

A COMPREHENSIVE VIEW – WHAT CAN WE DO TO PREPARE OUR STUDENTS FOR SALES CAREERS

Chris Kondo and Allen Broyles, California State University, Fullerton

Scott Sherwood, Metropolitan State University of Denver

Casey Donoho and Tim Heinze, California State University, Chico

According to the University Sales Center Alliance, approximately 75% of undergraduate marketing majors and 50% of business students accept sales positions upon graduation. Business schools vary in their approach to preparing their students for sales careers. This paper reports on activities at three universities. We believe it will be of interest and possible utility to marketing departments seeking to start or improve their sales education initiatives.

California State University, Chico, has developed a Sales Certification program within the Marketing Major. The program consists of two fundamental marketing classes, Principles of Marketing and Consumer Behavior, and four sales classes: Personal Selling, Sales Management, Advanced Selling, and an elective (which can include a sales internship). Chico State developed the program based on feedback from corporate employers who pointed out the need for more rigorous sales training. Prospective employers also give the curriculum credibility as guest speakers in the sales classes.

Chico State students have found that they are better prepared for entry-level sales positions and can go down the sales “learning curve” more quickly. Marketing professors enjoy teaching courses that are extremely “useful” for students and have found opportunities for sales based research.

In reflecting on the development of their program, Chico State recommends that a sales program be part of the marketing department’s and business school’s strategic plans. They recommend the program fit into the marketing major/option so students, with good planning, can complete certification with a minimum of extra units. Also, Chico State pointed out that an advisory board, participating employers, and successful alumni give credibility to the sales program.

California State University, Chico, also hosts the Western States Collegiate Sales Competition, a one-day event during which students compete in individual role-plays in the morning

and in team selling role-plays during the afternoon. Corporate recruiters act as buyers and judge the competition. Top student and team performers are awarded money and plaques at an evening awards banquet. During the course of the day, companies also informally meet with student participants for interviews or resume reviews. The hosting university is responsible for running the contest and obtaining corporate sponsor funding.

The competition provides a forum in which students, faculty, and interested companies can network. Corporations especially appreciate the opportunity to view potential recruits in real-life sales scenarios. The competition also increases the visibility of Chico State's professional sales program.

Recently, Chico State has added an intra-school one-day competition for students enrolled in the personal selling class. Sponsors were equally enthusiastic about participating in this competition.

Sales students benefit from real-life training and a better understanding of sales careers. In fact, many students receive job offers after their sales competition performance. Marketing faculty report that they benefit from enhanced interactions with students and corporations.

In planning to host a sales competition, Chico State suggests focusing on two areas: corporate sponsorship – be sure to recruit and develop corporate sponsors early in the process; and student involvement – although student teams only include 4 to 6 individuals, endeavor to include as many ancillary students as possible. If it helps their resumes, students like to be involved, and companies enjoying seeing a large number of competent, professional student volunteers.

The Metropolitan State College of Denver has developed an experiential course in which students gain actual sales experience. Metro State has two sales courses (Personal Selling and Sport Sales) where students are tasked with a sales quota as part of the curriculum. While many schools sell something (water bottles, shirts, continuing education courses, sponsorships, fundraising, etc.), their unique proximity to several sport facilities enables them to sell tickets to a variety of professional sporting events. The Personal Selling course typically has two separate events that comprise 20% of the total grade (equal to the midterm or final). The Sport Sales class sells a two game mini-plan that equates to 20% of their grade.

Corporate recruiters are impressed that students are involved in a real sales activity as part of the course. Students also gain experience in developing promotional materials. Top sellers receive additional recognition at the event, free tickets, shadowing and networking opportunities, connections for internships, and resume bullets.

The program helps fund marketing department activities. The sports teams offer the College deeply discounted prices for less desirable opponents on less desirable dates. The program

generates approximately \$5 to \$10 for every ticket sold. Classes have sold from 200 to 1000 tickets. When considering a similar program, Metropolitan State College recommends seeking out a true untapped needs. Professional teams may have unsold seats; school events may provide selling venues.

Cal State Fullerton developed The Sales Leadership Center, which offers “workshop style” sales classes, scholarships, panel discussions/networking opportunities, and sales competition opportunities. The Center is presented to all students as they take the required core course, Principles of Marketing.

In an effort to offset misperceptions about sales careers, the panel discussions are designed to provide students with a first-hand view of what the sales function actually entails. The classes have been designed to complement academic courses and offer a strong emphasis on role-plays and experiential learning. They also provide the opportunity to offer a “short course” on a relevant but perhaps limited sales topic.

Students enjoy networking with hiring companies, learning about the sales profession, and building relationships with sales and marketing professors. The Center offers the only scholarship program specifically for sales students.

Marketing faculty find that the Center complements their academic courses and serves as a referral point for students interested in sales. The Center’s activities engender ties with corporations. In developing a Center, CSUF recommends gaining support of the Dean and marketing department, addressing the needs of students first, being resourceful in the beginning, and seeking out venues such as sales competitions or the University Sales Center Alliance where one can learn from other sales centers.