

TEACHING WRITTEN COMMUNICATION SKILLS IN PROFESSIONAL SELLING: "THE COVER LETTER"

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ABSTRACT

The selling process steps have been an integral part of professional selling courses and textbooks for years. Although slight changes have been made in their wording and format, most textbooks are consistent in the recommended process for an effective sales interaction. In an effort to combine teaching the selling process with the increased demand from employers and accrediting institutions to improve written communication skills, this paper introduces the cover (sales) letter as an assignment for marketing instructors. This cover letter assignment has been very well received by students and employers, highlighting how universities can engage students in an active learning environment, teaching both theory and specific skills.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH

A common, recurring complaint among corporate executives is that college educated employees cannot write effectively and succinctly. These employees are too verbose, have not mastered basic English grammar, and cannot write with any persuasive ability. Certainly the cover letters which students often send with their resumes, all too often, lack effectiveness. Like graduates from other professional schools, business graduates need both theoretical training and practical skill development to become market-ready professionals (Cheit 1985; Floyd and Gordon 1998; Grayson 1977; McKenna, Cotton, and Van Auken 1997; Peltier, Schibrowsky, and Kleimenhagen 1997; Ruyter and Crask 1994; Sterngold and Hurlbert 1998; Walle 1991). An AACSB (The International Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business) survey claims that two-thirds of business employers feel that students need more work in the area of management, including communication skills (Wright, Bitner, and Zeithaml 1994). A survey of marketing educators found that the development of oral and written communication skills is essential to the future success of students (Smart, Kelly, and Conant 1999). What is needed is a classroom forum where students are encouraged to be active participants in the learning process. Many students begin their

careers in marketing through sales, and these skills need to be appropriately developed. Persuasive communication skills are an important factor in students' early career success (Arora and Stoner 1992).

PURPOSE

The purpose of this article was to describe a process, the cover (sales) letter, for developing students' written communication skills, while they simultaneously learn accepted professional selling theory. In this article, the sales process was transformed into a written system for a cover letter that has not only immediate value, but also future value and applicability to any task, which requires a persuasive written document. Students and professionals entering many different fields will be able to use the system to effectively communicate, either within their organizations or externally.

IMPLICATIONS

The implications of learning to write a persuasive document in any field are self-evident. Writing coherently and succinctly are critical skills for today's employees who must conduct business in a global marketplace.

RECOMMENDATIONS

One approach that has merit is adapting writing components currently used in the various classes and having the assignments be consecutive, building on the initial writing experience. The assignment could begin in Principles of Marketing, move on to Professional Selling and Sales Management, and could include assignments in Marketing Management or other elective classes. A final writing component could be included in the exit examination universities sometimes require.

References Available on Request