

# Creating Win-Win Collaborations for Students: An Immersive Learning Project for Advanced Sales Courses

Matthew M. Lastner, Rebecca Rast and James “Mick” Andzulis

**Purpose of the Study:** With the number of university sales programs on the rise, and a growing demand for sales professionals forecast well into the future, a need exists for undergraduate sales course innovations to better prepare the salespeople of tomorrow.

**Method/Design and Sample:** In this paper, we advocate for the design and implementation of immersive learning sales projects that move beyond classroom simulations and mock exercises to provide students with actual real-world selling experience.

**Results:** Through immersive learning, such as the method we propose here, students will enter the sales workforce with a more realistic preview of what will be required for success. Students will also further develop the soft skills essential for a successful career in sales.

**Value to Marketing Educators:** As firms grow more satisfied with the successes of college recruits who have experienced immersive learning, their relationships with sales programs will strengthen, enhancing both sales program recruiting efforts and the potential for donations.

*Keywords:* Sales, Immersive Learning, Experiential Learning, Collaboration, Incubator

**Matthew M. Lastner**, Doctoral Candidate; 225-578-8779; [mlastn1@lsu.edu](mailto:mlastn1@lsu.edu). **Rebecca Rast**, Doctoral Student; 225-578-2434; [rrast1@lsu.edu](mailto:rrast1@lsu.edu). **James “Mick” Andzulis**, PhD, Assistant Professor, 225-578-7418; [mick@lsu.edu](mailto:mick@lsu.edu). All from the Department of Marketing, E.J. Ourso College of Business, Louisiana State University, 2100 Business Education Complex, Baton Rouge, LA 70803; fax: 225-578-8616.

Recent economic trends have presented sales educators with an excellent opportunity to showcase the value created by formal sales education. Statistics reflect that roughly one out of every nine American workers currently works in sales (Schawbel, 2013) and, according to Pink (2012), the other eight also engage in sales related activities such as persuading, influencing, and convincing. Moreover, the ratio of America's salesforce compared to the entire federal workforce is five to one (Pink 2012), and the number of salespeople is expected to grow with two million new sales jobs forecast by 2020 (Bolander, Bonney, & Satornio, 2014). Graduating sales students are set to benefit most from this heightened demand. As highlighted in the *Wall Street Journal* (Mattioli, 2011), a growing number accept sales jobs upon graduation, due in part to their large debt and willingness to take a commission-based position to avoid unemployment.

However, a noted concern among employers is that such graduates are not prepared. A recent survey indicated that over 60% of bosses felt new college graduates were unprepared for the workplace (White, 2013). In response, sales educators have begun placing more importance on designing sales courses which incorporate active learning approaches. Compared to passive (lecture-based) learning techniques, active or experiential learning requires

student participation (Inks & Avila, 2008) wherein students benefit from activities designed to increase involvement with case studies, simulations, and role-playing (Cummins, Peltier, Erffmeyer, & Whalen, 2013).

Still, despite sales educator efforts to increase active learning, many such exercises fall short. Role plays, the most frequently implemented experiential learning activity (Cummins et al., 2013), only *simulate* the selling experience and students do not get the opportunity to learn in a real-world setting (Inks & Avila, 2008). By contrast, immersive learning activities, a form of experiential learning, go beyond simple simulations and emphasize a student-driven learning process which typically involves teams of students working to produce tangible outcomes in collaboration with actual businesses or organizations (Wahlers, Jones, & Chapman, 2014). In this paper, we explore the many benefits of immersive learning for sales education and describe an innovative, synergistic immersive learning project that can enhance sales student outcomes.

## BACKGROUND OF THE PROBLEM

*Need for Innovation.* Sales candidates are among those most in demand by businesses, but many college graduates struggle to find employment, often

owing to a lack of soft skills necessary to be effective in sales, such as communication, critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration (White, 2013). In fact, 44% of employers identified soft skills as the area in which recent graduates show the biggest gap in requisite skill set, and a recent survey found that among their top priorities, employers seek team players who can manage workloads and solve problems. (White 2013). While findings indicate that new salespeople who received college sales training perform significantly better (Bolander et al., 2014), more can be done to improve vital soft skills. How can colleges solve this dilemma and help sales students to develop these valuable skills? One solution is through immersive learning, an extension of experiential learning.

*Improvement for Sales Curriculum Objectives.* Experiential learning emphasizes applied learning experiences and has been identified as one of the most effective student learning strategies. It provides first-hand examples of salespeople’s responsibilities, including day-to-day activities, and the type of language used by sales professionals (Inks & Avila, 2008). As set forth in Kolb’s (1984) model, experiential learning has four core components: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. In sales education, these components translate into students receiving first-hand selling experience, applying learned theories, and then reflecting and readjusting with new ideas and solutions (Inks & Avila, 2008).

Immersive learning is a more advanced form of experiential learning which pulls together student teams to “create unique, high-impact learning experiences that result in real-world solutions” for actual businesses and organizations (Wahlers et al., 2014, 2). Such collaborations best distinguish immersive from experiential learning exercises, though immersive learning projects have potentially more to offer in their ability to prepare sales students for career success while reducing the “entry shock” of the actual sales environment they may encounter in new sales roles (Inks & Avila, 2008). However, owing to their complexity, immersive learning activities are still uncommon in the discipline (Inks & Avila, 2008).

Against this backdrop, we introduce an immersive learning project which can be easily implemented to answer the call for more real-world learning experiences in the classroom.

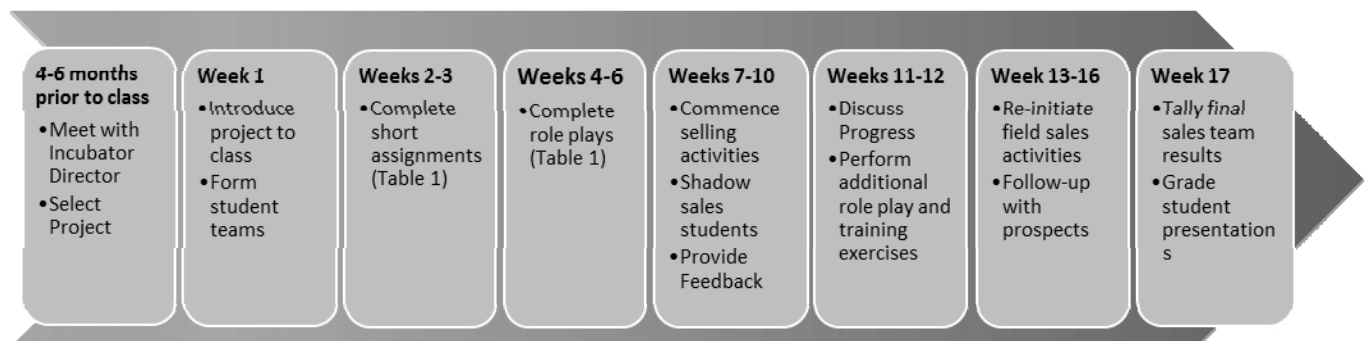
***An Innovative Solution: The Immersive Learning Project***

*Student Benefits Achieved Through Innovation.* The number of colleges offering formal sales programs is growing rapidly (Allen, Kumar, Tarasi, & Wilson, 2014; Bolander et al., 2014). The immersive sales project described here is designed for a full-semester advanced sales course. It has been noted in sales education literature that one major challenge confronting sales educators is how to develop course material that both meets learning objectives and offers students a fun and enjoyable learning experience (Inks & Avila, 2008). This project does both.

Central to this immersive learning project is collaboration between sales educators and university-sponsored incubators, which are entities that provide small new ventures with resources (Allen & McCluskey, 1990). In the U.S., with 400+ university incubators (Smith-Barrow, 2013), 110+ sales programs (“SEF Top Universities,” 2014), and countless entrepreneurship clubs and classes, these collaborative opportunities are only increasing. On one side, sales educators desire opportunities for students to gain real-world selling experience, while on the other side, student entrepreneurs aim to launch their businesses with access to a salesforce to generate sales. Conveniently, a partnership between the two entities can facilitate both goals.

*Outline of Innovation.* The following sections detail how sales educators can construct innovative immersive learning projects focused on collaboration between sales courses and incubators. To aid in the description, we provide an actual example successfully implemented in an advanced sales course at a major U.S. university wherein students sold a product called “Mashball” – a portable tailgating game. Additionally, a timeline (see Figure 1) and directions to replicate this project, as well as possible obstacles and how to overcome them, are provided.

**Figure 1: Timeline of Immersive Learning Project**



## STARTING THE PROJECT

To begin, the sales course instructor and director of the incubator must meet before the semester to identify which student incubator projects represent the best options for collaboration: preferably those with a product already developed and inventory ready to be sold. However, if inventory is not yet available, it is still possible for sales students to solicit advanced orders filled once the first product-runs are complete; Mashball fell into this category. Additionally, Mashball was selected because it represented a simple, tangible product, allowing students to more easily identify features and benefits. We do not recommend complex products or (intangible) services for this project as they present greater challenges for inexperienced student sales teams.

Sales instructors should plan the first week of class to serve as an introduction to the course and immersive learning project. On day 1, students should form sales teams of 4-6 students and appoint a leader (sales manager) responsible for coordinating activities with the instructor (sales director). Next, the instructor should invite the student entrepreneur to class to introduce the venture/product students will sell. Todd, student entrepreneur and Mashball inventor, spent a full class speaking about Mashball, outlining his vision, highlighting key features and benefits, and answering important questions related to pricing and delivery.

## *Managing the Early Stages*

Upon introduction to the venture/product, students should develop strategies to begin selling and completing the entire sales cycle, including prospecting for customers, cold calling, scheduling meetings, presenting the product, negotiating, and closing the sale (Manning, Ahearn, & Reece, 2012). Importantly, student sales teams are expected to operate autonomously to execute the project. The instructor's role is to provide initial instructions and then to offer additional guidance on an as-needed basis. For the Mashball project, students were split into groups of five with each sales team responsible for evaluating prospects, developing sales scripts, setting appointments, and closing sales. Given the enormity of this task, we recommend slowly indoctrinating students into the process through use of smaller, in-class activities designed to prepare them to sell to actual clients. For instance, Mashball project students spent the first several weeks role playing the sale of Mashball, broken into different steps of the sales process, from cold calling, to closing customers on the features and benefits of the game, before ever approaching an actual customer. These activities helped to sharpen student's skills and ready them to engage with actual customers. In the table below, we describe a number of recommended graded short assignments, as well as their intended learning purpose.

**Table 1: List of Course Assignments**

<b>Assignment Name</b>	<b>Purpose</b>
<b>Short Assignments (20% Total)</b>	
Features and Benefits (5%)	Student teams create an exhaustive list of features and benefits for the product; aim to be "product experts."
Buyer Profile (5%)	Student teams identify the demographic and psychographic makeup of potential buyers; use primary and secondary research.
Cold Calling Script (5%)	Students work individually to develop a cold calling script that can be used when prospecting for customers.
Competitive Intelligence (5%)	Student teams conduct primary and secondary research aimed at identifying potential competing businesses and products.
<b>Role Plays (20% Total)</b>	
Approach and Cold Calling (5%)	Students work to develop mastery of skills for a successful approach, including introductions, non-verbal cues, building rapport, and cold calling.
Needs Discovery (5%)	Students develop and utilize open and closed questions to adequately assess buyer needs and bridging those needs to the features and benefits of the product.
Presentation (5%)	Students develop both an abbreviated and longer version of a formal presentation of the product/service to be used in meetings with prospective customers.
Negotiation and Closing (5%)	Students work on overcoming buyer objections, negotiating parameters of the sale, striving for mutually beneficial outcomes, and ultimately closing the sale.
<b>Project (60% Total)</b>	
Units Sold (40%)	To reflect an actual sales environment, a large portion of the overall student grade is based on objective sales performance.
Presentation of Learning (20%)	Each student team presents what they learned from participating in the course and how their experiences in the field compared to their expectations based on previous coursework.

### ***Selling to Actual Customers***

After students have had adequate time to prepare to engage customers, sales teams may begin to actively prospect and sell to their territories/customers. To help guide students through this stage, we strongly advise instructors to mimic an actual selling environment, assuming the role of sales director. Given the nature of this project, students will need to spend time outside of class engaging in selling activities. Instructors should plan a flexible course schedule allocating class periods for off-campus student meetings, prospecting, and selling, with the instructor shadowing the process. For Mashball project sales, sales teams attended college football games, concerts, and festivals. The instructor shadowed sales teams, observed sales interactions, and provided notes for improvement at the end of each session. Additionally, in-class sales meetings should be planned so students can discuss their progress and instructor feedback from the field, and identify areas for further training. Finally, students should complete weekly activity reports to track the number of calls/contacts made, appointments set, presentations delivered, and sales closed, ideally using Customer Relationship Management (CRM) software if available.

### **CONCLUDING AND GRADING THE PROJECT**

*Student Goals.* Under the guidance of the instructor, the student's primary goal for the project is to maximize unit sales. However, to separate learning from outcomes, we recommend grading the project along two lines. The first, objective performance, should be based on the number of units sold by each team. This element provides students with a realistic preview of how salespeople are motivated, evaluated and compensated. The second, subjective performance, can be student class presentations detailing what they learned, assessing their own selling skills, and comparing their real-world selling experiences to that of previous theory-based courses.

### ***Benefits of this Immersive Learning Project***

*Assessment of Innovation's Effectiveness.* As detailed in Table 2, a number of benefits accrue to each party in this project, with the greatest being *sales students* gaining real-world selling experience essential for development of soft skills. According to Lauren, a Mashball project sales student, "Being out there and applying what we learned was much more valuable than a simple lecture. Selling an actual product is what made everything we learned in the classroom stick

and really make sense in my mind." Less obvious benefits of cooperative learning projects include greater levels of achievement, long-term retention of learning, intrinsic motivation, and overall effort (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith 2007). This suggests value in organizing synergistic immersive learning activities between two university-affiliated organizations, as opposed to collaborating with businesses outside the university. As Lauren explained, "Knowing that the product was created by a fellow student made selling much more enjoyable. It gave us a connection to the product that wouldn't have originally been there. It also gave us a sense of pride when selling, and I think our prospects could see that which made us more genuine in our endeavors." In addition, this project allows sales students to learn about start-up ventures first-hand, an invaluable experience for students interested in entrepreneurship. For the *sales educator*, the opportunity to partner with an on-campus organization offers the benefits of greater project control, more frequent communication, and better aligned interests with the collaborating entity. Greg, the sales instructor of the Mashball collaborative project said, "This was a convenient, in-house project that students all related to, and coordination was easy." *Student entrepreneurs* also derive benefits; most notably access to a "free" salesforce, paid with experience rather than money. Working with the salesforce, entrepreneurs generate sales, create product awareness, and gain valuable customer insights and feedback; exactly the results observed in the Mashball project. At project conclusion, sales teams generated over 200 qualified leads and 50 advance sales for Todd, who estimated over \$7,000 of sales were a result of working with the project. In describing the benefits, Todd explained, "The most beneficial part about working with the sales course was that it provided a true test as to whether or not people would really like the product. In other words, the market research obtained was priceless. The other beneficial aspect was my ability to see the key selling features before the product truly hit the market. All in all, the sales course provided answers to questions that would have otherwise taken months or even years to answer. Instead of trying to figure out a successful sales strategy, I was able to discover one from the start thanks to the sales course." The *Student Incubator Manager*, Kenny, concurred in stating, "Seeing this tangible success in the form of a physical product, capital raised, consumer interest and finally sales, gives us all a warm fuzzy feeling."

**Table 2: Benefits of Immersive Learning Project**

<b>Beneficiary</b>	<b>Benefits</b>
<b><i>University Sales Centers</i></b>	
Advanced Sales Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Real-world selling experience</li> <li>• Development of soft skills</li> <li>• Long-term retention of learning</li> <li>• Confidence and motivation through success</li> <li>• Exposure to entrepreneurial process/start-ups</li> </ul>
Sales Instructors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Real-world selling scenarios beyond mock exercises</li> <li>• Competitive atmosphere crucial to sales success</li> <li>• Convenient access to project partners</li> <li>• Enhanced project control</li> </ul>
Sales Programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enhanced credibility with students</li> <li>• Exposure to business community partners</li> <li>• Press coverage of success</li> <li>• Growth in sales student placement</li> </ul>
Sales Education Discipline	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased appreciation and interest from stakeholders</li> <li>• Improved alignment with industry needs</li> </ul>
<b><i>University Stakeholders</i></b>	
College of Business	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Integration with student incubator support network</li> <li>• Exposure to entrepreneurial community</li> <li>• Enhanced reputation with corporate partners/recruiters</li> </ul>
Corporate Partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Better prepared/experienced sales recruits</li> <li>• Reduced training and turnover costs</li> </ul>
University at Large	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reputation as innovator in sales education</li> <li>• Development of soft skills</li> </ul>
<b><i>Incubators and Entrepreneurship Centers</i></b>	
Student Entrepreneurs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Free access to a sales force</li> <li>• Market research/customer feedback</li> <li>• Product awareness in the market</li> <li>• Go-to-market strategy refinement</li> </ul>
Student Incubator Managers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Proving ground for student incubator projects</li> <li>• Additional support from sales educators</li> </ul>
Student Incubators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exposure and integration with business school</li> <li>• Collaborative support of sales programs</li> </ul>
Customers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intrinsic reward of supporting student learning</li> <li>• Access to new and innovative products</li> </ul>

### **Budgeting and Materials Needed for the Project**

Another advantage of this immersive learning project is that it can be implemented with very little sales program cost. The primary expenses are the development and printing of selling materials, such as business cards, brochures, and other leave-behinds. These costs can be shared with the incubator program, with the entrepreneur/incubator typically paying a larger percentage.

### **Challenges Encountered and Suggested Remedies**

Instructors may encounter several obstacles implementing this project. First, several months lead time is needed to arrange collaboration with the incubator. Second, instructors need to address the requirement that both students and the instructor must spend time outside of class. The course description must clearly stipulate time spent for off-campus meetings and sales activities. Instructors must also be flexible to shadow and coach students on sales calls.

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Finally, a last obstacle instructors may anticipate relates to payment collection. If university guidelines prohibit the direct collection of payments by students, student entrepreneurs can arrange payment through a secure website, with personalized codes used to assign sales credit to each sales team.

### **Adaptability of Innovation**

As the need for well-educated sales professionals continues to grow, paramount is the responsibility of university sales programs to prepare graduates for these roles. While theory-based courses build a strong foundation, immersive learning offers the opportunity to advance the readiness of sales students to the next level and can be easily implemented in various forms in other sales courses. This project is a viable option for sales educators looking to integrate efforts and create synergies with nascent university business incubator programs.