

Sales Renaissance: *The Birth of a New Independent Discipline*



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For anyone involved in academia for a length of time, it is no secret that universities across the United States are encountering a new era. In today's academic world, universities are faced with declining enrollments, changing demands in student life, and justification of the academic value proposition. When once there was the question, "where will you be attending college?", there is now the question, "should you attend college?" We appear to be at a juncture of change, but what that change should be is still to be determined. Often academia follows realities seen in practice as business executives share data and insights; however, it's time for academia to be proactive and to lead the way in this new age.

As of the time of this writing, the Sales Education Foundation website noted 38 universities world-wide offering students both a major and minor in sales; there are 94 additional universities offering a minor. This demonstrates that the time may have arrived to begin serious discussion and redefining of "Professional/Personal Selling" as a trade, to that of a true academic discipline, equal to the likes of Marketing, Finance, Accounting and Management. Can a Sales Renaissance in academia help to mitigate declining enrollments and bring about value for students, parents, and employers? Is now the time to consider Professional Sales as an independent discipline?

From its humble beginnings as traveling product sales in the early 1800s, to the sophisticated consultative and relational sales of today, what we now call Professional/Personal Selling has always undergone adaptation and evolution. Perhaps the most significant catalyst of evolution occurred in 1894 with the creation of the first sales training school established by James Patterson of the National Cash Register Company (NCR) (Hawes, 2021). Over the past 129 years sales training has grown, with a small but growing number of universities recognizing the importance of sales training. Traditionally,

REFERENCES:

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- Stevens, Howard and James, Geoffrey. "Sales and Academia: Preparing Sales Professionals for a More Demanding Business Environment," Chally Group Worldwide, accessed on November 30, 2022 at salesfoundation.org/resources/2017/07/EOS-Sales-and-Academia-1.pdf

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universities and colleges have favored the perspective that Marketing is the direction for academia, and that Sales was not worthy of “real” scholarly work. The culture of Sales as a “trade school” set of skills has led to decades of missed opportunity to offer strong sales programs as part of the business curriculum. One only needs to do a quick search for sales related research to uncover the depth, breadth, and quality of sales research. As a discipline, Professional Sales has truly emerged as a Phoenix from the ashes.

In 2017, Stevens and James noted that the realm of professional sales was evolving into a “Sales 3.0”; a point where professionals will require specialized training and certification. Furthermore, the researchers noted that gaps between sales and academia had been shrinking, as the need for professional business sales consultants became clearer. The idea that Sales is much more than a set of standardized behaviors that should be taught by the business community and employers, is slowing becoming a reality. Changes in the business environment, and the growing importance of the supply chain, have changed the role of the sales professional from one of order taking and product knowledge, to one of entrepreneur and transformational solutions creator. The role of the professional salesperson now requires knowledge of the buyer’s industry, business, and customers, not just that of the selling organization. Today’s post-pandemic sales professionals not only manage ever-changing buying behavior to co-create solutions, but they are also expected to consult on upcoming potential problems and assist customers in averting or navigating the future. To be at this level, sales professionals now need strong business acumen, critical thinking skills, and strong interpersonal skills. Employers who don’t have the resources to create these skills, are now forming partnerships with forward thinking and innovative business schools at universities and colleges.

Given the increase in need for business professionals with important selling skills, it is no surprise that business schools are seeing increased demand for sales training from students, parents, and employers. However, the past thinking of Sales as a “trade” in academia has created a shortage of qualified tenure track faculty to create, lead and instruct sales curriculum at the level currently required. For those schools that have created programs, the realities of increased demand and tightening resources create the perfect storm for over worked and under funded programs.

Does this indicate that we are at Sales 3.0? If so, this next level calls for Professional Sales as a true independent discipline, equal to that of Marketing, Finance, Accounting and Management. For this to occur, we need to begin considering program requirements and meeting AACSB standards as a Sales Discipline. It is time to invite others to the conversation that has continued between sales professionals and marketers for over a quarter century: is Sales part of marketing or an independent discipline? If we are to consider this question by answering that Sales 3.0 is Sales independent of marketing, several different sub-conversations must also begin. Some areas to begin the conversation of Sales as a discipline include:

- Sales will need to create program learning outcomes (PLOs), which are supported by course learning outcomes (CLOs), and these outcomes need to be mapped out across the learning curriculum.
- Curriculum mapping will need to include direct connections to AACSB standards, overall business school objectives and university objectives.
- The sales discipline will need to close-the-loop as part of Assurance of Learning.
- Outcomes will need to balance the educational standards and increased rigor with the higher-level criteria needed by employers.
- What areas of specialization and certification, which are externally certified, need to be incorporated into the curriculum and completed outside of the normal course offering?

Some may say this is naïve or presumptuous. It’s agreed that Professional Sales is not “there” yet, but don’t we teach to “dress for the position you want, not the one you have”? If we truly believe Sales is heading to, or is at, the higher level of Sales 3.0, it is time for the sales academic community to begin “dressing” for the new role. It’s time for a Sales Renaissance, and academia can lead the way before it begins in the corporate world. △