

Sales role play: an online simulation

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ABSTRACT

The online role play simulation as described in this article addresses critical skills as identified by practitioners and includes background materials, buyer and seller profiles, a sale/no-sale decision matrix, as well as a grading rubric, thereby facilitating a variety of selling scenarios. Both the buyer and the seller have integral roles in the outcome of the sales process in this role play, with as much emphasis placed on either role, enabling a more in-depth learning opportunity for students to clearly understand the buyer's motivations. This tool enables instructors to align their sales curriculum content and pedagogy with practitioners' needs, while facilitating the learning experience for the professional selling student by simulating the role stress and ambiguity of the sales profession and to actually employ adaptive selling techniques.

Key Words: Sales curriculum, experiential learning, role plays, online simulation

INTRODUCTION

In an effort to align sales curriculum with practitioner needs, much research has been conducted identifying key content and skills that industry seeks in its entry level sales hires (Loe and Inks, 2014; Leisen, et al, 2004). However, there has not been as much emphasis on developing pedagogy and tools for instructors teaching these courses that address those key selling skills, including role plays in which the seller progresses through all the stages of the sales process and the buyer plays an active and integral role in determining the success of the sales call. In addition, creating a classroom activity where the seller faces resistance provides an opportunity for the seller to either turn ‘no’ into a successful sale or develop the ability to accept the absolute rejection that salespeople experience somewhere between 80 and 90% of the time (Rapaille, 2006) .

As a result, this article describes a role play scenario in which both the buyer and the seller have integral roles in the outcomes of the sales process. By assigning either buyer or seller roles to Professional Selling students, and placing as much emphasis on both roles, a more in-depth learning opportunity is provided that enables students to clearly understand the buyer’s motivations. In addition, the instructor can manipulate the selling scenario by creating specific buyer personas, allowing sales students to actually experience adaptive selling techniques, often cited by practitioners as an essential skill (Newberry and Collins, 2015). Finally, through an online program, the instructor can create a variety of information gathering thresholds, actions or techniques at each stage of the sales process that the seller must obtain and utilize before the potential sale can advance, otherwise the seller will face resistance and/or rejection.

ROLE PLAY DESCRIPTION

This online case is a three stage role play, so in a sense it is three role plays in one. The instructor may have the salesperson progress through three steps of the sales process or select a single step for the student to experience. Stage one is a prospecting phone call with a salesperson’s goal of setting a face-to-face appointment with the prospect. Stage two is the initial face-to-face meeting with a goal of defining the needs of the prospect. Stage three is a follow-up meeting with the goal of moving an initial proposal forward to be considered by the buyer. In each stage the salesperson is faced with the possibility of failure depending on the buyer persona assigned to the buyer by the instructor and on the seller’s appropriate techniques or lack thereof. The complete three step role play is designed for implementation over at least a three teaching period cycle. A flow chart of the three stages is presented in Appendix A.

Selling Scenarios

In stage one the salesperson is provided basic facts regarding the prospect and the prospect’s company. The amount of information can be manipulated by the instructor but generally should provide the salesperson what might typically be acquired through the internet and by doing basic networking. The student is tasked with making the initial telephone contact as a cold call, so the salesperson needs to build some rapport and generate enough interest so that the prospect is willing to exchange the needed basic information. Ultimately the goal is to qualify

the prospect and if the prospect appears to be viable, set a face-to-face appointment. Of course, failure in any of those areas is a possibility and the instructor can set conditions on what would prompt the prospect from granting the appointment or the salesperson deciding the prospect was not qualified. The online programming will allow for these parameters to be easily set by the instructor, then provide the students participating in the role play the appropriate information.

In stage two the salesperson has the information acquired before and during stage one, plus any additional information the instructor would like to release. This additional information may include knowledge that would commonly be obtained through research or networking within the industry. The second stage purpose is to define precisely the needs of the buyer. Regardless of the sales process being taught, there will be an inquiry stage that attempts to determine the specific problems facing the buyer, their value perceptions regarding potential solutions and their decision making process/buying center structure. If the salesperson can acquire sufficient information and understanding of this material then the seller can decide if advancing the sale forward is appropriate. Of course, the prospect would also have to agree that there was potential value, so establishing need and a viable alternative solution is necessary as well. The goal is to achieve the above and set a follow-up appointment so as to present a proposal to the prospect.

The third stage is a proposal presentation, receiving feedback and handling objections. Again the instructor has choices regarding how much help is offered in preparing the salesperson to deliver the proposal. The instructor will also have a number of options regarding what kind of objections should be raised and how vigorous those objections are offered. The cycle of objections and asking for the business, trial closes or real closes, will lead to either a yes or no to purchase, or to a continuation if a solution requires further research.

Buyer Personas

In the online simulated role play, there are currently four buyer personas each with a unique communication style. The personas reflect the personalities and attributes that incorporate the four social styles developed by David Merrill and Roger Reid (1981): Analyticals, Drivers, Expressives and Amiables. This facilitates the development of the student seller's ability to both recognize the buyer's personality style and to adapt their presentation in order to best meet the customer's expectations. In addition, the student who takes on the role of the buyer has the opportunity to explore in greater depth the behavioral attributes of each of the personas in the social style matrix, thereby providing additional learning opportunities for students to gauge buyer personalities.

Within each persona there are two directives on buyer behavior, one leading to success if the salesperson can fulfill certain requirements adjusted to the social style and one leading to failure regardless of the salesperson's performance. While conflict or rejection is often associated with negative outcomes (Bradford and Weitz, 2009), learning to handle no effectively can also result in a positive and more satisfying buyer-seller relationship.

Learning resilience in the face of resistance and rejection ('no, not ever') is a key skill in which very few entry level salespeople have had previous experience. Thus, at any phase in this role play, the salesperson may fail to reach their objective because they failed to perform the necessary actions for success or they may fail despite achieving satisfactory performance standards simply because this was a prospect that refused to cooperate. Further, the sales role play can be manipulated to enable students to adapt their selling style in order to encourage the buyer to reconsider so that the sales may advance to either 'no, not yet' or to a successful continuation of the sale. Either scenario requires the student to further develop their adaptive selling techniques.

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

The benefits of this role play are limited if the student does not have the opportunity to reflect on his or her performance through appropriate and timely feedback. As proposed by Kolb's social learning theory (1984), experiential learning includes actually experiencing the new behavior, reflecting on it, assimilating it into existing knowledge and applying that newly learned behavior to another situation. Therefore, as can be seen in the flowchart (Appendix A), the role play provides 24 different scenarios, comprised of two yes/no directives by four personas by three stages. In addition, there are actually 36 possible outcomes since each of the 'yes' buyer assignments has the possibility of a negative outcome for the seller if they fail to succeed in meeting performance standards.

The appropriate curricula location for this online simulated role play is most likely in advanced professional selling courses, which often emphasize deeper learning and further enhancement of specific sales skills. Further, learning outcomes can be fashioned that not only include what knowledge the student is expected to exhibit, but this role play also offers a plethora of skill sets including:

- Pre-call research
- Rapport building skills
- Setting an appointment
- Determining need
- Asking probing insightful questions
- Moving forward in the sales process
- Learning about rejection/failure
- Dealing with alternative communication styles
- Understanding the buyer role

ONLINE METHODOLOGY

The idea of utilizing technology to enhance a role play is not new. However, the ability of the instructor to offer substantial variation within the application is unprecedented to the authors'

knowledge. The instructor can set absolute behavior and outcomes, or can establish guidelines of behavior forcing certain behavior to occur to reach a successful outcome, or allow participants virtual freedom within their character role to reach conclusions on their own. In the process, this allows the instructor to pursue any number of learning objectives as noted in the previous section. The process for the instructor to establish the role play for a pair of students is automated so that as the instructor makes programming selections the material is extracted from the database and compiled into a format that can be delivered to each appropriate participant.

The online program allows the instructor to provide the buyer with a specific persona and details as to their behavior in communicating with the salesperson. However, the buyer is not a robotic role. There is an expectation that the buyer will respond appropriate to their programmed communication style in a natural flow consistent with the salesperson's behavior. It is key to the success of the role play that the buyer seriously approach their role. This offers the opportunity for the buyer to experience significant learning regarding buyer motivation, communication styles and personalities.

Regarding the salesperson's role, the instructor has a number of options regarding knowledge available through the online program versus the salesperson conducting their own pre-call research. The instructor may also determine where in the sales process the salesperson enters the simulation. Thus, the simulation may start with the cold phone call or either of the advanced steps and the instructor through the online program will provide whatever information is appropriate for entry into the simulation at that point.

Of course, without assessment and feedback the role play loses its effectiveness. The simulation program distributes the appropriate assessment tools to each participant allowing the instructor to include other evaluators, such as student peers, instructors or external evaluators. Thus, the loop is closed at the direction of the instructor.

SUMMARY

The simulation online delivery methodology allows the instructor to offer and control as many as 36 different role play scenarios. With a few selections the instructor can assign a buyer persona and the criteria for the buyer to accept moving the sale forward depending on the behavior of the salesperson. The simulation has three distinct stages allowing a true experience of moving a sale forward and then following that success with an attempt at moving the sale even further along. Also, each stage allows opportunity for the salesperson to experience a definitive 'NO', the most common outcome of a sales call. Finally, the simulation provides assessment and feedback devices that can be easily utilized by the salesperson, buyer, instructor, peer reviewers or outside reviewers. The distribution of the assessment devices is controlled by the instructor, and through the simulation software are accumulated and reported to the parties that the instructor also assigns. The purpose of the simulation role play is to offer a more realistic sales situation that is easy to manage for the instructor.

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Appendix A.

Role Play Simulation Flow Chart

