

# Suggestions For Successfully Establishing A University Selling Center

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## ABSTRACT

*The authors describe the multiple benefits a university selling center offers to students, faculty members, administrators, and the general business community. The seven essential steps in first establishing a university selling center are addressed: find a champion, obtain the support of administration, find a white knight, establish a board of advisors, develop a mission, develop a facilities and technology plan, and develop the sales curriculum. In discussing these steps, the authors present both their experiences and discuss the literature in these areas. The authors also discuss what one should do after the selling center is established and future needs that a selling center might address.*

**Keywords:** Sales center, Selling center, Sales education, Selling program, Selling faculty

Recruiting and retaining good salespeople is critical to the long-term success of most organizations. In recent years, more and more businesses have begun looking to college campuses for their sales recruits. For example, the Center for Business and Industrial Marketing at Georgia State University reports that 75 percent of its marketing undergraduates go into sales careers (Simon, 2006). In fact, a recent study by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) found that 30 percent of the job offers made in the 2004-2005 school year to undergraduate students nationwide were for sales positions (Simon, 2006).

Faced with such high demand, universities across the U.S. are beginning to focus more on sales education. In fact, over the past decade several universities have established academic centers focusing on sales education. By establishing a center, these universities have demonstrated a commitment to dedicating resources, including faculty, facilities, and finances to sales education. This commitment to sales education translates to graduates that are better prepared to succeed in a sales career. Further, the establishment of a center signals to the business community that the university is committed to sales education, which often attracts more recruiters to campus. Finally, selling centers are often seen as an excellent outreach vehicle for interaction with the business community that often results in additional sources of external funding.

Of those Colleges of Business accredited by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), approximately thirteen currently have selling centers. More than half of these have emerged within the past seven years. The purpose of this manuscript is to help others that may be contemplating establishing such a center. Thus, in this paper we will first describe the benefits of having a university selling center, then we will describe in detail how one can get started in building a university selling center through describing seven essential steps, then we will discuss what one should do after the selling center is established and future needs that a selling center might address.

## BENEFITS OF A UNIVERSITY SELLING CENTER

A university selling center offers benefits for students, faculty members, administrators, and the general business community. For the students, the center offers the potential for a better sales education, which should give them a distinct advantage in the marketplace. In its simplest form, a university center indicates a focused effort in a certain area. Selling centers tend to have faculty and facilities that are focused on sales education and sales research.

As a result, selling students obtain an educational experience that includes a solid grounding in the principles of selling, exposure to the latest sales theory and research, and opportunities for hands-on selling skills development.

For faculty the university selling center offers the opportunity to focus their teaching, research, and outreach activities in the sales arena. The dedicated technology and facilities provide the sales faculty teaching resources that enhance the teaching experience. Further, the fact that recruiters are seeking out their students often provides the faculty research and consulting opportunities. Finally, the outreach efforts of the selling center can often lead to external sources of funding that may aid research efforts.

For administrators, the benefits include opportunities for visibility in the business and university community, the ability to better meet the needs of the business community through more professionally trained graduates, and the chance to showcase the teaching, research, and service activities of their sales faculty. Finally, the presence of a university sales center benefits the business community by providing outstanding candidates for sales positions. The presence of a selling center tends to attract sales recruiters to campus. The Hilti Corporation is a typical example of a company that has decided to focus its sales recruiting efforts on universities that have selling centers (Simon, 2006, p. 42). As a national recruiter for Hilti states, “Students from those schools have a complete understanding of the sales cycle and how to deal with customers. They have a very good understanding of the technology involved in selling and managing client, and are far above where a normal marketing student might be (Simon 2006)”. Furthermore, these additional sales recruiters visiting campus benefit students as they provide an expanded list of potential employers. Thus, the benefits of establishing a selling center tend to outweigh the costs in time and effort.

## **HOW TO GET STARTED BUILDING A UNIVERSITY SELLING CENTER**

In this section, seven essential steps in creating a selling center are presented. These seven steps should be viewed as interactive, not sequential steps. In discussing these steps, both personal experiences and the literature are described.

### **Find A Champion**

The first step in creating a university selling center is identifying a faculty member who has a strong passion for sales education. Establishing and building the center will most likely take a long sustained effort. Much like a product manager in a marketing organization, the center will need a key faculty member that will take this project on his or her shoulders and assume responsibility for making it happen. This faculty member must be willing to devote considerable time and energy to the task. Unfortunately, not just any faculty member has the skills or temperament for such an endeavor. Not only must this faculty be willing to take on this responsibility, she or he must be able to “sell” the selling center concept both to key internal and external constituents. Internally, the center champion will have to be able to effectively sell the center concept to colleagues and administration. Externally, the center director will need to be able to sell the center concept in the business community.

One of the authors of this manuscript has effectively served the center champion role at one university and as a result has been hired to build a selling center at a second university. In both cases, the challenges of building the center has been quite consuming over a sustained period of time. The first center required three years to build from the initial concept phase to approval of center status at the university level. In most instances, after the selling center is established, the champion is asked to assume the director role for at least the first few years of the center’s existence. In this case, the author served as the center director for the next four years until another faculty member was developed to take over that role. In other words, the center consumed a significant portion of this author’s efforts for approximately seven years. Such a commitment could easily detract from research and other important aspects of the academic career. As a result, we strongly recommend that any faculty member contemplating a lead role in a center development process should wait until after the tenure hurdle has been successfully crossed.

### **Obtain The Support Of Administration**

A selling center cannot be built overnight. Administration must be willing to support the individual leading this effort. Thus, obtaining buy-in and commitment from university administration is an essential element in the center development process. Commitment from administration often comes in the form of course release time, summer support, and secretarial support. A well-developed proposal that sells the selling center concept is an essential element in obtaining administrative support. This proposal should vividly detail the potential benefits that administration, students, and faculty will receive as a result of the selling center's establishment and operation.

In establishing the first sales center, the author often found himself selling the concept idea to whoever would listen. On any given day, he could be found presenting the benefits of the proposed selling center to a host of key players ranging from dean of the college to the university foundation president to business leaders or the local Rotary club. Often, these meetings resulted in little to no tangible support. Just as the professional salesperson needs the emotional maturity to stay positive in the face of negative results in a sales encounter, he needed to stay positive through the ups and downs of this process that seemed incredibly slow at times. Our experience has been that internal administrative support comes quickly once the center's potential to attract external support has been demonstrated to administration. Evidence of this potential to raise external support can take many forms, such as letters of support from business leaders and alumni, or an increase in the number of sales recruiters visiting campus. Perhaps the best evidence of this potential to attract external support is actual donations from external sources. In our experience, even relatively small donations from external sources offer evidence to administration that the center has the potential to become an important source of external funding.

### **Find A White Knight**

Building a center requires a commitment of resources that is seldom readily available internally. The existing sales centers have tended to look to external sources for funding. In some cases, this funding has come from a group of executives that are willing to provide funds to build the center and at least partially fund its continued operations. These sponsors are vital in supporting a selling center (Cabellero, 1989). Often, these executives are also asked to serve in an advisory role with a center. In other cases, the center is able to obtain its initial and at least a portion of its on-going funds through center activities. For example, the Center for Professional Sales at Kennesaw State University has been able to obtain considerable funding through its sales role-play competition.

In other cases, this external funding has come in the form of a large gift to the university. These gifts tend to come from alumni, due to their emotional ties to the university, or successful salespeople, due to their emotional ties to the sales profession. The late Russ Berrie was an example of such a businessperson. Mr. Berrie built his career, which resulted in heading a Fortune 500 corporation, around the selling function. Mr. Berrie decided to "give-back" to the sales profession by establishing the Russ Berrie Institute for Professional Sales at William Paterson University with a multi-million dollar donation. Demonstrating the ability to obtain outside funding often helps gain the support of the university administration.

At most universities, the faculty champion will be involved in almost all aspects of the center development effort, including fund raising. Additionally, the faculty champion often has the same teaching and research expectations that they had before they beginning the center development effort. Therefore, the faculty champion must be very circumspect with his or her use of time or can easily become spread too thin. Fund raising is one of the areas that can take up a considerable amount of the faculty member's time. As a result, it is very important that fund raising should be approached with an effective and efficient strategic fund raising plan.

At the author's first center start-up funds were primarily obtained through a fund raising campaign lead by the faculty champion and a retired sales executive that served in the white knight role for the center. The first step in the fund raising effort was deciding whom to approach for support. To that end, a decision was made to focused fund raising efforts on organizations that were already friends of the university (i.e., organizations that tended to hire our graduates, or make donations to our programs), and/or organizations that offered great potential for supporting

our center (i.e., organizations with large professional sales forces, organizations that offered grants to support educational programs). Using these criteria, a list of potential donors was developed. The next step was deciding how to approach these organizations. In order to make that decision, input was requested from several key individuals, including the dean of the school of business, the director of the university's foundation, the director of development for the university, and alumni affairs. Using this input, we were able to design an approach that was tailored for the specific organization. For example, alumni affairs was often able to suggest alumni we could use as our first contacts at certain targeted organizations. Further, alumni affairs or development could often provide information on key interest areas of that alumnus. Essentially, we found it helpful to know as much as possible about the organization and the individual prior to making contact. For example, one organization we approached had often hired our graduates. We approached that firm by asking for insights on how our graduates were performing. That initial discussion led to other meetings in which we solicited feedback on the relevancy and completeness of our sales curriculum. Finally, we asked the key individual at the organization to join our center's board of advisors and to make a contribution to the center's start-up campaign. While this may appear to be a lengthy process, we found it more effective to focus on relationship building prior to actually asking for financial support.

### **Establish A Board Of Advisors**

All thirteen of the existing selling centers have a board of advisors primarily selected from the business community. At Baylor University, this advisory board consists of individuals known for excellence in the field of sales and who can provide input regarding the mission of the program in terms of teaching, industry dialogue, and research (Caballero, 1989). An advisory board's central purpose is to provide business-oriented perspective and insight. As these insights can be helpful throughout the center development process, it is important to establish the board as early as possible in this process. To illustrate, the board can offer valuable insights into the relevancy and completeness of the existing and proposed sales curriculum. These insights could also be very beneficial in creating the center's mission. The potential contribution of the board can be maximized by selecting members that bring needed expertise or resources. For example, the technological design of the selling center could certainly benefit from the expertise of a board member from the technology industry. It is important to remember that in the long run, the board may become the primary outreach and fund-raising arm of the center.

Our experience indicates that along with their many benefits, board members often bring certain added demands on the center. For example, in today's competitive business environment, organizations are constantly looking for ways to move faster. With such a fast-paced perspective, the academic world can seem to move at a very slow pace. For example, waiting a year for a center proposal to be approved or for a new course to move through curriculum committees can be highly frustrating to someone from the business community. A key to maintaining the board members' interest during these long processes is keeping them informed through newsletters, seminars, and board meetings. Of course, each of these activities takes time away from other center activities as well as the faculty's traditional teaching, research, and service activities.

Additionally, care must be taken in selecting board members from differing stages of their careers. For example, a national vice president of sales for a large corporation may lose interest in a board that includes a variety of entry-level salespeople or local sales recruiters. On the other hand, if handled with care, this arrangement may prove beneficial to all parties involved. Obviously the entry-level salesperson or the local sales recruiter can learn from this interaction with a successful senior executive. Conversely, the senior executive may feel stimulated by this opportunity to help others in the developmental stages of their careers.

### **Develop A Mission**

While all the selling centers are focused on enhancing aspects of the sales discipline, a review of the missions of the thirteen university sales centers displays a variety of programmatic missions. For example, several of the centers see their missions as contributing to the sales discipline by focusing almost entirely on undergraduate sales education. Others tend to focus more on graduate education, while others tend to focus on industry sales training efforts. To be successful, it is important that the center have a clearly defined mission.

A good mission statement should clearly and concisely describe the selling center's reason for existence (Ferrell and Hartline, 2005). This mission statement needs to describe what the selling center stands for and its basic operating philosophy (Ferrell and Hartline, 2005). A mission statement should address five elements or questions: "who are we, who are our customers, what is our operating philosophy (beliefs, values, ethics, etc. . .), what are our core competencies or competitive advantages, and what are our concerns as they relate to our employees, our community, society in general and our environment (Ferrell and Hartline, 2005, p. 25)."

An example of a good mission statement for a selling center is Baylor University's:

- To provide specifically focused interaction between the institution and the business community's interest in professional selling.
- To assure excellence in the teaching of the professional selling curriculum.
- To provide functionally based, broad, high quality academic experience.
- To be a resource for information related to professional selling to the university family, business, and the community at large (Caballero, 1989, p. 55).

This mission statement addresses who they are, who are their stakeholders, what are their competencies, and what are their concerns.

The author found developing the mission for the selling center to be quite challenging. Since he was essentially the person driving the center's development process one could argue that the center's mission could simply be a codification of his vision for the center. In fact, while other faculty appeared interested in the center, it was often difficult for them, given their teaching, research, and service requirements, to find the time to become involved in center planning efforts. We found it important to involve other faculty in the planning for at least two reasons, however. First, the center cannot be successful in the long run with only one committed faculty member. For long run viability, the center champion must find ways to motivate other faculty to become involved in the center and its activities. We found getting other faculty involved in the mission development stage to be an excellent means of giving them a sense of ownership in the center. Additionally, creating a center requires a very focused long-term effort by the faculty champion. Such a focus can have the negative effective of limiting one's view of possibilities. We found that involving others in developing the mission to be a very healthy process in which multiple views by those not so close to the process tended to enhance the final product.

### **Develop A Facilities And Technology Plan**

Facilities can help or hinder the activities of the selling center. All thirteen of the university sales centers have dedicated facilities for sales training that include labs for individual and group role-play sales calls and presentations. Several centers have their facility layouts on their websites. It is important to consider where ones' sales program is today, and where one wants it to be in the future in designing facilities. For example, as previously discussed, the role-play sales call is a fundamental aspect of a sales education program. The number of role-plays that can be incorporated in the educational experience is constrained by the facilities available. Thus, the number of students in sales classes, both today and future expectations, should factor into the design of the facilities.

The technology built into the center can also facilitate or constrain center activities. The center's technology plan should be designed around the selling program's current and potential future needs. For example, several of the older selling centers were built around the use of videotape for capturing role-plays and other student presentations. Unfortunately, videotape equipment is becoming an obsolete technology. As a result, some of the earlier centers are now in the process of updating their labs and their equipment (Simon, 2006). Additional considerations in developing facilities is the need for one-way mirrors so observation can take place, micro-computers with sales-related software, a sales library of materials (Caballero, 1989; Simon, 2006), and conference room facilities accessible to an observation room (Anonymous, 1996).

In planning our sales center facilities, we started by asking colleagues from other sales centers what changes they would make in their facilities. We then attempted to integrate these recommendations into the center

technology and facilities design. For example, the sales lab director for one sales center commented that his sales labs did not have adequate soundproofing. As a result, the videos created during role-play sessions did not have the desired sound quality. He explained that renovation of the labs with the necessary soundproofing was cost prohibitive. Since we were in the design phase, including additional soundproofing was a minor expense.

To design the center's technology plan we used cross-functional teams that included sales faculty who knew their educational needs and technology experts who understood new developing technology. For example, the new Center for Excellence in Sales and Sales Management at Georgia Southern University is being designed with the latest digital recording technology. By using digital technology, the role-plays and presentations will be captured digitally and immediately placed on a streaming server. Each student video will be assigned a unique Internet address (URL). By visiting that URL students and faculty can view the student presentation on any computer that is tied to the Internet. This design eliminates any dependence on videotape or any removable media. It also provides two important additional benefits. First, the digital equipment is far less expensive than the equipment often used in earlier sales centers. For example, the digital equipment in each sales lab essentially consists of a dedicated personal computer, web enabled digital camera, and microphone. This equipment does not require a control room as needed in previous generations of analog equipment. Second, this system is easier to operate making it more user friendly for students and faculty.

### **Develop The Sales Curriculum**

Selling students need a complete understanding of the sales cycle and dealing with customers (Simon 2006). To deliver such an educational experience, it is important that students have the opportunity to receive a well-designed sales curriculum. The Professional Society of Sales and Marketing Trainers recommend that a university sales program consist of at least three unique selling courses. Those three courses are often an introductory sales course, an advanced sales course, and a sales management course (Caballero, 1989). Potential additional courses that could be included in a sales curriculum include account and relationship management (Simon, 2006), time management, and so forth.

It is not just enough to teach the concepts involved with these courses, hands-on reality-based experiences in which students can develop sales skills (Caballero, 1989) and sharpen what they have learned in the classroom is also vital (Weeks, Filion, and Luna, 1997). Role playing has been an effective sales training tool for sales organizations for many years and universities need to also utilize this tool as it aids students in developing needed skills, such as problem solving and interactive communication (Robinson, 1987; Weeks, Filion, and Luna, 1997). "Role playing gives students an opportunity to learn to think of, and implement, new strategies and new ways of making old strategies work (Weeks, et al., 1997, p. 68)". Widmier, Loe, and Selden (2007) discuss in detail how to utilize role-playing to teach selling skills.

In the role-play sales interaction, students assume the role of a seller or buyer in a sales encounter. The student playing the selling role enters the role-play with basic information about the buyer's company. The student playing the buying role enters the situation with the same information supplemented with additional guidance that may range from a general personality type they are to project to specific objections they are to raise during the role-play. By making these encounters as realistic as possible, students are taught to handle various types of situations they may encounter in real sales calls. Additionally, the ability to watch a video of their performances enhances the benefits of this learning experience. To incorporate the videotaped role-play in a university sales class, however, requires dedicated equipment and space. For example, the initial investment in technology for role-play facilities at several of the university sales centers has exceeded \$100,000 (i.e., William Paterson University, Kennesaw State University, Baylor University). Each of the university sales centers has at least one dedicated sales lab affording students the opportunity to perform multiple role-plays over their courses of study. The advantage of these dedicated facilities is obvious in the fact that selling center programs have dominated the team and individual awards over the history of the National Collegiate Sales Competition, an annual national university sales role-play contest. This is critical as the National Collegiate Sales Competition is a valuable recruiting resource for companies searching for the best prospects for sales positions (Loe, 1999; Strout, 2000).

Curriculum development is another area in which it is helpful to get other faculty involved. In fact, without the support of other faculty, curriculum changes will often die in departmental or college curriculum committees. Additionally, the selling center's advisory board may play a useful role in evaluating the curriculum for currency and relevance (Simon, 2006). Finally, it is important for the center director to attend every curriculum committee meeting through the approval process. The center champion is normally the person closest to the curriculum issues and, thus, should be in the best position to address any questions or concerns that may arise in the process.

#### **AFTER THE CENTER IS ESTABLISHED**

Once the selling center is founded, a first order of business should be seeking membership in the University Sales Center Alliance (USCA). The USCA is an organization of university selling centers that was formed to provide assistance to universities that were looking to build sales programs and to provide some commonality between university selling programs associated with selling centers. The USCA brings many benefits to its member universities ranging from research opportunities to enhanced national visibility. Companies look to recruit graduates from sales programs affiliated with the USCA (Simon, 2006).

Joining the USCA as an associate member is a first step toward full-membership in the organization. USCA associate member centers are allowed to send a representative to an annual USCA meeting and afforded valuable guidance in areas ranging from curriculum development to fund raising ideas. Full membership in the USCA requires a) formal acceptance of the center by the university's upper administration, b) the existence of an external board of advisors, and c) certification by the Professional Society of Sales and Marketing Trainers (SMT). SMT certification assures that member universities meet certain standards that are thought to be necessary to providing a quality sales education experience. The certification requirements focus on many areas of center operations, ranging from maximum class sizes to a minimum acceptable level of sales experience for the faculty. Complete details on the Professional Society of Sales and Marketing Trainers certification are available at the SMT website ([www.smt.org](http://www.smt.org)).

A new center is typically confronted with two immediate needs. First, unless a large donor has been located, the center will often need to find an external source of funding for its programs and activities. Continual financial support is vital for the success of a center. Second, the center will need to plan a series of programs and activities that support its mission. Some centers have been able to create activities that both support the center's mission and produce operations funds. For example, the H.H. Gregg Center for Professional Selling at Ball State University holds an annual sales only career fair that brings approximately 80 companies to campus to recruit selling students. Each company pays \$250 to recruit, so the revenue helps support the on-going activities of the center. As another example, each year approximately 50 universities send some of their best selling students to the National Collegiate Sales Competition (NCSC) at Kennesaw State University. Sponsorship from more than forty companies helps support the competition and the on-going programs and activities of the center. These companies serve as sponsors in order to get exclusive access to the career fair held during the competition (Simon, 2006). Other centers have worked to develop programs and activities that require little to no funding. For example, the newly created center at Georgia Southern University holds a lecture series and a local sales competition modeled after the NCSC with minimal funding.

The effort to seek funding and create programs and activities can be seen as a balancing act. Most center programs and activities require operational funds. Usually, this means that someone from the center, often the center director, will need to raise those operational funds. In fact, care must be taken or the fund raising itself can become the center director's primary responsibility.

Additionally, a selling center may choose to participate in a variety of additional activities including Executive-in-Residence programs, career fairs, internship opportunities that may include college credit, Pi Sigma Epsilon Sales and Marketing fraternity, sales research, sales competitions, and developing promotional materials to inform others about the center (Caballero, 1989). An Executive-in-Residence program would involve leading sales executives to visit the school for a several day time period to talk with classes, conduct seminars, and meet with both faculty and students (Caballero, 1989). A career fair would involve representatives from a variety of organizations

to discuss jobs and career opportunities both in formal interview settings as well as informal meetings and class presentations (Caballero, 1989). Several sales competitions exist giving students and universities a chance to compete on the basis of their students' selling skills. The benefits and uses of selling competitions are discussed in detail in Weeks, Filion, and Luna (1997). Finally, it is important for a selling center to be able to communicate with students, faculty, administrators, and business people its activities and successes.

### **FUTURE NEEDS FOR A UNIVERSITY SELLING CENTER**

Once a selling center is established and is able to meet students' educational, faculty research, and the business community's needs, it is important to see how the center can further encourage sales as a career. This can be done in a variety of ways. First, is encouraging future students to seriously look at sales as a potential career. For example, Baylor University utilizes a videotape targeted to high school students to illustrate that selling is something we all do (Caballero, 1989). Second, the selling center needs to determine if and how its curriculum could be enhanced and if establishing a degree in sales is a possibility; currently only four universities per the 2004-2005 Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business questionnaire offer a degree in sales, and none offer a masters degree that specializes in selling (Simon, 2006). Third, the selling center needs to determine how it can improve selling skills for current sales people such as through seminars for alumni and local sales people (Anonymous, 1993). Additionally, sales programs can develop modules for use by corporations for training sales employees (Corwin, 1997). Fourth, a selling center needs to extend its reach beyond the immediate geographical area to target students and businesses in other areas (Anonymous, 1993). This reach could include preparing students for an international selling career through a better understanding and experiences with other cultures, languages, and selling practices (Weeks et al., 1997). This could be done through international sales competitions (Weeks et al., 1997) or through a sales exchange program with an international university (Simon, 2006).

Next, selling centers need to determine how they can best utilize their corporate partners. This could include utilizing sales executives as guest instructors, utilizing corporate sales training materials in the classroom, and coaching and mentoring sales students (Simon, 2006).

Finally, once the center is up and running, it needs to continually seek ways to improve. To that end, selling centers need to periodically assess their strengths, weaknesses, and impact. This assessment should begin with goal setting in key mission-driven areas such as, size of student enrollment, graduate job placements, financial support for the center, and, perhaps most importantly, student learning. The next step in the assessment would entail measuring current performance in these key areas. The final step would be formulation of plans for improvement in any areas found lacking.

### **CONCLUSION**

This manuscript has described the multiple benefits a university selling center offers to students, faculty members, administrators, and the general business community. With the growing need for professional salespeople, and so many of our graduates entering the job market in sales positions, the need for selling centers will only increase. However, creating a selling center is no small task. This paper has offered insights into the process of establishing a university selling center and offered suggestions for successfully accomplishing this task. Specifically, seven essential steps in first establishing a university selling center have been addressed: finding a champion, obtaining the support of administration, finding a white knight, establishing a board of advisors, developing a mission, developing a facilities and technology plan, and developing the sales curriculum. Additionally, suggestions have been given for guiding the center once it has been established. It is our hope that these suggestions ease the process for others that take on the challenge and opportunity of creating a selling center.

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NOTES