



Pounding the Pavement: A Media Sales Experiential Learning Project

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Abstract

The sales industry in the United States is an economic powerhouse and is often where recent college graduates obtain their first real-world jobs. However, there is a need to understand students' perceptions and knowledge of sales and their experience selling advertising space. This study applied experiential learning theory to a mass media sales course. The purpose was to explore barriers, successes, and helpful sales tools that students could incorporate should they obtain a career in advertising sales. Results indicate students' openness to joining the sales industry upon college graduation and an overall positive perception of a sales career.

Introduction

Learning the art of sales is apropos for those in any field, including education, finance, health, the arts, and more (Pink, 2013). An abundance of industry articles reference a traditional sales career and consistently list sales jobs as an initial career move for recent college graduates. But the perception that working in the sales industry is undesirable is held by many job seekers, including recent college graduates (LaBombard, 2016; Pink, 2013). This perception could contribute to the projected decline of more than 200,000 sales jobs in the next eight years (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022).

While interest in sales industry jobs may be decreasing, it is still considered a major career field. More than 13 million Americans serve as salespeople in various areas such as retail, insurance, real estate, medical, and media (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). Specific to this study, a career in advertising

sales accounts for approximately 115,000 sales jobs in the U.S. (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). Additionally, the most common form of learning how to sell ad space remains on-the-job training. This study argues that it is important for students to have sales training gained through experiential learning inside and outside the classroom.

This current study expands experiential learning theory through its application to a mass media sales class. Similar to a 2010 case study about an ad sales course by Bobbi Kay Lewis, this study examined current college students' perceptions of a career in sales before, during, and after engaging in a sales-related experiential learning project. The benefits and challenges students encountered because of the sales field experiential learning project can inform both academics and practitioners of best practices in media sales.

Keywords: Sales, Experiential Learning Theory, Advertising, Mass Media, University News Organization

Literature Review

Advertising/Mass Media Sales: In the media industry, the advertising-supported model is defined as a “service that collects revenues at least in part from advertisers for advertisements that are viewed by users of the service” (Leonard, 2019, p. 2). In other words, much media content is accessible at no cost to consumers due to advertisers paying for ad space on programming, a decades-long practice.

A large portion of media sales are generated from online, digital platforms. According to Enberg (2019), digital advertising spend was projected to surpass traditional media spend for the first time in 2019, with more than 50% (approximately \$130 billion) of the entire ad spend reserved for digital media. Furthermore, the Interactive Advertising Bureau projected a 6% digital ad spend increase from 2019 to 2020 and a -8% traditional media ad spend (IAB, 2020). In a more recent report by the IAB, digital advertising grew by 35% in 2021, representing the most growth in 15 years (IAB, 2022).

While the sales industry operates on an ebb and flow basis, understanding a career in sales is paramount, especially as it relates to college students. According to the Sales Education Foundation, over 50% of recent college graduates will hold their first job in sales while marketing majors are entering the sales industry at almost 90% (SEF, n.d.). Thus, sales industry practitioners need to know if and how college students are being trained for a media sales career.

Sales Education: Academic literature covering sales in education is plentiful. Scholars have reviewed sales education from various angles, including a 100+ article analysis (e.g., Cummins et al., 2013), a primary focus on perception including, sales manager and student perceptions of relevant sales skills (e.g., Chowdhury & Miah, 2019), student perceptions of careers in sales (e.g., Ballestra et al., 2017; Bristow et al., 2006; Inks & Avila, 2018; Karakaya et al., 2011), and the impact of media on students’ perceptions of sales careers (e.g., Waldeck et al., 2010). Furthermore, scholars have also investigated motivations in sales careers between generations (e.g., Bristow et al., 2011) and implementing a sales leadership course on graduates’ sales careers (e.g., Wood, 2020).

One study central to this current undertaking is a 2010 case study conducted by Bobbi Kay Lewis. Lewis applied experiential learning theory to an advertising media sales course where the students engaged in prospecting assignments, creating ads for specific

businesses, a videotaped presentation portion utilized for self-evaluation and reflection assignments, and finally executing sales. The structure of Lewis’s (2010) course model helped inform the construction of the current case study. For example, the students for this project also engaged in various prospecting and reflection assignments. Additional components to the present study included a survey to gauge knowledge and perceptions of sales and sales careers before and after the sales process and training sessions on reading and understanding sales materials. The results of Lewis’s (2010) case study indicated that the students valued the practicality of the class along with their ability to apply their expanding knowledge of the sales process as the course evolved. Thus, various foundational elements of experiential learning theory were central to the success of the course and the students’ sales process.

Experiential Learning Theory: According to Svinicki and McKeachie (2013), a significant pitfall in some educational settings is the lack of transfer between theoretical knowledge and practical application. Experiential learning helps counter this problem by allowing students to apply skills learned in the classroom through projects that simulate real-world specific career experiences. Experiential learning theory is “a holistic model of the learning process and a multi-linear model of adult development, both of which are consistent with what we know about how people learn, grow and develop” (Kolb et al., 2001, p. 227). Kolb (1984) suggests that one can conceive experiential learning as a process rather than an outcome, and learning is a continuous process grounded in experience. The phases of experiential learning include 1) concrete experience, 2) observation and reflection, 3) forming abstract concepts, and 4) testing in a new situation (Kolb & Fry, 1975).

Healy et al. (2011) contributed to the application of experiential learning theory and Bloom’s Taxonomy tenants with the design of two sales courses as part of a study. Similar to the research conducted by Lewis (2010), the study’s goal was to reduce the gap between the theoretical sales process and the practical sales process. In addition, the authors highlighted essential elements needed to become more proficient salespeople, including the art of listening, investigating prospect needs, establishing dialogue, and tailoring the sale to specific prospects from opening to close of the sales relationship as focal points.

Methods

Mirroring Lewis (2010) this study implemented a case study approach. Case studies are an appropriate research method when “the focus is on an in-depth study of one or a limited number of cases” (Tight, 2017, p. 6). For the current study, students enrolled in a mass media sales class acted as advertising sales associates. They were required to sell digital advertising space available on the website for a 100-year-old campus news media outlet. Selling ad space for a university-sponsored media outlet “is more practical because of access and understanding of the vehicle” (Lewis, 2010, p. 28). According to the College Media Association Benchmarking Survey 2020, recent permanent changes to college and university media outlets have reduced print production, transitioned to online-only formats, and converged media outlets. While university newsrooms have slowly implemented industry trends, the COVID-19 pandemic pushed news publications, typically reliant on print revenue, to transition the focus to online advertising (Trinh, 2020).

Students took a pre-sales survey that focused on questions about their knowledge of sales, perception of sales, and experience in sales, among other sales-related questions. For comparison purposes, students also completed a similar post-sales survey related to their experience serving as an advertising sales associate for the campus newspaper after the semester’s end. See Appendix A for pre-test and post-test survey questions.

Sales Career: Bristow, Gulati, Amyx, and Slack (2006) developed questions related to a sales career and sought to gauge the interest level in pursuing a sales-related career upon graduation and the likelihood of holding a position in professional sales.

Sales Knowledge: Sales knowledge questions focused on the students’ general knowledge of sales, regardless of industry.

Sales Experience: Questions centered on the students’ sales experience, including industry-specific sales jobs, amount of time in sales, and the barriers and successes students faced in those sales careers.

Sales Perception: Questions were from the work of Bristow et al., (2006) and Karakaya et al. (2011). The purpose was to understand the students’ level of agreement about a career in sales concerning the following variables: rewarding, fun, excitement, satisfaction, and enjoyment. Furthermore, questions about confidence, intelligence, admiration, respect, trustworthiness, and

honesty concerning salespeople were posed.

Students also maintained an online, private weekly digital journal relating to their sales preparation and process for 10 weeks in between the surveys. The digital journal allowed for implementing one of the critical components of experiential learning theory – reflection. Reflection is a standard topic within pedagogy literature as it is a component of student learning that is long-lasting (Brown et al., 2014; Darby & Lang, 2019). According to Brown et al. (2014), “Reflection can involve several cognitive activities that lead to stronger learning: retrieving knowledge and earlier training from memory, connecting these to new experiences, and visualizing and mentally rehearsing what you might do differently next time” (p. 27). As it pertains to the sales process, reflection is of primary importance to the salesperson. Students can improve their relationships with prospective clients and the overall selling process through reflection. With that said, students provided a weekly summary of their sales process, emotional status, barriers, successes, helpful class resources/materials, and what they would do differently the following week. See Appendix B for journal reflection questions.

This study was funded by a Campus to Community grant from a university’s experiential learning office. The grant money provided all the sales tools the students needed, including personalized business cards, color-printed media kits, advertising contracts and invoices, branded news organization promotional items, and a subscription to the Penzu diary platform for student reflection purposes. Furthermore, although the students’ grades were not tied to making sales, the students did have the opportunity to make a 20% commission off each sale they closed.

Results

Eight students enrolled in the mass media sales course relevant to this case study. See Table 1 for student demographics. The results of the pre- and post-surveys and the thematic analysis of the Penzu diary student reflections are included in this section.

Sales Career: The level of interest in pursuing a sales-related career after graduation from college was higher ($M=2.25$, $SD=0.71$) at the onset of the term than it was after course completion ($M=1.88$, $SD=0.64$), with the most frequent response at both times being “somewhat interested.” Similarly, the reported perceived likelihood of holding a position in professional sales was higher ($M=2.50$, $SD=0.76$) at

Table 1 Mass Media Sales Student Demographics (N = 8)

Classification	Major	Gender		Age		Ethnicity	
		n	%	n	%	n	%
Junior 2, 25	PR/Adv, App Comm	4	50	Male 2, 25	21 YO 2, 25	White	7, 87.5
Senior 6, 75	Ag Media Comm	1	12.5	Female 6, 50	22 YO 2, 25	Hispanic/Latino/a	2, 25
	Theater Performance	1	12.5		23 YO 2, 25	Black/African Am.	1, 12.5
	Political Science	1	12.5		28 YO 1, 12.5		
	General Studies	1	12.5		38 YO 1, 12.5		

the beginning of the term with the most frequent response being “very interested” than after completing the course ($M=2.00$, $SD=0.76$) when the most frequent response was “somewhat interested.”

Sales Knowledge: While the most frequent response at both times of the assessment was “somewhat knowledgeable,” students reported feeling more knowledgeable about sales in any industry after the term ($M=2.38$, $SD=0.52$) than at the onset ($M=1.88$, $SD=0.35$), attributing the knowledge acquired to work experiences, communication courses, and the mass media sales course. In addition, the proportion of students following sales trends was higher after the course (63%; $n=5$) than at the beginning (25%; $n=2$). Reported ways in which students follow sales trends or practices included social media, course textbooks, practicing techniques learned in class, and research.

Sales Experience: Interestingly, at the beginning of the semester, most students (88%; $n=7$) reported having been in a sales position in any industry. However, after the semester, the responses changed, and a smaller portion (63%; $n=5$) reported having been in a sales position, which could result from a greater understanding of the sales industry and the type of professional roles classified as “sales work.” In reporting barriers faced in the sales position, the students mentioned having confidence, being knowledgeable about the product, and facing rejection. In addition, the students mentioned previous successes such as learning how to deal with difficult people, getting experience, feeling accomplished, and earning commission or extra money for successes.

Sales Perception: At the onset of the semester, the students agreed that a sales-related career would be rewarding ($M=5.63$, $SD=1.30$), satisfying ($M=5.25$, $SD=1.49$), fun, and exciting ($M=5.75$, $SD=1.28$), and that they would enjoy the challenges of it ($M=5.13$, $SD=1.46$). At the end of the semester, the students’ most frequent response was “neither agree nor disagree,” and their level of agreement with a sales-related career being rewarding ($M=4.63$, $SD=2.07$), satisfy-

ing ($M=4.88$, $SD=2.10$), fun, and exciting ($M=5.00$, $SD=2.0$), and that they would enjoy the challenges of a sales-related career ($M=4.75$, $SD=2.12$) decreased.

At the beginning of the course, the students believed that perceptions of salespeople by others including admiration and respect ($M=3.50$, $SD=1.77$), favorable perceptions ($M=3.88$, $SD=1.46$), trustworthiness and honesty ($M=4.13$, $SD=.99$), and generally being thought highly of ($M=3.75$, $SD=1.39$) mainly were neutral with the most frequent and consistent response being “neither agree nor disagree.” However, there was a slight attitude change after the course. The most frequent response for “salespeople are admired or respected by others” ($M=3.50$, $SD=2.00$) was “somewhat agree.” On the other hand, the most frequent response for “most salespeople are perceived favorably by others” ($M=3.75$, $SD=2.12$) and “most salespeople are trustworthy and honest” ($M=4.13$, $SD=2.30$) was “strongly disagree.” The most frequent response for “salespeople are thought of highly by others” ($M=3.38$, $SD=1.85$) was “somewhat agree.”

There was a consistently high level of agreement throughout the semester regarding specific characteristics possessed by salespeople. At the end of the term, students continued to perceive salespeople as confident individuals ($M=5.63$, $SD=2.13$), intelligent ($M=5.13$, $SD=2.36$), exciting ($M=4.88$, $SD=2.30$), and able to understand the customer’s needs ($M=5.50$, $SD=2.14$). However, students’ perceptions regarding the respect and admiration others feel for salespeople changed from mostly neutral ($M=3.50$, $SD=1.77$) to mostly “strongly disagree” ($M=3.88$, $SD=2.53$). Similarly, students’ negative perceptions when it comes to salespeople’s behaviors remained consistent. The level of agreement for “salespeople often misrepresent guarantees or warranties” increased from the beginning of the semester ($M=3.63$, $SD=1.06$) to the completion of the course ($M=4.38$, $SD=.74$) with the most consistent response being “somewhat agree.” Similarly, at the beginning of the course, the students perceived that “salespeople routinely take advantage of

uneducated buyers" ($M=4.0$, $SD= 1.31$), "often exaggerate the benefits of the products they sell" ($M=4.75$, $SD= 1.91$), "commonly sell products that people don't need" ($M=4.88$, $SD= 1.96$), "often make something up rather than admit that they don't know the answer to a buyer's question" ($M=4.38$, $SD=.92$), and often stretch the truth to make a sale" ($M=4.88$, $SD=.83$). At the end of the semester, attitudes were consistent with only slight changes and the students perceived that "salespeople routinely take advantage of uneducated buyers" ($M=4.38$, $SD=.74$), "often exaggerate the benefits of the products they sell" ($M=5.13$, $SD=1.64$), "commonly sell products that people don't need" ($M=4.50$, $SD= 1.77$), "often make something up rather than admit that they don't know the answer to a buyer's question" ($M=4.75$, $SD=1.67$), and often stretch the truth to make a sale" ($M=5.0$, $SD=1.93$).

Individual Reflections

In their weekly journal entries, students summarized their experiences with the sales process during the previous week, wrote about their emotional state regarding the sales process, barriers faced, and successes accomplished, mentioned valuable class materials, and identified what they would do differently in the upcoming week. The themes that emerged from the thematic analysis of the weekly entries are presented in this section.

Learning Through Personal Experiences: During the first week, students indicated a need for confidence with statements such as "This past week's sales process consisted of really just finding the right time and confidence to pitch the sale" or "In the past, I have seen sales as something scary and hard to do, but I want to be able to learn how to sell better... ." They also showed concerns about their ability to manage their time with statements such as "This past week was crazy with Valentines while working for a floral shop on top of having three exams; however, I still made time to sell." To ease the students into reaching out to prospects, they began with known businesses or people. This approach had a positive response as illustrated in the entries: "I also am glad I asked someone I knew to get started because it was easier..." "I feel like sales is not as hard as I was making it out to be in my head," and "In the past, I have seen sales as something scary and hard to do." Regardless of the uncertainty of not knowing if the meeting with the prospect would lead to a sale, some students mentioned feeling like "the success was taking a solid first step."

Students felt either "anxious" or "excited" about the sales process during the first two weeks. Emotions changed as they interacted with businesses and attempted sales. Some students felt "discouraged" or "irritated" on a consistent basis, especially when they could not contact a business representative or make a sale. On the other hand, making a sale elicited "excitement" and a feeling of accomplishment. Once students began approaching prospects with their sales pitch, they mentioned that the level of "anxiety" decreased. It was "like I ripped the Band-Aid off because the first time you try something is pretty hard." Frequently, the students' entries indicated an awareness of the need to be more prepared and to practice the sales pitches to sound more "fluid and persuasive" and to "plan more... rather than going for the sale" when they saw the chance. As the semester progressed, students learned the importance of networking and following up, which they identified in the approaches they set to try the following week. Students said: "I wanted to make it a point to actually go to businesses and meet with them [businesses]," "I am also trying to connect and get prospects in my every day," and "for this upcoming week, I need to go visit a business in person rather than relying on cold calls." The students also reflected on the speed of the sales process because they realized the prospects were slow to respond and give an answer. With this, the students were learning that making a sale took patience and persistence.

Course Materials Make an Impact: The students constantly referred to the assigned readings from *Jeffrey Gitomer's Sales Bible* as a source of helpful content throughout the weeks. Specific concepts mentioned from the assigned readings were to "have fun" with sales, "best practices," finding "confidence," and "sales advice." Notably, the readings also provided a source of motivation for a student: "I think reading about ways to continue to try to sell after being told 'no' helped because even when I could not have the meeting, I asked for another one." In addition to the assigned readings, students mentioned printed media kits as an essential resource because "having something tangible to give to potential clients seem[ed] to help."

Students considered in-class assignments helpful, including practice sales pitches, practice emails to prospects, and pricing exercises. The students also mentioned other in-class activities. For example, "practicing a phone call in class," "attentive listening" to help students be more self-aware in their conversations, "elasticity" discussion board where students

discussed the role of flexibility in sales careers, and “follow-up” exercises concerning sales tactics that are meant to build upon relationships with prospective clients. Finally, most of the students mentioned partnering with another student to visit on-campus offices to practice their sales pitch in hopes of making a sale. This exercise encouraged a discussion among teams regarding pitching styles and allowed students to bounce ideas off each other.

At times, students’ personal and academic challenges and barriers outweighed the successes accomplished and affected motivation. Yet, they found encouragement in the classroom through discussion boards about positivity and negativity and empowering phrases.

The Possibility of a Career in Sales: The students reflected on their level of professionalism, attitude, and motivation. Their entries indicated a self-awareness of their performance and a desire to continue improving after realizing their potential. As the semester progressed, some entries went from “I would be more professional” and “this week I would like to do more...” to “every week that I work on this confirms my love of sales...”

Discussion

This study focused on expanding experiential learning theory by applying it to a mass media sales class. Similar to the case study by Bobby Kay Lewis (2010), this study examined current college students’ perceptions of a career in sales before, during, and after engaging in a sales-related experiential learning project. This was completed through surveys and a weekly reflection piece.

Concerning this current study, changes to students’ interest, knowledge, experience, and perception of sales were noted based on the pre- and post-sales surveys over the course of 15 weeks. Most notably, their interest in sales and perception of salespeople decreased after they entered the sales field during the semester-long experiential learning project. However, their knowledge of sales increased due to several experiential learning tactics over the same timeframe.

The goal for this experiential learning project falls in line with the aim of Lewis’s 2010 case study of students who also sold ad space for a university media outlet in that “the purpose of this case study is to help provide a practical curriculum for applying the experiential learning model to teaching media sales with an emphasis on directed student reflection”

(Lewis, 2010, p. 34). Reflection is a key component to a successful experiential learning project (Brown et al., 2014; Darby & Lang, 2019; Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Fry, 1975) and was central to understanding the facets of students participating as real-world ad sales associates. The weekly reflection allowed for the media sales instructor to understand the successes and challenges of the students while they were pounding the pavement in terms of generating sales leads and finalizing sales contracts. Students openly reflected on their realities of sales including initial anxiety which often morphed into elation when some made a sale with one student reflecting, “I am feeling on top of the world about the sales process because I made my first sale!!!” Some students even used the weekly reflection to voice concerns about the varying demands on their time which led to a lack of motivation concerning their individual sales process.

In total, the students sold approximately \$800 in digital ad space, earned close to \$200 in commission, and built a prospect list of more than 250 businesses over the course of 15 weeks. More importantly than the numbers generated was the sense of achievement the students felt while engaged in this experiential learning project which was evident based on their weekly reflections. For at the onset of the course, students were asked to reflect on their thoughts on what they would like to accomplish over the course of the sales process. As is the purpose of many experiential learning projects, one student wrote, “I am excited to start the process. I am also excited to gain more knowledge about sales in a practical form rather than the theoretical form of other lectures.”

Appendix A: Pre-test and Post-test Survey Questions for Sales Students

The pre-test and post-test surveys asked the same questions, but were given at two points in time. The pre-test survey was given to students before they acted as sales associates. The post-test survey was given to the sales students at the conclusion of the sales course. The purpose was to gauge results from before and after they participated in sales.

Demographics: Gender, Age, Race/Ethnicity; Classification; Major; Department/College

Sales Career: Statements retrieved from Bristow, Gulati, Amyx & Slack (2006)

For the following statements, please rate your level of interest or likelihood:

- How interested are you in pursuing a sales-related career after your graduation from college?
- After you graduate from college, how likely is it that you will, at some time in your career, hold a position in professional sales?

Sales Knowledge

- How knowledgeable are you about sales (any industry)?
- Where did you gain your sales knowledge?
- Do you currently follow sales trends or practices?
- If yes, in what ways do you follow sales trends and/or practices?
- How often do you follow sales trends and/or practices?

Sales Experience

- Have you ever been in a sales position (any industry)? (Skip logic question based on yes/no answer)
- How long have you been or were you in sales?
- In what industry did you do your sales work? Please list all industries in which you have worked in sales.
- What barriers have you faced in your sales positions?
- What successes have you gained in your sales positions?

Sales Perception: Statements retrieved from Bristow, Gulati, Amyx & Slack (2006) and Karakaya, Quigley & Bingham (2011)

For the following statements, please rate your level of agreement:

- A sales-related career would be rewarding.
- A sales-related career would be satisfying.
- A sales-related career would be fun and exciting.
- I would enjoy the challenges of a sales-related career.
- In general, salespeople are admired or respected by others.
- Most salespeople are perceived favorably by others.
- Most salespeople are trustworthy and honest.
- For the most part, salespeople are thought of highly by others.
- Salespeople are confident individuals.
- Salespeople are intelligent.
- Salespeople are exciting.
- Salespeople recognize the importance of understanding customer needs.
- Salespeople are admired and respected by others.
- Salespeople often misrepresent guarantees or warranties.
- Salespeople routinely take advantage of uneducated buyers.
- Salespeople often exaggerate the benefits of the products they sell.
- Salespeople commonly sell products that people don't need.
- Salespeople often make something up rather than admit that they don't know the answer to a buyer's question.
- Salespeople often stretch the truth to make a sale.

Appendix B:

Online Digital Journal Weekly Questions

The following six questions were asked for 10 consecutive weeks over the course of the semester of the sales course. The students entered their answers to these questions in their individual Penzu digital, online journal.

1. Please provide a summary of what this past week entailed regarding your sales process.
2. How are you feeling emotionally about the sales process this week?
3. What barriers did you face regarding the sales process this week?
4. What successes did you accomplish regarding the sales process this week?
5. What resources/materials shared during class have been helpful this week?
6. What would you do differently regarding the sales process for the upcoming week?

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