

At a University Near You

Shaping the future of your sales organization

by: Jon Dunkelberger, Ricoh USA Inc.

Do you ever wonder what the future of your sales organization will be? There are two future-looking challenges that have led me to rewarding work and fun collaborations: (1) Evolving our sales organization for growth and (2) Developing our next generation of sales professionals.

As sales leaders, we are required to focus on our numbers this month and our results this year. But we also have a responsibility to focus on our people and build for the future — to care about what our sales organization will be like two to five years from now. That is where these two challenges converge. Yes, it is conceptual, but I will give you some strategies and resources that you can apply today.

To increase our customer impact and revenue, I think we need to start with purpose. In my work with the Ricoh dealer organization, we leverage our technology and capabilities to solve customer business challenges of user experience and productivity, security, sustainability, business process improvement and more. This can be a differentiator for our Ricoh dealers.

If we are doing something that matters to our customers — even if others can do it, but are not — it is a differentiator. I think that a purpose like this is meaningful for our next generation of sales professionals. Furthermore, I think that we need to evolve our sales organizations by investing in the next generation of sales professionals.

For me, it is personal; I struggled in the early years of my sales experience. Starting out in sales is tough, but struggling at it is brutal. So, I want to help those who commit to sales to have faster paths to success — and more fun — than I did.

I have been fortunate to have a mentor, Dain Dunston, to inspire me with ways to contribute. He partnered with us to form our Ricoh Dealer Next-Gen Advisory Group and told me: “The only thing we know for sure about the future is that it’s going to be shaped and led by energetic men and women coming into the business, just as our current dealer companies were conceived and grown by passionate people a generation or two ago. Sure, they are green, but to ignore their insight, ideas and enthusiasm is to miss the very changes we need to craft.”



There is a massive business reason for us to invest in our next generation of sales professionals. According to statistics I have seen, in five years, more than 60% of our workforce will be millennials and Generation Zs. Our customers’ decision makers will be in the same generations and our sales organizations should match. That is in just five years — the blink of an eye. Being ready means that we are planning, preparing and acting now.

As we have delivered the Ricoh Summer Series of webinars to our dealers, I have had the opportunity to chat with author Stan Phelps and see how he addresses cross-generational challenges. Phelps was kind enough to share these thoughts from his Goldfish Tank Summer Tour: “Today’s leader must manage across five generations. They also must find a balance. They first have to seek out and recruit the next generation of sales professionals. Gen Z wants M&Ms, but not the candy. They want meaning and mentoring. You need to master both to effectively onboard and retain the next generation. At the same time, you also need to make sure your [experienced] workers who have deep expertise don’t feel overlooked. They want to feel appreciated and valued. Leaders who are able to get both to

collaborate and work together will be poised for success.”

I have good news. You have a future partner that is already acting for your benefit — a university near you with a sales program. It is developing your next generation of sales professionals — candidates who have learned sales strategies and processes, practiced customer interactions, role-played sales engagements and learned approaches to solving customers’ business challenges. They may already have professional certifications, like the National Association of Sales Professionals’ (NASPs’) Certified Professional Sales Person certification. Best of all, you can get to know these candidates and even observe them in a sales setting to see if there is a fit (and vice versa).

When researching a university sales program, I can find practically all the information I need online. Here is what I am looking for:

■ **Curriculum & Faculty** — Sales curriculum is generally listed in the marketing department. I look for a continuum across multiple classes, from basic to advanced, with some experiential learning. I can also find out if there is a professional designation included as one of the classes.

■ **Student Engagement** — Specifically, I am looking for a university sales club. Being a member of the club will tell me a lot about the student because I will see the club’s activities — usually through its social media.

■ **Career Readiness** — Sales competitions are where I start. These competitions do not have the visibility of a major collegiate sport like football, but you will be surprised by how many and how relevant they are. Students can compete at a national, regional and intramural level, just like major sports. Competitions include every element of professional sales skills building and, thanks to business community partnerships, they are extremely relevant. Recently, there was a national competition based on digital transformation. How is that for relevant?

■ **Progressive Work** — Many university programs have a sales institute, center or lab. These organizations will demonstrate the institution’s commitment to advancing sales as a successful, vibrant discipline. They will usually have a website to tell you about their work and business partnerships, explaining what you will contribute (time and funds) and what you can expect in return (engagement with the students). There will often be partner tiers with a “starter” level.

A great example of a corporate/university partnership in our industry is Applied Innovation, headquartered in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and the University of South Florida (USF). Rob Hammond, director of the Center for Marketing and

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Sales Innovation at the Muma College of Business at USF, told me: “Business partner engagement is a win, win, win. Students win by learning about real-world business issues and opportunities. Companies win by connecting with amazing students who ramp faster, require less training and turn over less. And academic institutions win by providing relevant, impactful resources for students. We are grateful

to have the opportunity to partner with Applied Innovation to support the development of the next generation of go-to-market leaders.”

John Lowery, CEO of Applied Innovation, agrees: “The relationship with USF has been amazing. Helping to develop tomorrow’s sales leaders has been a joy and has created a pipeline of candidates for Applied Innovation.”

You do not have to go it alone. There are organizations that can help you with your research and engagement. The Sales Education Foundation (SEF) is an excellent resource for your research, from articles to program lists to contact information. Sally Stevens, co-founder of SEF, told me how gratifying it has been to see the foundation’s membership go from about a dozen institutions in 2007 to more than 200 today. She attributes it to three catalysts:

■ The willingness of the academics in the original programs to be very collaborative with new people wanting help and advice.

■ The willingness of corporate sponsors to fund new programs (because all sales programs must be self-sufficient).

■ The broader availability of doctorate programs in sales to train future professors so universities can maintain their accreditation with academically qualified staff.

How does the “big why” of solving customer business challenges intersect with evolving our sales organizations? Because our next generation of sales professionals will demand this type of organizational purpose.

Recently, Forbes covered Deloitte’s survey of 23,000 Gen Zs and millennials (“Gen Zs And Millennials Seek Purpose And Progress In A Changing World: Insights From Deloitte’s 2024 Gen Z And Millennial Survey,” Forbes, May 15, 2024) and stated that “having a sense of purpose at work is key to their job satisfaction.” Forbes goes on to say: “They want to work for organizations whose values align with their own.” And the Deloitte data shows “roughly six in 10 Gen Zs and millennials think businesses have the opportunity to influence a range of societal challenges. Protecting the environment is at the top of the list.”

We worked on this connection to societal challenges with our Ricoh dealer organization’s summer intern team:

Aliana Lockett (Penn State University), Hayden Dunlap (Elizabethtown College), Maeve McLaughlin (University of South Carolina) and Gabrielle Witte (James Madison University [JMU]). The interns learned about solving the customer business challenges of security, sustainability and employee engagement while generating leads through an outreach program of email, phone calls, LinkedIn and informational webinars.

In recent years, Ricoh has partnered with the JMU sales program, which is how we met Witte. Richard Tate, faculty member and director of JMU's Center for Professional Sales shared: "We collaborate with outstanding companies like Ricoh to bring real-world sales scenarios into our classrooms, creating immersive experiential learning opportunities. These hands-on experiences not only shape our students' career expectations, but also build the resilience necessary to thrive in any sales organization upon graduation."

Will your university partnership and the next generations

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be an end-all for your sales growth? Not at first. As with any worthwhile organizational development approach, there will be challenges and it will take time to make it a part of your culture. But as Dunston reminds us: "It's about learning from each other, sharing viewpoints and ideas, and balancing years of experience with fresh viewpoints. It's about the power of bringing divergent thinking into play, which makes all of us smarter." ■

Jon Dunkelberger serves as region business director for Ricoh's Dealer Division, where he is focused on helping dealers develop their sales organizations and grow their businesses. Dunkelberger is committed to the development of the next generation of sales professionals and has taught sales strategy as an adjunct professor at the University of South Carolina's Darla Moore School of Business. He can be reached at jon.dunkelberger@ricoh-usa.com. Visit www.ricoh-usa.com.

