

WHAT TO CONSIDER BEFORE DEVELOPING A SPECIALIZATION (TRACK, EMPHASIS, OR CENTER): PERSONAL SELLING AS A TEMPLATE

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ABSTRACT

Over the years many schools have developed specific areas of study within their college. Even though these efforts are directed at providing students with better education and job opportunities after graduation, there are issues that need to be considered before embarking on such a project. This article will provide some insight into benefits and problems associated with developing a specialized area within marketing. The article uses the personal selling area as a template but many of the issues are consistent with other specializations (e.g., research, retail, advertising, business marketing). Specifically this article discusses the development of sales programs along with the initiation of the University Sales Center Alliance. The article provides a framework and check list for those wishing to explore the possibility of creating a sales center at their school.

INTRODUCTION

Within marketing departments across the country there has been a recent trend to provide specializations in a number of sub-disciplines. This article is designed to help faculty who are interested in developing specializations some guidance and information on how to prepare and present the idea to the department and college. Even though the article is specific to Professional Selling, the concepts and issues are similar for any specialization.

Personal Selling has long been viewed by academics and some practitioners as a trade school profession. However, the growth of business-to-business selling has produced significant changes in student attitudes of professional selling over the years (Wotruba, Simpson, and Reed-Draznik 1989; Weeks and Muehling 1987; Stevenson and Paksoy 1983; Castlebery 1990a). Several universities have been ahead of the curve in pursuing professional selling as a valuable academic curricular component of a marketing program. This article provides some insight into what prompted some schools to pioneer and champion the sales curriculum while others schools have taken a wait and see attitude. The recent formation of the University Sales Center Alliance (USCA) as well as increased interest in the alliance, increased student interest and increased demand for sales program graduates are all indications that the sales focused curriculum is a viable option for many schools. This article will provide information on the benefits of a sales curriculum as well as some of the pitfalls encountered in the development of a university sales center.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

It is a fact that there have been personal selling courses offered at the university level for decades. These single courses have traditionally been electives that have been offered but often avoided by students due to the unpopular perceptions of a career in sales held by students. These single offerings in the sales area were traditionally a combined course of personal selling and sales management. It seems that having management as a part of a course provided some academic legitimacy to the offering. As far back as 1924, there has been a specific textbook for salesmanship (Buskirk 1924; McGraw Hill). Since that time the proliferation of textbooks developed specifically for personal selling has expanded to include over 15 different academic textbooks. Even though many of these textbooks also include sections on sales management, today the need for a separate text book that focuses solely on sales management has resulted in over 12 academic sales management specific textbooks being in print.

The personal selling process in both academic research and the classroom has gone through several phases that seem to mirror the changes in the business environment. Initially most of the personal selling academic literature was focused on retail selling or business-to-consumer selling.

This has given way to professional selling, which is based in business-to-business selling. Business-to-business selling involves selling to a company in which the decisions may or may not be made by a group of people

(depending of the type of product or service being sold). The use of buying centers shifted the selling process and content of selling to a more logical rather than emotional decision-making. The use of logic and analysis in the business-to-business arena placed a burden on the salesperson to acquire new and more complex skills in order to effectively communicate and sell to the business buyer. These new skills required a person who was more educated than previously needed. Thus, more and more salespeople were required to be college graduates rather than high school graduates. This shift has been one of the reasons that university sales courses have grown over the past 16 years.

Initially, corporations were happy to take new college graduates (from any discipline) and spend time and money training them in product knowledge as well as selling skills. However, as training costs continued to increase and customer demands on salespeople increased over the years, companies found that they needed a better system. One system was to continue hiring the same type of people and spending more on training. A second solution was to reduce training costs and time by hiring graduates of sales programs who understand selling and who have developed some basic selling skills. Thus, today corporations are relying more and more on colleges and universities to prepare new hires by giving them a basic understanding of the selling process, developing some basic selling skills, and knowledge that selling careers have many benefits and pitfalls.

USCA

The first two schools to adopt a college-recognized specialization in professional sales in 1988 were Baylor University and Northern Illinois University (Castleberry 1990b). With the success of these two programs, other schools soon initiated their own sales centers. By the end of 1996 there were now six schools that had recognized sales programs. They were: Ball State University, University of Memphis, University of Akron, and University of Toledo (*Sales and Marketing Magazine* 1996). By 2002 there were now nine schools that had established sales programs. They were: Ball State University, Baylor University, Northern Illinois University, Illinois State University, University of Toledo, University of Akron, Kennesaw State University, University of Houston, and Ohio University.

The faculty from these nine schools were always talking about the situations at their university and talking about what they were doing to improve the education of their students. At the National Conference in Sales Management (NCSM) in 2001, a special session on how sales centers had been developed was presented by three schools (Northern Illinois University, University of Akron, and University of Toledo). Then at the next NCSM (2002) meeting, the nine schools that had sales programs in place

were invited to sit down to discuss issues and how they might work together to move the sales profession forward. This was the birth of the University Sales Center Alliance (USCA). During a fall 2002 meeting of the USCA, the alliance members agreed upon the following mission statement: The USCA mission is to advance the sales profession through academic leadership in research, teaching and outreach.

BENEFITS OF ESTABLISHING A SALES CENTER

The fact of the matter is that initiating and developing a sales center within the marketing department provides benefits to multiple (but related) stakeholders. The three primary stakeholders related to sales centers are: (1) the students (graduates); (2) companies/recruiters; and (3) faculty/department/school. Each of these three stakeholders will be discussed separately.

Student Benefits

This is probably the easiest area to discuss the benefits of the sales center. In fact, unpublished researches done at one of the sales centers, found that graduates of that sales center program have obtained more job offers, received higher compensation, and have been more satisfied with the job than those students not taking the sales courses. In over a ten year period graduates of a sales program in the Midwest have over a 90 percent success rate of obtaining sales positions before graduation. Other sales centers have similar antidotal support for their programs. Finally, comments from companies that hire sales graduates feel that they tend to learn faster and are productive faster than their counterparts from other universities. This means that they are likely to receive better salary increases and faster promotions.

Company/Recruiter Benefits

Comments from companies that recruit and hire sales students from the sales center universities agree that they are able to reduce their training costs due to the education and training those students received while in college. The fact that students have already covered some of the material in the training program allows the students to concentrate more on developing the skills and not on acquiring the knowledge. This in turn makes them more productive or faster to be productive in the field faster than other recent hires from other non-sales center universities. Another benefit for companies is that since sales graduates have a realistic preview of selling, there is less likelihood that they will leave the position during the development phase of the job. This assists the company in reducing the cost of hiring. Finally, anecdotal information received from sales graduates indicates that they are more

satisfied with their position which leads to higher levels of motivation. All of which helps them be better salespeople and generate more revenue for the company.

Faculty/Department/School Benefits

There are several benefits that can be obtained with a successful sales center. The first is increased resources for the department. These resources come from corporate sponsorship, sales results of students, advisory board membership and alumni contributions. An example of corporate sponsorship is that the sales program receives a donation (\$2,500, \$1,000, or \$500 per year) and the company gains access to students in a variety of ways during the semester. An example of obtaining funds through selling activities of students occurs at one sales center that sells Jackets to sponsors (\$10,000). Another example of generating funds is by having the members of the advisory board pay \$1,000 for the seat on the board annually. When a sales center is seen as a resource for corporate recruiting, there are many corporations that want to be involved. One way to handle this demand for involvement is to limit it based on the level of support for the sales program and department by any of the methods listed above.

Sales alumni are also a source of revenue for the sales program and department. As sales graduates recognize the advantage they have because of the sales program and they are able to progress faster and higher in their organization, they are much more likely to give money to the sales program or department when they are called upon.

For the individual faculty the benefits might be the opportunity to engage in research activities with corporations that support the sales program. The research support does not have to be limited to financial resources. It may be that corporations who recruit and find value in partnering with the school will assist in obtaining participants for a sales study. It is widely known that it is becoming harder and harder to obtain permission to sample salespeople and sales managers in the corporate world. Having access to a sample is usually worth a lot more than money.

Faculty members in the sales program will also have consulting opportunities based on their interaction with companies recruiting and hiring their graduates. Especially for smaller organizations, the fact that a company can hire a qualified and proven sales trainer for specific projects can become a compelling issue.

Finally, the publicity obtained about the success of a sales program provides a halo effect for the department. Having one part of a department well known will only serve to bring the reputation of the entire department up. Thus, the perception of quality of the department is increased by its association with the sales center. The sales center is likely to obtain this publicity since sales positions are typically more numerous and available in almost every industry. Thus, by providing a sales center a university or

department will be perceived as supportive rather than isolated from the business community.

Problems/Issues

Even though there are many benefits to initiating and running a sales center within the marketing department, there are also some problems and pitfalls that anyone needs to be aware of in this process. The first roadblock is support from the dean and the college. If the dean does not see value in having a sales center then one of two things must occur. First, the faculty needs to point out the benefits that the school receives in terms of greater corporate recognition and support which will help raise the perceptions of the school. The second is to forget about developing a center until there is a new dean that might be more receptive to the program.

Once the dean has buy in, then the attention is tuned to the marketing department. There still remains some sentiment that sales education is not an academic discipline and it has no place in a university setting. To counter this, faculty can point to the proliferation of sales centers in many high quality universities. In addition, the fact that there is a major U.S. sales journal, several international sales journals, and many other journals that routinely publish academic articles on personal selling and sales management issues. One other issue that may arise in the department is the fear on the part of some faculty that the sales program will dominate the department. Again, one only needs to observe what has happened at the USCA schools to see that sales and marketing can and do co-exist and prosper.

Another major issue is the amount of resources needed to run a quality sales program. These resources consist of special rooms and equipment as well as the need to have smaller class sizes to accommodate the use of role-plays in the sales classes. In a semester system it typically takes about eight weeks to do one role play of about 20 minutes along with some feedback for about 24 students per class. Thus, it is imperative that classes be kept smaller than normal offering which means that more sections may need to be offered. This means more faculty are needed to cover the classes. The second resource issue deals with acquiring the money to buy and install audio/video equipment needed for student feedback. There also needs to be special rooms made available for the role-play sales calls.

The fact that personal selling is not a topic that many marketing faculty want to teach, another roadblock is hiring and keeping faculty that have a passion for teaching and researching in the sales area. The typical model for sales faculty is they have both sales and sales management experience in the corporate world along with a Ph.D. in marketing. Since the demise of the University of Memphis doctoral program in sales, many of the newer faculty have received their Ph.D. in marketing but have done their dissertation in a sales area even though the school is not

strong in the sales area. Thus, it is obvious that the number of new faculty coming into the academic worlds that are looking to teach sales is very limited. Therefore, some schools who may wish to start a sales program may be limited in what they can do based on their ability to attract and keep an academic leader for the program. This may require that some schools have only one Ph.D. and then a number of adjunct faculty to help carry the teaching load.

The fact that teaching sales is a very labor intensive proposition may require that several faculty are needed to put on as few as three different sales courses. This again puts a strain on the budget to hire and keep quality faculty in the sales area.

The final obstacle to overcome is the student's attitude toward selecting a sales career and thus sales courses. Even though there has been a positive change in student attitudes towards sales as a career (Murray and Robinson 2001; Swenson, Swinyard, Langrehr, and Smith 1993; Castleberry 1990a; Bellenger, Bernhardt, and Wayman 1974; Wotruba, Simpson, and Reed-Draznik 1989; Weeks and Muehling 1987; Weilbaker and Merritt 1992), even today there is still resistance on the part of some students to take sales classes. That is one reason that some schools have started requiring one sales course for all marketing majors and minors. Once some critical mass has taken the sales course and found their attitude changed regarding careers in sales, then they talk to others and soon there is even a desire to take the sales classes. When students find out that professional selling is not telemarketing, that they can make a significant amount of money and that they can get jobs, they begin to take it more seriously.

WHERE TO BEGIN?

One of the activities agreed upon as a condition of membership by the USCA is to mentor schools that have a desire to develop sales centers within their organization. Prior to seeing out a mentor from USCA, the faculty needs to do some work internally. This internal work requires several sequential as well as concurrent steps to make sure that there can be a payoff for all of the time and work needed to start the sales center.

The first sequential step is to engage the administration (dean and department chair) and to gain commitment and support from them. Without this commitment the likelihood of success in developing a sales center is very small at best. Identifying the specific benefits that students, faculty and department/college will receive will help this discussion. At this point if there is agreement and support from the administration, the faculty responsible for developing the sales center should reach out to a member of the USCA to obtain assistance. Any one of the members is available and the faculty should select one where a relationship already exists. The USCA member can then assist in the remaining steps in the development.

The next step is to develop the curriculum for each

course being offered in the sales specialty. The number of courses will depend on the type of program being offered (track, emphasis or major). Typically a sales track will offer three specific sales course while the emphasis will offer four sales specific courses and finally the sales major offers six sales courses. In addition to determining the number of sales courses to be offered, the specific content of each course needs to be developed. Again this is where a USCA mentor can be of great assistance. They have been sharing syllabi and course content with each other for years.

One area that has provided great value to all USCA schools has been the use of business professionals that come to class to provide real-world discussions on relevant topics. Building these interactions into the curriculum can be beneficial to the success of the program. Besides providing valuable information to the students these professionals provide an opportunity for students to network for possible positions upon graduation.

The next step is to determine who will be teaching the sales courses when the program is launched. In order to provide a varied curriculum and a variety of sales courses there will be a need to have multiple faculty involved in the program. Depending on the type of program being developed (track, emphasis, or major) the number of faculty could range from two to four dedicated to the sales area. Hiring the right faculty is very important and one factor that seems to make a difference is that the faculty needs to have credibility in the classroom that they know what they are talking about. That means that the faculty needs to be academically and professionally qualified to teach. They need to have been in the field selling for some period of time before coming to the classroom.

In addition to seeking out quality faculty, physical facilities need to be addressed. There are two main issues to be managed to develop a high quality sales center. The first is the availability of classrooms that are conducive to teaching sales and conducting high value role-plays. The availability of a dedicated classroom for sales that allows for interaction and impromptu activities is ideal. In our facility we have a room that seats 24 students in a U-shaped arrangement. Since the sales classes rely heavily on role playing and feedback it is important to limit the class size so that multiple role-plays can be conducted in a semester. Serious consideration needs to also be given to having separate office sized (an appointed) rooms that are electronically connected to the classroom. In our case, we have two role-play rooms and a small conference room all connected to the classroom with audio and video capabilities.

That brings us to the second facilities issue, electronic equipment. The use of audio/video recording and playback is essential in providing quality education in the sales program. Neither the classroom nor electronic equipment will be cheap. In most schools space is a sparse commodity and hard to obtain. The electronic equipment

although available is relatively expensive. Depending on the number of cameras and video playback systems, the costs could range from as little as \$5,000–\$8,000 to as much as \$200,000. It is important for the faculty in charge of the development of the sales center to identify ways to obtain the money needed. Is it to be from the university or does it need to be raised from corporate sponsors? If it is to be raised from outside, the faculty needs to start early to obtain the money so that there is no delay in implementation once the program is approved by the university.

One way to assist in the establishment of the sales center as well as helping to raise the money for equipment and facilities is the establishment of a sales advisory board. This board would be comprised of sales managers/sales directors/sales VP's, or even owners. The make up of the board is ideally heavily weighted toward alumni from the school who have been successful in their sales career. It is also important to ensure that diversity within the types of industries selected along with diversity in the people selected to participate on the board. There are two trains of thought regarding membership of the sales advisory board. The first holds that members need to pay a fee to obtain and maintain membership. This immediately assists in the fund raising arena but may limit the number and types of companies that are able to join the board. The second train of thought is to not charge a fee for membership but offer each company the opportunity to financially support the program. Thus, either path taken will assist the school in raising money to make purchases that are necessary for development of the sales center.

Another valuable opportunity provided by the sales advisory board is the input they provide on the curriculum and other activities provided by the sales center. These sales professionals have access to information about successful salespeople within their own organization and can share best practices in training that can be applied within the sales center.

Finally, the sales advisory board can be instrumental in helping graduates gain sales positions. The board members can provide a valuable link to a company's recruiting and hiring practices. In this way, there is almost a build in demand for graduates of the sales center. If the board has a number of high visibility companies then this will also help in the final phase of developing a sales

center-- attracting high quality student to enroll in the program.

Students have traditionally had a dim view of selling as a career choice (Wotruba, Simpson, and Reed-Draznik 1989; Weeks and Muehling 1987; Bellenger, Bernhardt, and Wayman 1974) and to reverse this perception within a schools sales program there needs to be several factors occurring. First, students need to see that quality sales positions are available after graduation. This is where the sales advisory board gives the school a jump start by being involved in the classroom and behind the scenes. Students will need to know and understand what a valuable asset it is to have this training before graduation. This requires that the department is behind the program and a consistent message is provided to the students regarding sales as a desirable profession and source of higher than normal income for graduates. Having faculty, alumni, sales advisory board members, and current students promoting the curriculum will assist in drawing more quality students to the sales center. Although these factors are all important, the two most important are recruiters and alumni.

Based on the experience of the USCA members, it will take time to grow the program but if all of the factors identified above are taken seriously, the program will grow in both number of students and quality of graduates.

CONCLUSIONS

This article is not for everyone. Not every school has the desire or resources to build and maintain a quality sales program within the marketing department. However, for those who do have the desire and resources, this article identified some benefits that such a program could provide along with some of the problems that can be encountered in developing a sales program. Finally, steps on how to start a sales center are provided to assist faculty who wish to join the ranks of schools that have sales centers within the marketing department of their school. Those belonging to the University Sales Center Alliance (USCA) have found that the sales center concept has been beneficial to both the sales and marketing area and the corresponding faculty. The various sales centers across the country are not viewed as competitors but rather as allies in the struggle to make professional sales a valued area of study with a marketing degree.

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