

June 2022

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Recommended Citation

Edmondson, Diane R.; Matthews, Lucy; and Makarczyk, Hannah (2022) "Enhancing Sales Education by Incorporating an Innovative International Role Play," *Atlantic Marketing Journal*: Vol. 11: No. 1, Article 8. Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/amj/vol11/iss1/8>

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Enhancing Sales Education by Incorporating an Innovative International Role Play

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Abstract – In today’s society, the global marketplace has become more relevant to all businesses to help ensure sustainability (Hummel, 2012). In marketing, students pursuing a career in sales can find significant opportunities; however, there are unique skills needed when selling internationally (Salesforce, 2021). Prior research has highlighted lost revenue due to internationally incompetent employees (Daniel, Xie, & Kedia, 2014). A content analysis of 139 Sales Education Foundation universities was completed to determine the extent to which international sales education is currently being incorporated in sales curriculum. Results indicate that only 6.5% include some international sales element as part of their program. Because of this, one innovative way to overcome this lack of international sales education is to incorporate an international role play in Professional Selling courses. An explanation of the innovation, as well as potential challenges and benefits, are explored. A sample scenario, grading rubric, and reflection prompts are provided. Information on how this could be adapted to other marketing courses is described.

Keywords – Sales Education, Role Play, International, Experiential Learning

Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers, and/or Practitioners – The growth of international sales requires a change in sales education so that students are better prepared for the workplace. This article provides information on one way that educators could add an international element to an existing Professional Selling course.

Introduction

A career in sales offers significant opportunities for students due to the rising number of sales positions available across numerous U.S. industries (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019). A majority of sales professionals (90%) believe that a sales career is worthwhile, with 70% recommending sales careers to their friends and family (Leitch, 2019). Further, a sales career offers students high-income potential, task variety, flexibility, autonomy, creativity, travel, and opportunities for quick advancement (Allen et al., 2014; Arnott, 1995; Lopez et al., 2006). Because of this, the number of universities incorporating sales education is on the rise. The Sales Education Foundation (SEF), a non-profit aimed at elevating the sales profession through higher education, featured 143 universities in North America that offer sales education in 2020 (SEF, 2020), which is a 450% rate of growth since 2008 (SEF, 2021).

However, sales careers are not exclusive to the U.S. One area where companies will see continued growth over the next few decades is global business (Hummel, 2012). International sales are becoming a critical business component rather than just an option for a business to pursue (Westworld Consulting, 2017). It is predicted that the globally competitive marketplace will be

profoundly changed by 2025 as emerging markets will base almost half of the world's biggest companies; therefore, requiring significant changes to the sales field (Dobbs et al., 2013). When examining the global marketplace exclusively, multinational sales operations require salespeople with specialized skills (Florida Tech, 2021). In essence, selling internationally requires a different skill set because of the unique challenges and complexity associated with language and culture (Salesforce, 2021). Some of the added complexities associated with international sales include technology, time zone differences, language barriers, exchange rates, and cultural norms and expectations.

Furthermore, prior research has shown that 40% of executives believe their company has missed international business opportunities due to a lack of internationally competent employees (Daniel, Xie, & Kedia, 2014). Many students lack international exposure of any kind (Delpechitre & Baker, 2017; Herlache et al., 2018), and study abroad opportunities are typically limited due to the cost and timing involved. In fact, in 2018-2019, only 1.77% of U.S. college students participated in a study abroad program (NAFSA, 2021). Because of this, there is a perception that U.S. students are not as globally minded as students from other countries (IvyPanda, 2021).

The importance of international sales leads to the following two research questions being explored in this study: 1. what the current status of international sales elements in sales curriculum is, and 2. how to feasibly incorporate international sales elements into sales programs. To answer these questions, the goals of this study are two-fold. First, conduct a content analysis of Sales Education Foundation universities to determine the prevalence of international sales education. Second, to describe a novel and innovative approach that would allow U.S. students to enhance their technological skills and allow them to gain international sales exposure through experiential learning activities in a sales course.

Current Status of International Sales Education in the United States

In order to determine how many universities affiliated with the Sales Education Foundation incorporate an international sales course or element as part of their program, a content analysis was completed. For each of the 143 SEF universities (SEF, 2020), the university sales course descriptions were examined for any mention of international sales content. Although many universities, especially those accredited by AACSB, may require an international course such as international marketing or international business as part of the business program, these courses tend to be general courses that do not focus exclusively on international sales content. Because of this, these general courses were not counted in this content analysis unless the description explicitly mentioned sales.

Results indicate that only nine (6.5%) of the 139 SEF universities in which course descriptions were available require an international sales course or element as part of their program. For those that offer an international sales course or element, some of the class titles include: "Professional Selling and Cultural Perspectives," "Cross-Cultural Communication and Negotiation," "Global Perspectives in Sales," and "International Sales Negotiation." Only three of the nine universities directly mention experiential and interactive international activities associated with the course description. These results highlight that a majority of the SEF universities focus solely on sales and sales-related issues for business buyers in the U.S. Because of this, one way

that a sales program could be novel and differentiate itself is with the inclusion of an experiential international element.

Innovation: Incorporating an International Sales Role Play

One innovative way sales and marketing faculty could provide students with international and cultural exposure is by incorporating an international role play into the introductory sales class between professional selling students at the U.S. university and an international partner university. This international element using a new international sales scenario would be added after the students complete the traditional U.S.-based role-play process. By adding the international element, additional complexity in the sales process would be introduced, enhancing student's sales skills. Overall, there are six goals associated with adding this international sales role-play into an existing professional selling class, including:

1. Provide students with international and cultural exposure
2. Enhance academic quality in sales by incorporating an international perspective
3. Foster collaboration between the U.S. university and an international university
4. Allow students to develop a relationship with students from the international partner
5. Create an ongoing partnership with overseas universities that teach sales related courses
6. Help differentiate the University Sales Program from other U.S. Sales Programs

Specifically, in this innovation, the U.S. university will partner with an international university that offers a similar sales class. SEF provides a listing of international schools with sales offerings as part of their yearly magazine to aid in partner selection. The instructors from the two schools will then work together to develop an appropriate international sales scenario, preferably based on a multinational corporate sponsor. A sample scenario with potential problems and objections can be found in the Appendix.

Students would be first introduced to the international sales scenario and the partner school during a class session. During this session, the importance of international sales will be presented. It is also recommended that faculty discuss important concepts such as cultural norms and stereotypes, as well as body language and gesture differences. A variety of YouTube videos exist which could be used for these purposes (e.g., Adichie, 2021; Binsky, 2021; The World is Our Thing, 2021; ZoneA, 2021). Furthermore, this class session is a good time for a zoom session with the partner school or a previously recorded video to be shared. If a multinational corporate sponsor is used for the international sales scenario, this session is also a great point for introducing company representatives to both classes. The multinational sponsorship could be used to provide a care package or goodie bag of local products to each participating school so they can experience some of the common cultural favorites from each location. For example, a U.S. southern school could include Moon Pies, RC Cola, Goo Goo Clusters, Pralines, Sweet tea, Cheerwine, pork rinds, BBQ sauce, Tabasco sauce, Easy Cheese, or a flavored Zapp's potato chip. Other American non-food-based products could include Burt's Bees lip balm, red Solo Cups, Wilson Football, board game Ticket to Ride, and unique holiday items.

After this introductory session, U.S. sales students would then be randomly assigned a student from the international university to be his or her role-play partner for this international element. The students will be responsible for two different assignments. The first is an introductory meet and greet to get to know their international partner. Students would be required to reach out via

virtual communication technology such as Zoom, Teams, or Google Meet. Students would turn in a self-reflection of the first meeting, which highlights the various things they had in common and differences among their cultures. Next, students would be required to complete a sales role-play outside of class, no longer than 30 minutes in length, in which each student plays the role of the seller. The instructor will randomly assign the problems and objections to their students to use when playing the buyer. In the role play, it would be expected that the student utilizes the available virtual communication technology tools such as screen sharing to aid in the sales process. Students would also be required to record their role play. The recorded role-plays would then be uploaded to the course management system for grading by the student's instructor. If desired, multiple international role-plays with different student partners could be utilized throughout the semester to strengthen the experience.

After students have completed the role play(s), they should also be asked to watch their recorded role play and then reflect on their experience. Reflection will allow students to connect their experiences with the academic knowledge learned in the class and allow them to understand how this learning can be adapted and applied to new situations (Rhodes, 2009). Some examples of potential reflection prompts can be found in the Appendix.

Innovation Benefits

There are multiple benefits that students would receive due to participation in this international sales role-play. In the end, students would benefit from this international sales element by learning effective skills related to communication, collaboration with international students, international sales call techniques, and international problem-solving. Developing these skills will help students stand out post-graduation by enhancing their competency in international sales. It will also allow students to acquire knowledge about global issues, cultural misconceptions, and cultural generalizations. Further, these students would better understand the added difficulty associated with large time zone differences between the buyer and seller.

Students will gain virtual communication technology skills which, due to COVID, is now a sought-after skill by employers. This is because the way business-to-business sellers and buyers interact has vastly changed as a result of the pandemic. Salespeople are traveling less and relying more on video and other digital communication channels to conduct their job (Zoltners et al., 2020). A recent study by Gavin et al. (2020) found that 90% of sales moved to a videoconferencing/phone/web sales model and that more than half believe that these new methods are equally or more effective than prior sales models. In fact, research has shown that technology has made it easier to strengthen human connections as 87% of remote teams felt more connected to their colleagues with the use of virtual communication, and 90% believe it makes collaboration easier and more attainable (Scott, 2020). Because of this, one additional benefit of this particular innovation is that it will allow students to practice selling in a digital environment, making them more prepared for the post-COVID sales field. Finally, this international sales role-play will force students out of their comfort zone by requiring them to communicate with individuals unlike themselves.

Innovation Challenges

There are a few challenges associated with incorporating this international sales innovation into a sales curriculum. Some of these challenges include setting up university partnerships, equal number classes and class sizes, an easily understood scenario, global corporate sponsorship, and language barriers. Each of these challenges is discussed in more detail below.

First, one of the biggest challenges is setting up university partnerships. Prior to the U.S. university soliciting partners, it is important to understand who is responsible for the partnership decision-making process. This could be done by the university itself, the sales program director, or left up to each sales professor using the professor's network. There are resources available to assist with partner selection, such as the list provided by SEF or the Center for Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) (SUNY COIL, 2021). These partnerships must have a time span attached to them. This time span could be by semester, by academic year(s), or as an ongoing relationship. A decision must also be made if there will be more than one international partner per academic year or semester. If a domestic school wants to experiment prior to full adoption of this innovation, then the university or sales professor could seek out international student groups already on their existing campus to play the role of the buyer. Alternatively, the domestic university could ask a multinational corporation to provide international salespeople to serve as buyers for this exercise. Finally, the university could reach out to local international citizens to assist in the role plays.

Along with determining the partnership school, another challenge that must be managed is class number and/or class size differences between the two universities. If there is an inadequate number of students from either university enrolled in Professional Selling classes, then the university with the smaller number of students may have to participate in multiple role plays in order for everyone to get a chance to participate. Alternatively, the university with the larger number of sales students may have to engage in team selling to a single student from the partner school. It is also possible to utilize students from other sales and sales-related classes such as Advanced Selling or Sales Management to serve as buyers to help alleviate this problem. However, if this is a consistent problem, then the university with the higher sales enrollment may have to solicit additional university partners. One potential benefit to using multiple university partners would be the ability for students to potentially role play with a more diverse international audience, especially if these partner schools are from different geographic areas.

Another challenge associated with this innovation is providing enough time in the semester to adequately complete this added role-play exercise. Both universities would have to dedicate an appropriate number of class sessions around this particular role-play for it to be successful. If the semester timing differs significantly between the two universities, the timing issue could be even more complicated. However, with proper advanced planning, this challenge can be reduced or alleviated. For example, pre-recorded videos could be created and placed in the learning management system by the instructors covering topics such as the role-play scenario, expectations, and information on setting up virtual meetings. Creating these in advance should help expedite the amount of time required in class.

The next challenge is developing an international sales scenario that students can easily understand at both universities. It is best if the international sales scenario is created collaboratively to help make sure it is suitable for all involved. If either school has a corporate sponsor that would

like to participate in this international exercise, then this third party may also want to be involved in the sales scenario development process. As part of the sales scenario, it is important that not only the scenario is created but also the potential buyer problems and objections, seller pricing, and a grading rubric be developed. Information on what specific details will be shared with students from both universities should be discussed as well in order to help ensure coverage consistency between the university partners. A sample scenario and potential rubric are provided in the Appendix.

The final challenge is the language barrier. Although it is likely that the non-U.S. students will speak English as a second language, students must be prepared for the language barrier and understand the lack of communication that can arise when using jargon, acronyms, or abbreviations. In addition, students must understand that specific words might either not be used or could potentially be seen as disrespectful if used in other cultures. Furthermore, the speed of communication and use of visuals may need to be altered in order to enhance understanding.

These challenges have the opportunity to arise every semester. However, these challenges can be handled with adequate advanced preparation prior to the beginning of class. For students, these challenges will lead to great discoveries about what companies face every day when trying to effectively communicate in an international selling situation.

Conclusion

Overall, adding an international sales element as suggested in this innovation will provide students with ample benefits. These benefits include globalization skills, experiential-based learning instead of case studies, enhanced problem-solving skills, effective global communication, and a greater understanding of the international business sales process. Furthermore, students will have the opportunity to grow their personal network, understand virtual communication technology more in-depth, and improve their international background. By providing students with international sales training, they will be better prepared for the global workforce post-graduation. These students are also more likely to pursue international opportunities. In addition, this innovation will also allow the university to differentiate itself from other sales programs.

Although this particular innovation focused on international sales, it is possible to adapt this innovation across many other marketing courses. For example, in marketing research, a similar approach could be used where U.S. students partner with students outside of the U.S. to complete an international marketing research project that would allow students to investigate cultural differences between the two countries. For a promotions class, students at a U.S. university would partner with students from an international university to prepare an international promotion plan for an existing company. Overall, exposing students to a diverse marketplace through an experiential learning activity, such as the one described in this innovation, will provide substantial benefits and lead to a more well-rounded educational experience.

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Appendix

Potential International Sales Scenario

[Insert partner university here] is a large, comprehensive university located ... [insert partner university description including student enrollment, number of faculty and staff, when established, and any future information about growth over the next five years].

As with any large university, [insert partner university here] has an expansive facilities management program, which includes building maintenance, grounds upkeep, technical infrastructure, parking lot management, sports facilities maintenance and parking/transportation services.

The Transportation Services Department currently offers support to faculty and staff who have travel needs. Trips farther than [xx] miles can be approved for air travel. Any trip shorter than [xx] miles must be taken by automotive vehicle. Faculty, staff and administrators can utilize their personal vehicles and receive mileage reimbursement. Often, groups of people travel together.

You've been with Enterprise for 4 years, but have just transferred to the International Sales desk for the Fleet Management Program. You've managed to win several international business accounts, but have had no luck breaking into the university's business. A manager at Nestle, Adrian Phillips, does business with you, and as you're talking with Adrian, he mentions he is good friends with Carson Stewart, the manager of Fleet Services for [insert partner university here]. Carson is a proud [insert partner university here] graduate, as s/he and Adrian went to [insert partner university here] and were both heavily involved in student government. S/He's been with the university over 10 years. Carson reports to Riley Cooper, the vice president of Facilities Services.

Adrian isn't sure of all the details, but to the best of his knowledge, [insert partner university here] has around 22 cars/vans/mini buses in its fleet. Adrian also mentioned that the budget for a large fleet is quite high. Money is tight for the school, as [insert partner university here] is a state-funded institution [Note: Change as needed based on partner university]. Rumors are circulating that the budget for higher education will be reduced by 5%.

Carson Stewart has been hard to reach for an appointment, but after Adrian called him/her and gave you a referral, Carson agreed to see you.

Your goal is to meet Carson, explore some potential needs with SPIN selling, discuss Enterprise's relevant features and benefits, and move the sales process forward. Right now, you have no pricing. You want to secure Carson's agreement to allow you to come back another day to present your quote.

Note: To make the sales scenario more challenging, pricing can be provided so students have the opportunity to practice with exchange rates and international pricing dialogue.

Potential Problems for International Sales Scenario

Maintenance

- The company we currently use for our maintenance, just raised rates and we don't have that increase in our budget
- Every time we take a vehicle in for service, the company tries to add on additional recommended services, that we aren't sure are truly needed.
- Two of the last three cars that we sent for an oil changes the prices billed were different from the originally quoted price. (This required 30 minutes in time to resolve this dispute).

Personnel Time - Accidents/Registration/Licensing

- We recently had a vehicle involved in an accident out of town. Although the accident wasn't our driver's fault, it left the driver stranded. Additionally, we spent hours working on the claim and repair. Then we had to send two of our employees to get the car back after being repaired.
- With so many vehicles in our fleet, we have found it can be difficult to remember when each vehicle needs to be inspected and re-licensed each year.

Buy/Sell

- We have two vehicles that we are ready to replace, but don't have the time to mess with all the hassle, so we're putting more miles on those vehicles than we prefer.
- We had three vehicles that we sold by advertising on campus, now we need to get those replaced, but we can't get the price that we have budgeted.

Rentals

- Recently a Professor went on a trip and had a rental from our local dealer that broke down. Getting a substitute vehicle took 15 phone calls and more time that my staff didn't have to spend on this issue.
- We have had a few situations where our current supplier doesn't offer the type of vehicle we need to supplement our own fleet.
- Our current fleet doesn't have the hours that our staff needs for pick up and drop off.

Potential Objections for International Sales Scenario

- “No, all these features sound really expensive. How much does it cost?”
- “No, I don't think right now is the time for us to switch. This is our fiscal year end and I don't have the time to try something new.”
- “No, I heard that Enterprise is really good at first, but over time, service diminishes.”
- “No, I would really like some time to think about this. Can we meet again in a week or two.” (Be indecisive - Just not really sure about everything. Make them re-emphasize the benefits).
- “No, I'm not sure that we need all these bells and whistles. I don't want to have to pay for things that I don't use.”
- Within the first 5 minutes – “No, I've heard that Enterprise is always high on price.”
- “No, I'm not interested at this time.”
- “No, I'm not sure that your company will be any better than what we are doing ourselves.”
- “No, we've had other companies offer these services to us before, and their prices were much lower.”
- “No, we prefer to work with local companies that understand our unique needs.”
- “No, it appears you really specialize in corporate accounts, I'm not sure that you can fit our needs.”
- “No, you haven't been in your position that long. I only work with established salespeople.”

Potential Reflection Prompts

- How did you prepare for the International Sales Role Play? What research did you do when preparing for the presentation?
- What steps did you take to complete the International Sales Role Play? Tell me about your thinking at each step.
- What problems did you encounter when completing the International Sales Role Play? How did you troubleshoot these problems?
- What cultural differences did you notice when working with your International Role Play partner?
How did these cultural differences impact your planning process? How did these cultural differences impact the role play itself?
- What risks did you take in the International Sales Role Play? Be specific.
- In your International Sales Role Play, did you use filler words? Did you use jargon, acronyms, or abbreviations that required clarification? How did using these items impact your presentation?
- Overall, how did your International Sales Role Play flow?
- When reviewing your International Sales Role Play recording, what type of body language did you exhibit? What type of body language did you observe from your buyer? How did this body language impact your International Sales Role Play?
- Discuss how the International Sales Role Play helped you become more comfortable with an international environment. Were you uncomfortable with this process? How did you overcome this discomfort?
- In what ways have you improved as a salesperson by completing this International Sales Role Play? What brought about those improvements? Point to specific examples from this course.
- What did you learn about yourself by completing this International Sales Role Play? Be specific.
- What skills did you master through the completion of this International Sales Role Play? What skills are you still developing? Be specific.
- Make connections between what you studied in Professional Selling, including the International Sales Role Play, with other marketing courses you have taken. Make specific references to your work in this class and in the other courses. How did what you learned in the other courses enhance what you learned in this class?
- In what other situations can you apply the material learned in this course?
- Reflect on how you thought about the other culture before you started the course and how you think about it now that the International Sales Role Play is over. Have any of your assumptions or understandings changed? Why? What influenced this change?
- What aspect(s) of the International Sales Role Play made you want to learn more about [specific topic]? Why?

Potential International Role Play Rubric

Greeting	Below Expectations	Meets Expectation	Exceeds Expectation
• Use Buyers Name			
• State Your Name			
• State Company Name			
• “Thank you for meeting...”			
• Verify that xx minutes is still ok			
Rapport & Transition	Below Expectations	Meets Expectation	Exceeds Expectation
• Use Info from Fact Finding/Approach			
• Easy and Smooth Conversation			
• Confirm Buying Decision Maker			
• State Agenda for the Meeting			
• Ask Buyer’s Goals for the Meeting			
Needs-Assessment	Below Expectations	Meets Expectation	Exceeds Expectation
• Ask a Confirming Question			
• S – Asked Situational Questions			
• P – Asked Problem Questions			
• I – Asked Implication Questions			
• N – Asked Need Payoff Question(s)			
Features and Benefits	Below Expectations	Meets Expectation	Exceeds Expectation
• Discussed Relevant Features			
• Utilized Appropriate Visual Aids			
• Quality of Visual Aids/Evidence			
• Interpreted Features as Benefits			
• Gained Agreement through Trial Close			
Objections and Closing	Below Expectations	Meets Expectation	Exceeds Expectation
• Clarified Objection(s) Appropriately			
• Used Appropriate Handling Technique(s)			
• Confirmed Objection(s) No Longer an Issue			
• Calculate and Explain Pricing			
• Utilized Proper Negotiating Technique(s)			
• Use Appropriate Closing Technique(s)			
• Appropriate Concluding Remarks/Actions			
Miscellaneous			
• Friendly Demeanor			
• Controlled Nervousness			
• Maintained Appropriate Eye Contact			
• Appropriately Dressed/Well Groomed			
• Minimal Filler Words/Good Flow			
• Effective Listening Skills			
• Appropriate Non-Verbal Communication Relative to Cultural Differences			
• Appropriate Adjustment for Language and Cultural Differences			

Comments: _____

