

Is Your Sales Management Curriculum in Need of Renaissance?



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The term renaissance can mean many things. In art, the renaissance was a time of innovation, change, and creativity. In humans, someone who epitomizes renaissance is thought to have many skills, abilities, and interests. More broadly, the term renaissance can be defined as a time of rebirth or revival. For sales management, how does the term renaissance apply?

To answer this question, a focus on “rebirth or revival” necessitates a look at both the current state of sales management instruction in academia and the practice of sales management. From these views, alignment can be assessed and areas in need of renaissance become clear.

THE STATE OF SALES MANAGEMENT IN ACADEMIA

The 2023 SEF Annual includes 196 Top Universities and Colleges, plus 39 Other Notable schools that offer sales programs. Within these programs, various forms of classes on sales management are offered to help students prepare for a career in professional selling. The question is, what content is being presented in these courses? A review of numerous texts on sales management reveals a relatively common set of topics that are deemed critical as the basis of student knowledge.

Main topics of Sales Management textbooks: The following list includes the most common chapter topics found in a review of fifteen sales management textbooks:

- Developing Leadership
- Salesforce Recruiting, Selecting, and Hiring
- Salesforce Development and Training
- Sales Leadership: Supervising and Managing a Sales Force
- Goal Setting, Role Perceptions, and Job Satisfaction
- Motivating the Sales Force

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- Compensation and Incentives
- Ethics
- Sales Force Technology
- Data in Sales Management and Sales Analytics
- Organizing the Sales Force and Sales Structures
- Evaluating the Sales Force
- Strategic Role of Sales and Strategy Development
- Cost and Profitability Analysis

The preceding list is proposed as a benchmark of the state of sales management instruction in academia. Though class content likely differs, most will include some mix of the topics. These topics seem relevant to what students should know as a foundational knowledge, yet it is unclear how they relate to what students will encounter as they develop a sales career.

THE STATE OF SALES MANAGEMENT IN PRACTICE

Benchmarking the industry practice of sales management is more difficult than reviewing chapter content of textbooks. To offer a broad view of sales management in practice, five industry thought leaders and consultants were asked to respond to a few questions relevant to what sales managers currently do and what skills and knowledge they will need in the future?

To establish a context, the panel was asked to respond based on the role of “frontline” sales manager, which was described as a career position that works closely with salespeople and customers in mid-size and larger firms (firms that typically employ graduates). The consensus of what is important was clear, and focused on three current and three future themes.

CURRENT SALES MANAGEMENT PRACTICE

1. IMPLEMENTORS OF SALES OPERATIONS The vast majority of tasks in the preceding list were described as being “determined by others and implemented by the sales manager.” Decisions on sales compensation, territories, pricing, budget, and technology were described as “provided to the sales manager” and “not in their control.” Higher level management, sales operations, or sales enablement were described as in charge of making data-based decisions on most aspects of the structure and tools of sales.

2. RECRUITERS OF SALES TALENT: One important aspect of frontline sales management was based on the hiring and onboarding of new sales talent suited to meet local markets and customers. Sales managers are not alone in this responsibility, yet are relied upon to make decisions based on fit of the applicant to their team and situation.

3. COACHES OF SALESPEOPLE: Topics of motivation, oversight, and guidance were stressed as central to the local sales manager role. Coaching was described as the main task of sales managers that lead a team, yet one that can be neglected. To

be effective, managers should be focusing their time on guiding customer-facing and internal-facing actions of salespeople in ways that demonstrate continued learning and support.

FUTURE SALES MANAGEMENT PRACTICE

1. ORCHESTRATORS WITHIN THEIR COMPANY: The growing complexity of sales practice necessitates a local sales manager that can facilitate cooperation across many teams at many levels. At the tactical level, managers must connect business development, customer success, and various sales roles. At the functional level, sales managers must work with product development, finance, professional services, and support teams. The orchestration role of managers requires political skill and emotional intelligence.

2. FACILITATORS OF INFORMATION: Information can take many forms, but data and technology savvy were central to this theme. Sales has become very data driven, concepts such as identifying ideal prospects, pipeline management, and win rate are within the purview of the local sales managers, yet many lack the ability to use their technology “stack” (set of sales automation and management tools) and data to drive effective decisions.

3. DEVELOPERS OF SALESPEOPLE: An emerging role of local sales managers relates to helping their team to move onward and upward in their individual careers. Newer sales employees arrive as products of professional sales programs and expect a focus on career development and opportunities to improve their leadership and knowledge skills. Thus, effective managers will need to go beyond coaching for immediate needs to include focus on longer-term career aspirations and goals of their sales team.

THE RENAISSANCE OF SALES MANAGEMENT TO ALIGN ACADEMIA WITH PRACTICE

To conclude, is academia’s sales management curriculum in need of renaissance? The answer is likely a qualified yes, for many programs. The “qualified” represents a view that most sales management courses are teaching topics related to current practice, yet may need to adjust their weighting and focus on many topics. Traditional concepts, such as territory management, compensation system design, functional organization, and sales strategy are important, yet are typically far removed from the local sales manager’s control. Conversely, topics related to data analytics, technology (beyond just CRM), and coaching should receive more weighting. In addition, new topics around pipeline management, orchestration within the firm, and career development of salespeople should be added to the learning objectives.

Overall, as the practice of sales is experiencing a renaissance, based on the digitation of products and solutions, it seems fair to conclude that academic instruction needs a

similar renaissance. How should this rebirth of curriculum occur...perhaps in a few simple ways:

- Engage sales program sponsors in a discussion of sales management to identify topics that are most critical to their companies.
- Review your current curriculum to make sure you are weighting topics appropriately and including topics that may be new.
- Realize that sales students will not typically be in a position to make decisions on much of what we teach until many, many years into their career, so include focus on:
 - o Things that salespeople do in their jobs that managers use differently (e.g., how does a salesperson's view and use of CRM differ from that of a sales manager).
 - o The use of data and analytics at a level appropriate to the local sales manager.
 - o Frameworks that describe organizations and the role of sales operations in developing territories, compensation systems, and other structural elements of sales strategy that sales managers must implement, not design.
 - o The changing role of salespeople and managers as orchestrators of complex internal, customer, and business partner networks.

- o The importance of helping to coach and develop salespeople in ways that promote longer-term organizational commitment and well-being.

Effective selling is adaptive, agile, persistent, challenging, and ever-changing, so it seems fair that sales management should be too. Renaissance can be difficult as it occurs, but in the end our world advances based on the new, innovative, and effective things that come from periods of renaissance - consider effecting a "rebirth or revival" of your sales management courses. Δ

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