

## Students' Perception on Career in Sales: The Challenge for Educators and Industrial Users

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### Abstract

Indonesia has a rapidly changing economy supported by the vastly growth of product and service providers. In order to compete in the highly demanding economy, those products and service providers need reliable, competent sales force as the companies' spearhead to win customers' attention and maintain the most valuable customers. However, the career in sales is likely to be under appreciated. Most people, including university business students have negative perception and tend to consider selling profession least prestigious. This study tries to investigate the perceptions of university business students about the career in sales. This study also tries to explain the challenge faced by educators and users in improving sales profession image in the eyes of the students.

**Keywords:** students perceptions, career in sales, salespeople performance, salespeople motivators

### Introduction

From a recent study it is concluded that the selling profession will play a vital role in protecting competitiveness and success in the complex and rapidly changing global economy. The U.S. economy requires approximately two million new sales force to maintain its economy leadership (Leasher & Moberg, 2008). Sales and sales related occupations is projected to be the most in-demand jobs in the United States with the growing number of 706,000 to 710,000 sales occupations advertised online by August 2012. By which, by 2010 and 2020, sales and related occupations are projected to add 1.9 millions new jobs (Rowe, 2012; ) with more than half of the new jobs will be for retail sales workers.

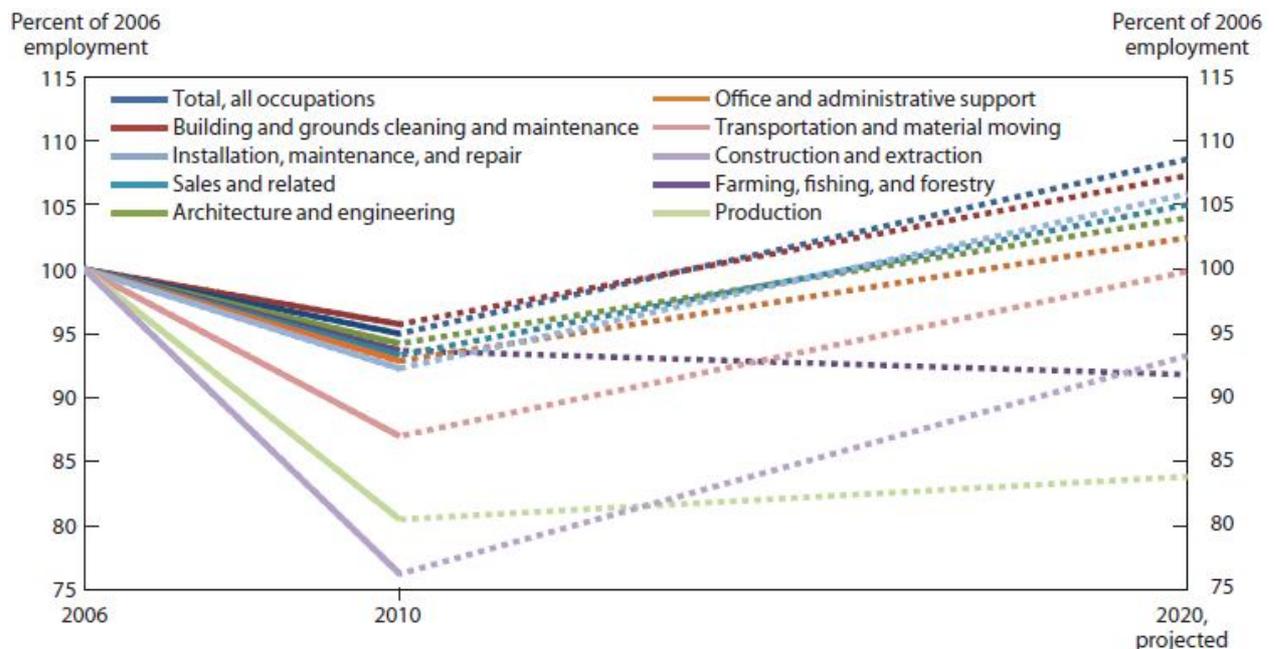


Chart 1. United States Employment, 2006 – 20120 and Projected 2010 – 2020  
(Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics)

Unfortunately, the career in sales is mostly viewed negatively and least favored by business students. Selling profession tends to have low image among them because they have negative and often inaccurate conceptions of selling (Dubinsky and O'Connor, 1983). The image and conception of

salespeople and selling profession are so low therefore most of university students were not interested to enrol in any career in sales. They consider the ethics of salespeople and selling profession as poor (Sparks and Johlke, 1995). Consequently, students were not interested in entering any selling profession (Jeski, 1995; Amin, Hayajneh, & Nwakanma, 1995).

### **Literature Review**

A recent study by Hendley and Shanka (2011), there are some motivational factors that influenced students to choose career in sales. Those motivational factors include the good working environment, strong leadership, high recognition, institutional support, challenging. Therefore, by identifying what motivates a higher education student to embark on a sales career, employers would be able to target these specific requirements and discuss them with prospective employees at the interviews. Consequently, these measures would help graduating higher education students to more likely stay in selling sales positions once they secure the position, thus reducing employee turnover costs for the firm. Additionally, it is imperative in today's selling to build customer relationships so as to both win and retain business.

Cook and Hartman (1986) found that female students were significantly more reluctant to enter sales related career than their male counterparts. Dubinsky (1980) explained that the male students' overall perceptions of career in sales tend to be more favorable. However, there are no statistically significant differences between female and male students' attitude towards career in sales. Negative images derived from various portrayals of salespeople in books, movies, and other mass media, have discovered by practitioners and academicians alike (Spillen, Totten, & Ziemniwics, 2007). They also discover that how students view the profession of selling will have an important effect on the sales of all types of companies. Simply put, without sales of products and services a market economy cannot survive. Yet, the study do not study very carefully the views and perceptions of potential sales professionals. As companies compete more and more in the global marketplace, sales force diversity becomes more important. Companies need to recruit salespeople to maintain their presence in various markets throughout the world.

Over the years many students have entered the workforce through the sales field. Many of them have become sales managers and have moved into various levels of importance in many wealthy companies. The need for well trained professional sales personnel to sell the products firms offer to the global markets is of major importance. The continuous recruiting process requires companies to seek out sales people who have the capability and desire to find and persuade buyers to consume goods and services (Weeks and Muehling 1987). Honeycutt and Ford (1995) indicated that the educational level of sales candidates is an important factor for companies selecting members of their global sales forces. As such, it is important to know what the students' beliefs and perceptions are regarding this important occupational position in the company. Knowing a student's predisposition up front can eliminate major recruiting difficulties when it becomes times to make a job offer in the future. Knowing students' opinions permits a firm an opportunity to create a message that could persuade or convince the potential candidates that personal selling may have some limitations (Honeycutt and Ford 1995).

Market economies worldwide are driven by the consumption of goods and services. To continue the consumption process we need sales people who are well trained with the skills to adapt to a continuous changing business environment. To achieve this goal and develop a sales force that is capable of producing sustainable revenues, companies visit college and university campuses to enlist potential sales personnel. Unfortunately, corporate recruiters many times find it difficult to persuade students to interview for sales positions let alone offer them a job in this field (Weeks and Muehling 1987). Because the sales profession is held in low regard by the public in general and students in particular, sales managers who are eager to recruit students for sales positions in their company are faced with a major challenge. The problem of the sales profession is one that is important to investigate and has implications throughout the business community. Efforts have been made to assess the skills needed by the sales profession and thereby adjust curricula to insure that students get the proper training that's needed by the profession (e.g., see Luthy 2006a, 2006b; Sohail and Bradmore 2003; Sojka and Gupta 2000; Dubinsky 1981; Dubinsky and O'Connor 1983).

Better understanding of the attitudes of students regarding personal selling can provide important directions for marketing education. Such information about the attitudes of students can provide opportunities for improving pedagogical approaches in university business programs in order to make careers in selling more attractive (Ford, Honeycutt, and Joseph 1995; Honeycutt et al. 1996; Lupton et al. 1997; Sohail and Bradmore 2003; Luthy 2006a).

### Research Objectives

The study has two objectives. First, to explain the students' perceptions regarding to the career in sales and sales related jobs in Indonesia. Second, to elaborate challenges faced by educators and industrial users to improve the image of selling profession.

### Methodology

This study entailed an early observation of students enrolled in Marketing Management and Sales Management units in a private university in Bandung, Indonesia. The survey was conducted to 130 sophomores who take the Marketing Management course and 65 third year students who take the Sales Management course.

### Results and Discussions

Table 1 shows the result to the students' perceptions of career in sales by examining the "selling profession images" that come to mind and an evaluation of these thought as being positive, negative, and neutral.

**Table 1. Evaluation of Selling Profession**

Thought Evaluation	Marketing Management Students	Sales Management Students	Total
Positive	40 (30.76%)	23 (38.40%)	63 (32.31%)
Negative	57 (43.85%)	21 (32.31%)	78 (40.00%)
Neutral	33 (25.38%)	21 (32.31%)	54 (27.69%)
Total			195 (100.00%)

Students with **positive thought** believe that career in sales is identical with good payment, target oriented, good communication skill, travelling, persuasive, people person, good behavior, and good appearance. On the other hand, students with **negative thought** believe that career in sales is identical with stressful target, pushy, undefined target market, long hours of work, low payment, low prestige, manipulative, and unclear career development.

It can be seen from the Table 1, there are more students who have negative perceptions about career in sales (40%) than those with positive perceptions (32.31%). By examining the two groups, it appears that the Sales Management students' perceptions towards the sales profession are more positive than the Marketing Management students's (38.40% compared to 30.76%). The difference perception is due to the Marketing Management students are still on their second year of study, while the Sales Management students are on their third year of study. It means that they are basically have better understanding that marketing profession is different than the selling profession.

Table 2 shows the result to the students' perceptions toward the salespeople's skill and job descriptions.

**Table 2. Student's Perceptions on Salespeople Skills and Job Description**

Thought Evaluation	Marketing Management Students	Sales Management Students	Total
To sell only means going door to door offering products.	130 (100%)	65 (100%)	195 (100%)
Selling requires a lot more skills than going door to door offering products.	0 (0.00%)	0 (0.00%)	0 (0.00%)
Total			195 (100.00%)

Looking at the table 2, it is no surprise that all of the students, both Marketing Management and Sales Management students believe that salespeople's only job description is going door to door offering products and that their only required skill is the selling skill. This believe is absolutely different from the reality whereas salespeople's job descriptions are a lot more than selling.

Industrial users, both products and service industry, require salespeople who have a much better skill than just selling skill. Many of the industrial users require salespeople with high soft skill, such as negotiation skills and communication skills, also those with particular technical skills. Industrial users often demand their sales force to master every technical aspects of their jobs including how to handle every customers' needs.

There is no formal education requirements for sales related jobs, although for some positions, especially those which concern with scientific and technical products, require a bachelor degree. Therefore many sales workers attend seminars or take courses in marketing to increase their skills to provide themselves with required skills.

### Conclusion

Therefore, it is a big challenge for the sales management educators and industrial users to be able to improve the image of sales profession by giving it a little more qualifications. First, sales management educators need to improve their own horizons that selling is not just about achieving target, but also a skillful job that requires determination to serve customers to the very aspects of customers need. Second, industrial users need to improve the image of selling profession by describing the salespeople's required skills and job descriptions on their job vacancy advertisement. They also should describe as much as motivating factors in sales profession in order to improve the students perceptions on career in sales.

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