

Creating Value: Can a High School Sales Competition benefit your Professional Sales Program and Recruiting Efforts?



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There is no doubt that sales competitions for students are valuable. Although there may be differences in the way they are run, sales competitions typically involve some combination of role-playing, team selling, and speed selling. There is often an accompanying career fair where employers gain access to sales students, and students can display their sales skills and network with potential employers.

University sales competitions are extremely valuable. Students gain beneficial leadership and sales skills. Employers attend to recruit students for jobs and internships, and students can secure employment opportunities.

While university sales competitions are relatively widespread, with the Sales Education Foundation listing 25 major sales competitions in their 2022 SEF Annual report, sales competitions for high school students are less common. However, similar to the skills college students gain from competing in college competitions, they have value for high school competitors. They also have value to universities for potentially recruiting future students. Further, college students running the competition can gain valuable event management skills and hone their sales skills during the event.

With these benefits in mind, we launched the Susquehanna University High School Sales Competition in March 2022. Our competition, which we will be running annually in March, is

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a day-long event. In this article, we provide those who wish to consider running a high-school-level sales competition with our insights into how to do it successfully.

HOW THE COMPETITION WORKED

AT SUSQUEHANNA UNIVERSITY

To ensure the competition would be a success, we formed a committee to organize a full-day event, design the sales competition, promote the competition, recruit competitors and volunteers to participate, and ultimately run the event on competition day. Sponsors were then secured, providing funds to advertise and run the event and to be the firm the students would sell. Promotional efforts to recruit high schoolers to compete quickly ensued as we developed the high school sales competition. Our initial goal was to get high school students excited about the university and its sales program and consider the university in their college search.

Organizing the Event

Collaborations on and off campus were vital in making the event a success. On-campus partners included admissions, marketing and communications, event management, the IT department, dining services, the campus bookstore, faculty, and university students. Off-campus partners included sponsors, alumni, business professionals, and a local hotel chain.

After considering the space and time available, we decided that for the one-day competition to be feasible, given our resources, we would limit the competition to forty students from high schools in Pennsylvania, where our university is located.

We reserved multiple rooms for competitors and judges, to hold the opening and closing ceremonies, and for student and teacher workshops. We also had a waiting room for competitors and a control center for tallying scores. Thanks to our IT department, we connected each of the five competitor rooms by Zoom. Student volunteers managed the schedule.

Hotel rooms were provided, with sponsor support, for any student and their teacher or advisor who had to travel two or more hours to attend the event. Dining services offered a continental breakfast and full lunch for all participants, guests, and volunteers. The campus bookstore opened for the duration of the competition. The marketing and communications department built the competition site, covered the event, and followed up with a press release packet of photographs, which they sent to participating schools.

Designing the Sales Competition

We secured a sponsor willing to have their product sold by the students. The sponsor was a minor league hockey team—a bonus, with sports popular among many young people today. We wrote the role-play scenario student competitors would use to prepare for their sales call, which was easy

since we regularly use role-plays in classes. In the scenario, competitors assume the role of a group sales representative for the hockey team selling an employee engagement event to a human resources manager for a chain of businesses – but it could be written for any product sponsor.

The competition is designed as a two-round role-play where students meet and build rapport with the client, uncover needs, make a sales presentation, answer objections, and close in a fifteen-minute sales call with a professional buyer. The expected close is a follow-up appointment in round one and a sale in round two. Students are given scenarios for both rounds prior to the competition, with additional guidelines and instructional videos on the competition site for students and teachers to reference. All competitors participate in the first round in the morning. Individual scores are tallied, with the top 10 students moving on to round two, which takes place in the afternoon. The top ten students receive cash prizes, and all competitors receive a complimentary ticket to a hockey game. Competitors who enroll at our university are also eligible for scholarship opportunities. An awards ceremony and photograph opportunities wrap up the day's events.

Competitors must have a teacher or advisor accompany them and are encouraged to bring a guest, so they have someone to help them practice as they wait for their turn to compete. Workshops led by faculty and businesspeople and campus tours led by admissions are also a big part of the day for students and their teachers.

Registration is free and can be completed quickly with a form shared by our admissions department on the competition site.

Promoting the Event

With the help of our marketing and communications department on campus, we developed the competition site and the promotional campaign for the event. The target audience is high school students, teachers, and parents of high schoolers. Included in the campaign's promotional efforts are the following:

- 1) Marketing and communications created a link on the university website with dedicated pages for the high school sales competition, accessible with a direct link or by navigating to the business school or the department of communication program pages. The site includes general information, the registration form, the role-play scenario, supporting documents, and videos for high school students and their teachers to learn about the sales process and how to prepare for the competition.

- 2) A full-color flyer with details about the event was created, posted on the university's social media accounts, and emailed to students and teachers. The Pennsylvania Future

Business Leaders of America (FBLA) distributed the flyer to their members, and the product sponsor posted it on their social media accounts. Admissions also posted the flyer on their Instagram and sent it as an email attachment to all high school students who applied to the university. The business school and the communications department also posted the flyer on their social media accounts.

Running the Event

As the saying goes, running an event takes a village. We were able to recruit students, faculty, alumni, and businesspeople to fill the roles of buyers, judges, and event workers. All sales students, as well as business and communications students, were emailed and asked to volunteer if they could. While there is a significant upside to hosting an event on campus during a university break, the downside is that students and faculty are on break, and fewer are available. Luckily for us, many sales students volunteered. Athletes who were required to stay on campus and students who lived locally to the university and were not going on a planned spring break trip also volunteered to help.

We also had a handful of faculty volunteer their time. Because our business school has a great relationship with alumni, we were able to get a few alumni to serve as judges. Our sales partners also participated as buyers and judges.

VALUE TO COLLEGE COMMUNITY

Hosting the high school sales competition helped support the university's recruitment efforts and provided a new and different experience-based learning opportunity for the university sales students, a vital component of all Professional Sales programs.

Recruitment for the University and the Professional Sales Program

Hosting a high school sales competition on a university campus can be a recruitment tool for a university. The competition allows high school students to visit a college campus, and many are likely still deciding which college to attend. When promoting the competition, the university is not only recruiting students to compete but also implicitly recruiting students to attend the university. From the moment the high school students arrive on campus, they are immersed in the competition and accompanying experiences, far more than what is offered by admission departments on the typical college visit. The most challenging part of the recruitment process is reaching the target audience with the promotional message. As mentioned earlier, we sought help from multiple campus departments and sponsors to help promote the event successfully. And although only having data from one competition makes it hard to produce any significant results, we did have four students commit to the university after our inaugural competition.

Experience-based Learning for University Sales Students

Because university students cannot compete in the high school competition, their role is helping to organize, promote and engage in various roles during the event. The most critical role of the university sales student, and one that provides the most experience-based learning, is that of a judge. Students are provided the unique perspective of seeing the participants compete while acting as judges alongside faculty and practitioners.

Students in the sales program, particularly students in advanced classes, are asked if they would like to participate as judges. Because the role of a judge is difficult to fill, it is nice to have a built-in pool of judges from advanced selling classes. The learning for the university sales student includes networking with and learning from faculty, alumni, and business professionals; gaining the ability to differentiate between a good and bad sales presentation; and understanding what it takes to run a successful event.

Many factors contribute to the success of a sales competition. We hope our perspectives on launching a sales competition for high school students are helpful for those considering introducing a program like this. Both authors are happy to help in any way should interested readers want to host a similar competition. ▲