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Today's sales professionals need to be more than salespeople. They must be marketing experts who can analyze market trends and develop strategies to meet customer needs.

Marketing, however, is not just a matter of whether a product satisfies a market need or how well it compares to other products. It's also about how well a company's brand image matches its products. In other words, marketing is about how well a company's image reflects its products.

Marketing, marketing, marketing. That's what we hear from our clients. And while we're not sure exactly what "marketing" means, we do know that it's important to understand what it means to our clients. We've found that the best way to do this is to start by looking at the way our clients define it. We've learned that there are many different ways to define marketing, but one thing is clear: it's not just about selling products or services. It's about creating value for customers through effective communication and relationship building.

Teaching Sales

Great sales professionals are scarce and getting scarcer.

Why aren't universities working harder to create more?

by Suzanne Fogel, David Hoffmeister, Richard Rocco, and Daniel P. Strunk

WE ALL KNOW that a well-staffed sales function is vital to business success. Consider, for example, the findings of a series of studies conducted since 1988 by the sales force consultancy Chally Group. Analyzing data from more than 100,000 business decision makers, Chally discovered that 39% of B2B buyers select a vendor according to the skills of the salesperson rather than price, quality, or service features. So business schools must spend a lot of time teaching sales skills, right?

Wrong. Take a look at the curricula of the world's top-ranked business schools, and you might come away with the impression that sales is unimportant. Most MBA programs offer no sales-related courses at all, and those that do offer only a single course in sales management. Even at the undergraduate level of business instruction, sales courses are sparse.



ARTWORK Chad Wys, *Hang*, 2011

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To put a finer point on it, of the 479 U.S. business programs accredited by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business, only 101 have a sales curriculum, and a mere 15 offer either an MBA in sales or some sort of sales-oriented graduate curriculum. Sales may be vital to businesses, 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.

The news isn't all bad, however. As we will show, signs point to an increasing awareness among universities that they should invest in sales education. There is a growing consensus that professional sales has entered a new era, requiring skills that are scarce but teachable—and best taught in a collegiate setting. We will share what we've learned from building the Center for Sales Leadership at DePaul University and suggest how it might guide the establishment of other such programs in the future. But first let's explore why sales hasn't been central to business education in the past.

Old-School Sales

Until quite recently, business education might have been perfectly justified in skipping over sales. Time was, the model salesperson was two parts personality and one part product knowledge. The job was to carry a bag, get a foot in the door, and talk up your offering's features and benefits. Perhaps a formal sales education couldn't add much to that. Product knowledge was unique to a company and therefore handled by internal training. People skills weren't considered teachable in any conventional sense. Selling was something to be learned by doing. As with riding a bicycle, you could read about it, but real knowledge came from trying, failing, and trying again.

Meanwhile, it was also true that many people enrolling in MBA programs had already proved they could sell. Graduate schools of business, back when they were fewer, favored applicants with work experience, and much of that experience had been won on the front lines of revenue generation. In seeking a master's degree, these go-getters wanted to acquire the general management skills their day-to-day jobs didn't teach. The boom in MBA programs coincided with the rise of marketing as a discipline, and mass producers relied on heavy advertising and strong brands to control the sale and distribution of goods. Sales, in contrast, got little respect.

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To the extent that instruction on how to sell was needed, the demand was met by a sales-training industry that included companies such as Axiom, FranklinCovey, and Miller Heiman. Within universities sales was at best a stepchild of marketing. Old-school sales was no-school sales.

A Profession Transformed

Selling and sales management have come a long way since the days when most business school curricula were designed—so far that the term *Sales 2.0* is now commonly used by people (such as the editors of *Selling Power* magazine) who have spent their careers watching the world of revenue generation. That term borrows from Web 2.0, or the idea that the real power of the internet is not to enable traditional content producers to publish more cheaply but to give users a hand in creating content. In the realm of selling, it's the buyer who is newly empowered. Customers no longer need a salesperson to learn about a company's offering, much less to place an order. As a result, sales has become more about helping customers define the problem they are trying to solve and assemble a complete solution. The sales tool kit has advanced dramatically: It now includes sophisticated analytics to identify opportunities, software to discipline processes and produce forecasts, and negotiation expertise to broker complex deals.

There is, in short, plenty of substantial material to be taught. And we know that when it is taught in a university setting, it affects performance. Research conducted by DePaul at a major industrial manufacturer in 2007 indicated that among sales personnel hired over a 10-year period, those coming from sales education programs hit the break-even point in their territories 30% faster. Moreover, their tenure with the company averaged 40% longer. That is an important difference, given the problem most companies have retaining capable salespeople. (DePaul's recent best-practices survey found that annual turnover for all sales positions averages a staggering 28%). Thanks to both effects, each hire with a sales education saved the manufacturer nearly \$175,000 over a hire without one.

Perhaps the strongest argument for increasing the number of sales education programs is that our economy is suffering in the absence of them. In regions desperate for jobs, good sales positions go unfilled for lack of qualified applicants. Many more jobs are filled by people who are unprepared to excel at them. For at least five consecutive years, Manpower,

Idea in Brief

Sales excellence is vital to any business but rarely taught by business schools. Traditionally there have been reasons for that, but as selling becomes more sophisticated and solutions-oriented, and good sales jobs go unfilled for lack of qualified applicants, the value of university-based education rises.

New sales education programs face substantial barriers in gaining funding and recruiting talent. Partnering with industry is the surest route to success. When businesses offer input to curricula and encourage their salespeople to contribute to classroom discussions, the benefits flow both ways.

As the state of sales education improves, another deficit will be addressed: the frustrating lack of scholarly research relevant to improving sales capabilities.

the recruiting and workforce development firm, has ranked sales as one of the hardest positions to fill.

The shortage only threatens to grow as today's older workers leave mid- and senior-level sales positions. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, companies will lose 40% of senior talent by 2016, placing a significant strain on Gen X talent, which is already insufficient to replace departing boomers. Today a company that has not been able to develop a sufficiently large sales staff pays a premium to recruit proven professionals from other companies. Soon even that option will be cut off by the declining supply of sales talent. To acquire new talent, companies will need strong college recruiting programs, but those can take several years to build. And right now only a few thousand graduates each year have been exposed to some sales education.

New-School Sales

As sales careers have moved beyond the days of glad-handing and door-opening, a whole realm of knowledge has come to separate the best-performing professionals from their peers. A great salesperson today can assess multiple customer needs and motivations, analyze and forecast market trends, use sophisticated automation tools, and develop value-driven solutions in partnership with clients. Critical thinking, analytical skills, and the ability to negotiate have become more important than an outgoing personality.

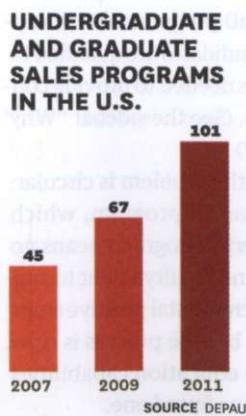
All this suggests the outlines of a robust undergraduate program. To prepare a new generation of sales professionals, it should require courses in fundamental sales (basic, one-to-one methodologies), advanced sales (complex, multibuyer methodologies), advanced valuations (analytic processes for customer development), sales management (channels and individuals), business communication (personal and group skills), and sales technology (sales-effectiveness tools).

Throughout this coursework the emphasis should be on developing the analytical skills necessary to understand a customer's value proposition, frame business issues, create customer insights, and present and direct solutions. At DePaul, in addition to courses in quantitative methods, statistics, and market research, we require students to take Advanced Valuation for Business, which focuses on the analytical and critical thinking needed to excel in business development roles. Over a decade of developing sales talent, we have found that a diverse curriculum is required to address the selling challenges of different fields and positions. It is not unusual for a sales program to require as much, if not more, curriculum content than the primary major in its department (usually marketing). It can't be denied, however, that sales representatives learn by doing. That is why most sales programs integrate personal coaching, video training laboratories, and selling competitions.

Moving in the Right Direction

As we look across the landscape of sales education now, it seems that universities are beginning to see the opportunity. We started formally surveying the landscape in 2007, when we found only 45 schools in the United States with a significant sales curriculum. Most schools then offered only one course, usually in the marketing department. (Our own university was among them; its single course was Personal Selling.) By 2011 the number of programs had more than doubled. The most comprehensive programs now offer a major or minor degree at the undergraduate level as well as an MBA with a sales concentration.

Educators in this vanguard realize that they can provide more for their students than the sales training industry can, in three specific ways: Students develop a broad understanding of all the functional areas of business, not just sales, and often study



Why So Little Research on Sales?

Look for rigorous academic work on sales, and you may not find much. Of the 48 articles published in 2011 by the *Journal of Marketing*, for example, only one addressed an aspect of sales. Why is that?

It's as simple as this: No institutions yet provide the support necessary to develop a PhD program in sales, and only a few encourage PhD candidates in other business realms to focus on it. This is

truly a "bottom up" challenge for universities and colleges, because few sales professionals have the time or the interest to obtain a doctorate. Our research confirms that universities find it challenging

to identify and recruit tenure-track faculty members who can publish quality academic sales research.

Part of the problem is that no prestigious journals focus on sales. The *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management* is not highly ranked at research-focused institutions, so ambitious professors sometimes have

little incentive to publish there.

Undoubtedly, academic research in sales will expand with the growth of university-based sales programs. The University Sales Center Alliance, the University Sales Education Foundation, and the National Conference in Sales Management are all advancing initiatives to increase inter-

live cases. They are exposed to multiple techniques, not just the one favored by a particular sales training vendor. And their knowledge is ingrained over many months, not delivered in, say, a weeklong seminar.

Universities that have invested in setting up such programs, often in partnership with local industry, are seeing proof that they are serving an unmet need. When we founded the Center for Sales Leadership, in 2004, we envisioned success as the enrollment of 90 students a year. Today about 700 students each quarter enroll in our courses.

Clearing the Hurdles

High-quality sales education serves students well, serves universities well, and serves our economy well. Why, then, do we not see more of it? Our latest landscape survey provided some answers. The greatest constraint is a lack of funding—rarely straightforward in a university setting, and particularly challenging when the institutional culture views sales as far below marketing in prestige and teaching priorities. Limited funding hobbles course development, experimentation, and faculty recruiting. But even if a healthy budget is in place, faculty members with the ability and interest to teach sales are hard to find. Because PhD programs rarely support research in sales, few candidates are qualified to fill the tenure-track positions needed to provide continuity to ongoing programs. (See the sidebar "Why So Little Research on Sales?")

It seems, therefore, that the problem is circular: No funding means no powerful program, which means no funding. No powerful program means no PhDs in sales, which means no faculty talent to support a powerful program. Incremental positive steps can help to break the circle, but the process is slow. Is there a way to build sales education capabilities much faster? We think we have found one.

The Power of Partnership

The best way to launch new sales education programs seems to be to partner with industry. Indeed, nearly all the university-based programs that exist today originated with funding from business partners or acquired partners over time. Typically, the relationship begins with outreach from a university. Partners are asked not only for financial support to develop a program but also for input to the curriculum, executive appearances in classes, internship commitments, and student mentoring. Some partners fund scholarships and guarantee employment upon graduation for top-performing students.

Curricular input from industry partners is vital, because it keeps instruction relevant to the tools and practices graduates will need in their careers. In the fast-evolving world of professional selling, identifying the competencies required by business and integrating them into the curriculum is an ongoing challenge. At DePaul we have benefited greatly from input by our founding partner, 3M.

Bringing senior sales professionals into the classroom gives students an authentic glimpse of what it is like to work in the field and the different kinds of people who can excel in it. And when these professionals come from partnering companies, they benefit from the opportunity to identify talent as it develops by interacting with students in class. Why rely on a series of short interviews to assess applicants and predict corporate fit when you can get a look at students' motivation and performance in a more relaxed setting and over time? Recruiters from DePaul's partner companies also become familiar with the faculty, the learning environment, and the curriculum, all of which affect their thinking about a student's potential to succeed. And when faculty members are conducting research relevant to a company's challenges, business partners can gain early access to findings and a chance to explore their im-

est in sales across U.S. PhD programs.

As the sales research community grows, the question it will have to confront is relevance. How can it ensure that the most prominent issues and topics in sales, as identified by businesses, are effectively addressed? A 2007 survey conducted by Brian Williams and Christopher Plouffe shows that

although academic sales research has risen over the past two decades, its insights rarely reach the business community. A 2009 study by Susi Geiger and Paolo Guenzi shows why: Experts who rated certain topics as important to academic sales researchers did not rate them as important to business leaders of sales organizations, and vice versa.

Scholars will find ways to connect research to pressing industry needs. We saw proof of this when a doctoral student (who later joined our faculty) worked with a *Fortune* 500 company on a study that was both methodologically rigorous enough for publication and highly relevant. The key was to partner with that company early in the re-

search development phase to ensure that the student acquired valuable data while the company stood to gain a valuable solution to a problem. Communication and collaboration like this, we are convinced, is the best way for academic researchers to become more relevant to business and for business to benefit from their insights.

plications. With deeper faculty relationships also come consulting and continuing education opportunities that might otherwise be inaccessible.

Does this relationship seem too cozy? We are familiar with the criticism of such partnerships. Gaile Cannella and Lisa Miller, for example, decry the influence of corporate sponsorship on research and course development in their 2008 article "Constructing Corporatist Science: Reconstituting the Soul of American Higher Education." In the case of sales education, however, we have no fear that a "corporate-university-industrial complex" will arise. The **Center** for Sales Leadership's partners include banks, insurance companies, manufacturers, logistics firms, software providers, and professional sports teams. Partners can't commission courses that are unique to their own needs. But their input has helped us design highly relevant courses focused on sales force automation, financial services sales, inside sales, and category management.

Our program would not exist without collaborative relationships with our corporate partners. We've been able to help them address a major pain point: the difficulty of recruiting high-quality sales talent. At the same time, we've prepared students to enter the work world and prosper.

Selling Sales

The film *Field of Dreams* famously launched the saying "If you build it, [they] will come." Unfortunately, that's not quite true for sales education, unless we can change the general attitude of college students toward a career in sales.

In the early stages of thinking about our program, we surveyed incoming students to find out if they were considering sales careers. The answer was a resounding no. Part of the reason for that dismal response may be that undergraduates have typically given little thought to career objectives. Part may

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be that many students have held temporary jobs in retail and mistakenly believe that they've gotten a taste of "sales." And misinformation about professional sales and salespeople is rampant. Popular culture and literature, from *Death of a Salesman* to *Tommy Boy* to *Boiler Room*, bombard the public with negative stereotypes.

These attitudinal barriers can be overcome. As it happens, sales positions offer qualities that appeal to Millennials: autonomy, rewards linked to personal effort, and the opportunity to interact with a variety of people. When we communicate the reality of sales, we see those who value such qualities approach it with real enthusiasm. For example, after taking a single class in our curriculum, Fundamentals of Sales and Networking, 35% of students declare that they will definitely pursue a sales career. As they continue, we see more willingness to relocate for a sales position, better understanding of sales compensation structures, and increased comfort with prospecting and developing new business.

IN A 2005 ARTICLE in *Harvard Business Review*, Warren Bennis and James O'Toole argued that, ultimately, business schools are professional schools, not scientific academies. Put us firmly in their camp: We feel that our responsibility is to educate students to succeed in their chosen professions.

It's a responsibility, however, that we cannot meet alone. The support from and involvement of businesses has been integral to our success and is, we believe, vital to the success of any sales education program. Several sales centers exist across the country, and there could be many more. If your company would benefit from access to a larger pool of talented sales professionals—and if your community would benefit from higher employment levels—consider becoming an active business partner to a college sales program.

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