

# WHAT IS *academic sales research* AND WHY SHOULD I CARE?

**YOU EITHER READ THEM OR YOU DON'T:  
the Journal of Marketing, Journal of the Academy of  
Marketing Science, Journal of Personal Selling and Sales  
Management, Industrial Marketing Management, Journal of  
Marketing Theory and Practice and the list goes on and on.**

Few sales executives are familiar with these publications but academic sales researchers focus significant effort here. Adam Rapp, a past winner of the Sales Education Foundation Dissemination Award, notes "Unfortunately, as there have been thousands of pieces of sales research conducted and published, I would contend that a fraction of this research has made it outside of the world of academia and into the hand of practitioners."

## SO WHAT IS IT?

Academic sales research seeks to understand the field of sales at a fundamental, scientific level. It comprises a significant portion of most sales academics' jobs and they typically have long term goals for generating and disseminating basic knowledge about how sales and sales management works and why. There are many topics covering virtually anything in the sales function. Some typical examples include sales strategy, sales management and control, training and hiring salespeople, the selling process, buyer-seller relationships, sales technology and automation and international selling.

Yet few sales managers are familiar with this body of work, much as it might shed light on current problems they face. Professor Michael Mallin, University of Toledo, attributes this to the reward system at universities. Sales academics are rewarded for publishing in these journals, which are largely inaccessible to the general population. Professor Rapp notes, "without a deep understanding of econometric modeling or social identity theory, as examples, to interpret the findings, they remain largely inaccessible." Universities' rewards are not aligned with translating findings for business or publishing in trade outlets. Some faculty may feel unprepared for this task as well.

Professor Mallin's answer is to present findings in executive training and other university interactions with businesses and to familiarize students with results in the classroom. His sales program recently began a blog with short summaries of findings and managerial implications. Professor Rapp feels that sharing findings through executive engagements, trainings and key note presentations has worked particularly well for him. For example, after a recent training, Sean Tripician, a Sales Forecast and Pricing Analyst with Niman Ranch, told Professor Rapp "You have given us all fantastic tools that we all can use in our day-to-day operations."

Managers can benefit from this research by gaining deeper understanding of the topics they are most concerned with. Much academic research eventually makes its way into textbooks, but that can take years. Familiarity with current findings provides earlier insight to what may become fundamental understanding down the road.

Paul Millette, VP of Sales, VisionPoint, says that he has to adapt to the workforce and needs to understand what drives employees and new hires. It is imperative to keep up to speed to know what excites employees, so he can keep them motivated and retain them. He's been following Bryant University's Stefanie Boyer's work on generational differences. Knowing what is being discovered in academic research has helped him change his mindset, resulting in new ways to motivate employees. "I've seen a number of changes since implementing findings from Stefanie's work. Employees are more comfortable with collaboration and prefer it, they want to have an impact and be heard, have ability to think outside the box is high and they are productive and efficient from home." He says as a manager he has to adapt and be open to get the results he wants. He

keeps an eye open for research that helps him to stay ahead of the curve.

Professor Boyer makes a deliberate effort to bring her research into the conversation when working with managers and through social media. Her research on self-directed learning, training, adaptability and managing the next generation of sales leaders has received the most interest from employers. "For the sake of our students and their future employers, we should share what we learn. One of the things I have learned is to share results with employers while it is in the publication process because waiting for it to come out can take years sometimes."

Efforts are not limited to the United States. Jorge Bullemore, Director Academico at Universidad de Chile, notes that while not as much academic research is produced in Latin America as in the U.S. and Europe, the issues are similar. In Chile, there is a concerted effort to attract more academic sales researchers, while at the same time finding ways to share research with managers. "Quality research, knowledge and best practices reach managers through open congresses where opinion leaders from around the world are invited, some newsletters written by consultants and academics and the publication of books in Spanish." He himself is working to make sure current findings reach managers, recently publishing a joint university/consulting project to study commercial networks in Chile.

Some managers also participate in research by providing access to certain aspects of their business, perhaps salespeople responding to a survey, researchers observing sales processes or providing company data on specific metrics. Companies are usually provided unique company-specific insights for participating, get early access to findings and can choose to remain anonymous in publications. The companies also have the satisfaction of supporting the creation of future knowledge.

While a clear purpose behind this research is to advance knowledge, the purpose has to be accomplished with the goal of helping businesses. That means researchers need to make sure they answer relevant questions and find ways to translate findings for business managers. Business managers need to seek out findings and encourage those who are sharing business implications with them. Sales academic research can provide valuable insight and competitive advantage to interested firms. Managers interested in learning about academic sales research don't have to read Journal of Marketing; start by contacting your local university sales program. ▲



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