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Journal of Agribusiness 35, 1 (Spring 2017)
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Attitude Change by Students in Professional Sales Courses: Implications for Recruiters and Potential Employers

Aaron J. Johnson, W. Scott Downey, Kerry K. Litzenberg, Allen F. Wysocki, and
Elizabeth A. Yeager

Food, agribusiness, and natural resource firms are faced with the challenge of hiring for nearly 58,000 jobs annually that require a related bachelor's degree when only 35,400 students graduate with related degrees. Of those jobs created, nearly half will be in management and business, with a majority of those focused on sales or service. When sales representative is one of the hardest jobs to fill, the talent acquisition challenge is sizeable. One issue leading to this compounded challenge is the fact that college students have long had poor perceptions and attitudes toward sales as part of a career path. This study looks at the impact professional sales courses have on student perceptions and attitudes toward sales jobs and the sales profession. The positive results offer some implications for firms in this talent acquisition challenge.

Key words: Attitude toward sales jobs, professional sales, recruiting, sales profession

Agribusiness talent is needed around the world and universities play an important role in preparing students for these careers (Shelman and Connolly, 2012; Boland and Akridge, 2004). In a report published by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), firms involved in agricultural, food, and renewable natural resources will create 57,900 jobs annually between 2015 and 2020 that require at least a bachelor's degree; yet only 35,400 students are estimated to graduate with degrees in an agricultural- or life science-related field (Goecker et al., 2015). The same study notes that nearly half of those new jobs will be in the management and business areas, with most new hires entering in sales and technical service jobs (Goecker et al., 2015). Their report collaborates the findings of Cummins et. al (2013) that sales is the most common entry point into many business careers. This high level of demand is seen in other industries as well. Deeter-Schmelz and Kennedy (2011) note that Manpower Inc.'s Annual Talent Shortage Survey of 2007,

Aaron J. Johnson is an associate professor in the Department of Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology at the University of Idaho, Moscow. W. Scott Downey is an associate professor in the Department of Agricultural Economics at Purdue University, West Lafayette, Ind. Kerry K. Litzenberg is a Presidential Professor for Teaching Excellence and Regents Professor at Texas A&M University, College Station. Allen F. Wysocki is associate dean and professor in the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences at the University of Florida, Gainesville. Elizabeth A. Yeager is an assistant professor in the Department of Agricultural Economics at Kansas State University, Manhattan. The lead author was Aaron J. Johnson and the remaining co-authors are listed in alphabetical order. We are appreciative of the anonymous reviewer comments. Any remaining errors are the sole responsibility of the authors.

2008, and 2009 have sales representative as one of the most difficult jobs to fill worldwide.

On the supply side, universities are expanding their efforts to offer a sales-related focus to their curriculum (Deeter-Schmelz and Kennedy, 2011). The bottleneck seems to be with perceptions and attitudes of students toward sales as part of their career path. The issue here is what can be done by universities to improve these perceptions. The authors of this study hypothesized that students who had completed a sales course would have more favorable attitudes towards the sales profession. This improved attitude could, in turn, increase the likelihood of hiring success. To examine this hypothesis, the authors created an 11-component attitude survey to measure the changes in attitude for students who had completed a sales course.

Background and Related Literature

The battle for sales talent acquisition is no doubt heating up. The picture painted by Goeker et al. (2015) regarding the demand and supply of new graduates in agricultural, food, and renewable natural resources is impactful. Nearly 40% of the jobs will need to be filled with students who have not directly studied in that field. The report also notes a significant portion of these new jobs will be in a sales- or service-oriented capacity. The challenge to fill the demand for sales representatives has proved to be one of the more difficult (Deeter-Schmelz and Kennedy, 2011). Compounding these issues is the recognition by many companies that people are a source of competitive advantage and, thus, have put a heightened emphasis on recruiting and selection (Chally, 2007; Adidam, 2006).

Adding pressure to the talent acquisition game is the fact that it is very costly to suffer turnover in a sales force. It has been estimated that turnover of a sales professional can cost anywhere from 25% to 200% of annual compensation (Adidam, 2006). Not only is there loss in account momentum, new sales are lost because the territory is open and unserved until a new salesperson can be hired and trained (Munasinghe and O'Flaherty, 2005). Even when a sales person comes on board, they go through a ramp-up period of a year or more, during which time they are not as effective as seasoned professionals (Cotton and Tuttle, 1986). According to Jim Miller, director of sales and marketing for CHS Primeland, Lewiston, Idaho, it can be three to four years before a new sales person begins to add to the bottom line of the business. The numbers above make a significant case, but they are only measuring direct costs. Adidam (2006) notes that costs associated with customer service disruption, emotional costs, loss of morale, loss of experience,

burnout, and absenteeism among remaining employees are more difficult to measure, but all too real.

Within the current sales talent acquisition environment, there are several opportunities for students graduating from college. However, researchers have documented low opinions of sales careers by students since the 1960s (Ditz, 1967; Dubinsky, 1980; Dubinsky, 1981; Dubinsky and O'Connor, 1983; Paul and Worthing, 1970; Swenson et al., 1993). Attitudes toward sales careers seem to be consistent throughout the world (Honeycutt et al., 1999; Murray and Robinson, 2001). Some authors have focused on identifying demographic differences that may affect this negative attitude towards sales careers with varying degrees of success. African American students, for example, do not find sales careers to be any more or less appealing than their Caucasian counterparts (Honeycutt et al., 1996). Researchers have also attempted to develop a sales profile based on attitude, opinions, and personal characteristics of students in marketing- or sales-related courses (Baalbaki et al., 2014).

Experiences of researchers attempting to show that attitudes are changed by coursework in the management area, explored successfully changing students' attitudes toward community service (McCarthy and Tucker, 2002) and increased students' environmental sensitivity (Cordano, Ellis, and Scherer, 2003). Educators and sales recruiters alike have long considered the benefits of educational efforts that are aimed at balancing the negative image of sales (Ditz, 1967; Weeks and Muehling, 1987). Yet, no authors have used a multiple-attitude approach to measure attitude change about sales careers due to completion of a course in professional sales.

Methodology

Students enrolled in a professional sales course at four universities in four different regions of the country were offered an opportunity pre- and post-course to complete a survey regarding attitudes and perceptions about sales jobs. The items included on the survey were generated and the survey was tested, refined, and then administered over three years.

Table 1 shows the 11 areas that were used for comparison of students' attitudes toward sales. These areas were developed by first considering the previous literature on attitude measures. Some research efforts focused on different types of sales jobs (e.g. Honeycutt et al., 1996) such as consumer, industrial, insurance, and real estate to see if differences existed between students with different demographics. Other studies identified attitudes about the jobs and the people doing the sales jobs to see how students felt about these attributes (e.g., Amin, Hayajneh, and Nwakanma, 1995). Adding to the

information found in the literature, four professors relied on their experiences in teaching professional sales at the collegiate level. Collectively, they had over 50 years of experience teaching professional sales with enrollments exceeding 8,000 students in four regions of the country. They identified the student attitudes they thought most important and collectively refined the list. They used a 100-point scale, where 1 signified total disagreement with the construct and 100 indicated a total agreement, to measure the student attitudes. The first draft of the survey was tested with four different courses in the fall of 2010 to be sure the attitudes intended to measure were well identified. After review of the test student responses, the survey forms were summarized and edited to identify the final 11 categories to be measured.

Table 1. Areas Measured for Attitudes of Students toward Sales Careers, Multi-Regional Sales Attitude Survey.

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1. A sales professional job would be a good way to launch a career.
 2. A professional sales job would be a good way to use a college education.
 3. Professional sales jobs are a highly respected profession.
 4. Professional sales jobs are important to the profitable operation of many types of businesses.
 5. Professional sales people are ethical in their job.
 6. Professional sales jobs provide an opportunity for high pay.
 7. Professional sales jobs provide good opportunities for advancement.
 8. Professional sales people travel too much.
 9. Professional sales jobs provide stable income from year to year.
 10. Professional sales jobs have good job security.
 11. Professional sales jobs provide an opportunity to travel the country/world.
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During both the spring and fall semesters of 2010, 2011, and 2012, over 2,000 students in four sales classes, at four different land grant universities, in four regions of the United States (Florida, Indiana, Texas, and Idaho) responded to the survey forms delivered by web-server survey software. Students enrolled in the classes completed a pre-course attitude survey during the first week of enrollment in the class. The post-course attitude survey was administered the last week of class. Since the responses were kept confidential, students had no known risks associated with completing the survey and near 100% participation was found from the four university campuses. Students who dropped the course did not have a chance to complete a post-course survey, but most of the students who completed the courses responded to the survey instrument. At least one instructor offered extra credit points toward students' overall quiz grades for completing the surveys or an alternative assignment.

Results

Over the three years the surveys were administered, 2,682 students participated. Of the total, only 2,017 completed the first round and 1,853 completed the post-course survey. Almost 60% of the respondents were male and well over half had more than two semesters until they graduated. About one-third of the respondents were majoring in agribusiness, with the next largest represented major being business at 20%. Sales majors only comprised 5-7% of respondents, depending on whether pre- or post-course survey is considered. The number of responses by demographics are presented in Table 2 by pre- and post-course survey.

Table 2. Useable Response Counts by Pre- and Post-Course Survey.

	Pre-Course	Post-Course
Total	2017	1853
Gender		
Male	1175	1069
Female	816	756
Time To Graduation		
End of Semester	323	267
End of Next Semester	436	414
More than 2 Semester	1256	1168
Majors		
Agribusiness	647	567
Tech Ag	230	189
Ag Ed/Leadership	134	108
Business	395	370
Engineering	180	143
Sales	96	128
Other	339	287

The results of the three-year data collection from 2,006 students are summarized in Table 3. The average score (on a continuous 100-point scale where 1= total disagreement and 100=total agreement), number of observations, and standard deviation are presented for the pre- and post-course surveys. In addition, the paired t-test results comparing post-

course average minus pre-course average for each item are presented, as are the degrees of freedom for each pair of variables. The minimum and maximum for the pre- and post-course surveys are not reported as they were across the board 0 and 100, respectively.

Table 3. 2010-2013 Pre- and Post-Course Professional Sales Attitude Survey Summary Statistics.

Measured Item	Pre-Course Results			Post-Course Results			Paired t-Test	
	Average	N	S.D.	Average	N	S.D.	Post-Pre Difference	d.f
Good Way to Launch a Career	69.13	2005	23.133	71.16	1831	23.98	1.681**	1180
Good Way to Use a College Education	64.43	2004	24.363	66.32	1841	24.961	2.379*	1184
Respected Profession	57.51	2003	23.269	61.32	1834	23.592	3.371*	1178
Important to the Profitable Operation	82.42	2007	18.539	82.96	1845	18.882	1.152**	1187
Ethical	56.51	2001	22.193	62.36	1837	21.923	6.965*	1180
High Pay	74.59	2006	20.59	78.14	1840	20.134	4.652*	1184
Advancement	72.76	2003	21.058	75.59	1838	20.878	2.975*	1181
Travel Too Much	44.56	1971	23.468	48.01	1818	24.845	3.885*	1148
Stable Income	49.27	1997	23.947	53.79	1829	24.387	4.670*	1169
Good Job Security	48.73	1997	23.175	54.45	1830	23.932	6.808*	1172
Opportunity to Travel	75.93	2006	20.266	78.4	1842	19.54	2.956*	1185

* and ** represent significance at 1% and 5% levels, respectively.

In the pre-course survey, the average ratings across items ranged from 44.56 (Travel Too Much) to 82.42 (Important to the Profitable Operation). Three of the categories were below 50: Travel Too Much, Good Job Security, and Stable Income. The top three were (in descending order): Important to Profitable Operation, Opportunity to Travel, and High Pay. Given the low scores for Good Job Security and Stable Income, it is clear students associate some risk in the sales profession. On the other side, it seems they see the possibility that the level of pay can balance the risk. They clearly recognize the importance of sales to the profitability of a firm. The travel seems to be acceptable and even seen as an opportunity rather than a detriment. Generally, the respondents were positive about using their education to enter sales and the potential for advancement. They were somewhat neutral to the attitudes that sales professionals are ethical and that working in sales is a respected profession.

The results were different in the post-course survey. The average ratings ranged from 48.01 (Travel Too Much) to 82.42 (Important to the Profitable Operation). There was only one item averaging below 50 in this round, indicating that students remained neutral about the amount of travel. The top three categories were, again, in rank order, Important

to Profitable Operation, Opportunity to Travel, and High Pay. The averages for the remaining items were all above 60 in the post-course survey.

Where comparing the results of the pre- and post-survey, it is helpful to consider the paired t-test results presented in the two far-right columns of Table 3. All 11 items showed statistically significant increases from pre- to post-course evaluations. The differences in pre- and post-course scores were statistically significant at the 0.1% level for nine items, and two items were statistically significant at the 5.0% level. The two largest movements in attitude were the Ethical and Job Security items. Students, on average, increased their perception by nearly seven points on each of these items, and in the case of Job Security, pushed it over the 50 mark. Attitudes about Stable Income and High Pay increased about 4.6 points on average.

The two smallest movements were in the Important to Profitable Operation and Good Way to Launch a Career. The respondents to the survey seemed to have an initial idea that sales are important to the profitable operation of a firm and this did not change much during the completion of their respective course. The small change in attitude about Good Way to Launch a Career may have been observed because the students responding to the survey were already enrolled in a sales course. However, when asked the likelihood of starting their career in sales, the average response was two points higher in the post-versus pre-course survey (see Table 4), which is statistically significant at 1%. Admittedly, a similar bump was not present when considering being in a sales position five years post-graduation.

Table 4. Comparison of Pre- and Post-Course Likelihood of Being in a Sales Job.

	Pre-Course Survey		Post-Course Survey		Paired t-Test	
	Avg.	S.D.	Avg.	S.D.	Post-Pre	d.f.
Likelihood of Beginning Profession in Sales	50.53	29.162	52.74	31.364	2.21*	1005
Likelihood of being in Sales in 5 Years Post Graduation	53.26	28.505	54.42	29.608	1.16	1037

* represent significance at 1% level.

In addition to the paired t-test comparing the pre- and post-course results, it is interesting to consider the ranking represented by the average scores for each item. In Table 5, three rankings are presented. The order of the items, from largest to smallest average response, is presented for the pre- and post-course survey results. In addition, the ranking of largest to smallest change from pre- to post-survey results is offered. In the ranking of the averages, the top six remain unchanged. There were only two sets of items trading spots from pre- to post-survey rankings. Stable Income dropped behind Job

Security and Ethical moved ahead of Respected Profession—not surprising that the two movers were the largest gainers from pre- to post-course survey (see Table 3 and Table 4 – Difference Ranking Column).

Table 5. Pre- and Post-Course and Difference Rankings of Items.

Presented Order	Measured Item	Rankings		
		Pre-Course	Post-Course	Difference
4	Important to the Profitable Operation	1	1	11
11	Opportunity to Travel	2	2	8
6	High Pay	3	3	4
7	Advancement	4	4	7
1	Good Way to Launch a Career	5	5	10
2	Good Way to Use a College Education	6	6	9
3	Respected Profession	7	8	6
5	Ethical	8	7	1
9	Stable Income	9	10	3
10	Good Job Security	10	9	2
8	Travel Too Much	11	11	5

This study proves that the participation in a professional sales class does, in general, improve the attitudes of students toward sales jobs. They clearly have a better outlook on the profession, the pay, and the stability sales jobs can offer. Of greatest note, they have a higher regard of sales jobs and sales professionals as evidenced by the Ethical item having the largest increase from pre- to post-course surveys. All of this is evidence as to why students also increased their likelihood of starting their careers in sales positions. Therefore, participation in sales courses prepares the student with not only the skills and knowledge, but also the proper attitude that will set up the student for greater success in finding and succeeding at a sales job.

Implications

Selection of Employees for Sales Jobs

This study clearly shows attitudes toward professional sales careers are affected by enrollment in sales courses. While it cannot be generalized to all courses taught in sales, the overwhelmingly significant results across four universities, over several semesters, in four different regions of the United States indicates that attitudes toward sales careers are

changed by enrollment in a sales course. Therefore, graduates who have had a sales class as part of their college education are more likely to embrace a sales career. This result could be partly due to the fact they self-selected to take a sales class (i.e., they were predisposed to sales jobs). However, given that not many of the respondents were sales majors and the average scores were between 48 and 82 out of 100, it is likely their improved understanding of the career will position them to be more receptive and sales-job minded.

Therefore, the authors of this paper suggest that recruiters might be well served to give preference to those applicants who have completed a sales course as part of their academic program. Recruiters could ask for specific responses of whether or not the student had completed a professional sales course as part of the initial screening of applicants by noting the completion of sales courses on applicant resumes or transcripts.

Sales Trainers

This research has shown that students in college enrolled in a sales class do not consider professional sales an exceedingly attractive and appropriate career path (e.g., Good Way to Use a College Education averaged only 66.3 in the post-course survey). This study also showed sales course participation can improve these attitudes and even increase the willingness of participants to consider sales jobs (e.g., the increase in likelihood of starting out in sales). Therefore, training programs for new sales job hires should include learning objectives about the sales profession—that is, the respect their firm has for the jobs, dispelling myths about the lack of income stability and job security, and clearly laying out the travel expectations—in order to address misconceptions. It worked for students in the college courses; it will likely have a positive impact with new professionals with skin in the game.

Corporate Recruiters

As argued above, job candidates who have taken a sales course are more likely to be favorable toward sales jobs. With the cost of travel to visit college campuses to recruit and interview candidates for sales jobs increasing and the cost of salesperson turnover at an all-time high, recruiters would do well to take a page from sales professionals and prioritize their prospects. In this case, this research suggests that recruiters may be best served to focus their efforts on campuses where students have an opportunity to take a sales course as attitudes towards sales will be higher.

An added benefit of recruiters prioritizing universities and colleges that have at least a sales course is they may be able to develop working relationships with sales educators. These relationships with sales educators could lead to the identification of sales job candidates with interests in particular industries. These relationships can be fostered via sales professionals and recruiters making classroom presentations and interacting with students in sales courses.

Alternatively, employers may want to encourage faculty at schools where they normally recruit to include a sales course in their curriculum, if one does not already exist.

Summary

This research has shown that attitudes regarding sales careers are different after completing a sales course. These results were used to create a set of implications for potential employers and recruiters that (1) suggested that recruiters focus on potential hires who have completed a sales course (i.e., they have an improved attitude towards sales as a career); (2) sales trainers should certainly include learning goals focused on showing the value of sales careers and the culture of professional selling in their training programs; and (3) corporate recruiters should use the fact that a sales course is offered as a high rated criteria in prioritizing the places from which they choose to recruit potential employees for sales jobs.

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