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Building sales people: Recommendations for the Development of a Professional Sales Mentorship Program

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March 30-31, 2017



**Appalachian State University
Boone, NC**



**Edited by:
G. David Shows and Pia A. Albinsson
Appalachian State University
Boone, NC**

2017 Appalachian Research in Business Symposium

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It is our pleasure to present the *Proceedings of the 4th Annual Appalachian Research in Business Symposium* from the 2017 conference held March 30-31 hosted by the Walker College of Business at Appalachian State University. The Appalachian Research in Business Symposium provides a venue for presenting new research, discovering contemporary ideas, and building connections among scholars at Appalachian State University, Eastern Kentucky University, East Tennessee State University, and Western Carolina University.

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BUILDING SALES PEOPLE: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF A PROFESSIONAL SALES MENTORSHIP PROGRAM

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Introduction

Companies will constantly need people to sell something for them. As Grant Cardone, author of *Sell or Be Sold: How to Get Your Way in Business and in Life*, puts it, “Great salespeople are literally the engine of every economy in the world.” This is evident as the Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that over 13.6 million Americans are in sales and related occupations.

Looking at specific industries; the real estate sector is projected to grow faster than any other sales sector over the next decade, according to the Department of Labor. With a 14 percent growth rate expected, this field is expected to hire around 75,000 agents and brokers over the next 10 years. The insurance sector is expected to see a 12 percent increase in jobs over the next decade. Due to its size, the retail sector is expected to gain about 375,000 jobs over the next 10 years — more than any other occupation. In the next decade, the sales engineering sector is expected to grow about nine percent, on average with the rest of the economy. With the technology sector growing quickly, companies such as software publishers and computer systems design firms will have the greatest demand for sales engineers with expertise in the field. The wholesale and manufacturing sectors are expected to add about 150,000 jobs over the next 10 years, a seven percent growth. Because the sector handles a variety of goods across the economy, the constant expansion of those goods will help drive the job growth of sales representatives.

The pervasiveness of sales is clear as more than 25 percent of all college graduates across different majors will begin their careers in a sales-related job. Professional sales is the most common entry level position for marketing majors, with some institutions reporting rates as high as 70%.

Colleges and Universities are responding to the phenomenal growth of the sales sector. Currently, a sales education curriculum is offered at a total of 101 United States universities and colleges. At the undergraduate level, 32 offer a major, minor or concentration, while the remaining 69 provide some level of sales curriculum in their offerings, but not a degree. At the graduate level, 6 offer graduate degrees with a sales concentration (and 9 provide some level of sales curriculum in their offerings). Further, 22 institutions nationwide currently house sales focused centers or institutes and the University Sales Center Alliance (USCA), an organization whose mission is to advocate for the continuing advancement of the sales profession through teaching, research and outreach; currently has 21 member institutions.

Problem

Given the widespread growth and importance of sales to industry, students and educational institutions; a major issue concerns the nature of curriculum offerings and how universities and colleges are preparing students for a dynamic career in sales.

Misconceptions about the sales industry and the nature of a sales career are often discouraging to students. Stereotypes of sales professionals as aggressive or unethical may discourage students from pursuing the study of sales and thereby preparing for a successful career. Further, many students lack the exposure to a professional environment that foster the communication skills to navigate a successful job search and potential career.

Results of a qualitative study by Hopkins, et al (2011) show it is apparent that personal selling/communicative skills are viewed as being imperative for sales profession success. Furthermore, interaction with industry, role-playing exercises and presentations and projects are viewed to be excellent tools for training the up and coming salesforce. Hence, based on these results, the paradigm for the development and execution of a successful sales mentorship program follows.

Several articles in the Chronicle of Higher Education and other popular press outlets indicated that students lacked professionalism skills. The Wall Street Journal featured an article stating that sales jobs, especially those in the technical areas, are increasingly difficult to fill due to lack of understanding among new college graduates about what the sales career entails. Firsthand experience among faculty in industry and in teaching provides the observation that many students, especially first generation college students, have had limited exposure to professional business environments and lack understanding of social norms, demeanor, polish and such that is required for success in a business environment. Having a mentoring program as a companion to our in-class discussions seemed to be a plus for my students in the coming semester. Given, the objective of this study is to outline a process for the development and implementation of a sales mentorship program. The manuscript contributes to the objective of providing quality sales education by outlining a step-by-step process for orchestrating and offering a sales mentorship program.

Sales and the Marketing Curriculum

The summary of the personal selling survey course is as follows:

In this course, students will learn about the professional sales career: what it is and what it is not. We will study skills and habits of a successful salesperson along with the

psychology of selling. With a focus on Business to Business (B to B) selling, will discuss theories and practices that lead to an understanding of customer needs and wants and the salesperson's role in providing information and service to fulfill those needs.

One of the course objectives is for students to gain an understanding of the professional sales career and be able to effectively communicate with professionals in a sales environment. Traditionally, students in the course engage in reading and class discussions about what a sales career entails, what qualities and habits a successful salesperson must develop, and skills for persuasion and relationship building. Further, they develop and give a sales presentation to an audience of their peers, the instructor, and one or more sales professionals. The objectives of the course are to expose students to an accurate definition and description of sales and selling, and to develop a perspective on sales and sales management as it pertains to its place in the marketing mix and as a tool of influence. While traditional reading and lecture format is effective to a degree, many students have not been exposed to a professional selling environment, especially not in a business to business (B to B) context. Because of this lack of experience, students often lack professional communication skills and confidence of interacting in this environment, and this may limit their success in securing a sales position, much less pursuing and being successful in a sales career.

Creating and Administering the Mentoring Program

The sales mentorship program described here was employed as a portion of the course requirements in the Personal Selling course, an upper level elective in marketing at the undergraduate level.

Step 1: Recruiting Mentors

The first step in organizing a mentor program is to identify mentor candidates in the community who are currently professionally engaged in a business to business selling environment. Several weeks prior to the beginning of the semester, a mentor development team consisting of the instructor, a graduate assistant and an administrative assistant, identified candidates from the community through searches of business school alumni lists and professional social media outlets such as LinkedIn.com. The Small Business Development Center and entrepreneurship organizations also assisted in the distribution of a call for volunteers, along with a brief description of the mentor's responsibilities to their members and contacts. Further, the team arranged to speak to regular meetings of service organizations such as Rotary and Kiwanis about the program and recruit more potential mentors.

Mentor Volunteer Role Description

During the semester as a Sales Mentor, you will be asked to do the following:

1. Answer questions from a personal selling student about 5 times during the semester (can be done on the phone or via email)
2. If possible, set up a "shadowing" day or half-day, where the student can join you for your day as a sales person. You can take them to a sales meeting, on a sales call, or to a networking event. This day is scheduled at a mutually convenient time, and is designed for you to show the student what a day in the life of a sales professional is like.

3. You'll receive invitations to act as a guest celebrity judge for our sales presentations throughout the semester. There are several days in the semester where students give brief presentations, and you'll be invited to join us and to give students valuable feedback on their style and content.
4. At the end of the semester (in May), you'll be invited to join us for a networking mixer with the students. They'll have an opportunity to practice their networking skills, and you'll have an opportunity to share your expertise and perhaps identify candidates for your company's sales force. We will recognize all sales mentors on our department website and in communications with our faculty and alums about the program.

Step 2: Matching and initial contact.

The first step in the process of matching mentors was for students to indicate if they had a mentor in mind, or whether they needed assistance in identifying a mentor. Students who indicated they needed assistance finding a mentor also listed their preferences for a particular industry, such as real estate, insurance, or consumer products. For students requesting assistance in finding a mentor, the instructor collected their preferences in a questionnaire and then assigned a mentor from the list of volunteers that was compiled prior to the beginning of the semester. The students then contacted the volunteer to confirm their availability and willingness to participate for the duration of the semester. During the third week of class, all students were required to submit the name, title, company, and contact information for their mentor as a declaration of their intent to work with that mentor for the semester. From those submissions, the instructor evaluated the choices made by students to confirm a fit with the criteria for the program. Students were then able to begin the first written mentor assignment.

Step 3 Interaction and Written Assignments:

To facilitate communication between students and their mentors, four short written assignments were administered, accounting for 10 percent of the course grade. Each assignment submission would consist of the prescribed questions and answers to the questions given by the mentor, plus a brief reflection on those answers written by the student. A specific format and rubric for the written submission, along with the schedule of deadlines throughout the semester, was provided via the course website. Each set of questions for the four regular mentor assignments covered a different topic, aligning with the in-class lecture topics. Personal management, prospecting, sales techniques, and pricing were the topics of these four assignments. Each written assignment was to be about 2-3 pages typed double spaced, and students received the assignment descriptions about 2 weeks prior to the due date.

Step 4: Shadowing Assignment

To give students firsthand experience with the day to day management of a sales career, students were required to meet with their sales mentors in person for a shadowing experience once during the semester. To complete this assignment, students were encouraged to attend a sales meeting or sales call, or to ride along with their mentor. The deliverable for this assignment included an in-depth written description of their experience, a reflection on what they observed and learned, and

a business card from their mentor. Students were given the choice to complete the shadowing assignment with the mentor they had communicated with for the previous assignments, or they could choose a different mentor to shadow. Several weeks prior to the deadline for this assignment, students submitted a “shadowing intent” form, indicating the name and contact information of their mentor, along with the date and time of the scheduled shadowing experience.

Step 5: Networking Mixer

The course’s final exam period consisted of a networking mixer with students, sales mentors and other professionals. Students invited their mentors to attend through personal email messages, and the instructor sent a formal, follow up invitation. The networking mixer consisted of a short networking and introduction period, then an elevator speech competition, followed by a longer networking period with refreshments. In addition to inviting their mentors, students were assigned to write and deliver a 90 second elevator speech, pitching themselves as job candidates. At one point in the mixer, the instructor announced the beginning of the elevator speech competition, and each student delivered his or her speech in the allotted 90 seconds in quick succession. Mentors, students and the instructor evaluated each speech using a concise rubric of 5-item scale ratings on three criteria: style, content and delivery. Once all of the speeches were delivered, each evaluator ranked the presentations they believed to be the top three. A graduate assistant collected the evaluations, and while they were being tallied, both students and mentors were treated to a mixer with refreshments. Prior to the mixer, the students learned networking skills in an in-class exercise.

The professional panel and instructor evaluations were tallied to choose the winners. In the case of a tie, student evaluations were tallied to determine the winner. Students who delivered the top three speeches, based on evaluations, were awarded gift cards in increments of twenty, ten and five dollars. In the future, additional awards may be issued for the most creative, the most inspiring, and most charismatic, along with other superlatives.

Built into the grade for the final exam was a copy of the invitation email and the response from the mentor, a copy of a hand written note thanking the mentor for their time and insights during the semester, and a typed copy of the 90 second elevator speech.

Advance planning for the mixer included issuing invitations, obtaining responses from mentors, refreshments, rubrics and pens, and incentive prizes. Following the organized activities during the mixer, recognition of the mentors could be incorporated by introducing and awarding mentors with personalized certificates of thanks for participating as a Sales Mentor for the class. Early in the semester, a work study student designed the certificates and ordered the papers on which to print the personalized certificate with the correct spelling of each mentor’s name.

Challenges and Concerns

Recruiting mentors takes time and energy. For some institutions with active advisory boards and specialized career centers, it may be as simple as a series of email messages to recruit mentors. For schools with smaller class sizes, recruiting mentors from the community is more manageable. Mentors change jobs – Often early career sales professionals will volunteer, but are unable to complete the mentoring semester due to career changes. By carefully screening mentors and obtaining the contact information of their supervisor, this situation can be avoided and/or handled

when it arises. Knowing a supervisor also allows for the opportunity to thank the company for the mentor's contribution of time and support.

Mentors are unavailable – Students encountered difficulties in their communication with mentors. This is often due to lack of follow up on the student's part. On several occasions, students reported being unable to complete their mentor assignments by the deadline because they had not received a response from their mentors. In some instances, it became apparent that these students had only contacted their mentor one time, using one mode of communication. Adding this caveat to assignment descriptions can help: One element of the mentor assignments is practice in professional communication and follow up. While the mentors have volunteered their time to participate, their primary job responsibilities will take precedent over mentor assignments. In many professional selling situations, your communication may not be a priority and it is your responsibility to obtain the attention you need to complete the assignments. Doing so in a professional manner, allowing time for communication delays, is part of your assignment.

Using Mentoring in Other Levels and Courses

Mentoring programs have a number of potential applications throughout a marketing curriculum. Specific to a sales program, mentors may add value to a sales management (upper level sales courses) by using the mentor experience with sales managers to answer questions about hiring, motivating, compensating and training successful sales people.

Across the marketing curriculum, a mentoring program could be valuable in a capstone Strategy or marketing management course by adapting the assignments to it to varying marketing positions within an organization. For example, students could communicate with professionals in sales management, sales promotion, marketing communications, retail operations or other positions to gain an understanding of their role in the organization and the skills and interests best suited to their duties.

An assignment for marketing principles classes on personal selling experience may consist of visiting a retail establishment of their choice near their university and observing personal selling activities by retail personnel. Students are asked to identify the type of sales position the staff in engaged in, what kinds of sales techniques they use, what other sales promotion tools support their efforts, how they are compensated, and then reflect on these and other details about the sales person.

Observing sales professionals provides a number of insights to students in marketing courses, and specifically in sales programs. Incorporating the program described here can have positive effects on the students' experiences in relevant courses, during a job search, and in their future careers.

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Hopkins, C., Raymond, M.A., and Carlson, L. (2011). Educating Students to Give Them a Sustainable Competitive Advantage in a Weak Job Market. *Journal of Marketing Education*, 33, 337-347.