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Roberta J. Schultz  
*Western Michigan University*

David J. Good  
*Grand Valley State University*

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# The Sales Entrepreneur: A New Generation of Challenges and Opportunities

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Roberta J. Schultz and David J. Good

The underlying purpose of the sales organization is to generate income. While the source of clients often varies among selling situations, creating opportunities in a changing environment remains a constant challenge. Reacting to marketplace needs, successful sales organizations must create and maintain methods that retain and grow revenue streams under a variety of dynamic marketplace conditions. For example, in an effort to foster better outcomes, marketers increasingly rely on technology related tools (Agnihotri, Rapp, & Trainor, 2009) as selling strategies have become more focused on relational building efforts (e.g., Jiang et al., 2010). Yet, the complexity of emerging

marketing tools has made it more difficult for sellers to manage their strategic arsenal.

Because the charge of management typically remains to create and maintain economic strength, lowering costs has become a valued organizational commodity (Baumann, 2009), as pressures make it operationally unrealistic to spend excessive amounts to capture or retain clients. As a result, a great deal of attention is being directed toward creative ways to capture and retain clients. For instance, marketers direct efforts toward enhancing existing relationships (Wathne, Biong, & Heide, 2001) since long-term connections often translate into higher economic returns (e.g., Triest, Bun, Raaji, & Vernooij, 2009) and it typically costs less to maintain clients than to obtain new ones (Peppers, Rogers, & Dorf, 1999; Reicheld & Sasser, 1990). In such an environment, it becomes incumbent on the seller to initiate selling strategies that embrace competitive, sustainable methods that differentiate one seller from another. Such a foundation provides

the premise of this study, which focuses on how a sales organization can cultivate such a unique strategy base. Specifically, this article discusses how incorporating an entrepreneurial orientation (Lumpkin & Dess, 1996) within the selling unit can foster a marketplace advantage. This discussion will also include a presentation of the advantages and challenges of sales professionals incorporating an entrepreneurial outlook as part of the selling strategy.

## **Having an Entrepreneurial Orientation**

While still limited in applications, the notion of an individual or organization being entrepreneurial has grown in exposure in recent years, with an army of applications emerging from the literature. For example, discussion of entrepreneurs has expanded to include such activities as seeking creative sources to borrow money (Jean, 2010), generating networking groups among women (Wu, 2010), and developing the medical supply business

Roberta J. Schultz, Ph.D., is associate professor of marketing, Western Michigan University, Grand Rapids, MI 49503.

David J. Good, Ph.D., is professor of marketing, Grand Valley State University, Grand Rapids, MI 49504-6495.

(Lynn, 2007). Interestingly however, discussions continue to mostly focus on start up situations and small business applications (e.g., Townsend, Busenitz, & Arthurs, 2010), with little dialogue addressing strategic applications of being entrepreneurial. In the context of this concern, the premise of this article is to discuss integrating an entrepreneurial orientation to sellers.

Lumpkin and Dess (1996) initially gave life to a perspective known as an entrepreneurial orientation (EO). This perspective notes differences between entrepreneurial actions and underlying processes that encourage such activities. As a cornerstone in understanding entrepreneurial perspectives, there is evidence to suggest businesses engaging in an entrepreneurial orientation can expect superior performance (De Clereq, Dimov, & Thongpapanl, 2010; Pearce, Fritz, & Davis, 2010). An EO includes being aggressive, innovative, proactive, accepting risk taking, autonomy, and problem solving. A basic tenant of the EO perspective therefore, is that being entrepreneurial is not the result of a single issue, quality, or action. Instead, it reflects a combination of factors that must mesh within a workable organizational framework that produces an integrated synergy.

For instance, as a part of this, innovation reflects being able to discover new methods, processes, and

ideas (Amabile, Bacharach, & French, 1996) to face opportunities and overcome problems an orientation that is often characterized as forward-looking (Lumpkin & Dess, 1996) in the pursuit of emerging opportunities. Consistent with this approach, Mullins (2009) recently called for entrepreneurs to start a “new business model,” viewing the application of entrepreneurial skills with a wider lens. Salespeople like entrepreneurs need to discern exploitable opportunities (Jones, Morris, & Rockmore, 1995; Stevenson & Jarillo-Mossi, 1990), as the very nature of the entrepreneurial activity is to become proactive and take advantage of situations (Poe, 1995; Tobin, 1995) and marketplaces (e.g., Li & Li, 2009).

Another key dimension of an entrepreneur is that of autonomy, which refers to the independent action of an individual or a team in bringing forth an idea or a vision and carrying it through to completion, designed to be self-directed in the pursuit of opportunities (Lumpkin & Dess, 1996). Again, consistent with individuals who choose sales as a career, autonomy is an important trait (Vecchio & Honeycutt, 2002) that transcends both entrepreneurs and salespeople.

Assertiveness is an important characteristic, as entrepreneurs have to accomplish required tasks (Stewart, Watson, Carland, & Carland, 1998) under difficult circumstances. Not

surprisingly, assertiveness and the ability to persuade are key qualities of salespeople (Meyer, 2009) demonstrated by the tenacity of sellers who despite rejection from some clients, do not become discouraged.

Entrepreneurs display unique qualities that enhance their ability to deal with difficult marketplace challenges. These qualities are consistent with those of selling professionals when incorporated into a larger organization. This article explores the evolution of the sales organization in adopting an entrepreneurial orientation, introduces the concept of a sales entrepreneur (SE), and addresses issues of why SE's will be utilized, how they are different from other salespeople, and benefits offered within highly competitive marketplaces.

## **The Sales Entrepreneur**

As previously noted, salespeople typically share common qualities consistent with having an entrepreneurial orientation. Hence, the premise of this article is that sales organizations should embrace, develop and seek sellers with an entrepreneur spirit and disposition, or as we call these individuals, the sales entrepreneurs.

The importance of an SE can be seen in advancements in marketing tools in recent years. For example, in an entrepreneurial application of technology the use of on-line banking has been found to be an effective method to build

and retain client relationships (Campbell & Frei, 2010) which is certainly a diversion from the traditional role of the bank teller. As demonstrated in this example, SE's are needed because marketplaces change, and the importance of adapting to these adjustments, and seeking new solutions is becoming a key role of modern day sellers.

The general premise of the sales professional remains overwhelmingly committed to obtaining sales performance goals (e.g., Verbeke et al., 2008). This basic responsibility of performance separates sellers engaged as SE's. Like other entrepreneurs, they need to be visionary, able to champion ideas, and be persistent in overcoming internal and external obstacles (Stewart et al., 1998), as well as have the unique ability to connect these qualities with a strong goal (e.g., quota) orientation which is unique to their direction, focus, and temperament. Because the intertwining of a formal sales process with assigned sales quotas generally produces higher results (Bistriz, 2009), the development of a sales organization that has an entrepreneurial perspective must be strategically crafted as part of the overall sales efforts. As a result, the SE must reflect a formally designed organizational process of intermixing the sales professional and the traditional entrepreneur in a competitive marketplace. Given that such an

orientation can be a source of competitive advantage (Pearce et al., 2010), upper management can influence its adoption within the firm (Simsek, Heavey, & Veiga, 2010) to improve performance (De Clereq, Dimov, & Thongpapanl, 2010; Pearce et al., 2010) and the sales organization is its perfect home.

The intermixing however of sales and entrepreneurial qualities can provide both organizational advantages and confusion. For instance, the emphasis of the SE is more specialized toward tangible, specific outcomes than traditional entrepreneurs. Traditional entrepreneurs typically seek innovative solutions to problems with fewer restrictions on the measurement of success. While solutions offered by traditional entrepreneurs in selling situations could be quite diverse, they may reflect esoteric aims that may not be directly linked to organizational gains. In contrast, if a firm uses SE's, they must work in a very results-oriented environment (the sales organization), where they must seek specific, measurable results that enhance the productivity of the organization in a measurable context. At the end of the year, the SE and the management staff must have specific measurable qualities in which to assess the position and progression of the individual.

Such differences suggest SE's offer conflicting views when assessing whether to encourage entrepreneurs in the sales organization. In

this context, Table 1 identifies positive individual traits (independent, creative, highly motivated, very customer oriented, rule reclusive, self defined, and success driven) for the SE, as well as the implications of employing such an individual.

As noted in Table 1, there are many important qualities of a sales entrepreneur particularly useful in competitive marketplaces. However, each of these conditions engenders conditions that need to be managed within sales to minimize organizational disharmony and to maximize outcome performances. These conditions are discussed below in more detail.

First, like the entrepreneur, the SE is typically an independent person. Driven by the need to individualize efforts and maximize their visions, SE's see objectives as more personalized, with less regard for organizational needs. Most selling positions require someone with the ability to operate in an organizational vacuum, receiving little direction from superiors (i.e., autonomy). While this can be a problem, properly channeled it creates the advantage of having salespeople who cherish limited supervision. If the sales organization assigns the SE tasks that do not require significant organizational interaction, the chance for success is increased in such an independent state. To be successful however, it is important the SE accepts the tasks he/she has been

**Table 1**  
**Traits and Organizational Implications of Sales Entrepreneurs**

<b>Entrepreneur Traits</b>	<b>Sales Implications</b>
Independent	Individualized efforts lead to strong salespeople. Seeks to pursue what he/she deems critical with strong will to succeed. May conflict with firm needs if seller believes organizational goals are misplaced. Independence allows commitment.
Creative	Sellers can discover new solutions and applications for customers. Needs freedom to explore new opportunities and applications. Reward system must support the ability to attempt new ventures (may need to be more behaviorally based, and not strictly outcome based).
Highly motivated	Driven to succeed. Major obstacle is ensuring individual and organizational goals mesh with minimal conflict. May need to communicate with sellers more systematically and individually.
Very customer oriented	Empathic to needs of others, can create strong client relationships, but potential for clashes exist. May override selling organization needs. Must be careful to ensure no client philosophy conflicts. Must create customer interactions within the boundaries of expected buyer-seller relationships.
Rule reclusive	Does what he/she believes is right. Because he/she works within framework of what he/she thinks is right, must be consistent with organizational needs and expectations.
Self defined	Craves autonomy, allowing for minimal supervision. Needs autonomy and ability to individualize position, but still requires sufficient oversight.
Success driven	Goal oriented. Create shared goals with clients and selling organization.

assigned to ensure these activities are consistent with  
 Since the nature of entrepreneurship rests with the pursuit of new opportunities (Messegem, 2003), management can anticipate SE's will have a need to be highly creative. For instance, SE's can explore extremely complex customer conditions that require

highly unique sales inquires and offerings, engaging in selling situations that demand creative customer solutions that might not be available to more traditional sellers. Under such conditions, the firm will have to construct compensation plans that reflect the uniqueness of such projects since the results may

demand efforts not easily evaluated in the short-term.  
 While all salespeople are expected to be internally motivated, the sales entrepreneur sees opportunity in a more personalized context, and sees successes/failures as their individualized responsibility. Internal motivation in this

environment is greatest when the SE is able to specifically apply his/her personal solution to the client's needs. This internal motivation in turn, becomes a strong underlying driving force to succeed. Under these conditions, the firm must ensure that the objectives of the firm and the individual reflect similar outcomes and needs. If the objectives of the SE are seen by the salesperson as being in conflict with the firm, the organizational goals will get less attention. In a worst case scenario, the SE would avoid working toward the accomplishment of the firm's objective. Hence, the role of management is to ensure consistent linkages between what the firm needs accomplished and the vision of the SE.

Because SE's seek to assist clients in very specialized situations, they can become very customer oriented and highly bonded with the customer and their specific objectives in a very unique relational connection. As a result, the SE can become incredibly strong relational sellers, creating robust long-term linkages between buyers and sellers. Overlapping the nature of relational marketing, it is possible under these conditions that SE's will become too customer socialized as they become wrapped up in an innovative type of sale that may benefit the customer at the cost of their own company. Management therefore needs to ensure that the SE retains buyer/seller equilibrium throughout the process.

The SE can be expected to operate to their vision of company standards and do what he/she believes is right which we are describing as rule reclusive. The advantage of this characteristic is that this role can be directed to a higher standard of excellence (very goal driven) if the framework is consistent with organizational needs and expectations. In contrast however, SE's can craft individualized positions that fit their perception of what is needed, and not management's vision. This means the organization may benefit from hiring these entrepreneurial types of salespeople, but they must be prepared for styles of management that accommodate the differences in supervision of the SE's yet still maintain the necessary level of control to meet their company objectives.

In addition the SE is typically self defined as craving autonomy. They prefer little supervision, but still require sufficient oversight to follow the company goals. They are also success driven which indicates they are goal oriented. They tend to create common goals between their own company and those of the customers.

The role of the sales entrepreneur (SE) goes beyond the view of the traditional salesperson. The SE is a salesperson responsible for integrating entrepreneurial actions, activities, and outlooks into the selling environment. This means the SE

encumbers the attitudes and desires of the entrepreneur, while retaining the responsibilities of the traditional salesperson. The utilization of an entrepreneurial perspective will be useful in enhancing marketplace positioning, client connections, selling tools and mechanisms, and any selling and support related activities that salespeople are required to perform. It is not however expected salespeople will actually assume the title of the SE, but instead assume and incorporate the vision and actions of the entrepreneur as part of this role.

### **The Sales Entrepreneur and Entrepreneurial Linkages**

The traditional sales environment is not completely conducive to the entrepreneurial orientation. The belief that one can be a marketer and entrepreneurial (Morris, Schindehutte, & LaForge, 2002) underscores that *simply* being entrepreneurial is not the same as being a salesperson. SE's will desire traditional entrepreneurial experiences such as proactiveness, risk-taking, aggressiveness, and being innovative (Lumpkin & Dess, 1996) which may be in conflict with the traditional sales function. Therefore the question arises, how can sales organizations develop sales appropriate skills, while ensuring the objectives of the selling organization remain in place? For

instance, how do you encourage sales professionals to prosper in an environment where having autonomy is critical (e.g., boundary spanning), while operating within selling boundaries (e.g., constant communication with sales managers)?

There are strategic advantages of blending entrepreneurial and sales activities. Similar to other functional demands, entrepreneurial selling provides a unique process that needs both separation and recognition (Weeks & Kahle, 1990) while representing a sales activity comparable to other types of market related actions. Hence, while marketing organizations might find it in their best interest to combine entrepreneurial and marketing activities (Morris et al., 2002), conflicts may arise through such a mutual inclusion. Thus, it is the differences in how sellers and entrepreneurs are seen and how they exist within the organization that limits opportunities to instill successful usage and growth.

### **Firms That Would Benefit from Sales Entrepreneurs**

There are styles, methods, and processes that underscore a firm's entrepreneurial actions (Stevenson & Jarillo-Mossi, 1990). The existence of entrepreneurs is typically environmentally specific, and as such, not all environments are entrepreneurial friendly. Many organizational

environments are not conducive to entrepreneurs, and just having a market orientation is not a sufficient motivator for marketers to capture opportunities (Matsuno, Mentzer, & Ozsomer, 2002). Underscoring a basic issue for the marketer, there must be organizational support for the entrepreneur to be successful as part of the strategic choice of the firm to embrace an entrepreneurial perspective. Opportunities for entrepreneurship therefore should be seen as a purposefully created situation (Van de Ven & Poole, 1995).

To reduce problems and to maximize economies of scale, many sales groups have become highly structured and bureaucratic, developing common training, hiring, sales techniques, and strategies. The consequence is that while sales managers need salespeople who are innovative and entrepreneurial, the very nature of the sales organization is increasingly working against entrepreneurs being employed and developed for the purpose of creating a marketplace differential advantage. While in practice it seems reasonable that a sales entrepreneur can be a positive asset, most selling structures suggest employing, growing, and retaining these individuals can be risky if they are not strategically and operationally embraced.

Entrepreneurs best succeed in an organization

with an entrepreneurial environment. Thus, to flourish within a sales organization, the role of the sales entrepreneur must be managerially supported. If management does not support such efforts, it is unlikely entrepreneurs could grow or survive in such a stagnated environment. Organizations such as those who regularly engage in new practices, and those who have clients who are supportive of new advancements, are best suited for developing and supporting sales entrepreneurs.

While advantages exist in having entrepreneurs in sales, there must be an examination of the strategic process as well as the position itself to ensure the usage of the SE is an appropriate strategic selling decision. Because of the positive relationship between entrepreneurship and performance (De Clereq, Dimov, & Thongpapanl, 2010; Pearce et al., 2010), having an entrepreneurial sales force may have rewarding results. Connections between entrepreneurship and strategic processes (Lumpkin & Dess, 2001) underscore that the creation of an entrepreneurial sales force can be a valued purposeful management choice.

### **Managerial Implications**

To determine if SE's are strategically appropriate, management needs to consider their organizational needs. Because differences

may exist, this is an area that needs close assessment prior to implementing entrepreneurs in the sales organization. Reasonable questions exist therefore as to how a sales organization can foster and create a sales entrepreneur to maximize the advantages of being entrepreneurial. Distinctions exist in the needs of a sales organization and an entrepreneur; these separations are identified in more detail in Table 2.

As noted in Table 2, differences exist between the needs of a sales organization and those of the SE. First, the sales organization is typically developed to provide different levels of management support. Sales professionals are often isolated from the firm, so internal mechanisms are necessary to ensure connections with the company. For instance, compensation systems are often structured to reward cooperative behaviors (e.g., team selling). It is expected salespeople and managers will embrace the directions provided via corporate policies (e.g., training). In contrast, Sales Entrepreneurs seek and embrace minimal organizational supervision. The SE operates to a large extent, as a self contained entity, and assistance is more selective. In essence, communication by SE's is seen as a single direction (upward), as they prefer to engage in independent decision making processes with minimal organization input.

Contemporary sales organizations are increasingly looking to teamwork to provide more integrative and expanded support. Creating marketing alliances has fostered situations where sales organizations are visualizing and enacting advantages in grouping selling synergies for additional power in dealing with vacillating marketplace conditions. In this quest, technology has been identified as a tool for cultivating more effective teamwork among marketers (Good & Schultz, 1997). The conflicting condition for the sales entrepreneur is that he/she operates in an individualized state, not relying on or desiring teamwork, or the tools that enrich its usage. Brought on by the desire to operate in a non-bureaucratic environment, the result is often a lack of sharing of key information and limiting of strengths that an individual can bring to the organization.

The most critical task of the sales organization is to provide sales performance (Good & Schwegker, 2001) which is usually measured routinely by sales quotas. Failure to meet the required outcomes may result in negative outcomes, including termination. In contrast, the sales entrepreneur performs activities that are not as easily measured (e.g., innovative sales proposals and account management). For instance, the SE may develop creative customer tools that enhance the client's productivity in the long-term but short-term

results may appear to be below selling standards.

Increased emphasis on performance (e.g., quotas) and centralizing organizational functional responsibilities suggests the reporting mechanisms of sales organizations need to reflect activities. For example, the increased usage and application of technology by marketers (Mohr & Shooshtari, 2003) has enhanced contact between management and field employees. The SE however, will avoid reporting mechanisms when possible. Not surprisingly therefore, sales organizations have increased needs for routine maintenance of activities, close supervision, and more centralized decision making processes. These needs reflect that sales management has an increased need for connections with the sales professional and more input on various activities. In contrast, the sales entrepreneur operates with a longer term framework, greater autonomy, and less management involvement in decision making and approvals.

A final difference that must be reconciled exists in measurement objectives. Salespeople are typically assessed on specific objectives (e.g., sales quotas), creating the driving question among most sales organizations that typically focuses on how sales results can be most productively generated. Marketers are interested in a variety of approaches to enrich sales productivity. The strategic methods sought most are those that create the



**Table 2**  
**Sales Organization Needs versus Sales Entrepreneur Needs**

<b>Sales Organization Needs</b>	<b>Sales Entrepreneur Needs</b>
Managerial supervision	Minimal Managerial supervision
Teamwork	Individualized efforts
Quotas/quantitative assessment	Measurement on qualitative components
Short term sales performance	Longer term sales performance
Managerial career path	Manager of individual efforts
Required reports	Minimal reports
Routine maintenance	Strategic maintenance
Supervision	Autonomy
Centralized (upward) decision approval	Decentralized (downward) decision approval

greatest amount of long-term revenue.

### **Conclusion**

Sales organizations have undergone a host of changes in recent years, as marketers expand the methods of strategically enhancing personnel. One of the natural organizational evolutions has been to reduce managerial levels, leaving salespeople more isolated, and separate from the mainstream of the firm. From this evolution, the increased utilization of salespeople as entrepreneurs seems to offer both advantages and concerns. The purpose of this article has been to explore a new type of professional, the sales entrepreneur. Accordingly, this article has addressed important issues critical to the incorporation of SE's within sales organizations.

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