

Integrating Practitioner Input into the Sales Curriculum Design/Evaluation Process

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The role of college level training in personal selling and sales management has long been an issue of contention. Educators, in seeking the respect of the academic community through scholarly work, have at times alienated the practitioners. The ideal state as seen by practitioners is curricula that integrate the fundamentals of personal selling with a systematic presentation of sales management techniques. Unfortunately, educators have frequently been told by curriculum committees that sales training should be done by companies, and that colleges should concentrate on training managers. On the other hand, small-to-medium-sized companies without formal sales training programs complain about college graduates who know everything about compensation methods, yet lack the basic prospecting, qualifying and presentation skills.

In this paper, the recruiters' expectations of college courses in personal selling and sales management are examined. In addition, the results of a curriculum design and evaluation process based on substantial practitioner input are presented. The suggestions by practitioners are treated as necessary components of the course design process within the context of a derived demand approach. Applying the marketing concept to the process, curriculum design changes to fit the needs of the market are explored. For this derived demand approach, students are viewed as the "product," with the potential sales force recruiters providing the practitioner input treated as the "market."

The Process

The two-year process of curriculum design evaluation (excluding the summer semester) involved 315 students in nine class sections over a period of four regular semesters. In three class sections (Labelled: EL1, EL2, and EL3) an experiential learning design was used that had been developed with the input of the two panels. In three other sections (Labelled: CS1, CS2, and CS3) a case study approach was utilized, and with yet three other sections (Labelled: LD1, LD2, and LD3) a lecture/discussion/role-playing approach was used. All students took part in the performance evaluation

process involving a set of before/after standard exams, resume/cover letter packages, and randomly selected mentor interviews.

The Outcome

The practitioners were involved in providing input to the instructor for sales curriculum design and they evaluated the results of different curriculum designs implemented during the course of the two year process. Two primary evaluation methods were used by the two panels to determine the relative merits and the outcomes of the three different curriculum designs.

The first evaluation method was utilized to test the conceptual learning that took place. This method was based primarily on the use of knowledge in situational application questions on a standardized exam. With the exception of class LD3 in the spring semester of year one, and class CS2 in the fall semester of year two, in all cases the EL classes scored between 14% and 18% higher than the CS classes and between 15% and 23% higher than the LD classes. In the case of the two exceptions, the margin was less than 3% for the CS approach and less than 2% for the LD approach.

The second evaluation method used to compare the three different curriculum designs yielded even more dramatic results. In this method, the panel members were asked to first review the pre-semester resumes and cover letters of the participating students, and to classify each as either a "definite interview candidate," a "possible interview candidate," or a "not an interview candidate." The process was repeated with the post-semester resume and cover letter sets. Using this evaluation method, without exception, the EL class sections yielded the highest number of "definite interview candidates" selections with the post-semester sets. The second group with an average of 30% fewer selections was the CS class sections. The LD sections achieved significantly inferior results with 2 to 3 selections per group, representing 75% lower level than the EL group, making experiential learning the preferred design for selling and sales management professionals.