

# TONS: A Guide to Teaching On-line Sales Courses

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**Purpose of the Study:** This study describes a creative solution to teaching on-line sales(TONS). On-line education is increasingly in demand; yet, many sales instructors are unsure of how to transfer this interactive, skills-based course from face-to-face to an on-line format. The on-line course is described in detail, with weekly topics, assignments, rubrics, and teaching materials available. The skills-based active learning format develops student knowledge and know-how while building to a final project. Importantly, the technological and time considerations for instructors are kept to a minimum.

**Method/Design and Sample:** This study tests the use of the on-line TONS teaching method through qualitative and quantitative student responses and evaluations from three classes. Qualitative data was analyzed to identify themes of learning and satisfaction. Quantitative course evaluations provide a comparison between on-line and in-person introductory sales classes.

**Results:** Qualitative results show that the TONS innovation was successful in promoting experiential learning in the on-line format. Identified themes indicate on-line students learned key aspects of the sales process, valued the interaction provided, and believed the course resulted in cumulative learning and was applicable to their employment. Quantitative evaluations show that on-line courses were rated equally to a comparable in-person course.

**Value to Marketing Educators:** As educators are pushed toward on-line, blended, and otherwise virtual course formats, it is critical that student learning not suffer. Also important is the need to minimize instructor time investment in course preparation and teaching. This study provides detailed instruction of how any instructor can use TONS to deliver experiential learning on-line.

**Keywords:** Sales, On-line, Education, Active Learning, Sales Process

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**P**ROBLEM BEING ADDRESSED  
“As marketing faculty, we must recognize the changes in the educational marketplace and be prepared to serve our students through on-line learning” (Eastman & Swift,2001, p. 34).Unfulfilled demand for skilled sales people abounds with sales positions being the second hardest job to fill, a trend that has endured since 2006 (Cummins et al., 2013). In order to help meet these demands, universities have responded with a growth in sales course curriculum (Cummins et al., 2013; Deeter-Schmelz & Kennedy, 2011). The majority of sales classes are offered through traditional classroom delivery, leaving a void in growing formats such as on-line and blended (Deeter-Schmelz & Kennedy, 2011). A lack of on-line sales classes occurs because sales is a skills-based, personal, and interactive class leaving educators who have traditionally taught sales in-person unsure of how to transfer activities such as role-playing and handling

objections to the on-line format (Deeter-Schmelz & Kennedy, 2011).

Developing an on-line class can be challenging for faculty for a variety of reasons including: (1) the amount of time needed to create and manage the course (Brinthaupt, Fisher, Garnder, Raffo, & Woodward, 2011); (2) unfamiliar technology creates a learning curve in training, setup, design, and delivery (Akroyd, Patton, &Bracken, 2013); (3) lack of faculty’s ability to use learning management (LM) systems effectively for student learning, especially in terms of matching technology with instructional techniques (Akroyd et al., 2013); and (4) developing pedagogy that is effective for on-line formats is different than effective pedagogies for in-person formats (Brinthaupt et al., 2011). These challenges have contributed to a dearth of on-line sales courses and prompted requests for sales educators to share effective on-line teaching techniques (e.g. Cummins et al., 2013; Deeter-

Schmelz & Kennedy, 2011). This paper answers this call by describing a tested teaching framework, Teaching On-line Sales (TONS), for teaching an introductory sales class on-line using skills-based active learning activities for each step of the sales process. The TONS innovation structures the on-line class to allow students to practice specific steps of the sales process in progression--building weekly to a final paper and sales presentation. Used over 50 times and assessed across university and delivery format, TONS can ensure a successful transition to on-line for the student and instructor.

### PROBLEM'S RELATION TO CURRICULAR OBJECTIVES

As described, current introductory sales courses are offered almost exclusively in-person. This reality is at odds with both administrator and student calls for more varied formats incorporating the flexibility and cost-savings of on-line and virtual learning (Deeter-Schmelz & Kennedy, 2011). When developing on-line and blending learning pedagogies, course content and student outcomes must not suffer. With half of textbook chapters devoted to the topic of the sales process (Inks, Scgetzskem & Raymond, 2011), this framework is utilized by most curriculums as the basis for teaching sales. The sales process is also used to structure the on-line TONS class. This framework allows students to practice specific steps of the sales process. Furthermore, TONS provides students with opportunities to learn experientially through student-centered individual and team assignments. Active

learning incorporates experience in the learning process and is an essential part of not only a successful marketing curriculum, but also of on-line teaching (Frontczak, 1998; Inks et al., 2011; Wood, Solomon, & Allan, 2008).

### SALES EDUCATION INNOVATION

TONS was developed for the introductory sales course; and thus, assumes no student knowledge of the topic. Experience with on-line courses is also not expected; however, it is assumed that students are aware of university-provided on-line class management systems (e.g. D2L, Blackboard, TopClass, Angel) and will have access to a microphone (widely available for \$15). Similarly, the design makes on-line teaching approachable for instructors with no prior on-line experience. Key assumptions for instructors are that they have access to an on-line class management system and are willing to record brief (approximately five minutes) audio lectures.

The TONS innovation directly addresses the problem of providing a framework for teaching sales on-line by outlining a method for organizing and setting up the class with weekly assignments and teaching materials based on the sales process as shown in Table 1 (Dubinsky, 1980). Weekly course activities culminate in a final paper and closing presentation. To support active learning, students are assigned textbook and supplemental readings, brief audio/video lectures, and YouTube video links that relate to each step of the sales process.

**Table 1: Overview by Week of Active Learning and the Sales Process**

Week	Sales Process Step or Learning Outcome	Type of Activity	Active Learning Activity
1	Introduction to Sales	Writing	Evaluate opportunities in sales at monster.com
1	Introduction to Sales	Discussion forum with peers and instructor	Share what hope to learn in class and explain a good or bad experience with a salesperson.
1	Introduction to Sales	Diagnostic	Gauge what is currently known about selling with a non-graded diagnostic quiz
2	Preapproach and Prospecting	Directed research and application of new skill Project building Discussion	Pick a company that student will sell for from job Website that student visited in Week 1. Create list of prospects for company and perform pre-call research for three prospects.
2	Learn about company where student will be acting as a salesperson	Directed research Project building	Begin final project research on company, competitors, and product using company that student will sell for.
2	Reflect on learning	Writing in essay (note each week has a reflection at the end)	Reflect on week's learning
3	Approach	Asynchronous discussion with peers and group work	Work with group to identify what is wrong and improve a weak cold call script
3	Approach	Writing	Create cold call script for chosen product
4	Approach, Presentation Objection Handling Closing	Visit a store and observe a salesperson	Critique the salesperson based upon the steps of the sales process
4	Approach and Presentation	Writing Project building	Create probing questions to ask prospect

5	Presentation	Writing Project building	Build upon probing questions script by providing the prospect's answers to the questions
5	Handling Objections	Discussion forum Writing	Build upon project scenario by creating 15 objections with salesperson's counter reply
6	Handling Objections The Close	Discussion forum	Student given a difficult scenario with the prospect and some partners. Through role-playing student must convince the prospect and deal with the prospect's objections
6	The Close	Writing	Create a proposal
6	Preapproach, Approach Presentation Objection Handling	Project Culmination Writing Written final project	Submit compilation of all previous assignments for sales paper, leading up to the scenario that will be used in Week 7's close demonstration
7	The Close	Discussion forum Project Culmination	Create a PowerPoint presentation delivering the closing pitch with recorded narration
7	Handling Objections	Discussion forum Project culmination	Student assigned to a partner in discussion who student delivers closing to and role plays rest of sales call including handling objections
7	All steps	Writing	Student considers real world situations of problems with the prospect and reflects on how these could be handled
8	Post-sale Follow Up	Writing	Student writes thank you notes to buyer
8	Reflection on all steps	Discussion forum Project culmination	Students discuss as a group their reflections on final project and what was learned in class

\*Organized for an 8 week accelerated semester, but easily adjusted to other (longer) semester formats.

The first portion of the course relates to learning the sales process. The students begin with the active learning experience of visiting a job website such as Monster.com. Using the website to evaluate outside sales jobs, students discern opportunities in sales through an essay. The next week, students revisit the site and choose a company and one of its products to "sell" throughout the course. For class purposes, students become an outside business-to-business salesperson for this company. Through this role, students engage in all stages of the sales process including: researching the company and competitors, prospecting, pre-call research, formulating probing questions, script writing, objection practice, proposal creation, and role-playing a sales meeting. Each aspect of the sales process is compiled into a paper representing a complete student-generated sales process. Highlights of the paper are a complete sales script including needs discovery questions, client responses/objections, student responses to objections, and closing.

The later portion of the course builds upon the developed knowledge of the sales process by engaging students in role-play practice of the process via electronic methods. To further experiential learning, students share their papers with assigned colleagues via discussion forums of the course LM system. The assigned buyer (another student) reads the paper to gather an understanding of the buying situation. The "selling" student must then create and practice a presentation, which serves as the equivalent of in-person course role-playing. Studies show that having students prepare a presentation in advance is beneficial since it helps alleviate nerves and allows for multiple takes (McDonald, 2006). Specific assignments guide the student to create a PowerPoint presentation where they must close the sale by recording a pitch

using the narration feature. This closing summarizes the buyer needs, establishes value, and demonstrates urgency to purchase today. The student's assigned buyer responds with an objection, which the student must then answer in writing through the discussion forum; and the two continue to role-play until the (un)successful completion of the sales call. This format allows for a selling encounter role-play with no location or time constraints. Similarly, it encourages practice at key role-playing skills including response to objections and closing. The final step in the sales process is practiced by writing thank you notes to the buyer to ensure customer satisfaction.

Student reflection papers and other activities are used to help build the skills needed for the final project throughout the class. Rubrics for grading and detailed assignments of the main projects, which break down the first six steps of the sales process, are available from the corresponding author. An example rubric can be found in the appendix. Weekly audio/video lectures are limited to five minutes and highlight the key skills being discussed and practiced.

## INNOVATION TESTING AND EVALUATION

Each week, students from two on-line sales classes with a total enrollment of 44 students anonymously responded to questions concerning what they had learned that week and how it could be applied. The use of student response data to gauge perception of assignment and teaching effectiveness is established in the literature (e.g. Morgan & McCabe, 2012). The open-field responses were retained for two unique qualitative analyses following grounded theory. First, three professors independently reviewed all responses. Without prior discussion of what may emerge, each recorded themes present in the

responses. Through dialogue, the three compared themes and created a set of six representing all responses. Individual responses were then re-coded into the six agreed-upon themes. Of 308 complete responses, the classification of five themes were discussed (not immediately agreed upon) and three were removed due to non-consensus or irrelevance; resulting in inter-rater reliability of .99 based on the proportional reduction in loss approach (Rust & Cool, 1994). See Table 2 for themes and responses showing

reactions to the course. Of the six themes identified, three relate to course learning outcomes: (1) leads vs. prospects and qualifying prospects, (2) relating to prospects' needs, and (3) the close and objection handling. The fourth, (4) interactions with students and instructor, revealed the value in peer and instructor interactions in stimulating learning. Two themes relate to the outcomes of skills learned and practiced such as (5) cumulative course learning and (6) applications to current workforce job.

**Table 2: Themes from Qualitative Research with Students' Comments**

<p><b>1. <u>Leads vs. Prospects and Qualifying Prospects</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The first call you make to a prospect is the first impression that person will have of you.</li> <li>- Qualify the lead by first listening to what the lead shares...and then asking specific questions to determine whether the lead qualifies as a prospect.</li> <li>- ....to learn a better insight into their needs is a great way to figure out prospects.</li> </ul>	<p><b>2. <u>Relating to Prospects' Needs</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- I now see . . . as an opportunity for the salesman to really help the customer by uncovering needs the customer may not have realized before.</li> <li>- Selling involves many different aspects....of what the prospects wants and needs are, as well as what the prospect wants to hear.</li> <li>- It takes great listening skills to actually understand what is being portrayed....If you cannot meet their needs, what purpose are you serving...?</li> </ul>
<p><b>3. <u>The Close and Objection Handling</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Going back and forth with our classmate... I think this really helped me close and deal with objections more and understand how I can get past them.</li> <li>- Learning how to handle objections was helpful as a way to better communicate and get my point across.</li> <li>- My thought process has changed because I know how to listen and offer a reply instead of taking no for an answer.</li> <li>- I did not know how to handle objections and I feel like this class made me a lot more confident.</li> </ul>	<p><b>4. <u>Interactions with Students and Instructor</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- I appreciated instructor's objection to my discussion because . . . [it] allowed me to review how to properly respond to her objection.</li> <li>- Interacting with my classmates and instructor helps build upon my learning because it allows me to get feedback from them to build upon my own ideas.</li> <li>- The interaction with my classmate and instructor helped me come to a better understanding of what exactly a prospect is and different ways to determine a prospect and communicate with them.</li> <li>- It was a lot of fun learning from everyone.</li> <li>- My interactions with the instructor definitely each time have helped me to build upon my learning.</li> </ul>
<p><b>5. <u>Cumulative Course Learning</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- I learned the value of selling step by step as we learned the concepts.</li> <li>- Presenting our project to a partner and receiving objections . . . [and] comments on our sale pitch and sales script. . . . helped me further my skills from last week's discussion.</li> <li>- [I now] see the end result of what has happened over the past couple of months.</li> <li>- To be more assertive, to actively listen, and to I have been in sales before as many of us have, but I didn't know as much as I know now.</li> <li>- Each week I built upon skills I have and learned new skills and insights.</li> </ul>	<p><b>6. <u>Applications to Current Workforce/ Job</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- I am on the phones all day at work and I deal with a lot of customers. These steps . . . will help with what I do now, e. g., building rapport. . . .</li> <li>- I deal with members of my financial institution every day and being able to identify and sell them what they need will be . . . helpful.</li> <li>- [re: the sales pitch] in life it's the same way, if you can satisfy anyone's objections to pretty much anything then you should be able to sway them to agree with you.</li> <li>- I will be able to apply this to my career because I have the knowledge to recognize when someone is objecting to what I am saying and I have the tools to listen and offer a rebuttal.</li> </ul>

Individual responses show perceptions of learning and skills derived from the course activities including readings, role plays, script writing, and interactions with peers and the instructor. The analysis of student

comments also suggests that students have learned the sales process in different ways and that forms of experiential learning reinforced all aspects of the course content. More importantly, responses

demonstrate an enjoyment and appreciation for the course and a realization that it will aid them in their current jobs and future careers.

As a check to the first coding process, and to further augment the learning from the student responses; a fourth professor reviewed the responses using AtlasTI 7 qualitative software, which allows for coding, sorting, and grouping of qualitative data. Focusing on the final entry, where students were asked to reflect on the overall course and not specific weeks or activities, analysis showed a similar pattern of responses to the entire data set. In total, 44 distinct concept codes were identified and further grouped into 4 code families. The vast majority of codes discussed the benefit of the course to students.

Discussion of student skill development took a leading role with 131 representative codes. The most often noted skills were objection handling (60), needs identification (24), and prospecting (13); which align with themes 1-3 (prospecting, objections, and needs identification) identified in the first analysis of the entire dataset. A student comment on handling objections illustrates this: "though I deal with some type of objection everyday (friends, family and work) any positive outcome has usually just been blind luck. Actually having the skills to influence a positive outcome will be useful no matter what situation you're in."

Learning relevant to professional growth or the workplace followed in frequency with 72 distinct codes and aligns with theme 6 in Table 2 (Applications to Current Workforce/Job):

"I was in sales before and did not know why I did not make several sales. After taking this class I now understand why. I could not get passed the gate keeper and I also had a problem with objections. As soon as I hit a road block or objection I just gave up on the sale. I have been taught to use these to your advantage and I think this will help me follow through on making the sale. I think being more confident and knowing more about sales and each step [of the] process will help me be more successful in my career and workforce."

Fifty codes described how the course improved the student personally in terms of cooperation, critical thinking, confidence, and improved ethics or attitude. These quotes relate to concepts discussed in theme 5 (cumulative course learning). The following quotes illustrate the breadth of these sentiments: "[I have] the belief I can succeed. Before this class I was shy and had hard time asking questions to any person or customer now I am more confident and I know I will succeed..." and "I started ... with a little bit of a bad attitude. "I don't like salespeople", "I am never going to be a salesperson"... I am coming out of this class with a changed attitude and with many skills that will benefit whether I do one day choose to do sales or not." The remainder of the codes aligned with the first coding process, discussing the course in terms of organization, activities, interactions with others, and accolades of the professor or peers.

First developed in 2003, TONS has been used over 50 times in the on-line format and seven times in hybrid or in-person formats. The method has proved durable with numerous iterations resulting mainly in improvements to instruction clarity and rubrics. While shared with other sales instructors across the country, providing positive feedback to the activities' usefulness across modalities, no comprehensive quantitative data on effectiveness is available. However, quantitative student evaluations of three introductory sales classes taught by the same instructor during the same academic year at two different universities do allow for comparison of TONS' effectiveness in both an on-line and in-person format. All evaluations were taken anonymously and consisted of 1-5 Likert scale ratings. The on-line sections evaluated satisfaction with the 1) course and 2) instructor, averaging 4.5/5 ratings for both categories. The in-person section, taught by the same instructor at a different university, used six-course criteria resulting in ratings from 4.3 – 4.8 with an overall average of 4.5. This comparison shows that the innovation was successful with the same instructor teaching the same course across different universities and different modalities (on-line and in-person). Computing average course grades using equally-weighted midterm grade, sales paper, and final presentation for the two on-line and one in-person classes, we find that average grades between the two formats are within 1.1 percentage points. Despite the sample size, the results suggest that TONS is an effective means of teaching an introductory selling course in the on-line format.

## POTENTIAL CHALLENGES

Organizing information in the LM software is important and prevents confusion. Content areas should be created using weekly folders. Within each folder, three subfolders should be created: (1) Lectures, for video or written lectures, (2) Assignments, for completion and submission instructions for work due, and (3) Resources, for YouTube links, websites, and other related content to support learning objectives. Using date restrictions is recommended to prevent jumping ahead; and thus enabling the technology to guide students through the sales process. Some students are not comfortable using a microphone so requiring practice recordings in PowerPoint, posted to a discussion thread/forum before the final presentation is helpful. Links to how-to video tutorials from YouTube or other sources can guide those who are unfamiliar with PowerPoint narration. Time dedicated to lectures using this method is limited as audio/videos are less than five minutes for each subtopic. For instructors without access to recording equipment, Jing® (available for free at [techsmith.com](http://techsmith.com)) provides a means of recording audio lectures over PowerPoint presentation. Additionally, written lectures with examples may be provided.

## HOW THE INNOVATION ADDRESSES THE PROBLEM AND ADAPABILITY

Similar to the growth in sales programs (Cummins et al., 2013; Deeter-Schmelz & Kennedy, 2011), on-line education has become more prevalent. Sixty-nine percent of chief academic leaders claim that on-line education is critical to their institution's long term strategy (Allen & Seaman, 2013). This is especially relevant in academic environments with shrinking budgets and lower local enrollment. The growth trends in on-line education have created a need for faculty to teach traditionally face-to-face courses on-line. Moving classes to an on-line format is hampered by faculty resistance, an important issue because faculty buy-in and time considerations are critical to the successful implementation of on-line classes (Akroyd et al., 2013). The framework presented in TONS can help ease the transition for faculty by providing a step-by-step roadmap for organizing and implementing an on-line introductory sales course with weekly assignments and teaching materials. Of equal importance, TONS limits the time needed to populate an on-line course as instructor-generated content is limited to five minute audio/video lectures and supplemental written

lectures, typically of two pages or less. Finally, rubrics clearly outline grading, offering the opportunity to outsource grading. We also suggest that instructors save any grading comments or any questions/links to relevant resources to post in weekly announcements, which can reduce time invested in grading for subsequent classes. All materials are available from the corresponding author.

With over a decade of adaptation and a proven track-record, TONS can help faculty make the transition to teaching sales in an on-line format. The assignments described offer a robust experiential learning opportunity with limited technological and time resources on the part of the instructor. While faculty will need to record brief five minute lectures to begin the course or provide written lectures, after this initial effort, subsequent classes can be taught with significant time savings over in-person formats. Additionally, the TONS model can be easily adapted to accommodate shorter timeframes (summer or tri-semester) or other delivery formats (hybrid or face-to-face), thus saving faculty TONS of time and creating TONS of learning!

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**APPENDIX**  
**Prospecting, Preapproach and Approach Grading Rubric**

Criteria	Exceeds Expectations	Meets Expectations	Below Expectations
<b>Company Information</b> 20 points	<i>20-17 points</i> Thoroughly and in detail includes information on the company's: history, location, size, sales trends, and products offered.	<i>16-14 points</i> Includes information on the company's: history, location, size, sales trends, and products offered.	<i>13-0 points</i> May not include information on the company's: history, location, size, sales trends, or products offered.
<b>Product Information</b> 15 points	<i>15-14 points</i> Thoroughly and in detail defines the company's product or service, describes how the product works, and how the prospect (buyer) would use it.	<i>13-11 points</i> Defines the company's product or service, describes how the product works, and how the prospect (buyer) would use it.	<i>10-0 points</i> May not define the company's product or service, describe how the product works, or how the prospect (buyer) would use it.
<b>Competitor's Information</b> 15 points	<i>15-14 points</i> Thoroughly and in detail explains the company's direct competitor's and in-direct competitor's strengths and weaknesses.	<i>13-11 points</i> Explains the company's direct competitor's and in-direct competitor's strengths and weaknesses.	<i>10-0 points</i> May not explain the company's direct or in-direct competitor's strengths and weaknesses.
<b>Prospect Information</b> 15 points	<i>15-14 points</i> Thoroughly and in detail selects an appropriate prospect, describes what the buying firm does, explains what the buying firm currently uses, and identifies the title and job description of the decision maker of purchasing your product.	<i>13-11 points</i> Selects a prospect, describes what the buying firm does, explains what the buying firm currently uses, and identifies the title and job description of the decision maker of purchasing your product.	<i>10-0 points</i> May not select a prospect, describe what the buying firm does, explain what the buying firm currently uses, or identify the title and job description of the decision maker of purchasing your product.
<b>Prospect's Needs</b> 5 points	<i>5 points</i> Thoroughly and in detail explains the purpose of meeting, history of past interactions, and explanation of prospect needs.	<i>4 points</i> Explains the purpose of meeting, history of past interactions, and explanation of prospect needs.	<i>3-0 points</i> May not explain the purpose of meeting, history of past interactions, or explanation of prospect needs.
<b>Sales Call Script</b> 20 points	<i>20-17 points</i> Includes 15 appropriate probing questions and answers, each question is accurately identified as open or closed and by situation, problem, implication, or need payoff. Provides a thorough and detailed summarization of prospect's needs, and transition statement to begin the sales presentation.	<i>16-14 points</i> Includes 15 probing questions and answers, each question is identified as open or closed and by situation, problem, implication, or need payoff. Provides a summarization of prospect's needs, and transition statement to begin the sales presentation.	<i>13-0 points</i> May not include 15 probing questions and/or answers, each question is identified as open or closed and by situation, problem, implication, or need payoff. May not provide a summarization of prospect's needs, or transition statement to begin the sales presentation.
<b>APA Guidelines and Writing Quality</b> 10 points	<i>10 -9 points</i> Paper follows APA guidelines, 5 or more references are used, references are correctly cited within the text and on references page. No spelling or grammatical errors.	<i>8-7 points</i> Paper follows APA guidelines, 5 references are used, most references are correctly cited within the text and on references page. 0-3 spelling or grammatical errors.	<i>6-0 points</i> Paper follows APA guidelines, less than 5 references are used, many references are incorrectly cited. 4 or more spelling or grammatical errors.