

# Changing Students' Perceptions of Professional Selling Using an Online Learning Workshop

Nita Paden, Roxanne Stell, Kevin J. Trainor and Sara Mushro

**Purpose of the Study:** This article describes an innovation designed with the goal of enhancing students' perceptions of sales careers and salespeople through a series of educational sales modules. The innovation was delivered online through a learning management system as part of a Principles of Marketing course.

**Design and Sample:** The innovation, referred to as The Professional Selling Workshop (PSW), was developed as a stand-alone course shell in the university's Learning Management System (BbLearn). The PSW, consisting of ten sales modules, was administered in multiple sections of a Principles of Marketing course. One hundred and sixty eight undergraduate business students at a public university in the southwest United States completed the workshop.

**Results:** The results of this study suggest that student perceptions can be moved in a favorable direction when exposed to the more positive aspects of sales careers, and when myths and common beliefs about sales careers and the types of persons who can succeed in sales careers are clarified.

**Value to Marketing Educators:** The professional selling workshop can be implemented fairly easily requiring only minimal adjustment to an existing marketing course. The favorable shift in student perceptions that resulted from the workshop is a step toward resolving the ongoing problem of negative student attitudes toward sales careers.

*Keywords:* student perceptions, professional selling, sales careers, student online learning

**Nita Paden**, Professor of Marketing, Northern Arizona University. Telephone: 928-523-7376; email: [Nita.paden@nau.edu](mailto:Nita.paden@nau.edu). **Roxanne Stell**, Professor of Marketing, Northern Arizona University. Telephone: 928-523-7404; email: [Roxanne.stell@nau.edu](mailto:Roxanne.stell@nau.edu). **Kevin Trainor**, Associate Professor of Marketing, Northern Arizona University. Telephone: 928-523-7369; email: [Kevin.trainor@nau.edu](mailto:Kevin.trainor@nau.edu). **Sara Mushro**, Instructor of Marketing, Northern Arizona University. Telephone: 928-523-7382; email: [Sara.mushro@nau.edu](mailto:Sara.mushro@nau.edu).

## **A**n Ongoing Problem: Students' Negative Perceptions of Sales Careers

A review of the literature highlights that negative attitudes toward sales careers have been challenging educators and professionals for many years (e.g. see Dubinsky and O'Connor, 1983; Peltier et al., 2014; Stevenson and Paksoy, 1983). While considerable progress has been made over the years in dispelling negative perceptions about sales careers and salespeople, many students continue to possess negative attitudes toward sales careers (Cummins et al., 2015; Peltier et al., 2014).

One approach has been to address these negative attitudes about sales careers via educational practices in courses taken by students early in their business programs (Cummins et al., 2015, Peltier et al., 2014). Cummins and colleagues (2015) examined the effects of several educational interventions on students' perceptions of sales and intent to pursue sales careers. The study revealed that certain interventions, particularly panel presentations and role plays, can positively influence both perceptions and intent to pursue sales careers. While effective, these activities

can pose several challenges for instructors delivering a Principles of Marketing course (e.g., coordinating guest speakers and administering the role-play) and may be impossible to replicate in online courses, which are increasingly more common. Other practices have varied from readings and exercises (Stevenson and Paksoy, 1983) to computer simulations (Castleberry, 2014) to a variety of active learning projects (Young and Hawes, 2013; Cummins, et al., 2015). Furthermore, education literature has encouraged the addition of more self-reflective learning approaches (Hubbs and Brand, 2010; Hedberg, 2009).

## **THE IMPACT OF NEGATIVE PERCEPTIONS ON STUDENTS AND SALES PROGRAMS**

Each year recruiters from various organizations participate in business college career fairs consistently demonstrating their desire to hire marketing and other business majors for entry-level sales positions. Universities are common sources for new hires in sales (Pettijohn and Pettijohn 2009). Given the desire of companies to hire our graduates for sales positions,

it behooves us to increase interest in, and better prepare students for these opportunities. In doing so, placement rates, a common indicator of a program's viability, may even be improved.

Whether or not students seek out these sales positions, it is highly likely that sales skills will be beneficial as life skills. The ability to persuade, to listen and to build relationships with others would certainly benefit most in a variety of life contexts. Even if students do not choose careers in sales, they are likely to interact with salespeople, and negative perceptions may harm those interactions (Fournier, et al. 2014). And, if many students are likely to begin their careers in sales, how can we better prepare them and help them to view the position positively? Perhaps the first step is to consider how faculty can shift student

perceptions about professional selling and possibly create more interest in learning these skills.

An exploratory study was administered in order to gain insight into our students' beliefs regarding sales careers and salespeople. The survey was administered to 398 students enrolled in several sections of a Principles of Marketing course. This introductory marketing course offered an opportunity to expose students of various majors to the possibility of a sales career and to help them understand how sales skills fit into their chosen field. The survey included 28 Likert statements, adapted from Dubinsky and O'Connor (1983), Pettijohn and Pettijohn (2009) and Gupta, et al. (2000) to gather students' opinions. The scale items can be seen in Exhibit 1.

### Exhibit 1: Likert Scale Items

Item	
1	A sales career is not a good career for everyone.
2	Sales positions are good paying jobs.
3	Sales positions are highly stressful jobs.
4	Most salespeople are honest.
5	It is difficult to have a good family life if you are in a sales position.
6	Successful salespeople need to have outgoing personalities.
7	Selling is about helping customers.
8	A salesperson needs to be able to analyze financial data.
9	Salespeople need to be persistent.
10	A sales career does not offer much in the way of job security.
11	Sales people are likely to take advantage of inexperienced customers.
12	Salespeople need to ask a lot of questions.
13	Salespeople who are very successful have to resort to unethical practices.
14	Professional selling is a prestigious career.
15	Selling is not a challenging career.
16	Sales positions involve a lot of travel.
17	Salespeople do not need to be creative.
18	Salespeople need to show empathy/care toward others.
19	A sales position offers a lot of variety day to day.
20	Listening is an important skill for successful salespeople.
21	Successful salespeople know how to build relationships with customers.
22	A salesperson must be able to handle rejection to be successful in sales.
23	Presentation skills are important for a successful sales person.
24	A salesperson needs to be aggressive to be successful in sales.
25	Salespeople need to handle a lot of tasks at the same time.
26	A salesperson needs to have good writing skills to be successful in a sales position.
27	Only self-motivated people are good in sales positions.
28	To be successful a salesperson needs to be good at managing their time.

All questions are 5-point Likert items ranging from 1-Strongly disagree to 5-Strongly Agree

Sixty-four percent of the students surveyed had not had a selling class or sales training. Of the students who said they had worked in sales, 60 percent said their experience had been in a retail store either full or part-time. Sixty-one percent of the respondents said they had a family member or friend who worked in sales.

Generally, the results were fairly positive in terms of attitudes toward salespeople. Attitudes were less positive in terms of favorability toward a sales career. For example, all respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, *a sales career is not a good career for everyone*. All respondents agreed with the statement, *salespeople need outgoing*

personalities to be successful (average response 4.18 out of 5), but they strongly agreed that a salesperson has to be able to handle rejection in order to be successful. Students did not think that salespeople have to resort to unethical practices in order to be successful, and they perceived that sales careers were challenging. Students who have family or close friends in sales (244 of the 398 students) answered negatively to the question, *Do you plan to have a career in sales?* Only 36 of the 244 (14.7 percent) said yes; 98 said no; 110 were unsure.

The findings from the exploratory survey provided additional evidence that sales positions are still not considered by students as highly desirable, even though our placement surveys indicate that many students are hired by companies whose entry level positions are in sales. These results are consistent with research and observations by others indicating that students perceive sales careers negatively (Spillan, et al. 2007; Hartman, 2006; Stevens and Macintosh, 2003). A possible solution was an innovation that we call the Professional Selling Workshop (PSW).

## **THE INNOVATION: THE PROFESSIONAL SELLING WORKSHOP**

The goal of the workshop was to help students more clearly understand the realities of sales careers while

improving perceptions and increasing interest in sales programs and sales careers. In an attempt to address the problem of ongoing negative perceptions, the innovation described below was created by one college of business to identify the perceptions of their students about salespeople and sales careers and to implement a self-paced learning workshop as part of an introductory marketing course.

### **Design and Delivery of the PSW**

The PSW included a series of educational modules designed to change negative perceptions or false beliefs toward sales careers and salespeople, or to add beliefs about sales careers and salespeople that students had not considered. Brief descriptions of the modules are provided in Exhibit 2. Some questions addressed within various modules were:

1. What is selling and how are those skills used in personal and professional life? (modules 3, 4, 5)
2. What characteristics or attributes are needed to be a successful salesperson? (modules 2, 8, 9)
3. How do trust and relationships relate to selling? (modules 3, 6, 7)
4. Can a salesperson be successful without resorting to unethical practices? (modules 6, 7)

## **Exhibit 2: Description of the Modules**

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### **Module 1 – Getting Started**

This module included the pre-workshop survey, instructions for the ten modules, and a brief assignment asking students to reflect upon their current beliefs about sales careers and salespeople. Specifically, students were to identify five words that describe “salesperson” and five words that describe sales careers.

### **Module 2 – Are Some People “Born” to be Salespeople?**

Our exploratory research suggested that most students do not think a sales career is a good career for everyone. Interactions with students, revealed that many students believe that only certain “types” of people can be salespeople. The module addresses the perception that only certain “types” of people can be salespeople. The students were asked to reflect upon their image of a salesperson. Then they read an article describing characteristics of successful salespeople. Finally students watched two short videos showing salespeople interacting with customers; then completed an assignment and quiz.

### **Module 3 – How Does “Selling” Fit Into Different Kinds of Organizations?**

This module exposed students to how selling fits into all kinds of organizations. Students read an excerpt from Daniel Pink’s book *To Sell Is Human, The Rise of Non-Selling Selling* to let them think about how selling has changed over the years. Videos of two of our alumni who use sales in their very different companies were embedded in the module. One of the alumni sells commercial real estate, and the other is an entrepreneur selling artisan hot sauce. In the videos, the alumni discussed how they interact with clients and both emphasized the importance of getting to know the client and building a relationship with them. The assignment in this module asked students to identify their “dream” company and then to investigate and report on how selling fits into that particular organization.

### **Module 4 – How Does “Selling” Fit into Non-Business Aspects of Life?**

Videos of our alumni discussing how sales skills have benefited them in their personal life were presented. Here an entrepreneur speaks about how he “sold” himself to his girlfriend’s parents. This module was one that students enjoyed and commented on in their final essay (module 10). We introduced this module with these thought starters:

*Have you ever tried to persuade someone to do something, not do something, or let you do something? Have you ever tried to convince your parents to let you go out with friends, borrow the car, or get you a new cell phone? Have you ever tried to get another person to go on a date with you or help you move into your new apartment? Have you ever tried to convince a faculty member to NOT give an exam on the Monday after spring break? In each of these scenarios, you probably tried to persuade or convince the person that there were good reasons for*

what you were asking. In each of those cases, you were "selling" your position. Listen to how Mike Konefal and Sherri Slayton talk about selling outside of their business roles.

Students were instructed to read two articles on "persuasion" and then describe a time they have attempted to persuade someone of something.

#### **Module 5 – How to Tell/Sell a Story**

Some of you may be thinking, "I just don't think I can sell anything". You might be surprised. When we stop thinking about selling as pushing products on others, and start thinking about sharing your love or excitement for something with others, selling takes on a whole new look and feel.

In this module we helped students compare selling to telling a story about something they like. Students read two articles on the art of story-telling; watched a lighthearted You Tube video of a salesperson speaking about a brand she loves. Then we asked them to write a story about or video themselves telling a friend about a product that they LOVE.

#### **Module 6 – Building Trust and Relationships**

Here we wanted the students to think about how they build trust. A video included two of our alumni talking about the importance of building relationships through trust. Students read an article on building relationships. Students were then asked to reflect upon and write an essay describing how they build trust with others and to consider if their approach varies with different people.

#### **Module 7 – Ethics in Selling**

It was important to include a module addressing ethics, as the stereotypical image of the unethical salesperson continues to generate negative perceptions about salespeople and sales careers. Students read an article about the long-term positive effects of behaving ethically and viewed a video from an entrepreneur (alumnus) about treating people well in business settings. They read articles on relationship selling and ethics and then wrote an essay about the connection between ethical behavior and building trust.

#### **Module 8 – But I Don't Like Rejection!**

The exploratory survey revealed that a majority of students felt strongly that "a salesperson has to be able to handle rejection in order to be successful." To help students see that rejection doesn't have to be a bad thing, they read an article about famous people who failed initially. Students then reflected upon a time when they didn't get the answer they had hoped for from a friend, parent, teacher or employer and how they moved forward and what they learned.

#### **Module 9 – Am I Already a Salesperson?**

Students took a personality test that included an indication as to whether they were introverts, extroverts or somewhere in between. Most students found they are neither extroverts nor introverts (referred to as ambiverts). They then read an article by Daniel Pink discussing how ambiverts are really better suited to sales careers than the other two "verts." Many students commented in their final essays in module 10, that the personality test was an eye-opening experience and something they had not previously considered.

#### **Module 10 – Wrapping It Up**

Students wrote an essay reflecting on how their opinions had changed about sales careers and salespeople during the workshop. Students then completed the post-survey and were congratulated on completing the workshop.

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The PSW was developed as a stand-alone course shell in the university's Learning Management System (BbLearn) and was administered in multiple sections of our Principles of Marketing course, a required course for all business majors. The PSW could be easily delivered by instructors who teach on-ground, online, or in hybrid (i.e., blended) course delivery formats.

One hundred and sixty eight undergraduate business students at a public university in the southwest United States completed the workshop. The PSW included ten modules that were self-paced, although a suggested schedule and a deadline for full completion were provided. Most students roughly followed the schedule and all completed the workshop by the deadline. Students received up to 100 points for completing all ten modules in the workshop. These points were incorporated into the total points for the Principles of Marketing class. Points were given for the individual quizzes (8 @ 5 points each) and assignments (10 @ 5 points each), as well as for completing the two surveys (5 points each). That resulted in each of the 10 modules being worth 10

points. Completion of both the assignment and quiz in each module was required before the student could move to the subsequent module.

#### **Materials and Activities Provided in the PSW**

Marcos-Cuevas, et al. (2014) suggested that learner-centered pedagogies can improve the sales abilities of students, but perhaps more importantly create sales mindsets that can benefit professional selling at large. As they noted, this type of learning consists of experiential learning and self-reflective practices. Each module in the PSW included self-reflective thinking, readings and/or videos; a short assignment over the topic and a short quiz. The articles and readings were selected from current business professional publications such as The Wall Street Journal and Forbes, as well as excerpts from Daniel Pink's book, *To Sell is Human*. The assigned materials were chosen based on their readability and relation to the module topic (e.g. earning trust). The PSW also included a pre and post survey (in modules 1 and 10, respectively) consisting of the Likert items used in the

exploratory research to gauge student opinions about sales careers and salespeople as explained and presented above in Exhibit 1.<sup>1</sup>

### **ASSESSMENT OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE PSW**

In order to evaluate student perceptions of sales and examine the efficacy of the PSW, qualitative and quantitative data were collected from all workshop participants. The PSW included a final assignment requiring students to write a short essay describing what they learned from the workshop. Student essays were reviewed to assess the general "tone" towards the PSW and identify areas where the workshop could be modified. Overall, the essay responses were generally positive and provided anecdotal evidence that the PSW was influencing students' views towards sales careers and salespeople. The following student comments are examples that reflect the general feelings expressed in the surveys:

*"This sales workshop has opened my eyes to a profession I have never thought about having."*

*"I have learned a lot about selling and how it applies to almost every job and to everyday life."*

*"I learned that when someone says "sales" the term means much more than pushing products on people in the hope they will buy them. Relationships are the key to successful selling."*

In addition to the data from student essays, quantitative data were collected from workshop participants through a pre and post workshop survey (administered in modules 1 and 10 respectively). All 168 students that participated in the PSW completed the two surveys. The pre and post workshop surveys were identical to each other and included the same Likert scale items used in the exploratory research described earlier.

A paired-samples t-test was conducted to compare students' pre and post workshop perceptions of sales careers and salespeople. As seen in Table 1, significant changes were found for 15 items covering questions addressed by the workshop. For questions

relating generally to the sales profession, several notable differences were found. First, there was a significant increase in the perception that selling is about helping customers after the workshop ( $M=4.16$ ,  $SD=.745$ ) than before the workshop ( $t(167) = -5.812$ ,  $p = .000$ ). Similarly, significant increases were found in the perception that listening is an important skill for salespeople ( $t(167) = -2.891$ ,  $p = .004$ ); that sales positions offer a lot of variety ( $t(167) = -2.291$ ,  $p=.023$ ); and that selling is a prestigious career ( $t(167) = -2.501$ ,  $p=.013$ ). Several significant decreases in the negative perceptions about sales careers were also found including a decrease in the perception that sales careers don't offer job security ( $t(167) = 3.428$ ,  $p=.001$ ), sales positions are stressful ( $t(167) = 2.306$ ,  $p=.022$ ), and sales positions make it difficult to have a good family life ( $t(167) = 2.209$ ,  $p=.029$ ).

For survey items relating to the characteristics and attributes needed to be successful in sales, three pre and post workshop measures were significantly different including a decrease in the perception that successful salespeople must have outgoing personalities ( $t(167) = 7.903$ ,  $p=.000$ ), a decrease in the perception that salespeople need to be persistent ( $t(167) = 2.238$ ,  $p=.027$ ), and a decrease in the perception that sales careers are not good for everyone ( $t(167) = 1.988$ ,  $p=.048$ ).

Significant differences in how trust and relationships relate to selling were also found. There was a significant increase in the perception that salespeople are honest after the workshop ( $M=3.18$ ,  $SD=.866$ ) than before the workshop ( $M=2.51$ ,  $SD=.833$ );  $t(167) = -7.349$ ,  $p=.000$ ). Additionally, an increase in the perception that salespeople need to show empathy towards others ( $t(167) = -4.590$ ,  $p=.000$ ) and a decrease in the perception that salespeople need to be aggressive ( $t(167) = 2.839$ ,  $p=.005$ ) were also found.

Finally, two significant differences were found for items relating to salesperson ethical behaviors. There were decreases in student perceptions that salespeople are likely to take advantage of inexperienced customers ( $t(167) = 4.358$ ,  $p=.000$ ) and that successful salespeople will have to resort to unethical practices ( $t(167) = 3.149$ ,  $p=.002$ ).

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<sup>1</sup> Subsequent iterations of the workshop used the Peltier et al. (2015) scale which was not available for the initial implementation of the workshop.

**Table 1: Paired Sample T-Test of Pre/Post-Workshop Perception Changes**

Survey Items with Significant Difference Between Pre- and Post-Workshop Means	Survey Item Statistics		Paired Differences			
	Pre-Workshop	Post-Workshop	(Pre-Post)	t	df	Sig.
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	ΔMean	Value		
<b>What is selling and how are those skills used in personal and professional life?</b>						
Selling is about helping customers	3.62 (.978)	4.16 (.745)	-0.54	-5.812	167	.000
A sales career does not offer much in the way of job security	3.04 (.990)	2.67 (.933)	0.37	3.428	167	.001
Listening is an important skill for successful salespeople	4.42 (.670)	4.63 (.615)	-0.21	-2.891	167	.004
Sales positions are highly stressful jobs	3.85 (.797)	3.63 (.852)	0.21	2.306	167	.022
A sales position offers a lot of variety day to day	3.73 (.817)	3.92 (.785)	-0.19	-2.291	167	.023
It is difficult to have a good family life if you are in a sales position	2.37 (.945)	2.15 (.880)	0.22	2.209	167	.029
Professional selling is a prestigious career	3.38 (.860)	3.61 (.869)	-0.23	-2.501	167	.013
<b>What characteristics or attributes are needed to be a successful salesperson?</b>						
Successful salespeople need to have outgoing personalities	4.12 (.839)	3.23 (1.130)	0.89	7.903	167	.000
Salespeople need to be persistent	3.98 (.944)	3.75 (.907)	0.23	2.238	167	.027
A sales career is not a good career for everyone	3.76 (1.161)	3.52 (1.050)	0.24	1.988	167	.048
<b>How do trust and relationships relate to selling?</b>						
Most salespeople are honest	2.51 (.833)	3.18 (.866)	-0.67	-7.349	167	.000
Salespeople need to show empathy/care toward others	3.32 (.842)	3.77 (.900)	-0.46	-4.590	167	.000
A salesperson needs to be aggressive to be successful in sales	3.26 (1.148)	2.89 (1.061)	0.36	2.839	167	.005
<b>Can a salesperson be successful without resorting to unethical practices?</b>						
Sales people are likely to take advantage of inexperienced customers	3.53 (.978)	3.04 (.969)	0.49	4.358	167	.000
Salespeople who are very successful have to resort to unethical practices	2.61 (.906)	2.27 (.903)	0.34	3.149	167	.002

All questions are 5-point Likert items ranging from 1-Strongly disagree to 5-Strongly Agree

### **ADAPTABILITY OF THE PSW**

Results of this study suggest that an online, self-paced workshop on sales may be able to positively influence student perceptions of the sales profession. At the same time, the online workshop caused minimal disruption for the instructor delivering the Principles of Marketing course. The result suggests that this form of intervention may strike the difficult balance between effectiveness and ease of implementation that may not be possible with the other forms of educational interventions examined in prior studies. The workshop can be created once and delivered in many future courses with little involvement from instructors. Not only does this reduce the burden placed on instructors who are already time-constrained, it also ensures consistency across course sections.

While the Professional Selling Workshop (PSW) described here was administered in a Principles of Marketing course, the workshop could be easily

adapted and used in other courses or as a standalone requirement for business students as they are accepted into the business program. An additional module that should be added in future versions of the PSW is a session on salaries of salespeople. The change in the pre and post survey statement regarding salaries did not show significant change, which was expected since there was no module addressing that topic. And, in both the pre and post survey, students slightly agreed with the statement that sales positions are not good paying jobs. From this, it appears that students are unaware of the salary potential of many sales positions, or they perceive that sales positions are not financially lucrative. Changing this belief could further improve perceptions of sales careers.

Another possible added benefit of using the approach described here is to engage alumni and the business community to provide content (e.g., video interviews) for the individual modules

within the workshop. For colleges placing an emphasis on sales education or those with formal sales programs, the PSW can provide a platform allowing alumni and corporate sponsors to engage with a large number of students while minimizing the coordination typically required for classroom visits. For students, having alumni and corporate sponsors involved in the creation of module content provides an opportunity to hear from companies and professionals that will likely be involved in recruiting and other on-campus career development events. Such exposure can be beneficial for students and partners alike.

### **CONCERNS AND CHALLENGES WITH THE PSW**

While the study presented here suggests the PSW may be an effective mechanism for improving student perceptions, we recognize the study's limitations and opportunities for future research. While our results suggest that student perceptions changed in some areas, it is difficult to attribute all the changes to the

PSW. Future studies employing an experimental design would provide stronger evidence of the workshop's effectiveness. The online nature of the workshop also provides opportunities for researchers to test individual module effectiveness, to refine module content, and increase overall workshop effectiveness. Furthermore, research examining the effect the PSW has on enrollment in subsequent sales courses would be beneficial for colleges attempting to increase participation in sales programs or initiatives.

Negative attitudes toward sales careers have been challenging educators and professionals for decades and there is no silver bullet to correct this. The results from this study, however, are promising in that the PSW appears to strike a delicate balance between effectiveness and implementation practicality. The approach described here can scale easily and can be implemented in nearly any course delivery format while ensuring consistency across course sections.

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