

CHANGING STUDENTS' ATTITUDE TOWARD PROFESSIONAL

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ABSTRACT

Whether or not students seek out sales positions, it is highly likely that sales skills will be beneficial as life skills. The ability to persuade, to listen and to build relationships with others would certainly benefit most in a variety of life contexts. And, if students are likely to begin their careers in sales, how can we better prepare them and help them to view the position positively? Perhaps the first step is to consider how a faculty can change student attitudes toward selling and possibly create more interest in learning these skills.

INTRODUCTION

While considerable progress has been made over the years in dispelling negative perceptions about sales careers and sales people, many students continue to possess negative attitudes toward sales careers. A study of MBA students found that perceptions of sales careers included that those positions did not require a university education; that the jobs were stressful; that the jobs were not respectable; were not prestigious, didn't offer security; and the salaries were not attractive [3]. Hartman [2] found that of ten careers listed in her study, careers with the word *sales* attached were rated as three of the bottom four choices. An informal inquiry among my marketing students revealed that sales jobs are still not considered by students as highly desirable, even though our placement surveys indicate that many students are hired by companies whose entry level jobs are in sales.

One approach to address these perceptions is to consider attitude theory and repositioning strategies. Both positioning strategies and attitude formation involve perceptions that are formed as consumers consider various stimuli. Beliefs or perceptions that last over time, and that are relatively consistent beliefs, form the basis for attitudes. Generally, as marketers consider attitude formation and positioning, they are interested in the beliefs about the product and/or company that are held by the target market. Repositioning a product means that the company is attempting to change what the consumer currently believes about the product.

But what if instead of a product, one tried to reposition a career that has traditionally been so negatively viewed?

Positioning and Repositioning

Positioning is understood by marketers to be the perception of a product, service or company relative to competitors. Ries and Trout [4] suggested that to understand the position held, consider what the prospect (client or customer) already thinks about the product. If in fact company goals suggest that their belief about the product is not what was intended, or if it is perceived negatively, steps must be taken to change those perceptions. This is referred to as repositioning the product.

Research and observations indicate that students perceive sales careers negatively [2,5]. It follows that "undesirable" relative to other careers is the current position of sales careers from the students' perspective. While these perceptions have been formed over time, and presumably formed from

stereotypical depictions in movies and television [2,6], and possibly personal experiences with salespeople, the reality is that in order to get more students to learn selling skills and consider sales careers, sales careers need to be repositioned.

Attitude Change

Repositioning involves changing beliefs, i.e. attitudes, toward the focal object—in this case sales careers and sales people. The literature tells us that it may be difficult to change attitudes, but that it can be done by using several different approaches. The first approach is to change beliefs about attributes. For example, if a consumer believes a particular brand of cell phone has a short battery life when, in fact, the battery life is no shorter than any of the cell phone competitors, then the marketer's strategy may attempt to change those incorrect beliefs as part of their strategy.

If students believe, for example, that the skills used to make a sale involve deception or other unethical behavior, when in fact those kinds of behaviors are the exception rather than the rule, then information to change that misconception needs to be part of the strategy.

A second approach to creating attitude change is to change the importance of beliefs about a certain product attribute. For example, if consumers believe that high fructose corn syrup is a necessary ingredient for making food taste good, but a company chooses to make good tasting products without using that particular ingredient, it may be necessary to show consumers that tasty products can be made without that ingredient. By exposing consumers to an alternative, the consumers' beliefs may change from the necessity of high fructose corn syrup to the importance of eating tasty products that are healthier.

If students believe, for example, that the main reason to avoid a career in sales is that beginning salaries are low, one approach to changing attitudes could be to focus communication efforts on the opportunities to travel and the *long-term* salary opportunities. By shifting the importance factor away from the beginning salaries to an attribute that might be desirable may change the attitude toward sales positions.

Finally, attitudes may be changed by adding new beliefs. A commonly used growth strategy of consumer goods companies is to show consumers additional uses for their current product. For example, a company that makes a relatively healthy oatmeal cookie may suggest that in addition to snack time, the cookie could be used as a quick breakfast alternative. The consumer adds "breakfast food" to his/her beliefs about the cookie.

Adding the belief that selling skills are good life skills, in addition to the application of those skills to a sales career, or adding the belief that all personalities can be successful at sales careers may be useful in helping students re-think their attitude toward possible career paths.

This abstract describes repositioning theory and attitude change theory as can be applied to changing student attitudes toward sales careers. In the full paper, a theoretical model will be developed as well as strategies offered to help business schools change student attitudes toward sales careers. Data is currently being gathered in an attempt to learn more about student attitudes.

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