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Will Millennials Fill the Expected Flood of Open Sales Positions?

By William Steiger

UCF Forum columnist

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The aging of the sales workforce is expected to create a glut of open sales positions in the next five years.

The recession resulted in many sales jobs being held open and it created a gap between experienced sales people and the rest of the sales force. New sales people just weren't being hired to keep the pipeline full.

Now, as sales workers retire at an increasing rate, sales companies are under pressure to play catch-up. They will need millennials to fill the gap.

A millennial is someone born from 1982 to 2000, but there are varying opinions on whether they can or will fill that sales void.

Mark Roberge, chief revenue officer of Inbound Sales Products for HubSpot, wrote an article for Sales & Marketing Management magazine that explained why "Millennials Make Great Sales People." The Wall Street Journal recently featured an interesting article titled "Bright Future in Sales? Millennials Are Hesitant," in which the writer highlighted the difficulty employers were having persuading millennials to work in sales. A follow-up to that article in Forbes by Roberta Matuson pointed out "Why You Can't Fill Sales Positions With Millennials, and What You Can Do to Change This."

So why is there this apparent contradiction? First of all, it's always dangerous to generalize when discussing generational cohorts. Second, the sheer size of the millennial cohort ensures that there will be considerable variance within the group. Third, the occupational preferences of the millennial cohort are complicated by the range of ages within the group.

As an instructor in the sales track at the University of Central Florida, I have an up-close view of millennials and their inclination to pursue a career in sales. The basic sales class that is offered in the marketing department includes students from a wide variety of major courses of study. They enroll because the class is required or because they want to improve their interpersonal communication, especially as they prepare for job interviews.

At the start of the semester I ask them if they're interested in a career in sales and about 25 percent raise their hands. When I ask the same question at the end of class, about 50 percent of the hands go up.

This confirms two things. Many millennials don't know what they want to do after graduation. Second, the millennials' interest in a sales career can be influenced by a program that emphasizes professional behavior in the pursuit of an honorable occupation. It has to change their perception of a career in sales.

Sales isn't for every millennial student, so sales recruiters have adapted and learned how to attract the millennial student. This generation is graduating with more debt than any previous generation of college students. Companies have introduced sales jobs that start students at a higher rate of base salary to reduce the initial risk of taking the jobs.

Millennials want to learn, grow and advance, so companies have structured career paths to clearly define how new employees can advance through performance and promotion to leadership positions. Millennials are also very interested in choosing a company with a positive culture. The response has been an increased emphasis on having a transparent business culture that is collaborative, exciting, fun and, ideally, technology driven.

I also coordinate the professional sales program at UCF. This limited-access program is designed to prepare students for a career in sales. Last spring, more than 100 students applied for admission to the program and they all shared one thing in common: They wanted a career in sales.

The program has a 95 percent placement rate because companies need sales people, and our program—and more than 100 other programs around the country—are producing a supply of freshly minted millennial sales professionals to meet the industry demand.

Research studies have found that sales-program graduates ramp up in sales assignments quicker, they stay longer with the company, and they perform at a higher level than non-sales program graduates.

Whether they graduate with a business degree or a sales-specific training program degree, millennials *are* ready to fill sales jobs.

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