

Entry-level Salesperson Selection: An Engaging Experiential Exercise for Sales Management Students

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Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this paper is to present an innovative recruitment and resume screening simulation that has been used and tested for many years in sales management courses.

Method/Design and Sample: The Entry-level Salesperson Selection Exercise engages sales management students in a realistic activity where they review resumes submitted by their peers (anonymized) and select the most ideal candidate for the position. The “applicants” are then ranked and the top three choices from each student are shared with the class along with the reasoning behind the choice. The sample consists of undergraduate sales management students who have completed a Professional Selling course.

Results: The project consistently engages and challenges sales management students. Reviews from students indicate their appreciation of the realism involved in the exercise and the resume evaluation techniques they discover. It is simple enough for faculty to implement immediately with very little preparation time.

Value to Marketing Educators: This project is an innovative improvement to other sales management simulations that sales management faculty can use in class that also provides a great learning experience to their students.

Keywords: Sales Management, Experiential, Simulation, Recruitment

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The field of sales has undergone such radical change over the last few decades that researchers have referred to it as a “revolution in sales” (Marshall, Moncrief, Rudd, and Lee, 2012). In addition, organizations are continuing to expect entry-level salespeople to be prepared to create value almost immediately upon hire (Dixon and Tanner, 2012). Therefore, it is critical for faculty to continue to seek innovative methods to better prepare entry-level sales professionals.

However, it is not enough for sales students to just understand the expected role of the salesperson. They must also understand how the sales force is managed so they can understand what is expected of them in order for them to succeed. To create the value expected as soon as possible by organizations, sales students in general, and sales management students in particular, need specific preparation on the changing roles and responsibilities of sales managers (Dixon and Tanner, 2012; Michaels and Marshall, 2002). Therefore, innovation is needed to design relevant and rigorous sales management activities for sales management students.

Sales faculty typically use the sales call role-play activity as a foundational tool for teaching sales to students (Sojka and Fish, 2008). This standard method has been used successfully for years because the exercise is a realistic simulation that engages and

teaches the students simultaneously. Sales instructors rely on the role-play to evaluate students’ ability to apply what they have learned in the classroom about the sales process. According to Kolb (1981, 1984), in order to be effective, any teaching tool needs to be based on the learning cycle consisting of four elements: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. The sales role play is thus one of the most effective learning tools as it includes all of these elements. Researchers also agree that the role-play is an experiential learning exercise that enables students to practice the skills necessary to succeed as a salesperson (Widmier, Loe, and Selden, 2007; McBane and Knowles, 1994; Moncrief and Shipp, 1994; Tanner and Chonko, 1992; Castleberry, 1989, Inks and Avila, 2008).

Since the sales call role-play activity is the gold standard for teaching sales, it would be logical to expect that a similar, experiential activity would also be an effective tool for teaching sales management (Michaels and Marshall, 2008). However, designing effective sales management training exercises is difficult (LaForge, Mehta, and Strong, 1997). The value of the role-play exercise for sales students rests in the structure of the simulation with the student playing the seller and someone else (ideally a business professional) playing the buyer.

Similar sales management simulations are much more difficult to design because, to be effective, exercises must involve both the sales management student and others acting as employees to be managed. However, most sales management simulations have the student playing a sales manager with the computer playing the other party (Cook, 2003). Thus sales management simulations do not offer the same level of realism as sales simulations (e.g. role-plays). Although there are arguments for and against the use of computer simulations in sales management training, the final outcome is: "The learning experience is only as good as the simulation" (Cook, 2003).

While a sales manager has a lot of responsibilities ranging from goal setting, monitoring targets, managing day-to-day operations, and motivating salespeople to meet and achieve their targets (Michaels and Marshall, 2002), one of the fundamental responsibilities a sales manager also performs is recruitment of their team of salespeople. Salesforce recruitment and selection play a critical role within organizations given the cost of a bad hire in sales (Richardson, 1999; Darmon, 1990). Research indicates the need sales managers have for tools to select the right talent (Dubinsky, Howell, and Ingram, 1986; Weilbaker, and Merritt, 1992; Wiles and Spiro 2004). Also, according to Marshall and Michaels (2001), one of the key topic areas that should be covered in the sales management classroom but is typically missing is career development skills (p. 1). Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to present an innovative recruitment and resume screening simulation that engages and challenges sales management students and provides students the opportunity to apply the sales management principles they are learning in the classroom to this term-long project.

INNOVATION NEED

This pedagogical exercise teaches students how entry-level salespeople are evaluated and selected. This is a very important skill as one of the roles of the sales manager is to be a recruiter of talent. This exercise attempts to teach that skill in a very realistic and challenging way.

The exercise is actually based on an older sales management assignment that a lot of sales professors might have used to teach recruiting. In the original version of the assignment, the professor provides the students with a collection of fictional resumes and asks the students to sort and write an evaluative report on why someone was chosen versus others. One of the authors of this paper, who has been teaching sales management for over a decade now, had used the older assignment for many years before realizing that most of the students became disengaged with the task very quickly. The students were also disinterested and not putting any major thought or effort into doing the exercise. The feedback from the students suggested that they considered the assignment more like "busy-work" rather than a true learning experience. In addition, students felt that it lacked any realism as compared to

the role plays that students were familiar with in their previous sales classes. To overcome the weaknesses of the older exercise, we designed this new updated assignment making it more realistic and engaging.

We wanted the students to be more invested in their learning and also be able to link it to real life experiences that they were likely to face as sales managers. We wanted them to understand that during their own job search, it was very likely that a sales manager would be evaluating them and their resumes soon, so understanding the process and where they stood in comparison to their peers would potentially allow them to get ahead of the competition.

INNOVATION DESCRIPTION

This project is a semester term-long project with the final deliverable due on the last day of the semester. To date, we have only used it with junior/senior level undergraduates. The authors have used this project with undergraduate classes that range in size from 18-22 students. The project is introduced early in the semester and discussed in class at different stages throughout the semester. The final discussion is done in one class period and does not take up much class time. In our class, the entire project is worth 20% of the grade. While the project is intense, challenging, and lengthy, our experience has shown that the time demands are not unrealistic for either faculty or students.

The exercise has three main components with each individual component building on the previous one. Thus a student who did not do Part 1 could not complete the latter parts.

Part-I: First students were provided with a real job posting for an entry-level sales position from a well-known job website (we used Monster.com however any website which posts local entry level sales positions like LinkedIn or Indeed.com can be used) and they were asked to apply to the job posting. They were told to imagine, for the purposes of the exercise, that this was their "Dream entry-level job" and to write their application accordingly. We only proposed one caveat. All students were asked to use a pseudonym and change any identifying information in the entire application. For example, if he or she worked in a Starbucks, they were to say that they worked in a local coffee shop. At this point, the students were not told anything about Part 2 of the assignment. Most of the students assumed that they would be evaluated by the faculty for the strength of their resume and the pseudonyms would make the exercise more fair.

Part II. Once all the anonymized applications were collected (as pdf files), they were saved into a folder in the university learning management system and the folder was shared with the students. Then the second part of the assignment instructions were provided. The students were now instructed to assume the role of a sales manager who had advertised the job and who would be selecting the top candidates for interviews. The students were informed that the folder contained all the applications received and that they would be

required to evaluate each application and choose the top three people to call for the second-level interview. By this stage, the students knew that the applications were from their peers but, due to the use of pseudonyms, they would not know who the applicants actually were. The students were also asked not to disclose their pseudonyms to their peers or inquire from others about their pseudonyms.

Before doing the evaluation, the students were told to do the following: Create a rubric and evaluate each applicant on the rubric and provide an overall score. The final step was to rank order all the students. The students are also asked to provide summary comments for each applicant (strengths and weaknesses). The students were asked not to evaluate their own application. The rubric was to be created based on what they had learned in the sales management class about

key salesperson traits. The deliverable for the second part of the assignment was the rubric (with the summary comments) and the rank order of the candidates. The criteria for reviewing the applications is intentionally left vague to force students to apply the sales management course concepts that they have learned and create a rubric based on that learning. We use this process to assess the students' grasp of the concepts and their ability to apply them. The students were graded on how well they created the rubric and the depth of the evaluation of each candidate as demonstrated by the summary comments for each student (see Figure 1 for the Grading Rubric). Thus for a class of 20 students, each student evaluated 19 individual applications with detailed comments for each student (See Appendix for sample rubrics).

Figure 1: Grading Rubric for Assignments

| | 1-Did not complete | 2-Did not meet expectations | 3-Marginally met expectations | 4-Met expectations | 5-Exceeded expectations |
|--|--------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------|-------------------------|
| Student crafted a rubric based on class learning | | | | | |
| Student provided qualitative pros and cons for each applicant | | | | | |
| Thoroughness of student's evaluation | | | | | |
| Quality of student's overall comments | | | | | |

Part III. The final part of the assignment was designed as an in-class group exercise. In the final part, students get together in class and are separated into small groups (2-3). Each of the groups is now tasked with coming up with a consensus list of top 3 candidates. The students in the group have to negotiate with the other students to come up with the consensus list of top candidates.

At the end of the exercise, (which can get very engaging as the students now know they are evaluating their peers), each group then lists the names of the top three candidates they would like to interview. The group also reads aloud a brief rationale for their top pick. The professor lists the names of all students on the board and rates a top choice as 3 points, second choice as 2 points, and third choice as 1 point. A running total is kept using tally marks. At the end, the scores for each student are calculated and the top 3 scoring candidates are now asked to reveal themselves and be publicly recognized as the persons most likely to get the job

interview. We have also experimented with each student mentioning their individual top three choices and the individual reasoning (no group discussion). However, with larger classes, it can consume a lot of time.

EXERCISE IMPACT

The first part of the assignment is individualized learning but as students start to become more engaged in Part 2 and Part 3, they are totally immersed in the exercise. This project is innovative because it is simple for the instructor to implement and requires little or no resources to begin using. It also engages the students from two different perspectives: resume writer and resume reviewer. Each student receives an individual grade assessment on the rubric they create to review the resume thereby providing the instructor with clear evidence of each student's grasp of course concepts and ability to apply them in a practical and useful way.

As mentioned in the beginning of this article, scholars recognize that teaching sales management is difficult and online/computer simulations do not really do justice to the task at hand. Many times online simulations become more like busy work and students forget what the original learning objective was. In contrast, this assignment achieves all of the teaching goals involved in salesperson recruiting as follows:

First, it is a very realistic assignment, just like the sales role play simulations used in professional selling classes. All students are asked to apply for a real job and the applications are from real people. The students also realize that the resumes are not fictional, but actual resumes from their peers.

Second, the students become very invested as they know that they are evaluating real people who they would be competing against in the job market. The fact that the resumes are from their class peers really makes them evaluate the applications carefully, something we would want all sales managers to do. One key point to note is that only the second part of the assignment is graded by faculty. Students are not penalized if they are not chosen by their peers. However, the students still get very invested in the third part when the students are trying to come up with consensus candidates.

Third, the most important thing that this exercise teaches students is competitiveness and also humility. Many of the students (especially millennials) are known to score high in narcissism (Bergman, et al 2011; Twenge, et al 2008 a, 2008 b) and do not take criticism well (Anderson, Buchko and Buchko, 2016). In the authors' past experience, students sometimes become defensive when they receive critical feedback from faculty about the quality of their resumes. This is mainly because many students have never seen their peers' resumes, so they assume that theirs must be the best. Students have also been told by their friends, parents, and well-wishers (out of politeness sometimes) that their resumes are the best. This exercise is the first time that students get to see 20-25 resumes of their peers at the same time. They can evaluate their own applications and resumes as compared to the competition. They can judge how good their own applications are in comparison to their peers. Also when the group discusses their top choices, the students are able to observe how other people evaluate candidates. This could be very different from how they evaluate a candidate. This adds to their ability to understand the problem of recruiting from the point of view of others.

Finally, when a student's application is not in the top three consensus list, it really drives home the fact that they need to improve their resumes, applications or both. Since the choice is not made by the faculty, they are much more willing to accept the results. The end of the exercise is a very humbling experience for all students who do not make it to the top three and very often we hear the comment about how eye opening the experience is for them.

OUTCOME ASSESSMENT

Because of the nature of the assignment, the assessment is more qualitative in nature. Students have been asked what they felt was the strength of the exercise. Almost without exception, all students love the exercise. Some of the verbatim comments we have received are provided below:

"It made me realize that I will be competing with others for a limited number of job openings - my resume has to be extremely compelling and sell ME."

"I was able to see the mistakes I (and my peers) make in a resume or cover letter and how crucial wording can be."

"I was able to look at the hiring process from 2 perspectives - applicant and hiring manager - very interesting."

"I have a better understanding of how a manager evaluates individuals."

As can be seen from the above comments, the students like the realism of the assignment. We also find that since the students know the applications are from their classmates (although they don't know exactly who), they are eager to see them and evaluate them fairly.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPLEMENTATION

The assignment is simple enough that all faculty can implement it very easily. One of the challenges that has emerged in the past is that students are unable to or are unwilling to mask their identity sufficiently. This happens when we have students who are well known for their extracurricular activities (e.g. SGA president). While something like this happens rarely, if it happens, the faculty should work with the student to come up with a plausible and equally high status achievement substitution. Another concern shown by students is the possibility of other students negatively determining their grade. We were able to resolve this concern by making it clear that students are not penalized in any way if they are not selected by the class in the final part. Similarly, we make it clear that the students also do not gain any points by being chosen. We do advise that faculty using this exercise reiterate this point in class.

The project described in this paper has been used to engage sales management students successfully for over a decade in the current format. However, there are multiple ways the project can be modified and extended. For example, after each student creates their own rubric to evaluate the resumes, the instructor could consolidate them into one common rubric for all the students to use. The authors did not do this because the rubric creation was an individual assessment of each individual student's grasp of the course concepts and ability to apply them to an actual task.

There are also opportunities for adapting this exercise in classes which are not sales related. While the innovation was developed mainly for the sales management class, this innovation can readily be

adapted for any major. Human Resource students can be taught how to evaluate new job applicants. Marketing majors similarly can be taught how competitive they are compared to their peers. This activity would be an even more significant success in higher level MBA courses, as MBA candidates also need some way of comparing themselves to their peers before they enter the job market. This can be a great exercise to teach them about personal branding and help them craft their own personal brand that helps them stand apart from the competition.

LIMITATIONS

Like all papers this paper also has some limitations that need to be noted. If sales educators choose to use this project for large class sizes (e.g., 40-50), both students and faculty may face different challenges than we have encountered. The volume of resumes to review and rubrics to create might be overwhelming for both.

Another limitation is the use of qualitative comments from the overall course evaluation to evaluate the

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effectiveness of the method. It would be interesting to also collect quantitative data from the students regarding their experience specifically with this project. Another natural extension of the current project would be to collect candid, qualitative student evaluations regarding the activity and analyze them to uncover the themes that emerge. This would enlighten the developmental process and enable educators to keep the project current.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the project is a very rewarding experience for students as well as faculty. Over the years as we have encountered challenges, we have modified the assignment and now find the project to be a very effective sales management teaching tool. We hope that other sales educators will also adopt and adapt the assignment so their students are also able to reap the same benefits.

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Appendix

(Names redacted for privacy reasons)

Sample rubric 1

Grading process:

#1CoverResume: [Redacted]

Total: 53 Points

| Category: | Points granted: | Why: |
|------------------------|-----------------|---|
| Bachelor's Degree (20) | 10 | Will graduate in May 2018, degree in Marketing, sales and Info. Did not talk about any college experience |
| Sales experience (30) | 10 | Although Daniel was a sales intern, no true sales are shown. Making 2000 calls is great but if there were no sales it is a waste of time |
| Grammar (10) | 5 | Run-on sentences and bullet points are long |
| Organization (5) | 0 | This cover letter is pretty awful: "to whom it may concern" should not be used ever, especially if you were given a name Tom Brady. Writing about high school experience should be replaced with something relevant in college. The resume's organization is pretty strange and The interests are mostly unprofessional |
| Travel (5) | 5 | Mentioned travel in the interests |
| Team Oriented (10) | 8 | Team work was mentioned in the internship |
| Self-motivated (10) | 5 | Motivation can be seen with the 2,000 calls made, but there are no other indicators of motivation |
| Customer service (10) | 10 | Customer service is mentioned in the experiences |

Sample rubric 2

Application reviews:

| S# | Name | Sales | Education | Leadership | Intrapersonal | Budgeting | Total | Pro's | Con's |
|----|------------|-------|-----------|------------|---------------|-----------|-------|---|---|
| 1 | [Redacted] | 18 | 18 | 16 | 18 | 4 | 75 | Liked the confidence in Cover Letter Short term experience but diverse experience showing adaptability and coach ability | Not much direct sales experience, just knowledge Not much current leadership experience Could elaborate more on current info Doesn't need the interests line |

Sample Rubric 3

Name: _____

| Criteria | 0-5 | 6-10 | 11-15 | 16-20 |
|--------------------------------|---|---|--|--|
| Experience/Education 20 | No work experience related to a professional work environment, group work, no business degree | Little experience related to a professional work environment with sales or business development, group work, a business class or two. | Sufficient experience related to a professional work environment with sales or business development, group work, very little sales experience, a business minor/major. | Exceeds experience requirements of proficient time spent in a professional work environment, group work, sales certification or training, business degree, graduating this semester. Leadership. |
| Skill Sets 10 | Little experience and training in technology, virtually no soft skills, little achievement. | Some technological training/experience, soft skills, some achievement in background. | Sufficient technological training/experience, good soft skills, achievements that augment the candidate considering the job description. | Skill sets that exceed required skills in technology, soft skills, much achievement and awards for leadership and accomplishments. |
| Persuasiveness 10 | No rational organization of points on resume in line with job description. Main points in cover letter are not clear. | Organization of resume barely resembles the job description. Cover letter hits main points for job description. | Resume is sufficiently organized to match the Job description. Cover letter demonstrates the candidates experience parallel to the job description. | Resume reflects the job description. Cover letter demonstrates critical thinking and creativity in how the candidate is perfect for the job. |
| Grammar/Spelling 20 | Resume and Cover letter are riddled with grammar and spelling errors | Mostly legible and understandable. Many grammar and spelling errors. | A few grammar and spelling errors. Good usage of the English language. | Very few if any grammar and spelling errors. Excellent mastery of the English language. |
| Formatting 12 | Resume is too cluttered. Cover letter is not aligned correctly and its missing information | Resume is better but still crowded and not very legible. Cover letter has all the components but not cohesive. | Resume is formatted correctly with few errors. Cover letter has all components and is cohesive. | Resume is spotless. Cover letter has all components and exceeds expectations of clarity and cohesiveness. |

Total: 72/100

Comments: No mention of technological skills.
Bullets in cover letter is a no-no