

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING: MAKE OR BREAK A SALES CAREER?

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Considering the speed at which the sales profession is growing, it only seems reasonable that sales education should also expand to keep up with this pace. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, sales jobs are projected to grow 18.8 percent between 2010-2020, compared to 14.3 percent for all other occupations. As the demand for salespeople increases, more universities are offering formal sales programs. DePaul University's 2011 Sales Education Landscape Survey identifies 101 institutions in the United States offering sales curriculums – an increase from just 45 in 2007. The increase in sales education is for good reason: studies indicate that as many as 60% of all college business graduates and 88% of marketing graduates will hold their first job in sales (Bolander, Bonney, Santornino, 2014). Given the demand for salespeople and the probability that marketing graduates will start their careers in sales, identifying opportunities that can better prepare students for sales success should be of significance to educators.

Traditional sales curricula focus on learning the steps of the sales process, which generally include prospecting for new business, establishing rapport, uncovering needs through questioning, presenting the appropriate product or service, handling objections, and closing the sale. Inks & Avila (2008) attest that active or “experiential” approaches are more effective in sales education and better prepare students than traditional passive learning, noting that, “These experiences are designed not only to enhance students’ understanding of sales and improve their selling skills, but also to begin socializing students to the world of the sales professional”. In addition to improved learning outcomes, could experiential learning also contribute to better job performance for students accepting sales positions upon graduation? According to a 2013 report by the Aberdeen Group, only 38% of new sales representatives meet their first year quotas, compared to 45% of overall sales representatives. Turnover for new sales representatives is traditionally high, which can impose recruiting, hiring, and training costs, as well as opportunity costs associated with lost sales and customer relationships. Sales students, educators, and managers could each benefit from knowledge of a relationship between experiential assignments and sales performance after graduation.



Figure 1. Model

Therefore, this research proposes an investigation of the relationship between experiential learning in sales education and sales performance after graduation. For purposes of this research, experiential learning is identified as role plays and sales projects. As can be seen in figure 1 above, no experiential learning, and experiential learning through role plays and sales projects, all have a relationship with sales performance. The projected relationships are as follows:

H1: Students who receive no experiential learning in their sales education will have lower sales performance than students who do receive experiential learning.

H2: Students who receive experiential learning through role plays will have higher sales performance than students who do not receive experiential learning.

H3: Students who receive experiential learning through sales projects will have the highest sales performance when compared with students who receive experiential learning through role plays and students who do not receive experiential learning.

A role play is a mock selling situation where the student acts as a salesperson and another student, faculty member, or business person acts as the buyer. A role play can provide students with the opportunity to engage in selling, review and reflect on their performance, and integrate their reflections into their understanding of sales and how to successfully engage in selling (Inks et al. 2011). Role plays can even be used in online courses through video platforms, such as YouSeeU, that can record a role play and make it available to the student, faculty, or potential employers to review the experience (YouSeeU.com). This type of video platform can even be beneficial for students to review their role play in order to improve on it the next time. Although educators and employers both recognize the significance of incorporating role play into sales education, it can have limitations due to the fact that the scenario is simulated, rather than actual and unpredictable.

Sales projects are exercises where students are responsible for selling real products or services to real customers. The product or service can vary, but a common project entails students selling tickets for a professional sports franchise. Such projects can provide students with actual sales experience (which is drawn from both successful and unsuccessful calls) and quantifiable results that can be incorporated into a resume.

To determine if the aforementioned experiential learning contributes to salesperson performance, surveys can be administered to ticket sales account executives for franchises in the National Hockey League (NHL) and/or National Basketball Association (NBA). These organizations are ideal for this research because, historically, the majority of new sales hires are recent college graduates. The franchises are also located in large metropolitan areas of comparable size and sales potential. Sales performance can be measured as a percentage of the salesperson's annual goal. Revenue and ticket quantities would not provide accurate comparisons, as salesperson tenure and team ticket prices, inventory, and popularity can vary. Whether the salesperson participated in an experiential sales assignment during college can be assessed by asking if the salesperson took a sales class as part of their undergraduate education, and if they participated in a role play and/or sales project. Demographic information as well as personality traits and testing would need to be done to see if there are any mediating factors in these relationships.

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