

Corporate partnering for role play competitions in an advanced selling course

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ABSTRACT

Sales programs in higher education are booming. This study argues that faculty of advanced selling courses (typically offered in sales programs) should consider incorporating multiple sponsored role play competitions. These highly realistic role play competitions provide students with benefits such as enhanced confidence and motivation, experience at performing under pressure, and opportunities for employment. Sponsoring companies benefit with enhanced recruitment efforts by interacting directly with students in the context of selling their company products, which allows them to better gauge the company-specific sales potential of those students and contribute to the lives and careers of future sales professionals. This research details the experience of a Midwestern university in establishing a format of role play competitions sponsored by multiple corporate sponsors in its advanced selling courses.

Keywords: Personal Selling, Role Plays, Experiential Learning

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INTRODUCTION

According to Damast (2012), the number of U.S. colleges and universities offering sales programs has exploded. Now 32 schools offer a major, minor or concentration in sales, up from nine just four years ago. Many of these schools offer advanced selling courses, in addition to the traditional sales management and personal selling courses. Fogel et al (2012), found that curricular input from partnering companies is vital because it keeps instruction relevant to the selling profession.

According to Parker, Pettijohn and Luke (1996) both sales professors and sales representatives rated role plays as the most important sales curriculum topics. Widmier, Loe and Selden (2007) argue for the inclusion of role play competitions in personal selling courses. The present paper argues that student competitions sponsored by selling companies are a viable major component of advanced selling courses.

ADVANCED SELLING COURSES AND ROLE PLAY PARTNERSHIPS

The topic of advanced selling (aka, advanced professional selling) courses has received scant research attention. An exhaustive review of the sales pedagogical literature yielded two notable exceptions to this. Parker, Pettijohn and Luke (1996) reported that 12.5 percent of academicians who were members of the American Marketing Association's "Sales Special Interest Group" indicated that an advanced selling course was offered at his/her institution. More recently, Deeter-Schmelz and Kennedy (2011) reported 59.6 percent of schools with a sales major, or sales program (e.g., minor, emphasis, or certificate) offer an advanced selling course, or a total of 28 out of 47 such schools. Thus, the number of schools offering an advanced selling course seems to be increasing.

Deeter-Schmelz and Kennedy (2011) noted that role plays are used in 89 percent of advanced selling courses. This is not surprising considering that role plays have been frequently used in personal selling courses for some time now (Castleberry 1989; Moncrief 1991; Moncrief and Shipp 1994; and McDonald 2006). Despite the high percentage of advanced selling courses featuring role plays, little is known about how these role plays are implemented. This is remarkable considering the myriad ways role plays could be integrated into such courses, such as the scope of the particular role plays (e.g., uncovering needs versus the presentation of a solution); whether classmates or professional salespersons play the buyer role (Totten 2010); whether the role play incorporates a competitive or non-competitive format (Widmier, Loe and Selden, 2007); and the number of role plays in a given semester (Calcich and Weilbaker 1992). The purpose of this study is to show how multiple sponsored role play competitions can be incorporated into an advanced selling course. The various benefits that students, faculty and company sponsors can realize are discussed.

Benefits to Students

Missouri State University's (MSU's) advanced selling course engages in multiple sponsored role play competitions each semester. These competitions offer students an opportunity to experience selling different types of products and services as well as to different types of customers (e.g., final consumers, retailers, manufacturers, etc.). By participating in realistic role plays from various areas of the selling profession, students are in a better position to

select sales positions in which they will potentially be successful. Professional sales organizations such as Northwestern Mutual, Cintas and Frito-Lay have participated in past semesters.

According to Moncrief and Shipp (1994), for sales role plays to be effective, realism must be incorporated into them. Students in the sponsored role play competitions described in this paper benefit by working with representatives of the product being sold. Role plays are more realistic when students sell to buyers that sell those same products professionally, as opposed to when they sell to their instructor or to classmates. Having dealt with real world buyers of the product on a daily basis, such salesperson buyers are logical choices to play the role of buyers. Their experience allows them to more accurately predict how real world buyers would respond to particular questions and situations, adding to the realism of the role plays. Moreover, salesperson buyers are experts on the very product being sold. It seems logical that the more realistic the role play, the more seriously students will take the role play and the more engaged they will be.

The competition aspect of this format enhances its realism. According to Loe (2004), role play competitions help prepare students for the type of pressure they may experience in their sales career as well as providing learning motivation. Moreover, the introduction of competition to the classroom may enhance the level of commitment and preparation (Widmier, Loe and Selden, 2007).

Students also typically receive an abbreviated oral feedback session from the buyer and judges immediately following the role play. Additionally, more detailed written feedback from the judges and instructor is provided at a later date. Upon completion of the role plays, digital video files of the role plays are uploaded to a server and students are e-mailed links to access their videos. Students view their videos and complete a self-critique guided by specific questions involving relevant criteria such as nonverbal communication, rapport building, etc. In the assignment, they consider how they could have performed better. Additionally, students are required to submit a detailed plan of their role play prior to each role play, which addresses issues such as questions to be asked, anticipated objections, competitive analysis, etc.

Competitors are judged according to specific criteria, the weighting of which depends upon the objectives of the particular role play. For example, a needs uncovering role play would more heavily emphasize problem identification and development than would one focusing presenting a solution. Sponsoring firms present awards in front of the class. These presentations ideally occur during the class session immediately following the conclusion of the company's sponsored competition. For each role play competition, the sponsoring firm provides a gift card to the top finisher and award certificates are presented to the top five finishers. As a courtesy to the sponsoring firm, award certificates suitable for framing are created in-house at the institution's document design center. Additional certificates may also be created recognizing outstanding student performance in specific areas, such as "most enthusiastic" "best use of fact based data" "best objection handler" and "best closer." Students highly value these awards as evidence of their selling skills and are encouraged to include these certificates in their brag books and to offer them as evidence of their selling skills to sales recruiters. Students report that sales recruiters are keenly interested in these documents. In an effort to provide students with maximum exposure, as well as to provide them with an experience of sales performance recognition, group photos of the top finishers are posted on the course Blackboard sites and featured in newsletters and departmental social media sites such as Facebook and LinkedIn. Additionally, links to these stories and photos are sent to personnel from the sponsoring

company to be shared with influential members of those organizations, potentially strengthening the relationship between the educational institution and the sponsoring firm.

The Benefits to the Partnering Companies

Companies partner with universities in role play competition sponsorships for a variety of reasons. Some view the role play competitions as a recruitment tool, because partnering companies can “test drive” a prospective candidate. As noted by Fogel *et al.* (2012), rather than relying on traditional interviews to gauge applicants’ sales potential, sponsoring companies benefit from the opportunity to identify talent by interacting directly with students in the class. More specifically, these competitions allow sponsoring companies to experience students selling the company’s very own product/service. This allows sponsors to better envision each competing student as a potential salesperson for the firm. For example, one judge at the MSU competition commented that a particular student “fit the mold” of that company’s salesperson. If and when those students later contact the sponsoring companies regarding job openings, the company and sales manager may be able better able to gauge the company-specific sales potential of those students.

Sponsoring companies benefit by having their products and services exposed to future sales professionals. Thus, these same student competitors may someday be prospects for the sponsoring company’s product. For example, in the 2013 National Collegiate Sales Competition (NCSC) hosted by Kennesaw State University, students sold NetSuite, an integrated web-based software program, including customer relationship software commonly used by sales forces. In spring 2013, 126 students competed at the NCSC, allowing NetSuite an opportunity for future sales professionals to become familiarized with their products and services.

Lastly, the role play competitions provide sponsoring companies with an opportunity to perform community service as sponsoring companies must agree to be available to mentor students. Participation in these competitions offers sponsoring salespersons the potentially rewarding opportunity to contribute to the lives and careers of future sales professionals by experiencing.

Requirements of the Partnering Companies

Each partnering company sponsors one of the in-class sales role play competitions. Sponsorships may occur each semester the course is offered or less frequently, as the needs of the course and company dictate. Sponsorship requires companies provide their personnel (e.g., salespersons, sales trainers and/or sales managers) to play the role of buyers and to serve as judges for the competition.

Potential partnering firms should be forewarned that a role play competition sponsorship entails a considerable time and resource commitment. It is potentially problematic when firms enter into such arrangements unwilling and/or unable to allocate sufficient resources for the competition to function effectively. Role play sponsorships typically involve a minimum of three classroom visits by representatives from the sponsoring firms, although the number of visits varies with the size of the class and length of class sessions (i.e., day versus evening courses). In the class session immediately prior to each competition, personnel from the partnering firms make class presentations introducing the students to their company and products. These presentations are in effect mini-training sessions in which students experience a taste of a real

world corporate sales training. These mini-training sessions consist of a rudimentary industry and product training and a familiarization with the company's selling process. For example, a typical mini-training session might address topics such as how to best approach prospects in the company's industry; how to uncover buying motives; how to resolve commonly encountered company specific objections; how to probe prospects to uncover needs; how to set follow-up appointments and close sales. The mini-training sessions typically conclude with an example role play. In order to avoid students simply parroting the example role play in the competition, students are not allowed to record the example role plays.

Sponsoring firms should be selected which adhere to a selling philosophy consistent to that taught in the course. Prior to the "mini-training" sessions, it is advisable for the faculty member to consult with the partnering company regarding the content of the mini-training. This is done to avoid having the sponsoring firms contradict material learned in the course prior to the role play, potentially confusing the students. For example, if the advanced course advocates a non-manipulative consultative selling process which focuses on uncovering needs prior to presenting a customized solution, it would be detrimental to partner with a firm that adheres to a "feature dumping" or "show up and throw up" approach to selling. Thus, during the initial meetings with potential sponsors, questions should be asked to determine the degree to which a fit exists between the selling philosophy taught in the class and that of the firm.

Sponsoring companies are responsible for providing company personnel to play buyers in the role play and others to judge the role plays. Usually a minimum of three representatives (one buyer and two judges) are present for the class session(s) when the actual competition occurs. Occasionally, large class sizes require role plays to be conducted in multiple rooms simultaneously (or on multiple days), potentially compromising judging fairness due to inconsistency in judges' scoring. To counter this potential bias, students compete only against the contestants completing their role plays in their respective rooms. This allows contestants to compete only against those judged by the same judges.

ILLUSTRATIVE ROLE PLAYS

Three examples of sponsored in-class role play competitions were chosen to illustrate how the process works. One of the authors was personally involved as the instructor in the role play competitions. These role plays occurred as part of the advanced selling course at Missouri State University (MSU), which offers an emphasis in selling (marketing major) as well as a selling minor. The MSU marketing department offers three sales related courses that make up the core of the sales program: personal selling, sales management, and advanced selling.

The advanced selling course at MSU presently requires the participation of students in two in-class sponsored role play competitions that are both digitally video recorded. The first sponsored role-play focuses on gathering information from a new client in a needs identification and development effort, with no solution presented to the prospect. The objective of this role play is simply to close the buyer on a follow-up appointment for a customized solution presentation. Cintas and Northwestern Mutual Life (NML) have sponsored this role play in the past. The second role play involves a sales call with the objective of securing an order. This role play emphasizes the solution presentation portion of the selling process, with less emphasis on the problem definition portion of the process. Frito-Lay has sponsored this role play in the past.

MSU developed its first of three sales role play partnerships with Frito-Lay. The first MSU-Frito Lay role play competition involved students selling a meal bundling program

(involving Lays potato chips, a drink and a sandwich) to a convenience store manager. This manager is a customer that is regularly called upon by the seller. In the early days of the Frito-Lay role play, students played the buyer role and the video recordings were provided to company sales executives for remote judging, with regional sales trainers and regional vice presidents participating as judges in this manner. This format allowed difficult to access company professionals the ability to judge the competition at their convenience. While the student sellers benefited from their expert feedback and judging, the realism of the role play suffered due to the tendency of student buyers to be an “easier sell” than would normally be encountered in an actual sales call (Moncrief and Shipp, 1994). To counter this issue, Frito-Lay personnel have most recently judged and played the buying role in person. The role play was also updated to selling a display rack of various Frito-Lay products to a convenience store manager. Because this type of sales mainly involves repeat calls on existing retail customers, the role play emphasized the presentation and objection handling phase of selling process rather than the needs uncovering phase. Frito-Lay provided sellers with realistic slides to use as supporting documentation. During the competitions, these slides have been presented on iPad, laptops or even cell phones, offering students the experience of using cutting edge sales presentation technologies.

Initially, Frito Lay was the sole role play sponsor each semester for the advanced selling course at MSU. That changed when a partnership formed between Northwestern Mutual Life (NML) and MSU. The inclusion of NML offered students an opportunity to experience selling an intangible financial product. Because the advanced selling course adheres to a customer-oriented and consultative selling philosophy, the NML role play was designed to focus on the uncovering needs stage in the selling process. This allowed for greater synchronization of the course material and this role play, as sellers focused on gathering information from a previously unknown client in an effort to identify and develop his/her needs. In the week prior to the role play, sellers were provided with basic prospect information similar to what is typically available to financial representatives prior to their initial fact finding interview (e.g., prospect and spouse’s names, occupations, children ages, etc). Students were given the choice of selling a 529 college savings plan or a term life insurance policy. The objective was simply to secure a follow-up appointment where a customized solution could be presented. Because this role play involved no solution presentation, the mini-training focused less on product knowledge training and more on the needs uncovering process and how to resolve common objections to follow-up appointments (e.g., “Check back with me in six months.”) While in-depth product training wasn’t necessary, students were familiarized with some of the basic problems the financial products could potentially solve for their buyer.

The most recent semester of MSU’s advanced selling course marked the addition of Cintas as the needs uncovering role play sponsor. One of the authors collaborated with sales representatives from a local Cintas office to create multiple scenarios for the sellers. As Moncrief and Shipp (1994) argue, using multiple scenarios requires sellers to adapt their presentation to the situation at hand, adding to the role play’s realism. In this role play, students attempted to sell a uniform service contract to one of four buyer profiles of the student’s choosing: a saw mill owner, an auto repair shop owner, a purchasing agent for a small school district, and an operations manager for a large manufacturing plant in a “dirty” industry. The person playing the buying role varied the role play elements so that each student faced a unique and predetermined combination of buying motives, problems, and objections. This negated any advantage sellers could gain from gathering information from classmates that had completed the role play earlier. Due to time constraints, each seller received only one buying motive, one problem and one

objection. Students sold to a buyer with several possible buying motives (e.g., company image enhancement; employee benefit, company identification, safety, and security). Some students' buyers had a problem with their current uniform provider (e.g., uniforms that were uncomfortable, poorly repaired, poorly cleaned, poorly fitting, low quality, as well as mix-ups on weekly order drop-offs). Other students' buyers had problems resulting from not having a uniform provider (e.g., employees coming to work in unsafe, soiled, or inappropriate personal work clothes). Objections to the Cintas uniform contract included: loyalty to current uniform provider; too expensive; employees perceived individual expression threatened by wearing uniforms; and employees more comfortable in personal clothing as opposed to ill-fitting or uniforms inappropriate for temperature conditions in the workplace. Varying the different role play elements resulted in a many possible combinations, making it extremely difficult for students to accurately predict the specific combination of elements they would encounter in their role play. The mini-training consisted of familiarizing students with these different elements and with processes designed to uncover and develop problems (e.g., probing sequences) and buying motives as well as how to resolve specific objections. Because this was a needs uncovering role play, no contract was signed with the buyer in this role play; rather, the objective was to secure a follow-up appointment.

STUDENT FEEDBACK

In the most recent semester of the MSU advanced selling course, a questionnaire was administered with open ended questions to gauge student's perceptions of the benefits of sponsored role play competitions, attitudes towards selling to a salesperson of the product being sold versus choosing one's own product, suggestions for improving the role play competitions, and attitudes towards adding a third sponsored role play.

Twenty-five of the 28 (89 percent response) students enrolled in the advanced selling course properly completed the questionnaire. The small enrollments in the advanced selling courses precluded the gathering of quantitative data. The qualitative data collected does, however, provide exploratory insight into the use of sponsored role play competitions in advanced selling classes. The questionnaires were content analyzed and the key findings are discussed below.

The majority of students mentioned the benefit of having a "real world" selling experience as the most important aspect, mentioning that they learned a lot from participating in the competition; it helped build their confidence and left them with something specific to talk about in job interviews. Students also liked the fact that having professional salespersons serve as buyers and judges motivated them take the assignment more seriously and work harder on understanding the company and the products. In fact, the majority of the students said they wouldn't mind doing three sponsored competitions as opposed to two. Of course, their expressed improvements to the competition would be to have more time to prepare and practice and more detailed communication of expectations by the company (things that most sales personnel don't get in the profession). Nearly all students said that having prizes and award ceremonies motivated them to do better and added fun and excitement to the course.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Universities are increasingly rolling out sales programs to meet the demand for sales majors. These programs typically offer courses such as personal selling, sales management and advanced selling. Faculty teaching advanced selling courses in these programs should consider including multiple role play competitions with corporate sponsors in their courses. These highly realistic role play competitions provide students with benefits such as enhanced confidence and motivation, experience at performing under pressure, and employment opportunities. Sponsoring companies benefit with enhanced recruitment efforts by interacting directly with students in the context of selling their company products, which allows them to better gauge the company-specific sales potential of those students. Since MSU's first role play competition sponsored by Frito-Lay in 2007, the sponsored role play format in the advanced selling class has been in a continual state of evolution. For the fall 2013 semester, a third such role play sponsored by one of the nation's largest third party logistics companies will be added (Total Quality Logistics - TQL). Skype will be used in the mini-training and possibly in the judging, as MSU is located several hundred miles from TQL's nearest sales office. This will enable TQL sales executives to participate without a travel time investment and will mark the first time at MSU that remote participants have participated in the role play competitions in real time.

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