

RIGOR, RELEVANCE AND REALISM: A CO-OP COURSE IN PERSONAL SELLING

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ABSTRACT

Co-op courses can address the several objectives of academic rigor, practical skill development and real-world exposure without the costs of full co-op programs. This article describes a successful new course in personal selling which combines the traditional content areas with hands-on experience that promotes problem solving, communications, self-management and personal selling skills. The small-enrolment course is self-funding, and has been well received by students and the client organization. Other opportunities for co-op courses are also described.

INTRODUCTION

Undergraduate business curricula, and marketing curricula in particular, strive to balance three basic objectives: rigor, relevance and realism. These objectives are rooted in the past several decades of unrelenting criticisms of business schools: allegations from other disciplines that business courses lacked academic rigor, complaints from the business community that students lacked important skills, and protests from students that the material they were being asked to master wasn't "relevant".

Across North America, first MBA curricula and now undergraduate curricula are being revisited. The resulting "back to the fundamentals" approach reveals a remarkable convergence in employers' expectations of productive workers and life-long learners, society's expectations of well-rounded citizens, academics' expectations of knowledge acquisition and rigor, and students' expectations of intrinsic interest and immediate relevance. Graduate and undergraduate business programs now strive to promote development of basic skills, particularly communications, analytic and interpersonal skills, and of personal attributes such as creativity, initiative and self-motivation, confidence and mature work habits (see, e.g., Arova & Stoner, 1992; Chonko & Caballero, 1991; John & Needel, 1989; Kelly & Gaedeke, 1990; Kotter, 1982). This skills enhancement is typically grounded in concrete, practical contexts that broaden students' understanding of the complex real world of business.

Experiential techniques, whose effectiveness in promoting these objectives has been well

demonstrated, have been used in management education for some time: case studies, role playing, field projects and simulations are now integral to the marketing curriculum. However, these techniques have been criticized as artificial, contrived and oversimplified and none address the tasks involved in implementation. Test (1995), in particular, insists that "the field ('real life') is the only place that ... skills can really be perfected" (p. 54).

A second avenue of response to these objectives was for many schools to develop co-op programs. However, co-op programs too have limitations, particularly administrative costs and, in small-market centres, limited availability of appropriate placements. An alternative that has been successfully implemented at Saint Mary's, and which is exceptionally well suited to the personal selling course, is a co-op course combining a practicum placement with ongoing course instruction.

COURSES IN PERSONAL SELLING

For decades, personal selling has most often been taught, if at all, as a topic in the more academically acceptable sales management course. Increasingly, however, stand-alone courses are being offered. The course content is obviously skills-intensive and best delivered using participative methods (Castleberry, 1989; Lagace & Longfellow, 1989).

Schools introducing courses in personal selling report positive consequences. Students develop positive attitudes toward careers in sales, and they build marketable skills (e.g., Bowers & Sumney, 1983; Bragg, 1988; Clabaugh et al, 1995; Lagace & Longfellow, 1989; Swinyard, 1982). More importantly, however, and likely due more to the course delivery methods than the subject matter, the benefits of a practical course in personal selling are not restricted to development of career-specific skills. Other outcomes include enhanced skill in problem-solving, opportunity appraisal, goal- and priority-setting, interpersonal communication, persuasion, time management.

Typical courses include cases, role-playing, simulations, supervised practica or client-based projects that provide some field experience (e.g., Bragg 1992). However, many of these activities

have been used to supplement a traditionally delivered course and have had a dominant focus on one selling activity rather than in-depth exposure to all aspects of selling. For instance, students' experience may have focused on cold calling, with insufficient exposure to handling objections, closing, building partnerships, or following-up (Macintosh, 1995). A second concern, as Cunningham (1995) states, is that supplementary projects run the risk of being treated, by faculty and by students, as minor parts of the course. Major activities or projects that supplement course material also face the challenge of changing class dynamics in mid-stream, as responsibility for motivation must be shifted from the instructor to the learner. Lastly, some (e.g., Bragg, 1988; Test, 1995) find these techniques still artificial and insufficiently practical.

A co-op course reverses the typical structure, making the experiential-learning situation focal and the instruction supplementary. As a consequence, students are motivated by the situation rather than by the instructor; learning is active, student-centred, and question-driven; and the relevance of the material is immediately apparent. Rather than "filling their tool-kits" in preparation for real-world challenges which are several years away, students are thrown into a challenging situation and provided with access to the resources needed to succeed.

DESCRIPTION OF THE COURSE

The course addresses all but one of the content areas recommended by Bowers and Sumney (1983): personal sales training, organizational skills, problem definition and opportunity appraisal, quantitative decision making, and awareness of success-engendering mental outlooks and lifestyles. It doesn't address computerized information and inventory control systems in any depth.

Students are recruited to sell advertising space to local businesses for three students' union publications. The course is co-taught by a practicing sales manager and an academic, who are paid a small honorarium by the students' union. The "employer", the Director of the students' union (a permanent administrative position), who tracks sales and signs the advertising contracts, also attends most classes.

Admission to the course is competitive and restricted to marketing majors in their third or fourth year. The class size (currently ten) is limited by the number of viable sales territories. Application forms solicit information on previous experience, career plans,

and general interests. All applicants are subjected to a high-pressure interview. Students' maturity and work ethic are the primary criteria and are assessed by reasons for choosing the course, grades in other courses, interest in personal selling or advertising as possible careers, and ability to handle the interview. In practice, the number of applicants only slightly exceeds the available positions. Although a brochure describing the course is mailed to all marketing majors, word-of-mouth seems to be the primary promotions vehicle, and it effectively fosters the self-selection that seems to ensure that only committed students apply.

In addition to serving as a selection device, the personal interviews set the stage, introducing students to the real-world approach that characterizes the course. The new recruits are given copies of the course text, supplemental readings and *The One-Minute Manager* (Blanchard & Johnson, 1981), as well as business cards, day planners and sales kits. All expenses (transportation and occasional meals) are reimbursed and real incentives are offered: salespeople are paid an escalating commission, 10% of net sales and 15% over quota.

Students are 'hired' and each is immediately assigned a sales territory. Territories are designed geographically and are balanced in terms of sales potential, the number and sizes of current accounts, and numbers of preferred clients and 'challenges'. Each territory includes around 20 established accounts and 20 to 30 prospects, and each new salesperson is expected to generate and qualify enough new leads to create next year's prospects. Prospecting can be a challenge, since some of the businesses that target student markets -- and that students find attractive -- raise ethical issues. The employer therefore provides guidelines. Each new salesperson inherits the files created by salespeople previously assigned that territory. These files record contact person, influencers, purchase dates and volumes, and general observations. In addition to handling upwards of 60 accounts, students are exposed to a full range of small to large business owner/managers. Thus the territories are sufficiently large and diverse to provide a real opportunity for students to develop their skills.

As much as possible, an attempt is made to address relationship marketing. The first priority is maintaining established accounts. Sales to established accounts require three to five contacts, initial contact and account follow-up typically being handled by telephone. Difficult, multiple decision-maker and new sales typically require more

contacts. As consultants, the students are expected to help plan ad timing, placement, frequency, execution and perhaps evaluation so that the purchase is an effective expenditure for limited advertising budgets.

The first few weeks of term are learning-intensive. The first classes are used to orient the new recruits to the organization and to familiarize them with the products' fit to potential advertisers' objectives and alternatives. The next classes introduce basic selling skills, using a problem-solving focus. (Record keeping, prospect generation, cold-calling, account servicing, and territory management are also included.) Students are expected to prepare the assigned readings and to practice the basic selling skills outside class time.

The classes draw heavily on guest speakers, applied exercises, role-playing and video-taped role-playing. Sessions on listening skills, self-motivation and time management have also been included. Typically the class meets once a week for three hours at this stage, although supplementary full-day Saturday and Sunday workshops have also been used successfully. (Guest speakers at the end of term describe careers in sales and technical sales of more complex products and services.)

Three weeks into the term, each new recruit makes his or her first sales presentation. For the rest of the term, the new salespeople devote most of their time to their assigned territories and weekly sales meetings replace formal classes.

Responsibility for chairing the weekly sales meetings, and for choosing the agenda items, rotates through the group. At each meeting, the salespeople publicly set their quotas (prospects, contacts, closes) for the upcoming week and report on last week's progress, and each can request personal feedback or assistance. However, the sales meetings are primarily intended to help the team build confidence, share insights, master the basic skills, try out new techniques and brainstorm approaches to common difficulties or special challenges.

Initially, a buddy system is used; the mutual support of dual sales calls seems to more quickly build both the new recruits' confidence and their call productivity. Personal coaching is an important component (see also Corcoran, 1994). Early in the process and then again when skills are more fully developed, the sales manager accompanies each recruit on several calls.

From the very first class, students take responsibility for delivering their quota objectives and for the learning needed to perform successfully. To achieve this, the group environment is one of support and enthusiasm in which trust and rapport are well developed. All of the course resources are clearly focused on developing the team's skills and abilities. Simple behavioral changes, such as the instructors' soliciting feedback from the group before offering their own comments, reinforce the student-centred approach.

COMPENSATION AND EVALUATION

Performance is evaluated in terms of both academic and practical objectives, weighted equally. The sales managers assess performance and meet with each salesperson to provide written feedback addressing the range of objectives (from meeting selling and prospecting quotas to interpersonal skills). To satisfy the academic criteria, each student completes a term paper reviewing several models of personal selling and assessing his or her learning, areas of strength or ability and areas needing development.

Wobruha (1992) describes the merits of grades described in terms of a sales-force compensation plan. A co-op course can take that concept a step forward: grades are a direct result of performance in the field: students receive monetary compensation and bonuses and, in this case, students also compete for the opportunity to continue in a paid position for the balance of the year.

Grades in the course run the full gamut from failure or marginal pass to excellent. The course truly tests individual initiative. As is often the case in applied courses, students who have maintained an "A" average on their ability to learn quickly and repeat effectively are not automatically the top performers. On the other hand, many otherwise underperforming students shine, apparently motivated by the immediacy and relevance of the course. The average remuneration, not including expenses, is \$400 and the top-performer usually receives \$500 to \$800.

OUTCOMES AND ASSESSMENT

From the client's perspective, the course has been highly successful. Sales of advertising space have tripled and costs of sales are minimal.

From the department's perspective, also, the course is highly successful. The practical experience and

development of personal skills complement other courses. The course also serves a public relations function, developing the department's contacts in the large and under-reached group of local small businesses. It is also important that the course is entirely self-funding, as the current budgetary pressures make small-enrolment courses hard to defend.

While no systematic follow-up of graduates has been done to assess the course's impact on career success, the feedback from students after completion of the course has been positive. Almost all of the students have rated this "the best course they have ever taken". The benefit mentioned most frequently is the opportunity to hone skills that will assist them in the job market: selling skills, self-management skills (initiative, self-motivation, self-discipline, time management, goal-setting and execution/implementation) and interpersonal communication skills (negotiation, persuasion, handling rejection and disappointment, and working with different personality types). Students frequently say that the course has built their self-confidence and their comfort in interacting with the business community. Students also note that the course is a good resume builder and provides an opening for them to describe their capabilities during job interviews. It also helps them build contacts in the business community and every year several students find immediate placements as a direct result of the course. Students can test their fit to sales as a possible career and, while a handful have discovered that they didn't want a career in selling, most discovered the opposite (as Bragg, 1988, Lagace & Longfellow, 1989 and Swinyard, 1982 also report).

The most frequent criticism is the time commitment can be substantial. Hence for some the course is seen as taking time from other courses.

LIMITATIONS

While the course is designed to give students a taste of sales as a profession, the scope of that experience is limited. As the course deals with the same client organization each year, the instructors' learning curve is short. However, students are exposed to only a small range of offerings of one particular type of relatively simple product. Thus students have little opportunity to develop skills in customer service and relationship marketing, areas of increasing importance to the profession and to marketing educators (Macintosh, 1995; Moore et al, 1986; de Ruyter and Krask, 1994; Swan & Nolan, 1985; Tanner and Castleberry, 1995).

The short duration of a one-term course also means that sale of a technically complex product would not be practical. As a result, students have little exposure to technical sales and may not develop a full appreciation of the range of responsibilities, such as customer education, problem solving and dealing with product failure. An attempt is made to deal with this both by recruiting instructors whose industry experience is in technically complex sales and by inviting guest speakers from different businesses.

Finally, the length of a one-term course also limits the emphasis that can be given to the integration of sales activities into the operation of the firm. While this could in part be addressed by requiring a more traditional course in selling or sales management as a pre- or co-requisite, that option isn't appropriate to generalist programs which do not have room to develop extensive course streams within the major.

EXTENSIONS

The Personal Selling Co-op course has been offered for six years, and is now a routine offering. The long-term intention is to expand the course by soliciting new sites and sales managers for each. Seasonal sales, Internet services and business-expansion projects might be potential placements.

Co-op placements are already used in many small-business centres, with student groups serving as consultants to the range of projects that present over the term. The co-op approach could also be extended to other courses. For instance, even small local advertising agencies cannot respond to the number of requests for pro bono work. However, groups of students, supervised by professionals, could run a mini full-service agency for non-profit organizations or small businesses. Professionals would be able to volunteer their time more effectively, and a larger number of organizations that are otherwise ignored could benefit.

Similarly, students could run a small marketing research firm, serving small and non-profit organizations that cannot afford professional services. From an instructional perspective, the key factor is that students be exposed to the entire range of activities involved in the collection and application of market information rather than just completing data-collection projects.

References available on request