Using Personal Selling Techniques to Influence Student Evaluation of Faculty Instruction

C. Mitchell Adrian

JP Morgan Chase Bank Endowed Professor of Business
Associate Professor of Marketing
Department of Management, Marketing, and Business Administration
McNeese State University
Lake Charles, Louisiana

Lonnie D. Phelps

Professor of Management and Department Head
Associate Professor of Marketing
Department of Management, Marketing, and Business Administration
McNeese State University
Lake Charles, Louisiana

Jeffery W. Totten

Associate Professor of Marketing
Department of Management, Marketing, and Business Administration
McNeese State University
Lake Charles, Louisiana

ABSTRACT

Use of Student Evaluation of Instruction (SEI) in higher education was originally intended as a source of feedback to faculty, but it has developed into a significant part of faculty performance evaluations. Administrators supporting the use of SEI's as a performance indicator assume students recognize and reward 'good teaching'. It is suggested here that personal selling techniques commonly used in marketing and sales can be applied in a classroom setting to help faculty influence student evaluations in a way that is positive both for the faculty member and for the students. Through relationship building and using language to "close the deal," faculty can increase perceptions of trust from students. This, in turn, can result in student confidence regarding the relevance and importance of course content as well as higher scores on SEI's for the instructor.

INTRODUCTION

For most US universities, Student Evaluation of Instruction (SEI) is a primary measure of faculty performance in the classroom (Adrian 2015; Darling-Hammond 2013, Evans 2013, Pepe and Wang 2012, Secolsky and Denison 2013). Politically motivated desire for accountability of faculty time and effort has led to attempts to quantify, in any way possible, what are considered generally qualitative activities and measures (Hernandez 2012). In addition, the view of "student as customer" has broadened beyond student life and campus facilities and is now viewed by many administrators as the standard for program, curriculum, and instructional design in academics (Vuori 2013, Singleton-Jackson 2010).

In the US, faculty performance is typically derived from combined measures of teaching, research, and service. While the weight or priority of each of these criteria varies among universities based upon their respective missions, these three categories predominate. Evaluation of classroom activities or "teaching effectiveness" is a difficult component to objectively quantify (Darling-Hammond 2013, Pepe and Wang 2012). The use of student evaluations of instruction in higher education began in the early 1900's but gained increased popularity after the 1960's and 1970's (Medley et. al. 1984). Over time, evaluations appear to have become a measure of "professional behavior," which may have little to do with student learning (Medley, Coker, and Soar 1984). Thus, SEI's do not always capture the essence of "good teaching" (Darling-Hammond 2013). The ongoing use of SEI's is nearly guaranteed as administrators believe that measuring the

student experience is of competitive importance in higher education (Webber, Lynch, and Oluku 2013). The idea that faculty should be evaluated and held accountable has popular political support which further solidifies the use of student evaluations (Meyer and Rowan 1977).

EVALUATION OF PERFORMANCE: THEORIES FROM MANAGEMENT AND HR

Management and HR theory indicates a number of recommended procedures and concepts that are typically not implemented regarding the use of SEI's. Fundamental components of performance evaluation should specify: 1) what are standards of performance, 2) who will appraise the performance, and 3) how will performance be evaluated (Bohlander & Snell 2010).

In the work world, it is widely recognized that it is management's responsibility to define work behaviors and expected outcomes to direct the work of employees. Workers best know what to do when they know what is expected of them (Kim 1984), and it has been shown that specificity of goals increases performance (Latham & Baldes, 1975; Locke, Cartledge & Knerr, 1970). Samples of questions from SEI's reveal a wide range of expectations, from the very specific to the very nonspecific. For illustration, the author has listed a few sample SEI questions from multiple universities. They are categorized here according to whether they 1) provide specific information/expectations for the faculty member, 2) are subject to interpretation by the faculty member, and 3) are nonspecific in nature.

- ▸ Specific
  - The instructor covered material consistent with the stated objectives of the course.
  - The instructor made it clear how my grade in this course would be determined.
- ▸ Subject to Interpretation
  - The instructor organized the course in a logical manner.
  - The instructor's communication skills were clear and effective.
- ▸ Nonspecific
  - The instructor is a good teacher.
  - How satisfied were you with this course?

Thus, faculty may adjust their classroom activities and behaviors to attempt to achieve higher SEI scores, but in many cases it is up to interpretation by the faculty member as to what behavior will achieve the desired result. For example, how should one behave in order to improve stu-

dent satisfaction with the course? There is also the issue of "criterion contamination" in which faculty are being measured against factors that are outside of the faculty member's control (Bohlander & Snell 2010).

Who Appraises Performance?

What may be the most egregious error regarding student evaluations of faculty is the fact that students have not been trained in the process of faculty evaluation. Training those who appraise performance is considered crucial to an effective performance evaluation process (Bohlander & Snell 2010). Training appraisers should begin with an explanation of expectations of performance and a review and discussion of each of the performance dimensions to be measured. Training will usually include helping raters gain an understanding of the meaning of each measurement item and will allow raters the opportunity to better standardize their measurement expectations. Without rater training, the possibility of rater error increases and can include Error of Central Tendency, Leniency or Strictness Errors, Recency Error, and Contrast Error ((Bohlander & Snell 2010). As a result, SEI's in any given course for any given faculty member can have a high degree of variability, thus creating potential problems with measurement reliability.

STUDENT/FACULTY RELATIONS

In general, faculty members tend to assume that SEI's bear a correlation to course GPA, with the expectation that a more rigorous course results in lower SEI's and higher grades equating to higher SEI's. As a former university administrator, the author suspects there is only limited truth to these assumptions but it is also recognized that the interpretation of "difficult" or "rigorous" varies by student and by faculty member. In this author's experience, "required" courses tend to show lower SEI scores than elective courses, regardless of the professor. This may be attributable to the fact that required courses contain a greater percentage of students who are not majoring in the subject as compared to electives. Thus, the perception of "enjoyment" of the course varies with more students "not enjoying" the required course and thus indicating a greater amount of negative feedback. This relationship suggests that SEI's are less a measure of student learning and more a measure of student "liking."

Based on this experience, it is proposed that faculty/student relationships in the academic environment can be viewed much like relationships in the sales environment, whereby faculty are "selling" to students the belief that the information and expertise provided by the faculty member has value to the student. If students respect the

faculty member as a professional and perceive course activities as being in their best interest, the perception of "enjoyment" of the course is likely to increase. Please note, the author does not believe in the concept of the student as customer in the academic setting. Rather, it is assumed that employers, or the society into which the student will graduate are the customer and student is both the product and the primary builder of that product. However, it is expected that faculty members who "tell the best stories" and build professional relationships with students are usually rewarded with higher SEI scores from students.

Building Meaningful Relationships

"The value of satisfied customers is so high that it makes good business sense to build the strongest possible relationships" (Castleberry & Tanner, 2014, p. 343).

Experts in marketing recognize that building relationships with clients is an important tool for maintaining and improving sales, especially over the long-term (Abeysekera and Wickramasinghe 2013, Marshal, Moncrief, Rudd, and Lee 2012). Communicating with clients, building trust with clients and maintaining a strong rapport are all seen as important factors in a strong sales relationship (Drollinger and Comer 2013). Likewise, faculty members engage, to some degree, in "relational partnerships" with their students. Faculty and students build relationships as the professor offers guidance to the students regarding course learning objectives, career guidance and general advice. "When both partners feel safe and stable in the relationship, open and honest communication takes place" (Castleberry & Tanner, 2014, p. 346). A study by Pepe and Wang (2012) found that students assign higher evaluation scores to instructors they perceive as organized and who can clearly communicate content. This may indicate that students gain respect for faculty who can present material well and "relate" to students on a professional level.

Developing relational partnerships with students involves mutual trust, which is based on "dependability, competence, customer orientation, honesty, and likability" (Castleberry & Tanner, 2014, p. 354). As the professor does his/her best to teach the students, the students will hopefully put more trust in the professor and this will deepen the relationship. As students realize that the professor has their best interests involved they will trust the professor more. Like a professional salesperson, the professor needs to remember "if you have done your job well and you have a product [insights and knowledge] that the buyer truly needs, then you deserve" the commitment from the customer (Castleberry & Tanner, 2014, p. 286.

Thus, relationship building may also be important to developing higher SEI scores. In a study by Palmatier, Jarvis,

Bechkoff, and Kardes (2009), findings suggest that relationship building creates a sense of gratitude that drives gratitude-related reciprocal behaviors. Therefore, it is expected that faculty members who communicate well and build a rapport with students will gain a degree of student trust and in turn the students present a reciprocal gratitude through higher SEI scores.

Obtaining Student Commitment

While relationship building and trust are key ingredients for influencing student perceptions we learn from marketing research that this may not be enough. It is still up to the faculty member to "close the deal" regarding evaluations. Just as the sales person will directly ask the customer to purchase a product, the faculty member should be able to ask for high evaluation scores. In many ways, this relates back to the concept of commitment on the part of the student. As mentioned before, when students realize that their professor has their best interests involved, the level of trust tends to increase. As this relationship is built, the professor is gaining commitment repeatedly from the student: day by day, assignment by assignment; advising session by advising session, etc. (Castleberry & Tanner, 2014, p. 284). "Obtaining commitment is also important in moving the [student-professor partnership] through the relationship process" (Castleberry & Tanner, 2014, p. 285). The professor needs to have a positive attitude with each student interaction and let the student set the pace of the development process.

IMPROVING SEI RESULTS: A THREE STEP PROCESS

Do the actions measured by the instrument

When SEI's are an important part of overall performance measures, faculty members search for ways to improve SEI's not just for intrinsic satisfaction but also for the extrinsic purpose of high evaluation scores. Of course the first suggestion for improving SEI's is to live up to the expectations of the questions on the evaluation instrument. For example, a question from one university SEI states "Does the instructor return graded items within two weeks after they are submitted?" Therefore if an instructor wants a higher SEI score, he/she should always return graded items within two weeks after they are collected. Unfortunately two problems still remain. First, in a specific question as stated above, the author has noticed a wide range of student responses even when all graded materials are returned by the next class meeting (see discussion on training the raters). Similarly, one significant problem for faculty attempting to adjust their performance to suit the

evaluation instrument is that some (or many) questions on the instrument are non-specific regarding faculty actions. For example, the question of "rate the professor overall." Such questions tend to have a high degree of multi-colinearity within the instrument and there is a lack of understanding by the faculty member as to what actions to take in order to improve upon this score.

Form Professional Relationships

'Trust in the salesperson is one of the primary antecedents of customer satisfaction' (Campbell, Davis, and Skinner 2006). In a sales relationship, building and managing a rapport with customers is fundamental in helping move through various phases of early exploration of the relationship, customer objections, and potential conflicts. In addition, when it is time to "close the deal," trust and rapport help to build a relationship that allows both parties to more comfortably discuss terms and expectations with less dissonance or stress (Campbell, et. al. 2006, Davies, Ryals, and Holt 2010). When faculty members build a rapport with students they increase trust. Students trust they will receive fair treatment. They trust the professor is an expert and that proper and sufficient information will be provided for the student. Students trust that the activities and assignments in the course are done in the best interest of the student and students trust that the successful completion of the course will have them properly prepared to succeed in future courses and their future profession.

Close the deal

Marketers recognize the importance of asking for the sale, or what is typically referred to as 'closing the deal'. It is recognized that a good closing statement is important to encouraging the customer to become a buyer (DeGennaro 2014). The concept of 'closing the sale' is to obtain a purchasing agreement from the prospective buyer (Prus 1988). Seven general 'closing' strategies are recognized in sales (Prus 1988). Of those, the strategy of 'Closing by Inquiry' may be most appropriate for use by faculty in a classroom setting. This technique simply requires the sales person to ask for the sale (Prus 1988), or in this case, for the faculty member to inform the students of a desired outcome – high SEI scores. It is recommended that at the beginning of the semester, faculty simply ask students for maximum scores on the SEI. Faculty should show a willingness to work with students regarding the concept of earning those high scores, but it should be clear that faculty want high SEI scores. Informing students of faculty desires for high SEI scores provides clarity for students and demonstrate that faculty members consider the results as important and meaningful.

TESTING ASSUMPTIONS

This is an exploratory attempt at learning more about how faculty actions in the classroom affect student perceptions of faculty performance and ultimately SEI scores. Interventions using sales techniques were applied and results were compared against the previous semester.

First Semester: No intervention

For the control group, the lead author conducted classes (three different courses with approximately 30 students per course) over the semester term and followed the customary university procedures for administering SEI's. Evaluations were presented to students, unannounced, by a graduate student who would first enter the class while the faculty member was not present. Results from this semester are categorized as "no intervention." Course material was covered using the author's regular efforts to work with students and to effectively teach course content.

Second Semester–Intervention: Ask for high scores

Given the lead author's expectations of how to influence SEI's, it was decided to experiment in the author's courses to determine if simple actions could lead to a better classroom experience for the students and higher SEI's for the faculty member. While this is not a true scientific study (there are not real controls in that even with a single faculty member and identical subject matter we cannot ensure that teaching behaviors are identical across courses or semesters), it is still of interest to faculty as there seems to be common interests in improving student evaluations.

For the second semester, the author presented course material with a focus on a relationship building style of teaching and added an intervention specific to SEI's. In the opinion of the lead author, the "teaching" methods used during this intervention differed little from a typical semester, but in this case the author was aware and focused on the concept of building professional relationships with students. As a standard practice, the author uses lecture techniques that include eye contact with students, acknowledging students by name, open discussion in the classroom, and an open-door office policy.

To "close the deal," this semester included a request for high SEI scores. During the first day of class, while introducing the syllabus, the author informed students of a desire for maximum SEI scores (all 5's), and that the author intended to work to attain those scores. Then, the week before administering SEI's, the author again reminded students of desire of a maximum scores (all 5's) and that their scoring was a significant portion of the overall fac-

ulty performance evaluation. SEI's were administered the next week through the standard process – by a graduate student while the faculty member was not present.

RESULTS

Results of average SEI scores over the two semesters showed improvements from the intervention. The combined SEI's with no intervention (three undergraduate courses) was 4.48. The combined average with the intervention (three undergraduate courses) was 4.90. A list of questions and breakdown by item and intervention are provided in Table 1.

A Kruskal-Wallis non-parametric test was used to compare summary averages. Results were not significant but are perhaps still meaningful. Given that SEI's are often a major component of faculty performance evaluation scores, actions that increase scores by .42 points may have noticeable results on overall performance scores, and thus be of practical value to instructors. These small samples do not allow conclusive results but do raise the question regarding effective methods for influencing SEI's.

CONCLUSIONS AND LIMITATIONS

There are many limitations to the findings and presumptions of this report. Most notably there are very few sam-

ples and there are no controls between course offerings. Even when the same course was offered over multiple semesters using the same books, lecture notes, tests, etc., this does not guarantee an equal performance by the instructor. Much of the assumptions made are anecdotal and result from the experience of the faculty member involved.

Despite the many limitations of a very non-scientific experiment, the implications are noteworthy. When SEI's are a significant component of faculty evaluations, there is a strong incentive for faculty members to find ways to improve SEI scores. Unfortunately, simply teaching classes well does not guarantee correspondingly high SEI scores. Despite the lack of statistical support, improving SEI scores by a half point may have enough impact on a faculty member's overall evaluation to motivate a change in that instructor's classroom behavior. Relationship building creates trust. If relationship building between faculty and students is key to improving SEI's, then the process of relationship building and maintaining a rapport with students will increase trust and respect between students and faculty and greatly benefit students both during and after their educational process. Once a good rapport is achieved, 'closing the deal' by asking for good scores simply furthers the relationship.

Is it ethical? First, all relationships must be professional and are not to be considered 'after hours' or 'personal'

Item	No INTER	INTER
TABLE **AVERAGE SEI SCORES:** **ALL SCORES SHOW AVERAGE RESULTS ACROSS THREE COURSES**		
Item	**No INTER**	**INTER**
The instructor organized the course in a logical and effective fashion	4.36	4.87
The instructor provided pertinent feedback on graded tests and assignments	4.49	4.83
The instructor's communication skills were clear and effective.	4.33	4.87
The instructor covered material consistent with the state objectives of the course.	4.67	4.92
My rating of this instructor to other students.	4.26	4.89
The instructor provided course materials in a timely manner	4.59	4.88
The instructor graded and retuned tests within two weeks	4.81	4.92
The instruct made it clear how my grade in the course would be determined	4.69	4.94
The instructor applied grading standards consistently for student to student	4.47	4.96
The instructor was willing to provide extra help as needed	4.20	4.91
The instructor allowed/encouraged relevant questions or comments	4.67	4.96
The instructor was well prepared	4.59	4.96
The instructor stayed on the subject	4.63	4.90
The instructor is a good teacher	4.27	4.92
Summary Averages	4.48	4.90

relationships. Students must trust the professor. Second, students understand the power they have regarding SEI scores. They know that reporting is anonymous, and they know faculty members will not see the results until after grades are submitted. Proper university procedures should always be used to ensure faculty members are not present while students complete SEI's. In general, it is expected that 'asking' for high SEI scores is no more unethical than is using the scores provided by untrained participants (students) as a significant component of a faculty member's performance evaluation.

REFERENCES

Abeysekera, N. and Wickramasinghe, A. (2013). **Relationship** marketing and customer orientation of **sales** people: learning from banks. *International Journal of Financial Services Management. 6*(1), 79-91.

Adrian, M. (2015). Pizza, Donuts, and SEI's: Influencing Student Evaluations of Instruction through Relationship Building. *Journal of Research in Business, Economics and Management. 3*(3), July 14, 188-194.

Bohlander, G. & Snell, S. (2010). *Managing Human Resources.* South-Western Cengage Learning. Mason, OH.

Campbell, K., Davis, L. and Skinner, L. (2006). Rapport Management During the Exploration Phase of the Salesperson--Customer **Relationship**. *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management. 26*, 359-370.

Castleberry, Stephen B., and John F. Tanner, Jr. (2014). *Selling: Building Partnerships.* New York: McGraw-Hill, 9th edition.

Darling-Hammond, L. (2013). *Getting Teacher Evaluation Right: What Really Matters for Effectiveness and Improvement.* Teachers College Press, New York, NY.

Davies, I., Ryals, L. and Holt, S. (2010). **Relationship** management: A **sales** role, or a state of mind?: An investigation of functions and attitudes across a business-to-business **sales** force. *Industrial Marketing Management. 39*, 1049-1062.

DeGennaro, A (2014). The trial close: Right time to ask for the sale from an optical customer? *Ophthalmology Times.* September 15, 44.

Drollinger, T. and Comer, L. (2013). Salesperson's listening ability as an antecedent to **relationship** selling. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing. 28*(1), 50-59.

Evans, C. (2013). Making Sense of Assessment Feedback in Higher Education. *Review of Educational Research. 83*(1), 70-120.

Hernandez, R. (2012). Does Continuous Assessment in Higher Education Support Student Learning? *Higher Education: The International Journal of Higher Education and Educational Planning. 64*, 489-502.

Kim, J. S. (1984). Effect of Behavior Plus Outcome Goals Setting and Feedback on Employee Satisfaction and Performance. *Academy of Management Journal. 27*(1), 139-149.

Latham, G. P., & Baldes, J. (1975). The practical significance of Locke's theory of goal setting. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 60*, 122-124

Locke, E. A., Cartledge, N., & Knerr, C. S. (1970). Studies of the relationship between satisfaction, goal setting, and performance. *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance, 5*, 135-158.

Meyer, J. and Rowan, B. (1977). Institutionalized Organizations: Formal Structure as Myth and Ceremony. *American Journal of Sociology. 83*, 340–363.

Medley, D., Coker, H. and Soar, R. (1984). *Measurement-Based Evaluation of Teacher Performance: An Empirical Approach.* New York: Longman.

Palmatier, R., Jarvis, C., Bechkoff, J. and Kardes, F. (2009). The Role of Customer Gratitude in **Relationship** Marketing. *Journal of Marketing. 73*(5), 1-18.

Pepe, J. and Wang, M. (2012). What Instructor Qualities Do Students Reward? *College Student Journal. 46*, 603-614.

Prus, R. (1988). Pursuing commitments: An analysis of the influence work involved in 'Closing Sales'. *Qualitative Sociology*, 11(3), 194-214.

Secolsky, C. and Denison, D. (2011). *Handbook on Measurement, Assessment, and Evaluation in Higher Education. Routledge*, Taylor & Francis Group, Florence, KY.

Singleton-Jackson, J., Jackson, D. and Reinhardt, J. (2010), Students as Consumers of Knowledge: Are They Buying What We're Selling? *Innovative Higher Education. 35*, 343-358.

Vuori, J. (2013). Are Students Customers in Finnish Higher Education? *Tertiary Education and Management. 19*(2), 176-187.

Webber, M., Lynch, S. and Oluku, J. (2013). Enhancing Student Engagement in Student Experience Surveys: A Mixed Methods Study. *Educational Research. 55*(1), 71-86.