

The Future Professional Sales Force

WILL LOOK DIFFERENT

While much has been written on how the sales profession is being impacted by trends of digital interaction, digital reality, online sales, AI and more, the pandemic-driven move to virtual selling was not the only major transformational event last year. Fueled by summer protests, another trend gained momentum, if perhaps not as much blog attention; that of underrepresented minorities in professional sales.

The general population in the U.S. (2019 Census Bureau) consists of 13.4% Black or African American 18.5% Hispanic or Latino. With respect to business-to-business wholesale and manufacturing sales positions, according to the Bureau of Labor 2020 statistics, 4.5% are Black or African American and 13.6% Hispanic or Latino. These numbers show an underrepresentation of minorities. The results vary by type of sales positions, being most exaggerated in the financial services career, and skewing the opposite direction in low paying sales positions that don't require higher education like retail sales and cashiers.

A lack of representation in professional sales forces can lead some underrepresented minorities to feel like outsiders. This lack of representation can limit productive networking and lead to lower levels of awareness and connections related to sales career opportunities. Many businesses are seeking to serve a more diverse business-to-business customer base and want their sales force to better reflect their customer base as well. Many of the same issues occur in university sales programs. Closing this gap is a priority for many

universities who support diversity and inclusion initiatives and want to meet the business demand for more diverse sales candidates.

One sales program, The Edward H. Schmidt School of Professional Sales at the University of Toledo, with direct support from the 3M Corporation, is launching a research initiative to better understand African American and Hispanic students and their decision-making about both college major and career choice, along with their thoughts around professional sales careers. The goal is to increase the number of African American and Hispanic students in university sales programs so they can obtain fulfilling professional sales careers at a variety of businesses. Results of the study will be used to develop programming to help support African American and Hispanic student experiences in order to better capitalize on the opportunities in professional sales, and to help university sales programs to better support this under-served population.

Anne L. Balazs, Dean of the John B. and Lillian E. Neff College of Business and Innovation at The University of Toledo recognizes the importance of this initiative. "Our college's core values start with diversity and our sales program is a gem. This initiative combines the best of both. We believe in the value of many voices and supporting all students—we are 110% committed."

The research-focused initiative is designed to use focus groups and surveying methods to engage high school students, current university students majoring and not majoring in sales, and university sales program alumni. The goal is to understand the information needs and decision factors that influence whether to pursue a major in sales and whether to pursue a position in sales upon graduation. The outcome will be recommendations at a programmatic level to help educate pre-major URM students about the opportunity, to promote inclusivity within the programs, and to help diversify sales forces of corporate partners.



Following recent catalysts, many people have written about current changes in professional sales and what the future may hold.



More than 20 years ago, 3M launched its Frontline Program with historically black and women’s colleges to encourage and build sales education to support more diverse talent in sales. UToledo joined in 2005. According to 3M Frontline Program Manager Celeste Hughes, “We are excited to provide support to UToledo for this important research initiative. We intend to build awareness and interest in professional selling careers among African American and Hispanic students and hope to share the findings to help schools and businesses around the country diversify their sales programs.”

There are many benefits to diversifying the sales force and focusing on inclusion. According to Damion Wright, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Talent Programs Leader at Intuit, “The ultimate goal for a company should be to diversify their sales organization so it is a reflection of its customer base and/or user base. If you can achieve this goal, this can create amazing synergies and impact the bottom line of the organization in ways you wouldn’t be able to imagine.” In addition, hiring salespeople is competitive and challenging for many companies. It makes no sense to eliminate talented people from the pool inadvertently because those individuals haven’t been introduced to the opportunity. Diversity in thinking also encourages innovation. Finally, a more diverse sales force can lead to overall feelings of inclusion by all, which tend to result in better decision making and improved overall performance.

While many things in sales are changing, and no one has a crystal ball to know exactly what the profession will look like in the future, it does seem that one thing is likely – that the actual faces of sales will be more varied than ever before. ▲

According to a Deloitte 2013 report (<https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/au/Documents/human-capital/deloitte-au-hc-diversity-inclusion-soup-0513.pdf>), “When employees think their organisation is committed to, and supportive of diversity and they feel included, employees report better business performance in terms of ability to innovate, (83% uplift) responsiveness to changing customer needs (31% uplift) and team collaboration (42% uplift).”



ELLEN PULLINS
University of Toledo



DEIRDRE JONES
University of Toledo