

Pounding the Pavement: A Media Sales Experiential Learning Project

Mary E. Brooks, Ph.D. and Nancy Garcia, Ed.D.
Sybil B. Harrington College of Fine Arts and Humanities
Department of Communication

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 in spring 2021. 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.

Theoretical Background

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, Boyatzis, & Mainemelis, 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).

Methods & Measures

Participants

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

Classification	Major	Gender		Age		Ethnicity				
		n	%	n	%	n	%			
Junior 2,	PR/Adv, App Comm	4,	50	Male 2,	25	21 YO	2, 25	White	7,	87.5
Senior 6,	Ag Media Comm	1,	12.5	Female 6,	50	22 YO	2, 25	Hispanic/Latino/a	2,	25
	Theater Perform.	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			

Procedure and Measures

- Pre- and post-sales surveys; Private weekly digital journal relating to sales preparation and process for 10 weeks in between the surveys
- **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, Gulati, Amyx, and Slack (2006) and Karakaya, Quigley, and Bingham (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.

Results

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 ($M=1.88$, $SD=0.64$). The reported perceived likelihood of holding a position in professional sales was higher ($M=2.50$, $SD=0.76$) at the beginning of the term than after completing the course ($M=2.00$, $SD=0.76$).

Sales Knowledge - 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. 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 - 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 ($M=4.63$, $SD=2.07$), satisfying ($M=4.88$, $SD=2.10$), 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. 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" ($M=5.0$, $SD=1.93$).