Introducing Student Sales Managers into Experiential Sales Projects:
Improving Student Performance and Reducing Classroom Management

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Purpose of the Study: The recent marketing education literature suggests that experiential learning is superior to traditional lecture and test methods. However, student teams can add complexity and chaos, comparatively, and present challenges for both faculty and students. This study presents a potential remedy to this complication via an innovative approach: Using former students as student sales managers (SSMs) to enhance pedagogical delivery and students' learning.

Method/Design and Sample: This study utilizes a two-group analysis of 72 undergraduate students in a basic sales class performing the same real-world selling project. Non-SSM (control) and SSM-managed teams were assessed during a single academic quarter. SSMs were recruited from a prior class and randomly assigned to teams. Measures were assessed using sales dollars and class evaluations.

Results: Results confirmed a statistically significant difference (p < .05) between the groups (non-SSM versus SSM-managed students) on both measures. The findings reveal that the SSM recruiting/training approach heightened students' project performance (sales) and students' course satisfaction compared to the non-SSM group. The SSM managed teams had a lower reported level of team conflict than the non-SSM teams.

Value to Marketing Educators: This instructional innovation is an effective way for faculty to improve class management, student evaluations and increase learner project performance. Also the administrative burden can be reduced as student management tasks were shifted from the instructor to the SSMs. Faculty interested in adopting the SSM method are offered tips on recruiting and managing SSM led classes, applicable to a range of courses utilizing various team projects.

Keywords: Sales, Experiential learning, Teams, Credibility, Student sales managers

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PROBLEM BEING ADDRESSED

Innovative instructors are stepping away from the traditional lecture and test teaching method and embracing experiential learning (Cummings et. al. 2014). This more active learning may include cases, simulations, role-play activities and real-world projects. The timing is right to employ experiential learning as today's students are particularly receptive to, and adept at, activity-based assignments (Sojka & Fish 2008). It has been shown that team-based, experiential "real-world" projects provide significant benefits including student satisfaction, superior project outcomes, and more direct application to their careers (Rocco & Whalen 2014). Sales faculty are eager to inculcate selling skills in their students, but some faculty have been slow to adopt these desirable methods (Young & Hawes 2013).

We suggest that instructors may be inhibited by barriers related to experiential learning's inherently more complex-to-execute pedagogy and the prospect of having to moderate potential student team conflicts, especially with real-world selling projects (Young & Hawes 2015; Hansen 2006; Bobbitt et al. 2000; McCorkle et al. 1999; Inks, Schetzsle & Avila 2011). Consequently, this paper offers experimental evidence that student sales managers (SSMs) increase learners' performance and satisfaction. In addition, the SSM group was observed to reduce the professor's teaching administrative burden compared to the non-SSM group. The upfront time invested by instructors in recruiting and training SSMs was greatly offset by the reductions in classroom administration time and instructor time spent providing 1-on-1 student coaching. Consequently, the SSM approach can yield benefits for both students and instructors.

The class sales project described in this study was selected to serve as an illustration on how SSMs can enhance the effectiveness of the class sales

experience for both the instructor and student. However, this SSM innovation can offer equal efficacy in a range of class types including marketing management, sales and other project-based marketing courses.

Problem's relation to curricular objectives

Sales educators can use a range of classroom experiences to provide students the same skills used by actual salespeople (Cummins et al 2014). These teaching methods can also positively impact the SSMs' skill development (Young & Hawes 2013; Bobbitt et al. 2000). We conducted an empirical study to explore how student sales managers may streamline the complex sales pedagogy and increase students' selling performance as well as satisfaction in a real sales application assignment. This study demonstrates how students selected from prior classes can be trained as SSMs. These peer sales managers can produce positive learning effects to benefit both students and instructors including:

1. Reduced faculty labor devoted to classroom and student team management.
2. Enhanced project outcomes including selling performance and student satisfaction.
3. Improved sales student skills through experiential learning projects.
4. Extend classroom learning into real-world applications.

Sales education innovation

We posit that the SSM's effectiveness observed was derived from factors inherent in the relationship between SSM and the student teams they lead, where, for example, SSMs serve as role models as a means to facilitate students' skill building (Rich 1997; Bandura 1969). The SSM's experience with and success in the prior "same" class make them ideal role models for students in the current class. Instructional communication is facilitated because the SSMs and students are members of the same peer group (sales class students) who share similar values and cultural orientation (Williams 2001; Gillespie 2004; Rich 1997, Deter, Goebel & Kennedy 2008). The SSM enjoys high perceived credibility due to their legitimate authority (via professor's appointments), subject matter expertise (having successfully completed the class), and trust (the SSM's motivations are altruistic in sharing the benefit of their experience) (Hovland, Janis & Kelly 1953; Eagly, Wood & Chaiken 1975).

The SSMs do not actually engage in selling with their team or class. They primarily serve as a communication bridge between the instructor and current students. Further, the SSM brings the experience assets gained from participation in the prior class to act as a coach. The SSMs knowledge and experience from the prior class greatly enriches and speeds the current student's learning. As demonstrated by Mehra et. al. (2006) the SSM is a more socially connected leader (more context about the class) and thus enjoys an enhanced reputation that yields higher trust. We have observed that the SSM has an elevated role or relationship with the instructor (e.g., graduate teaching assistant), not enjoyed by the current students. The SSM is both a senior member of the previous group of students and a peer leader among the current students.

METHOD

In this study, students enrolled in two basic undergraduate sales classes engaged in an experimental learning project: Selling to raise university scholarship funds. Other educators have used non-profit/fundraising projects within a course as noted by Cummins et al. (2013) as well as Young and Hawes (2013). In the treatment group the student teams were mentored by an SSM—a *former* student that previously completed the class. The newly trained SSMs directed the treatment group's selling activities. Team members were given individual and team quotas to manage. In the non-treatment class (non-SSM) student teams were only taught by the instructor. This present study extends prior research by demonstrating how the incorporation of student sales managers impact two measures of the student sales education experience:

1. Student sales performance
2. Overall student satisfaction with the course

Students who successfully completed a prior section of this class were trained to serve as SSMs (Tanner & Whalen 2013). The present classes' students gained real world selling experience in the quarter-long assignment (eight week project).

The data were aggregated from two concurrent undergraduate sales classes taught at a large Midwestern university. The subjects (N = 72) were enrolled in two 36-student classes. The learning experience in both classes was identical, with one exception. In the non-treatment class (non-SSM) the student sales teams were self-directed with faculty assistance. The treatment class student teams were led by SSMs with limited faculty coaching. They also had identical amounts of selling time (combined) as part of the 8-week sales class project.

Classes met in three primary settings wherein the students experienced both B2B and B2C selling.

1. Traditional classrooms
2. Phone-Sales – Students phoned local businesses seeking product/service donations. The donated goods were then sold to both local businesses and/or individuals.
3. Face-To-Face Sales - Each team contacted and met local business customers as well as consumers.

One sales manager was assigned for each four-student sales team (1:4 ratio proved optimal). Our experience with past projects and supporting research (Useem 2006; Oakley et al. 2004) proved this optimal.

The SSMs accomplished an intense amount of coaching and teaching in a short time. While a real-world sales team may have a larger span of control, factors including learner inexperience, shortened sales cycle, and complexity of the tasks support the 1:4 ratio to yield a high level of sales performance and student satisfaction. Nine SSMs were utilized for the treatment group. The class sales manager training process covers four stages.

Stage 1 Recruiting (pre-class identify and motivate candidates)
Stage 2 Setting expectations (establish commitment, outline role and activities, time)
Stage 3 SSM training (administrative and relational/ teaching roles)
Stage 4 SSM on-going development (instructor coaches the SSMs and receives team feedback)

The Appendix describes the instructor's role during recruiting, setting SSM expectations and SSM management and administration. Suggestions supporting professors trying the SSM method for the first time are offered.

Measures Students' sales performance was measured by total revenues raised by each individual and team. Student satisfaction with the class was measured utilizing our university's standard class evaluation instrument (5-point Likert scale ranging from 1- not at all satisfied to 5-extremely satisfied). The assessment was administered in class to ensure feedback from all students.

RESULTS

Sales (fundraising dollars) level As anticipated, mean individual salesperson revenue for the SSM led group (n=36) was higher than the non-SSM group (n=36). The mean individual sales among the SSM-managed group was $297.30. The non-SSM individual mean was $232.70. An independent samples t-test revealed a statistically significant (p<.05) difference between the SSM managed and non-SSM means (t=2.279, df=70). Students led by a SSM, on average, outperformed the students who were not supported by a SSM.

Class evaluations General student satisfaction with the class was assessed via in-class administration of the university's teaching evaluation instrument. The SSM group (n=36) had a higher mean class satisfaction score 4.65 (5-pt scale). The non-SSM group's (n=36) satisfaction score was 4.12. An independent samples t-test revealed a significant (p<.05) difference (t=3.398, df=70) between the groups, reflecting higher satisfaction with the SSM-managed students. Although not directly assessed, the number of positive qualitative comments was higher among the SSM group compared to the non-SSM students.

How the innovation addresses the problem
The results of this study support the notion that SSMs can be effectively incorporated in a college basic sales class, yielding more learner sales success and learning satisfaction than students who do not benefit from SSM. We suggest that the selling model presented here is quite isomorphic with the real-world practice of sales as the selling model utilized in the class follows a "traditional" 7-step sales model that includes prospecting, preparation, approach, presentation, objection handling, closing, and follow-up (Tanner, Erffmeyer, and Honeycutt 2009).

While not measured directly, the classes' professor reported less time devoted to class administration, coaching, questions, and student conflict resolution in the SSM section, compared with the non-SSM section. In considering the time involved in stages 1-4, the instructor estimated an average net time savings of 6-8 hours each week with the SSM group (over the project duration) compared to the control group. Further, we observed that the SSM managed class had far fewer team conflict issues requiring instructor intervention than the non-SSM class.

Teaching resources Instructors wishing to try the SSM method can see teaching support materials: *Faculty Guide - Insuring Successful Student Sales Managers* (Appendix).

Study Limitations
In alignment with other researchers (Huffaker & West 2005), our in-class student evaluations do not quantitatively measure the students' satisfaction with their SSM. However, open-response, student verbatim comments in the optional qualitative response section of the teaching evaluation instrument provided some feedback and positive comments specific to the student sales managers. However, the use of the standard university course evaluation tool limited a mix-method analysis due to a lower percentage of respondents completing the qualitative section.

To a reasonable extent the class experience described in this paper generalizes to a real world sales experience as students conducted a campaign to fund-raise for university scholarships. The students were engaged in real phone and face-to-face selling. Using their selling skills they convinced local companies to donate goods. They then sold those goods to consumers and businesses, all within a defined selling period. However, we recognize that generalizability is impacted by the short, eight-week project duration, reduced sales time, and absence of the sales role pressure to provide a living wage.

Adaptability of the innovation
We suggest that this innovative SSM approach specifically utilizing *former students from the class* is very adaptable. SSMs can play a useful role in a wide range of sales and marketing courses and helping deliver on learning objectives using team-based experiential projects. For example, the specific SSM approach described in this paper is now incorporated

within both our sales and marketing curriculum in three different courses. Some examples of related learning objectives are noted in the Appendix. SSMs have increased students' productivity and satisfaction in marketing consulting (products/services) with companies (strategic marketing management course), not-for-profit selling (basic sales class), and sport ticket sales (inside sales class). All three classes incorporate real-world, team-based projects lead by SSMs (former students acted as team managers in the strategic marketing management class example). Instructors in all three classes reported a significant lowering of their class administrative burden. The methods presented in this paper could be utilized for a short-term team project (a few weeks) or as an integral part of a semester long sales project as an application of experiential learning.

In utilizing this teaching innovation, we illustrate and advocate a team-based approach. The team relationships provide necessary support and obligation that yield the essential motivation to sell, especially since students are not receiving compensation. The teams also provide the benefit of shared learning. The competition between the teams gives further motivation to perform. In turn, the SSMs foster team cooperation, support and goal commitment. The SSM provides both individual and team consulting during the process. Students selling on their own do not get such reinforcement.

The concept illustrated here - former students helping others master the same skills they have learned earlier - can ease the teaching burden and perhaps encourage more faculty to incorporate experiential learning in their classrooms. Future research could include measures of student perceptions of specific learning objective outcomes between SSMs versus non-SSM projects. A mixed-method research approach may capture richer qualitative data. Comparisons to other SSM-to-student ratios should be explored when instructors have fewer SSMs available or larger classes. We observed that SSM alumni have begun to establish a SSM network, so a deeper understanding of that group should be explored. Finally, greater understanding of SSM's motivations and satisfaction involving this work would add to this teaching method.

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Appendix

Faculty Guide
Insuring Successful Student Sales Managers

Faculty can expect to navigate through four developmental stages as they adopt Student Sales Managers (SSMs):

      Stage 1 Recruiting (pre-class identification and motivation of candidates)
      Stage 2 Setting expectations (establish commitment, outline role and activities, time)
      Stage 3 SSM training (administrative and relational/teaching roles)
      Stage 4 SSM on-going development (instructor coaches the SSMs and receives team feedback)

Offered here are suggested approaches on recruiting optimal SSM candidates, setting their expectations, and a checklist of tips to insure successful SSM incorporation into the experiential learning class.

I. Recruiting

How to recruit student sales managers

1. Monitor your current students throughout the class to identify likely candidates.
2. Top-performing students are likely prospects. Indicators include excellent class work, test performance and A-Level projects. Also look for energy and active involvement/interest in the class.
3. While a highly qualified and motivated SSM is desirable, instructors should be aware that the SSM position offers abundant opportunity for growth for motivated students in general. In our experience, SSMs that are "less than stellar" in the beginning experience a great growth in learning and skill, rising to the occasion during the class. This provides more than competent, even superior, leadership to their teams due to the role and training approach.
3. Successful SSMs understand and deeply believe in the product being sold especially when selling altruistic goods, e.g. scholarship contributions.
4. Seek recommendations from current sales managers. Students are keen evaluators of each other's ability and effort.
5. An effective sales pitch to use recruiting prospective SSMs is the WIFM approach… "What's in it for me." The two best WIFM have proved to be:
   Pitch One- Intrinsic benefits such as "you'll be giving back" and helping others by paying it forward
   Pitch Two- Extrinsic benefits such as sales manager role on resume and real-world experience managing a team (great for job interview talking points)

II. Setting expectations

Framing The SSM Experience

During recruiting and initial meetings the faculty will want to be sure to communicate these essential SSM attributes and functions. SSM's:

1. Provide an important teaching role. They also give the professor invaluable insight to the day-day/weekly activities of a group
2. Help peers see if they want to be in sales (or related role if a non-sales project)
3. Develop early perspective on the sales manager's or "management" role. They can better understand the attitudes and skills needed to lead a team
4. Appreciate the SSMs essential role in eliminating individual or team roadblocks to success. Helping students attain, or exceed, the project's goals
5. Encourage and motivate students throughout the term of the project

III. SSM Management and Administration

Best-Practice Tips for the Instructor

The following are tips and observations accumulated over time that have proven critical to SSM success.

1. **Student/SSM Ratio** Assign 1 SSM per 4 students max. This is the optimal span of control for the sales manager. The 4 member group produces a good team dynamic.
2. **Training & Supervision** The professor holds mandatory weekly group training sessions for the SSMs. Also, individual weekly "touch-base" sessions are held with each SSM.
3. **Enhancing Socialization & SSM Credibility** Professors should introduce student sales managers early in the class. Some key points to consider:

   First - Emphasize the SSM qualifications and the stringent criteria used for their selection (peer-credibility).
   Second - The professor should cite the SSM success as students in the current class, reinforce the SSM belief and value re: Raising money for scholarships. Students should learn that they may have the opportunity to be selected to become SSM future classes (aspiration).

4. **Communication & Control Tools**

   - SSMs should attend each class during project phase
   - Daily check-in via email
   - End-of-week status/update meetings held via Skype, Google+, or in-person
   - End of week (Friday) Google+/CRM document updates (i.e. project playbook items, required project reporting)
   - Create a sales team manager Facebook or "virtual" community. Over time this affiliation of SSMs and former SSMs become an entity for ongoing social and professional support/activities

The above procedures and tips will help instructors execute on these examples of learning objectives

Student will learn to:

1. Know the steps in the sales process.
2. Relate the selling model to a real-world selling situation.
3. Initiate and maintain networking relationships across different modalities including phone, social media and interpersonal, face to face settings.
4. Successfully execute a real-world sale through the steps of the sales model.
5. Give and receive coaching with student peers.
6. Adapt selling strategies following student peer and student sales manager coaching.