

# **Developments in Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 9, 1982**

**AN EXPERIENTIAL EXERCISE INTRODUCING STUDENTS  
TO THE ROLE AMBIGUITY FACED BY SALESPERSONS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper presents an experiential exercise designed to introduce future salespeople to the type of role ambiguity that they may well be facing in the future. The exercise requires class members to role play the parts of a buyer, a sales rep, and a sales manager. Two versions of the task were run, with varying levels of expectations on the part of the buyer and the sales manager being incorporated. Although time problems were encountered, the students evaluated the exercise favorably.

## **INTRODUCTION**

More than 50 percent of the students graduating with a 8.5. in Marketing take sales jobs. Many of these students take courses such as Sales Management or Sales Communications to better prepare for their first position, but many still find the transition difficult. One frequent problem is leaving a situation in which their role (as a student) is highly structured and entering a role which is more ambiguous.

Although all members of organizations face some role ambiguity, few encounter as much as the salesperson. The salesperson has the normal encounters with supervisors, co-workers, and other home organization personnel. Additionally, the sales rep is primarily responsible for customer relations. While she/he represents the selling firm, it is quite clear that she/he must be as flexible as possible in terms of his/her "offering so that long term customer relationships can be developed. Further, characteristics of the sales rep's position increase the ambiguity (1) the sales transactions normally transpire on the customer's business location, lessening supervisor scrutiny and the normative constraints felt by the salesperson; (2) given that the salesperson is frequently removed from the supervisor, the evaluation process is based on performance outcomes rather than on the process used--the salesperson thus becomes quite dependent upon the customer to insure positive performance outcomes; and (3) the goals of the two parties (supervisor/customer) are in some conflict, with the sales rep in the middle. Consequently, the selling situation generates uncertainty and interpersonal conflict, and demand for coping exceeds most occupational norms (Bagozzi 1980).

The typical sales management student is introduced to role ambiguity in class lectures. The student, however, may perceive the topic to be one of academic interest rather than of practical significance. The experiential exercise discussed in this paper is intended to help the student experience the nature of the role ambiguity phenomenon. The transition from student to sales rep is therefore made with a more realistic set of expectations about the job structure.

## **THE EXPERIENTIAL EXERCISE**

The conflicting expectations held by the sales manager and

by the customer are one cause of the salesperson's role ambiguity. A simple paradigm showing possible situations is shown in Figure 1. A comprehensive exercise might try to present examples of all four combinations. However, due to time constraints (one class period), this exercise used only two combinations: (1) high sales manager expectations, low customer expectations and (2) low sales manager expectations, high customer expectations. These combinations were chosen because of their contrasting natures. If only one combination were used, the high-high

**FIGURE 1  
COMBINATIONS OF SALES MANAGER'S AND  
BUYER'S EXPECTATIONS**

		Buyer's Expectations	
		Less Demanding	Very Demanding
Sales Manager's Expectations	Less Demanding	Not Investigated	Exercise B
	Very Demanding	Exercise A	Not Investigated

combination might be the best choice.

Scenarios were written for the two selected combinations. Three students role played in each scenario, taking the positions of sales manager, sales rep, and buyer. The general instructions (shown in Figure 2) and the sales rep's instructions (shown in Figure 3) were the same for both scenarios.

**FIGURE 2  
GENERAL INSTRUCTIONS**

Each of you will be assigned a specific role (sales manager, sales rep, or buyer). During the presentation, the supplier will be located on the side of the room away from the door and the buyer will be located near the door (except that the buyer will originally be in the hall while the sales manager gives the instructions to the sales rep). The presentation will start with the sales rep in the sales manager's office, receiving instructions. The sales rep is free to clarify these instructions should he/she want. Next the sales rep is to visit the buyer in his/her office and attempt to negotiate a sale. The terms of the final contract (should one be made) will serve as the basis of the class discussion.

Students seeking extra credit volunteered to participate in the exercise. All students volunteering were

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given extra credit, but the students selected to participate were told that they had been randomly selected. In actuality, the students were selected on the basis of (1) their likelihood of being in class, (2) their willingness to participate according to the guidelines supplied, and (3) their ability to perform the task well. Three selected students were notified during the class period before the exercise was to take place, and they were given the necessary materials. Also, they met with the instructor in order to clarify any questions. The second group of students was notified during class on presentation day. They organized their presentation while the first group was making theirs.

FIGURE 3  
SALES REP'S INSTRUCTIONS

Given the instructions from the sales manager, negotiate a contract with the buyer. Your product is generally rated as the best available, and your firm has always been very customer oriented. Prior to the class presentation, you may interact with the sales manager to prepare a dialogue and you also may interact with the buyer to prepare that dialogue. The buyer and the sales manager are not to interact with each other directly.

As indicated in Figures 4 and 5, the first group was given a scenario in which the sales manager was very exacting while the buyer had relatively flexible demands. The second group had the opposite combination. The sales managers' instructions are shown in Figure 4, while the buyers' instructions are shown in Figure 5.

FIGURE 4  
SALES MANAGERS' INSTRUCTIONS

### Sales Manager's Instructions--Exercise A

Stress the following details in your discussions with the sales rep.

--The sales rep has spent a lot of time "prospecting" for sales from the buyer and it is time to close in for the kill.

--While it is the general practice to allow the sales rep some flexibility in determining the terms of the contract, it has been noted that the sales rep has been too liberal in the past and some of this contracts have been only marginally profitable. Cases in point:

1. The sales rep has allowed Buyer A to order in lots of 50 cases, which is below our normal minimum order quantity of 200 cases. As a consequence, our transportation costs to Buyer A are much higher than we had planned.
2. The sales rep negotiated a contract with Buyer B that failed to specify how frequently he/she could order. Our normal procedures are to ship on a weekly basis, but Buyer B has been ordering 200 cases twice a week. We would be able to save \$100 or so a week with this buyer alone by pooling shipments in order to get volume discounts.

3. While we give our sales reps a little flexibility in price setting, we expect them to deviate from the traditional price only in those situations in which they cannot close the sale otherwise. This sales rep has consistently used the lowest price available in his/her negotiations.

—Our traditional terms are as follows:

1. Price:

Volume	Price per Case	Discount Price (if necessary)
50 cases	\$100	\$100
51-200 cases	\$ 98	\$ 96
201-500 cases	\$ 95	\$ 92
Any Quantity over 500 cases	\$ 92	\$ 88

2. Minimum Order Quantity of 200 cases except in extreme instances.

3. Minimum Order Frequency--weekly.

YOU ARE NOT TO INTERACT WITH THE BUYER

### Sales Manager's Instructions--Exercise B

The sales rep has consistently done well in terms of volume, although at times it appears that he has been too flexible in his/her terms in order to get the sale. His customers seem to be loyal to him/her, as repeat sales are high. Our traditional terms are as follows:

1. Price:

Volume	Traditional Price per Case	Lowest price that the product can be discounted to in order to get a sale
50 cases	\$100	\$100
51-200 cases	\$ 98	\$ 96
201-500 cases	\$ 95	\$ 92
Any Quantity over 500 cases	\$ 92	\$ 88

2. Minimum Order Quantity of 200 cases except in extreme instances.

3. Minimum Order Frequency--weekly.

YOU ARE NOT TO INTERACT WITH THE BUYER

The sales rep and the buyer in each group were to agree to terms and sign a contract similar to the one shown in Figure 6.

After the completion of the transaction, the audience rated the quality of the contract on the following criteria: fairness of the overall contract to both parties, fairness of the price, equitability of the minimum order quantity, and equitability of the order frequency. These criteria were presented as statements, and the responses were given on a five-point Likert-type scale varying from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree. Next, the audience was asked to rate the amount of role ambiguity faced by the sales rep, using an instrument developed by Ford, Walker, and Churchill (1974) and discussed in Bagozzi (1980). The instrument is shown in Appendix A. The instrument's

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dimensions span more than the ambiguity associated with determining the terms of sale that will satisfy both the sales manager and the buyer. For example, items deal with the sales rep's allocation of time, the frequency of sales calls, and family expectations.

FIGURE 5  
BUYERS' INSTRUCTIONS

## Buyer's Instructions--Exercise A

There are four suppliers for the product being sold by the sales rep. You have purchased from one of his/her competitors in the past, but that firm is closing out its line and you are to choose from one of the three remaining suppliers. The firm being dealt with now has the best reputation in terms of quality and dependability, but their price is generally higher than the competition. Your firm rates quality, dependability, and price as being equally important. Your firm does have some unused inventory capacity.

Your firm needs:

Weekly quantity	150 cases
Current price	\$95
Current ordering practice	weekly

YOU ARE NOT TO INTERACT WITH THE SALES MANAGER.

## Buyer's Instructions--Exercise B

There are four suppliers for the product being sold by the sales rep. You have purchased from one of his/her competitors in the past, but that firm is closing out its line. You are to choose from one of the three remaining suppliers. The firm being dealt with now has a good reputation in terms of quality and dependability, but they also have the highest price. This product is used as a major component of your own product, and the demand for your product is very price elastic. In other words, there is a big emphasis from purchasing, engineering, and accounting to buy as cheaply as possible as long as the component is of adequate quality and is available when needed. Your firm currently uses 150 cases each week, and has been used to ordering on a weekly (or in emergencies, twice a week) basis. You are paying your current supplier \$95 per case. Warehouse capacity is available, but the company's preference is to use that precious space for finished goods as opposed to manufacturing inventory.

YOUR ARE NOT TO INTERACT DIRECTLY WITH THE SALES MANAGER.

FIGURE 6  
SALES CONTRACT

## OFFICIAL CONTRACT

As a representative of my firm, I agree to purchase \_\_\_\_\_ units per \_\_\_\_\_ at a price of  
number time period  
\_\_\_\_\_ per unit.

\$

Buyer's Signature

Sales rep's Signature

Students have some problems in using the instrument to evaluate the role playing exercise since some of the terms are not pertinent. The inclusion of the seemingly irrelevant items is intentional, as they provide basis for obtaining a more systematic view of the ole ambiguity faced by sales representatives. The debriefing session emphasizes those causes of sales ambiguity not related to the sales transaction itself is well as those observable in the role playing exercises.

To better understand how the exercise has been employed, the following discussions relates the exercise to the guidelines for ABSEL contributors to facilitate replication and use' that Dick Nordstrom provided for Certo's (1981) presidential comments in the ABSEL News Letter. The details are shown in Table 1. The exer- cise has been used only once to date. The exercise ran smoothly, except that too much time was spent in evaluating the learning process (this will be discussed in greater detail in the next section). As this evaluation process was added primarily for providing feedback for this paper, this added time will not be required for future exercises. Consequently, it is thought that ample time will be available for adequate debriefing in the future.

TABLE 1  
DESCRIPTION OF THE COURSE SETTING

### Class Organization

1. Size of class: 50 (44 attended on presentation day)
2. Size of team: 2 groups of 3
3. Length of class period: 75 minutes

### Feedback Mechanism for Debriefing

1. Exercise evaluation using the instrument in Appendix A

### Grading System

1. Extra credit offered to all those willing to participate; participants chosen "randomly"
2. Extra credit was worth 2 percent of their grade

### Time Allocation

1. Presentations take about 10 to 15 minutes; a break of about 10 minutes in between is needed to give the second group enough time to prepare.
2. Advance planning is required only to the extent that the first group needs to be notified in the class period previous to the presentations. Some time should be allowed for out-of-class interaction with that group. A second person is needed at the beginning of the class to work with the second group as they develop their presentation outside the classroom.

### Useful Sources

1. Most sales management texts have chapters covering role ambiguity.
2. Added reading may be found in Bagozzi (1980) and Ford, Walker, and Churchill (1974).

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## Depth of Experience

1. The exercise has been used only once to-date.

## Alternatives

1. None known

## Special Equipment Required

1. None

## Expected Results (in the exercise itself)

Quantity ordered	201 units
Price	\$95
Ordering frequency	twice every three weeks

## Actual results

	Scenario A	Scenario B
Quantity ordered	200	201
Price	\$95	\$92
Ordering frequency	weekly	every other week

## Mistakes Made

1. Insufficient time was available for the debriefing session. This was largely due to the amount of time allocated to the evaluation of the learning process; this time will not be required normally.

## EVALUATION OF THE EXERCISES

Five students were asked to miss the first presentation and to use that time to read the two scenarios (in reverse order of their presentation). After reading each scenario, they filled out the instrument in Appendix A. The intent was to evaluate the scenario itself, without the presentation having an effect. The five students found this to be a difficult task and, consequently, they took more time than had been expected. Thus, the second presentation was delayed, as it was desired that the evaluators have a chance to view one of the presentations. Consequently, the expected one half hour debriefing session was considerably shortened (to about 10 minutes). Another reason for the limited debriefing session was the time required for all students to evaluate the exercise as a learning exercise. The instructor was disappointed that the debriefing session was shortened, and it is his belief that the exercise would have been much more effective had it been discussed more thoroughly. One student commented similarly on his evaluation sheet, "Not enough time at the end of the presentation to discuss what went on. If there were more time, it would have been great."

### Evaluations of the Role Ambiguity in the Scenarios

Table 2 gives the mean ratings of the role ambiguity found in the two scenarios. For each scenario, two means are presented; the first represents the ratings of the 33 students who saw both presentations and the second represents the ratings of the five students who read the scenarios (in reverse order) before rating. In general, the pattern of ratings for those who saw the presentations (the audience) were the same as those given by the readers. The readers' scores tended to be more extreme for both scenarios, but this is expected since the sample size was so small. Apparently, the order in which the scenarios were presented did not affect

the evaluation.

The scenarios were designed such that A had a demanding sales manager and a more flexible buyer, while Scenario B had the roles reversed. As might be expected, the sales rep was seen as knowing his/her limits to authority better in Scenario A, while the sales manager's satisfaction with the sales rep's performance was seen as being lower in that scenario. Otherwise, the two scenarios were viewed quite similarly on the criteria listed in Appendix A. To some extent, this would indicate that the attempt to present two contrasting role plays was not very successful. The instructor noted that this was due in part to the individuals chosen to play the various roles. The sales manager in Scenario B, who was given more flexible instructions than his counterpart in Scenario A, took the role playing very seriously and actually was just as stern, or possibly more so, than his counterpart. The best laid plans of mice and men

The contracts agreed upon in the two scenarios were also evaluated by the audience, and the results are shown in Table 3. The terms of the contracts themselves (as well as the expected terms) are given in Table 1. The contract determined in Scenario B is actually closer to the expected results, although the audience rated it as being less fair. The terms of the contract in Scenario A are far more favorable to the seller in terms of the order frequency, order quantity, and price. Quite possibly the class orientation had encouraged the student to view the sales transaction more from the sales manager's perspective (after all, the exercise did take place in a sales management class).

Again, the primary reason for the evaluation of the scenarios as to the amount of role ambiguity found and as to the fairness of the contracts was to provide more food for thought for the debriefing session. The instrument in Appendix A was used to show that the sales transactions only incorporated some of the potential causes of the role ambiguity faced by salespersons.

TABLE 2  
EVALUATION OF THE ROLE AMBIGUITY IN THE TWO SCENARIOS

Criterion (Listed Completely in Appendix A)	Scenario A		Scenario B	
	Audience n = 33 Mean*	Readers n = 5 Mean	Audience n = 33 Mean	Readers n = 5 Mean
Limits to authority	4.2	3.8	3.9	2.8
Sales manager's expectations	3.4	3.2	3.2	4.4
Frequency of sales calls	3.3	3.4	2.9	3.2
Importance of activities	3.6	3.4	3.4	4.4
Customer's sales call frequency	3.1	3.2	3.0	3.8
Amount of time spent on job	2.8	3.0	2.9	2.1
Freedom in negotiation	4.1	4.8	4.2	4.6
Modify delivery schedules	3.8	3.4	3.3	3.0
Sales manager's satisfaction	3.2	3.2	3.6	4.0
Customer's expectations	3.6	3.6	3.9	3.8
Customer's satisfaction	3.8	3.6	3.8	3.6
Family's expectations	3.0	3.0	3.0	3.0

\*Based on coding system 5 = strongly agree, 1 = strongly disagree.

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**TABLE 3**  
**EVALUATION OF THE CONTRACTS REACHED**

<u>Criterion</u>	Scenario A n = 33 mean*	Scenario B n = 33 Mean
The overall contract is fair	3.9	3.5
The price is fair	4.0	3.9
Minimum order quantity is fair	3.9	3.6
Order frequency is fair	3.8	3.5

\*Based on coding system 5 = strongly agree, 1 = strongly disagree.

## Evaluation of the Exercise Itself

All 45 students evaluated the exercise after the abbreviated debriefing session. The results are shown in Table 4. As can be seen, there was generally strong agreement that the exercise was enjoyable and a good learning experience. Even though demand characteristics were present that would tend to elicit favorable responses, these results are viewed as being especially favorable when one considers that the debriefing session was shortened due to a lack of time. The comparison of the exercise to the lecture as a learning experience is made more meaningful when one considers that the instructor was named the University's outstanding teacher during the 1978-19 school year.

## SUMMARY

This paper discussed the development and use of a role playing exercise to present the topic of role ambiguity faced by the sales

representative. The students gave favorable attitudinal measures toward the exercise, despite the fact that the debriefing process was incomplete due to a lack of time. The exercise discussed here had two groups of students portray sales transactions, with the intention that different sales managers and customer orientations would be seen. However, the results indicate that the two presentations were seen very similarly. Consequently, we recommend that only one of the cells in Figure 1 be presented, preferably the high sales manager/high customer expectations cell which can be expected to generate the largest amount of role ambiguity. This reduction would allow more time for debriefing, during which most of the learning is expected to occur. Given the difficulty that many students have with the concept of role ambiguity, and the likelihood that it will become an important factor in their lives if they join a sales force, we believe that the role playing exercise is a valuable teaching tool.

## REFERENCES

- Bagozzi, Richard P. (1980), Causal Models in Marketing, New York: John Wiley and Sons.
- Certo, Sam (1981), "President's Ramblings," ABSEL Newsletter, 1 (#3, April), 10.
- Ford, Neil H., Walker, Orville C., Jr., and Churchill, Gilbert A., Jr. (1974), "Expectation Specific Measures of the Inter-Sender Conflict and Role Ambiguity Experienced by Industrial Salesmen, Journal of Business Research, 3, 95-112.

**TABLE 4**  
**EVALUATING OF THE LEARNING EXPERIENCE**

<u>Criterion</u>	Percentage Distribution (n = 44)					
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean*
I enjoyed watching/ participating in this sales exercise	31	60	4	4	0	4.2
I believe that this exercise was a good learning experience	20	73	2	4	0	4.1
This exercise was a better means of presenting the material than a lecture on "role ambiguity faced by the sales rep"	22	60	11	7	0	4.0

\*Based on a coding system of 5 = strongly agree and 1 = strongly disagree.

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## APPENDIX A

### ROLE AMBIGUITY INSTRUMENT

Evaluate the situation faced by the sales rep in this scenario. Using the following scale, indicate your level of agreement with the associated statement.

<u>Statement</u>	<u>Strongly Agree</u>	<u>Agree</u>	<u>Neither</u>	<u>Disagree</u>	<u>Strongly Disagree</u>
The sales rep is certain as to his/her limits to authority.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
The sales rep is certain as to his/her sales manager's expectations for allocating time.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
The sales rep is certain as to how frequently she/he is to make sales calls.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
The sales rep is certain of his/her sales manager's evaluations of the importance of various activities.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
The sales rep is certain of his/her customer's expectations as to the frequency of calls.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
The sales rep is certain of his/her family's expectations for the amount of time spent on the job.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
The sales rep is certain as to how much freedom he/she has in the negotiation of prices.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
The sales rep is certain as to how much freedom he/she power to modify delivery schedules.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
The sales rep is certain as to his/her sales manager's satisfaction with his/her sales performance.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
The sales rep is certain at to his/her customer's general expectations.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
The sales rep is certain of his/her customer's satisfaction with his/her performance.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
The sales rep is certain of his/her family's general expectations.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____