



A chance to shine

Sales and marketing is an ideal career for young people, argues [PATRICIA SEABRIGHT](#). But they need your help

The 'lost generation' was a recent headline reporting the news that youth unemployment has hit record levels, with one in five young people between 16 and 24 years old now unemployed.

What does this mean to the sales and marketing industry? What can the industry do to help ensure that it can find suitable recruits? And what can it do to help cultivate core skills in young people that will ensure their fitness for work?

The good news is that sales and marketing is a core industry of the 21st century. The UK may no longer be primarily an industrial economy, but it still retains a significant manufacturing base as well as its large, diverse services sector. And we consume a great deal. In order to satisfy the needs of consumers, we have to sell and market a vast range of products and services.

What, though, are young people doing to take advantage of this and equip themselves for the world of work in the 21st century? Sadly, the answer is not a lot.

Did you know, for example, that every year in the UK there are more people training to become hairdressers than there are actual working hairdressers? Similarly, there are about 370,000 students on 'theatre studies' courses, which is more than the total number of people employed in the whole of the UK entertainment industry,

including theatres, cinemas, radio and TV broadcasters and computer games manufacturers. A college principal in Yorkshire commented recently on the courses run by her college: "Beauty is full to bursting, construction is crammed, but in the areas where there are jobs — in business, sales and marketing, IT and logistics — there is still plenty of capacity."

Employer bodies such as the Confederation of British Industry and the Institute of Directors often complain about the lack of basic commercial awareness, business acumen and communication skills in young people, which are often seen as a major contributor to the worryingly high levels of youth unemployment and the rise of structural levels of so called NEET (not in employment, education or training) young people.

Why then are young people selecting education that is very unlikely to help them secure their future financial wellbeing? Why do they seem stuck in a gender-stereotyped time warp that says boys do construction and girls hair and beauty? Why are they not seeking out education that equips them for the realities of the 21st century job landscape; education that gives them more pragmatic and commercial skills?

Training and experience in sales and marketing offers young people a skill set that is applicable to all industries, from retail through to real estate, from software to shipping. Its universality makes

it a gateway to a huge range of jobs, at many different levels, and even to various self-employment options.

We need to find out why young people are not flooding into sales and marketing as a career of choice. Can we attribute it to the young people themselves, or could it also be a failing of the sales and marketing industry to market itself as an attractive career choice?

What do young people think of when you ask them about sales? Many years ago, I got a very clear indication of what many graduates thought of a career in sales. I remember being a new recruit for Procter and Gamble and manning a stand at recruitment fairs at various universities — and watching as my colleagues on the marketing stand were mobbed, while I felt like ‘Norma-no-mates’ on the sales stand. Clearly, a sales career was perceived by graduates to be ‘uncool’.

Perhaps the many stereotypes of ‘Del boys’ and secondhand car salesmen have created a very negative perception of sales. The reality of many of today’s sales operations (sophisticated national and global account management, business management, category and trade marketing management) may be a million miles away from the stereotypes — yet the negative image persists and influences young people’s thinking.

If we look at another group of young people, those who are NEET, what are their perceptions of a career in sales? One of many issues for this group is lack of awareness of any role or industry that is outside the limited sphere of their immediate experience.

Often from challenged family backgrounds, many of them have not had much opportunity to experience life beyond their town or their borough. What can be done to help raise awareness among these young people that opportunities exist for them in sales and marketing? Raising the awareness and aspirations of this group might help them make more practical choices of college courses and qualifications.

Physician, heal thyself! Perhaps we in the sales and marketing industry need to market our profession better. Could it be that we are doing a poor job at selling the benefits of the industry to young people? Do we need better PR and to evangelise the profession much more than we are doing at present?

The raison d’être of the ISMM is to raise the profile and credibility of the sales and marketing profession. Its qualifications at different levels provide young people with a practical route into sales and marketing careers. The ISMM and one of

its approved centres, Eureka, are working specifically to communicate the benefits of sales and marketing qualifications in schools and young people’s organisations.

There is, however, a real need for other sales organisations to play an active role in this, both for their own benefit in producing their own pipeline of future employees, and also to demonstrate their social responsibility in helping to promote these practical skills to young people. Salespeople and sales organisations could and should make an effort to:

- Liaise with schools to promote practical learning in sales and marketing
- Offer meaningful work experience
- Sponsor local young people to attain ISMM qualifications
- Talk about sales and marketing careers to young people’s groups and organisations
- Provide learning materials and equipment to schools and young people’s groups to raise their awareness of the company and help teaching of core commercial skills.

If you or your organisation would be interested in getting involved in this type of initiative but don’t know how to engage with local schools and young people’s organisations, then the ISMM and Eureka can help you. Please contact us for more information on how to get involved.



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