

Understanding the Role, Competencies and Training of the Sales Professional Today - **A Case Study of Thule Group**



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Abstract

Title: Understanding the Role, Competencies and Training of the Sales Professional Today - A Case Study of Thule Group

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Summary: The purpose of this paper is two fold. First we clarify and enrich the understanding of the need for higher sales educated professionals through an extensive understanding of the sales transformation. Second, we develop an understanding of the sales role and its related competencies in a transformed sales landscape. We introduce a theoretical framework to understand the need for sales educated professionals and use this to develop further understanding of the role and competencies. The underlying aim of our research is to bring in line the substantive importance of sales as an academic discipline from our context setting, In a single case study of Thule Group, semi-structured interviews with five professionals working in several sales functions and levels, we confirm the need for university educated sales professionals due to the transformed role of sales and the need for higher level thinking to fulfil the role today. The changes to the role of sales today is described (greater responsibility, more relationship management, co-creation of value, analytical thinking and unification of goals) and leads to contribution of a set of required competencies as a sales professional today. We identify for educators, students and practitioners the competencies required to fulfil a sales role today. As a result of our research, a new problem of obtaining these competencies is revealed and a number of barriers to begin the thinking on this issue are addressed.

Keywords: transformation of sales, sales education, sales role, sales profession, sales competencies and sales skills

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1. Introduction

Higher sales educated people are increasingly needed (Bolander, William, Leff Bonney, and Cinthia Satorino, 2014; Hawes, Rich and Widmier, 2004; Marcos-Cuevas, Donaldson and Lemmens, 2015; Verbeke, Dietz and Verwaal, 2011). However, not to perform the step by step process of traditional sales, but to perform sales in a transformed sales context with more complexity, more responsibility, and in a context that demands higher level thinking and problem solving skills (Hawes, Rich and Widmier, 2004). Many people still perceive sales as being only about 'closing a deal' at times in an unethical way and it is not uncommon to think of sales professionals as money-motivated, materialistic and greedy (Fogel, Hoffmeister, Rocco and Strunk, 2012). Many researchers have indicated that a negative perception towards sales is omnipresent (Cummins, Peltier, Pomirleanu, Cross, and Simon, 2015; Lee, Sandfield and Dhaliwal, 2007; Muehling and Weeks, 1988). This implies that there is a need to recognize sales for what it is today.

The sales function has become central to senior executives' agendas (Marcos-Cuevas et al., 2015). Nowadays, sales is responsible for the creation and maintenance of all a company's turnover and its most important relationships (Marcos-Cuevas et al, 2015; Murray and Robinson, 2001). Despite its importance to an organization's success, sales still remains an under-researched and under-educated topic (Cummins, Peltier, Erffmeyer and Whalen, 2013; Fogel et al., 2012).

Until quite recently, skipping over sales might have been justified. Salespeople got a foot in the door, glorified their products and tried to make a deal. In such a step by step simple process, academia and education could not add much (Fogel et al, 2012). However, sales people are no longer operators in a repetitive linear process - only promoting products, rather they are value creating knowledge workers with a focus on the exchange with customers (Beckham and DeVincentis, 1999; Dixon and Tanner, 2012; Ellis, 2000). The transformation of sales towards a more complex mechanism only increases its importance, demands more advanced skills and offers plenty of substantial material to be taught.

Many researchers support the view that the transformation of sales has led to a more professionalized function needing more advanced skills and business acumen (Cron, Marshal, Singh, Spro and Sujan,2005; Ellis 2000; Marcos-Cuevas, Donaldson and Lemmens, 2015; Murray and Robinson, 2001; Peltier, Cummins, Pomirleanu, Cross and Simon, 2014). There is awareness amongst scholars that sales has become more important and is therefore demanding different capabilities of sales professionals (Dixon and Tanner, 2012; Ceuvas et al, 2014; Ellis, 2000). For instance, Pettijohn and Pettijohn (2009) indicate that sales positions request individuals who are formally educated and capable of making complex business decisions. Marcos-Cuevas, Critten, Squire and Speakman (2014) exclaim that sales professionals need to develop a more advanced range of competencies before they enter the job market and continuously in their careers, seen the continuous evolution of the sales landscape.

Due to the high demand on salespeople and the urgency for certain skills, you would think that business schools put a lot time and effort in teaching sales skills. Mainly because several researchers have indicated that these advanced skills are better learned in a university setting, than with traditional on-the-job training (Chonko, Dubinsky, Jones and Roberts, 2003; Dixon and Tanner, 2012; Marcos-Ceuvas et al., 2015; Marcos-Ceuvas,

Critten, Speakman, 2014; Ricks, Williams and Weeks, 2008). However, when you look at the curriculum of business schools, particularly in Europe, you might even think that sales is *unimportant* (Fogel et al, 2012). In Europe, only 13 universities were included in the Sales Education Foundations list of top sales universities (compared to 44 in the US), and most of these universities only offer an elective in sales at best (SEF, 2015). Sales seems a vital business function, but sales education is only slowly picking up.

Consequently, finding adequate sales professionals has been a long standing issue for recruiters and business globally (Cummins et al., 2013; Fogel et al., 2012; ManPower Group Media Centre, 2015). The evidence in the literature points to an 'institutional culture', a lack of scholarly incentive and support, and reticence towards sales education as a starting point to this problem (Karakaya, Quiqley, Bingham, Nasir, 2014; Lee, Sandfield, and Dhaliwal, 2007, Waldeck; 2010; Fogel et al., 2012; Deeter-Schmelz and Kennedy, 2011). Furthermore, it proves salespeople and the sales profession suffer from a persisting negative stereotype (Lee et al., 2007; Fine, 2007).

While previous studies have identified a need for development of the sales field through academia and the need for highly sales educated applicants, few have addressed the competencies sales practitioners are looking for today in sales positions. Raymond, Carlson and Hopkins (2006) provide evidence from a sales manager and sales representative perspective as to what entry level skills recruiters look for. However, they do not address the competencies required of sales professionals today in the context of a transformed sales landscape and limit their research to focus on entry level sales positions. It is not clear in the literature what competencies, skills and responsibilities are required to fill a sales professional's role in the transformed sales landscape. Moreover, there is little evidence as to what competencies are required and what role sales professionals have to perform in the transformed selling landscape, specifically from the perspective of practitioners.

A single case study is conducted to explore how a global company, who recognises the importance of academically skilled professionals, works with sales. First, our purpose is to clarify and enrich the understanding of the need for higher sales educated professionals through an extensive understanding of the sales transformation. Second, using that information as a tool, we aim to develop an understanding of the sales role and the competencies they need in the transformed sales landscape. The underlying aim of our research is to bring in line the substantive importance of sales as an academic discipline from our context setting, highlighting the need and importance of a highly skilled sales function, and thereby contribute to the awareness why sales should be more recognized as a discipline and why we need a different understanding of sales.

We contributed to the literature in several ways. First, in clarifying the need and importance of higher sales educated professionals from a practitioners' point of view. Second, by providing an understanding of the new sales role and the competencies needed from the perspective of a successful sales organization. Third, in conducting our research we identified a problem in obtaining such competencies. Finally, understanding the barriers and drivers to obtaining the competencies gives rise to a very interesting topic for future research.

Our research has practical implications for recruiters and universities about the need for higher sales educated professionals and which competencies are required for the sales profession today.

2. Literature Review

In this section we argue for the departure of our research in relation to our purpose. We define 'sales as it is today', followed by further investigation of the transformation of sales and its implications for the sales profession of today. We address how the role of a sales professional has changed and examine evidence of the need for higher level sales skills (i.e. business acumen). Thereafter we draw the link between the need for higher level skills and a need for academic sales education. We introduce the role and competencies of the sales profession today and, finally, we close this section with possible barriers in obtaining the higher level competencies.

"The days when all the sales force did was "sell, sell, and sell" are long gone" – (Kotler and Keller, 2016, p.613)

Our theoretical departure was related to the transformation of sales, sales skills, the sales profession and sales education. The literature reveals an increasing need for higher educated sales professionals, and a number of reasons for why this need exists. However, previous literature about sales does not clearly explain what the sales role looks like today and which competencies sales people need in a modern context. Therefore, it is our objective to address this important topic in a case study of a successful sales organization. Our review of the sales transformation, the need for advanced skills and sales education is therefore a helpful tool to help us understand the role and competencies of the sales profession today.

In exploring why sales should be more educated, it is important that we first define sales in a modern day context. We prefer Dixon and Tanner's (2012) definition of sales: "the phenomenon of human-driven interaction between and within individuals/organizations in order to bring about economic exchange within a value-creation context" (p.10). This definition challenges the old way of doing sales and highlights the important role of relationships in today's complex business environment. Furthermore this definition shows that sales is much more than a single transaction, or step by step approach, it involves multiple parties and comes with great responsibilities in a highly competitive sales environment. Driving the phenomenon are sales professionals as key players in the value creation process.

As the definition suggests, sales has increased in the complexity of tasks, in the function, in the responsibility a role carries and it plays a more fundamental role in organization-wide strategies. First, we review sales and marketing literature to better understand how sales has transformed. Three key drivers to the transformation of sales are identified. Second, we address how the role of a sales professional has changed in the context of a transformed sales environment. Third, we examine the evidence of the need for higher level sales skills (i.e., business acumen). Fourth, we draw the link between the need for higher level skills and a need for academic sales education.

2.1 The Transformation of sales

In the context of the last 30 years sales has transformed and shifted from a simple selling function to a strategic organisational function where the focus is on a customer's productivity (Leigh and Marshall, 2001; Piercy and Lane, 2007; Storbacka, Ryals, Davies and Nenonen, 2009;). Selling has traditionally been judged and measured on a seller's ability to close sales,

and skill in identifying who and what is successful (Kotler, Rackham and Krishnaswamy, 2006). However, certain changes in the selling landscape make clear that sales continues to develop into a game involving much more than closing deals.

Sales is no longer a linear, step by step process, it is now multifaceted and uncontrollable at times (Dixon and Tanner, 2012). Sales is no longer focusing on one party, or one process, but multiple parties and points of engagement (Dixon and Tanner, 2012). Sales is no longer principally about promoting products, it is about the exchange (Ellis, 2000). Furthermore, the context of the exchange, and the way the exchange brings value to the customers is of grave importance in today's marketplace (Ceuvras et al, 2014; Dixon and Tanner, 2012; Ellis, 2000).

Understanding the transforming sales landscape resulted in identification of three key themes as drivers of the ongoing sales transformation: heightened levels of globalisation and competition, the nature and expectations of professional buyers and opportunities offered by new technologies. These drivers shape the most obvious change in sales from selling a product, to co-creating solutions with the customer.

2.1.1 Heightened levels of globalisation and competition

Markets have become more global and hypercompetitive (Jones, Brown, Zoltners and Weitz; 2005). Mergers and acquisitions together with growth of market leaders (e.g., expansion into other countries) drive concentration to new levels (Murray and Robinson, 2001). Customers are reducing their supplier base, to achieve better working, long-term relationships and reduce cost (Marcos-Cuevas et al, 2015). The popularity of category management by retailers further reinforces the concentration trend, re-shaping the competitive arena (Murray and Robinson, 2001). This re-shaping of the competitive arena has changed the way that business do sales today.

The key functions of sales persons have grown with globalization and increased competition. Salespeople need to negotiate with a more global mind-set and need to develop an integrated approach for their offerings to meets customer demands and preferences across borders, while at the same time maintain the ability to adapt to local customs (Marcos-Cuevas et al, 2015). Expanding a company across borders can have a great impact on an organisation's sales function, with ethical, legal and political environments coming into consideration. Sales professionals increasingly need to be aware of political and social factors impacting a seller buyer exchange. This may include diverse cultural expectations, economic situations (e.g., exchange rates), and ethical considerations.

2.1.1.2 The nature and expectations of the customer

Customer expectations and demands on sales professionals and their referring organisations continue to augment (Jones et al., 2005). Customers have greater access to a greater deal of information which has led to an increase in expectations and a greater diversity among customer's expectations (Ingram, LaForge and Leigh, 2002). Buyers can easily evaluate offerings of competitors and feedback from current or past customers is widely accessible (Jones et al, 2005). Customers are demanding not only products and services of superior value, but also a relationship of superior value and access to specialised supplier capabilities on the best possible terms and conditions, for the lowest price (Ingram et al., 2002; Ingram, 2004; Tuli, Kohli and Bharadwaj, 2007). Customers now want both off-the-shelf products and more complex, customized solutions with different levels of sales support (Davie, Stephenson and Valdivieso de Uster, 2010). Customers also vary considerably in their

preferences and attitudes (Leigh, DeCarlo, Allbright and Lollar, 2014). This all leads to an increased buyer power, a more complex selling relationship, and a need for sales professionals to adapt to customer diversity.

The buyer power of customers continues to increase with product knowledge and knowledge of the competition more available than before. Furthermore, mergers and acquisitions of organizations and international expansion of key players in many sectors have resulted in consolidation of market points (Jones et al., 2005; Murray and Robinson, 2001). The customer has more control in the buyer seller exchange by telling the supplier exactly what they want with the expectation that the need will be met immediately or someone else will provide the desired requirements (Marshall, Moncrief, Rudd and Lee, 2012). Customers are in the middle of a conversation and salespeople have to engage and collaborate in those already occurring conversations (Babbitt, 2009). The customer has more advantage meaning the sales professionals needs to be responsive and attune to customer demands.

Salespeople have entered a very competitive selling situation (Jones et al., 2005). The procurement process has professionalized whereby the customer seeks stronger relationships with fewer suppliers (Jones et al., 2005). Companies have re-organized procurement into a strategic function linked to the business plan, in order to select the 'right' suppliers and dictate terms for the relationship (Boer, Labro and Morlacchi, 2001; Talluri and Narasimhan, 2004). Professional purchasing managers have the task to realise higher profit margins, contain costs and contribute to superior shareholder value (Janda and Seshadri, 2001). This has increased the level of the supplier-customer conversation.

Relatedly, the process of value creation for the customer has changed. In the new sales, this solution is often co-created with the customer. Instead of promoting a commoditized product, sales people now perform service (or solution) selling (Storbacka et al., 2009). Supplier and customer work together to co-create value in the customer's industry. How to create value and valuable relationships is no longer predictable or contained with organizational boundaries but is open to networks across functions and firms (Enz and Lambert, 2012). Therefore, salespeople need to be able to communicate with customers and to add value by collaboratively solving customers' business challenges (Dixon and Tanner, 2012). Co-creation of value is further explored in 2.3.2.

2.1.1.3 The opportunities offered by new technologies

Technology development has resulted in an increasing need for qualified people to manage complex relationships. Technologies are facilitating new ways of working and establishing relationships (Marshall et al., 2012). Automated transactions of various kinds from telemarketing to e-commerce has resulted in a reduction of the number of people needed for traditional "order taking" sales and has made room for the operation of complex relationship management (Murray and Robinson, 2011). Through technological and search developments (i.e., the internet), customers today no longer rely on the traditional sales person for learning about products or services (Rhoton, 2011). It is up to the sales professionals to respond to technological advancements and use it to both their advantage and the customers.

In order for sales professionals to meet the ever changing demands and expectations of the customer in the increasingly competitive landscape they must gain more knowledge about the customer, and they must do it fast (Jones et al., 2005). Technology is a means for doing so given it enables storage, retrieval and analysis of customer data (Jones et al., 2005).

Also, technology enabled sales people to diagnose the customer's problems, offering solutions and furthermore planning with the customer to reach success. There are more sophisticated tools to analyse and categorize customer data in information systems which can lead to novel and unique customer insights (Marcos-Cuevas et al, 2015; Fogel et al, 2012; Jones et al, 2005). This facilitated sales professionals to make recommendations that are customized for long-term business solutions (Jones et al, 2005). Thus, sales professionals have become 'knowledge brokers' (Jones et al., 2005) as they need to blend information from their customer's organization and their own organization to manage the customer relationship and identify opportunities to co-create value (Jones et al., 2005).

Furthermore, technology made it possible to bring together information from marketing, finance, operations and other functions in order to gain a better understanding of cost structures and customer profitability (Marcos-Cuevas et al, 2015). The transparency in information has made it easier to see what is valuable and what is not in order to provide profitable solutions for the customer and the supplier.

2.2 Transformation of the Sales Role

"The role of the sales force is changing, and extends beyond the context for the sale itself" (Ellis, 2000, p.34).

This statement outlines that sales has transformed, and continues to transform leading to a need for sales professionals to respond and adapt to these changes. Traditionally, the sales function is seen as is a subsidiary function within the promotional portion of the marketing mix based on McCarthy's 4Ps Model (product, price, promotion, place) (Perreault, McCarthy, Parkinson and Stewart, 2000). However, this model seems outdated in today's competitive marketplace as recent conceptualizations show sales as a separate business function from marketing, performing a totally different role. Many companies today have a sales budget that exceeds the marketing budget and put more resources and people into sales than any other promotional activity. This indicates that both the importance and the role of sales has changed dramatically (Marcos-Cuevas et al., 2015).

The centrality of customers in marketing asks for re-examination of the strategic role and value of the selling function (Ingram et al, 2002). Previous named drivers of the sales transformation make clear that traditional marketing needs to put an emphasis on the importance of relationships with customers. Srivastava, Shervani and Fahey (1999) support this view and argue that the attraction and retention of customers is the essence of marketing. As sales people are 'the voice of the firm' and in direct contact with the customers, they are responsible for managing these key assets (Ingram et al., 2002). Thus, it are the sales people who have a key role to play in this obvious shift towards relationship marketing (Blocker, Cannon, Panagopoulos and Sager, 2012; Marcos-Cuevas et al., 2015).

This shift occurred partly because technological advancements have led to less need for sales people performing the traditionally "taking orders"- type of sales, as most of these orders have become digitalized. This resulted in an increased need for qualified sales professionals to pick up relationship management (Murray and Robinson, 2001). Thus, sales is increasingly taking up a relationship role (Storbacka et al, 2009). In order to retain and attract customers, sales people need to build and maintain profitable long term customer relationships relative to short-term revenue goals (Jones et al., 2005; Ricks et al., 2008). Therefore in the transformed state of sales, the sales force has a new purpose to create

value for their customer with a focus on driving customer loyalty and maintaining long term customer relationships.

Thus, next to generating sales the goal of the sales force is to create customer satisfaction and loyalty (Marcos-Cuevas et al, 2015). Business marketing research has highlighted creating customer value as a path for building a highly satisfied and loyal customer base (Anderson and Narus 2004; Blocker et al., 2012). And there is wide agreement amongst scholars that sales professionals in the transformed landscape play a key role in the value creation process between customer and supplier (Anderson, Kumar and Narus, 2007; Blocker, Cannon, Panagopoulos and Sager, 2012; DeVincentis and Rackham, 1998; Dixon and Tanner Jr, 2012; Haas, Snehota and Corsaro, 2012; Hohenschwert; 2013).

The value of exchange has taken sales on a consultative role whereby the shift towards relationship marketing puts an emphasis on co-creation of value with the customer. Value is co-created with the customers through a series of exchanges and interactions (Storbacka et al, 2009). So to say, the sales professionals become strategic partners in solving problems and challenges of the customer (Blocker et al., 2012). Dixon and Tanner (2012) describe this change for the sales person as becoming the 'architect for change' in the customer's world. They say the sales person co-creates the outcome that fits best with the customer's vision, within the context of the customer's setting.

With a wide variety of customers in nature and expectations, creating value for customers has become increasingly sophisticated (Fogel et al, 2012). A sales person has to become an expert in their customer's industry and their own, to foresee opportunities that can drive new sources of value to the customer in cooperation with the selling company (Thull, 2010). Sales persons have to operate closely with buyers and customers. Consequently, they are in the optimal position to add value to the exchange (Flint, Woodruff and Gardial, 2002). Traditionally this was done by addressing the needs of a customer, however now sales persons must not only adapt to customer needs but also anticipate their goals, challenge existing paradigms and offer a decision making process better than the one already in place (Flint et al., 2002).

A key task for sales professionals in co-creation of value is to span the boundary between the supplying company and the customer company. The selling function is changing into a relationship based organisation where the key tasks are co-ordination between buyer and seller, and co-ordination within the supplying company (Murray and Robinson, 2001). The sales person is the contact point between customer and seller company and therefore his/her job involves in many interactions. Not only with the customer company, but also internally with colleagues from different departments, such as research and development or operations, and other third parties related to the customer project (Hohenschwert, 2013). It requires effective sales management to create maximum value for the customer, while at the same time trying to get maximum value for the suppliers' products and services (Marcos-Cuevas et al, 2015). A sales person therefore needs to become a capable orchestrator of organizational resources and to fully understand the products and customers and what is required to co-create solutions for customers (Jones et al., 2005; Fogel et al., 2012).

Sales has transformed from a traditional step by step process in which the aim is to meet the needs of the customer, to a focus on the relationship with the customer and working with them to co-create value. Creation of value is no simple task, and requires not only product knowledge and a strong relationship with the customer, but also knowledge of the exchange and how to add value to this exchange.

When referring to value creation, sales literature often conceptualises value as success in driving revenue and profit (Hohenschwert, 2013). For instance deVincentis and Rackham (1998) and Anderson and Narus (2004) both talk about sales professionals driving value by improving the efficiency or effectiveness of the customer. However, Hohenschwert (2013) questions how value is created when it is neither inherent in the characteristics of a tangible object nor lies in established collective judgements (such as efficiency or effectiveness). She argues that value is not only created through co-creation and interaction with different parties, but also through the “interpretive process involved in the interaction” (p. 49). She further argues that without an understanding of the interaction between individuals, researchers and practitioners, insight in how value is created will not be gained. For instance, the sales role has been assigned to be more important in value creation in services-based or non-standardized markets (Storbacka et al., 2009; Dixon and Tanner, 2012). Therefore, it is interesting to understand from the perspective of practitioners how they perceive value creation, and whether there are differences in their conceptualization to that outlined in the literature.

2.3 Professionalization of the Sales Role and the Demand for Advanced Skills

The transformation of sales makes clear that sales a function is more professionalized. The sales role is crucial to an organizations success; it comes with great responsibilities and is increasingly complex, therefore requiring highly skilled professionals to fill this role.

Sales professionals have become a key player in the creation of value (Hohenschwert, 2013). As value is created through customers, and sales persons are the (only) link between the customer business and supplier company, the responsibility of sales people has dramatically increased (Hautamaki, 2015; Ellis, 2000). A well-staffed sales function is therefore vital to business success (Fogel et al, 2012).

Before the sales transformation, on the job sales training might have been enough. Product knowledge was unique to a company and learned by internal training. Selling was something learned by doing and knowledge came from trying, failing and trying again. In the new world of sales, selling has become more complex and sales people have entered increasingly competitive selling situations (Jones et al, 2005). The sales role has changed tremendously and has become more sophisticated (Storbacka et al, 2009). To create value, sales professionals need to be an expert in the customer’s context and be an orchestrator of organizational resources of the supplier company (Dixon and Tanner, 2012; Jones et al, 2005). This asks for different skills that are more important than an outgoing personality (Fogel et al., 2012).

An examination of the different aspects of the sales transformation in the literature showed that sales professionals need specific skills to cope with the transformation. For instance, the increasing customer demand in greater knowledge and insight, value-adding solutions and responsiveness from salespeople have led to a need for skills in sophisticated analytics to identify opportunities (Adamson, Dixon and Toman, 2012; Leigh, DeCarlo, Allbright and Lollar, 2014). Technological advancements have resulted in the fact that sales people need to know more, they need to know it faster, and need to work with software to discipline processes and produce forecasts. Interrelated, the increased competitive landscape relates to the need of sales persons to have negotiation expertise to broker complex deals and skills that differentiate them from other sales organizations. Salespeople need to continually update their market knowledge of products and competitors in consideration to fulfil customer

expectations and remain competitive. The number of contingencies to which they must be able to adapt (e.g., different variations of competitive selling situations) continues to expand at a rapid rate (Jones et al. 2005).

The transformation of sales into co-creation of value requires salespeople to identify the actions that will solve client problems. Therefore sales persons need to have analysis skills (e.g. understand the customer's business, research client problems, analyse urgencies and open chances and explore solutions for the customers), synthesis skills (e.g. linking a solution to a specific problem or complication, gather information to form new ideas) and evaluation skills (e.g. acumen in terms of complex criteria, comparing proposals, evaluate courses of action and value market offerings) (Alvarez, Taylor and Rauseo, 2015, p.235). There is a need for a deeper understanding of the clients' businesses, development of additional services, an understanding in much greater depth buyer behaviour, information gathering, market analysis, sales forecasting and familiarity with new technologies (Wilson, 1993 in Ellis, 2000, p.4).

The evolution to relationship management asks for skills to improve the consultative relationship and communicative skills. It calls for an advancement in certain analysis skills (e.g. categorize clients, prioritize the allocation of time to clients), synthesis skills (e.g. developing a sales pitch, proposing a strategy) and evaluation skills (e.g. as opposed to judgments based on personal attitudes) (Alvarez et al., 2015, p.235). Furthermore, customers are known for purchasing solutions without taking into account the difficulty of implementation (Doney and Cannon, 1997). This results in the sales professional being a part of the solution (and service) offered to customers and adds to the importance of a sales person being able to build relationships and trust (Hautamäki, 2015).

The fact that sales has grown in importance puts a burden on sales organizations to select the "right" individuals. Salespeople are the closest contact to the company's greatest assets (i.e. the customer) and given that salespeople should have the best insight and opportunities to both create value for customers and appropriate value for sellers, it demands highly qualified sales personnel to make this happen. The increased power and activity of the customer means that the sales person must learn how to impact and shape already occurring conversations of the customer in a manner that is consistent with their organization's offering, mission and performance goals to make a good sale (Mangold and Faulds, 2009).

In order to remain competitive, today's firms must find the best way to connect sales operation with other functions such as manufacturing, distribution and finance as the sales function has to communicate the plan of the customers company to their own company. Of particular importance is the interface between marketing and sales (Marcos-Cuevas et al., 2015). The new sales thus needs great internal communication (Storbacka et al., 2009). Furthermore, to create the best fitting solution for the customer, the sales person needs to know what the supplying company can offer the customer. This obliges knowledge not just held by marketing (e.g., unique selling features, value in use, CA, segmentation, branding), but also by operations (e.g., product issues, production, scheduling, quality control, RandD, delivery timeliness and reliability), and finance (e.g., profit and loss information (Storbacka et al., 2009).

In summary, we understand that the transformation of sales has professionalized the sales role and asks for more advanced skilled sales professionals. Sales as a function has become more important and has more responsibilities. Being a key player in the creation of value has

led to an increased cognitive load on sales people, needing to understand different customers, markets and technologies. Furthermore, the sales person needs to develop negotiation expertise, analysis skills, synthesis skills and evaluation skills to co-create value with the customer and manage the relationship. Finally, they need to understand the supplying and customer company thoroughly to create a viable business solution. Some scholars argue that these skills are best taught in university settings (Marcos-Cuevas et al., 2015; Fogel et al., 2012).

2.4 The need for higher sales educated professionals

Common to a sales position is participation in a sales training program (Salopek, 2009). A number of articles indicate shortcomings of these programs. Cron, Marshall, Singh, Spiro and Sujana (2005) argue that traditional sales training programs are “standardised” and unsuited to the evolution of the modern sales person (p.124). Salopek (2009) relay the enormous costs that go into such training programs (on average \$US2000 each year per individual) despite salespeople themselves finding them “ineffective or less than useful” (p.71).

Some scholars argue that sales education offers advanced skills and training where sales training program does not. Marcos-Cuevas et al (2015) argue that unlike the sales training provision from industry, it is the unique combination of academic research-led education, consulting thought leadership, and business expertise that can create a powerful pedagogical approach to develop the aforementioned selling skills. Fogel et al., (2012) suggest that sales education can provide more than the sales training industry. Their main arguments include: (1) a sales education would to develop a broader understanding of all functional areas of business, often studying live cases, (2) to train multiple techniques (not biased by a particular sales training organization and (3) to ingrain knowledge over many months (not in approximately one week of sales training). Ricks, Williams and Weeks (2008) emphasise the importance of learning at the organizational and individual level to broaden and develop the field.

Many scholars agree that sales education is vital to ensure that individuals seeking employment in the field are equipped with the capabilities to succeed in this increasingly professionalized function (Bolander, William, Leff Bonney, and Cinthia Satorino. 2014; Chonko et al., 2013; Dixon and Tanner, 2012; Hawes, Rich and Widmier, 2004; Marcos-Ceuvas et al., 2015; Marcos-Cuevas et al., 2014; Marcos-Cuevas et al, 2009; Verbeke, Dietz and Verwaal, 2011; Weilbaker and Williams, 2006). There is some evidence to suggest professionals in the field with a sales education background perform better than those without a sales specific education. Fogel et al (2012) found in their research that skills taught in a university setting, positively affects performance. They note that a research from DePaul University indicated that sales personnel from sales education programs hit the break-even point in their territories 30% faster (over a 10-year period). Also, the Sales Education Foundation (2015) indicates that students from university programs when compared to their non-educated peers “(1) ramp up 50% faster with standard company training, (2) turn over an average of 30% less and (3) save companies approximately \$200K per hire within the first months of employment”. Other related research have found that selling knowledge is the highest predictor of performance in sales (Verbeke, Dietz and Verwaal, 2011) and that formal collegiate sales programs outperformed other salespeople on the job (Bolander, William, Leff Bonney, and Cinthia Satorino, 2014).

Consequently, in increasingly competitive industry contexts, sales education is recognised by some as a source of competitive advantage for businesses (Dixon and Tanner, 2012; Marcos-Ceuvas et al, 2015; Marcos-Ceuvas et al., 2014;). For instance, Marcos-Ceuvas, Donaldson and Lemmens (2014) suggest supplying graduates with both industry experience and higher education as the way forward for optimal sales performance. Furthermore, they argue that a higher education program in sales would create a unique opportunity for differentiation in the marketplace. According to Weilbaker and Williams (2006) specialized sales programs offer benefits to students and hiring firms. David Case, President of Advastar Incorporated (in Sales Education Foundation, 2015) notes that “the benefit of hiring sales program graduates is that they have gained valuable sales specific exposure and perspective which can help to increase the internal learning curve.” Furthermore, Fogel et al., (2012) suggest salespersons can differentiate themselves by being able to apply skills that are scarce but teachable and best taught in a university setting.

Therefore we understand that according to scholars a university sales education is needed because sales has transformed in such a way that certain skills are required. Given the growing awareness of the importance of sales to a business success, higher sales educated professionals have begun to be recognised by some scholars as a source of competitive advantage for business (Marcos-Ceuvas et al., 2015; Marcos-Ceuvas et al., 2014; Chonko et al., 2013; Dixon and Tanner, 2012). Furthermore sales education equips sales professionals with business acumen, and the right capabilities and a wide range of competencies needed in a sales role today (Bolander et al., 2014; Chonko et al, 2013; Dixon and Tanner, 2012; Hawes et al., 2004; Marcos-Cuevas et al, 2015; Marcos-Cuevas et al, 2014; Verbeke et al., 2011; Weilbaker and Williams, 2006). Sales education offers advanced skills and training that a sales training program might not be able to measure up to (Marcos-Cuevas et al., 2015).

A summary of the literature on the sales transformation reveals changes that have large implications for the role of sales professionals today. The changes are summarised in a table in the Appendix (see Appendix A) to categorise the transformation according to differences in definition, in environment, in its importance, in its value, in the tasks itself and in its goals. The table functions as a summary and gives a clear oversight of how the changes have occurred according to these categories and allows us to conceptualise the large extent of the changes.

The literature demonstrates a need for higher sales education from the perspectives of academics for a number of reasons relating to a transformed sales role, and demands on sales professionals today. However, it is unclear in the literature if the perspective of an organization with an important sales function would see higher sales educated professionals as necessary and what kind of skills they perceive sales professionals to have today.

2.5 The Current Sales Situation

The literature shows a need for developing an understanding of what a higher educated sales professional’s role looks like in a transformed sales landscape and what competencies it requires. As outlined in previous sections, there is strong evidence of the need for higher sales educated professionals. Evidence of what exactly a sales professional’s role and competencies would be today according to practitioners is unclear. It is particularly valuable to gain these insights from a successful sales organization, as they know how to develop a good sales function. Furthermore the barriers to obtaining the competencies required in a sales role today from the perspective of practitioners deserve attention.

We identified the most recurring concepts and relationships in the literature in the need for higher sales education and described them in the literature review. We integrated these in the framework below (see figure 1). We used this framework as a tool to analyse the need for higher sales educated professionals and understand the role and competencies of the sales profession today.

A number of articles detailed the knowledge and skills that students require when entering sales careers. Raymond, Charles and Hopkins (2006) surveyed sales professionals to understand the required knowledge, skills and attributes recruits are looking for in graduates seeking employment in sales. They also addressed educational factors contributing to student success in meeting the requirements of an entry level position. Kimball (1998) also surveyed sales professionals to understand the perceived characteristics between sales managers and sales representatives. Similar to our research, these articles address knowledge and skill requirements of sales professionals, and touch on educational factors contributing to student success in meeting these requirements. However, these articles do not address the knowledge and skills that professionals require in the context of the transformed selling landscape, and limit their research to focus on entry level sales rather than the sales force as a whole.

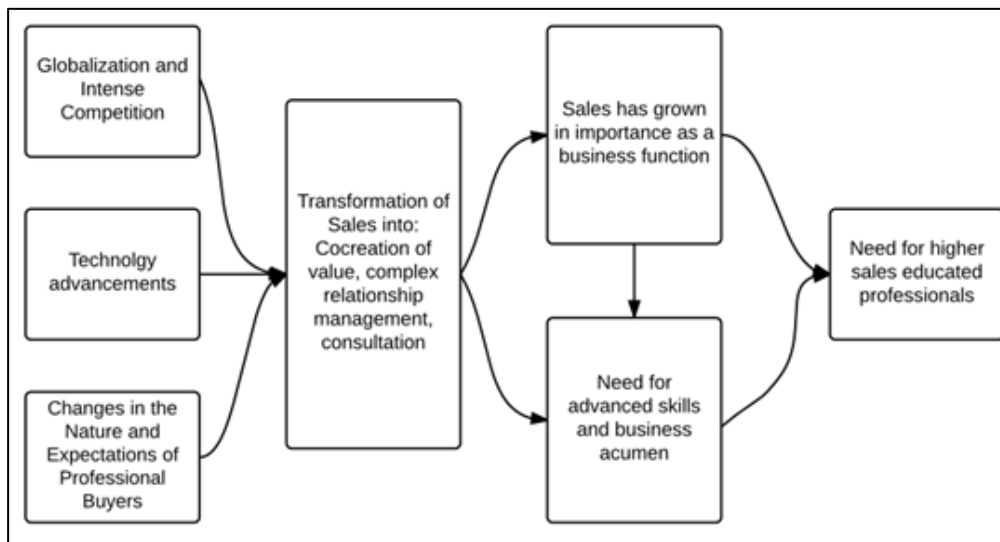


Figure 1. Identified inputs for the need for higher sales educated professionals

From our extensive literature review, we found it remarkable that many scholars show the increasing need for higher sales education, while there is not any university in our surroundings providing a sales university program. After short examination of the current state of sales education, it was clear that there is a very slow uptake of universities responding to this need from business. Sales as a discipline is under-researched and under-educated compared to its recognized importance from a business point of view. This has led us to further examine this issue and focus on what the barriers are towards obtaining sales education.

Several articles point to the growing presence of sales as an academic discipline particularly in the US (Anderson, Dixon, Jones, Johnston, LaForge, Marshall and Tanner, 2005; Cummins, Peltier, Erffmeyer and Whalen, 2013; Waldeck, 2010;). In 1980, sales research was first acknowledged as an opportunity in education and in 1985 Baylor University was the first to introduce a sales centre (Dixon and Tanner, 2012). A number of Universities joined together in 2002 to create the University Sales Center Alliance and since then the number of

schools offering sales programs and enquiring about membership has grown (Marcos-Cuevas et al., 2014). The number of sales programs more than doubled from 2007 to 2011 and the number of universities providing sales education courses increased from 44 in 2007 to 101 in 2011 (Fogel et al., 2012; Cummins et al., 2013). Other examples of growth in the field are the establishments of the Sales Education Foundation (2014) in the United States and the Global Sales Science Institute in 2007 based in Europe but servicing the world. These articles look at the growth relative to where sales academia began, which only a decade ago was barely existent (Dixon and Tanner, 2012). Upon examining the reality of university offerings of sales education it would appear that indeed sales centres are dramatically growing in presence, however the uptake of sales as an academic discipline from universities is slow (SEF, 2015).

Given the advantages of sales education for sales professionals established in this research and the long standing difficulty of finding adequate sales professionals to fill sales positions, it seems logical that business schools respond and put time and effort into teaching sales (Anderson et al., 2005). In 2015, according to the Sales Education Foundation Annual Report only 13 European Universities were counted as top universities for sales, compared to 93 in North America (SEF, 2015). Of the 13, 11 offer some form of sales in their graduate program offerings. For instance, Dublin Institute of Technology offers 'Management of Sales' as an elective that program students from Bachelor of Science in Marketing, Strategic Management, or an MBA can choose (SEF, 2015). The uptake in Europe of both programs or courses in sales and sales research does not reflect the need for sales educated professionals today (Deeter-Schmelz and Kennedy; 2011). If it is so clear in the literature that there is a need for higher sales educated professionals, it does not seem logical that so few programs are offered at universities.

2.6 Indications of Barriers to Obtain Sales Education

Remarkably, most marketing graduates begin their careers in a sales role (Cummins et al., 2013). This finding alone signals an imbalance in sales academia's offering. The literature reveals a number of indicators as to the lack of sales educated professionals. These include a persistent reticence towards sales as a career, an old institutional culture undermining the importance of sales, and a lack of support from academia.

Over the last 40 years, much research has focused on presence of negative perceptions and stereotypes of sales careers (Milord and Perry, 1977; Muehling and Weeks, 1988; Lee et al., 2007, Cummins et al., 2015). The research initially focused on whether or not there is a negative perception towards sales careers and more recently has focused on why the negative perception exists. The negative attitude towards sales careers issue has been recognised as a problem of the perception of sales (Dubinsky, Berkowitz and Rudelius, 1981) with negative attitudes towards sales careers evident in university institutions, in the workplace, and in the media (Karakaya et al., 2014; Waldeck et al., 2010). Previous important findings towards an understanding of the negative perception of sales include a lack of student knowledge about sales as a profession (Dubinsky et al., 1981; Stevenson and Bodkin, 1998; Fine, 2007; and Karakaya et al., 2014), ethical concerns grounded in the perception that selling involves manipulative behavior (Burnett, Pettijohn and Keith; 2011; Lee et al., 2007) and the influence of media on stereotypes of sales professionals (Waldeck et al., 2010).

Institutional culture would have it that sales is not something taught at a university because sales is something you learn on the job. This old candid perception of sales still persists today in universities and is enough reason to leave sales curriculum out of the question for many institutions. Fogel et al., (202) found that the academic culture puts sales far below marketing in terms of prestige and teaching priorities. Until recently marketing professionals had more formal education than sales professionals and are still perceived to be more analytical, data oriented and project focused in their role (Kotler and Krishnaswamy, 2006). Furthermore the lingering traditional perception of a sales professional, still used in common language today indicates a lack of awareness of the changes role of the sales professional (Waldeck et al., 2010).

Finally sales as an academic has little support from in terms of funding, finding faculty members to teach and a lack of motivation to contribute to scholarly research (Fogel et al, 2012). According to faculty perceptions of the ranking of sales marketing journals, the single journal focused on selling has very low perception providing very little incentive for scholars to contribute to sales literature (Hult, Neese, and Bashaw, 1997). There is very little support for PhD programs in sales and few are encouraged to study it through another business discipline (Fogel et al, 2012).

While the literature indicates a number of reasons as to why there is a lack of educated sales professionals, further understanding of the reasons as to why from the perspective of sales practitioners is needed. Moreover, the literature does not reveal the drivers and barriers to gaining the competencies needed to fulfil a sales role today. Hence an additional purpose of our research is to identify the barriers and drivers to gaining the required sales competencies today.

3. Method

In this section the methodological approach and reasoning is presented. First, we argue the philosophical position and the choice for performing a case study related to our research objective. Second, we describe the selection of our case and how the case study is designed. Furthermore, we explain the sampling method, selection criteria for the participants and how the interviews have been designed and conducted. Lastly, we explain how the data was analysed and how we argue for rigor in our research.

3.1 Research Philosophies

The object of study, the research design and how to interpret research findings, follows on the choice of research philosophy (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson, 2012, p. 52). Several paradigms have been created to understand epistemological and ontological foundations about the nature of the social world and how knowledge can be obtained from that world (Bryman and Bell, 2011, p. 26). Ontology is about the nature of reality and existence (Easterby-Smith et al, 2012, p. 53) and epistemological considerations concern the question what should be regarded as acceptable knowledge in a discipline (Bryman and Bell, 2011, p. 15). Awareness of the research philosophies can both increase quality and creativity of the researchers (Easterby-Smith et al., 2012, p. 53).

3.1.1 Ontological Considerations

A central question in ontology is 'whether social entities can and should be considered objective entities that have a reality external to social actors, or whether they can and should be considered social constructions built up from the perceptions and actions of social actors' (Bryman and Bell, 2011, p. 20). We viewed our research questions from a constructionist ontological point of view, which implies that social phenomena and their meanings are continually being created by social actors and social interactions between individuals (Bryman and Bell, 2011, p. 713). This stance challenges pre-given categories and concepts. It argues that concepts are emergent realities in a continuous state of construction and reconstruction. This implies that concepts such as 'competencies for sales positions' can act as a point of reference, but will always be in the process of being formed (Bryman and Bell, 2011, p. 22). 'Competencies for a sales position' and 'sales role' are thus seen as a specific version of social reality that has to be perceived as uncertain knowledge (Bryman and Bell, 2011, p. 22). We believe that concepts cannot be closely examined in isolation from the influences of the people who created and provided them. The emphasis in this research is therefore on words and conversations between people to create meaning to the world (Thompson et al, 1994). Therefore, the assumption is that there may be many different realities (Easterby-Smith et al., 2012). We have decided for the constructionist ontological stance, as this is appropriate to create an understanding of subjective opinions and perspectives of our research topics.

3.1.2 Epistemological Considerations

Epistemological issues regard the appropriate way to gain knowledge and understand a unique person's worldview (Bryman and Bell, 2011, p.15). We epistemologically characterized this study from an interpretivist point of view. Interpretivists stress that the understanding of the social world is based on subjective meanings of social world actions, in contrast to natural sciences (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2009). This philosophy enables researchers to understand the subjective meaning of concepts and to do this in an objective

manner (Schwandt, 2000). Therefore, the interpretivist stance allowed us to understand the perspectives and motivations of individuals.

We emphasize on meaning from the individual's point of view (Bryman and Bell, 2011: 168). In fact, different interviewees could provide distinct answers in 'competencies of sales professionals today', because each interviewee perceives that through their own 'lens' of reality. This includes that the interpretations by the researchers, such as the logic behind discoveries, can bias the research.

3.1.3 The Role of Theory

After an extensive literature review of the sales transformation and the sales position of today, it has been concluded that current literature lacks explanation of 'why there is a need for higher sales educated professionals', 'competencies for the sales position' and an identification of 'the sales role' in today's transformed selling landscape. Therefore, this study mainly adopts an inductive process in order to generate an understanding for competencies of the sales position and the sales role. Within this approach, theories about sales transformation and the sales profession described and illustrated in the previous chapter are considered as an important point of departure to conduct the research.

We found concepts and relationships that were repeatedly identified in the literature regarding the changed sales role and the need for higher sales educated professionals, therefore appeared to be meaningful and significant. Because of this significance, we have brought these concepts into our research to identify the role they might play (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). We have used these findings as stimulants for the process of investigation and the structure of the interviews.

Qualitative researchers often integrate the literature throughout their study, working back and forth between the literature and the research (LeCompte and Preissle, 1993). Some interesting new topics came across when conducting our research. Therefore, we have used an iterative approach, going back and forth between research and theory.

Next to that, it is important to note that the understanding of sales transformation is used to support the researchers in partially defining the competencies and sales role in a socially constructed reality. It should be clarified that the expected findings do not reflect the 'complete' picture of competencies and the sales role, nor provide a full description, but only partial 'hypothesized' understandings (Yin, 1994).

3.2 Purpose and Rationale for Case Study

We entered our research with a well-defined focus. The purpose of research is to explore the following research questions: 'why is there a need for formally education sales professionals?', 'what role do sales persons perform in today's transformed selling landscape?' and 'what are the competencies required to fulfil this role today?'. Our aim is to study an international company with a highly successful sales function in order to understand how they work with sales and provide answers to our research questions.

The ontological and epistemological positioning of our research have led to gather data in a qualitative manner as the favoured form of data is spoken words (Bryman and Bell, 2011, p. 386). Yin (2014) defines case study research as "an empirical enquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (p. 14). Case study research is therefore chosen as an appropriate method to fulfil our purpose to provide a level

of detail and understanding of competencies and the role of the sales profession today. A logical step in this kind of research (and an under-researched topic) is to gather empirical data in an exploratory manner through in-depth interviews (Bryman and Bell, 2011, p. 35).

As noted, we specified constructs from the literature to help shape the initial design of theory building (Eisenhardt, 1989). We identified several potentially important constructs to confirm and extend our understanding of why there is a need for higher sales educated professionals (e.g., transformation of sales, the importance of sales as a business function and the need for professionals with business acumen) and integrated these into a framework (see figure 1). We have used this framework as a tool in our data gathering and analysis to explicitly measure those constructs. This allowed us to measure the constructs more accurately and lead us to identify the changes in the role today and what competencies come with those changes.

A case study is the intimate connection with empirical reality that permits the development of a testable, relevant and valid theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). There are several reasons why we have chosen for a case study to fulfil this purpose. At first, a case study is an appropriate research strategy to focus on understanding the dynamics present within single settings (Eisenhardt, 1989). This suits our purpose to explore and understand the competencies and role of the sales profession today in the particular context of an international company with a large sales function. Secondly, consistent to our research objective, case studies can be used to provide descriptions and generate theory (Yin, 1994). Third, a case study is useful for exploration of an issue and area that lacks in knowledge. Competencies for the new sales profession and the new sales role have only received solid academic attention over the last decade, thus many questions remain unanswered and unexplored (Dixon and Tanner, 2012). Fourth, a case study tends to be more intensive, thus allowing for depth and richness in detail (Flyvbjerg, 2011). Fifth, case studies are likened to a unit of study thus allow a researcher to achieve high levels of conceptual validity (Flyvbjerg, 2011; Yin, 2009; George and Bennet; 2005). A case study involves a detailed consideration of contextual factors meaning the indicators that best represent theoretical concepts are more easily identified (George and Bennet, 2005: 19). Consideration of contextual factors is extremely difficult to do in statistical studies, and unlike statistical studies, case studies are conducive to “conceptual refinements with a higher level of validity over a smaller number of cases” (George and Bennett, 2005, p. 19). Flyvbjerg (2001) relays the value of a case study in providing context-dependent knowledge, as a crucial source of learning and becoming an expert in an area. Thus our research investigates an overarching phenomenon, the need for higher sales educated professionals with a focus on the competencies needed and the new sales role they play.

3.3 Case Selection

In case methodology, cases should not be chosen because they are interesting or because they provide ample data to study (George and Bennett, 2005, 69). Rather, case selection and analysis should be guided by “a well-defined research objective and an appropriate strategy to achieve that objective” (George and Bennett, 2005, 69).

As our research objective is to identify competencies for sales personnel and describe the sales role in the new sales landscape, we have chosen to carry out a single case study, as it is more valuable for our research questions to collect more information from one company context rather than less from data across a range of contexts (Gomm, Hammersley and

Foster, 2000). Besides, we decided to choose an extreme or “critical case” in which the process of interest is “transparently observable” as sampling strategy to maximize on the use of information gathered (George and Bennett, 2005; Flyvbjerg, 2011; Yin, 1994) Theoretical sampling has been identified as an effective way to develop new concepts, variables and theories (Flyvbjerg, 2011).

Therefore, we specified two main criteria for the selection of our single case. First, it was important in the selection of a case that we chose an international business in which the higher education of sales professionals was highly relevant. Second, we wanted a business that stood out as a ‘critical case’ in having an especially high performing sales function (Yin, 1994). It had to be a company having great knowledge about how to develop a sales professional.

We chose to investigate Thule Group, an international publicly listed company operating in a consumer industry. When it came to the first criteria, we knew that for Thule the issue of higher sales education was highly relevant as executives within the company had been suggested to us as highly engaged with this issue. Given Thule operates in 139 markets, has 35 sales locations, 12 production sites and over 2000 employees around the world, they met our criteria for an international business.

For criteria two, selection of a critical case, Thule stood out for a number of reasons. They are market leaders in many categories and run an extremely successful sales operation with strong growth over recent years (Thule, 2016b). They publically place high value on the sales function, for instance, they do not shy away from titling sales roles with the words sales, unlike many other businesses who call the positions ‘consultants’ or ‘business developers’. Furthermore, Thule has a very prominent sales function. The organization consists of 221 sales personnel (out of just over 2000 employees). The interface between marketing and sales demonstrates the value placed on sales within the company. For instance, the marketing function is positioned as a support of sales and consists of 41 employees compared to 221 employees involved in the sales function. Therefore, Thule poses a relevant and appropriate context from which to conduct our study.

Overall, secondary data including yearly reports, and CEO’s statements were used to understand the unit of study to be covered.

3.4 Description of the Case

Thule Group, with headquarters in Malmö, Sweden, operates within the Outdoor retail industry and has two product categories. These categories include ‘outdoor and bags’ (e.g. equipment for cycling, water and winter sports, roof boxes, bike trailers, baby joggers, laptop and camera bags, backpacks and cases for mobile handheld devices) and ‘specialty’ (pick-up truck tool boxes). Thule defines their two key markets as Europe Rest of World (ROW) and the Americas and in total is located in 139 countries worldwide. Thule is the global market leader in a number of categories including sport and cargo carriers for the car, camera bags, and multi-functional child carriers (Thule, 2016a). Net sales for 2015 amounted to 5.3 billion SEK (approx. \$650 million USD). The company has seen continued strong growth in sales across the last few years, and just last year (2015) had a sales increase of 5.1% (Thule, 2016b).

3.5 Sampling method and participation selection criteria

Snowball sampling, and thus convenience sampling, was used to gain access to our participants. We preferred to focus on “theoretical sampling”, thus selecting interviewees of high relevance to the theory in question (Bryman and Bell, 2011, p.192). Therefore, we contacted a professor from Lund University School of Economics and Management (LUSEM) with great interest in our research topic and connections to companies in which our issue was highly relevant. He put us in contact with the Senior Vice President of HR at Thule Group, who was passionate about our issue. Consequently, she referred us to the VP of Sales and the Sales Developer, who in turn referred us to the Area Sales Manager of the Nordics and the Sales Representative operating in Denmark. The main limitation of snowball sampling is that the resulting sample is not representative of a population (Bryman and Bell, 2011, p.192); however, given the qualitative nature of our research we did not seek to find results generalizable to a population. Therefore, snowball sampling was an appropriate method to recruit our participants.

The intention of our research is to explore and describe competencies and the new role of sales professionals today. We considered whether a greater or a fewer number of interviews would produce the desired outcome. We focused on finding the ‘right’ persons to meet our research question. Therefore, we selected interviewees who were not only relevant to our research question, but also had the potential to prove our assumptions wrong in the analysis. It was therefore important to have at least one interviewee from each level in the company’s sales function. Due to time given to complete this research and availability of potential interviewees in the company, we aimed for producing high quality data through dignity, care and time taken to analyze the interviews, rather than quantity. Thinking about our research, our interviewees from five different levels and perspectives are capable of describing the ‘real’ world to answer our research questions and deliver valuable information for the research. Ideally it would have been beneficial to have more than one interviewee in every level of the sales function, however, outside determinants for defining the number of interviews were more dominant in our decision to interview five staff members (Brannen and Nilsen, 2011). The interviewees are presented in the following table (see table 1):

Name	Sex	Years Thule	Education	Occupation
Kajsa von Geijer	F	11,5	- B.B.A. personnel and workplace issues - Extra classes in Economics and History	Senior Vice President of HR
Johan Hedberg	M	3,5	- Executive MBA - B.B.A. Marketing - Minor Economics - Extra classes in Finance	Vice President of Sales
Magnus Matsson	M	4	- M.B.A. Industrial and Financial Management - Bsc. Business Administration	Sales and Marketing Planning Manager
Andreas Holm	M	2,5	- M.B.A. Henley Management College London - IHM Business School	Area Sales Manager (Nordic and Baltic Region)
Mads Moltsen Kjølner	M	1,5	- Shop Assistant Education, Handelsskole, Alborg Area, Denmark	Sales Representative (Nordic and Baltic Region)

Table 1. Overview of Interviewees

3.6 Data Collection

A valid design in this qualitative case study method is the use of in-depth interviews (Bryman and Bell, 2011, p.465). We used in-depth interviews with the aim being to gain valuable insights about the unit of analysis and the research questions in question.

We have used semi-structured interviews. The interviews were open discussions, but had “fairly specific topics” to address (Bryman and Bell, 2011, p. 467). We used a checklist as interview guide with a list of topics covering the main reasons (based on theoretical understanding derived from the literature review) as to why there is a need for higher sales educated professionals, what competencies were necessary to fulfil the new sales role and what the new sales role involves to answer our research questions (Avlesson, 2003). Furthermore, topics were noted to fully understand the unit of analysis and to reveal how participants construct reality and think about situations. The topics included: the educational backgrounds of the staff, an overview of the sales function within Thule, the involvement of sales in their role in the organization, the changing role and function of sales, drivers for these changes, adjustments to these changes, challenges they were facing in their position, things that work very well in the sales function, how the sales function could improve, the demand for different skills of sales professionals, the need for higher sales education, on-the-job training and the qualification of marketing students for a sales job (see Appendix B for the interview guide). The checklist was later adapted to include views on the recognition of sales as an academic discipline today.

The use of semi-structured interviews was decided because of the importance of having structure in the interview and a checklist of issues as a format to work from (Jones, 1986). This increased the dependability of our research design (Riege, 2013). We decided against a structured interview to avoid having a rigid question and answer base whereby the conversation does not flow and there is great difficulty capturing the meaning of the respondent (Thompson et al, 1989). Conversely, we decided against an ‘unstructured interview’ technique as to not undermining our research by failing to address important topics (Bryman and Bell, 2011).

Four out of the five interviews were face-to-face and lasted between 45 minutes and one and a half hour. We aimed to conduct all interviews face to face due to the advantage of being able to capitalise on body language or any non-verbal data and to increase the ease of probing (Bryman and Bell, 2011). However, one interview we had little choice but to conduct over the phone as the respondent was mostly working out in field. The other interviews were held in the Thule office in Malmö at times that suited the interviewees. All interviews were recorded with the iPhone voice recording application, transcribed and annotated, with initial impressions and observations directly noted during and straight after the interviews to capture the main emergent themes (Bryman and Bell, 2011).

3.7 Data analysis

Initially we introduced a framework derived from the literature and covering key theoretical concepts seen as input to why there is a need for sales education (see figure 1). These concepts were used as the basis for the themes used in the analysis. We executed a relational analysis to identify themes and explore relationships between concepts. We initially identified nine themes from the framework. First, (1) *globalization and intense competition*, (2) *technology advancements* and (3) *changes in the nature and expectations of professional buyers* are defined as themes expected to be drivers for the transformation of sales. Second,

(4) *the transformation of sales* is proposed to be characterized as (5) *co-creation of value* and (6) *complex relationship management*. Together with (7) *sales growth in importance as a business function* and (8) *the need for advanced skills and business acumen*, this will lead to (9) *a need for higher sales educated professionals*. The checklist used in the interviews covered a number of key issues generated from the framework and our aim was to find recurring themes and confirm or reject the themes already identified. The checklist used in the initial interview was modified as a result of recurring themes in the empirical analysis. This type of research can be characterized as a continuous interaction between theory and empirical data (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2000).

To process the data, we transcribed the interviews (see example Appendix C). We broke up the interview transcripts in chunks of data, sentences and paragraphs and allocated and labelled each unit of analysis with one of the themes from our framework manually by using different colours of highlighting. For data which could not be categorized under a pre-determined theme, a summary was given to that segment of text and openly coded. Open codes were then processed to a smaller range of ideas and identified as themes. When new ideas or themes emerged, we reassessed the transcripts to look for other information reinforcing this idea (use of constant comparison). Then, we collected all individual quotes for each theme. Furthermore, we examined the theme and looked for a range of responses within a theme and described sub-themes. Sub themes were compared to see if there were differences and if there is evidence to explain the differences. Finally, we narratively incorporated the interpreted summarised themes by using examples and quotes to illustrate these interpretations and described the differences and relationships within the themes (University of South Hampton Education School, 2012).

In specific relation to our study, we aspire to reveal data which strengthens, reduces or extends the themes and theory derived from the literature review by describing the competencies sales professionals need to have today and what role they play in today's selling landscape.

3.8 Establishing Rigor

Despite advantages of the case study method, subjectivity of the data leads to difficulties in establishing reliability and validity. To enhance the validity and reliability of our research, we used several techniques to achieve objectivity, credibility, transferability and dependability of the findings (Riege, 2013).

3.8.1 Confirmability (Objectivity)

This section explains whether the interpretation is drawn in a logical and unprejudiced manner. A main bias of case studies can be the subjective judgements during the periods of research design and data collection. In order to refrain from this bias and increase the objectivity and neutrality of our study, we have let our participants review the interview transcripts, part of the data analysis and final report outlining the findings, and if it was necessary change unclear aspects (Yin, 1994). Also, we made use of multiple investigators (two) to enhance confidence in the findings (Eisenhardt, 1989).

3.8.2 Credibility (Internal Validity)

The purpose of this section is to demonstrate that the research is carried out in a way that ensures credibility. This involves the approval to conceptualize research findings as realities

(Riege, 2013). Therefore we had to make sure our concepts were rich and meaningful, the findings were internally coherent and to show that concepts are systematically related.

A big advantage of case studies is to achieve high levels of conceptual validity: identifying and measuring the indicators that best represent the theoretical concepts the researcher intends to measure (George and Bennet, 2005). In order to establish the phenomena in a credible way, we used within-case analysis and cross-checked the results to assure internal coherence of findings in the data analysis phase (Yin, 1994). Where there were inconsistencies in the views of the respondents, we flagged these in the analysis and focused on the understanding why there were these differences. We have highlighted major patterns of similarities and differences between respondents' experiences or beliefs, and tried to identify what components are significant for those examined patterns and what mechanisms produce them. Furthermore, we used our framework to illustrate our explanation building to assist the reader (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

3.8.3 Transferability (External Validity)

Transferability is achieved when the findings can be generalized to some broader theory (Riege, 2003). In order to generalize findings, the scope and boundaries should be defined, which will help to achieve analytical generalizations.

In previous paragraphs, we provided a detailed portrait of the setting in which the research is conducted. This information is the basis to judge the applicability of the findings to other settings. Our findings may be applicable for other international companies, who sell products to retailers and have a large sales function (separate from marketing). Although the case can be valuable for all kinds of enterprises, generalizations can only be made within this scope and boundaries.

The focus of this study is to explore and describe how the constructs in our framework lead to competencies and a new sales role for sales professionals. Although it is hard to transfer knowledge of a case study to some broader theory, we have tried to achieve analytical generalizations by comparing the initially identified theoretical constructs with the empirical results of our single case study. By using the framework we aim to establish a logic that might be applicable to other situations within the scope and boundaries of the research, like a "working hypothesis" (Yin, 1994).

3.9.4 Dependability (Reliability)

The use of an in-depth case study and interviews can raise problems for dependability. Findings from semi-structured interviews are not necessarily intended to be reliable, as people are not as static and it reflects reality at a specific moment in time and context, thus results may differ (Saunders and Lewis, 2011). The purpose of this section is to show the methods we used to increase the dependability so that operations and procedures of the research inquiry can be repeated by other researchers which then achieve similar findings (Riege, 2013). First, we recorded our data mechanically with the iPhone voice recording application which is open to external scrutiny (Nair and Riege, 1995). Second, we used the semi-structured case study protocol (Yin, 1994). The interview techniques and procedures therefore remained consistent. Third, we increased confidence by using multiple (two) researchers which independently gave their descriptions to the data (Le Compte and Goetz, 1982). And fourth, we developed a case study data base at the end of the data collection phase to provide sufficient clarity in the way of organizing and documenting the mass of collected data (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

4. Findings

This section is the resulting narrative of a detailed exploration of the theoretical concepts seen as input for the need for higher educated sales professionals and the changed sales role of today using evidence from five in-depth interviews. The narrative is set out according to the themes and subthemes corresponding to the concepts in the framework, and introduces further themes and variable that have come to our attention as a result of the findings.

It is useful at first to understand the organizational context from which our research was derived. The Vice President of Sales is the head of the structure, followed by customer service and the Sales and Marketing Planning Manager to support. The structure shows the different markets Thule Group serves. Each market has one 'Area Sales Manager', followed by one or several 'Sales Representatives' and one or several 'Sales Field Workers'. The OES market is a separate market for the car accessories category and has a different sales function. Below a visual illustration of the structure of the sales function within Thule Group is given (see Figure 2).

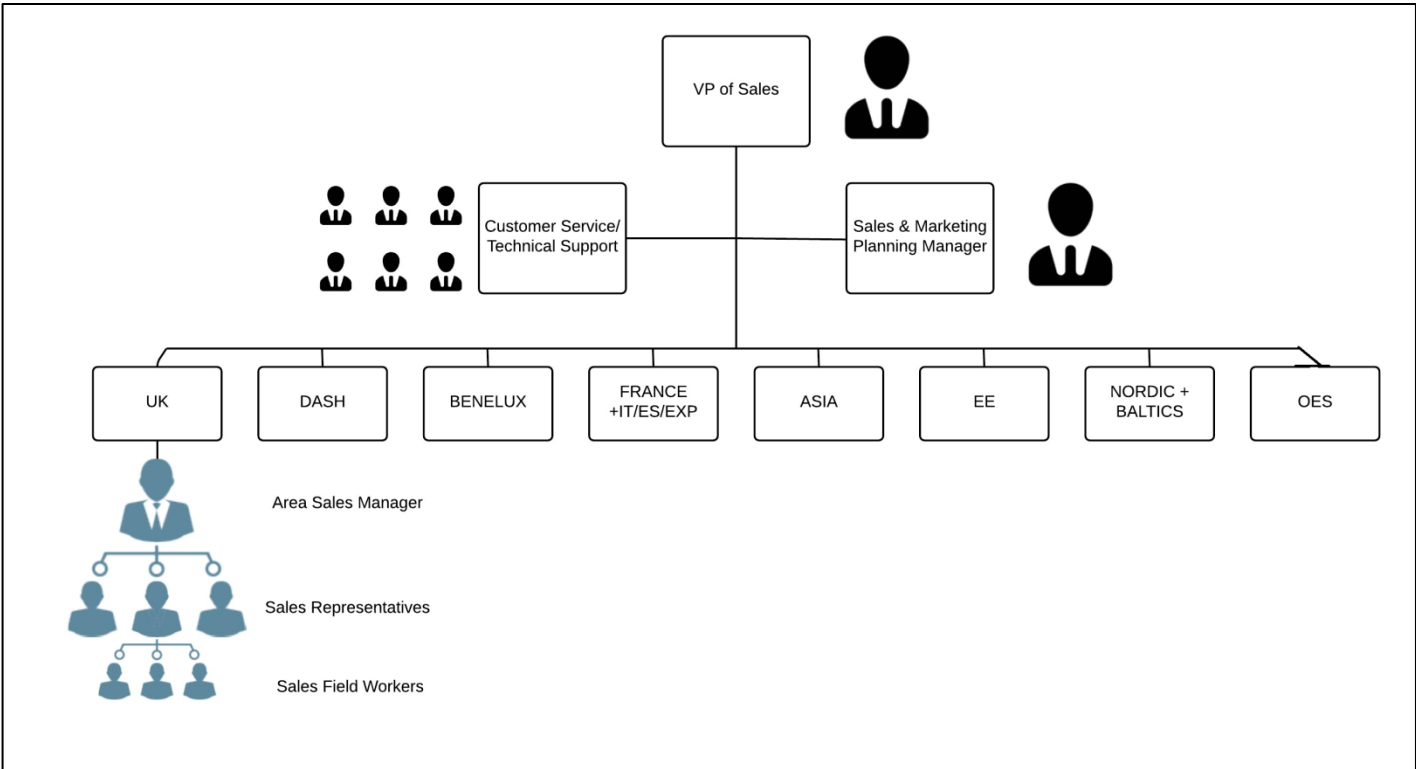


Figure 2. Organizational chart of the Sales Function in Thule Group

The framework derived from the literature review (shown in figure 1) is used as a basis for the analysis. As said in the method section, we defined nine (sub) themes from the framework. During the analysis, additional themes were identified. In total we defined 25 themes: five main themes and twenty sub themes. We decided to separate the theme 'strategic change within Thule Group' in order to distinguish it as a resemblance of a (successful) strategic move within Thule Group compared to other changes more representative of the whole selling landscape. Three subthemes have risen under this theme: (1) reformation of the channel approach, (2) upgrading staff and (3) becoming a "lean"

company. Furthermore, a new subtheme was created under the transformation of sales: unification of sales goals. When researching the demand for business acumen, there was a clear distinction between two segments of data to explain the phenomena (1) analytical thinking through academic education and (2) limits to learning on the job. In addition, we discovered that 'barriers to obtaining a sales education' was apparent according to the practitioners, which led to the development of a new theme. The following barriers as subthemes were identified: (1) disconnect between sales academia and business, (2) sales has an image problem and (3) a perception that sales education will be too theory based.

4.1 Strategic Change within Thule Group

The interviews revealed a number of internal changes across the different levels of sales management. Notably, Thule are constantly "challenging the go to market approach" and striving to be a "lean" organization and reducing inefficiencies both in human resources and in their operation. Furthermore, the company has seen an organization wide strategic shift to be a key player in not only the automotive accessory industry but also in the outdoor industry, thus needing a transformation of both the sales function and sales roles.

4.1.1 Reformation of the channel approach

Internally, Thule as an organization has undergone a number of strategic changes over the last 10 years in relation to sales. The overarching strategy that prompted some internal changes to the sales function was the shift from being a company supplying accessories to the car industry to an outdoor company (including car accessories). This strategy meant a reformation of the channel approach. The channels include retailers, distributors, agents, key accounts and OE, but now had a much larger focus on key accounts and selling directly to retailers, and a much smaller focus on the distributor channel. Coinciding with the refocused channel approach was a need to rethink the way Thule did sales. As Senior VP of HR explains:

When we took our sales force and when we took our company from being this accessories supplier to the car industry transforming it into an outdoor company we needed to go through a huge sales training. You have to sell differently if you sell directly to retailers. Before we only sold it to distributors. We have changed the channel approach - the way we do business - So we needed a big change, we needed to approach it differently. We needed to give them account management training. We needed to go through finance and business acumen – Senior VP of HR

This strategic change to focus more on selling to retailers rather than distributors is not a strategy unique to Thule Group. More and more businesses today are realizing the benefits of skipping the middle man and going direct to the retailer. Therefore, more and more business have a greater dependence on the value they bring to the retailer as more and more companies skip the distributor and compete for retailer attention. Thule is well aware of the condensed competition in winning the retailer and consequently realized they needed to have staff with the required business acumen to compete.

4.1.2 Upgrading staff

Thule Group internally felt the need for refocus across the entire sales function, and went on to contract a corporate sales training company to implement this within Thule. Furthermore, the refocus involved upgrading staff across the whole company to be both academically and

practically skilled. The Senior VP of HR said that one of the goals for her over the last 7 years within Thule has been to “upgrade the education level that is in all layers of management”. Having highly educated staff may well be common to many companies in today’s competitive market however for Thule, it is a strategic focus.

It is common to have highly educated people on the job, but perhaps not as focused as Thule has (on education) – Area Sales Manager Nordics and Baltics

Having a focus on highly educated staff could well be a large contributor to Thule Group’s success and growth evident in their annual reports (Thule Group 2015a). It is likely that many organizations with a key selling function do not realize the importance of having sales staff across the whole organization equipped with critical thinking skill and higher level knowledge.

4.1.3 Becoming a “lean” company

Becoming a “lean” company has been a gradual process, and one which is still occurring. One interviewee explains that the biggest change in the last three years within Thule was removing inefficiencies by making sure that (a) all sales team have the tools in time to be successful and (b) making sure they are all aiming for the same goals, the Thule Group goals, rather than general micro managed goals.

That has been a big change, making sure everyone knows what their role is and what is expected of them. Also to remove all of the reason why they shouldn’t be able to be successful – Sales and Marketing Planning Manager

The biggest change has been gathering everyone and making sure we are pushing for the same goals...In the end we are one company, the local sales managers are not driving sales as if for a local country specific company....But instead jointly to reach the goals for the entire company... In the end we increase sales, increase profitability and make our owners happy – Sales and Marketing Planning Manager

Improving efficiency by supporting the sales operation to have the tools that are necessary requires aptitude to differentiate the necessary tools from the unnecessary. Identifying these tools is a difficult task in itself and requires problem solving and analytical skill, as well as thorough communication between parties internally.

4.2 Transformation of Sales

4.2.1 Drivers for the transformation of Sales

4.2.1.1 Globalization

Globalization is evident in the scale of Thule today, now operating in 139 markets and continuing to expand. According to Thule Group respondents, sales people now need to know and understand laws, regulations, policies and politics, cultural norms, structures and many other things. A sales person has to be able to break down legal content into what are the consequences on a higher and broader level. “One thing that is functioning in one market may not function in another market”. One respondent spoke about this new level of thinking

as an example of the increasing cognitive load that comes with the area sales managers' role:

We have one sales manager responsible for Asia, and that's 20 countries. Different languages, different currencies and business cultures. So the sales manager has to be very knowledgeable, very professional, very analytical in their role – Sales and Marketing Planning Manager

Sales persons need to be able to think about the big picture, taking into account a number of external and internal influences on their task. The broader their knowledge span, the better their responsiveness and preparedness to these influences. Thinking about a sell as simply between a buyer and seller would be ignorant and limiting to what a sales person could offer.

4.2.1.2 Heightened level of competition

Thule made it clear that increasing international competition means companies, such as Thule need to be creative in the way that they conduct sales if they want to have an advantage over the competition. Put simply by an interviewee:

The thing that's getting harder is the competition. In the old days, there were some crappy, some good brands. Now they are all good brands so the competition is much harder. That's where you have to be creative to find solutions that fit the accounts...You have to be well prepared – Sales Representative

A heightened level of competition relates to many aspects of a transforming sales function. Being creative is more and more important in the sales role today given the competition. Being creative can be conceptualized in a number of ways, however in the context of Thule Group, being creative means always questions the way they go to market, being open and responsive to changes and improvements and making strategic informed decision rather than irrational decisions.

4.2.1.3 Technology advancements

Thule Group respondents remarked on certain technological developments. The increase in speed and flow of information was one such development to which salespeople have to be very alert to and have to "point out what [information] is important and relevant and what is less of a priority". Next to that, the Senior VP of HR noted that in the future, technological developments will be crucial to the development of the sales force and highly influential in the change of the sales landscape:

Into the future, it's going to be more about the digital sales and how to explore on that. There will always be products in shops to touch and feel. Sales process might look different because we as consumers are changing our patterns [...] So it is system, digitals, that is what going to be the difference in future, that will totally change the sales force and the knowledge they possess. It will require new knowledge in the demand plan and supply chain for organizations – Senior VP of HR

Technology developments have largely influenced the heavy of information sales professionals have to sort in their role today. Thule staff acknowledges that it is up to them to be prepared for technological developments and use them to be able to forecast trends and implement sales in a smart way.

4.2.1.4 Changes in the nature and expectations of customers

The Senior VP of HR commented on a change in the nature of the customers (professional buyers). She mentioned that the level of the conversation between buyer and supplier has increased:

And the sourcing people are getting much stronger in their acumen. Really have to plan and cannot send in someone who is way below a very skilled purchaser. Because you don't balance that relationship – Senior VP of HR

It was also indicated that customers differ in nature:

Each channel has its own culture, its own way of working. And its own set of key customers that drive the channel – Area Sales Manager

To balance the relationship and therefore maintain a positive and valuable relationship, sales persons need to meet the acumen of the buyers. For Thule this means being able to offer retailers more than just a product, by bringing their expertise of the market, and their expertise on how to sell better to the table.

4.2.2 Changes in the sales role

All interviewees and thus all levels of management agreed sales is transforming as a role and function and no longer looks the way it used to be.

When it came to changes in the sales role it was clear from all respondents that the sales role has become a lot more complex, and more customer relationship focused. The interviewees talked about the transformation occurring during the timeframe of 20 years ago to still occurring today. Within this time period (1993 to now) the transformation of the sales role has been the most evident.

4.2.2.1 Increasing complexity

When it comes to increasing complexity, it was clear from the respondents that sales is no longer a “one step at a time” process through which you meet with the customer, offer them a sale as a solution and they can take or leave the deal. The role of a sales professional used to involve “picking up your briefcase”, “making an offer and coming up with a solution” (Sales Representative). Sales representatives used to drive around, visit customers, have “big dinners, entertainment, all that stuff” (VP of Sales) in far less competitive markets with smaller markets and smaller scale.

The criteria for being a sales rep are higher now. You used to just drive out to a show and sell those 10, come back and say hey you've sold 10 so I'll order another 5. That's the old type of sales guy. Now it's at more a strategic level, now if you do like the old days you won't succeed – Sales Representative

Now, the high competition, the diverse and wide reaching markets and the scale of customers mean “there's a higher professional demand on sales now than there was around

20 years ago” (VP of Sales). Sales professionals have to be far more prepared than they used to if they want to have a chance over the competition.

When I go to a meeting with them I have to be very well prepared, whereas in old days you would make them an offer, come up with a solution. Now, I have to plan the meetings, prepare the numbers, prepare the plan for the account next year (what campaigns with them, any new products)...Now you have to make appointments, find the right person, make a plan, to have the long term strategic plan for the customers, where are we now where would you like to go. Accounts are also expecting more feedback, can we do more sales, shall we do more marketing, can we do a campaign, writing campaigns together. That’s the biggest difference – VP of Sales

For sales managers the increasing complexity has had a potentially bigger impact on their role. Since 2009, some Area Sales Managers have taken on great responsibilities. They have gone from being the single account manager for his region to now being responsible for multiple sales representatives’/account managers in the region. His role has developed from managing one category channel (automotive accessories) to five categories (soon to be 6). As the Sales and Marketing Planning Manager explains:

They [sales managers] need to be aware of much more than just increasing sales...Our sales managers today are completely different to five years ago. They did the knocking on the door, creating the accounts themselves, they managed the accounts. Today with the expansion they have 10-20-30 people working for them and have to take a step back and focus on management. Driving his or her markets and channels, complexity is increasing with more customers, more people they are responsible for, more products, and more channels. The amount of information a sales manager at our company has to process is very high – Manager Sales and Marketing Planning

An increase in complexity is noted by the fact that a sales person should know and understand different functions in the company and be in close contact with them. This demands a high level of business acumen.

They (the sales force) are managing complex relationships with key accounts etc., so they need to have a high level of business acumen in order to drive that business. They also need to look at the marketing span. And they of course also need to be in close contact with our supply chain. To make sure we have a good customer service support. They are definitely key people in our business – Senior VP of HR

Thule sales persons are involved in many interactions between the customer or retailer and the company. They have to span the boundary between the Thule Group, production, marketing and supply chain.

4.2.2.2 More customer relationship focused

Relationships build business – Senior VP of HR

For sales representatives, effectively driving sales and therefore revenue for the company in today’s competitive outdoor and automotive environment largely rests on the relationship with the customer. This was also highlighted as one of the biggest challenges today, especially when moving into new categories and therefore dealing with new customers:

Relationship management is one of the big points you need to do as a sales person. You are constantly building your relationships with customers – Senior VP of HR

Because we know that if you work hard with your customers and retailers, you get have better sell-out for the business and we will have better sell in to them. The goal is to get as many products out to the retailer's store – Senior VP of HR

A good depiction of the importance of relationship was given by the Area Sales Manager, Andreas who pointed out that the success of sales in the automotive category is largely related to established relationships with customers (retailers, distributors, key accounts) within the category, given Thule has operated in that category for 73 years. The newer categories, such as the 'Juvenile' category (prams, child carriers etc.) are growing in their annual sell, however as Andreas quotes:

Each channel has its own culture, its own way of working. And its own set of key customers that drive the channel. To know who that is, that's not hard, but to get close to them and to get their business, that takes time. Like all relationships - Area Sales Manager

For a sales professional, developing relationships are central to the role. Thule demonstrates the importance of the relationship and interaction between the sales person and the customer. They also make it clear however that establishing relationships isn't a simple process, and does not develop overnight. Many dimensions contribute to whether the relationship is strong or not, for instance trust is fundamental to a strong relationship. Thule are a trusted supplier in the automotive category given they have promised and delivered on their promise to many customers over a long historical period, however in the Juvenile category, Thule are still proving their worth thus relationships are harder to establish. Brand awareness and reputation is another dimension of establishing a relationship. If you ask anyone who Thule is, they are immediately associated with ski boxes. Thule is recognised for supplying high quality products and especially ski boxes to the automotive retailers and thus relationships are created on the basis this familiarity with a good brand.

4.2.2.3 Co-creation of value

All interviewees and therefore all level of management involved with sales flagged co-creation of value as crucial to driving sales today, and something that was barely considered 20 years ago.

Since the world is changing with more and more globalization then it's a matter of managing your customer to sell more, not just sell in. That's becoming more and more important now and will be more and more important - Area Sales Manager

With the internal strategic shift to focus less on distributors and largely on retailers to sell Thule products it is more important now that Thule as the suppliers provide not only the products, but also a high quality service. The respondents relayed how the sales role involves working together with retailers to improve the provision of sale. This involves supplying marketing material, running campaigns, negotiating with suppliers and ensuring the supply chain is readily pushing the products onto the shelf. Thule depends on the retailer's selling capabilities just as much as the retailer depends on the supply of high quality products to the customer.

In 2010 it was more about making products for the distributor who owned their market. We didn't really care about how they did their marketing because that was their business, not ours...today it's about big monthly reviews with big customers, having joint marketing plans and working toward goals together - Area Sales Manager

4.2.2.4 How sales professionals create value

While all staff were in strong agreement that sales persons have a crucial role to play in the creation of value, the concept of 'value' was perceived differently according to the different levels of management. For all the senior levels of management, creation of value came from an ability to problem solve and think analytically, whereas for the staff closer to the field work (area sales manager and sales professional) value was spoken of more in relation to the relationship management.

According to the senior VP of HR, the sales person's role in value creation was conceptualized as having broad knowledge and applying it intelligently. She emphasized the importance of having sales persons who understand the fundamentals of sales, and understand the reality of your customer.

You need to have people who drive sales on a very high skilled and trained educational level. To be able to sell you need to understand what the fundamentals of sales, presenting a product, building a relationship, to protect the financial value of a product, otherwise it's just giving away sales – Senior VP of HR

For the VP of sales, value was created through financial means, selling products and therefore driving revenue and value for the shareholder. The sales person was said to create this value by being knowledgeable and being able to apply that knowledge where it's required.

What is important is to be able to be analytical, understanding of what resources do I need, what I need in order to get into new channels, selling to an automotive dealer is a completely different sales process and approach than selling to a juvenile store. Different person, different approach, different sales process. Have to be smart enough to figure that out. – VP of sales

The Sales and Marketing Planning Manager seemed to conceptualize a sales professional's value as the interpreter and mediator of the relationship between the company and the customer. He distinguished this from the value of a sales manager, which was to be responsive to business changes by thinking about the big picture, taking in a lot of information and using analytical skills to problem solve.

In the end, they (sales professionals) only have to focus on getting in the door and getting the sale done. For them getting in the door. Whether they sell a vacuum cleaner or a car it has a lot to do with the chemistry between the seller and the buyer. But for a sales manager, responsibility over a country the complexity of the work increases enormously – Sales and Marketing Planning Manager

I think a good sales manager has to have a large analytical mind, they have to be aware of many aspects of their business...the sales manager has to be very very knowledgeable, very professional, very analytical in their role...But a sales person, it's enough without an academic degree. It's more important to build relationships. The soft sided things are more important – Sales and Marketing Planning Manager

Conversely, the Area Sales Manager and the Sales professional both emphasized the sales person's important role in managing relationships as central to value creation.

It's about managing relationships. What goes around comes around. If you come from a big company with many resources (i.e., Thule) and talk to/manage a small company with small resources you always going to have the upper hand. But need to level out that, figure out how does this company work, what does it take, what is important for them and how do I manage that in the best possible way. It's not just an agreement on paper its about managing relationships - Area Sales Manager

Whereas now you have to make appointments, find the right person, make a plan, to have the long term strategic plan for the customers, where are we now where would you like to go. Accounts are also expecting more feedback, can we do more sales, shall we do more marketing, can we do a campaign, writing campaigns together – Sales Representative

The emphasis on analytical thinking and ability to problem solve are a central part of a sales people's role as value creator. That is not to say that relationship management isn't important, rather, we now understand that value creation can have many conceptualizations. For Thule, the conceptualization of value is highly related to being clever and using that cleverness to their advantage. Sales staff is used as key instigators of this mindset.

4.2.2.5. Unification of Sales Goals

Another change that occurred with the transformation of sales, evident to Thule Group, was a change from general micro managed goals towards aiming for the same goals. This involved refocusing the goals of the sales team to strive for the same company goals. "Before everyone was doing their own thing, and it was like they were managing their own business". Now everyone is working in the same direction and knows what is expected of them. Respondents explained that part of this refocus included the company providing the sales force with all the tools necessary to succeed, and remove any inefficiencies that may have prevented their success, so that "the input of the sales force" can work to its full capacity with nothing else to blame.

The biggest challenge has been gathering everyone and making sure we are pushing for the same goals.. In the end we are one company, the sales manager isn't driving sales of one company in one country, and then another sales manager driving sales another company in another country. We are all working for the same company with the same goals.. In the end we increase sales, increase profitability and make our owners happy – VP of Sales

Unification of company goals is a challenge for many organizations. Thule Group are no exception, however they may be an exception in that the unification of the sales force goals appears to have been achieved and it is now a matter of maintaining the unification for an effective sales function.

4.3 Importance of Sales

Many of the views relating to transformation of sales point to the importance of sales as a business function today. For Thule, sales' is king. With the net company sales in 2015 amounting to 5.3 billion SEK, and in increase in 5.1% off the year before, it would seem Thule Group are doing something right when it comes to sales. It is clear from all five

interviewees across four different sales operating capacities and an additional HR perspective that the sales function is at the heart of the company.

Without sales basically there is no turnover. Sales is King. Everyone needs to have a sales hat on. Everything is geared around sales – Senior VP of HR

Respondents conveyed the importance of sales by relaying the central role of sales to Thule's business model and by relaying the great responsibilities adjoined to a sales role today.

4.3.1 Central role of sales

The importance of sales to the Thule business function and to a business function in general was explained through the valuation of companies today. The VP of sales pointed out that investors are looking at growth, companies are valued on growth, and growth generally is driven by sales.

All you have to do is look at what happens to the stock prices if sales aren't very good...Sales should be at the heart of every company. If you don't sell anything then nothing else matters...It's fundamental to a company – VP of sales.

Furthermore, when comparing the value of different departments including the age old contentious marketing vs sales debate, marketing within Thule is considered a "support function" to sales.

Marketing is just a support function. Sales is what drives business. Because you need to understand the full value chain of what you're doing – Senior VP of HR

Respondents put great emphasis on sales being to generating business and revenue, as "a brand does not sell itself" and you "have to have people to provide the retailers with products". Despite respondents acknowledging the importance of other functions such as the product development function as a provider of a product to sell in the first place the message that really came through was that sales is fundamental to a ticking organization such as Thule.

4.3.2 Great responsibilities

The importance of the sales role was further understood through the high demands on sales professionals today. When taking into consideration the budgets of between 300 million SEK (~\$US 36 million) and 700 million SEK (~\$US 84 million) that area sales managers are responsible for, it's clear that "you can't put an idiot in a sales position like that" (Senior VP of HR).

The sales manager has to be very knowledgeable, very professional, and very analytical in their role. Because it's such a wide role. These are the roles that perhaps in another company you would be president or head of sales. If you're working at a national country, only doing sales in one country...it's relatively easy. As soon as you put 10 or 20 markets it becomes very challenging – Sales and Marketing Planner Manager

Being a company that operates in 139 markets worldwide, the sales manager has to take into account different currencies, cultures, languages. For instance, the Area Sales Manager for Asia is responsible for 30 countries. Similarly, understanding math and numbers were identified as "increasingly important" to implement sales effectively today.

The great responsibility goes further than sales management, sales professionals are said to be managing “complex relationships with key accounts”, they need to look across an entire marketing span, they need to be in “close contact with our supply chain” and they need to make sure they are offering “good customer service support”. This in turn is highly related to the increasing complexity of a sales role today.

Both transformation of sales and the importance of sales give cause for a need for sales employees with higher order thinking and analytical skill. The Senior VP of sales herself coined this term “business acumen”.

4.4 Demand for business acumen

The need for the sales staff in Thule to have business acumen was a reoccurring theme for respondents. One respondent summarized what he meant by business acumen well:

Having a broad base of knowledge, we call it business acumen. That is really what you need. That is the total of understanding products and to be able to market your product both from the technical point of view but also if you look at product placement, how to build up a retailer’s product portfolio...So understanding what is driving that retailers business. There are a lot of components you need to understand. Need to understand how to manage agents, distributors...different channels, how to make money, how to cut cost in their [customers], everyday business you need to understand the complexity of their world as well. You need to be well structured – Senior VP of Sales

Having business acumen to respondents meant broadly having an understanding of the sales function and responding to all dimensions that shape sales performance. Many respondents related business acumen to being able to think analytically and critically. Respondents notably suggested such skills are most often learnt in an academic setting.

The point is, when you have people with education...what is the goal of education? It is to break down the different topics, to know that’s how you solve a problem. That’s what you learn at university. You need to be able to go in and dissect a problem and then come up with different solutions for how you go about it. That is what education is about. That is to up level your way of thinking – Senior VP of HR

4.4.1 Analytical thinking through academic education

Within Thule Group, 12 years ago a strategic decision was made in order to see growth in the company. That decision involved changing of management, and upgrading the staff academic level. Directly in line with the transformation of sales and the internal company changes, Thule sought “intellectual capacity” and “the right skilled people” in order to become and continue to be a “lean” organization.

Nowadays, Thule uses their high levels of educated staff as a key resource. For instance, the Area Sales Manager in Japan with very important clients and one of the biggest markets of sales, holds a masters’ degree, is fluent in French and Japanese. His education is a competitive advantage for Thule, as in Japan you “need to know the codes, what to do, how to behave”. Having staff that drive sales “on a very high skilled and trained educational level” is a must for Thule.

The Sales Representative for Denmark doesn’t have an academic background, but as a 34 year old working in the field for 10 years, he has taken up studies upon realizing that having

education and improving his skills would be advantageous. Not only for his personal sales skill level but also, to find a balance of business acumen when meeting with his key accounts and to have an edge over the many (up to 100) competitors.

Life experience gives me some good skills with people. I'm very good at reading peoples signals, arguing with them etc. But if I have to stand out from some of my competition, to come up with a better plan for how we can do business in a proper way then [with an educated background] I have an advantage. That's one of the reasons I'm studying. - Sales Representative

Given the high responsibilities that come with their role and the increasing complexity, sales managers need to be “very knowledgeable, very professional, and very analytical in their role”. For all sales roles, “there are a lot of components you need to understand” and with an educated background it was said that you “understand the fundamentals and therefore “plan better”.

What is the goal of education? It is to break down the different topics, to know that's how you solve a problem. That's what you learn at university. You need to be able to go in and dissect a problem and then come up with different solutions for how you go about it. That is what education is about. That is to up level your way of thinking – VP of Sales

Generally speaking, respondents agreed that skills from learning on the job and having a university education “that's the perfect combination”.

4.4.2 Limits to learning on the job

Common to all respondents was acknowledgment that to be a better performing sales professional, higher education was a must. ‘Learning’ on the job was said to have limitations. The need for a sales specific education program on the other hand drew varied responses.

Having experience from learning on the job was not discounted by the respondents. The Sales and Marketing Development Planner felt that for sales representatives, the “soft side of things is more important”. Meaning, for sales representative the most important skill was in building relationships, and an academic background wasn't a must but it was “a huge help”.

All other respondents including the sales representative himself felt that having no formal education, but having the “energy, the drive to succeed” works but only “up to a certain level”. This “certain level” is the point where professionals without an education are often at risk of being promoted over their capacity.

Some self-made people have success. However, there are many examples of when you have promoted beyond their intellectual capacity, and their educational capacity - Senior VP of HR

The sales representative described the benefits of education using the metaphor of playing soccer. You learn how to play the game on the field, but then you can add some more skills by increasing your knowledge of soccer off the field.

It's like when you play soccer, you can't read in a book how to play soccer. You have to get on the field and play it. You can look at how the guy is doing it on YouTube to improve your skills and understand; ah I see that's how the guy is doing it.. That's the same as education, you have to have the basic knowledge for how to work as a sales rep [learning on the job] and then you can add some more knowledge on top by studying - Sales Representative

What generally comes with an academic background is an analytical mind, being able to make informed decisions and knowing what you need to know. Many sales managers used to “be more knocking on doors” however now Thule is putting the pressure on a “demanding them to step it up on the analytical work”.

Respondents also indicated that given the competitive and changing nature of sales today, improving sales skills through education is an advantage over the competition. For the Sales representative, being prepared for meetings with clients, balancing the intelligence level of the buyer and using a broad range of sales knowledge to come up with a valuable plan with the customer was important to being a good sales representative today, and gave him an edge over the competition.

I'm very good at reading people's signals, arguing with them etc...But if I have to stand out from some of my competition, to come up with a better plan for how we can do business in a proper way than [with an educated background] I have an advantage. That's one of the reasons I'm studying to improve my skills – Sales Representative

It is quite remarkable that professionals who work in a field that is traditionally taught on the job suggest that there are limitations to learning the required sales skills on the job. All but one respondent conveyed limitations to learning on the job in the competitive sales environment today.

4.5 Barriers to obtaining a sales education

Respondents were very welcoming of a sales dedicated program and felt it would be highly valuable and necessary to the sales field today. Notably, some respondents identified barriers to obtaining a sales education.

4.5.1 Disconnect between sales academia and business

The academic world is not interested in sales - Senior VP of HR

One respondent pointed out that in the US, universities are “more dependent on donations and commercial interest” to drive research, however in Sweden the relationship with between business and academia is weak. The lack of monetary incentive for the university department is communicated as one of the key reasons for why there is so little research in sales. However, this lack of interest in sales was also flagged as a key issue as academia and the sales function should be working together to progress the field.

At the end of the day, the university is still interested in getting funds from the business world, and if we don't make any money we won't give them any funds - Senior VP of HR

On the other hand, interviewees from the business seemed to be unaware of sales dedicated programs being offered at university signaling a disconnect between academia and business. Some were aware of various learning centers offering sales education, and one was enrolled in a learning center to further his sales knowledge, however on a university level the awareness was low. One respondent was also aware that there were opportunities for sales education in the US, but not in Europe.

If you look at the sales organization, at the different levels, take the area sales managers most of them have academic degrees. Some of them come from industrial economy, regular bachelor business and I don't even know if there are sales degrees? – Senior VP of HR

Despite the disconnect, the prospect of a sales specific education program, and sales academia was welcomed by the respondents. If businesses are looking at advancing the field of sales, and are interested in having a competitive advantage over other companies sales capabilities it is up to academia to respond.

4.5.2 Sales has an image problem

One of reoccurring themes volunteered as need for sales education was the need to improve the image of sales. It was suggested that sales is all too often hidden within other disciplines, it is labelled something other than sales, rather than “calling it what it is”.

It's not good enough [to not have a dedicated sales education program at university]. We need to promote sales. We need to give sales more attraction – Senior VP of HR.

Some respondents brought this question image back to the importance of sales. It was reiterated that “people need to understand that sales is important across the business”.

It's known that it's really important; it's just not all that sexy. It is called anything else than sales. Business development, all includes sales. Masked in other great words – VP of Sales

Offering a sales dedicated program was suggested as a way of improving the recognition of sales. A common theme was also the suggestion that sales deserves its own stream rather than being “woven into other courses” such as channel management, business and marketing curriculum. “I think it's nice to see they are breaking it out” said one respondent.

Academics to a certain degree will shape what people get into in business, or perceive what they are getting into. If you have a sales program that calls it exactly what it is, people are attracted [to sales]...Calling it what it is will make people understand the importance of it to understand what it is – VP of Sales

Thus sales specific education was seen as a tool for giving sales the recognition it deserves.

4.5.3 A Perception that Sales Education will be too Theory Based

The issue of relevance to business was brought up as crucial to offering a sales education program at a university level. For the sales representative, being educated now while he works suits his learning style as like many sales representatives he prefers to 'learn by doing' and can apply the theory to "real life". This signals two issues, first, a fear from professionals of sales education being too theoretical and not suiting their practical learning style. Second, that university sales programs would need to offer curricular that is highly relevant to sales in practice today.

To be honest, when younger, I wouldn't have finished this [sales education] course because some of the theory wouldn't make sense if you're not working in real life as well. In school now, I can apply it to real life – Sales Representative

It is not uncommon for sales professionals to develop a late interest in education, once they have learnt the fundamentals on the job.

I was a late bloomer so never cared much for going to school. I went straight into sales. We have a business school called IHM and it had a sales and marketing focus. There I grew my interest for education. To tag onto that I had the opportunity to do my MB. – Area Sales Manager

Finally, a disconnect between sales academic and business, a tainted perception of sales as a career and the fear from professionals that sales education would be too theoretical were identified as barriers to completing sales education and obtaining the required sales competencies to fulfill the role today.

5. Discussion

In this section we reveal a number of findings from the analysis confirming the need for higher sales educated professionals due to the transformed role of sales and the need for higher level thinking to fulfil the role today. The findings lead us to contribute a number of required competencies in performing effectively as a sales professional today.

Research in sales has identified a need for formal sales educated professionals, including suggestions for what should be taught and what pedagogical styles would best suit (Cummins et al, 2013; Deeter-Schmelz and Kennedy, 2011; Dixon and Tanner, 2012; Fogel et al., 2012; Marcos-Cuevas et al, 2015). Including sales education in university curriculum and as whole programs is more relevant today than ever before (Fogel et al., 2012). An understanding of the reasons as to why there is a need for higher sales educated professionals deserves more attention in the literature. Furthermore discussion about what competencies and role these professionals need in today's transformed sales landscape has seen little research and a business perspective to our knowledge has not been explored.

Using our framework developed from the literature (see figure 1) we confirmed and extended our understanding of the need for higher sales educated professionals. We developed further understanding of how the role of the sales professional has changed. Furthermore we contribute a list of competencies required to be an effective sales professional in the context of a transformed sales landscape. Our findings bring in line the substantive importance of sales as an academic discipline from the perspective of a highly successful sales organization.

5.1 The need for sales education

Not only does the literature indicate a need for sales education, so too does our analysis. From the literature we identified a number of reasons why there is a need for sales education including the transformation of sales professionalizing the role of sales today, and the need for business acumen. Our findings confirm these reasons and further develop the understanding and argument for why sales education should have its own dedicated university program.

5.1.1 The Role of Education for the Sales Profession

When it comes to business acumen, the findings confirm the need for sales professionals today to not simply rely on having an outgoing personality. A sales professional needs to be able to think critically, use analytical skills and be able to negotiate (Fogel et al., 2012).

All respondents agreed higher education provided the grounds for the fundamental skills needed in today's competitive selling environment. They also agreed that sales specific education was needed in order to drive awareness and recognition of sales as an important function today. One respondent suggested that for a sales representative the relationship with the customer and therefore personality was more important than business acumen, and thus analytical thinking wasn't a crucial detail. This is a contrary finding to what the literature suggests which is that sales representatives require skill that extends further than personality and involves advancement of analysis, synthesis and evaluation skills (Alvarez, Taylor and Rauseo, 2015, p.235). To further the argument for higher education, the sales representative himself, identified the need for higher level skill and education in order to

compete with other brands today. All other respondents drew attention to the fact that sales professionals roles are becoming more and more demanding and thus a university education would be necessary moving into the future if they want to remain competitive. Therefore, the comment from the respondent that university education wasn't crucial for a sales representative is perhaps emblematic of the "old candid perception" of sales representatives required skill level, and not emblematic of the actual required skill level as sales continues to transform and become more competitive (Marcos-Ceuvas et al, 2015). The problem of recognition is further discussed in 5.4.

It was clear that within our case study, higher level thinking and business acumen should be a focus across the whole organization. A sales company should be highly concerned with selecting the right people for their sales division. Upon selection of highly educated professionals across the sales function, the likelihood of driving a competitive advantage increases. As Fogel, Hoffmeister and Rocco (2012) explain, a well-staffed sales function is vital to business success.

The findings suggest that the increasing responsibilities and complexity of the sales role must be matched with a wide knowledge base, and an ability to "dissect a problem". For Thule Group, and likely many similar organizations, an ability to think analytically was what university education is all about and this analytical skill is what many companies and recruiters of sales professionals are looking for today (Raymond et al, 2006).

5.1.2 Limits to Learning on the Job

The literature touches on the limitations of learning on the job; however our findings suggest that this limitation is a key contributor to the need for higher sales educated professionals (Fogel et al, 2012). University education provides the grounds for analytical thinking and business acumen which the respondents reveal is paramount for sales manager positions today. For sales representatives university education was not considered as crucial as it was for sales managers, however, it is clear from our research that education is becoming more and more important in both roles.

The literature demonstrated that if sales was executed in the same way it used to be, learning on the job might be sufficient to the required skills (Fogel et al, 2012). However sales is continually transforming and not the way it used to be (Dixon and Tanner, 2012). Both the literature and our case study confirm that sales is no longer a simple process, it is much more strategic, requires preparation and "constantly challenging the go-to-market approach". Therefore learning on the job, generally speaking, is not sufficient today to be a high performing sales representative.

For a sales representative, the pressure to become more intellectual and have broader knowledge in order to meet with demands of buyers was suggested in the literature and confirmed in the interviews. A number of articles drew awareness of the increased power of the buyer. Access to information about products, prices, suppliers and the competition, work to the buyers advantage and lead them to have greater expectations of the seller (Marshall et al, 2012; Jones et al., 2005; Murray and Robinson, 2001). To meet this power shift respondents spoke about the need to balance the knowledge base of the customer to come up with a plan that is valuable to the buyer and meets their expectations. Respondents confirmed that meeting the buyer's expectations often requires higher level thinking to be able to understand the numbers, help the customer plan and ultimately have an edge over the competition in bringing intellectual value to the buyer seller exchange. According to a

sales representative, the Senior VP of HR and an Area Sales Manager, if the seller can be prepared in the sense that they can meet the expectations of the buyer and further this with broad knowledge exchange, they will have an edge over the competition. Moreover our findings suggest that higher level thinking, a broad base of knowledge, sales planning, and financial acumen are skills better taught in a university setting than on the job. Having both a higher university education and learning on the job is “the perfect combination”.

These findings confirm the need for business acumen as a reason for higher sales education and sales educated professionals. In the transforming sales environment, critical and analytical thinking is likely to drive success for a business. Furthermore offering sales specific education at a university level removes the limitations put on sales professionals learning on the job.

5.2 The New Sales Role

The findings support the goal of today’s sales profession in creating a satisfied and loyal customer base (Marcos-Cuevas et al., 2015). This is not done by simply ‘selling-in’. The job of the salesperson is to manage your customer to ‘sell more’. This has involved several changes to sales role.

5.2.1 More responsibility –Pivotal role

It is clear from the literature and our case study that the sales role has become more important and has more responsibilities. The literature addresses the importance of sales, by stating that the sales function is responsible for managing the key assets of the company (Ingram et al., 2002). Because they are in close contact with the customers, they have the best position to gather insights and opportunities in how to create value for customers and appropriate value for the selling organization (Jones et al., 2005). Our study made clear that sales people indeed have a great responsibility, demonstrated by the enormous budgets under their management (between 300 million SEK and 700 million SEK).

Notably, our findings suggest that sales encompasses much more responsibility than the literature suggests. Sales should be at the heart of the company and gear the other functional parts of the company. With statements as “without sales, basically there is no turnover” and “everything is geared around sales”, our case study emphasizes the increasingly important role the sales profession has taken today. In addition, in our study-setting sales is clearly seen as a separate business function. Literature already suggested that the marketing mix model of McCarthy is outdated for the more advanced sales landscape of today and that sales is a separate function from marketing (Perreault et al, 2000; Malshe, 2008; Marcos-Cuevas et al, 2015), but several scholars argued for an efficient interface between marketing and sales (same level of importance) to operate successfully (Malshe, 2008). However, our study emphasises that sales should be seen as one of the most essential functions of the company. Extraordinarily, marketing is considered a support function to sales in the Thule Group business model.

5.2.2 More relationship management – Boundary spanning role

This study highlights establishing relationships and relationship management as central to a sales person’s role. Sales professionals are constantly building your relationships with customers (Murray and Robinson, 2001). Statements as “relationships build business” and “if

you work hard with your customers and retailers, you get to have better sell-out for the business and we will have better sell in to them” show that in order to retain and attract customers, indeed long-term customer relationships have to be built and maintained (Jones et al, 2005).

The literature as well as our findings note that a sales person’s role is to span the boundary between the own organization and the customer company (Hohenschwert, 2013). Not only are sales professionals in contact with different individuals within the customer’s business, but also with internal colleagues. Jones et al (2005) urged that sales people today should have more influence in other functional areas, such as operations, manufacturing, distribution and finance. Our findings confirm the individuals role in coordinating and managing relationships with many aspects of the business, both internally (marketing, supply chain, product management) and externally (retailers, distributors, customers). For a company with an important selling channel to retailers being in close contact with the supply chain was especially important.

5.2.3 More co-creation of value – Value creating role

Consistent with the literature, our findings reveal that co-creation of value has been found to be crucial in driving sales today (Anderson and Narus 2004; Lam et al. 2004; Ulaga and Eggert 2006; Thull, 2010). Furthermore, sales professionals are indeed key players in the co-creation of value with customers. Competition is intense so customers have greater expectations and are demanding greater services of sales persons (Jones et al., 2015). Sales professionals must meet these demands and offer more than just a solution in order to be a step above the competition and keep their customers happy (Thull,2010). Sales professionals used to walk in, sell a solution and walk out, but now in a transformed landscape, sales professionals are expected to be ‘knowledge brokers’ and provide customised solutions and advice for the customer (Jones et al, 2015). They are expected as to support the customer in driving their business, as sell out of the customers’ business means sell in for the product company.

For the company in subject, creation of value came through the sales professional’s role in being analytical, identifying problems and offering clever solutions for the customer and the company. If we look critically at the concept of value creation, both scholars and staff of different hierarchical levels within a company, all agree that sales professionals have an important role to play in the value creation process (Hohenschwert, 2013). Value in a sales context is not static, rather value is “interpretative, contextual and interactive” and it is the sales professional who must do the interpreting, situation assessment and interaction (Hohenschwert, 2013). Thus the sales representative has a key role in creating value by shaping the interpretation and interaction between parties involved.

5.2.4 More analytical thinking – The thinking role

The days when selling was simply about selling are gone. Our case study revealed that sales professionals take in a high amount of knowledge, and they need use it in a clever way in order to rival the competition and maintain effective relationships. This involved being mathematically acute in being able to deal with numbers, analyse data and create forecasts based on these numbers. It involved not only understanding the numbers but understanding why they look like they do. It involved being able to use their knowledge to meet the demands of customers and co-create value with them. The sales person needs to have an

analytical mind to quickly adapt to changes and understand all kinds of business aspects. It is expected that the sales professional knows how to identify problems for the customer and work with the customer to reach a solution (Anderson et al., 2005).

5.2.5 More unification – The mediator role

New to the literature, is our finding that the role of the sales professional today is ideally unified with the company goal. Compared to the old days of sales where sales professionals were judged on their own ability to close sales (Kotler, Rackham and Krishnaswamy, 2006), the sales force nowadays has to align their own goals with the companies: “to increase sales, increase profitability and make the owners happy”. Our study reveals that an important feature is to “gather everyone” and “make sure we are pushing for the same goals”. We have interpreted this unification as a change in the sales profession from working as an individual with micro goals, to working in a unified group. This implies more cooperation internally with colleagues and helping each other in reaching the company goal.

Our findings demonstrate that the sales role has changed and these changes have implications on both the qualification and the required skill level of sales professionals today. Overall we understand from our analysis that the role of sales is no longer simple. A sales role now comes with great responsibilities, it must span boundaries of groups and individuals involved in the process, it must drive value for the customer and it must be aligned with the goals of the seller company.

5.3 Competencies

In understanding the transformation of sales and how this has impacted on the need for higher sales educated professionals, we identified a number of competencies required of sales professionals today. These competencies have developed as a result of the changed sales role and are reflected in the way the sales role has changed. Our research contributes a valuable list of competencies arising as a result of the transformation of sales and the change in sales role today (i.e. changes in environment, focus, importance of sales, co-creation of value and business acumen) (see table 3). For an extensive report of how the competencies emerged in the transformed selling landscape, we refer to table 4 in Appendix D. Here we present the competencies carefully constructed from the literature and our case study.

Environment	Focus
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Knowledge of external influences (e.g., political, cultural and legal dimensions) - Global negotiation expertise - Adapt to customer's context - Be aware of diverse cultural expectations - Being responsive to changes, think quickly and creatively - Relationship management - Understand multiple approaches and techniques - Ability to quickly understand new information - Differentiation skills - Outsmart the competition - High level of business acumen - Mediate stretch between revenue and costs to serve the customer - Ability to quickly understand new occurring circumstances and learn how to operate with them - Data analysis skills (analyze a large amount of information and categorize them) - Forecasting skills - Evaluation skills (e.g., prioritizing) - Operate as knowledge broker 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Be adaptive and attune to customer demands and customer diversity - Expertise in customer context - Respond to technological advancements and use to their advantage - Customer Management - Communication skills - Cooperation skills - Negotiation skills - Relationship management - Co-ordination between buyer and seller and co-ordination within the supplying company and third parties - Awareness and understanding of the capabilities of the supplying company - Understanding of cost structures and customer profitability - Strategic partner of customer company - Expert in clients industry - Understand the capabilities of the supplier business - Boundary spanner between customer and supplying company - Drive new sources of value to customer - Challenge existing paradigms - Maximum value for suppliers
Importance of Sales	Co-Creation of Value
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Managers of key assets (being the customers) of a company - Responsible for a large part of the company turnover - Understand Priorities - Understand how to get maximum value for the supplying company - Internal communications - Work together with colleagues - Social cognitive construction (Haas et al, 2012) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Analytical skill - Synthesis skill - Evaluation skill - Understanding of client's business - Understanding of buyer behavior - Understand how to gather data - Understand how to analyze, synthesize and evaluate data - Understand how to make use of the data (sales forecasting) - Relationship management - Categorize clients, prioritize clients - Develop sales pitch - Propose strategy - Understanding customers challenges and difficulties - Building trustful relationships
Business Acumen	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Consulting thought leadership and business expertise - Broader understanding of functional areas of business - Multiple sales techniques - Ingrained sales knowledge - Critical analytical thinking - Analytical skills - Synthesis skills - Evaluation skills - Negotiation skills - Responsiveness - Understanding of sophisticated software - Produce forecast, valuable information from analysis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Negotiation expertise - Have broad business knowledge (sales planning, financial acumen) - Continually update market and product knowledge of the customer and supplying organization - Higher level thinking to be able to understand numbers - Higher level thinking to help the customer plan - Bring intellectual value to the buyer-seller exchange - Adaption to various competitive selling situations

Table 3. How the Transformation of Sales emerged different requirements of competencies

Globalization, competition, diverse and wide reaching markets and the nature and variety of customers means that there is “a higher professional demand on sales now than there was around 20 years ago”. In line with Jones, Brown, Zoltners and Weitz (2005) our study makes clear that for a global company, the sales person needs to have competencies in adapting to the customer’s context and should be aware of diverse cultural expectations and consider these when selling globally. Furthermore, our study points out that due to heightened level of competition, the sales person has to be creative to find solutions to fit the accounts. Expectations of the customers have to be met immediately or else risk the competition meeting the desired requirement (Marshall et al., 2012). Our findings respond to this by emphasizing the importance of sales professionals being prepared before meeting with customers. Therefore the required competency is to be able to quickly and creatively co-create the outcome that best fits the customer’s vision, and setting (Dixon and Tanner, 2012). The sales landscape has transformed in such a way that sales people have to be prepared, otherwise the competition will prevail.

Our study revealed that as a consequence of technology advancements, sales professionals “need to be very alert with the speed and flow of information and “you need to point out what is important and relevant and what is less of a priority here”. This reinforces Jones et al (2005)’s statement that “salespeople need to know more, and faster”. This dense inflow of information requires certain analytical skills and synthesis skills to use the information available to the sales person effectively (Ingram et al, 2002; Alvarez et al, 2015). We have interpreted this as the salespersons need to have the ability to analyse a large amount of information and categorize them according to importance and relevance. Our study also shows that in the future technology advancements are going to play an even bigger role in sales, as it is going to be more about digital sales and how to explore on that. This requires new knowledge in the demand plan and supply chain for organizations. We interpreted this as need for salesperson to quickly understand and adapt to new occurring circumstances and quickly learn how to operate with them.

The literature has made clear that customers may vary considerably in their intentions, needs and attitudes, which makes relationship selling complex (Leigh et al, 2014). Our findings are in accordance with this suggesting that a big global company requires knowledge of different channels, product categories and different approaches as it needs to work with a variety of customers. We interpreted this need as a need for business acumen or as a skill to understand the set-up of a business speedily.

Our study revealed that in a sales process, the knowledge and skill base of the sales professionals must mirror the individual or group they are dealing with. The procurement process, retailers and distributors are professionalized and the sales professional has to balance this. Many companies have re-organized procurement into a strategic function linked to the business plan, in order to select the ‘right’ suppliers and dictate terms for the relationships (Marcos-Cuevas et al, 2015). Therefore, “one cannot send in someone (a sales professional) who is way below a very skilled purchaser.” In reaching a balanced relationship salespeople of today have to meet or exceed the knowledge base of those involved in the relationship. Salespeople need to be smarter and develop skills in order to mediate the stretch between revenue and profit targets and the cost to serve customers (Jones et al, 2005).

Creating customer satisfaction and loyalty through building close and long-term relationships is a main priority on the sales agenda. The creation of value for the customer is the path for

building a highly satisfied and loyal customer base (Anderson and Narus, 2004; Blocker et al, 2012) in which sales professionals have an important role to play (Hohenschwert, 2013).

The literature and our findings confirm that in the transformed selling landscape sales is about being a strategic partner of your customer in solving problems and challenges (Blocker et al, 2012; Storbacka et al, 2009; Dixon and Tanner, 2012). Sales professionals have to become experts in their customer's area, to successfully fulfil this new process of value creation (Storbacka et al, 2009). It is important to understand the customer's business and buying behaviour and be able to gather, analyse, synthesise and evaluate data and use this to foresee opportunities that can drive new sources of value to the customer (Thull, 2010). This asks for competency in working with numbers to create value for the customer, while at the same time create maximum value for the supplying company.

From the development of sales into a more consulting role, our findings show that sales professionals should have great knowledge in relationship management and who and what to prioritize (Murray and Robinson, 2001; Jones et al, 2005; Ricks et al, 2008). First, because the sales person today needs to cooperate often with its customers. And second, because customers often make decisions based on trust compared to well-informed knowledge, it is crucial to know how to develop trustful relationships.

Besides good relationships with the customer company, our findings support that co-ordination within the supplying company is crucial in today's sales role. The sales person has to closely operate with the customer have a good understanding of what the supplying company can offer the customer in order to create value (Flint et al, 2002). Therefore, the sales person needs to understand the capabilities of the supplying company and cooperate with all departments to find the best fitted solution for the customer. This is reinforced by the statement that the new sales professional does not work for micro (sales) goals anymore, but strive towards the same company goals in cooperation with all their colleagues. This asks for great internal cooperation and communication.

Roughly said, the competencies include a quick understanding, adaptability, responsiveness, negotiation expertise, relationship management, analytical skills, synthesis skills, evaluation skills a high level of business acumen, consultation skills and being smarter than the competition, as the competition of today is fierce.

Furthermore these competencies have implications for what is included in sales curricular and in recognising the sales professional today as someone of high skill and professionalism.

5.4 Barriers to reaching the required competencies of a sales professional today

Our research brought to light a number of barriers to reaching the required competencies of a sales professional today. Notably, these barriers were volunteered by practitioners themselves bringing high value to these suggestions. The barriers included: the image problem sales careers and sales as an academic discipline are burdened with, the lack of availability of sales programs offered at universities, disconnect between sales academia and business, and the sales professionals perception that sales education would be too theory based.

5.4.1 Sales has an image problem

The literature revealed a lingering negative perception of sales as a function as well as negative perceptions of sales professionals; Fine, 2007; Karakaya et al., 2014; Waldeck, 2010) driving reticence towards sales careers. Our findings were consistent with the negative perception of sales as a profession, however our study suggests the barrier is not for lack of understanding the importance of the business function, it is more that sales has an image problem. Sales was considered to be perceived as important, however the issue was that “it’s just not that sexy”. Our study found a number of contributing factors to this image problem. First the lack of recognition of sales as an academic discipline and the fact that sales is seldom offered as a dedicated sales program at university was one identified contributing factor. Relatedly, it was suggested that sales education programs would assist in improving the sales image problem by promoting it and giving it more attraction. Second, respondents noted that sales is all too often given a different job title, hidden in a different curricular, rather than “calling it what it is”. Our research calls for the need to recognise sales for what it is, the need to promote sales and therefore make it more attractive as a profession. “Academics to a certain degree will shape what people perceive they are getting into.” Our study suggests that the overcoming the image problem begins on the academic level.

5.4.2 Slow uptake from University

According to the Sales Education Foundation (2016) and (Deeter-Shmelz and Kennedy, 2011) there is a growing presence of university sales education not only in the US but also outside of the US. However evidence of such growth in Europe is not convincing with only few universities offering sales education, and at best most of these only offer sales education as an elective and within other programs (marketing, management most often). In Sweden for instance, the country where the headquarters of our case study company are located, there is no form of university sales education. Some private institutes offer sales education programs however on a public institutional level sales education is not an option. Sales professionals and managers were unaware of any university sales education programs on offer in Europe but were welcoming of the prospect.

5.4.3 Disconnect between Sales Academia and Business

Our research confirmed the literature finding that there are many benefits of academia working together with business to progress sales research (Deeter-Schmelz and Kennedy, 2011). However, according to a Thule spokesperson, academia has shown no interest in sales. Deeter-Schmelz and Kennedy (2011) also found that demand for sales education for the most part comes from business. This flags a disconnect between the demand from business for sales research, and the lack of response from academia to uptake sales research and therefore sales education. This is a loss not only for business but also for academia. If businesses are looking at advancing the field of sales, and are interested in having a competitive advantage over other companies sales capabilities it is up to academia to respond.

5.4.4 A perception that sales education will be too theory based

A sales specific education program was welcomed as relevant and necessary according to our study. However, our study revealed an underlying hesitation towards university sales

education due to the perception that a university program would be too theory based. Our study acknowledges the importance of those working on the field to be able to learn in practice, based on their preferred learning style. Research on sales personality and preferred learning style in order to develop appealing sales curricular deserved more attention. This emerging issue also brings to light the importance of having a curricular that is highly relevant to business application.

Transitioning from a job that was traditionally learnt on the job to one that demands both university education and learning on the job requires very close alignment with the preferred learning styles of sales personality types. Research on sales personality has linked personality to preferred learning style (Lounsbury, Foster, Levy and Gibson, 2014) however further research on sales curricular development is needed with input from sales professionals, managers and academia.

Finally these barriers to obtaining the required competencies of a sales professional today provide the grounds for further research as to the barriers and drivers to reaching the competencies and the qualifications of sales professionals today.

6. Conclusion

The recruiting problem of sales professionals shows that there is a high demand for highly qualified sales professionals, while the supply is lacking. Despite its recognized importance by businesses, sales as a discipline is still under-developed in academia and education. There is strong evidence suggesting that business demand highly qualified sales people to fill up sales positions. Not to operate the traditional role of selling, but to perform a role more qualified and complex. However, it is still unclear in the literature why this need exists and what competencies are required of a sales professional in today's transformed sales landscape from a business point of view. The purpose of our research was to clear up this understanding by clarifying the need for higher sales educated professionals and providing an understanding of the transformed sales role and competencies of the sales profession today. An in-depth case study of a successful sales organization, emphasizing the need for academic understanding of sales, has gathered opinions and perspectives of five participants from different responsibility levels to fulfil our purpose. Moreover, the underlying purpose of this research was to bring in line the substantive importance of sales as an academic discipline and contribute to the awareness why sales should be more recognized.

Our research, combining the literature review with our empirical findings, resulted in an understanding of the new sales profession. We iterate that the sales profession of today has changed significantly over the years having a great impact on the role of a sales professional today. First, our study confirmed the need for a highly educated sales function and a need for higher sales education. We identified contributors to the need for higher educated sales professionals and the role today requires skills that are best taught in university settings (e.g. analytical skills). Second, the study revealed an understanding of the transformation of the sales role into a one involving more responsibilities, relationship management, co-creation of value, analytical thinking and unification of goals. We conclude that within a company setting where 'sales is king' the new sales role has to perform a pivotal role, boundary spanning role, value creating role, thinking role and mediator role. Third, our research has contributed a carefully constructed set of competencies required to fulfil the transformed sales role today (see table 3). Broadly, these competencies include a quick understanding, adaptability, responsiveness, negotiation expertise, relationship management, analytical skills, synthesis skills, evaluation skills and consulting skills. An extensive report is given in the Appendix. Furthermore, as our research developed, we identified a problem regarding obtainment of such competencies. We revealed some barriers to obtaining these competencies including a sales image problem, slow uptake of sales education from universities, a disconnect between sales academia and business and the perception that sales should be learnt on the job.

These guidelines are specifically created in the context of our case study of Thule Group, however, we suggest that it might be applicable to other companies with a similar setting (large, international sales company with a significant sales function focused on selling to retailers). As this study was of limited scope and was carried out in a specific context, we do not expect our findings to be applicable across sectors, but they might serve as an indicator of the importance of a highly educated sales function and for competencies and sales roles in other contexts. As the findings show that the sales professionals require skills gained from a university setting, these findings can contribute considerably to the development and evaluation of sales as a discipline. For educators, it warrants the further development and growth of university sales education. For businesses, it demonstrates the value of higher educated staff in driving growth and gaining a competitive advantage

7. Future Research and Limitations

7.1 Future Research

While there seems lots of evidence showing the need for educated sales professionals. There has been a slow uptake of universities providing programs and curriculum to fill up this need. Additionally, the representation of sales in academia is relatively slow compared to other domains. An interesting field of study is to see which barriers hinder the offering of sales in education and academia, and moreover the barriers and drivers to obtaining the required competencies of a sales professional today. We have found several potential barriers, including as a negative perception towards a sales career, a lack of interest from academics and the old candid perception that sales is something you 'learn on the job'. Our research confirms from the sales representative's perspective that there is a view of sales as learning by doing, and being more about having a suitable personality than knowledge. Therefore, it is interesting to see whether these are barriers to sales education and if there are alternative barriers obstructing the field.

Our research has outlined a number of competencies required to fill a sales role today, however further research could develop an understanding of what professional qualifications these skills lead to. Next to this, an interesting topic for future research is to investigate the extent to which a university sales program would have to include practical relevance and how to go about this pedagogically.

7.2 Limitations

As argued in the methodological part of the research, we have made a great effort in increasing objectivity, credibility, transferability and dependability. We have found rich and substantial information from our five participants within Thule Group. However, there are several limitations that should be acknowledged in this research paper.

First, the qualitative nature of our case study requires high dependence on researchers' interpretations of the data, which might have influenced processes of interpreting and analyzing the data as well as the generation of findings. Despite the fact that we are two researchers to limit this bias, we are inexperienced in conducting interviews and interpreting data. Follow up studies might benefit from having more experienced interviewers to increase the objectivity of the study.

Second, the issue of generalizability looms larger at case studies than any other type of qualitative research because of the focus on a single unit. Given we are conducting qualitative research, we cannot claim to generalize to a population, and we must be careful in the way we 'theorise' a snippet of reality. Furthermore, our research outcome is not an objective contribution to society. From a constructionist perspective we are making theoretical generalizations about a reality. This is limiting in that the results cannot necessarily be applied systematically to all businesses. We prefer to think of our findings as a *way of understanding* what is going on between education of sales professionals and businesses rather than a strict solution. However, Flyvbjerg (2006) argues that the force of a single example is underestimated. What we learn in a particular case can be transferred to similar situations. But, it is always better to have more observations or participants as the basis for greater generalizations. The proposed requirement for case studies is to have at least two participants in each category to show consistency and differences within the case.

Due to time constraints, this research could only interview five participants (one from each category). Although these participants were rich in information from several levels, it might not have fully represented the unit of analysis. Future research would benefit from having several participants from one category to make more valuable statements and comparisons between categories (in our case levels in the sales function) to increase reliability and validity of the study (Yin, 1994).

Another limitation is that it would be ideally to have more interviews and data to increase transferability. We chose to make analytical generalizations rather than statistical generalizations. In order to conduct analytical generalizations it is ideal to have more interviews and data to credibly argue for findings and provide more valuable answers. However, given the time frame it was not possible to conduct a wider case study.

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Appendix

A. 'Findings of the Transformation of Sales'

Old Sales	New sales
Definition:	
"The exchange of a commodity for money: the action of selling something" (TheFreeDictionary, 2016)	"The phenomenon of human-driven interaction between and within individuals/organizations in order to bring about economic exchange within a value-creation context" (Dixon and Tanner, 2012)
Linear, phased approach (Dixon and Tanner, 2012)	Multifaceted and dynamic process (Dixon and Tanner, 2012)
Single parties and points of engagement (Dixon and Tanner, 2012)	Multiple parties and points of engagement (Dixon and Tanner, 2012)
Environment:	
Market more stable (Schultz, 1997)	Hypercompetitive market (Schultz, 1997)
Customers have several suppliers (Marcos-Cuevas et al, 2015)	Customers reduce supplier base to a few (Marcos-Cuevas et al, 2015; Rapp, Bachrach, Panagopoulos, 2014).
	Negotiations more global (Marcos-Cuevas et al, 2015)
	Customers vary considerably in their intentions (Leigh et al., 2014)
	Customers demand off-the-shelf products and more complex- customized solutions (Ingram et al, 2002; Ingram, 2004)
Salespeople as a contact point to the customer (Rhoton, 2011).	Salespeople a strategic partner of the customer (Blocker et al, 2012)
Sales person as information source (Ingram et al., 2002; Rhoton, 2011).	Internet as information source (Ingram et al., 2002)
Sales people in control (Jones et al., 2005)	Customer in control (Jones et al., 2005)
Customer relations relatively simple (Jones et al, 2005)	Customer relations are complex (Leigh et al, 2014; Jones et al, 2005; Murray and Robinson, 2001)
Seller power (Marshall et al, 2012)	Buyer power increased (Marshall et al, 2012; Jones et al., 2005)
Procurement average level (Boer, Labro and Morlacchi, 2001; Talluri and Narasimhan, 2004)	Procurement high level (Boer, Labro and Morlacchi, 2001; Talluri and Narasimhan, 2004)
	More advanced technological software (Murray and Robinson, 2011; Marshall, Moncrief, Rudd and Lee, 2012)
Importance:	
Executor of Marketing strategy (Malshe, 2008)	Sales as strategic function of market-oriented organizations (Storbacka et al, 2009)
	Sales persons manage the key assets of a company: the customers (Ingram et al, 2002)
	Responsibility of sales people dramatically increased (Hautamaki, 2015; Ellis, 2000)
Good communication between marketing and sales is vital to success (Malshe, 2008; Malshe and Sohi, 2009; Marcos-Cuevas et al, 2015)	Well-staffed sales function is vital to business success (Fogel et al, 2012)
Values:	
Selling-centric (Ingram et al, 2002)	Customer- centric (Ingram et al, 2002; Srivastava et al, 1999)
Commoditized products, one-size-fits-all solution	Adapted products, viable solution for customer

(Storbacka et al, 2009)	(Storbacka et al, 2009)
Less close, shorter-term relationships (Storbacka et al, 2009)	Closer, Longer-term relationships (Ricks et al, 2008; Storbacka et al, 2009)
Part of marketing mix (Perreault et al, 2000)	Sales growth most important priority for businesses (Fogel et al, 2012; Marcos-Cuevas et al, 2015)
Tasks:	
Stimulate demand for products (Marcos-Cuevas et al, 2015)	Satisfy demand for products (Marcos-Cuevas et al, 2015)
Transactional sales (Murray and Robinson, 2001)	Transactional sales mostly digitalized, now complex relationship management (Murray and Robinson, 2001)
Sell, sell, sell (Kotler and Krishnaswamy, 2006)	Identify customer problems and get solutions for them (Fogel et al, 2012)
Task: Promote a product (Storbacka et al., 2009; Ellis, 2000)	Task: service (or solution) selling , co-ordination between buyer and seller and co-ordination within the supplying company (Storbacka et al, 2009; Ellis, 2000; Beckham and DeVincentis, 1999)
Sales Operation (Marcos-Cuevas et al, 2015)	Co-creation of value (Dixon and Tanner, 2012; Fogel et al, 2012)
Operators (Jones et al, 2005)	Value-creating knowledge workers, much like architects (Jones et al, 2005)
Promoting products (Ellis, 2000)	Exchange of value (Dixon and Tanner, 2012; Marcos-Cuevas et al, 2014)
	Architect for change in the customer's world (Dixon and Tanner, 2012)
Goals:	
Judged on ability to close sales (Kotler and Krishnaswamy, 2006)	Ability to attract and retain customers (Srivastava et al, 1999)
Goal: generating sales (Marcos-Cuevas et al, 2015)	Goal: create customer satisfaction and loyalty (Anderson and Narus 2004; Lam et al. 2004; Ulaga and Eggert 2006; Marcos-Cuevas et al, 2015)
Sales Management (Murray and Robinson, 2001)	Strategic Customer Management (Murray and Robinson, 2001)
Achieving short-term results for their firms using persuasive selling techniques (Marcos-Cuevas et al, 2015)	Build and maintain profitable long term customer relationships, relative to short-term revenue goals (Jones et al. 2005; Ricks et al, 2008)
Needs:	
Experts in own industry (Thull, 2010)	Experts in own industry and their customer's industries (Thull, 2010)
Personality (2/3), Knowledge (1/3) (Fogel et al, 2012)	Broader set of competences (Fogel et al, 2012)
	Capable orchestrator of organizational resources (Jones et al, 2012)
	Fully understand the products and customers and what is required to co-create solutions for customers (Jones et al., 2005; Fogel et al, 2012).

Table A. Summarized Findings of the Transformation of Sales

B. 'Thule Group Checklist for Interviews'

This checklist constitutes the final adapted topics used in the final interview. Initially, we didn't ask about recognition of sales and the distinction between a higher educated professional and a higher sales educated professional was not made. Due to the empirical data we updated the checklist to include these.

Checklist:

1. Background (position, time working there, educational background)
2. Their role (contact, management of sales staff, sales training, conducting sales)
3. Changes in their role
4. Changes in the sales function
5. Drivers of change
6. Adjustment to change
7. Challenges in relation to sales role
8. Expertise, competencies of sales function
9. How to improve sales function
10. Demand for higher educated professionals
11. Demand for higher sales educated professionals
12. Recognition of sales as a discipline
13. Required skills in a sales force
14. On the job VS sales training programs Vs university training
15. Consideration for university sales education

C. 'Example Interview Transcript'

Interview Transcript –Kajsa von Geijer – Senior Vice President of HR

Interview at 9am on Monday the 2nd of May

Duration: 1:05:57

That is very important to define, what do you envision when we you say sales? Before everyone who was within sales were the most glorifying people. Then a couple of years ago, you started to talk about market people, category managers, different definitions to make it more 'fancy' and anyone who came from academia, they didn't want to go into sales because that was less attractive. But everyone that works in a company needs to cherish sales. Because without sales, basically you don't have any turnover. Sales is king. Everyone needs to have a sales hat on.

We have VP sales, area sales managers, and sales representatives. We call them sales, because that is what they do. They sell our products. And then we have marketing, and marketing is only a support function to support the sales. Product management is a department that helps finding platforms for developing new products, look at the life cycles of our products, in close cooperation with sales. They layout the pattern of categories of what products should be sold, what products are missing and what should be phased out. They are running project development projects with one goal, to sell as many of that one product. Supply chain makes sure products are delivered to customers in the shortest possible way. We are a seasonable business so everything is geared around sales.

We have two regions: Europe, rest of the world & America. Sales regions. Within those regions, one area sales manager, kind off country responsible person for the sales. Under them they have sales representatives.

Special sales force for RV sales function.

Different channels:

- Directly to retailers
- Distributors
- Agents
- Key Accounts (PAN European)
- OE, direct to car manufacturers, Volvo, Volkswagen (different sales function)

All of them (area sales managers) have an academic degree. And most of the sales representatives have an academic degree as well. [Is that a conscious decision?]. They absolutely need to have that (an academic degree). Because here (Dash?), it's almost 1 billion sek he is responsible for. You can't put an idiot in a sales position like that. If you look at what we do, we are a premium priced company when it comes to our Thule product. Some mid priced products like case logic less premium. Essential we keep our margins, and keep our prices and push through the price increases we have every year. They are managing complex relationships with key accounts etc, so they need to have a high level of business acumen in order to drive that business. They also need to look at the marketing span. And they of course also need to be in close contact with our supply chain. To make sure we have a good customer service support. They are definitely key people in our business.

We've had this structure. However, over the last 10 people we have changed a lot of people. The whole Thule group has changed. When I started in 2005, one of my tasks was to upgrade the education level. That is in all layers of management. To get more skilled people

with better education and people who understand business better. Both from a practical point of view and from an academic point of view.

In all professions, when I came into the real life, you need on the job training. And learn from the experience. The point is, when you have people with education...what is the goal of education? It is to break down the different topics, to know that's how you solve a problem. That's what you learn at university. You need to be able to go in and dissect a problem and then come up with different solutions for how you go about it. That is what education is about. That is to uplevel your way of thinking.

Because if you have an uneducated person, they can go to a certain level. Sometimes you say you promote a person over their capacity. Some self made people have success. However, there are many examples of when you have promoted people beyond their capacity. Their intellectual capacity. And their educational capacity.

One of the strategic choices we made almost 12 years ago, in order for us to grow, we needed to change our management. We needed to change the people. We needed to upgrade the academic level.

Totally transformed compensation package, lowered bonuses, gave people more of a base salary. We need fewer people if we have the real skilled people. When we took our sales force and when we took our company from being this accessories supplier to the car industry transforming it into a outdoor company we needed to go through a huge sales training. You have to sell differently if you sell directly to retailers. Before only sold to distributors. We have Changed channel approach. The way we do business. Today, here in Europe, 30 percent of our retailers are outdoor, 70 percent are still in the car accessories. And we can see the big key accounts and we need to approach differently. So we needed a big change, we needed to approach it differently. We needed to give them account management training. We needed to go through finance and business acumen. We brought in 360 sales people on different levels, coaching, training etc. That was a big eye opener, first time sales force met, and starte to exchange experiences, it was very fruitful.

We also saw that we needed to give them different tools in order to be more professionals. Even if people are trained and educated, you still need to manage and give the right tools to a sales organisation. But you need to have people who drive sales on a very high skilled and trained educational level. Like Johan, his CV is impressive.

To be able to sell you need to understand what the fundamentals of sales, presenting a product, building a relationship, to protect the financial value of a product, otherwise it's just giving away sales. You have to understand the fundamentals. And then you have to understand the reality of your customers. What do you think the margins on a retailer on average? On average 3-4%. In order to understand how to do business. We keep your inventory, we make sure we deliver to you within a certain time, provide you with certain in store material, provide a certain display. That's how you build a relationship. That is through financial insights. You ened to understand the kind of business a retailer or distributor is working.

If we had more retailers, we would have a bigger profit because we don't have to give so much away to the distributors.

That's what sales people need to understand. Giving away discounts.

No it's not good enough (to not have sales education at a university level). We need to promote sales. We need to give sales more attraction. Because its very hard to find sales

training. We used BTS, a company doing a lot within sales training and financial training. But too many are on a too low level. And I see that young people, like yourselves, you don't want to go into sales because there's less money, less attractive. "Oh I want to do marketing". What is marketing? Marketing is just a support function. Sales is what drives business. Because you need to understand the full value chain of what you're doing.

We have retailer programs which means that the best retailers, and the ones who manage the brands the best in their stores, they get to join this club of highly selected customers-retailers. They get special services, packages, and that is how you work with them. Because we know that if you work hard with your customers and retailers, you get better sell-out for the business and we will have better sell in to them. The goal is to get as many products out to the retailers store. Maybe you have a nice looking in store concept. Then go into different channels. The juvenile channel. Know exactly what you need to sell where. Juvenile channel, we need people who worked in that channel. Different margins, different realities.

You need to have basic commercial training going into a job, like financial training. If there was anything like channel management and those kind of things. Need to know marketing. Need to know some of the tools you want to bring to the market. When are the big chains going to do their big sourcing events? You need relation management. Relation management is one of the big points you need to do as a sales person. You are constantly building your relationships with customers. What the big chains are doing, for example wallmart, mediamarkt, they are constantly changing their sourcing people. They also know that relationships build business. So they don't want their purchasing people to get too close to the suppliers because that's how you build relationships, so they constantly change them in order to negotiate better. And the sourcing people are getting much stronger in their acumen. Really have to plan and cannot send in someone who is way below a very skilled purchaser. Because you don't balance that relationship.

Is it difficult to recruit sales people. We are an attractive brand therefore it's easier for us (to recruit sales professionals). But then again, it is not that simple. Because, usually if you recruit. Like when we recruited the VP Sales that was not an easy recruit. We found Johan in the US. If you go in and talk about a market manager...you have to call them something else. To call them sales is tricky.

Chairmen Lundakor Student Consulting Business in Lund. What they are about is teach them how to sell, meet customers, how to sell product. It is easier to sell a product than a service. To work with sales and sales methods that is really interesting. To really promote sales. It was less interesting for students to do sales. They wanted to do sales branding, anything not to do with sales. Now we have one General Manager (of Lundakor) and she is passionate about sales. Easier, less stressed. They are building a culture where sales is king. They are generating business. Because that's what sales is all about, generating business.

It is all about being honest and just change the perception.

WHY?

Combination of course (of education and desire to learn in practice), if you are not interested in generating business and doing sales, if you're lousy in that part that's something that can't be trained in the university. But you can understand the fundamentals. You maybe plan better. When you are in the conversation you don't have to go back and do control mechanism because you didn't understand what that person was talking about when he was talking about margins.

Having a broad base of knowledge, we call it business acumen. That is really what you need. That is the total of understanding products and to be able to market your product both from the technical point of view but also if you look at product placement, how to build up a retailers product portfolio. So that person is not wasting his money on products that he will never sell out his store. So understanding what is driving that retailers business. There is a lot of components you need to understand. Need to understand how to manage agents, distributors. Distributors are getting less but they still exist. If you look at e commerce, their different channels how to make money and how to cut cost in their everyday business you need to understand the complexity of their world as well. You need to be well structured.

Are we going to do e-commerce ourselves? Some retailers have it, distributors have it, so that is a very tricky question. We stay out of it. But retailers are in to that. Need to support them with marketing, pictures of our products, technical specifications, looks nice and we can manage our brands. Has to be monitored closely. Sales representatives need to check what is going on on the retailers ecommerce to make sure it looks right, they use our logo correctly.

Should we compete with our own customers? That is the reality our customers are under, they are constantly pressing costs out of their own store and that is how they survive.

Change – information – internet- for some channels you need specialized people, for example in the juvenal channel, broad, hard for one person to take everything in consideration. More women are working in juvenal, special brands within that, we have started to recruit sales reps with expertise within juvenal channel.

Each market is different. Japan is a small organization, only four of them. Very important clients and during the 80s Japan was one of our biggest markets. So we have a guy who is Swedish, and has a masters, fluent in French and Japanese. In Japan, need to know the codes, need to know what to do, how to behave, some sort of sense. In China we have a guy with a business management education.

How could sales function improve?

In future it is much more, area sales managers are doing sales themselves, have their biggest accounts (UK, Halford), he is managing that account himself. Future much more about leadership, leadership for their salesforces but also about leadership about the relationship with their accounts. Much more about planning and making sure that with that broad assortment of products you really know when to do what. Management aspects will be more important, financial acumen is always important but it will get even more important.

We are operating in 140 countries in the world. Need to know laws, regulations, policies, eu structures, so many things you need to know you need to understand. You need to break down legal content into what is the consequences for us on a higher and broader level.

With the speed and flow of information you need to be very alert and you need to point out what is important and relevant and what is less of a priority here.

2200 employees thule, 221 sales people.

Transformation of sales

It started approximately 10 years ago with this co-creation of value. A lot of books written at that time. Before that it was a lot about business to business etc, that was what was fancy.

Today, much more, into the future, it's going to be more about the digital sales and how to explore on that. There will always be products in shops to touch and feel. Sales process

might look different because we as consumers are changing our patterns. We might go to these super fancy flagship stores to look for our products but we accept that the products are sent home by mail. In the future I can imagine that we are sending the parcels directly to the customers. So it's system, digitals, that is what going to be the difference in the future, that will totally change the sales force and the knowledge they possess. It will require new knowledge in the demand plan and supply chain for organizations.

You can just envision how difficult the demand plan would be, only consumers are going through e-commerce. I think think that consumers want to go and touch products. You know you order a dress on the internet and you get it and its crap. Especially for our products of course. Then we can see that some products are still spontaneous. You are going to alps, you change your car, and you need a rack to put on the roof, need to go to the store, going day after so you need the product here and there. If they don't have it in store you're not going to wait 24 hours so then you take the competitors product. It's a balance of course.

Coincides with academic moves

We could not have transformed our company if we didn't have the right skilled people in the right positions in our company. We have only the resources that we need, we are not a fat cat, we are quit lean. Capacity of the people we have we need to rely on those capacities. Need to have intellectual capacity to quickly move. We don't need people who are only interested in models and theory, there needs to be a match between drive and understanding of how things are put together.

The academic world are not interested in sales. What do you make of sales? Either you come from product management which is a fancy area, or you come from marketing, developing brands. But a brand does not sell itself, it doesn't sell products if you don't have people to provide the retailers with products. SO you can have a fancy marketing department, but if there is not an organization that really drives selling and the sell through at the retailers place there will never be sales. You can design as many fancy products as you want, but you will not get the revenue.

Universities have never...in the US it's different because they more dependent on donations and commercial interest. Here in Sweden they don't even understand if they are on the board of a commercial company that the company needs to earn money. That's not a high value. They don't understand. Economikhogskolan Lund have a better understanding now, but if you look at people on the board, they don't understand fundamentals of business. That's why there is so little research in this area.

At the end of the day the university is still interested in getting funds from the business world. And if we don't make any money we won't give them any funds.

Sales is fun.

Few countries, as the Netherlands, Denmark, Turkey, they are trade people. They are countries that have been dependent on trade. So interesting because in those countries the interest of sales is bigger. I guess it is because you didn't have another industry. depending on trading merchandize to in between countries. In Denmark, what do they have, butter and beer. But they could sell their grandmother twice.

If you look at classical assortment, in the uS you have Yakama, they have 40% market share. They were in a deep crisis before. So they changed their management and I don't know how that's progressing. In Europe we have competitors in the bike carrier industry. But you know they are so small. There are competitors that only sell with two product ranges

going to distributor/retailer whereas our sales force are managing a much broader range of products.

Marketing department is working with out brand. We have a branding committee, CEO and BA president of the US and our two VP of sales. Before we had a brand person working for the group. Where we are now we don't need a brand manager. Once you've built the brand, its about keeping the consistency in the brand communication which is incorporated in the marketing work.

Marketing work together with sales and with the product development people as well. Roughly 30 people. They have defined separate functions but they work together.

D. 'Competences of the sales profession today'

Sales was	Sales today	Competence
Environment		
Less global markets	Increasingly globalized markets	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Knowledge of external influences (e.g., political, cultural and legal dimensions) - Global negotiation expertise - Adapt to customer's context - Be aware of diverse cultural expectations
Less competitive markets	Highly competitive markets	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Being responsive to changes, think quickly and creatively
Focused on selling to one type of customer	Various types of customers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Relationship management - Understand multiple approaches and techniques - Ability to quickly understand new information
Buying companies less professional	Level of buyer-supplier conversation very high and competitive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Differentiation skills - Outsmart the competition - High level of business acumen - Mediate stretch between revenue and costs to serve the customer
	Quickly changing technology environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ability to quickly understand new occurring circumstances and learn how to operate with them
A straightforward equation	Data heavy involving storage, retrieval and analysis of customer data (Jones et al., 2005)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Data analysis skills (analyze a large amount of information and categorize them) - Forecasting skills - Evaluation skills (e.g., prioritizing)
Stable flow of information about the customer	Fast, dense and rapidly changing information about the customer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Operate as knowledge broker
Focus		
Selling-centric - Promoting products	Customer-centric - Bringing value in the exchange to the customer, focus on customer productivity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Be adaptive and attune to customer demands and customer diversity
More one size fits all – products/solutions	Complex customized solutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Expertise in customer context
Traditional "order taking", teacher about products and services	Operation of complex relationship management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Respond to technological advancements and use to their advantage
Sales as a subsidiary to marketing	Sales is king	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Customer Management
Working with product knowledge unique to a company	Working with the customer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Communication skills - Cooperation skills - Negotiation skills
Less close, not necessarily long-term relationships	Closer, long term relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Relationship management
Transactional types of sales	Complex relationship management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Co-ordination between buyer and seller and co-ordination within the supplying company and third parties
Not so much in contact with other departments	Work closely with all departments in the business to design the most valuable solution for the customer (incorporating marketing, finance, operations, etc. into the sale)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Relationship management - Awareness and understanding of the capabilities of the supplying company - Understanding of cost structures and customer profitability

One sided relationship	Consultative “capable orchestrator of organizational resources” (Jones et al, 2005)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Strategic partner of customer company - Expert in clients industry - Understand the capabilities of the supplier business - Boundary spanner between customer and supplying company - Drive new sources of value to customer - Challenge existing paradigms - Maximum value for suppliers
Importance of sales		
Less at stake between the customer’s business and the sales organization	Link between customer’s business and the sales organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Managers of key assets (being the customers) of a company
A few salesmen	A well staffed sales function	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Responsible for a large part of the company turnover
About the ability to close sales	Ability to attract and retain customers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Customer Management - Understand Priorities
	Sales growth most important priority for business	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Understand how to get maximum value for the supplying company
Micro sales goals	Unification of sales goals to company goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Internal communications - Work together with colleagues
	Social role in selling (Hohenschwert, 2013)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Social cognitive construction (Haas et al, 2012)
Co-Creation of Value		
<i>According to our findings the concept of co-creation of value has risen approximately ten years ago</i>	Identify actions that will solve client problems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Analytical skill - Synthesis skill - Evaluation skill
	Customer insight	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Understanding of client’s business - Understanding of buyer behavior - Understand how to gather data - Understand how to analyze, synthesize and evaluate data - Understand how to make use of the data (sales forecasting)
	Consultation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Relationship management - Categorize clients, prioritize clients - Develop sales pitch - Propose strategy
	Assisting customers with challenges in dissemination of solutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Understanding customers challenges and difficulties - Building trust with customer
Business Acumen		
Learned on the job, internal training	Often insufficient to learn on the job	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Consulting thought leadership and business expertise - Broader understanding of functional areas of business - Multiple sales techniques - Ingrained sales knowledge

An outgoing personality is important in making a sale	Need for different competences to identify actions that will solve client problems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Critical analytical thinking - Analytical skills - Synthesis skills - Evaluation skills - Negotiation skills - Responsiveness
Knowing the basics	Knowing more, and knowing it quickly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Understanding of sophisticated software - Produce forecast, valuable information from analysis
More simple way of doing sales	Broker complex deals / Consultation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Negotiation expertise
	Fulfilling customer expectation and remaining competitive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Have broad business knowledge (sales planning, financial acumen) - Continually update market and product knowledge of the customer and supplying organization - Higher level thinking to be able to understand numbers - Higher level thinking to help the customer plan - Bring intellectual value to the buyer-seller exchange
	Involving a number of selling contingencies (Jones et al., 2005)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Adaption to various competitive selling situations

Table B. Competences of the sales profession today in the context of the Sales Transformation