College," Sales and Marketing Management, 140 (March), 35-37.

Heckman, James (1998), "Internet, Sales Force to Affect Higher Ed," Marketing News, (December 7), 9.

Martin, Gregory S., Bob Kimball and Ronald F. Bush (1998), "Evaluating the Success of Outcomes-Based Education at the course Level: A Unique Application of the SOCO Scale in "Professional Selling" Course," Marketing Education Review, 8 (Summer) 9-18.

Parker, R. Stephen, Charles E. Pettijohn and Robert H. Luke, (1996), "Sales Representatives and Sales Professors: A Comparative Analysis of Sales Training Perceptions, Topics and Pedagogy," Marketing Education Review, 6 (Fall), 41-50.

Rackham Neil and John De Vincentis, (1999), Rethinking the Sales Force: Redefining Selling to

Create Value and Capture Customer Value,
McGraw-Hill, New York.

Thrasher, Steven D. and David E. McNabb, (1984),
"Undergraduate Education for Careers in Sales,"
1984 Western Marketing Educators Association
Conference Proceedings, edited by Bruce J. Walker
and David L. Kurtz, 28-31.

Weber, Robert P. (1985), Basic Content Analysis,
Beverly Hills, CA, Sage Publications.