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Destructive Selling: An Empirical View from the Perspective of University Level Business Students

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Abstract - Preliminary evidence indicates that salespeople working in a variety of industries hold the perception that destructive selling (defined as the intentional use of unethical tactics including lying, misrepresenting product/service performance, misleading the client, spreading rumors about the competition, etc. by professional salespeople) does occur in the professional selling discipline. A rich history of related research provides further evidence that university students exhibit negative perceptions and attitudes towards professional selling. In the work reported in this manuscript, the authors employed the survey research method to empirically study the perceptions held by university level pre-business and business students regarding the presence of destructive selling tactics in the world of professional selling. Results indicated that respondents believed that both B2B and B2C professional salespeople are intentionally engaging in destructive selling behaviors and tactics and that some firms are training their salesforces in the use of those tactics. Implications, limitations and future research avenues are presented.

Key Words - Professional Selling, Student Perceptions, Destructive Selling

Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and/or Marketing Practitioners – Findings revealed that between 50% and 75% of the surveyed sample of pre-business and business students perceived that some professional salespeople belonging to both B2C and B2B firms engage in a variety of destructive sales behaviors including lying about their products as well as competitors' products. Marketing and sales educators may be advised to re-evaluate their focus and emphasis when teaching sales and sales management courses and to consider further emphasizing the benefits of constructive ethical sales behaviors on the part of sales professionals.

Introduction

Late in the Fall of 2017, during a presentation to some 350 sophomore level university students, each of whom had indicated a strong interest in majoring in business, the

following question was posed to the audience: “How many of you are considering a career in professional selling?” Not surprisingly, albeit disappointingly, a grand total of 4 students raised their hands. Further discussion revealed that students described professional selling/salespeople using such words/phrases as dishonest, pushy, selling unwanted products, conniving, manipulative, and more.

Such responses are not surprising given the generally dubious portrayal of professional sales people in the popular media. Indeed, for the most part, for decades the sales profession has often been depicted in a less than flattering light in movies and television shows. From Arthur Miller’s classic 1949 play - ‘Death of a Salesman’ and the 1980 film ‘Used Cars’ to the more recent ‘Tommy Boy’ (1995), ‘Boiler Room’ (2000), ‘The Goods: Live Hard, Sell Hard’ and ‘Love and Other Drugs’ (2010), and the popular ‘Mad Men’ television series (2007 – 2015), salespeople have been portrayed as dishonest, unethical and, as Hair et. al (2009) wrote ‘sleazy’ (p. 30). Such portrayals, coupled with other factors, have undoubtedly colored student perceptions of the professional selling discipline (Dubinsky, 1980; Bright et. al., 2005; Fine, 2007; Waldeck et al., 2010). A rich stream of research shows that, for a variety of reasons, university students tend to hold distinctively negative views of salespeople and the profession. Swenson et. al. (1993) cited work from Sales Management in the 1960s documenting that only 1 in 17 male college students was willing to try selling (p. 51). Bristow et al. (2006a, 2006b) documented that university students tended to view the sales profession negatively and salespeople as less than honest and trustworthy. Spillan, Totten, and Ziemnowicz (2007) continued the work on students’ negative perceptions of professional selling and cited a long list of related studies. Pettijohn and Pettijohn (2009) noted ‘while sales positions are readily available to college graduates (and MBAs), a problem exists: attitudes toward sales are not always positive’ (p. 36).

Preliminary evidence shows that the ‘negative attitude’ toward professional selling extends beyond the university and permeates the selling discipline itself. Ongoing research by the authors of this manuscript has shown that such perceptions may indeed hold merit. A series of focus groups with business-to-business professional salespeople and sales managers revealed the strongly held perception that some salespeople, across a variety of industries, are intentionally engaging in unethical sales practices. Based upon language and terms used by the focus group participants, those sales practices and tactics have been labeled as ‘destructive selling’ which, again based upon examples used by the focus group participants, include lying, misrepresenting product or service performance, over promising regarding delivery times, spreading false rumors about competitors, and more. Such tactics are destructive in terms of hindering the creation of and/or maintenance of long term buyer/seller exchange relationships and harmful to hiring efforts in the sales arena. A survey of additional sales professionals provided further evidence that the participating salespeople held the perception that other sales professionals were purposefully employing destructive selling tactics in the field.

With such findings in mind, the presence of the negative attitudes university students hold toward professional selling at both the Business to Business (B2B) and Business to Consumer (B2C) levels, while perhaps understandable, is unfortunate. Research by

Stevens and Kinni (2007) showed that up to 80% of all university level marketing majors and as many as 70% of all business school graduates will spend at least a portion of their careers in the field of professional selling. Further, Spillan et al. (2007) concluded that the professional sales discipline provides the initial point of entry into the workforce for many business students.

Further, the demand for sales professionals remains strong and is predicted to remain so (Cummins et al., 2013). Selling Power Magazine (2017) noted that the top 200 sales firms in America will seek to hire over 500,000 new salespeople each year. As reported by the U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics (2017), the demand for college educated sales professionals is predicted to increase through 2024.

In their attempts to meet the ongoing and growing demand for college educated professional selling candidates, corporations in virtually all B2B and B2C settings view colleges and universities as primary recruiting grounds for the brightest and best sales candidates (Bristow, Gulati and Amyx, 2006; Nachanani, 2007; Pettijohn and Pettijohn, 2009). And colleges and universities are responding with added emphasis on professional selling and sales management as part of their curricula (Bolander, Bonney and Satornino, 2014; Titus et al., 2017).

In those curricula, as well as in virtually every university sales/sales management textbook, the importance of trust, integrity and honesty in successful, long-term selling relationships is touted. In sales and marketing classrooms across the world, educators emphasize trust-based professional selling and devote significant time and energy to the topic of ethical and honest selling.

Despite those efforts, the negative attitude university students continue to exhibit towards professional selling is well documented. That documentation, coupled with new evidence of the intentional practice of destructive selling tactics and the ongoing demand for college educated sales professionals, provided the impetus for the current study.

The Study

The study examined student perceptions of the intentional use of destructive selling tactics by professional salespeople. Based upon terms, phrases and examples provided by sales professionals who participated in a series of focus groups, destructive selling has been defined in this study as: The intentional use of deceit, misrepresentation, lying, falsehoods (pertaining to competitors, product/service portfolios, delivery times, product performance), damaging rumors, etc., as a professional selling tactic or strategy.

Method

The survey research method was used to investigate the primary research question in the study: "What perceptions do university level pre-business (students who have not declared

a business major but who have indicated a strong interest in doing so) and business students hold toward the intentional use of destructive selling tactics by professional salespeople?"

The survey instrument employed in the study was a modified version of a questionnaire previously used to assess the perceptions professional salespeople exhibited towards destructive selling techniques and the use of those techniques by other salespeople. The paper-and-pencil questionnaire included 21 statements, written in a six-point Likert format with endpoints ranging from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (6). Each statement, along with several demographic items, was pilot tested with 36 undergraduate university students representing a variety of business majors. The piloting procedure indicated no problems with the clarity of the items nor with the ability of the students to understand the statements and to respond to the statements via the Likert scales. All data were collected in regularly scheduled classroom sessions and the instructor of record for each course was not present in the classroom when the data were collected. During each data collection session, students were informed that their participation in the study was voluntary, that all participants would remain anonymous and that all data would be reported in aggregate form only. Study participation instructions (see Appendix A) were included on a cover sheet attached to the questionnaire and those instructions, including definitions of B2C and B2B professional selling, were also read aloud to all students. Students were encouraged to carefully read and respond to each statement included on the questionnaire and were reminded that their candid, honest response to each statement was the best response. Finally, upon completion of the questionnaire by all participants in each class session, the respondents were debriefed regarding the purpose of the study.

Participants

The overall sample in the study consisted of 658 business and pre-business students in a Midwestern university. A total of 338 students completed the survey instrument that asked questions/presented statements regarding business-to-consumer salespeople (hereafter referred to as the B2C survey), and 320 students responded to the survey that inquired about student perceptions regarding business-to-business (referred hereafter as the B2B survey) salespeople. As depicted in Table 1 the entire sample included 287 (44.0%) female students, 61 students (9.3%) had completed or were enrolled in sales classes, and a not-insignificant percentage (24.6%) of all respondents indicated that they had experience working in either B2B or B2C professional selling. The total sample consisted of pre-business students and students from all business majors offered (Accounting, Entrepreneurship, Finance, General Business, Information Systems, Management and Marketing) in the university where the study was conducted, with the highest percentage of respondents belonging to the Marketing (23.5%) and Finance (21.1%) majors. The ethnic breakup of the student respondents was representative of the business student body

at that university. Table 1 also presents this information for the two sub-samples corresponding to the B2C and the B2B surveys. In both sub-samples, the demographic break-up of participants approximated that of the overall sample.

Table 1: Participant Demographics

Demographic Variable	Total Frequency (%)	B2C Sub-Sample Frequency (%)	B2B Sub-Sample Frequency (%)
Gender			
Female	287 (44.0)	142 (42.5)	145 (45.5)
Male	366 (56.0)	192 (56.8)	174 (54.5)
Sales Class Exposure			
Yes	61 (9.3)	33 (9.8)	28 (8.8)
No	597 (90.7)	305 (90.2)	292 (91.3)
Professional Selling Experience			
Yes	158 (24.6)	100 (30.1)	58 (18.7)
No	484 (75.4)	232 (69.9)	252 (81.3)
Class Standing			
Freshman	124 (19.1)	65 (19.6)	59 (18.6)
Sophomore	82 (12.6)	39 (11.8)	43 (13.5)
Junior	200 (30.8)	108 (32.6)	92 (28.9)
Senior	241 (37.1)	119 (36.0)	122 (38.4)
Graduate	2 (0.3)		2 (0.6)
Academic Major			
Accounting	85 (12.9)	39 (11.5)	46 (14.4)
Finance	139 (21.1)	73 (21.6)	66 (20.6)
General Business	43 (6.5)	30 (8.9)	13 (4.1)
Information Sciences	42 (6.4)	20 (5.9)	22 (6.9)
Management	70 (10.6)	37 (10.9)	33 (11.0)
Marketing	155 (23.5)	77 (22.8)	78 (26.1)
Entrepreneurship	19 (2.9)	8 (2.4)	11 (3.4)
Non Business	59 (8.9)	29 (8.6)	30 (9.4)
No Major	46 (7.0)	25 (7.4)	21 (6.6)
Ethnicity			
American Indian	5 (0.8)	2 (0.6)	3 (0.9)
Asian	132 (20.2)	61 (18.3)	71 (22.3)
Black/African American	46 (7.0)	24 (7.2)	22 (6.9)
Native Hawaiian / Pacific Islander	2 (0.3)	1(0.3)	1 (0.3)
White	433 (66.3)	231 (68.3)	202 (63.3)
Hispanic or Latino	9 (1.4)	3 (0.9)	6 (1.9)
Other	26 (4.0)	12 (3.6)	14 (4.4)

Note: Table 1 contains valid percentages, totals may differ due to nonresponses.

Results

In order to learn more about student perceptions of destructive selling, statistical analyses were conducted across 7 different categories of investigation.

1. Student Perceptions of the Intentional Use of Destructive Selling Tactics by Both B2B and B2C Salespeople.

Table 2 reflects the level to which respondents agreed or disagreed with statements related to the existence of destructive sales behaviors by B2B/B2C salespeople. As the distribution of responses across various statements in both sub-samples were similar, the study reports the combined results of descriptive analyses conducted on both sub-samples. As Table 2 depicts, approximately 70% (n = 460) of the entire sample agreed, to a lesser or greater extent, that destructive selling tactics are used intentionally by some salespeople to discredit competition, approximately 75% (n = 490) of respondents perceived that some B2B/B2C salespeople intentionally distort factual information, and 65% (n = 420) of respondents believed that some professional salespeople lie to their customers about the performance of their products/services. Consistent with these negative perceptions held by the student sample toward B2B/B2C salespeople, approximately 50% (n = 333) of the sampled respondents perceived that some salespeople are dishonest about delivery times for their products/services. Additionally, a substantial number of the sampled students also believed, to a lesser or greater extent, that some B2B/B2C salespeople lied to their customers about (1) performance of competitors' products/services (73%; n = 479); (2) delivery times for competitors' products/services (59%; n = 390), and (3) used rumors as a tactic to undermine competition (65.6%; n = 430). The sampled students also agreed that professional salespeople were more likely to tell lies on a sales call as a "last resort" tactic (61.65; n = 405).

Table 2: Perceptions of Destructive Sales Behaviors of Salespeople

Some B2B/B2C salespeople ...	Strongly Disagree n (%)	Disagree n (%)	Somewhat Disagree n (%)	Somewhat Agree n (%)	Agree n (%)	Strongly Agree n (%)
... intentionally use destructive selling tactics to discredit their competition	20 (3.0)	60 (9.1)	116 (17.6)	218 (33.0)	167 (25.3)	75 (11.4)
... intentionally distort factual information in order to gain advantage	26 (4.0)	41 (6.2)	101 (15.3)	194 (29.5)	193 (29.3)	103 (15.7)
... lie to their customers about the performance of their products/services	30 (4.6)	86 (13.1)	111 (16.9)	186 (28.3)	147 (22.4)	97 (14.8)
... lie to their customers about delivery times for the products/services they sell	45 (6.8)	123 (18.7)	156 (23.6)	156 (23.6)	105 (15.9)	72 (10.9)
... lie to their customers about the performance of the products/services sold by competitors	22 (3.4)	42 (6.4)	113 (17.2)	196 (29.9)	180 (27.4)	103 (15.7)
... lie to their customers about delivery times for the products services sold by competitors	33 (5.0)	90 (13.7)	144 (21.9)	192 (29.2)	136 (20.7)	62 (9.4)
... use rumors as a tactic to undermine the competition	22 (3.3)	63 (9.6)	141 (21.5)	180 (27.4)	178 (27.1)	72 (11.0)
... are more likely to tell lies on sales calls as a "last resort" tactic	32 (4.9)	75 (11.4)	145 (22.0)	174 (26.5)	156 (23.7)	75 (11.4)

2. Student Perceptions of the Use of Destructive Selling Tactics by Market Leader Salespeople.

Student sample perceptions regarding destructive sales behaviors of B2B/B2C salespeople working for industry market leaders were also revealing (see Table 3). Approximately 39% (n = 258) of the respondents disagreed, to a lesser or greater extent, that such salespeople were less likely to tell lies on sales calls, and approximately 35% believed that such salespeople were (a) more likely to use rumors to undermine competition, (b) more likely to lie about the performance of their products/services, and (c) not less likely to lie about the delivery times of their products/services. Approximately 40% (n = 264) of the respondents perceived that salespeople representing market leaders in their industries were more likely to lie about the delivery times for their products/services, and approximately 45% (n = 290) tended to disagree that such salespeople were less likely to dissemble about delivery times for competitors' products/services. In sum, Table 3 indicates that, although still negative, student perceptions regarding the use of destructive selling tactics by salespeople belonging to market leader firms were somewhat less severe.

Table 3: Perceptions of Destructive Sales Behaviors of Industry Market Leaders

B2B/B2C salespeople who represent market leaders in an industry are ...	Strongly Disagree n (%)	Disagree n (%)	Somewhat Disagree n (%)	Somewhat Agree n (%)	Agree n (%)	Strongly Agree n (%)
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... less likely to tell lies on sales calls	29 (4.4)	67 (10.2)	162 (24.7)	155 (23.7)	169 (25.8)	73 (11.1)
... more likely to generate rumors to undermine the competition	52 (7.9)	198 (30.2)	174 (26.6)	147 (22.4)	62 (9.5)	22 (3.4)
... more likely to lie about the performance of their products/services	70 (10.7)	183 (28.0)	177 (27.1)	144 (22.1)	61 (9.3)	18 (2.8)
... less likely to lie about the delivery times for the products/services they are selling	19 (2.9)	70 (10.7)	136 (20.8)	175 (26.8)	171 (26.1)	83 (12.7)
... more likely to lie about the performance of the products/services sold by competitors	46 (7.0)	165 (25.2)	180 (27.5)	158 (24.1)	87 (13.3)	19 (2.9)
... less likely to lie about the delivery times of the products services sold by competitors	20 (3.1)	82 (12.5)	188 (28.7)	156 (23.9)	159 (24.3)	49 (7.5)

3. Student Perceptions of Company Provided Training In, the Effectiveness of, and the Frequency of the Intentional Use of Destructive Selling Tactics.

Responses to statements relating largely to student sample perceptions regarding training, effectiveness, and frequency of occurrence of destructive selling behaviors by B2B/B2C salespeople are depicted in Table 4. As this table reports, a majority of the sampled respondents felt that (a) commission only B2B/B2C salespeople are more likely to use destructive selling tactics (86.8%; n = 503); and (b) some firms train their salespeople in the use of destructive selling practices (57.4%; n = 376). A majority of the sample did disagree, to a lesser or greater extent, with the idea that using destructive selling tactics is an effective practice (58.7%; n = 385). However, it is notable that approximately 41% of the student sample perceived that destructive selling tactics were effective. A majority of the respondents perceived that (a) the use of destructive selling tactics is a common occurrence (57.9%, n = 376) (b) the frequency of use of destructive selling tactics is on the rise (56%; n = 367), and (c) salespeople use such tactics to create doubt about competition (73.3%; n = 426). And finally, students tended to agree that less experienced salespeople were more likely to use destructive selling tactics (54.4%; n = 354).

Table 4: Destructive Selling Behaviors: Perceptions Regarding Training, Effectiveness, Frequency

Statements:	Strongly Disagree n (%)	Disagree n (%)	Somewhat Disagree n (%)	Somewhat Agree n (%)	Agree n (%)	Strongly Agree n (%)
Commission-only B2B/B2C salespeople are more likely to use destructive selling tactics	13 (2.0)	41 (6.3)	98 (15.0)	136 (20.8)	192 (29.3)	175 (26.7)
Some firms train their B2B/B2C salespeople to use destructive selling tactics	42 (6.4)	90 (13.7)	147 (22.4)	202 (30.8)	112 (17.1)	62 (9.5)
Using destructive selling tactics is an effective sales practice for B2B/B2C salespeople	142(21.6)	101(15.4)	142 (21.6)	148 (22.6)	79 (12.0)	44 (6.7)
The use of destructive selling tactics by B2B/B2C salespeople is a common occurrence	21 (3.2)	80 (12.3)	172 (26.5)	229 (35.3)	112 (17.3)	35 (5.4)
The frequency with which B2B/B2C salespeople use destructive selling tactics is increasing	16 (2.5)	93 (14.3)	178 (27.3)	202 (31.0)	125 (19.2)	38 (5.8)
B2B/B2C salespeople use destructive selling tactics to create doubt about their competitors	5 (0.8)	55 (8.5)	113 (17.4)	220 (33.9)	189 (29.1)	67 (10.3)
Less experienced B2B/B2C salespeople are more likely than more experienced B2B/B2C salespeople to use destructive selling tactics	47 (7.2)	93 (14.3)	157 (24.1)	146 (22.4)	144 (22.1)	64 (9.8)

4. Demographic Comparison of Student Perceptions of Destructive Selling Tactics.

To further explore student perceptions, analyses were conducted by evaluating potential differences in student perceptions by (a) major, (b) exposure to sales course(s), and (c) self-reported professional selling work experience. Due to the existing evidence that marketing majors are likely, at some time in their careers, to be engaged in professional selling, each sub-sample (B2B and B2C) was further divided into two groups, marketing majors and all other majors taken together. Pair-wise t-tests were conducted to assess differences, if any, in responses of these groups to statements in the survey. Table 5 presents results that were statistically significant at $\alpha = 0.05$. Group means on the various statements reveal that although both groups held the perception that salespeople use destructive selling tactics, perceptions on the part of the marketing majors were less severe on 6 statements in the B2C sub-sample. Specifically, marketing majors disagreed to a greater extent than other respondents that (a) using destructive selling tactics is an effective sales practice ($t = -4.284$; $p = 0.000$); (b) the use of destructive selling tactics by salespeople is a common occurrence ($t = -4.291$; $p = 0.000$); and (c) some firms train their salespeople to use destructive selling tactics ($t = -2.034$; $p = 0.043$). Additionally, marketing majors agreed to a lesser extent than other student respondents that some salespeople lie

to their customers about their products' performance ($t = -3.034$; $p = 0.003$). And Table 5 depicts that marketing majors in the B2C sub-sample agreed to a greater extent than all other respondents that "market leader" salespeople are less likely to tell lies (a) on sales calls ($t = 2.755$; $p = 0.006$); and (b) about their delivery times ($t = 1.984$; $p = 0.048$).

Table 5 also depicts that marketing majors differed from other respondents on 8 statements regarding destructive selling behaviors/tactics by B2B salespeople. Marketing majors disagreed to a greater extent than other respondents that (a) using destructive selling tactics is an effective sales practice ($t = -2.405$; $p = 0.018$); (b) the frequency with which B2B salespeople use destructive selling tactics is increasing ($t = -2.423$; $p = 0.016$); and (c) some firms train their salespeople to use destructive selling tactics ($t = -2.218$; $p = 0.027$). Additionally, marketing majors agreed to a lesser extent than other student respondents that some salespeople lie to their customers about (a) their products' performance ($t = -2.768$; $p = 0.006$), (b) performance of competitors' products/services ($t = 2.815$; $p = 0.005$), and (c) delivery times for competitors' products/services ($t = -2.443$; $p = 0.15$). Finally, Table 5 depicts that marketing majors in the B2B sub-sample also disagreed to a greater extent than other students that B2B salespeople (a) are more likely to tell lies as a "last resort" tactic ($t = -2.487$; $p = 0.013$) and (b) who represent market leaders are more likely to generate rumors to undermine competition ($t = -2.754$; $p = 0.006$)

Table 5: Significant Differences in Perceptions (Marketing Majors Versus All Others)

Statements (B2C sub-sample):	Marketing Major n (mean)	All other majors n (mean)	t-statistic (sig.: 2-tailed)
Some B2C salespeople lie to their customers about the performance of the products/services they sell	77 (3.69)	260 (4.20)	-3.034 (0.003)
B2C salespeople who represent market leaders in an industry are less likely to tell lies on sales calls	77 (4.27)	259 (3.80)	2.755 (0.006)
B2C salespeople who represent market leaders in an industry are less likely to lie about their delivery times	76 (4.20)	259 (3.90)	1.984 (0.048)
Some firms train their B2C people to use destructive selling tactics	77 (3.42)	258 (3.77)	-2.034 (0.043)
Using destructive selling tactics is an effective sales practice for B2C salespeople	77 (2.44)	259 (3.29)	-4.284 (0.000)
The use of destructive selling tactics by B2C salespeople is a common occurrence	77 (3.21)	256 (3.84)	-4.291 (0.000)

Statements (B2B sub-sample):	Marketing Major n (mean)	All other majors n (mean)	t-statistic (sig.: 2-tailed)
Some B2B salespeople lie to their customers about the performance of the products/services they sell	78 (3.42)	242 (3.53)	-2.768 (0.006)
Some B2B salespeople lie to their customers about the performance of competitors' products/services	78 (3.76)	242 (4.23)	-2.815 (0.005)
Some B2B salespeople lie to their customers about delivery times for the competitors' products/services	78 (3.47)	242 (3.88)	-2.443 (0.015)
B2B salespeople are more likely to tell lies as a last resort	78 (3.54)	242 (3.96)	-2.487 (0.013)
B2B salespeople who represent market leaders in an industry are more likely to generate rumors to undermine the competition	78 (2.69)	242 (3.13)	-2.754 (0.006)
Some firms train their B2B people to use destructive selling tactics	78 (3.36)	242 (3.74)	-2.218 (0.027)
Using destructive selling tactics is an effective sales practice for B2B salespeople	78 (2.69)	242 (3.19)	-2.405 (0.018)
The frequency with which B2B salespeople use destructive selling tactics is increasing	77 (3.39)	241 (3.77)	-2.423 (0.016)

5. The Influence of Sales Course Enrollment/Completion Upon Student Perceptions of Destructive Selling Tactics.

To explore the potential influence of exposure to sales courses at the college level upon student perceptions of destructive selling, the study conducted additional analyses by dividing each sub-sample (B2B and B2C) into those respondents that had exposure to at least one sales course and those that did not have such exposure. Table 6 presents the results of the pair-wise t-tests conducted to evaluate such differences. Remarkably, except for 2 statements (see Table 6) there were no statistically significant differences in student perceptions regardless of whether they had exposure to one or more sales courses in the B2C sub-sample. In the B2B sub-sample, however, students who had exposure to sales courses did differ in their perceptions regarding destructive selling tactics on 6 statements. Specifically, students with sales course exposure disagreed to a greater extent than did other students with the following statements: (a) that using destructive selling tactics is an effective sales practice ($t = -5.07$; $p = 0.000$); (b) that use of destructive selling tactics is a common occurrence ($t = -2.21$; $p = 0.028$), (c) that the frequency with which salespeople used destructive selling tactics is increasing ($t = -4.01$; $p = 0.000$); (d) that “market leader” salespeople are more likely to generate rumors to undermine competition ($t = -3.59$; $p = 0.001$); (e) that “market leader” salespeople are more likely to lie about the performance of their products/services ($t = 2.85$; $p = 0.005$); and (f) that “market leader” salespeople are more likely to lie about the products/services of competitors ($t = -2.90$; $p = 0.004$).

Table 6: Differences in Perceptions (Students With/Without Sales Course Exposure)

Statements (B2C sub-sample):	Sales Course n (mean)	No Sales Course n (mean)	t-statistic (sig.: 2-tailed)
Using destructive selling tactics is an effective sales practice			

for B2C salespeople	32 (2.03)	304 (3.20)	-4.15 (0.000)
The use of destructive selling tactics by B2C salespeople is a common occurrence	32(3.28)	301(3.74)	-2.12 (0.035)
Statements (B2B sub-sample):	Sales Course n (mean)	No Sales Course n (mean)	t-statistic (sig.: 2-tailed)
B2B salespeople who represent market leaders in an industry are more likely to generate rumors to undermine the competition	28 (2.43)	292 (3.08)	-3.59 (0.001)
B2B salespeople who represent market leaders in an industry are more likely to lie about the performance of the products/services they sell	28 (2.36)	291 (3.05)	-2.85 (0.005)
B2B salespeople who represent market leaders in an industry are more likely to lie about the performance of the products/services sold by competitors	28 (2.54)	292 (3.24)	-2.90 (0.004)
Using destructive selling tactics is an effective sales practice for B2B salespeople	28 (1.75)	292 (3.20)	-5.07 (0.000)
The use of destructive selling tactics by B2B salespeople is a common occurrence	27 (3.19)	289 (3.69)	-2.21 (0.028)
The frequency with which B2B salespeople use destructive selling tactics is increasing	28 (2.82)	290 (3.76)	-4.01 (0.000)

6. The Impact of Professional Selling Work Experience on Student Perceptions of Destructive Selling Tactics.

Table 7 presents the results of pair-wise t-tests conducted to evaluate potential differences in perceptions of students that (a) reported having professional selling work experience, and (b) those that did not report having such experience. Except for one statement (see Table 7), analyses conducted with the B2B sub-sample did not yield any statistically significant differences in the responses to various statements included in the survey. Student groups in the B2C sub-sample did differ on 4 statements. Specifically, students with sales experience disagreed to a greater extent than students without such experience that (a) “market leader” salespeople are more likely to lie about the performance of their products/services ($t = -3.45$; $p = 0.001$); (b) “market leader” salespeople are more likely to lie about the performance of competitors’ products/services ($t = -2.44$; $p = 0.015$); and (c) the use of destructive selling tactics is a common occurrence ($t = -2.27$; $p = 0.024$). The group that reported sales work experience exhibited a greater degree of agreement with the statement that destructive selling tactics were more likely to be used by commission-only salespeople ($t = 2.31$; $p = 0.022$).

Table 7: Differences in Perceptions (Students With/Without Sales Experience)

Statements (B2C sub-sample):	Sales Course n (mean)	No Sales Course n (mean)	t-statistic (sig.: 2-tailed)
B2C salespeople who represent market leaders in an industry are more likely to lie about the performance of the products/services they sell	100 (2.64)	230 (3.14)	-3.45 (0.001)
B2C salespeople who represent market leaders in an industry are more likely to lie about the performance of the	99 (2.98)	232 (3.34)	-2.44 (0.015)

products/services sold by competitors			
Commission-only B2C salespeople are more likely to use destructive selling practices	100 (4.84)	232 (4.48)	2.31 (0.022)
The use of destructive selling tactics by B2C salespeople is a common occurrence	99 (3.46)	231 (3.78)	-2.27 (0.024)
Statement (B2B sub-sample):	Sales Course n (mean)	No Sales Course n (mean)	t-statistic (sig.: 2-tailed)
Commission-only B2B salespeople are more likely to use destructive selling practices	57 (4.72)	252 (4.33)	2.086 (0.038)

7. The Effect of Class Standing on Student Perceptions of Destructive Selling.

ANOVA was conducted to explore if class standing (freshman, sophomore, junior, senior, graduate) influenced student perceptions regarding the use of destructive selling practices. The mean scores indicated, that in general, students who had a higher class standing, i.e, juniors and seniors, were less negative in their perceptions of salespeople, and perceived that destructive selling tactics were used to a lesser extent. Due to the lack of statistically significant findings, this paper does not report the specifics of these results.

Discussion and Implications

Study findings revealed that between 50% and 75% of the surveyed sample of pre-business and business students perceived that some professional salespeople belonging to both B2C and B2B firms engage in a variety of destructive sales behaviors including lying about their products as well as competitors' products. Between 35% and 45% of the sampled students also believed that B2B/B2C salespeople with firms that are dominant in their industries (market leaders) also engage in destructive selling behaviors. A majority of the sampled students perceived that destructive selling behaviors are common, on the rise, and that firms train their salespeople in such tactics. And more than 40% of the sampled students perceived that destructive selling tactics are effective selling tools. Although approximately 62% of the respondents believed that lies were likely a "last resort tactic" and that less experienced salespeople were more likely to engage in destructive selling tactics, in sum, we conclude that the sampled business students held generally negative perceptions of salesperson behaviors as they related to the existence and extent of destructive selling tactics employed by those salespeople. Acknowledging the limitations of the study (see below), a generalization of these findings to the entire business student population raises some important considerations for educators.

Business students are more likely than other college graduates to progress towards business-oriented careers which would likely include direct/indirect involvement with sales professionals. Further, a significant number of business students will have the opportunity to pursue and enter into sales and sales-related careers. Bearing these eventualities in mind, marketing and sales educators may be advised to re-evaluate their focus and emphasis when teaching sales and sales management courses and to consider

further emphasizing the benefits of constructive ethical sales behaviors on the part of sales professionals.

That people hold negative perceptions toward sales as a career is definitely not something new and this study acknowledges that academicians and businesses have worked diligently for decades to change such perceptions. What the study results emphasize, however, is that there remains a long way to go in that effort and that serious consideration should be given to evaluating the marketing and sales curricula to more proactively engender realistic perceptions of the sales profession.

Marketing students, as compared to other business students, are more likely to engage directly with salespeople in their careers. Also, these students are likely to have a heightened awareness and knowledge of marketing related professions, including sales and sales management related professions. This was partially borne out in the finding that, as compared to non-marketing majors, marketing majors (who are required to take at least one professional selling course and many of whom complete a total of 3 sales courses in the curriculum at the university where this study was conducted) seemed to hold more positive perceptions of sales behaviors overall as revealed by the mean response scores across all statements relating to destructive selling tactics. Table 5 highlights that, based on pair-wise analysis ($\alpha = .05$), marketing students tended to exhibit less negative beliefs regarding the existence and extent of destructive selling practices across several statements. Even considering a family-wise $\alpha = 0.0024$, marketing students disagreed to a greater extent, than did non-marketing majors, that using destructive selling tactics was an effective practice for salespeople and that the use of destructive selling tactics was a common occurrence.

Further, study findings revealed that exposure to one or more sales courses had the effect of improving related student perceptions. That is, sampled students that had such exposure tended to disagree to a greater extent, than did those without such exposure, regarding the extent and existence of destructive selling tactics. At the family-wise $\alpha = 0.0024$, sampled students with sales course exposure disagreed to a greater degree that the use of destructive sales tactics was rising and that using destructive sales tactics was an effective way to sell. However, this effect was found only in the B2B condition.

Although the study findings did indicate the existence of more positive perceptions as they relate to the existence and extent of destructive selling tactics across selected statements for (a) sampled marketing students, and (b) sampled students that had sales course exposure, by and large, sampled students perceive that destructive selling tactics are used by professional salespeople. And there may be several reasons for such perceptions including, but not limited to, communication in the popular press, media commentaries, movies and television shows, existing salesperson stereotypes, and unfortunate personal and work experiences with professional salespeople.

To the extent that negative perceptions prevent a potential hire from pursuing a career in sales, firms looking to hire promising individuals lose out. And that is why firms currently put efforts towards, and should endeavor to (a) build ongoing partnerships with educational institutions, (b) promote business, sales, and marketing related student

fraternities, and (c) actively lend their resources to in-class instruction, etc. in addition to providing business students with mentorship and internship opportunities.

Limitations and Conclusions

This study was conducted using a cross-sectional pre-business and business student sample from one Midwestern university, so any generalization of the perceptions held by the student sample in this study to other business students may be limited. Also, the demographic mix of students at the sampled university may not hold true for other universities. Further, depending upon a variety of factors, including various professional selling cultures, courses and programs at other universities, student perceptions of destructive selling may differ from those exhibited in this study. As such, researchers are encouraged to replicate the study at other universities.

This study highlights that, although efforts by firms and sales educators has done much to improve the reputation and credibility of the sales profession, individuals involved with this profession continue to face negative stereotypes and perceptions. And to the extent that some firms and/or salespeople may engage in destructive selling tactics, both educators and firms should strive to provide salesforce training with an emphasis on the use of honest and ethical sales tactics, decisions and behavior by the salespeople of tomorrow.

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Appendix A

Student Instructions

Hello and thank you for agreeing to help us with this important and timely research. Our work focuses on professional business-to-business (B2B) salespeople and business-to-consumer (B2C) salespeople who have been defined as follows:

Professional B2B salespeople are individuals who make their living by selling goods or services to businesses. For example, a B2B sales representative working for Coca Cola might sell Dasani bottled water to Coborn's Grocery stores. The relationship between professional B2B salespeople and their clients is designed to be built upon mutual, long term benefit to both.

Professional B2C salespeople are individuals who make their living by selling goods or services to consumers. For example, a B2C sales representative working at Hollister's Clothing in the mall might sell you a pair of jeans for your own wearing enjoyment. The relationship between professional B2C salespeople and their clients is designed to be built upon mutual, long term benefit to both.

According to existing literature, **destructive selling** has been described as professional salespeople intentionally using sales tactics which include lying about product/service delivery times, distorting the facts about the salesperson's own products/services, using rumors to discredit the competition, intentionally distorting factual information to gain competitive advantage, etc.

In order to learn more about this phenomenon, we are asking you to share with us your perceptions of the use of such tactics in the professional selling discipline.

As you complete the questionnaire, we ask that you keep the following in mind:

1. If you are under 18 years of age, please do not participate in the study.
2. For those of you 18 years of age or older, your participation in this research is voluntary and there are no penalties if you choose not to participate in the study. If you decide not to participate, simply hold onto your questionnaire and it will be collected with all the other questionnaires at the end of this session.
3. Your responses to this questionnaire will remain anonymous and all responses will be reported in aggregate form only. Do not put your name or any self-identifying marks on your questionnaire.
4. We realize that you are busy and as such we have attempted to keep the questionnaire very short. It should take you no more than 7-10 minutes to complete.
5. It is important that you complete the entire questionnaire but if you become uncomfortable responding to the statements you can end your participation in the study at any time.
6. There are no 'right' or 'wrong' responses to the statements/questions to which you'll respond. Your candid responses are the best responses;

7. If you have questions, please contact Dr. _____ at (e-mail address here). I'll do my best to provide answer to your queries.