

MANDI : LEARNING MANAGEMENT THROUGH FIELD SALES EXPERIENCE

T Prasad

National Institute Of Industrial Engineering (Nitie)

Tprasad1961@Yahoo.Co.In

ABSTRACT

In this article author tried to describe how a field sales experience can be used as effective management teaching method. The field experience titled as "Mandi" involves selling toy products in the market place. Four learning objectives are identified. They are: a. Understanding the managerial functions, b. Practicing certain managerial skills, c. Understanding the Personal Selling Process and d. Understanding the Customer and Markets. The process of conducting the exercise and the framework for learning is shared in this article. Method of student evaluation is discussed as part of the exercise. The article concludes that there is great potential to use the field sales experience to create learnings encompassing various topics in management discipline.

RATIONALE

"Learning is more effective when it is an active rather than a passive process" (Johnson & Johnson, 1991. p.42). In addition, "People will believe more in knowledge they have discovered themselves than in knowledge presented by others" (Johnson & Johnson, 1991. p.43). Based on these learning principles, experiential learning methods have become part of management teaching. Although business simulations, management games try to simulate the reality in business as much as possible, they cannot bring in the dynamics of reality that is there in business situations. Other methods like summer projects and working on corporate projects to some extent provide the business realities. Overall, these methods fall short of providing a feel of the reality, the hardships and rigors involved in carrying out the business.

Mandi is a real life experience where students are exposed to real market where they have to understand and manage the multiple uncontrolled variables effectively to continue with the field exercise. Mandi is a word in Hindi language. English meaning for the word is 'Market'. Mandi also connotes the meaning – "Process of exchange of products between sellers and buyers".

FOR WHOM?

Any management student is suitable to participate in this exercise. Specifically those students whose objective is to learn management processes, managerial skills, and understanding of customer and markets are the right students.

LEARNING GOALS

Four broad objectives are set forth for this exercise. They are;

- To sensitize students regarding certain **Managerial functions and Processes viz.**, Planning, Visioning and Goal setting and Organizing
- To understand and practice certain **Managerial Skills viz.**, Communication, Negotiation, and Self leadership skills
- To understand the **'Personal Selling Process'**
- To understand the nature and the types of **Customers and Markets**

MAJOR GROUPS INVOLVED IN THE EXERCISE

The exercise involves following **FIVE** groups of people in its execution. They are:

The B-School / Institute: The B-school or the management institute, which will provide necessary support for organizing the field exercise with a purpose to arrange management training to the students.

The Students: The students who will be taking active part in the field exercise

The Facilitator: The faculty who conducts the field exercise and facilitates the learning process

Inventory supplying organization: The organisation, which provides the products and necessary inventory for the students to sell in the market place

The Customers: The Customers at the market place - to whom the students will be selling the products

NUMBER OF STUDENTS

A batch of 60 to 80 students will be an ideal strength for this exercise.

TIME BUDGET

For a batch of 60 to 80 students, a total time of 15 - 20 hours of time (in addition to the field day time) is required to conduct this exercise. This total time may spread over two or three days. Time budget across the four phases of the exercise is given below.

Phase - I: Preparing the students for the exercise takes **3 - 4** hours.

Phase - II: Field experience requires a minimum of **6 - 8** hours of time.

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Phase - III: Post exercise session requires 2 - 3 hours of time.

Phase – IV: Wrapping up of the whole exercise takes at least 4 - 5 hours of time. This includes oral feedback by the students, group work on the learnings and presentation by the facilitator after integrating various groups' learnings.

In addition to the above, considerable personal time of students also forms part at various stages of the exercise. This personal time includes mental preparation of a student. The overall time budget may be more or less depending on the type of objectives the facilitator has kept for the exercise, number of students involved and the depth of coverage in various phases of the exercise.

FACILITIES AND MATERIALS NEEDED

- Block board for posting the important notices and information.
- One spacious hall that can accommodate 60 - 80 students. Counters for every ten teams of students may be created for issue of inventory.
- An arrangement need to be chalked out so that the Toy supplying organization will supply the necessary inventories at least one day in advance of the 'sales day'.
- Inventory Issue Form, Phase – I Questionnaire copies (One copy for each of the student), Prompt Sheets for each of the students
- Sufficient inventory of the products need to be organized. Products should also be packed in separate carry bags for each student team.

PREPARATION NEEDED BY THE FACILITATOR

Facilitator should have clarity regarding the overall objectives of the exercise. All the materials required for conducting the exercise need to be organized in advance. Similarly, facilitator should also develop a detailed plan for debriefing the session. Debriefing is the MOST important part of the active learning process as it involves integrating various learnings emerged from the exercise so as to achieve the overall objectives.

PREPARATION NEEDED BY STUDENTS BEFORE THE FIELD EXPERIENCE

Before beginning of the Phase – I, students need to have general understanding of managerial processes, managerial skills, selling process, customers and markets. A comprehensive presentation by the facilitator covering these topics will also help the students to learn more at a later stage.

MANDI PROCESSES - PHASE WISE

PHASE – I: PREPARATION PHASE: Preparation of the students for the exercise is crucial at this stage. In addition to this, the students are also asked to go through the literature on the topics viz., managerial process, managerial skills, personal selling process and customer and markets in general. Students may be advised to use the **Prompt Sheet Questions** to prepare for the exercise.

- Facilitator along with the representative from the toy supplying organization demonstrates the products to the students and allows the students to understand each of the products and visualize the marketability of the same. Facilitator may pose thought provoking questions to students with a purpose to stretch their thinking with regard to the relevant markets and product usages to specific customer groups.
- Later on, facilitator collects the team wise inventory requirements and compiles them to arrive at the overall inventory requirements for the field experience.
- Facilitator administers Phase – I Questionnaire and collects the data which will be used at a later debrief session.

Inventories may be issued to students at least one-day in advance. This will provide sufficient preparation time to the students to get fully acquainted with the products.

At this stage, students need to be encouraged to discuss in small groups regarding the sales strategies that they need to develop for higher sales. The discussion may cover specific aspects like: Appropriate Markets that need to be focused, Customer Profiles, Products and Product benefits, probable problems students will face while selling, the alternate strategies which need to be ready with - in case of surprises if any. There is very good scope for creating learning milestones at this stage as students will be rearing to go to the field to make sales.

PHASE – II: FIELD EXERCISE DAY: Students along with inventories will be transported to the markets. This arrangement relieves the students and helps them to focus on the primary activity i.e., Sales. Students may be dropped at various market places as per their choices.

PHASE – III: POST EXERCISE SESSION: On completion of selling activity, arrangements need to be made to collect back the unsold inventories from the student teams. It is advisable to complete the settlement of accounts at this juncture without any delay.

PHASE – IV: DEBRIEFING SESSION: The last phase of the exercise is debriefing session. This session need to be considered as the most important phase in the whole activity. Author opines that one may delay this session or two days after the field exercise day. During this period certain insights/learnings from the experience will be in circulation amongst the students. This needs to be encouraged in view of the impact of these insights on the students leading to discovery of learning.

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PROCESS OF DEBRIEFING

Guidelines for debriefing: Author opines that an unstructured method of debriefing will be better for this kind of field experience. Students may be asked to form small teams comprising of six to eight students. They may share their learnings within and across the teams. Prompt questions will help the facilitator to generate the discussion on the important learning points.

The data collected through Phase – I questionnaire may be used for post exercise debriefing session. The data so collected will be compared across the student teams. Differences and similarities in thinking across the student teams will be identified. Students need to be sensitized on various managerial processes, skills and knowledge at this stage. A written report on this assignment may be insisted from the teams, which can reinforce the students’ understanding on the subject.

STUDENTS’ EVALUATION

Facilitator may allocate some weightage (may be 10% to 20% of a course) for the exercise. For awarding the academic scores in a course the following criteria can be taken as a basis:

- The value of sales made by the student team,
- The volume of sales made by the student team,
- The ‘Best Student Team Performance’ may be taken as a basis to arrive at the class percentile performance. This may be used as a basis for awarding relative scores to students within a class.
- An evaluation of the written report of the assignment submitted (after the debriefing session) may also be taken as basis for awarding the marks.

What additional learning can be brought forth? There are scope to extend and add new learning objectives through this field experience. For example, other related management subjects like Personality Development, Managerial Economics and Costing can also be discussed by using the present experience.

STUDENTS’ FEEDBACK

The author has conducted this exercise for management students (N= 110) studying at National Institute of Industrial Engineering (NITIE), Mumbai, India. The students’ feedback from this exercise is recorded here with.

Dimension	Excellent	Good	Fair	Poor
1. Overall assessment of the field exercise	42%	58%	nil	nil
2. Methodology	64%	25%	11%	nil
3. Recommendation to others	Yes = 100%;		No = Nil	

Overall, students’ feedback was very encouraging. Most of the students rated the exercise as ‘Excellent’ and ‘Good’. No student had given the rating as ‘Fair’ and ‘Poor’ for the exercise. Similarly, 64 percentage of students rated the ‘methodology followed’ for the exercise as excellent. It is interesting to note that all the students (100%) has recommended the exercise for others as learning tool.

Experience 2: ‘I really appreciate the distinct and creative idea of Mandi market exercise which the facilitator brought to us. Really it was an application of soft skills and creativity. More importantly the products gave us a way to correlate itself with our knowledge and day-to-day life experience’. - ANKIT JAIN, MBA Student.

Students have appreciated the academic evaluation part of the exercise, despite many students not able to make good academic scores. This is because the academic scores (20% grade in a course) were linked to the sales performance and many students could not do so well in terms of sales performance. Students have opined that the academic evaluation was the **FAIREST** possible one as the academic scoring is linked to objective sales performance achieved in the market place.

ALTERNATE WAYS OF CONDUCTING THE EXERCISE

Scaling up: There is scope for scaling up the exercise in two different ways. Firstly, using higher economic value products like laptops, cars, computers, audio systems etc. This can

Some of the students’ feedback, has gone beyond the set learning goals of the exercise. A few students’ feed back are quoted below.

Experience 1: “While coming back from the field experience, I was passing through a particular area where I saw FOUR women called ‘**LADIES OF THE NIGHT**’ standing by the road looking for prospective customers. At that moment, I could analyze the whole scene only from the sales point of view. Initially I was very hesitant to stand on the road and sell products - and here there are women – human beings - who are selling themselves. I JUST COULD NOT HELP ADMIRING THEM. IT IS THEY WHO TAUGHT ME WHAT IS SALES AND WHAT SALES MEANS IN LIFE”. - ANISH MATHEWS, MBA Student.

increase the seriousness for a student to involve much more in the exercise.

Second, more and more students can be admitted to the exercise. For example the number of students for the exercise can be increased from the present 100 students 300 - 500 students. This requires scaling up of the facilities and planning of the exercise.

Repeating the exercise: It is mentioned that “Repeated attempts by the learner to achieve the desired performance” can facilitate learning process (Gagne & Driscoll, 1988, p. 100). The exercise may be repeated for second time and third time with some time gap. This will give scope for the students to practice their initial learnings in the repeat attempts and the learning cycle can be made complete.

Sales commission: To increase the involvement of the students, remuneration in the form of ‘sales commission as percentage of the actual sales made’ may be paid to the students.

WHICH PRODUCTS ARE BEST TO USE IN THIS EXERCISE?

The products must be chosen consciously for this exercise. An attempt was made to minimize the influence of external factors like brand value, products essentiality etc.. This is done with a purpose to bring in to focus the impact of the managerial process, managerial skills, and customer and market understandings displayed by the students while working on the exercise. The more stringent the criteria of selecting the products the greater the challenge for the students in achieving certain sales performance.

Following criteria was used in selecting the products.

- Well-established branded products were avoided as the brand value has an impact on the sales performance
- Essential products (Ex. Eatables) were also avoided as the buying behavior of customers of these products, to a great extent, is related to the customers’ felt needs
- Products that are ambiguous in terms of their value to the customers were preferred. Because sale of such product demands the best efforts of the students
- Products that can have value to people, irrespective of their age, income and status were preferred
- Products without any ethical connotations and prejudices attached were also preferred. For example a product like Chocolates may be avoided as some parents may have objections for chocolates as a product causing some health problems.

REFERENCES:

- Gagne, R., & Driscoll, M.P. (1988). Essentials Of learning for instruction. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Johnson, D.W., & Johnson, F.P.(1991). Joining together: Group theory and group skills. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

APPENDIX – I: PHASE – I QUESTIONNAIRE

Names of the students: 1. _____ 2. _____

Answer the following questions for your self. You will be asked to share your responses with others as directed by the facilitator.

1. Have you ever involved in “Selling” something in a market place? (Tick)

a. Never	b. Sometimes	c. Very many times	d. Selling is part of my life
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2. Write a Vision statement for Mandi exercise?

3. Write a Mission statement for Mandi exercise?

4. What goals you have set for Mandi exercise?

5. What planning you are making to achieve the sales goals? Detail out.

APPENDIX – II : PROMPT SHEET FOR DISCUSSION

Few prompt questions are given below. These prompt questions help the facilitator to generate discussion among the students at the time of debriefing session. Depending on the convenience and learning objectives set for by the facilitator, prompt questions may be added or deleted to the list given below.

A. MANAGERIAL PROCESSES

A1. PROMPT SHEET ON VISION SETTING

- What are the important points that need to be kept in mind for setting a vision statement?
- How vision statement will be useful in achieving the overall results?
- Write a vision statement for this exercise.
- How the vision will affect the other managerial functions that follow in this exercise?

A2. PROMPT SHEET ON SETTING MISSION STATEMENT

- How mission statements are different from vision and goals set for?
- Define your mission statement for this exercise?

A3. PROMPT SHEET ON GOAL SETTING

- What is meant by SMART goals? Are they relevant for you in this exercise?
- Identify the areas in which you want to set goals?
- What is the relationship between SMART goals and organizing and managerial skills needed for Mandi exercise?
- Discuss how vision, mission, and goals mutually support each other to achieve the over all-purpose of the exercise?

A4. PROMPT SHEET ON PLANNING FUNCTION

- Who are the customers for the products?
- What is right level of stock to be picked up for sale?
- What is the target market you have identified to achieve the sales goals?

A5. OPERATIONAL PLANNING

- Is there any plan for managing your time?
- What is the flow chart of activities at different stages of the exercise?
- What is the sales talk you want to make for various products?
- What tactics are being planned to use to convince the customers?
- How the member roles / duties among the team members are distributed?

A6. PROMPT SHEET ON ORGANIZING FUNCTION

- How to operationalise the plan's that are drawn initially?
- How the work roles are allocated among the team members?

- What contingency plans are drawn for?

B. MANAGERIAL SKILLS

B1. PROMPT SHEET ON COMMUNICATION SKILLS

- What language is best to communicate to the target customers?
- What should be the tone and style of presentation?
- What cues one should take in to consideration to understand the customer?

B2. PROMPT SHEET ON NEGOTIATION SKILLS

- What are the important rules that need to be followed in effective negotiation with customers?

B3. PROMPT SHEET ON SELF LEADERSHIP

- How to remain self motivated despite of odds?
- How to remain cool in failure and ready to bounce back
- Ability to continuously find out new ways to achieve the goals set

C. PERSONAL SELLING PROCESS

C1. PROMPT SHEET ON PERSONAL SELLING PROCESS

- What are the steps in personal selling process?
- Identify the importance of the each of the steps in the selling process.
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D. UNDERSTANDING CUSTOMERS' ATTITUDE

D1. PROMPT SHEET ON UNDERSTANDING CUSTOMER ATTITUDES

- What kind of perceptions the customer holds regarding the products value?
- Will the customers look for quality as an important aspect of the product?
- Whether the customers prefer quality even at a cost?
- What kind of perceptions the customer holds regarding the sales people in general?

E. UNDERSTANDING MARKET AND STRATEGIES

E1. PROMPT SHEET ON UNDERSTANDING MARKET AND STRATEGIES

- How much is the market demand for the products?
- What type of strategy you think will lead to achieving greater sales target?