

Diversifying the Sales Force:

Filling the Gender Gap in Sales

IN SPITE OF EVIDENCE WHICH SUPPORTS SUCCESS FOR WOMEN IN SALES, AND COMPANIES RECOGNIZING THE VALUE OF A DIVERSE SALES FORCE, THE NUMBER OF WOMEN EMBARKING ON SALES CAREERS HAS REMAINED FLAT.

According to a recent Forbes article, “Why We Need More Women in Sales” (January 2018), the sales profession has seen only a 3% increase in the number of women within the last decade. Perhaps the first step in increasing the number of women pursuing sales careers is to increase the number of women in university sales courses. To this end, the University of Cincinnati experimented with our sales curriculum to generate women’s interest in taking a sales class. We believed that if we could get college women to enroll in a sales class—where they could learn the skill set for sales success and gain confidence in their abilities—more college women would consider sales a viable career.

With the help of a higher education grant from Procter & Gamble, a new experimental course, “Women in Sales” was developed. A three prong approach was undertaken. First, the title of the course, “Women in Sales,” along with word-of-mouth promoting the class as a place where women could develop their unique skill set, attracted women and a few men to enroll. Second, to build confidence in their sales skills, the class format was heavily weighted with experiential learning activities which included both in class practice and out of class assignments. Third, to build resiliency and reduce fear of failing—both critical skills for sales success—a resiliency assignment was created.

As anticipated, the course title did indeed attract women, and a few men, to the course: not because the women were interested in sales, but because they were intrigued by a business course for women. The underlying premise for the course was that women have different communication and leadership styles than men, and we wanted to give women the chance to practice with their unique leadership style. As one woman wrote “...I learned that women have the capabilities to excel in sales, not just men. Since women know how to listen and ask empathetic questions, our strategies can sometimes be more effective than men’s strategies.”

What we did not anticipate, but found pleasantly surprising, was how the conversation changed when a business class was composed of predominately women. Women were no longer hesitant to speak up in class and consequently, lengthy class discussions ensued. In fact, it was sometimes difficult to get through the course material because the women were talking so much, a sharp contrast to behavior observed from women in traditional sales classes.

Gender differences were also observed at the culminating sales role play activity. While men in the traditional sales class were competitive, the women would collaborate and encourage each other to do their best. In addition, the women asked challenging questions that never arose in the traditional sales course. As one woman noted, “It can be hard being a woman in the business field, and I feel that is much overlooked... This class gave me open space to address these concerns and get them answered while learning about ones that I had not even had to think of yet.”



One of the interesting things about offering a sales class for women was the positive effect it had on men who took the course. While men are welcome to enroll, usually only one or two elect to take the course. As one male student noted, some of the most successful sellers in his organization were women. To become a successful sales leader, he needed to understand how to partner with, promote, and motivate his female colleagues.

In addition, men taking the Women in Sales class have become strong advocates for women entering the sales force. The women were equally impressed with the men who enrolled in the class. As one woman noted,

“Throughout the semester, I got to experience women breaking stereotypes and empowering one another. I also got to see men be put into a position where they can see things from our perspective, helping them to be colleagues with us.”

The class promoted a positive experience for everyone.

To gain confidence in their sales skills, the course emphasized experiential learning with mini sales practice sessions incorporated into every class meeting. In addition a new assignment was devised to help women increase their resiliency and have courage to not fear failure—life-skills that are critical for success in sales. The goal of this assignment was to help women learn to get over failure quickly and move forward to try again. One woman wrote, “The most important thing that I have learned is to be resilient. I am so thankful that we had to write resiliency journals this year; it has taught me how to bounce back and that failure isn’t always a bad thing.”

Pre-class/post-class assessments corroborated the women’s self-reports. Exploratory research found that women in the class increased their level of resiliency to those equivalent to men (closed the gender gap in resiliency), reduced their fear of failure (statistically

significant), and had greater confidence in their ability to sell as compared to men who completed the traditional sales course. Based on the success in helping women learn resiliency, the assignment is now included in the traditional sales class as well and has met with similar success.

As a result of starting a sales class for women, the number of women enrolling in a sales class and considering a sales career has increased on our campus. Based on their positive experience with the women’s sales course, more women are enrolling in subsequent sales courses: thus increasing the quality and quantity of our sales program. The success of this course has attracted national attention.

Finally, as predicted, more women from our campus are pursuing sales careers. As one woman noted: “Prior to this class, I never expected myself to be pursuing a career in sales, I was mostly just curious about the class. But because of this class, I got my first internship in sales this past summer. Now, as result of that, this upcoming summer I will be working as a sales intern in Denver.”

While the Women in Sales course was designed to help undergraduate women, it turns out everyone—men, women, sales organizations, and our sales program—all benefited from this course. Encouraging women in sales benefits everyone. ▲



Jane Z Sojka, PhD
University of Cincinnati