

Chapter 20

The Challenge of Sales and Marketing Silos in University Curricula: A Teaching Perspective

Harvey B Markovitz

Pace University, New York City, USA

Mary M. Long

Pace University, New York City, USA

Deborah Fain

Pace University, New York City, USA

Dennis Sandler

Pace University, New York City, USA

ABSTRACT

A mixed-methods design was used to investigate the skills required for college graduates of sales and marketing programs to be successful. Opinions were sought from campus recruiters, sales and marketing executives, and recent alumni. Online job postings and course syllabi were also examined to identify skills that are both sought and taught. While there are specific skill sets for each discipline, a problem-solving, analytical mindset will go a long way towards landing an entry level job. The curricula must satisfy the needs of both marketing and sales executives, bridging the silos that often exist in university programs between the two disciplines. Recommendations for curriculum development are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

What is the best way to ensure that graduates of today's business programs are truly prepared to be productive members of their teams in their initial jobs and the development of their careers? As Neil Braun, a business school dean said at the AACSB Best Practices Conference on Feb 27, 2015, "the traditional professorial role of conveyor of information and insights... continues to be rendered increasingly obsolete... The development of critical thinking requires more than the lecture" (Braun, 2015, p. 1). Curricula must satisfy the needs of both marketing and sales executives, bridging the silos that often exist in university programs between the two disciplines. This exploratory research investigates the skills required for the young marketing/sales executive to be successful.

One clearly important curriculum need is adding the teaching of sales to the marketing skillset. Several McKinsey & Company articles from March 2015, encourage this capabilities building task. "Executives today need to focus on building capabilities with the same commitment they showed when transforming their businesses through lean operations in the 1980s... the process of upgrading marketing, sales and pricing capabilities to drive revenue of margin improvement..." (Hatami, McLellan, Plotkin, & Schultz, 2015, p. 1). In fact, a recent McKinsey benchmarking study found that "revenue growth at companies with more advanced marketing and sales capabilities tended to be 30 percent greater than the average company within their sector." (Delmulle, Grehan, & Sagar, 2015). And on PBS NewsHour, Carlos Watson, CEO of OXY Media, argued that business professionals need sales skills regardless of their job. He stated that college students should be trained in sales if only to sell their good ideas to investors and customers. (PBS NewsHour, 2017).

The issue of filling the potential labor shortage that is predicted to be 20 million skilled workers by 2020 has been noted numerous times. Carnevale (2005) and Dawley, Houghton, & Buckley (2010) pointed out the importance of recruitment and retention of qualified employees. Bush, Bus, Oakley, and Cicala (2014) pointed out that to minimize salesforce turnover, a big and expensive problem for companies, students must be educated in a way that helps them develop realistic expectations. No wonder both academics and practitioners have a new interest in the teaching of skills along with concepts. Reviewing 16 years of personal selling and sales management research, Rodriquez, Dixon, and Peltier (2014) found that, "the sales literature is relatively underdeveloped in terms of not only the number of articles published but also in terms of conceptual frameworks needed for advancing firm performance" (p. 295). And, that "...only a small percent of Internet articles primarily focused on personal selling and sales management issues..." (p. 295). Moreover:

A very high percentage of published articles have focused on the adoption and implementation of interactive marketing by salespeople and sales managers. For many of these articles the emphasis is on user perceptions and attitudes, and a limited set of subjective performance indices. (p. 303)

Concern with how to teach professional sales skills is not new. In fact, in a meta-analysis published in 1985, the authors noted that while "selling skills have received less attention as predictors of performance than aptitude, it is skills that matter." (Churchill et al., 1985). This acknowledgement that skills are more important than aptitude demonstrates the need for sales skills in today's complicated market.

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