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Competency Assessment for Entry-level Sport Ticket Sales Professionals

David Pierce

Richard Irwin

Abstract

With the emergence of outbound sales philosophies taking hold in sport organizations, sales managers are seeking talent to fill sales positions with candidates launching their careers in the sport industry. However, observers have noted that the infusion of sport ticket sales personnel has not been accompanied by an appropriate professional development and evaluation protocol, which has contributed to high turnover rates. As sport management education programs modernize their curriculum to meet industry needs and sales managers attempt to reduce turnover, a better understanding of the competencies required of entry-level sport ticket sales professionals is required. The purpose of this research was to identify the competencies required for success in an entry-level sport ticket sales position and the extent to which sales managers find it difficult to train salespeople on those competencies. Nineteen sport sales managers served as expert panelists on a study that employed the Delphi method. The result of the study is a 40-item competency model comprised of the following eight global competency areas: knowledge and skill development, relationship building, communication skills, opening the sale, consultative or adaptive sales, closing, maximizing each call, and service and education. Implications for sales managers, human resource managers, sport sales educators, and academic scholarship in sport sales are discussed.

Keywords: *sales; sales management; sales competency; sales effectiveness; sport sales*

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The recruitment, training, development, and retention of salespeople is a critical issue for the sport industry and sport management academia. The identification and cultivation of sales talent is important to the financial health of sport organizations because ticket sales are the most important source of local revenue for most professional sport organizations and Division I intercollegiate athletic departments (Fulks, 2013; Smith & Roy 2011). Not surprisingly, sales positions account for the largest percentage of jobs in the professional sports industry, and Division I college athletic departments are increasing their investment in a sales infrastructure (Popp, 2014; Wanless & Judge, 2014). For sport management educators, the prevalence of entry-level sales positions in the sport industry provides a compelling impetus to design learning experiences that arm students with the requisite knowledge, skills, and abilities to be successful in sales (Pierce & Petersen, 2015).

Despite the importance of sales management in the sport industry, observers have noted that both industry and academia have failed to embrace the need to support sales training, development, and evaluation programs (Irwin, Southall, & Sutton, 2007; Irwin & Sutton 2011; King, 2010; Pierce & Petersen, 2015; Popp, 2014). It has been speculated that less than half of all professional sport franchises invest in structured sales training, and research has documented that fewer than one-fourth of sport management programs offer a course in sport sales (Eaglesman & McNary, 2010; SBJ/SBD Ticketing Roundtable, March 16, 2010). All too often, sport management programs graduate students ill equipped to demonstrate the competencies needed to be successful in entry-level sport sales positions, and sport organizations adopt the boiler room approach where entry-level salespeople are provided minimal training under the “trial-by-error” management style (Washo, 2004). Subsequently, sport management graduates are unprepared for the sales jobs they are hired into, and then only top revenue generators are promoted after a brief trial period (Johnson & Shaivitz, 2006; Washo, 2004). Neither academia nor industry has historically invested the resources needed to create a trained force of competent salespeople. In sum, the industry receives ill-equipped students and then emphasizes outcomes instead of process.

This lack of training and evaluation likely contributes to the high turnover rates that stem from unsuccessful salespeople quitting or being fired for poor performance. It is estimated that five out of six entry-level ticket salespeople either choose to leave sales or are let go from their positions (King, 2010), a rate much higher than the 18% to 23% annual turnover in other businesses (ASTD, 2008). High turnover rates lead to sales departments stocked with first year talent as compared to more seasoned salespeople (Mickle, 2010), which in turn leads to inefficiency and suboptimal performance. Contrast the results in the sport industry to the business literature that finds companies placing greater emphasis on training veteran sales representatives experience higher sales performance and company profits and report lower incidences of turnover (Pelham, 2006; Pettijohn, Pettijohn, & Taylor, 2007; Sager, Dubinsky, Wilson, Shao, 2014).

Serving more as a coach, the sales manager is in the best position to improve the state of sales training and evaluation (Bush, 2013). Similar to a coach fostering the development of athletes, the sales manager is in position to directly influence the team's sales force performance through the use of appropriate training and evaluation methods (Leisen, Tippins, & Lilly, 2004). The absence of sales training and evaluation within sport may best be explained by the lack of support from upper management, difficulty in developing an infrastructure to support training, lack of immediate results, too few sales managers possessing the knowledge and skill to implement a sales development program, and the dearth of a defined set of core sport ticket sales competencies (Irwin & Sutton, 2011; Irwin, Sutton, McCarthy, 2008; Johnson & Shaivitz, 2006).

Competencies within the context of sales represent the requisite knowledge, skills, and abilities of salespeople (Lambert, Ohai, & Kerkhoff, 2009). A set of core sales competencies is valuable to sales managers in designing a holistic approach to training focused on key behavioral and performance metrics for salespeople, improved performance evaluations, as well as enhanced retention, promotion and compensation decisions (Campion et al., 2011). Likewise, establishing a set of core performance competencies will influence sport sales education through the identification of existing discrepancies in content and preparation (Hurd, 2005). While sport management academia has started to address industry concerns about the lack of sales preparation, the competencies and related rubrics identified in this research can serve as the ground work for a student learning outcomes assessment plan in a client-based experiential sport sales project or course (Pierce & Petersen, 2015). These student experiences are particularly relevant because ticket sales are one of the primary avenues for entry-level employment in the sport industry (Pierce, Peterson, Clavio, & Meadows, 2012). In sum, both the industry and academia have a vested interest in identifying a set of core sport sales competencies.

Literature Review

Theoretical Background

The theoretical basis for examining competencies is rooted in strategic human resource management (SHRM) (Hurd & Buschbom, 2010). Dubois (1996) argued that competencies should be identified at each level of the organization in order to determine where employees are deficient. He developed a five-step model that is tied to the strategic goals of the organization and focused on employee improvement throughout the organization: (1) front-end needs analysis, assessment, and planning, (2) competency model development, (3) curriculum planning, (4) learning intervention design and development, and (5) evaluation. Dubois' model aligns with SHRM, which can be defined as the "ongoing efforts to align an organization's personnel policies and practices with its business strategy" (Tompkins, 2002, p. 95). While SHRM theory provides a broad framework for the examination of competencies, it is important to note "competency modeling is not driven

by a single theoretical perspective or even a clear theory” (Lambert, Plank, Reid, & Fleming, 2014, p. 89). As a result, this study aligns with most academic research on competency development that not been theoretical, but instead “more aligned to practitioner needs” (Lambert et al., p. 90).

Sales Activities and Job Responsibilities

Competency studies create numerical taxonomies of competencies within a specific context (Lambert et al., 2014). Early attempts to identify competencies in the sales literature defined competencies as activities. The seminal work in this regard was Moncrief’s (1986) factor analysis that reduced 121 sales activities into 10 factors like selling, working with orders, servicing the product, and information management. Moncrief, Marshall, and Lassk (2006) updated Moncrief’s original taxonomy to account for changing environmental conditions in the twenty-first century. Pierce et al. (2014) built off the works of Moncrief (1986) and Moncrief et al. (2006) and reduced a list of 56 sport sales activities to seven factors, listed in order of importance: leveraging post-sale opportunities, communication with supervisor and clients, customer relationship management, developing client relationships, research and trend analysis, salesforce management, and professional development. Activities performed by salespeople can also be captured by analyzing position announcements. Pierce et al. (2012) conducted a content analysis of ticket sales and service position announcements and identified job responsibilities commonly posted by sport organizations like cold calling, customer service, prospecting, and database management.

Value in Adopting a Competency Approach

A gap exists in sales competency research because competencies have historically been conceptualized as activities or tasks and not skills. While content analysis of position announcements and factor analysis of sales activities described above can identify activities salespeople perform, “the focus of all of this work has been on the frequency of activity, not the quality or importance of those activities” (Lambert et al., 2014, p. 88). Activities and tasks are key components in job analysis, but do not emphasize the quality of the activities or their role in driving performance.

Competencies differ from job analysis in several fundamental ways, as outlined by Campion et al. (2011). First, competencies discriminate between levels of performance and describe how competencies change with employee level. For example, promotion from an inside sales representative to an account executive can be illustrated through competencies more effectively than through a list of activities. Second, competency modeling is a deductive process that starts with the outcome and works backwards to determine the tasks, while job analysis is an inductive process that starts with the job tasks and then draws conclusions about what might be important to the job. Third, competency modeling is used to align the human resources system so that the organization “hires, trains, evaluates,

compensates, and promotes employees based on the same attributes” (Campion et al., p. 228). In contrast, job analysis is simply conformed to the human resources system already utilized by the organization. Lastly, competency modeling can be used across a variety of different jobs within the organization and can look into the future for what competencies will be required of successful employees, while job analysis is restricted to specific positions and looks only at what employees currently do on the job. Thus, examining a set of competencies for entry-level sport ticket salespeople moves beyond traditional job analysis found in studies that examine the content of job descriptions or studies that ask salespeople questions about how they spend their time or what activities they perform. However, a research-based approach to developing key competencies in sport has heretofore not been employed.

Competency Research in Sales

Four recent studies in the business literature yield useful insights with respect to the methodology for determining sales competencies and the nature of the competencies. These competencies set a general framework in the attempt to identify competencies in sport sales. First, Rosenbloom (2001) identified the following seven emerging sales competencies via performance and survey data from customers, managers, and account team members: engaging in self-appraisal and continuous learning, listening beyond product needs, orchestrating internal resources, aligning customer/supplier strategic needs, establishing a vision of a committed relationship, understanding the financial impact of decisions, and consultative problem solving. Second, the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) (2008) surveyed 210 sales trainers and 179 salespeople and found the top five skills were as follows: asking effective or productive questions of customers, becoming a better listener, selling with customer’s best interest in mind, making ethical decisions, and leveraging sales approaches that are adaptable from one situation to the next. The key areas of prerequisite knowledge were customer requirements and potential uses of the product, product knowledge, company knowledge, and knowledge of competitors.

Two recent studies utilized the Delphi method to identify sales competencies. Lambert et al. (2014) utilized the Delphi method to construct a competency model for entry-level business-to-business services salespeople that included the following 10 competencies: sales process, performance, technology, learning, relationship, risk, influencing, customer, product/service, and administrative. Busch (2013) moved beyond salespeople and extended the analysis to frontline sales managers in for-profit organizations. Utilizing the Delphi method Busch identified the following eight competencies: coaches for sales results, manages performance, builds talent, manages as a leader, influences to achieve goals, develops self to achieve goals, builds and maintains relationships, and manages the sales process.

Sport Sales Research

While the sales literature has recognized value in a research-based approach to identifying sales competencies, sport sales research has lagged behind in terms of identifying an empirically based set of competencies. Irwin, Southall, and Sutton's (2007) *Pentagon of Sport Sales Training Model* (PSSTM) outlined a conceptual model that indicated students should be able to demonstrate proficiency in the following areas: inventory terminology; understanding of assigned readings; role play, mock call, and actual sales call execution; referral seeking; closing on ticket plan and group sales; and generating new leads. The PSSTM outlined competencies specific to the classroom, and two subsequent studies examined the outcome of projects using the PSSTM. Pierce and Petersen (2010) examined the impact of a client-based, experiential sales project on students' perceptions of competencies did not change as a result of completing a client-based, experiential sport sales project. Second, Pierce, Petersen, and Meadows (2011) added authentic assessment by having industry experts evaluate student sales calls. Students were assessed on the following competency areas: opening, enthusiasm, interpersonal communication, confidence, overcoming objections, needs analysis, and presenting solutions. Results indicated that students enrolled in a client-based, experiential sales project improved their ability to open the sales call and demonstrate enthusiasm compared to a control group. However, these approaches were limited in that the identification of sales competencies was not based on an empirically confirmed set of competencies.

Purpose

While the PSSTM established the conceptual framework for competency development in sport sales, no study to date has sought the opinion of sport sales managers to develop a specific set of competencies. In light of recent research that has utilized the Delphi method to identify sales competencies (Busch, 2013; Lambert et al., 2014), this study utilized the Delphi method to identify competencies for sport ticket sales. Additionally, there is a lack of research that identifies which competencies are the most difficult to train, which could help to explain the high rate of turnover in entry-level sport sales positions. As a result, two research questions guided this study:

1. What are the competencies required for success in an entry-level sport ticket sales position?
2. To what extent do sales managers find it difficult to train entry-level sport ticket salespeople on those competencies?

The academic paper contained herein accomplishes the two objectives above, and the management white paper focuses on how the competencies identified in the academic research can be translated into a competency assessment model that distinguishes between levels of performance in key competency areas.

Methodology

Selection of Delphi Method

Not only has the Delphi method been adopted in recent studies examining sales competencies, but this methodology has a long history of being utilized for competency identification in a variety of disciplines and employment settings (Hurd, 2005). The Delphi method is a group communication process that allows geographically dispersed experts to offer confidential feedback in an anonymous environment where all opinions are allowed to emerge (Wiersma & Jurs, 2005). The Delphi method provides researchers with a systematic approach to collecting informed opinions in cost-effective and timely fashion with the ability to transcend organizational and geographic boundaries (Busch, 2013). Over the course of three rounds of survey questions, consensus is typically reached between experts on the panel through feedback delivered by a moderator via summary statistics and qualitative statements (Ziglio, 1996).

Participant Recruitment

Purposive sampling was utilized to recruit the panel of experts. The criteria for being included in the study was that the participant have at least three years of experience supervising entry-level sport salespeople or students. Potential participants were recruited through personal contacts within the sport sales industry. Experts from Major League Baseball (MLB), National Football League (NFL), National Basketball Association (NBA), National Hockey League (NHL), Major League Soccer (MLS), Minor League Baseball, Minor League Hockey, Minor League Football, Intercollegiate Athletics, Academia, Consulting Firms, Motorsports, and Professional Tennis were invited to participate in the study. After compiling a list of 45 potential experts, invitations to participate were emailed that outlined the purpose of the study and approximate time commitment. Of these 45 potential participants, 26 participated in round 1, 21 in round 2, and 19 in round 3. Participation levels in this study meet the guidelines for use of the Delphi method. The general rule of thumb is that a 70% response rate is required for rounds 2 and 3, which was exceeded in this study. Additionally, the final number of participants ($n = 19$) meets Linstone and Turoff's (2002) recommendation that the panel consist of between 10 and 30 participants.

Participant Profile

Nineteen panelists completed all three rounds of the study. Each participant supervised or trained entry-level salespeople as part of their current job responsibilities. Panelists hailed from the NBA ($n = 4$), MLB ($n = 3$), third-party sales firms ($n = 3$), intercollegiate athletic departments ($n = 2$), minor league sports ($n = 2$), NHL ($n = 2$), academia ($n = 1$), motor sports ($n = 1$), and MLS ($n = 1$). Eighteen panelists were male, which may slightly over-represent males in sales management positions in some leagues but not others. Panelists ranged from 25

to 58 years old ($M = 33.4$, $SD = 8.1$) with a range of 3 to 22 years of experience supervising entry-level sport salespeople or students ($M = 10.5$, $SD = 5.2$).

Delphi Rounds

For round 1, participants were emailed a link using a web-based survey platform and asked to respond to the following prompts regarding entry-level sport sales employees:

1. List the competencies you think are essential for success prior to and in preparation for the sales call or meeting with a prospect.
2. List the competencies you think are essential for success during the sales call or meeting.
3. List the competencies you think are essential for success after the sale has been closed.

The constant comparative method was used to summarize and present the competencies identified in the first round. This method was used to “compare segments of data for similarities and differences in order to identify patterns leading to categorization” (Busch, 2013, p. 301). These competencies were also compared to past sales competency and sport sales research to ensure that the qualitative responses in round 1 were reliable compared to previous studies addressed in the literature review. Round 1 yielded 41 sales competencies that could be divided into eight general categories.

In round two, the panelists rated these 41 competencies using two different 5-point Likert scales. The first scale asked panelists to rate the importance of each competency to a salesperson's success: 1= *not at all important*; 2= *slightly important*; 3= *moderately important*; 4= *somewhat important*; and 5= *extremely important*. The second scale asked panelists to rate the ease with which they are able to train sales reps to demonstrate these competencies: 1= *very easy*; 2= *easy*; 3= *moderately difficult*; 4= *somewhat difficult*; and 5= *very difficult*. Because the Delphi technique is a consensus-building process, benchmarks were established in order to eliminate competencies from subsequent rounds. The benchmarks established by Hurd and Buschbom (2010) were adopted for this study: 1= *no importance as a competency* ($M = 1.00 - 1.49$); 2= *slight importance as a competency* ($M = 1.50 - 2.49$); 3= *moderate importance as a competency* ($M = 2.50 - 3.49$); 4= *significant importance as a competency* ($M = 3.50 - 4.49$); and 5= *extreme importance as a competency* ($M = 4.50 - 5.00$). Hurd and Buschbom set 3.50 as the cutoff for inclusion as a competency. Last, participants were asked to provide written comments to explain the reasoning behind their ratings for each general category.

In round 3, panelists were provided with the mean, standard deviation, frequency count, open-ended comments, and their original rating for all 82 items. Armed with this information, participants considered the opinions of the other experts and re-scored all 82 items. The experts were also encouraged to provide an explanation if they changed their answer by more than two points, or if their

answer deviated from the mean by more than two points. Competencies below the 3.50 cutoff established by Hurd and Buschbom (2010) were removed from the final model. Once all of the responses in round three were tabulated and competencies below 3.50 were eliminated, the framework set forth in Busch (2013) was then utilized to draw distinctions between primary and secondary competencies within each general category. Competencies with a mean score of 4.0 or above and a range of 1.0 or less, and competencies with a mean score of 4.0 or above and a range of 1.0 or greater with a maximum of one response below 4 were coded as primary competencies. In other words, if at least 18 of 19 panelists rated a competency at 4 or 5, then the competency was coded as primary. The remaining competencies were coded as secondary. With respect to difficulty of training, the competencies were placed in rank order by mean score and then categorized into quartiles for simplicity of interpretation.

Results

In round one, the panelists developed a total of 41 unique competencies. These competencies were categorized into eight general competency categories: (1) knowledge and skill development, (2) relationship building, (3) communication, (4) opening the sale, (5) consultative or adaptive selling, (6) closing, (7) maximizing each call, and (8) service and education. In round two, the panelists rated the 41 competencies on how important the competencies are to a salesperson's success and how difficult it is to train the salesperson on the competency for a total of 82 questions. With respect to importance, all but one competency (possess knowledge about the competition, $M = 3.14$) was rated below Hurd and Buschbom's 3.5 cutoff. It was the judgment of the researchers to include this item in the third round of questions. With respect to training, responses ranged from the easiest competency to train (possess thorough knowledge of the product you are selling) to the most difficult (ability to think on your feet and adapt quickly to new information).

After the second round was completed, panelists re-scored all 41 competencies on both questions after considering the responses of other panelists. With respect to importance, possessing knowledge about the competition ($M = 3.38$) remained the only competency below the 3.5 benchmark. As a result, this competency was removed from the final competency framework, yielding a total of 40 competencies. Twenty-five competencies were identified as primary competencies, and 15 were coded as secondary competencies. With respect to training, responses were nearly identical in nature to round two with no significant changes to the ordering or scoring of the competencies. The competencies were placed in rank order by mean score and then divided in quartiles for training difficulty. Table 1 provides the mean scores on level of importance and training difficulty for each of the eight general competency areas. These scores were created by summing the scores on each competency and dividing by the number of competencies

in that area. Figure 1 displays the 40 competencies categorized into eight general categories and stratified by primary versus secondary competencies and level of difficulty in training salespeople on that competency.

Table 1

Mean Importance and Training Difficulty Ratings of Competency Categories

Category	Importance		Training	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Maximizing Each Call	4.87	.33	2.84	.91
Consultative or Adaptive Sales Approach	4.81	.25	3.15	.58
Closing	4.72	.48	2.66	.78
Communication Skills	4.72	.30	2.97	.59
Opening	4.58	.41	3.09	.67
Relationship Building	4.42	.51	3.08	.58
Knowledge and Skill Development	4.38	.42	2.65	.66
Service and Education	4.33	.51	2.60	.47

n = 19 panelists in round 3

Category 1: Knowledge and Skill Development	
Competencies required in order to acquire a proficient level knowledge about sales technique, prospects, and product.	
<i>Primary competencies:</i>	
1.	Willingness to improve through learning new ideas and professional development ¹
2.	Demonstrate an understanding of each step of the sales process during training ³
3.	Possess thorough knowledge of the product you are selling ⁴
<i>Secondary competencies:</i>	
1.	Ability to conduct research and network to maintain a pipeline of leads ²
2.	Ability to conduct research and acquire relevant information about prospects ⁴
3.	Possess knowledge about the prospect ⁴

Figure 1. Competency Model for Entry-Level Sport Ticket Salespeople

Category 2: Relationship Building
Competencies required in order to build relationships with prospects.
<i>Primary competencies:</i>
1. Ability to empathize with the customer ²
2. Ability to develop a relationship with the customer ³
<i>Secondary competencies:</i>
1. Ability to adapt to the personality and emotional style of the customer ¹
2. Ability to relate to and build rapport with the customer ¹
3. Ability to build trust with the customer ²
4. Demonstrate a sense of humor ²
5. Ability to appear assertive, but not pushy or aggressive ²
Category 3: Communication Skills
Competencies required in order to effectively communicate with customers
<i>Primary competencies:</i>
1. Ability to speak clearly ²
2. Possess strong verbal communication skills ³
3. Ability to speak intelligently ³
4. Ability to appear comfortable in conversation ³
<i>Secondary competencies:</i>
1. Demonstrate sales-appropriate body language (posture, dress, facial expression) ¹
2. Ability to lead and be in control of the conversation ³
Category 4: Opening
Competencies required in order to effectively open the sales call
<i>Primary competencies:</i>
1. Ability to navigate the gatekeeper and set an appointment with the decision maker ¹
2. Ability to pique the customer's interest in the opening of the conversation/presentation ¹
<i>Secondary competencies:</i>
1. Ability to create a customized game plan for the sales call or meeting ⁴

Figure 1 (cont.)

Category 5: Consultative or Adaptive Sales Approach
Competencies required in order to effectively deliver a customized sales pitch tailored to the needs of the customer
<i>Primary competencies:</i>
1. Ability to listen ¹
2. Ability to think on your feet and adapt quickly to new information ¹
3. Ability to place the customer's interests ahead of their own interests ¹
4. Ability to anticipate and overcome objections ¹
5. Ability to adapt each presentation (sales pitch) to the needs of each customer ²
6. Ability to use information learned in the needs analysis to tailor an appropriate recommendation to the customer ²
7. Ability to solve problems for customers ²
8. Ability to ask the right questions to uncover the needs of the customer ³
9. Ability to ask the right questions to qualify the customer ⁴
Category 6: Closing
Competencies required in order to close the sale
<i>Primary competencies:</i>
1. Ability to confirm specific next steps with the customer (in the event there was not a sale) ³
2. Ability to recognize customer buying signals ⁴
3. Ability to close the sale ⁴
<i>Secondary competencies:</i>
1. Asks for the sale multiple times ⁴
Category 7: Maximize Each Call
Competencies required in order to maximize the potential of each call or sale by upselling and obtaining referrals
<i>Primary competencies:</i>
1. Ability to maximize each sale by upselling ²
2. Ability to ask for and obtain referrals ³

Figure 1 (cont.)

Category 8: Service and Education
Competencies required in order to deliver and educated customer to the service team
<i>Secondary competencies:</i>
1. Ability to communicate clearly with the customer what they are buying ³
2. Facilitate a smooth transition to the service team after the sale ⁴
3. Ability to educate the customer on how to best utilize their tickets ⁴
¹ Competency was ranked in the top-quartile of difficulty (hardest to train)
² Competency was ranked in the second quartile of difficulty
³ Competency was ranked in the third quartile of difficulty
⁴ Competency was ranked in the bottom quartile of difficulty (easiest to train)

Figure 1 (cont.)

Discussion

Taken as a whole, the competencies identified in this research aligned closely with past sales competency research. Even though sport is unique in some ways with respect to purchase decisions made by customers, the competencies required of sport salespeople mirror the competencies identified in the literature to be required in any type of sales. For example, regardless of what product or service is being sold, a salesperson must overcome objections. However, it is important to note that while similar competencies exist for sport and non-sport sales, the unique nature of the sport product makes the way in which account executives demonstrate these competencies different than other types of sales. While the fundamental competencies are similar across all types of sales, the unique nature of the sport product creates different contexts in which the companies are demonstrated. These differences will be highlighted within the appropriate competency area below.

The similar nature of sport and non-sport competencies illuminates the fact that sport organizations should invest in training and preparation for entry-level sales employees like other industries. According to ASTD (2008), “sales training must quickly and deliberately evolve from a sometime activity by sales managers to an intentional, qualified effort that is directly tied to business strategy and measured according to business outcomes” (p. 15). Sport organizations should consider increasing their investment in sales training in order to develop employ-

ees that achieve a high level of proficiency on the competencies identified in this study. By adopting a strategic human resources management approach that aligns sales training with hiring practices and strategy, sport organizations can better develop and retain top sales talent.

Before examining each competency area in more detail, it is worth noting that the ability to effectively utilize technology and social media was absent from the list of competencies. As technology has changed the way that people communicate and information is delivered, sales training has not kept pace with strategies to effectively leverage social media (Lassk, Ingram, Kraus, & Mascio, 2012). In fact, some panelists held a negative view toward younger salespeople using social media instead of making sales calls. One panelist noted, “Embracing technology is used to excuse sales folks who use Twitter and Facebook to sell. They don’t really sell on those things. Often, they’re tweeting out nonsense to their friends, who aren’t buying anyway.” However, a strong case can be made that the most successful salespeople are able to leverage social media and other online tools and that social media will become an indispensable part of sales strategy (Belew, 2014). Sport organizations will need to define best practices in this area to ensure salespeople leverage social media effectively.

Maximizing Each Call

The general competency area rated as the most important was maximizing each call, which is comprised of maximizing each call or sale through upselling and referrals. Similarly, Pierce et al. (2014) found that leveraging referrals and upselling was rated as the top factor for success by sport salespeople. The importance of maximizing each call is rooted in the fact that sporting events are experienced in social settings (Mullin, Hardy, & Sutton, 2014). While life insurance salespeople will seek referral opportunities by asking for the names of three friends, there is not expectation that the size of the sale will be increased because people purchase insurance together. In contrast, an account executive selling sport experiences will want to know who is in the prospect’s personal network because those people might attend the game with the prospect as part of a social engagement. Neither competency was rated in the top-quartile in terms of difficulty of training, so the challenge may be simply getting the salesperson to try. One panelist noted, “Referrals would seemingly be a pretty easy thing to train, but it never seems to sink in no matter what team I’m at.”

Consultative Sales

Consultative or adaptive sales skills were ranked second in terms of importance. Consultative selling is a customer-focused sales method where the sales person asks questions in order to learn more about the customer before presenting a customized solution that will specifically address the needs or concerns of the customer. Key elements of a consultative sales approach include “diagnosing and determining customer needs, facilitating sound decision making by purchasers,

and rejecting the use of manipulative, unethical sales techniques” (Lassk et al., 2012, p. 145). Panelists were in agreement about the importance of consultative sales skills with all of the competencies coded as primary.

Because the sport product is unpredictable, inconsistent, and experienced differently by each customer, proper utilization of the consultative selling philosophy can aid the salesperson in delivering a customized sales pitch that meets the unique needs of each individual customer. As a result, a consultative sales approach is best implemented when salespeople are utilizing a full-menu marketing approach where they can sell any combination of individual tickets, mini season plans, full season plans, premium seats, and flexbook plans (Irwin, Sutton, & McCarthy, 2008). Another unique characteristic of the sport product is the strong emotional connection that fans have toward their favorite franchise, which may cloud their judgment of their experience when the team is losing. Account executives must overcome objections about team quality in a way that those selling predictable, non-emotionally charged products don't have to consider. Finally, sport salespeople are selling an intangible experience produced and consumed simultaneously and accessed with tickets that must be sold before the event occurs (Mullin, Hardy, & Sutton, 2007). Thus, a salesperson selling season ticket packages can create urgency to overcome objections and close a sale by pointing to the starting date of the upcoming season. In contrast, a salesperson selling office products cannot create urgency by pointing to an expiration date of a printer or copier.

It is apparent that consultative sales skills is a differentiator between high and low performing salespeople based on the level of difficulty sales managers perceive in training salespeople in this area. Four of the nine competencies were rated in the top quartile of difficulty. While sales managers find it relatively easy to train salespeople on what questions to ask during a needs analysis, it is more difficult to get the salesperson to ask the right question at the right time. One panelist explained, “There is always a gap in ‘knowing’ the right questions and then actually ‘executing’ them at the right moment.” Similarly difficult is getting the sales rep to listen to what the customer is actually saying in order to translate that information into an appropriate, customized recommendation. Rosenbloom (2001) also noted that the largest gap between top and bottom performers was in listening beyond product needs, whereby top performers are able to identify the issues underlying the expressed needs. One panelist explained,

The biggest issue today with young kids is that not enough of them enjoy talking to others, especially over the phone. They are used to social media in a capacity which avoids engagement of listening. I think one of the cores of that is “active listening” where they don't just wait for the other person to stop chattering so they can talk, but instead, actually discovering new things about the person through what information is given to them verbally.

Opening and Closing

The sport product is unique in the way that a variety of situational variables impact the ultimate offer that is presented to the customer. These situational variables include the decision to renew or purchase a new package, quality of team and opponents, weather, star players, time of day, and other seasonal influences (Mullin, Hardy, & Sutton, 2014). Sport salespeople must navigate these situational variables throughout the call, but particularly attempting to close the sale. Closing was the third most important rated competency, but perceived as relatively easy to train. As one panelist shared, “A great rep is not afraid to ask for the sale multiple times. A manager can’t be with every rep every time they talk to someone, so all we can do is continue to practice and give real-world examples of when our structure has worked. From there it is up to the rep to execute.” Perhaps panelist adherence to the age-old sales adage “Always be closing” aids in the relative ease of embedding closing within their training protocol for newly hired sport ticket sales representatives. However, one panelist pointed out, “A lot of young folks when they get told NO instantly stop, instead of trying to find another creative way to get a YES,” indicating the content necessary within training targeting the close.

Interestingly, opening was rated as slightly less important than closing, but much more difficult to train. Author experience has found that absent required adherence to a prescribed script, sport ticket sales trainees encounter difficulties initiating a meaningful and impactful introduction that piques receiver interest and frequently resort to casual, or insincere introductory conversation such as “How ya doin?” The design of a captivating opening demands constant revision in order to be relevant to the receiver. The business-to-business context demands that during the opening a sport ticket sales representative determine the initial receiver’s purchasing authority and, if necessary, appropriately navigate their way to the purchasing decision maker. Such tactics are not common to the newly hired sport ticket sales representative necessitating extensive training involving carefully structured role-playing.

Communication and Relationship Building

The panelists included competencies associated with personal communication skills, which was the fourth most important competency area. Most, if not all, of the competencies found within the category, primarily grounded in rhetoric, serve as the basis for success in a majority of the general competency categories. In all likelihood these skills would be screened during the hiring process perhaps accounting for their training difficulty ranking.

Relationship building was the sixth most important competency area. Widely held as an importance competency in sales, sport salespeople can leverage the strong emotional attachment and personal identification from fans that form strong emotional bonds with their favorite teams to build relationships (Mullin, Hardy, & Sutton, 2007). For example, a salesperson can simply “talk sports” to build rapport. Because salespeople are typically calling warm leads that have en-

gaged with the organization in some way in the past, they are talking with prospects who care about the team to some extent. Contrast this with a sales call pushing insurance, printers, or vacation clubs where product-focused salespeople may struggle to find common ground with customers.

Past research has indicated that the ability to build relationships stems from trustworthiness, a trait that is built on compatibility, credibility, and expertise (Wood, Boles, Johnson & Bellenger, 2008). “Compatibility portrays a friendly, approachable salesperson with a good reputation. Credibility addresses dependability and honesty. Expertise describes a competent, expert salesperson” (Lassk et al., 2012, p. 146). Sales managers reported that relationship building was nearly the most difficult competency to train. Not surprisingly, this training difficulty rating was almost identical to *opening* as author experience has found many sport sales managers suggest that sport ticket sales representatives use the opening to develop a relationship. While the opening serves as a first impression opportunity, it seems unlikely that a trusted relationship, as described by Wood et al. (2008), can occur without an investment of effort over time. This investment of time, coupled with the fact that relationship building is driven by innate personal characteristics and hard-to-teach soft skills, support why this competency category is difficult to train.

Knowledge and Skill Development

Knowledge and skill development was the seventh most important competency area. While the PSSTM model advocates for a systematic approach to training during the onboarding process, not all organizations may follow-up initial sales training with much support for entry-level employees. The most difficult to train competency in the area of knowledge and skill development was the willingness to improve through learning new ideas and professional development. Pierce et al. (2014) found that sport salespeople rated professional development activities, defined as reading books and articles on sales technique and attending sales training workshops, as the least important of the seven factors impacting job performance.

There are several possible explanations for why salespeople undervalue professional development. First, it is possible there is a lack of administrative support to deliver ongoing professional development. In fact, only a limited number of sales managers within professional sport organizations serve as actual trainers (Irwin & Sutton, 2011), in part because enhancing sport sales staff competency proficiency demands time away from selling. Likewise, managers often coach their staff as they were coached. Given the relatively new approach to professionalizing the sport ticket sales office, support for training, often viewed as an added expense, will take time. Second, there may be a lack of motivation on the part of sales reps to improve. As one panelist noted, “The most difficult thing to do especially with young people who are just starting out...is asking them to get better on their own time by reading and studying their craft.” Another panelist indicated that it is difficult to “motivate the individuals to WANT to learn and improve.” A third

explanation may be that organizations have a poor screening process. One panelist explained, "I believe that the assumption that you can improve a salesperson's willingness to invest time and energy in professional development is flawed. Most salespeople with gaps in this area were improperly screened in the hiring process."

Service and Education

Service and education was the lowest rated general competency area, and all three competencies in this area were coded as secondary. While service and education received broad support for inclusion in the competency model, the sales managers in this study did not reach a consensus that delivering an educated customer to the service team was a primary competency. The organizational model employed by the panelists' organization may have resulted in the disagreement toward service and education. Some organizations have a team dedicated to service and retention where the initial salesperson, on which this study primarily focused, hands the customer over to the service team. In contrast, salespeople in other organizations service the same clients to which they sold the package.

Implications

Sales managers, sport management educators, and researchers can use the competency model developed in this study. This study provides a framework for competency development that follows the five steps in Dubois' (1996) model. First, needs analysis for the sport ticket sales profession indicated that additional resources need to be deployed for the development of sales training in sport organizations. Even though sport sales accounts for the greatest percentage of positions, it also accounts for a high level of turnover. Second, the Delphi method employed in this study developed a list of 40 competencies divided into eight general competency categories stratified by primary and secondary competencies. Third, the competency model serves as a vital resource for professional training as well as academic curriculum planning. Fourth, the competencies provide hints as to the design and implementation of appropriate learning interventions. Activities such as role-playing, mock sales calls, video analysis, audio analysis, and other simulations allow salespeople to practice the skills before calling customers. Educators are encouraged to identify places in the curriculum where these competencies can be assessed such as courses in sport sales, marketing, strategic management, and communications.

Finally, the model provides formative and summative assessment measures. In lieu of relying exclusively on revenue generation and ticket sales volume, sport ticket sales managers and sport sales educators using an instrument such as a rubric that clearly defines levels of performance for each competency and collectively for each category of competencies, can provide staff and students with meaningful feedback aimed at improving performance. As a result, data collected from the competency model can be used in association with existing performance metrics such as revenue production, call ratio, appointment ratio, upselling ratio,

hours worked, personality type, lead conversion and the like. Such practice would enable practitioners and researchers to determine the factors most significantly influencing sport ticket sales performance. Sport management educators can utilize such performance data to report student-learning outcomes to external accrediting bodies.

Limitations

This study was limited to entry-level ticket sales positions. The competencies needed in other revenue generating departments within sport industry were not considered. The panelists did not address sales positions in corporate sponsorship and premium seat sales. Not only are the products different with premium seating and sponsorship sales, but these customers are also corporate purchasers. Additionally, the competencies at different levels of advancement in the organization were not considered by the panelists. As employees progress from inside sales to account executives and beyond, different competencies may become important. Finally, the sample may have over-represented males.

Conclusion

Despite being the largest employment sector within professional sports, the sport sales industry has yet to empirically develop a list of competencies for sales professionals. As a result, sales managers and educators lack tightly focused training and evaluation protocols, which has led to inefficient hiring practices negatively impacting performance, turnover, and satisfaction. This research identified the competencies required for success in an entry-level sport ticket sales position and the extent to which sales managers found it difficult to train salespeople on those competencies. The competency model is fundamental to improving the development of sales talent from the classroom to the sales room and beyond. Sport sales curriculum designers can utilize the competency model developed herein to create robust training protocols that best prepare account executives. The competency model is flexible in that training materials can be customized to the unique sales culture of each organization. It can also serve as the framework for a holistic assessment and evaluation plan that identifies talented sales employees.

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