

Consulting Edge: How Sales Management Training is a Difference Maker

By Jim Hamilton with Meredith Dault

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ANYONE WHO HAS EVER WORKED IN MANAGEMENT CONSULTING WILL AGREE that it's a tough business. Not only are the timelines tight and the stakes high, there are all kinds of risk and change management challenges to contend with. As a growing number of young people aspire to work in consulting, they will need to be equipped earlier with the right skills to help them succeed. They not only have to be able to manage the inherent complexities within the organizations they will be working with but also need to know how to swiftly identify their clients' priorities and help busy executives to champion their ideas internally.

The earlier that students can be helped to develop and refine critical sales skills, the more effectively they will be able to draw on them, no matter where they will end up in their careers. In my mind, sales skills are now vital for succeeding in a rapidly changing, increasingly digitized business environment, where time is of the essence and decision-makers are spoiled for choice.

To be clear, this does not mean we should teach students to sell things using coercion or the slippery techniques made famous by used car salesmen. Rather, we need to equip them with the people skills that are common among the best sales professionals and, by extension, the most

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It's important for business students to learn approaches to sales development to move more swiftly up the corporate ladder

effective consultants – skills that include knowing how to nurture relationships, ask the right questions, and work well as part of a team. While business schools are very good at equipping students with critical technical skills – those used for analyzing information and navigating spreadsheets, for example – it is also important they learn approaches to sales development that will help them move more swiftly up the corporate ladder.

Sales management training prioritizes the development of communication competencies. It teaches young people how to understand what their clients need in order to better support them, as well as how to ask the right questions, and how to listen effectively so they are not missing valuable information as it slips by. Ultimately, being an effective sales person starts with being kind, open, and responsive to other people. It means knowing how to establish rapport quickly so you can get to the heart of the problem you are trying to solve for your client.

Smith School of Business alumni are finding a solid foothold in the world of consulting, even just a few years after graduating, thanks to their abilities to take a sales-focused approach to engaging with their clients. I've asked some of them to share their experiences in their own words.

Sarah Masotti (BComm, 2015)

Senior Associate, Digital Consulting, PwC

I work in consulting at a firm that has offices around the world. Currently, I'm helping companies digitize their workplaces through the adoption of cloud-based technologies and change management programs to generally modernize and transform their organizations. In the last six months, I've worked in 19 countries, meeting with C-suite executives and leading workshops with over 800 people.

I frequently turn to the skills I developed as part of my sales management training at Smith. Whether I am selling my own expertise internally to a director or partner, or selling my firm and our services to a client, I'm exercising sales skills. We had to do a lot of presentations in class. We also frequently were put on the spot with questions or asked to share our opinions. It was practice that has served me well in my work. I was recently told that my reputation at my firm is strong because people feel confident putting me in front of the client or letting me take the lead on projects.

I've realized that people want to work with others who have strong interpersonal skills. You could have been an A+ student, but it doesn't matter once you get into the work world. What matters is how you present yourself and how you interact with others – and a lot of that comes down to sales skills.

Rohan Wadhwa (BComm, 2014)

Senior Consultant (Education Sector), Oliver Wyman

I work in the education sector. We basically come in as a mini SWAT team and help education companies figure out how to grow or fix things they're struggling with.

I spend a lot of my time listening to clients and asking open-ended questions to figure out what's going on, which is something I had a lot of practice doing as part of my sales management training at Smith. Actually, it was my

"I've learned that with sales skills, you can help people solve problems and create mutual benefits at the same time"

experience asking questions and actively listening that landed me a great opportunity to work with TED prize-winner Sugata Mitra and his School in the Clouds platform, which promotes education in underprivileged areas. I knew I wanted to move into the education sector at that time, so I reached out to him to ask about where he might be able to use help, and what kinds of immediate problems he was dealing with. As it turns out, I was able to offer some solutions and my relationship with the organization progressed from there, eventually leading to work in England. Without knowing how to ask the right questions, I never would have heard about what they were struggling with or how I could help.

People have problems. I've learned that with sales skills, you can help solve them and create mutual benefits at the same time.

While some, like Sarah and Rohan, may be naturally oriented to adopt a sales-focused approach in their work, experience has shown that such skills can be learned and honed with practice. Preparing students effectively to operate in the consulting world means taking them through an active role-play, asking them to think on their feet, and letting them make mistakes in the classroom so that they are properly equipped to hit the ground running once they are in the boardroom. That kind of practice, including real-time feedback coaching and repetition, all help to flex important muscles when it comes to honing the communication skills they will need to gain an edge over competitors. Smith School of Business graduates explain:

Tom Kewley (BComm, 2015)

Associate, WndrCo LLC

I can remember a few projects as part of my sales management training that really helped me to develop the skills that I now use all the time in my work. One assignment, an enterprise sales project, was about supporting a company that was finding its way. Everything from the way we were asked to structure the final report, to the process of determining where the gaps were, to the fact that it culminated in a series of recommendations, was parallel to the stuff I did in my first job out of school as a business analyst at McKinsey & Company. From my first day on the job, I felt like my training was something that I always had in my back pocket. I really wasn't surprised by anything I encountered, even if I was the least experienced person in the room.

I also remember that at one point in the semester we had to do a mock sales simulation in which we had to work hard to uncover the client's hidden agenda, while at the same time completing a complex B2B sale. I didn't experience that in any other class but that kind of simulation was so relevant for me and to the work I'm doing now.

My sales management training generally left me feeling equipped to handle anything. At a performance review during my first job, I remember being told that I was calm and collected and appeared to be mature for my age. I think my training was a significant contributing factor, because we had practiced working through stressful and unpredictable situations, so I knew how not to get flustered. Instead, I could stay focused on what I needed to accomplish, all while building relationships and working effectively in teams.

Nurturing sales skills within today's students will ensure a nimble workforce able to thrive in a shifting business world

Yifan Zhou (BComm, 2015)
Senior Associate Consultant, Bain & Company

I'm grateful for the training I got in sales management at Smith. Everything I learned was valuable and applicable to any field, including the work I do in consulting. We learned about the importance of asking open-ended questions to identify what matters most to clients before beginning to problem solve. When you're a junior person, it's easy to feel pressured to jump straight to solutions before fully assessing the situation. I have now experienced firsthand how much time you can save by asking questions upfront to ensure you are focused on the most critical problems.

Moreover, you can build rapport and confidence with your client if they know you are aligned with their goals. I remember feeling like I was always at the edge of my seat in class, knowing that I could be called on at any time – but learning to think on your feet was part of the training. Over the semester, we all built more confidence in formulating thoughtful comments to share with the class. This now parallels many meetings I've attended in the workplace. When clients call me now to ask for my opinion, I am more prepared. Every time it gets a little easier, and I'm happy I was exposed to that in a classroom setting first.

One of our class assignments was to do a sales call and to make a video recording of it. Sometimes it can be hard to see your own mannerisms and how they might come off. I could see that I was using filler words, speaking too fast, and not sitting up straight – all things that I have since been able to work on. Now I find that I don't have to worry so much about how I look or sound when I am speaking with a client – I can focus instead on what I want to say.

There's no question that it is an exciting time to be aspiring to work in the field but it is a challenging one too, with the next decade promising to bring many more changes. Nurturing sales management skills within today's students will ensure a nimble and versatile workforce able to thrive in a shifting business world. Failing to do so will do them — and us all — a disservice.

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