

Preparing your sales course for Generation Z

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ABSTRACT

Generation Z, also known as Gen Z, are individuals born in the mid-1990s to 2010. They represent the newest group of college students and soon to be sales professionals (Schawbel 2016). This group is unique in how they have developed and in turn, how live their lives. They learn, communicate, and express themselves in very different manners compared to other generational groups. Unlike other generations, they seem to be an extremely entrepreneurial generation, driven by practicality and financial success (Zimmer 2015). Because they have become accustomed to simultaneous receipt of information from multiple sources, developing Gen Z's into sales professionals will require a variety of well-structured pedagogical methods and designed training processes.

Sales careers and other related occupations is expected to grow approximately 5% by 2024 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). GrowthPlay, a known researcher and developer of sales education, believes it is vital to focus on the upcoming generations (GrowthPlay 2015). It is essential that we realize that there is untapped energy and talent within these future sales professionals.

Keywords: Generation Z, Pedagogy, Professional Sales Education, Learning Theory

INTRODUCTION

According to Cespedes and Weinfurter, studies indicate that approximately \$900 billion is being spent on salesforces annually. This represents a significant portion of expenses associated with a typical firm's marketing strategy execution (Cespedes and Weinfurter, 2016). Moreover, in the United States it is estimated that organizations spend "\$20 billion annually (by conservative estimates) to train salespeople on products, selling skills, and territory management" (Zoltners, Sinha, and Lorimer, 2016 p.2). Sales education and training requires an understanding and ability to apply psychological, sociological, behavioral, economic, and communication principles. Students' sales training must lead them through the organizational buying process. If we are to develop Gen Z into sales professionals, we have to grasp the values, learning styles, and expectations expressed by this group. Therefore, we must be willing to modify sales instruction but align our strategies with expected outcomes in the marketplace.

A collegiate sales course is ideal to introduce the Generation Z student to the sales profession and develop selling techniques that will enable them to communicate and build relationships with business clientele. Effective sales people can be developed using very specific training methods that provide students with the opportunity to realize their potential skill set and gain confidence in their selling abilities. Utilizing various learning constructs like Metacognition, Scaffolding-Spaced learning, Project Based learning, and Constructivist learning theory allows the professional selling instructor to connect and develop sound pedagogy. It requires a systematic approach that creates a balance between purpose-built learning experiences and the challenge of sales production (GrowthPlay, 2015).

Generation Z Defined

There is a unique opportunity to develop the future salesforce and marketing professionals from this group. They have a much more global perspective that allows them to approach sales in a more culturally adept manner. Gen Z has the ability to develop sales contacts and build client relationships through a broader perspective (Jenkins, 2015). Throughout their lifetimes, Gen Z has been able to witness critical cultural change by means of considerable prosperity generated through technology, social connectedness, and newly emerging revenue streams. They are aware, involved, and value driven individuals.

Who is Generation Z? These individuals have been the most informed and influenced population within our society. They are fast-paced individuals, constantly identifying ways to express individuality in a more socially conscious world. They possess the ability to absorb information quickly and create quick evaluation of value. Much of their learning and communication skills are developed through constant technological bombardment and high-tech interactions with their peers and other people (Turner, 2015).

Generation Z measures success through the positive impact that is made on other people and improvement of life overall. Because Gen Z is inherently entrepreneurial, they are willing to take on risk for potential reward. Due to this trait, they are a generation that can create direct impact on their clientele by offering authentic and unique solutions.

The profession of sales offers the variety and freedom sought by this generation, while providing the structure and mentorship they desire. In addition, a good portion of Gen Z desires to take on leadership roles within an organization if viewed as valuable. They are a hard-working generation that is willing to put forth the effort needed to generate beneficial value for them and the world around them. (Robert Half, 2015).

This group naturally strives for personal connections. They want to participate and not be observers. Organizations are rewarded with Gen Z's loyalty and devotion when included as a potential participant. They recognize those organizations and develop relationships built through proven trust. Generation Z wants to see how their own beliefs and goals are being reinforced before buy-in takes place. In sales, they are motivated to be stakeholders and investors in the process not simply facilitators. According to Mary Lou Addor, "the level of stakeholder involvement increases when the goal of the project is information exchange; it increases further still when the purpose of the project is to provide recommendations and again when the outcome is agreement" (Addor, 2013 pg. 3). They thrive on collaboration and desire to provide their insight during strategic decision-making and planning processes.

These individuals have a desire to be taught through customized approaches and demand immediate access to authority figures in order to obtain feedback. They feel the need to differentiate themselves and have made major strides by seeking mentorship and guidance. Typically, they do respond well to individual evaluation but yet seek improvement to discover the best ways to be successful (Tulgan, 2013). Training techniques are crucial. To engage these overly digital natives, we need to create educational programming directed towards interactive experiences. Teaching strategies need to include small-group activities, games, and simulations. It is also essential to create group integrations that include functions of networking, peer-to-peer coaching, and collaborating with other people (GrowthPlay, 2015). Because Generation Z requires genuineness, they prefer to communicate through face-to-face conversations in business settings. They have the ability to develop keen listening skills will allow them to be in a better position to create unique solutions based on facts (Carson, 2015). Generation Z has the potential to become an impactful salesforce of the future due to their ability to learn new information quickly , present value driven solutions, and create an array of successful relationships during the process.

In order to create a workable teaching structure, instructors must recognize the importance of the above factors to influence Generation Z. Applying a variety of learning theories becomes necessary when developing specific pedagogy that develops the art and skill of professional selling. The following theories address first the underlying influences behind the adjusted training towards Gen Z followed by the most impactful practices used to address the teaching techniques desired by this generation.

Learning Theories Applied to Generation Z

Metacognition

This evidence-based learning theory identifies a procedural method that takes the student through a self-revelation of what they know and how well they know it. Ibahe and Jauregizar (2010) suggest that Metacognition directs the instructor to create a managed environment where they oversee activities that require students to behave in a certain manner in specific structured situations. It allows the students to assess their thoughts and actions throughout an educational program. Teaching procedures involve a variety of activities that require the student to model self-taught solutions and assessments. During the process, the goal is to have students continually develop new thoughts and measure how well they perform (Dunn et al., 2013).

The student participates in both formative assessments during the process and concludes with summative assessments at the conclusion of the educational experience(s). These assessments measure what the student should learn, what they have learned because of the educational experience, and provides an opportunity for the instructor to change or improve the pedagogical approach.

Scaffolding Spaced Learning

Spaced learning identifies that information is presented, repeated, and then after a time, repeated again to ensure retention and application. However, this strategy requires modification when delivering effective selling training. Within the selling environment, only a certain portion of information needs to be learned in a systematic manner. Competencies like prospecting and designed selling processes require systematic approaches. In this sense, spaced learning is appropriate while directing students through short practice sessions that enable them to have better memory and longer retention of these competencies (Dunn et al., 2013).

In addition, Scaffolding learning is a theory that provides opportunities for learners to engage in activities beyond their initial abilities. Each learner begins the learning process at various capability levels. Once a baseline is established, course design allows students to develop independently by creating reflective thinking and learning

skills (Jackson et al., 1998). Procedures will then change over time to reflect the acquisition of one skill and the advancement towards a more advanced level of that skill.

By combining these two learning theories, the instructor develops a series of planned activities intended to continually build competencies throughout a specific course. The series of activities are meant to reveal the students' capabilities in the beginning of the course and transition them through a projected elevation of skill-building processes. In essence, instructors are creating building blocks with a desired course-ending outcome. These building blocks rely on the achievement of a prior competency but continue to propel the student towards the same ending result.

Project Based Learning Theory

Though the origins of Project Based Learning are in the medical field, it has since been applied to many disciplines. The common issue to be solved through Project Based Learning is overcoming the concern that students do not remember what they have been previously taught, resulting in the inability to use the proper reasoning for future decisions (Hmelo-Silver et al., 2015). To overcome this issue, curriculum would be developed using student design, problem solving, and decision-making. More specifically, learning is achieved through a set of activities designed to test the ability of the student to work through particular organizational problems connected to trial-and-error processes.

All forms of instruction are built on the concept that people learn better from real-life or simulated real-life experiences. Being usually theme based or time based, these methods utilize the group setting. One variation of Project Based Learning is identified as Actor-Centered Learning. To develop this method of learning, actors are individuals that act because of views and perceptions of someone within an organization (Poell et al., 2009). In particular, this concept can be applied to the buyer or seller roles within sales education.

Constructivist Learning Theory

Within constructivist instruction, the student is directed through a series of experiences that drive them to develop or "construct" potential solutions. This theory of learning suggests that the student develops knowledge through the continuous testing of ideas as a result of experiences and cultural applications (Ertmer and Newby, 1993). Course time is used to develop structured activities and interactions where students then are required to provide their authentic solutions.

A lecture or led discussion provides background for students. The students may also use their past experiences as information to generate a new solution. Fictitious problems are presented as part of simulated real-world situations (Dewey, 1916). The student in turn learns to sift through a variety of pieces of information including sociological, psychological, and modeled solutions in order to arrive at an optimal solution. The end goal is to have the student to create an objective outcome where the situational information is directly applied to a possible solution. In the case of sales instruction, a fictional role-play involving the buyer and seller would result in the outcome of closing or making the sale.

Development of Course Teaching Methods

The question that remains is how to adjust the selling learning theories to the changing Generation Z population. Within every sales course, there is an inherent need to develop the interpersonal skills of the prospective salesperson. However, emphasis needs to be placed on the discovery process used to generate problem solutions for the intended customer. Overall, Generation Z is likely to be more concerned with the person selling the products than the price or quality of the products (Stevens and Kinni, 2007). However, this is not always the case for the buyers themselves. Within a particular purchase situation, buyers are motivated by many forces including corporate needs, personal needs (physical, psychological, and economic), as well as sociocultural influences. They are looking for a consultant that will be able to listen, consult, collaborate, and in the end create a solution. Adaptation of the seller is vital and becomes one of the most significant skills to be taught. Other important elements to a salesperson's success include being intuitive, communicating well, and delivering both short-term and long-term solutions.

Course development is the key to developing a sales engineer or a person that can be a technician and expert for their product. In the past, much of our professional sales pedagogy has been directed towards listening, developing a sound presentation, and concluding with an agreement. Limited attention has been dedicated towards innovative solution creation. There has been a shift in what is expected in the future sales problem-solvers. They are not simply facilitators between buyer and product but now they have to become formative professionals that create unique solutions. Organizations want to do business with salespeople who can deliver original solutions. They have to be

able to address future strategic goals and open new opportunities for growth. It becomes imperative that the Generation Z sales students become visionary solution generators (Stevens and Kinni, 2007).

The selling course now needs to address the changing needs of the customer, as well as harness the character of the Gen Z salesperson. Changes in the character of this newly arriving student have been noticed. They no longer approach education or coursework in the same manner. Unlike other generational learners, this group of students does not necessarily need to be spoon-fed but rather seeks to obtain sales training through slightly modified instructive methods involving feedback and growth opportunities.

The course structure is vital. Utilizing a variety of learning theories, the sales course now allows for the guidance that Generation Z seeks. Specifically, metacognition creates exercises where the student learns to adapt and modify their behavior during the selling process. They will be able to try out their methodology, receive feedback, and finally develop the proper thought and behavioral processes needed to arrive at an optimal outcome. Scaffolding-spaced learning, as well as project based learning generates a systematic approach used to reveal a student's capabilities to close a sales encounter. Typically, selling scenarios are utilized throughout sales training to derive effective communication and problem solving. They tend to measure the entire selling process.

In a new approach, selling scenarios are performed in a shorter but repetitive manner. Each scenario should have a specific sales technique attached to the selling scenario. As scenarios progress throughout the semester, higher level objectives and techniques should be derived. In the beginning of the semester, the selling scenario ought to be directed towards building rapport, then progressing through a series of scenarios related to buyer identification, call objectives, developing sales approaches, ethics, communication questioning, listening, need/motive discovery, intuitive solution creation, sales presentation, addressing objections, trial closing, obtaining commitment and follow-up. These scenarios should build on each other, repeating the earlier topic, reinforcing it, then progressing into the next topic. As a rule of thumb, the time necessary for scenarios grows as the semester progresses through either more frequency or lengthened sales presentation time.

Secondarily, the newly developed scenarios involve students on both sides of the desk; one as a seller, the other as a buyer. Students are responsible for preparing each of their sides of the scenario. Students are provided guidelines and objectives to be achieved prior to the actual scenario performance. Each scenario should be different and unique to a particular situation and buying circumstance. This may also include an interruption and continuance of a particular selling scenario generating a simulated breaking point in the sales call. This process allows the instructor to become an observer, providing immediate feedback related to the key selling objective, communication skill development, and selling effectiveness. In addition, each student provides peer-to-peer evaluation. After every scenario, students are required to submit a written evaluation related to their peer's preparedness, their displayed personalities, well-performed aspects, and areas of improvement needed.

Constructivist learning needs to be applied to the overall course development. Each scenario, case, and assignment needs to have realistic customer problems intended to have realistic solutions. One has to consider that there can be a range of possible solutions. The construct of the activities needs to allow the student to have the freedom to offer a different solution within a provided framework. They need to be able to progress through the need discovery process but engineer a solid customer solution. For example, class discussions may address the need to create innovative purchase solutions to a common organizational problem like document storage and disposal. In the attached Dispose-a-problem Document Shredding scenario, a student has to perform a situation analysis, utilize questioning to reveal the customer needs and concerns, and engineer an innovative solution for the prospective sales client. Depending on how the buyer proceeds through the scenario, the student has the opportunity to generate a unique solution.

Each semester represents an overall project that culminates with a concluding demonstration of the student's ability to effectively progress throughout the complete selling process. As confidence in each selling skill increases, a final evaluation is put in place as a measurement of selling excellence. A formal final examination divided in four parts may be used. Each student is given four timed essay sections related to a particular selling scenario. The selling scenario requires no previous information. The essay exam requires the student build their selling proposition and identify the various intended selling methods throughout each of the rounds. This helps evaluate their methodology and prepare for a final selling scenario. Students have developed selling competencies through previous selling scenarios, building their abilities a piece at a time. In the end, the student now has to work through an entire selling situation beginning with establishing the sales appointment to creation of follow-up after the sales call. A final scenario is then created where the instructor takes on the role of the buyer, recording the interaction. The student is provided with the particular selling scenario requiring individual preparation and delivery. Each situation may have

the same selling objectives, however, the buying dynamics and situation varies slightly therefore resulting in unique presentations and solutions.

DISCUSSION

Sensing the changes in the student population, it has become essential to research this newest generation of student, test the different instructional theories, and develop a measurable and systematic approach in the Personal Selling course. If the goal is to prepare the student for the real business world, then measurable tactics have to be implemented in order to address the differing characteristics of Generation Z. Over the past two years, I have made progressive developmental changes in the Personal Selling course. Not every student entering this course possesses the desire to become a sales professional. The course attracts students from multiple disciplines within the university so we have to approach the development of student capabilities in a very adaptive and systematic manner.

After making modifications in course delivery, students have expressed a greater appreciation for the selling technique and developed stronger selling ability. They have come to realize that these skills are universal and able to be applied in a variety of situations. The measurement of success is two-fold. First, standardized semester-end evaluations have been conducted to both quantify and qualify the effectiveness of teaching/learning. Statistically, over the last two years, students have indicated that the modified course delivery tools were more satisfactory and valuable. Kent State University utilizes a standardized Student Evaluation of Instruction to determine the course effectiveness. These evaluations are a measurement of anonymous student perceptions about the course. In a course like Personal Selling, student perceptions are valuable in deciding how to plot and identify expected changes in their selling capabilities.

In particular, a question is asked related to student perceived evaluation practices. Table 1 demonstrates the changed perception over the last two years of evaluation.

Table 1: The assignments and tests allowed me to demonstrate what I learned

	No. of Respondents	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
AY 2015-2016	26	73%	27%	0%	0%	0%
AY 2014 -2015	37	44%	41%	10%	5%	0%

The overall change in student satisfaction has been significant. This measurement provides validation of the success of directed pedagogy within the Personal Selling course. In addition, students have registered comments that have included statements like “Best, most valuable class I have taken at Kent; I found my niche.” In addition, one particular non-Marketing major stated, “Really enjoyed the format of the final exam and the selling scenarios - Made it easy to demonstrate one’s knowledge and preparedness.”

Students have rated their learning experience highly due of the applied teaching methods. The course design directly correlates to the desired needs of the Generation Z student, as well as the addressing the desired performance levels needed by prospective employers. Many of these students whether marketing or other majors, will find themselves beginning their careers in a sales-related field and will need possess these skills to ensure their success.

CONCLUSION

Teaching in an applied area like sales and marketing requires the instructor to evaluate student learning, teaching methodology, and the needs of industry. We are at the brink of Generation Z entering into the workforce. In a recent article by Frank V. Cespedes and Daniel Weinfurter (2016), they argue that more universities should be teaching sales because the market continues to evolve and is requiring more students to understand relevant selling techniques. Whether in sales or another area of organization, communication with the customer is often inevitable. The prowess of future business professionals is key to linking academia to the needs of industry.

Successful sales training is the result of the application of the correct pedagogy method within a course. Successive activities, simulations, and quality feedback are necessary to develop future salesperson. By applying key learning theories, we are able to generate successful teaching and training techniques for Generation Z. They will find these techniques to be beneficial and likely to propel them into successful sales futures.

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Appendix Sample of Instructor Designed Role Play with Intended Outcomes

Dispose-a-problem Document Shredding (Seller)

You are a representative for Dispose-a-problem Document Shredding Services. Your sales manager has provided you with a lead for the local university. They have posted a bid related to document shredding and destruction. You aren't necessarily familiar with how the university system operates, but you can envision how much paper a university goes through. Secondly, there is an inherent difficulty with larger organizations because documents spread throughout a variety of buildings, so you will need to consider what options you have to centralize those papers.

Since this is a bid situation, you know that there will be several possible competitors. There are many document shredding companies that claim how secure their process is when it comes to document destruction, but you feel that you are one of the most respectable organizations and have a solid name to prove it. Two basic methods of

document destruction exist: 1.) Pick up the documents in designated document containers and take them back to your centralized document shredding facility or 2). Take a specially outfitted shredding truck to the place of business and shred documents on location. There are advantages to both solutions but the bottom line is that you need to offer the method that best fits the customer needs and willingness to pay for the services.

Pricing is comprised of several aspects:

1. **Hours needed for destruction or tonnage of documents being shredded**
2. **Frequency of document removal and destruction**
3. **Method of removal and destruction: On-premise or Off premise**
4. **Other services that are available for bundling.**

OBJECTIVE: Understand the bidding process and secure your position as the leading choice for document shredding. It is your responsibility to understand the buyer's need and respond to those needs with a solid comprehensive solution. Be sure that you are at least one of the final options among the various competitive choices.

Dispose-a-problem Document Shredding (Buyer)

You are the business manager for the local university. Since the privacy policies for the university now require a great deal of diligence and caution relating to student information, you have sent out a purchasing bid for a document shredding service. You realize there is a great deal of printed material that contains sensitive information in the university, including student records. Although the university has a plan to direct more things onto the web, you are certain that the campus will never be completely paperless. Document shredding seems to be a no-brainer and you are hoping that it does not cost much. There seems to be many companies out there and they all seem to look alike.

Many of the companies not only offer shredding services but also document storage. The document storage element would require you to convince campus administration to consider the additional service since it is not part of your original bid listing. Since administrators are always complaining that there is never enough room on the campus for classrooms or offices, this might be a way to free up space. An overshadowing issue remains with creating buy-in from faculty and staff to dispose of these sensitive documents securely. Generally, they do not like change, so convenience and security will be crucial to sell them on the process.

A representative from Dispose-a-problem Document Shredding is coming in to see you today. You need to gather the information about possible document shredding services quickly. You have been asked to bring a proposal to the campus business meeting at the beginning of next month. Instructions were to make the best choice and present that choice to the administrative committee. This is a priority and needs to be in place by next semester.

OBJECTIVE: As the Buyer, you need to know how to best approach the document destruction problem, how much it will cost, and how long it will take to get up and running.

Disclaimer: The information contained in this scenario is not necessarily factual. Specific details described were developed for educational purposes by Professor Don Thacker at Kent State University. This scenario is intended for the completion of the Personal Selling course at the Kent State University Stark Campus. While some organizations may resemble actual companies, the profiles and situations are purely fictitious and any comments or remarks made in this document or by participants of the selling scenario do not reflect the views, opinions, or facts of any actual organization.