

To master something, teach it: An innovation for a sales management course

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to present a project that builds labor market skills employers are seeking through experiential classroom learning. The sales management training exercise described in this article provides students with an opportunity to think and act like sales managers by working together in teams to collaborate on a training exercise and determine how to best train their salesforce on a particular topic. The project engages students to research a sales topic, develop a training module and evaluation tool, and deliver the module to other students. Included in the project is a list of relevant sales training topics, an outline for the written training plan, and grading rubrics for both the training exercise and evaluation tool; and the written training plan. The sales management training exercise endeavors to enhance student learning by providing a concrete project that encourages collaboration and communication, critical skills employers look for when hiring sales professionals. Assessment results show that students enjoy the project, actively participate and retain the information.

This innovative project enriches the sales management course which is particularly important if it is the only sales related course in the marketing curriculum. If the sales management course is part of a sales curriculum, the project provides an excellent review for students. The sales innovation presented in this paper strives to incorporate the development of the critical skills employers seek in a potential sales employee into the sales management curriculum.

Key Words: Experiential Learning, Sales Management, Sales Skills, Training

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INTRODUCTION

The unfortunate disconnect between marketing and sales has been widely acknowledged over the years. Researchers have noted the friction, animosity and mutual lack of respect between sales and marketing (Biemans, Brencic and Malshe 2010). That disconnect has also occurred in colleges and universities. Kellerman and Heckmat (1989) found a variety of differing opinions regarding the teaching of sales at the college level. Johnson, in a 1982 survey of AACSB schools, found that those schools were most likely to offer a sales management course if they offered any sales related course. Fogel, Hoffmeister, et al (2012) reported that sales curricula were rare among AACSB schools, and if any sales related courses were offered it would most likely be sales management.

Fogel, et al (2012) cited a DePaul study from 2007 that found that sales personnel hired over a ten-year period who came from sales education programs reached break-even in their territories 30 percent faster. Yet in 2017, only 119 colleges/universities were listed by the Sales Education Foundation as having a recognized sales education program (<https://salesfoundation.org/>). As Fogel, et al (2012) noted, sales is “vital to business, but of the 350,000 students a year who earn bachelor’s degrees in business from American universities and the 170,000 who earn MBAs only a tiny fraction have been taught anything about it” (p. 96). Since many universities may only have a sales management course, or it may be the only sales course required of marketing majors, the challenge is to deliver a course rich in a variety of sales content and to provide students with the opportunity to develop salesforce specific skills. The purpose of this paper is to present a project that builds labor market skills employers are seeking through experiential learning in the sales management course.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research conducted on the skills employers value from recent college graduates identified the ability to work in a team, and written communication skills as two of the most important attributes, with more than 80% of respondents requiring these skills (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2018). The skills required of the sales professional mirror those required of the recent college graduate, with communication skills and teamwork listed as two of the most important traits employers are looking for when hiring recent graduates for their sales teams (Greaves, 2018).

It has been observed that in general students are apathetic about traditional learning methods (Bradford, et al 2016). Experiential learning has been extensively recognized in the literature as an effective learning strategy to improve student engagement. Wanless, et al (2016) define experiential learning theory “as the constructivist process through which the learner creates their own knowledge in reaction to experiences and subsequent reflection on those experiences, in which they are actively engaged (p 115). The premise is that with active learning students are engaged in the learning process and therefore, learn better through participating in discussion, problem solving or other activity that requires them to process the new information. Karns (2005) found that active learning was more memorable and enjoyable for students. Karns (2005), also found that students were more likely to participate in learning activities that they found enjoyable. Inks and Avila (2008) demonstrated that experiential learning is positively received by students and students perceive the experiential exercises as providing “greater

value,” (p 54). Indeed, there is a substantial body of business education research that has focused on the value of experiential learning and its superiority to passive methods.

In addition, Rocco and Whalen (2014) demonstrated that team-based experiential projects had additional benefits to students including additional satisfaction, and improved applicability to their future careers. It has been shown that team-based learning facilitates the active learning environment and improves student preparation, cooperation and serves as a basis for thinking that leads to improved critical decision making (Stamatel, et al 2013, Gullo, et al 2015). Rocco and Whalen, (2016) note that faculty may be reluctant to implement team-based learning due to the prospect of the potential for being involved with student team conflicts. Consequently, this paper offers a well-defined team-based project and a method for resolving potential student team conflicts.

Chapman and Avila (1991) used an experiential approach in a personal selling class and found it to be superior over traditional methods. According to Inks, et al (2011). In July 1999 at the American Marketing Association Faculty Consortium on Professional Selling and Sales Management the consortium concluded with recommendations concerning “Key topical areas that should be covered in the selling and sales management classroom/curriculum but typically may be missed” (p.1). Among those topical areas was, “Personal development skills-building (e.g., time management, goal-setting, etc)” and “Active listening skills” (p.1). The project proposed here directly addresses those topical areas.

EDUCATION INNOVATION

The inspiration for the project is the quote “If you want to learn something, read about it. If you want to understand something, write about it. If you want to master something, teach it.” (Yogi Bajan) Honeycutt, Ford and Tanner (1996) stated that Sales Managers are one of the primary individuals involved in training salespeople and that is even more true in smaller firms. Little has changed since this assertion. Therefore, one of the key responsibilities of sales managers is to train their salesforce. The general objective of the project is to provide students with an opportunity to think and act like sales managers and develop valuable sales skills. Students, in teams of 4-5 students depending on class size to produce no more than 10 teams, will complete a training module and deliver a training exercise of approximately 30-45 minutes to their classmates. To facilitate students readiness, presentations are typically scheduled beginning in week five thus allowing for multiple presentations per week throughout the remainder of a 15-week semester. Each team will work on the project throughout the semester, with class time scheduled to assist teams in meeting deadlines. Additional time outside of class is also expected to properly research topics and prepare all project components. There are three distinct components that comprise this sales management project, including the training exercise, where teams will conduct a training session with their classmates; an evaluation tool to assess the training program; and a written training plan, with a discussion of what the topic is and why it is important to sales people.

The first project component, the training exercise, should be approximately 30-45 minutes long. The training exercise will be presented by each sales team (sales trainers) to their classmates (sales trainees) and will focus on a discussion of the chosen topic, providing information on why it is an important topic for the salesforce. This requires students to research the topic and provide relevant information from reliable sources that salespeople could utilize in the field, and properly cite the information. Students are encouraged to prepare multimedia

presentations to deliver their training topics, creating Power Point presentations, and using graphics and video clips when appropriate. To develop the skills employers value, relevant training topics are provided for students. The training topics include, but are not limited to:

Team building	Multicultural Awareness
Listening	Emotional Intelligence
Ethics	Negotiation
Cold Calling	Questioning Skills
Leadership	Telephone Skills
Time Management	Business Etiquette

Students may also conduct a training session on a topic of their choice with prior approval from the instructor. Students are permitted to find simple activities on the web related to their topic and incorporate them into their 30-45 minute training session. An example of a simple activity to include in a training exercise on team building might be the Marshmallow Tower Game, a 15-minute activity that uses communication and decision-making skills as a team to solve a problem. Each group receives toothpicks and marshmallows and has 10 minutes to build a tower using the toothpicks and marshmallows. The group that has the tallest standing tower would be the winner. Common activities such as the Marshmallow Tower Game can easily be found on the web and are a great way for students to engage their classmates and enhance their training exercises.

The second project component is the evaluation tool, where students can design and collect their own assessment of the presentation. Instructors may guide students to design their evaluation tool using both closed-ended and open-ended questions to obtain both quantitative and qualitative feedback from sales trainees. By requiring students to design their own evaluation tool, rather than using one created by the instructor, they are forced to organize and focus their training efforts around a desired result they hope to achieve from their classmates, thus aiding in their concentrated learning of the specific sales topic. Knowing they will be evaluated by their peers generally encourages students to work harder and perform at a higher level. Designing the project to include an evaluation tool not only provides immediate feedback to the sales trainers to measure the effectiveness of their training session, but also provides invaluable information to the instructor about whether the sales trainees felt they gained knowledge about the topic through this tasked-based learning effort. The built-in evaluation tool also helps the instructor assess whether the trainers achieved some level of subject-matter knowledge and if they adequately conveyed that information to the trainees, thereby expanding everyone's understanding of the sales skill.

The third project component, the written training plan, is essentially the lesson plan to accompany the training presentation. It should not reiterate the content of the presentation, but rather discuss how the presentation should be conducted, just like a lesson plan. Students are encouraged to include enough detail in the written training plan so that if the preparer is called away, the plan could be given to someone familiar with the topic who would be able to easily conduct the training. The training plan should include objectives of the training exercise, details and a timeline for all lecture components, and references. A sample format of the written portion of the project is included in the appendix. Point weighting is equal for the written portion, and the training exercise and evaluation.

Students do not need any special knowledge prior to beginning the project. The key is for the instructor to clearly define the project and the learning goals. Students learn through the exploration of their chosen topic and the collaboration with their teammates on how to design a training session around it. Additional learning centers on the development of the written and oral communication to produce a valuable training program, as evidenced by the evaluation tool completed by the sales trainees. The project includes both sales trainers and sales trainees, therefore, the entire class benefits from every training exercise. In addition, to motivate students in the class to actively participate in the training they are told by the instructor that there will be several questions on the next exam related to the training sessions. The basic outline of the exercise and grading rubrics are included in the appendix.

Also, it should be noted that one of the challenges of team-based projects that has been noted is the free-rider or social loafer (Mello 1993; Strong & Anderson 1990) This student contributes little to nothing to the project and leaves the other group members unsatisfied and disgruntled. To manage the free-rider and give the group direct control over this issue an innovative termination procedure was established and included in the course syllabus as follows: Team Member Dismissal: In the event that a team member is not actively participating as a productive member and the team wishes to terminate that member the following procedure is to be followed:

1. The team must provide a written warning to the unproductive team member warning him/her of the team's opinion and provide a recommended course of action for the unproductive team member to comply with, if he/she wishes to remain a member of the team. A copy of the warning must be provided to the course instructor.
2. If the unproductive team member does not comply with the recommended course of action in a reasonable amount of time the team may choose to terminate that team member. Notice of the team member's termination must be provided to him/her in writing and a copy provided to the course instructor.
3. The terminated team member may call a "last chance meeting" with all team members which the course instructor will mediate. The team will then make a final determination about the problem team member.
4. If a team member is terminated by his/her team he/she must individually prepare a ten-page research paper, with citations on the chosen topic. Failure to do so will result in a zero for the project. To facilitate this process the instructor at the beginning of the semester collects for each group, names, emails, phone numbers and campus mailing addresses. Campus mailing addresses are collected if the need arises for certified mail.

ASSESSMENT

In the spring of 2018 an assessment questionnaire was constructed and submitted to the two sections of Sales Management offered at that time. There was a total of 64 students enrolled and 56 completed the questionnaire for a response rate of 87.5 percent. The items were ranked on a one to five scale with one being strongly disagree and five being strongly agree. The specific items and results were:

1. Found participating in training project enjoyable – 82 % agree to strongly agree.
2. The training project illustrated/reinforced sales topics – 78.5% agree to strongly agree
3. I feel confident I could design a sales training session if asked – 82% agree to strongly agree.

4. I liked that the training project presentations were staggered – 82 % agree to strongly agree.
5. I liked that sales topics were included in sessions that were not part of the text – 60.7% agree to strongly agree.
6. I believe that I know more about specific sales topics because of the training project – 80% agree to strongly agree.

Students seemed to enjoy the training exercises and actively participate in them. One student said “That was more fun than I thought it would be.” In addition, over the five years the project has been used in class, specific training project presentation questions have been added to the exams. On average students get 85% of these correct. The experiential nature of the exercise seems to engage the students and boosts retention of the material. Many groups will include prizes with their training sessions and cheer on training teams.

The team member dismissal procedure has been very effective in handling the free-rider. The instructor has used this procedure in various classes over 15 years and in that time has only had to call two last chance meetings and send one piece of registered mail. Prior to instituting this procedure free rider complaints arose frequently. Students report that they like the procedure because they believe it motivates the other group members and they have the control to prevent sharing their grade with a free- rider.

Because collaboration is critical to the success of this project, student trainers are graded as a group rather than individually. To support all learners, the project includes both a presentation and a paper, giving student teams an opportunity to communicate what they have learned on their sales topic with both spoken and written communication. Understanding that some student teams may be better presenters, and others better in written mode, offering the two distinct opportunities to convey knowledge gives students the ability to capitalize on the communication component they feel most comfortable with. Building multiple assessments into the team project helps instructors evaluate students more fairly and better supports student success.

CHALLENGES

As with all group projects, the major challenge of this innovation is for the combination of students who comprise the individual teams to work well together and contribute meaningfully to the final product. This effort is often derailed by a variety of variables such as time management, personality conflicts, and level of effort expended. Instructors can try to help prevent these challenges by allowing students to select their group members, and by reminding them to choose wisely. As previously mentioned the passenger or free-rider student may become a problem regardless of whether teams are self-selected or selected at random by instructors. To combat that issue, this project has the team member dismissal policy built right into the project instructions, leaving little room for students to feel as though they will get a free pass on this project. As noted earlier, this team member dismissal policy is a comprehensive plan to discourage student apathy, and its mere existence as an element of the team project has been shown to lessen the overall likelihood of student complaints.

Although this project is believed to work best when started early in the semester and spread throughout the entirety of the course, another inherent challenge of this team project is that as the confidence level of the student body increases throughout the semester, the training exercises improve. The training sessions toward the end of the semester are generally both

richer in content and in the development of the training activities. As students feel more comfortable with the class material and with their classmates, presentation skills also seem to improve, allowing student trainers to better communicate their training topic to student trainees. One way to combat this issue is to plan for the simple, elementary training topics to be presented earlier in the semester and schedule the more complex training topics later in the semester.

ADAPTABILITY

The project is centered on designing and delivering a training session to a sales team to better understand the training topic, as well as build critical teamwork and communication skills. What makes this project sales-specific is the language in the instructions, as well as the training topics that are chosen. Many of the suggested topics are the typical knowledge, skills, and abilities that sales managers are looking for from the salespeople they hire. Therefore, it could be easily adapted to a variety of sales classes, such as Principles of Selling and Advanced Sales with little to no modification. By its very nature, the project could fit into any general business or communications class where sales or management is a component of the curriculum. In particular, it could also be useful for a variety of business classes in marketing and management by simply modifying the suggested topics and changing the sales specific language in the project instructions. As previously stated, the skills necessary for completing this project, such as teamwork and communication, also comprise some of the key traits necessary to succeed in business today.

THE INNOVATION ENHANCES SALES MANAGEMENT CLASS

The project innovation builds sales skills into the sales management course and actively engages students in the training and development responsibility of sales managers. Students are also challenged to come up with their own sales related topic if they choose and clear it with the instructor. If sales management is the only course offered in a marketing curriculum this project enriches that class with specific sales skills.

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APPENDIX

Outline for Written Project

Overview of Training

Title

Objectives: (goals of the training should be S.M.A.R.T.)

- 1.
- 2.

Outline of Training: (Include times for all)

- **Opening activity:** Use an ice-breaking activity related to the topic to warm the group up. Briefly describe it here.
- **Lecture:** summarize the topic.
- **Exercise/Activity:** Briefly describe the exercise/activity.
- **Debrief and Summary:** Determine if trainees assimilated key objectives. Briefly summarize key points.
- **Evaluation**

Materials needed for this session:

1. List specific materials needed.
- 2.
- 3.

Instructor's Notes for Session

Title of Session

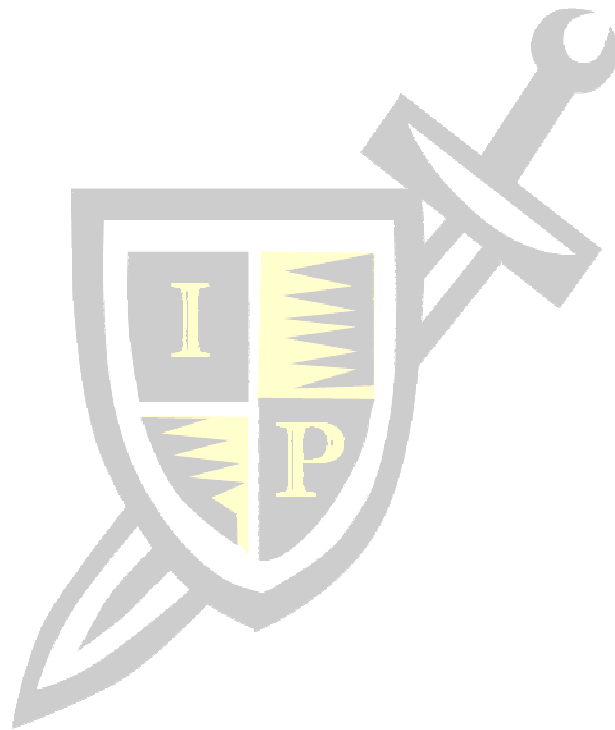
- A. Introduction of Session:** Statement introducing topic and trainers.
- B. Transition:** Introduce Icebreaking activity
- C. Outline of Icebreaking Activity:** Complete description of activity including any special materials or set up. Also, include expected time.
- D. Transition to Short Lecture:** Statement introducing the main topic.
- E. Lecture Outline:** (Include expected time)
 1. Topic
 - a. Subtopic
 - b. Subtopic
 - c. Subtopic
 - d. Subtopic
- 2. Summarize lecture**
- F. Learning Activity:** Completely describe the learning exercise/activity including any and all special materials or set-ups required. Completely identify desired participant take-aways. Include the expected time the exercise/activity will take.

G. Interactive Debriefing/Summary: Determine if trainees assimilated key objectives. Briefly summarize key points.

H. Evaluation: Distribute evaluation instrument, request participants to complete and collect.

Annotated Bibliography

Include all references with complete citations and a brief summary of key information.



Rubrics for instructor Evaluation of Project

ASSESSMENT CRITERIA FOR TRAINING EXERCISE AND EVALUATION	POSSIBLE POINTS	Your Points
Provide a proper introduction for your presentation	5	
Appropriate in terms of objectives and target audience	5	
Reflects knowledge of the topic area and awareness of relevant sources	5	
Ideas well-developed	5	
Activity well-developed/appropriate for topic	5	
Appropriate debriefing of activity	5	
Evaluation tool distributed / appropriately measures training	5	
Appropriate use of aids, attention to pacing of entire session	5	
Professional dress / presentation was well-rehearsed, polished, and clean	5	
Project was complete (conclusion provided), well-organized, and followed appropriate format	5	
TOTAL POINTS	50	

ASSESSMENT CRITERIA FOR WRITTEN TRAINING PLAN	POSSIBLE POINTS	Your points
Choice of content appropriate in terms of objectives and target audience	5	
Objectives clearly stated	5	
Details provided for all lecture components	5	
Timeline provided for each lecture component	5	
Points expected to emerge for all discussions/activities clearly stated	5	
Details provided for all content (slides, activity materials)	10	
In-text reference citations included in outline as needed	5	
Reference list provided in APA	5	
Well organized throughout	5	
TOTAL POINTS	50	