

## UNIVERSITY SALES EDUCATION: WHERE ARE WE TODAY? WHERE ARE WE GOING TOMORROW?

Scott G. Sherwood, Metropolitan State University of Denver  
April L. Schofield, Metropolitan State University of Denver  
R. Gregory Smith, Metropolitan State University of Denver

### Abstract

The world that sales reps serve has changed dramatically in the last 10 years. More college graduates are entering a sales career than ever before. Yet, it appears that only a small minority of students are trained or schooled in processes and creativity that will allow them to succeed. What form will the future of collegiate sales education take?

### Introduction

The education of sales students by American universities has changed significantly in the last 10 years. No longer the “Always Be Closing” of *Glengary Glen Ross*, today’s students are being trained as trusted business advisors. Sales curriculum now includes education in the sales process, sales management, CRM, role playing, sales competitions, shadowing, paid internships, sales competitions, interviewing skills, negotiating, advanced writing skills, plus associated business courses in marketing, management, accounting, finance, computer information systems, economics, psychology, and communications. Instead of a sales pitch, students are more likely to study how to uncover needs by developing the ability to ask questions. Features, advantages, and benefits are superseded by ROI, ROA, and Contribution Margin. The Willy Lomans of the world can no longer compete on the basis of a shoe shine and a smile.

The cost of putting a sales rep in the field can easily run over \$100,000 the first year. Coupled with turnover rates of approaching 50% during the first year, companies are faced with the prospects of buy two, get one. Employers are searching for an economic way to select and train those reps who will survive and succeed. According to studies reported by the Sales Education Foundation, DePaul University, and George Washington University, sales’ careers are the likely destination for a majority of business graduates, particularly marketing students. In addition, the business world is facing increasing sales competition internationally. Technological advances in hardware, software, and social media have helped create a world where sales reps require constant training and retraining.

What role does a college education play in the training and on-boarding of tomorrow’s sales force? Clearly, this is not the same sales environment as the 1990s, least of all the old timers’ world of post WWII. The complexity of the sales environment has dramatically increased. Design, purchasing, and production frequently cross several national borders. And then the process changes again with the next product. Product life cycles are measured in months, not years. The sales rep is no longer a conduit of product information that customers consult. Product information and specifications are easily available online. In order to deal with customers schooled in technology, a sales rep needs to understand his customer’s products, their applications, their market, their competitors, his own company’s market and their competitors. He/she is expected to craft custom solutions that fit a particular customer at a particular moment in time. In addition, he/she is expected to understand global economic conditions, business legal considerations, and financial market relationships.

## **Areas for Research**

Sales curriculum is evolving at many universities. Research is being published at increasing rates, but much of it is focused on studies that may have minimal impact on sales education. The University Sales Center Alliance has created minimum standards for curriculum, faculty, laboratory facilities, and structural suggestions for universities that are considering the creation of a sales center. The Sales Education Foundation also is a resource for instructor certification and offers students the ability to measure aptitude for selected types of sales positions.

This paper proposes that research be conducted with recent graduates on the satisfaction of their preparation for their sales position. Secondly, a similar research program with employers should be conducted to better understand their overall experience with new sales' hires. Is their preparation adequate or are there areas that need improvement or new areas to be covered

References Available upon Request