

The Renaissance of Sales Scholarship



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The Renaissance in Europe started in the fourteenth century, resulting from growth in trade and commerce that led to prosperity and the ability to finance art and science. It was a period of rapid discovery and invention. Today, the prosperity of the past few decades, coupled with rapid technological innovation, leads to increased interest in the scholarship of professional selling and sales management. Sales scholarship is in a period of renaissance.

To understand more about this renaissance in sales research, several Sales Education Foundation (SEF) scholars shared their thoughts.

SEF Dissemination award winner, Adam Rapp, The Ralph and Luci Schey Professor of Sales and Executive Director of the Ralph and Luci Schey Sales Center at Ohio University, believes that both the profession of sales and sales scholarship have experienced ebbs and flows in popularity. First, there was growth due to more strategic approaches (e.g., KAM and CRM), followed by concerns of disintermediation due to the potential of new technologies. More recently, though, he feels, “giving customers the ability to research and review products, even in complex environments, would actually strengthen the role and elevate the importance of a qualified sales professional.” Now, Rapp says “as researchers began to look at more strategic questions, incorporated more complex data structures, and employed sophisticated data modeling techniques, we are living in an era of unprecedented sales research and opportunity.”

“Whosoever desires constant success must change his conduct with the times.”

—NICCOLÒ MACHIAVELLI,

Italian political philosopher, and historian, who lived from 1469 to 1527.

Rapp, who serves as the current Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management (JPSSM)*, the preeminent sales-focused journal in the Marketing field, shows how the journal’s progress can attest to the trends identified above. “In a short 5-year window, we have witnessed total journal submissions increase by 29% from 97 annual submissions to 125 (as of the time of this article). Similarly, article downloads in the same 5-year window increased 19% year-to-date. I view article downloads as a leading indicator of what the future holds based on interest in the field. The growth and quality of the recent publications can also be evidenced by the fact that the journal will be recognized on the Emerging Sources Citation Index (ECI) this year and then placed into the queue for the Social Sciences Citation Index.”

Michael Ahearne, C.T. Bauer Professor of Marketing and Research Director, Stagner Sales Excellence Institute notes that sales research has increasingly been able to penetrate elite marketing journals due to its impact and rigor. Observing that only six articles were published in the elite marketing journals from 2003–2006, Ahearne stated “Fortunately, this trend has reversed, and the area has now become an area of focus for elite journals. In the four years from 2019–2022, over 40 articles were published in elite journals. In addition to showing interest in the area, respect for the quality and contribution is more apparent today.”

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Academic leaders attribute the growth in the amount and importance of sales research to the sales community. According to Miami University's Endres Associate Professor of Marketing Scott Friend, two-time SEF Research Grant recipient, the key academic journals in marketing value actionable implications that can affect practice and look at the complexity that exists in how firms interact with their audiences. The sales area fits these needs. However, it always has. What's different now? Friend says "it is that there is now a larger collective group of scholars who are blending all of these factors to produce such meaningful research. Across early-, mid-, and late-career sales scholars, the constant churn of creative, rigorous, and eye-opening sales research is inspiring. Thus, perhaps it isn't that the journals are changing or that sales has changed. Instead, sales researchers have evolved and collectively elevated the profession. It is the people in our field of study that are responsible for the sales renaissance."

2022 SEF Research Grant winner Bryan Hochstein, Associate Professor at the University of Alabama, agrees. The sales community comes together through a variety of organizations and events to promote the area. "I have been impressed at how the sales research community is coming together around the topic of helping each other to be successful in advancing quality research. The efforts of both organizations and individuals signal a desire by many to bring together the experienced scholar with the doctoral or pre-tenure learner that has a dedicated focus on sales research. Overall, these specific efforts, along with those of top journals to feature special issues on sales, and organizations that increasingly promote and encourage sales research, portend a vibrant current state and future for our domain."

Hochstein also notes that "the interest in sales research by doctoral students is growing, with numerous doctoral candidates seeking guidance in the topical area at their local institutions, as well as via external committee members that see value in helping to guide and shape quality sales research in aspiring researchers." Qualified future sales scholars are needed to continue to develop the myriad of sales education programs and to continue to publish actionable work to inform the practice of sales.

New initiatives, such as the formation of the Sales Researcher's Collaboration Consortium (SRCC) demonstrate a focus on investing in a sustainable research pipeline and developing future researchers. Another signal of the current level of interest is the strong enrollment in a Fall 2022 sales seminar held by the Institute for the Study of Business Markets (ISBM) at Penn State and taught by Ahearne. ISBM seminars target Ph.D. students around the world interested in developing research skills in a topic area not offered at their university. Ahearne's seminar had about 30 Ph.D. students, by far the most popular seminar offered by ISBM over the last five years. Ahearne notes,

"Developing the next generation of academics with an interest in the sales and sales management area is critical to the success of our field. Fortunately, we now have a strong pipeline of Ph.D. students with an interest in the area."

The importance of scholarly research in sales and sales management rests partially in its dissemination. As the work is shared with students, as well as business and industry, it gains value in shaping how selling and sales management is conducted. Impactful research is shared in the classroom by scholars who stay up to date in the field, as well as disseminated through textbooks. It is shared with businesspeople through trade media, consulting practice, and more recently, through social media. According to SEF Advisory Board Member Lenita Davis, Associate Professor and Executive Director of UWEC Professional Sales and Sales Management Program, "Sales research provides knowledge by uncovering facts and truths. The wisdom to create agile and successful sales strategies in turbulent environments is anchored in the knowledge and universal truths provided by sales research. The gap between the research is bridged by the educational process, which provides sales reps of the future an understanding of how research informs practice. For example, work done by sales researchers on the importance of social media and digital communication in sales has been important to changing the sales curriculum so that students understand the importance of leveraging digital communication for professional purposes."

According to Rapp, "we are seeing greater dissemination of sales research to practice and in the classroom. With the growth of professional selling programs at the University level, more students are entering the business world with a sales emphasis than ever before. More programs are leveraging digital strategies to share research results and insights." As an example, the recent effort put forward by JPSSM to release executive summaries via LinkedIn received ten times more followers than a few short months prior.

In the words of Renaissance painter Nicolas Poussin, "what is worth doing is worth doing well." Certainly, that adage is clear in the progress made in the study of professional selling and sales management. Undoubtedly the sales scholarly community and the needs of business will continue to drive the renaissance of sales scholarship into the foreseeable future. ▲