

Aligning sales curriculum content and pedagogy with practitioners' needs

Robert Newberry
Winona State University

Marianne K. Collins
Winona State University

ABSTRACT:

Meeting the instructional needs of both students and sales practitioners is a common challenge for sales educators. The dynamic and ever evolving nature of the sales landscape, in conjunction with the need to align sales curriculum with relevant business practices is the focus of this article. Building on previous research, this study investigates critical topics and training methods currently utilized by industry in order to assess the relevance of content and pedagogy of the sales curriculum. Utilizing qualitative exploratory research methods, the authors identified content, key selling skills, and pedagogy as preferred by sales practitioners. A sales curriculum framework is then proposed that aligns and prioritizes these content topics, skills and pedagogical tools.

Keywords

Sales curriculum, curriculum development, sales practitioners, curriculum content, teaching pedagogy, qualitative research

INTRODUCTION

There is an emerging interest in the sales education landscape, as evidenced by the rapid expansion of universities and colleges offering sales curricula. Employers often reference the value of these classroom experiences when evaluating potential entry level employee prospects. Demand for graduates interested in pursuing sales has been uninterrupted by technological advances or economic conditions. There are currently more than 24 million salespeople in the United States (Selling Power, 2013), and the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2013) estimates that the number of sales positions is expected to grow by over 12% through 2020. The Bureau of Labor Statistics also indicates that while most of these sales positions require a bachelor's degree, few require a specific major but rather they seek out candidates that have developed certain skill sets.

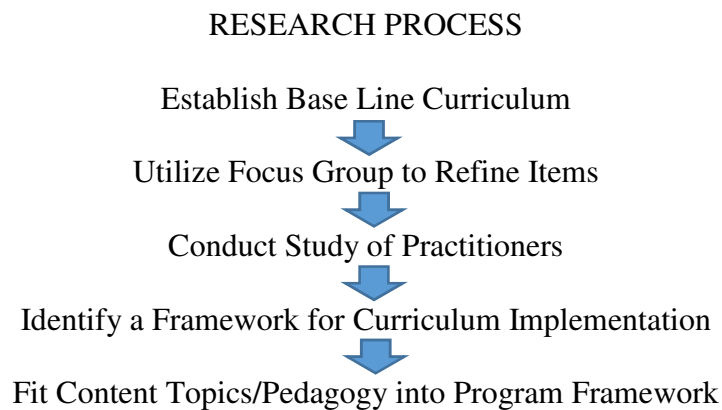
As further evidence of this opportunity's availability to undergraduate students, the most prevalent entry level career positions for all college graduates from 2002 through 2007 were either sales or management trainee positions (NACE, 2009). In addition, a recent study conducted by HR Chally (2012) found that 82% of all marketing majors and 66% of all College of Business students are headed for a sales related job. So the demand for these courses and this material is substantial not only within marketing, but also across numerous other disciplines.

Despite this demand, educators are challenged to meet the instructional needs of the students due to a lack of current and relevant content given the dynamic nature of the global business environment and technological advances, and the potential for a disconnect between academia and practitioners. Hence, there appears to be a need for aligning current curriculum with practitioner needs while enhancing students' key communication and sales skills. Logic suggests that connecting with practitioners by involving them in the development and delivery of curriculum content might best accomplish both goals. Building on previous research (Deeter-Schmelz and Kennedy, 2011; Liesen, Tippins and Lilly, 2004) the authors extend the review of the sales curriculum to include exploratory qualitative research on current business practices, critical topic areas as defined by current practitioners, training methods utilized by industry, identification of key topical areas and skills most sought by employers, and the proposal of a pedagogical framework for content delivery.

The creation of relevant curriculum content promotes the development of student skills and abilities in key selling skills and attributes, and will support student career readiness through their exposure to a sophisticated curriculum in sales and customer service. In addition, it will equip them with the ability to network with professional contacts in their chosen field. By making the content and pedagogy current and attractive to both students and potential employers, the generally negative perception of sales as a profession held by many students, as supported by a rich stream of research (Wiles and Spiro, 2004; Michaels and Marshall, 2002; Peterson and Devlin, 1994; Weilbaker and Merritt, 1992), may in fact be mitigated or abated. Further, through "closer connections between educators and business professionals" (Cummins, Peltier, Erffmeyer and Whalen, 2013), this research contributes to the improvement and enhancement of the content and pedagogy of the sales curriculum. By developing course topics as a direct result of research with practitioners and potential employers, sales programs can not only provide substantial opportunities for professional employment but also advance key personal skills (e.g., communication skills and critical thinking) useful for a lifetime.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The primary objective of this study is to discover/identify critical instructional content topics and pedagogy for sales program curriculum based on the judgment of current practitioners, ascertained through focus groups and in-depth interviews. To accomplish this task a five stage process was followed as is depicted below.



The initial stage involved establishing a core set of topics for discussion. This was accomplished through the use of secondary sources and by conducting two focus groups. To establish a starting point the authors first took an inventory of the topics currently covered and the pedagogy utilized in the three sales classes currently in the university's sales program (Professional Selling, Advanced Professional Selling and Sales Management). Next a review of a wide range of published academic material was conducted, again identifying most prevalent content topics and pedagogy. A third source for building the initial inventory was a study published by the National Sales Education Foundation located at The Chally Group in Dayton, OH. The Chally Group (2012) had recently completed an inventory of critical issues facing sales forces and sales managers by interviewing hundreds of industry experts and participants. Finally, a survey of recent articles identifying key content topics and pedagogy applications in sales courses was conducted. The results, a compilation of common topics, can be found in Table 1 - Literature Review Inventory of Content Topics and Pedagogy (Appendix).

Stage 2 of this research involved two focus groups reviewing the inventory of topics and pedagogy, discussing the importance of each item, adding, subtracting and redefining items as they saw fit and then prioritizing the topics and pedagogy. The two focus groups were comprised of practitioners with substantial experience in sales. Participants ranged in number of years of experience from 2 to 27 years. Focus group I was composed of 6 people while group II was composed of 7 individuals. Table 2 - Focus Group Ranking of Content Topics and Pedagogy (Appendix) summarizes the topics and pedagogy each focus group provided and the final consensus rating for each item.

Stage 3 involved in-depth interviews of numerous experts and experienced professionals in sales. The goal of this stage, given the inventory created in the first two stages, was to build on an understanding of current practices, technology tools in use, training methods, critical content topics, and sales practices in general. Over an 8 month period, 37 interviews took place across 32

companies operating in 19 different industries. The firms ranged in size from several Fortune 1000 firms to firms with less than 100 employees. Mostly the firms are located in the upper Midwest and many of the interviewees are alumni of the authors' institution. Distribution across industries of respondents included 10 from business-to-business services, 8 from banking/insurance/investment, 7 from wholesalers/distributors, 6 from manufacturing, and 6 from retailing including retail services. In each case the interview was recorded in detailed notes and the information was synthesized seeking out patterns. Tables 3, 4 and 5 – Practitioner Inventory of Content Topics, Key Selling Skills and Pedagogy (Appendix) provides the final list and a rating of each item's importance according to the cumulative opinion of those surveyed.

Stage 4 required identifying a framework around which the actual program could be implemented. As noted earlier in this paper there is substantial, negative bias among students regarding sales as a profession. To improve student interest this bias must be mitigated by altering the way students think of salespeople and job they do. Several research studies (Bristow, Gulati and Amyx, 2006; Sojka, Gupta and Hartman, 2000) have shown that students exposed to a sales class have a more positive attitude toward sales as a career, or at least as an entry level position. Thus, if a program desires to attract a greater number of students, the initial introduction to that program must focus on changing attitudes among non-sales students regarding professional selling. For those experiencing this attitude transformation, the natural progression is to provide them the opportunity to learn the fundamentals of selling. Content would include a significant amount of communication, persuasive and organizational skills, including a mixture of theory and skills with exposure to a wide range of selling concepts. The third step would focus on perfecting selling skills and applying theory to practice with substantial experiential learning opportunities. Finally, the fourth phase would place participating students in a practicum situation so as to demonstrate their abilities in a 'real world' situation. The culmination of this analysis was the realization that the program needed to substantially change the content and pedagogy within the current three course format and to add a fourth course involving a practicum as a program capstone. The next challenge was to refine those courses to fit this framework and to implement the learning objectives above.

The final stage involves making decisions on where in the program each content topic item and pedagogy usage fits in the framework, and determining the emphasis of each within a particular class. Tables 6, 7 and 8 – Course Framework as Defined by Content Topics, Key Selling Skills and Pedagogy (Appendix) show the placement as recommended by practitioners within the inherent limitations of a three credit per course model, program funding and faculty expertise. The key is that those items identified as critical are given the greatest emphasis in the program, while the important items are given sufficient attention. Again, the goal is to produce graduates that are deemed as preferred candidates for entry level sales trainees by the firms that hire the program's graduates and that those graduates are positioned to advance along a progressive career path as they so choose.

ANALYSIS AND IMPLICATIONS

The initial review covered the existing program, a survey of academic materials, and a literature review. The resultant inventory was presented to and discussed by two focus groups. Their analysis suggests that the three content topics as determined most critical by both focus groups are listening skills, framing benefits and relationship building skills. The most critical pedagogy applications according to both focus groups were real life experiences and sales

competitions. Other items considered critical/very important by both focus groups included negotiation skills, critical thinking ability, role play and professional development readings. Most importantly the focus groups allowed researchers to observe numerous perspectives discussed openly among practitioners and to consider their alternative semantics.

The practitioner interview results identified key content topics and pedagogy applications according to practitioners. Critical content topics included Basic Sales Process, Communication Principles and Relationship Selling. Critical skills included Communication, Self-Perception/Personal Expression, Professional Development and Presentation. Critical pedagogy applications include Role Play, Actual Sales Experiences, Job Shadow/Observation and Extra-Curricular. These findings appear to emphasize personal development and skills versus reaching an understanding of broader principles. Also, the pedagogical emphasis is on experiential learning techniques versus traditional methodology.

If a program is to implement a market driven curriculum then the above findings must incorporate appropriate content and pedagogy into a set of courses. This study proposes a framework for that implementation. Tables 6, 7 and 8 suggest one implementation possibility.

RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

There are several limitations to this research. There was no attempt to interview a population other than firms and alumni that support this program. Thus the results cannot be generalized across other programs. However, discussion with other educators and practitioners appears to support the content topics and pedagogy emphasis discovered in this study. Secondly, while exploratory qualitative research methodology utilizing in-depth interviews does provide insights and did allow clarification and expansion of issues, there was no effort to confirm research findings though a quantitative follow up. As a tool for discovery this in-depth interview methodology has proven enlightening in uncovering new information about topics of great diversity. These exploratory research findings offers a basis for future research utilizing quantitative methods.

REFERENCES

- Ary, W. (2006). *How to become a superstar sales professional*. U.S.: Ary Group, Inc.
- Bristow, D., Gulati, R. & Amyx, D. (2006). A look at professional selling from the students' perspective: A replication and extension. *Marketing Management Journal*, 16(1), 88-103.
- Cummins, S., Peltier, J.W., Erffmeyer, R. & Whalen, J. (2013). A critical review of the literature for sales educators. *Journal of Marketing Education*, 35(1), 68-78.
- Deeter-Schmelz, D.R. & Kennedy, N.K. (2011). A global perspective on the current state of sales education in the college curriculum. *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management*, XXXI (1), 55-75.
- Hoffmeister, D. (2012), Universities and colleges sales education landscape. DePaul University Best Practices Research Program, Center for Sales Leadership.
- Jolles, R.L., (1998), *Customer centered selling*. New York, NY: The Free Press,

Liesen, B., Tippins, M. & Lilly, B. (2004). A broadened sales curriculum: Exploratory evidence. *Journal of Marketing Education*, 26 (3), 197-207.

Lill, D.J. & Lill, J.K. (2012). *Selling: The profession*, 6th Edition. Antioch, TN: DM Bass Publications.

Michaels, R.E. & Marshall, G.W. (2002). Perspectives on selling and sales management education. *Marketing Education Review*, 12 (2), 1-11.

National Association of Colleges and Employers. (2009). Fall 2009 Salary Survey.

National Sales Foundation. (2012). Greatest sales challenges working paper. Chally Group Worldwide, Inc., Dayton, OH.

Peterson, R.T. & Devlin, J.S. (1994). Perspectives on entry-level positions by graduating marketing seniors. *Marketing Education Review*, 4, 2 -5.

Rackham, N. (1988). *SPIN Selling*. New York, NY: Huthwaite, Inc., McGraw-Hill Book Company.

Schwantz, R. (2010). *The wedge, how to start selling and start winning*. Erlanger, KY: The National Underwriter Company.

Selling Power. (October, 2013). 500 largest sales forces in America.

Sojka, J.Z., Gupta, A. K. & Hartman, T.P. (2000). Student perceptions of sales careers: Implications for educators and recruiters. *Mid-American Journal of Business*, 15(1), 55-64.

Stevens, H. & Cox, J. (1992). *The Quadrant Solution: A business novel that solves the mystery of sales success*. AMACOM.

Tasso, K. (2003), *Dynamic practice development: Selling skills and techniques for the professions*. London, England: Thorogood.

U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2013), *Occupational Outlook Handbook*.

Weilbaker, D.C. & Merritt, N. J. (1992). Attracting graduates to sales positions: The role of recruiter knowledge. *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management*, XII (4), 49 – 58.

Wiles, M.A. and Spiro, R.L. (2004). Attracting graduates to sales positions and the role of recruiter knowledge: A reexamination.” *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management*, XXIV (1), 39 – 48.

Table 1 – Literature Review Inventory of Content Topics and Pedagogy

Most Frequently Referenced Content Topics		Pedagogy
Prioritizing target prospects	Quantify/monetize most compelling benefits to prospects	Independent Studies
Prospecting & qualifying leads	Facilitating different communication styles	Internships
Gaining access to (the right) decision makers	Nonverbal communication skills	Role Plays
Building rapport	Listening skills; motivational interviewing	Presentations
Identifying customer's key pain points	Presentation skills	Simulations
Understanding implied versus explicit needs	Developing relationship selling skills	Exams/Quizzes
Demonstrating capability	Consultative selling techniques	Case Studies
Simplifying complex products/services	International selling	Lecture
Accelerating the buying decision process	Time/territory management	
Facilitating buying by removing obstacles	Understanding and some experience with CRM	
Moving customers from cost to value decisions	Sales management	
Overcoming loyalty to an existing competitor	Networking techniques & experience	
Qualifying a buyer's readiness to commit	Buyer psychology	
Obtaining the right commitment	Understanding legal/ethical issues	
Problem/Implication/Need	Sales careers; types of sales positions	
Payoff questions	Post sale service	

Source: Ary, 2006; Cummins et al, 2013; Deeter-Schmelz et al, 2011; Jolles, 1998; Liesen et al, 2004; Lill & Lill, 2012; National Sales Foundation, 2012; Rackham, 1988; Schwantz, 2010; Stevens & Cox, 1992; Tasso, 2003

Table 2 – Focus Groups Ranking of Content Topics and Pedagogy

Content Topics	Group 1	Group 2
Listening Skills	Critical	Critical
Framing Benefits	Critical	Critical
Relationship building skills	Critical	Critical
Negotiation skills	Very important	Critical
Critical thinking skills	Somewhat important	Critical
Gaining assess	Somewhat important	Very important
Overcoming resistance	Very important	Optional
Understanding self-perception; attitudes & motivation	Somewhat important	Somewhat important
Ability to collaborate	Useful	Somewhat important
Personal, time & territory management	Very important	Optional
Networking skills	Very important	Not mentioned
Customer education & program implementation	Somewhat important	Not mentioned
Ethics/Legal issues	Optional	Somewhat important
Qualifying prospects	Somewhat important	Optional
Business principles	Not mentioned	Somewhat important
Pedagogy	Group 1	Group 2
Real life experiences, e.g., internships & job shadow	Critical	Critical
Sales competitions	Critical	Critical
Role play	Very important	Critical
Professional development readings	Very important	Very important
Resources, e.g., videos, online examples	Very important	Not mentioned
Presentations	Somewhat important	Very important
Exams/Quizzes	Optional	Somewhat important

Table 3. Practitioner Inventory of Content Topics

Importance	Topics
Critical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ <i>Basic Sales Process</i> – preliminaries, investigation, demonstrate capabilities, obtain commitment, follow up <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preliminaries – generating leads, qualifying leads to prospects, prioritizing prospects, gaining access to decision maker, and building rapport • Investigation – building empathy for customer situation/understanding the customer’s business, uncovering explicit needs, identifying key customer pain points, overcome loyalty to existing customers • Demonstrate Capabilities – framing benefits, move customer from cost to value decision, quantify/monetize most compelling benefits, simplify complex products/services, solutions sales versus product sales • Obtain Commitment – overcoming resistance and removing obstacles to buying, resolve emotional issues, qualifying readiness to commit, obtaining the right commitment • Follow-up – post sale service, solicit feedback, oversee installation and/or structured training ➤ <i>Communications Principles</i> – understanding different styles, communication process ➤ <i>Relationship Selling</i> – accessibility during sales process, post purchase, maintaining/growing customer relationships, soliciting feedback
Important	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ <i>Consultative Selling</i> – expertise, strong relationship, persistent, collaborator, patience ➤ <i>Legal/Ethical Issues</i> – ethical principles, typical organizational standards, ROI in ethical behavior ➤ <i>Sales Careers</i> – types of sales jobs, benefits, daily activities, long term career options ➤ <i>Hunter-Farmer Sales Roles</i> ➤ <i>Selling against Competition</i> – “The Wedge” (Schwartz, 1998), valued differentiation ➤ <i>Buyer Psychology</i> – needs/wants/desires, beliefs/attitudes/opinions, emotion/reasoning/motives ➤ <i>International Selling</i> ➤ <i>CRM</i> – basic principles, types of applications, the technology
Useful	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ “<i>The Quadrant Solution</i>” (Stevens & Cox, 1992) – sales roles types: closer, consultative, relationship, display ➤ <i>Building a Sales Funnel</i> – unique structure, information sources, technology based tools, key hierarchical qualifying rules ➤ <i>Business Principles</i> ➤ <i>Salesperson’s Organization</i> – vision/positioning, resources/capabilities, culture (customer driven) ➤ <i>Sales Management</i> – hiring, motivation and compensation

Table 4 – Practitioner Inventory of Skills

Importance	Topics
Critical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ <i>Communication</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nonverbal – body language, facial expressions, grooming and fashion, proxemics • Listening – focus, responsiveness, active listening, • Questioning – “SPIN” (Rackham, 1988), motivational interviewing • Communication Styles – social style • Writing • Persuasion ➤ <i>Self-Perception/Personal Expression</i> – positive image, attitude, motivation, self-reliance, accountability, energetic, sociable, optimistic ➤ <i>Professional Development</i> - competitive, practice positive behaviors, entrepreneurial, coachable, organized, work efficiently, adaptable, demonstrate integrity ➤ <i>Presentation</i> – use of visuals, touching audience emotions, nonverbal, organization, providing a big finish, engaging the audience, voice clarity and use of tone/volume, being prepared
Important	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ <i>Networking</i> – purpose, tools, processes ➤ <i>Rapport Building</i> - meet and greet, use of questions and listening, communication styles ➤ <i>Collaboration</i> – teamwork, leadership, gaining by compromising, supporting others, with internal departments ➤ <i>Critical Thinking</i> – problem solving ➤ <i>Negotiation</i> – overcoming resistance, reaching a favorable commitment, conflict management ➤ <i>Empathy Expression</i> – focus on customer, use of communication skills, expressing understanding ➤ <i>Time/Territory Management</i> – goals and objectives, results oriented, establishing a plan, organization and scheduling, prioritizing customers/prospects, account planning
Useful	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ <i>Research Techniques</i> – leads, qualifying, identifying decision makers ➤ <i>Closing Techniques</i>

Table 5 – Practitioner Inventory of Pedagogy

Category	Importance	Pedagogy
Experiential	Critical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ <i>Role Play</i> – competitive, own creation, given scenarios, computer generated ➤ <i>Actual Sales Experience</i> – internships, fundraising sales calls, class project, mentors ➤ <i>Job Shadow/Observation</i> ➤ <i>Extra-Curricular</i> – competitive sales team, networking events, seminars/workshop
	Important	➤ None listed
	Useful	➤ <i>Simulations</i> – online/computerized
Traditional	Critical	➤ None listed
	Important	➤ <i>Speakers</i> – live, online
	Useful	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ <i>Lecture</i> – traditional, interactive ➤ <i>Exercises/Assignments</i> ➤ <i>Exams/Quizzes</i> ➤ <i>Research/Independent Study</i>

Table 6. Course Framework as defined by Content Topic

Importance	Content Topic	Introduction to Professional Selling	Professional Selling Basic	Advanced Professional Selling	Sales Emersion/ Internship
Critical	Basic Sales Process	Primary	Primary	Primary	Primary
Critical	Communications Principles	Primary	Primary	Primary	Primary
Critical	Relationship Selling	Secondary	Primary	Primary	Situational
Important	Consultative Selling	Secondary	Primary	Primary	Situational
Important	Legal/Ethical Issues	Secondary	Primary	Primary	Primary
Important	Sales Careers	Primary	Primary	Primary	Secondary
Important	Hunter-Farmer Sales Roles	Minor	Secondary	Primary	Situational
Important	Selling Against Competition	Minor	Secondary	Primary	Situational
Important	Buyer Psychology	Minor	Primary	Primary	Situational
Important	International Selling	Minor	Secondary	Secondary	Situational
Important	CRM	Secondary	Secondary	Primary	Situational
Useful	Quadrant Solution	Minor	Secondary	Secondary	Situational
Useful	Building Sales Funnel	Secondary	Secondary	Secondary	Situational
Useful	Business Principles	Secondary	Secondary	Minor	Situational
Useful	Salesperson's Organization	Secondary	Secondary	Minor	Situational
Useful	Sales Management	Minor	Secondary	None	Situational

Table 7. Course Framework as defined by Key Selling Skills

Importance	Skills	Introduction to Professional Selling	Professional Selling Basic	Advanced Professional Selling	Sales Emersion/ Internship
Critical	Communication	Primary	Primary	Primary	Primary
Critical	Self-Perception/ Personal Expression	Primary	Primary	Primary	Primary
Critical	Professional Development	Primary s	Primary	Primary	Primary
Critical	Presentation	Secondary	Secondary	Primary	Secondary
Important	Networking	Primary	Primary	Primary	Primary
Important	Rapport Building	Secondary	Primary	Primary	Primary
Important	Collaboration	Secondary	Primary	Primary	Primary
Important	Critical Thinking	Secondary	Secondary	Primary	Situational
Important	Negotiation	Minor	Secondary	Primary	Situational
Important	Empathy Expression	Minor	Secondary	Primary	Secondary
Important	Time/Territory Management	Minor	Secondary	Secondary	Situational
Useful	Research Techniques	Minor	Secondary	Secondary	Situational
Useful	Closing Techniques	None	Minor	Minor	Situational

Table 8. Course Framework as defined by Pedagogy

Importance	Pedagogy	Introduction to Professional Selling	Professional Selling Basic	Advanced Professional Selling	Sales Emersion/ Internship
Critical	Role Play	Minor	Primary	Primary	Situational
Critical	Actual Sales Experience	Minor	Secondary	Primary	Primary
Critical	Job Shadow/ Observation	Minor	Secondary	Primary	Primary
Critical	Extra-Curricular	Secondary	Primary	Primary	N/A
Important	Speakers	Primary	Secondary	Minor	Situational
Useful	Simulations	Minor	Secondary	Minor	N/A
Critical	Lecture	Primary	Secondary	Minor	N/A
Critical	Exercises/ Assignments	Primary	Secondary	Minor	N/A
Critical	Exams/Quizzes	Secondary	None	None	N/A
Critical	Research/ Independent Study	Minor	Minor	Minor	Situational