

# Assessing High Schools Students' Perceptions of Sales as an Area to Study in College, and as a Career to Pursue after College

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## Introduction

The Department of Education's latest data (2011 – 2012) indicates just over 20% (370,000) of 1.79 million bachelor's degrees conferred in the U.S. are in business. The next highest major (social sciences and history) accounted for about 10% of the total. More recent data suggests business degrees continue to be the most popular among college students. According to a 2014 USATODAY study, business is the most popular major among the nearly 21 million college students in the U.S. (Stockwell 2014).

While these numbers look impressive, it has been difficult for America's companies to find an adequate number of qualified sales professionals. One explanation is that, because the reference to business majors includes business administration, finance, accounting, marketing, management, and other related areas, many (if not most) business majors do not have the preparation necessary for success in b2b sales roles. Compounding this issue is the speculation that college students have misperceptions of sales and, as a result, have little interest in pursuing a career in it (Weber 2015). However, it is interesting to note that the number of universities that teach professional selling in the United States has gone from under 20 in 1990 to 101 in 2011 to over 150 in 2014 (Peltier 2014). Even with this increase, the shortage of qualified sales professionals persists.

Several studies have examined college students' attitudes towards b2b sales (Dubinsky 1981, Spillan et al 2007, Bristow 2006, Peltier 2014) but none of looked at college-bound high schools students' perceptions of sales. The purpose of this study is to explore how high school student who plan on attending college feel about b2b sales as an area to study in college, and as an occupation to pursue after graduating from college.

## Student Perceptions about Salespeople and Sales Careers

Several papers and article have been written about the need for salespeople, and the need to fill those jobs with college graduates (e.g., Fogel et al 2012). Unfortunately, College students tend to have a negative view of sales as a career option (Spillan et al 2007, Bristow 2006, Peltier 2014). Why and how do students develop these negative views?

It is likely that most traditional students (18 – 24 years old) are relatively unaware of b2b sales because it is unlikely they have ever had any direct exposure (other than a parent or other relative) to it. It is more likely that these students' exposure to sales is limited to retail, door-to-door, and telemarketers. It's possible that this lack of exposure is a contributing factor to college students' negative perceptions of sales and salespeople. Bahhouth and Spillan (2014) noted that students who have never interacted first-hand with any salesperson still regard the sales profession in a negative light. A study by Thompson (1972) notes that “anecdotes, stories, novels, stage productions and the mass media” may be to blame for the negative images of the sales profession. Popular movies such as Glengarry Glen Ross, Tommy Boy, Boiler Room, and so forth certainly do not present a flattering image of salespeople.

The influence of reference groups (e.g., parents, friends, teachers, etc.) may be another factor shaping students' perceptions of sales and sales careers. According to Fogel et al (2012), many parents believe sales isn't a career and, as a result, dissuade their children from pursuing it as a career option. In contrast, students who have one or more family members (e.g. parents) or friends who are or have been sales professionals may already hold the belief that sales is a noteworthy profession prior to entering college. Those students may already be exposed to the actual standards of the field, including the personal and professional attributes that are required to be successful in sales, thereby not holding negative misconceptions upon entering the college or university (Sojka 2000).

In addition to parents and friends, teachers may influence students' perceptions of sales and sales careers. Educators in higher education around the world are striving to provide students with a more accurate view of professional selling (Bristow D. N. 2006). To be successful in professional selling, a salesperson must be sensitive to the problems and needs of the client. These educators are relaying the fact that “selling from a customer orientation involves the development of mutually satisfying, value-added solution to those problems”, much different from the initial opinions that many students hold prior to collegiate-level education (Bristow D. N. 2006).

Once again, marketing educators are looked to as a motivating link between the transition from student to sales professional. Professors within marketing departments help facilitate the transition through educational preparation and professional connections to sales jobs (Cummins et al 2013). Although a general consensus exists that students who take marketing classes are more motivated towards sales careers, more research would be needed to determine the specific

curricula that best reach this goal (Bristow, et al 2011, Deeter-Schmelz & Kennedy 2011, Gray et al 2012).

Of course, not all students may be exposed to sales through family members, friends, or teachers, but instead may have been introduced to the world of sales through sales internship opportunities. These students may be less likely to hold negative perceptions after experiencing the profession first-hand (Sojka 2000). Internships afford the occasion for students to enhance their communication skills and gain confidence, core skills needed in a sales environment (Rawlinson and Connor 1996). In turn, these internships may act as a domino effect, fostering accurate and positive images that further encourage the consequent pursuit of sales as a career (Sojka 2000).

## **Gender Differences**

A burning question in the mind of researchers is the possible differences in perceptions of and interest in sales careers between males and females. While research suggests students' perceptions of salespeople are negative, it also indicates those perceptions may be different based on sex. In a study conducted by Spillan, Totten, and Ziemnowicz (2007) on the perception of the sales profession among students, sales was more interesting to males than females, though more generally the field was viewed as a profession that fostered neither creativity nor advancement within the workplace. These differences stand in contrast to research from the 1980s that suggested, at the time, that women were more likely to look favorably upon professional selling compared to men, possibly due in part to the newer availability of sales jobs for women in an otherwise male-dominated field (Gable and Reed 1987, Jolson 1983, Kanuk, 1978, Swan, Futrell, & Todd 1984).

## **Current Study**

Research suggests that negative images fostered by mass media and personal experience continue to stifle the influx of possible sales majors. Some research lays the blame in faulty recruitment efforts—a wasted opportunity for promoting positive perceptions of sales. Nevertheless, not all students hold these misconceptions, and by examining various collegiate subgroups, samples of the population are found with positive perceptions of sales. These groups include students who have taken sales or marketing courses, students who have held sales internships, as well as those who have been positively exposed to sales through family or personal experience.

While college students' perceptions of salespeople and sales as a profession have been the focus of several studies, none have examined the same perceptions of high school students. Do high school students feel the same way about sales and salespeople as college students? What factors influence their perceptions? Do males and females share the same perceptions? This study begins the process of answering these questions by examining high school students' perceptions of sales as an area of collegiate study and a viable career option to pursue after earning a college degree.

## Method

A questionnaire was developed using a combination of scales from previous studies and new items created for this study. In addition to some basic demographic information, the survey collected information regarding 1) intent to attend college, 2) perceptions of salespeople, and 3) perceptions of sales as a career.

The items used in the questionnaire came from the studies of Bristow et al (2006), Churchill et al (1974), Dubinsky (1981), Muehling and Weeks (1988), and Lyonski and Durvasula (1988) . A pretest, using students from two high schools, was conducted prior to finalizing the questionnaire.

The survey was created in Qualtrics and distributed electronically and in hard copy. High school teachers from two high schools located in the Midwest agreed to distribute the surveys. Two high school teachers, each at different schools, distributed a total of 82 surveys (hard copy) to students. High school teachers also distributed the survey link (Qualtrics) to an unknown number of students via email. A total of 158 completed surveys were collected for analysis. Of those 158 surveys collected, 82 were from the hard copy distribution and 76 were from the electronic version. While the response rate for the hard copy distribution is 100%, the overall response rate is difficult to estimate because it is unclear to how many students the survey link was sent. Because the survey was distributed, in part, via email (non-tracking), it is impossible to determine the overall response rate. Table 1 shows a demographic breakdown of the respondents.

<b>Table 1 – Demographic Breakdown of Respondents</b>		
<b>Variable</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<i>Age</i>		
15 or Younger	32	20.4
16	26	16.6
17	56	35.7
18 or Older	43	27.4
<i>Sex</i>		
Male	78	49.7
Female	79	50.3
<i>Year in High School</i>		
Freshman	33	21.0
Sophomore	18	11.5
Junior	63	40.1
Senior	43	27.4

## Intentions to Attend College

Table 2 provides information about the respondents' intentions to attend college, pursue a sales major in college, and a sales job once they graduate from college. As

the table shows, 72.8% of the responding students are planning on going to college. This figure is in-line with, yet slightly higher than, the United States Department of Labor's 2016 report which indicated 69.2% of 2015 high school graduates enrolled in college (Bureau of Labor and Statistics 2016). Another 19.6% indicate they "probably" will attend college, leaving only 8% (roughly) of the respondents indicating they will not, or probably will not, attend college. As mentioned previously, the purpose of this study is to examine students' perceptions about sales as a college major, and as a career to pursue after college. Consequently, the 12 respondents indicating they would not, or probably would not, go to college were dropped from further analysis.

Table 3 shows the results of an independent sample t-test comparing mean scores of males and females on intent to attend college (definitely yes and yes), pursue a sales major, and obtain a sales position after graduating. The results indicate high school student males and females do not differ with respect to their planning to attend college.

<b>Table 2 – College and Career Intentions</b>		
<b>Variable</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<i>Planning on attending college</i>		
Definitely Yes	115	72.8
Probably Yes	31	19.6
Probably Not	11	7.0
Definitely Not	1	0.6
<i>If you go to college, would you consider pursuing a Sales Major*</i>		
Definitely Consider	6	4.3
Would likely Consider	25	18.0
May Consider	19	13.7
Would Not Consider	86	61.9
Don't know what the major is	3	2.2
<i>Interested in pursuing a sales position after college*</i>		
Strongly Agree	0	
Agree	11	8.0
Indifferent	43	31.2
Disagree	32	21.9
Strongly Disagree	52	35.6
<i>*takes into consideration only those indicating “Probably Yes” or “Definitely Yes” with respect to planning on Attending College.</i>		

**Table 3 – Mean Differences between Males and Females on Attending College, Majoring in Sales, and Pursuing a Sales Job after College**

Item	N	Mean	Diff.	Sig.
<i>Planning on attending college</i>				
Male	68	1.28		
Female	77	1.16	.124	.075
<i>If you go to college, would you consider pursuing a Sales Major*</i>				
Male	63	1.92		
Female	72	1.37	.545	.001
<i>Interested in pursuing a sales position after college*</i>				
Male	64	2.33		
Female	73	1.88	.451	.008

## **Interest in a Sales Major**

As can be seen in Table 1, to assess interest in pursuing a sales major, respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they would consider the major. The response options were Would Not Consider (1), May Consider (2), Would Likely Consider (3), Will Definitely Consider (4), and I Don't Know What that Major Is (5).

Of the 146 students indicating they probably will or definitely will attend college, 31 (22.3%) indicated a strong willingness to consider pursuing a sales major. In contrast, 86 (61.9%) indicated they would not choose sales as a major to pursue in college. The remaining students were either indifferent (19, 13.7%) or were not familiar with the major (3, 2.2%). Because "I Don't Know What That Major Is" doesn't fall in the continuum of consideration, that response was recoded to "system missing" and dropped from consideration. Table 3 indicates the mean score of males (2.25) on interest in a sales major is higher than that of females (1.55). This indicates males have a greater interest pursuing a sales major than do female, and this finding is consistent with Spillan, Totten, and Ziemnowicz (2007).

## **Interested in Sales Position**

The number of students expressing an interest in sales as a position to pursue after graduating college was limited to 11 (8%P) expressing agreement (with interest in pursuing a sales position after college) and 0 (0%) expressing strong agreement. Eighty-four students expressed either disagreement or strong disagreement with item, indicating they had little to no interest in pursuing a b2b sales position after college. As can be seen in Table 3, the mean score of males (2.33) is greater than that of females (1.88) and that difference is statistically significant. This indicates males have a greater interest in b2b sales as a career than do females. This result is consistent with the difference between males and females interest in pursuing a sales major.

## **Influencers**

Table 4 displays the results from the analysis of items designed to ascertain the extent to which certain reference groups influence high school students' career plans (1 = Not at All Important, 3 = Indifferent, and 5 = Very Important). As one might expect, parents appear to exert substantial influence over high schools students' career plans. It is interesting to note that while the difference between males and females on the influence scores are not statistically significant, in each case the female's mean score is greater than that of the males. While not conclusive, these findings suggest that males may be slightly less influenced than females with respect to how the specified reference groups influence their career plans.

<b>Table 4 – Mean Differences between Males and Females on People Influencing Career Plans</b>				
<b>Item</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Diff.</b>	<b>Sig.</b>
<i>Parents</i>				
Male	65	4.05		
Female	74	4.36	-.319	.147
<i>Friends</i>				
Male	64	3.09		
Female	73	3.52	-.427	.061
<i>Teachers</i>				
Male	64	3.33		
Female	72	3.58	-.255	.321
<i>Coaches</i>				
Male	64	3.44		
Female	73	3.85	-.412	.132
<i>Siblings</i>				
Male	64	3.56		
Female	72	3.96	-.396	.100
<i>Counselor/Advisor</i>				
Male	62	3.29		
Female	73	3.48	-.189	.487

## **Discussion**

As mentioned previously, the United States Department of Labor’s 2016 report indicates 69.2% of 2015 high school graduates enrolled in college (Bureau of Labor and Statistics, 2016). The present study indicates 72% of high school students are planning on attending college and another 20% will probably attend college. The differences between the findings of the present study and the 2016 U.S. labor report is most likely attributed to the idea that the number of high school students planning on (or probably will) attending college is somewhat greater than the number of students who actually attend college after graduating from high school. An alternative explanation is that the sample used in the present study is not representative of the U.S. high school population. A longitudinal study tracking students from high school to college is necessary to assess the relationship between intent to attend college and actual enrollment in college.

The results of this study indicate approximately 22% of students planning on attending college would likely consider (18%) or definitely consider (4%) pursuing a sales major. In other words, 22 out of every 100 students planning on attending college are open to the idea of pursuing sales as an area of study. Given the variety of majors available at most universities, this result should be encouraging to sales educators. However, a longitudinal study is needed to determine the relationship between consideration to pursue and actual pursuit of sales education.

While 22% of high school students are open to studying sales in college, only 8% indicate an interest in seeking a b2b sales position after graduating from college. These two findings combined suggest that while students are open to learning more about b2b sales, they have little interest in sales as a career. This result is probably not surprising to experienced sales educators as most are familiar with students eschewing the idea of sales as a career until they have completed a b2b sales course or otherwise become more familiar with b2b sales career opportunities.

The results of this study suggest males are more open to studying sales in college and to pursuing a sales position after graduating from college. Additional research is needed to compare these results with actual sales course (or major) enrollments and job placement (after graduating from college) in sales positions. However, given the abundance of b2b sales opportunities (which may span all majors) relative to the number of job opportunities within any given major, high school students disinterested in sales careers may find themselves, perhaps reluctantly, taking a sales job when they graduate from college because 1) it's the only viable opportunity available, or 2) because it is an entry point to a non-sales career (e.g., product manager).

With respect to influencing career plans, parents seem to have the greatest impact relative to the other reference groups examined in the present study. This finding is consistent with Fogel et al (2012), a study indicating parents influence career choices of their children. Siblings exerted the second highest degree of influence followed by coaches and teachers. Ironically, Advisors/Counselors were among the least influential reference groups. A study on parents' and their high school-aged children's perceptions of sales education and sales as a career would shed greater insight into the extent to which parents influence their children's career choices. Although beneficial, such a study would be difficult to implement.

## **Conclusion**

The results of this study provide sales educators useful insight. While the number of high school students interested in sales career is low, the number of students open to learning more about sales is promising. Sales educators interested in growing enrollment in sales programs (e.g., majors, minors, concentrations) need to develop and implement marketing campaigns designed to increase the number of students who will "definitely consider" pursuing a sales major/concentration. The campaigns should focus on educating high school students, their parents, and their teachers about the virtues of studying sales in college and pursuing sales careers after graduating from college. Although the gap between males and females is small, it may be beneficial to give special attention to high schools females, making sure they are aware of the opportunities a sales education and career represent.

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**Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and Practitioners:** There is a severe shortage of college graduates pursuing a career in sales after graduation. This paper

assesses high school students' perceptions of sales as an area of study in college. It is important that in the future students learn more about sales as a promising career.

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**TRACK: Professional Selling**