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Rebecca Dingus

Alexander Milovic

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Honor Among Salespeople: Using an Ethical Role Play and Code of Ethics Exercise to Develop an Ethical Framework in a Professional Selling Course

By Rebecca Dingus and Alex Milovic

Building on recommendations from both sales educators and the AACSB, the authors propose a three-step approach to assist professors in teaching ethics in a Professional Sales course. An ethics module is presented that consists of an ethics role play, a discussion of “grey area” situations that a salesperson will often experience, and a Code of Ethics written assignment that will allow students to experience, analyze, and reinforce positive ethical behavior in order to help prepare them for sales careers. Following a detailed explanation of each exercise, student feedback is presented to support this multi-faceted ethics program as a valuable contribution to sales education.

Addressing the topic of ethics and providing guidance for students in professional selling courses is especially important due to the nature of sales careers. Salespeople are given a great deal of independence and are frequently placed in situations where making an unethical decision is an available option—and may even appear to be a beneficial choice for the short-term advantage of commissions, bonuses, or other perks. The sales classroom provides a location where students can develop their professional skills, consider challenging circumstances they may face in the future, and also evaluate how their ethics may impact their actions on the job.

Through discussion, engaging activities, and service-based learning, business faculty aim to develop their students into good citizens and incorporate components of curriculum that can easily be transferred into students’ lives beyond the classroom (Andrews, 2010). In the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB)’s 2013 Business Standards, one of the identified General Skill Areas for bachelor’s and master’s degree programs is “ethical understanding and reasoning (able to identify ethical issues and address the issues in a socially responsible manner)”

Rebecca Dingus (Ph.D., Kent State University), Assistant Professor of Marketing, Central Michigan University, Mt. Pleasant, MI, dingulr@cmich.edu

Alex Milovic (Ph.D., University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee), Adjunct Assistant Professor of Marketing, Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI, alexander.milovic@marquette.edu

(AACSB, 2013, p. 30). Granitz and Loewy (2007) find that teaching students about ethics and increasing their ability to make ethical decisions positively impacts on-the-job ethical practices. As Forbes, Loe, Peterson, Erffmeyer, and Boehm suggest, it is effective for students to model professional behavior in the sales classroom (2014). While faculty won’t be in the field with students when tempting situations arise, presenting students with challenging ethical scenarios in the classroom may shape how they act in their professional lives. Therefore, it is important that salespeople have a strong internal compass for ethics and a clear understanding of how to act ethically when presented with situations where an ethical quandary might occur.

In a review of the literature addressing sales education, Cummins, Peltier, Erffmeyer, and Whalen (2013) examined 107 articles, finding that only nine articles addressed ethics in sales education. Teaching ethics varies from presenting lectures on ethical theories (Nguyen, Basuray, Smith, Kopka, and McCulloh, 2008) or online modules (Bodkin and Stevenson, 2007), to answering situational questions where students choose which ethical decision they would be most likely to make in a selling scenario (Castleberry, 2012; Mathison, 1988). Class lectures and discussions focus on how students will face situations in their careers where “black and white” decisions are not clearly delineated and the “right” solution isn’t always evident. Time is spent discussing possible “grey areas” but, even at their most engaged, these lessons typically involve written scenarios where subjects in the text engage in

questionable acts. Students are asked how the characters in the story should have acted or how they would have handled the situation themselves.

When teaching ethics, Cummins et al. (2013) emphasizes having students consider their own ethical beliefs to apply to the course material and associated activities, while also acknowledging that experiential learning helps students internalize concepts (Neeley and Cherry, 2010) that will be useful for future professional application. Experiential learning is popularly attained through case studies, simulations, and role plays, and this active engagement helps students learn and apply techniques (Black, Daughtrey, and Lewis, 2013). Accordingly, we propose teaching ethics with a three-part learning-by-doing program: (1) a buyer/seller role play, (2) a stimulating discussion about potential “grey area” decisions that a salesperson may face, and (3) a self-assessment of personal ethics through a written code of ethics.

INCORPORATING ETHICS AS A TOPIC IN THE SELLING CURRICULUM

In the typical undergraduate curriculum, most students will gain little to no experience in ethical decision making. In addition to the AACSB’s call to action for ethics to be incorporated into business education (2013), we advocate that the sales classroom presents an ideal outlet for such a topic because of the differing perceptions that Bush, Bush, Oakley, and Cicala (2014) have found sales students and sales professionals to have regarding job performance and ethics.

The more applied nature of courses in selling also lends itself to encourage students to learn through engaged role plays and self-exploration exercises. Role-playing is advantageous because of the low level of risk and high level of interaction that “capture[s] the students’ imaginations and allow[s] significant freedom of expression” (Brown 1994, p. 109), as well as role playing’s capability of uncovering an individual’s thoughts and feelings (Donoghue, 2000). In-depth discussions conducted after the role play will reinforce students’ learning about the choices they made as well as potential consequences. The Code of Ethics Assignment enables students to write and reflect on

their own core values, personal ethics, and aspirations. This assignment helps students determine how they will hone their selling skills to promote ethical selling while also assisting them in determining what qualities they should look for when considering careers in sales.

Ethical Dilemma Role Play

In a learning-by-doing exercise, we recommend a role play that stretches students to engage classmates in an examination of true short- and long-term consequences that result from using unethical tactics in sales encounters. Students are divided into two groups, buyers and sellers, and each group plans their call in a separate room. Salespeople prepare to close the buyer on a fictional product (i.e., a widget), and the professor persuades the sellers to close the deal using high-pressure tactics. In another room, the buyers are told that they do not have to buy the product and merely have to listen to the sales pitch. Buyers and sellers alike are informed that the buyer currently uses a competing widget, but might be open to this widget if the price is right. After preparations are made, two-person teams are created for the role play itself, where one student role plays the seller and the other acts as the buyer.

To expedite unethical negotiations, there is no zone of possible agreement between the minimum selling price and maximum buying price. In order to influence the unethical aspect of this exercise, instructors can provide ideas to sellers focusing on unethical tactics to close these seemingly unwinnable sales. Suggestions might include making promises they know they cannot keep, emphasizing a satisfaction-guaranteed timeframe or return period (allowing credit for sales while encouraging the buyer to return the item if they do not want/need it), bribing, promising future discounts, or paying a portion of the sale out of one’s own pocket just to make the sale. Students are typically surprised to hear their instructor suggest these unethical techniques, but they quickly begin to come up with their own list of questionable actions. While this is an important component of the, the true value of this conversation becomes apparent in the class discussion following the role play.

Recommended Discussions about Ethics

Following a brief introduction of the exercise and the buyer and seller roles, the role play lasts about 10 minutes. Most salespeople will make the sale, and very few buyers will decline their seller's tempting offers. Following the role play, the remaining class time should be spent debriefing the role play and discussing ethics in a sales framework. The nature of the ethical dilemma role play creates an open dialogue for discussion. Buyers can discuss how the sellers' actions made them feel, sellers share what they were facing, and both sides agree on the importance of ethical behavior in creating positive long-term buyer-seller relationships. Tactics that are clearly "right and wrong" are reviewed, and then behaviors in the "grey area" are further examined. Consequences of ethical and unethical behavior, as well as company codes and allowances for ethical dilemmas, are also discussed.

Personal Code of Ethics Writing Assignment

The final component of our recommendations for bridging ethics into a sales course is a written assignment where each student creates his or her own personal code of ethics. While Ferrell, Johnston, and Ferrell (2007) acknowledge that "the sales professional has been a great example of self-regulation through professional codes of conduct" (p. 297), we utilize personal codes of ethics to bring such awareness to students while they are still in the classroom. This exercise builds on the earlier discussion where corporate codes of ethics are addressed in class, while personalizing the topic to students' lives and experiences. The code of ethics exercise consists of two parts: a brainstorming exercise and a writing section.

In the brainstorming portion, students are asked to look introspectively and consider who they are, who they want to be (socially and professionally), what their core values are, what attributes they want to exhibit, how they wish to be perceived by others, and circumstances when they might waver in their personal beliefs. During the writing portion, students are asked to develop the code of ethics in four sections: (1) background, a discussion of who and what experiences in their lives have guided and developed their ethics; (2) an ethos statement, where students discuss how their beliefs and

aspirations apply both personally and professionally; (3) a code of conduct, where students list their own rules for their professional dealings (along with explanations for each); and (4) a conclusion, which acts both as a summary of the above points and a forward-looking statement for how they will continue to develop their code of ethics.

THE IMPACT OF ETHICS ASSIGNMENTS

This trio of activities has been used by two faculty members to actively engage undergraduate students in ethical considerations during Professional Selling courses at universities in the Midwest. The three components of verbal role playing, class discussion, and the written code of ethics have made a noteworthy impact on students' awareness of ethical dilemmas they may face and has helped them to establish their own standards and expectations for themselves. Quantitative support is provided below for various aspects of the ethical dilemma role play suggested in this paper. Additionally, qualitative components and comments are provided from students that come directly from writing their personal code of ethics.

Role Play Findings

The ethical dilemma role play has been completed in four sections of a Professional Selling course, two each taught by two different instructors. A survey was distributed to students after the role play and post-exercise discussion. Overall, the students found the exercise to be helpful in learning the value of ethics in selling (5.35 out of 7) and learning the consequences of using bad ethics in selling (5.61). Buyers and sellers both enjoyed the exercise (5.85) and recommended the exercise for use in future classes (5.93). Responses are broken down by semester in Table 1.

Student feedback was valuable and helpful for designing future activities. Both buyers and sellers enjoyed the exercise and recommended it for future use, but qualitative comments indicated that additional value can be added to this ethics role play by repeating this exercise in a varied format so that all students can play both roles. Also, multiple locations for the role play would increase the seriousness of the exercise, rather than having 15 role plays occurring simultaneously

Table 1: Averages of Post-Test Feedback from Students

Semester, Instructor, Class Size	Learned Value of Ethics*	Learned Consequences of Unethical Behavior*	Enjoyed Exercise*	Recommend Exercise for Future Use*
Spring '14, Instructor 1, <i>n</i> = 42	5.67	5.71	6.00	6.12
Fall '14, Instructor 1, <i>n</i> = 33	5.35	5.59	5.97	5.91
Fall '14, Instructor 2, <i>n</i> = 30	4.87	4.97	5.13	5.43
Fall '14, Instructor 2, <i>n</i> = 31	5.39	6.13	6.19	6.19
Overall Mean, <i>n</i> = 136	5.35	5.61	5.85	5.93

*All measures were taken with Likert-type scales scored from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

within the same classroom. With so much focus in the sales classroom on functional knowledge, faculty must be always aware of improving interpersonal skills and adding value to the customer for the long-term. Discussion following the role play can be as involved as the professor desires, as we found that this role play makes students very willing to contribute to the conversation.

Personal Code of Ethics Findings

The code of ethics writing assignment was also incorporated over four semesters and made a valuable contribution to the Professional Selling course. Emphasizing personal reflection allowed students to consider their values (both positive and negative) and how they had developed or how they should change moving forward. Students quickly commented on the value of this assignment beyond the classroom, as it made them more cognizant of how decisions and experiences can/should match their expressed values. Student comments follow:

- A code of ethics on paper is nothing more than a list of what is right and wrong, acceptable and unacceptable behavior in life. It truly becomes a code of ethics when put in motion in your everyday life. My personal code of ethics will guide me through all of my endeavors in life.
- I am still continuing to work on my personal code of ethics as I experience new things each day.
- I will use this personal code of ethics throughout my personal and professional life. This code will

help me make tough ethical decisions I will face in the future. I believe that writing down all my values makes them seem more powerful and obtainable instead of stuck in my head.

- My personal code of ethics will guide my life. It will allow me to come up with resolutions when I am faced with ethical dilemmas. As I continue to grow as a person I will continue to expand on my beliefs but I will always value this code of ethics and will refer to it when things get tough to reassure myself I will continue to grow as a person.
- This paper reminded me of everything that I do believe in and made me question if there are others values that I might need for my future.
- I hope this code of ethics inspires me to become a better person inside and out. I want this code of ethics to show who I am today, but also who I one day aspire to become.
- I believe that this helps me on my journey because I never know what I will have to deal with in my life. I am interested to see how this Code evolves over time.
- I believe that this code of conduct will be useful in the most difficult times. Its simplistic, yet detailed nature will serve its purpose to me throughout my education, career, and life. As my experiences grow, my code of conduct will grow as well. I will continue to reflect on this passage as a gentle reminder of who I am when times get tough.

- My personal code of ethics is applicable to my personal life and professional life. I hope this will be consistent with my future employer's code of ethics.
- This personal "code of ethics" is something I want to stand by, live by, and act upon in my everyday lifestyle.
- I really appreciate you assigning this activity. It was definitely very eye opening to write down who people think you are, who I think I am and who I actually am. I feel that this assignment will help me rekindle the values that were once my top priorities and expound upon those that I will try to instill in my everyday life. Again, thank you.

The development of a personal code of ethics is an important addition to the sales curriculum, providing a framework that can assist students when they are faced with challenging situations as professional salespeople. Additionally, while the personal code of ethics assignment alone does not make the Professional Selling course "writing intensive," it does respond to the AACSB's recent call to increase written components in the business curriculum (AACSB, 2013) while also challenging and encouraging students to analyze their ethics.

CONCLUSION

As building long-term buyer-seller relationships becomes increasingly important in selling, sales professionals must practice positive ethical behavior. As this is a critical, but often lacking, area in sales education, we have presented three activities to assist faculty members in incorporating ethics as a component of the Professional Selling curriculum. Through the use of role playing, active discussions, and an introspective writing assignment, students will reflect on their own ethics, respond to challenging ethical situations, and discuss the pros and cons to making ethical (and unethical) choices. This aids in not only their personal development but also their professional development, as Evans, McFarland, Dietz, and Jaramillo (2012) find that ethical sales behavior leads to increased sales performance.

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