

# Russ Berrie Institute For Professional Sales

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## The Star-Ledger Birth of a salesman

### National Sales Challenge tests students' skills

By Stacy Jones / STAR-LEDGER STAFF

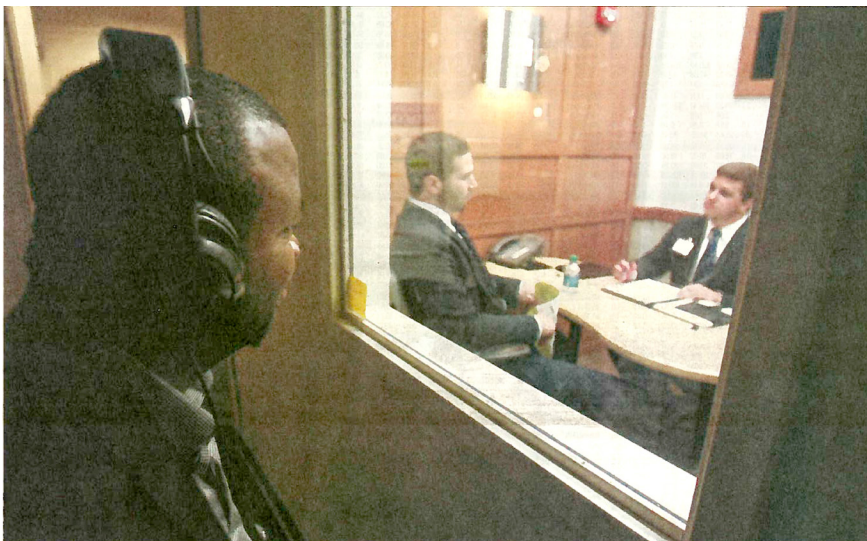
**T**he scene looks like the precursor to an interrogation. A group of people in suits and ties crowd around a conference table, studying live footage of nervous students in small rooms just down the hallway.

The pressure and high stakes are real, but the undergraduates battling nerves to smile, nod and exude confidence were in the middle of a competition, and the group in the conference room was their judges.

For seven years, the Russ Berrie Institute for Professional Sales at William Paterson University has hosted the National Sales Challenge, an annual competition that crowns the best collegiate salesmen and saleswomen.



Judges monitor sales calls on television monitors during the sales challenge. The annual competition brings business students from all over the world who hope to impress with their sales skills.



Michael Gatlin, left, listens in and watches through a two-way mirror as Robert McCandlish of Baylor University, center, presents a sales pitch to Mark Melillo during the National Sales Challenge at the Russ Berrie Institute for Professional Sales at William Paterson University in Wayne on Thursday.

On Thursday morning, Asha Andrews, a student from the University of Texas, kept her shoulders back and hands clasped lightly during her mock sales call. She nodded slowly, the universal gesture for understanding.

She glanced a few times at the two-way mirror that separated her from the dark control room where contest organizers monitored video feeds from the fake board rooms.

Her cell phone sat in plain view.

Mike Zurlini, a sales manager for medical-device manufacturer Stryker and a former judge, said leaving a cell phone out on

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the table might have been a fatal flaw for the Texas student.

"It's totally necessary to be connected with people, especially for professionals," he said, "but it also becomes a distraction and crutch."

The number of competitors hoping to score a job by showing employers their talent has grown so much that the 150-student sales department nearly doubled in size for three days when competitors arrived on Wednesday.

The challenge's lure has grown, drawing competitors from universities in the Netherlands and Scotland. This year, more than 100 students from 37 schools traveled to the Wayne campus to compete.

## SALES SCENARIO

The Berrie Institute, founded 10 years ago with a gift from Englewood businessman Russell Berrie, centers around the observation rooms and control panel that manages video feeds from them. It's one of the few schools in the country to offer an academic program focused on sales.

This year, students assumed the role of ADP representatives selling human resource services to the owner of a fictional frozen yogurt chain. To make it challenging, the professors impersonating business owners pretended to have already hired a competitor and were very wary of price.

One challenger from Illinois State University used charts and screens shots to engage her buyer.

Using pictures and charts can be tricky, according to Zurlini.

"Those can be distracting. You want to have the buyer focused on you," he said. "But the biggest deal breaker is not asking for the sell. You have to close."

Three times she looked her client in the eye and, as natural as breathing, said his company's success would contribute to her own. She opened

client in the eye and, as natural as breathing, said his company's success would contribute to her own. She opened and closed the meeting with compliments on the business owner's pineapple-mango frozen yogurt and bluffed that she had worked with a similar fake company, Dairy King, in the St. Louis area.

Zurlini said his employer, which has offices in New Jersey, hired its second sales challenge competitor earlier this year.

On Thursday, the William Paterson alum was manning a table in the cafeteria, sizing up potential job applicants.

"We're looking for hires that aren't afraid," Zurlini said. "You have to be courageous, know the product and ask questions."

## FRIENDLY COMPETITION

The competition is cutthroat. Only four of the 72 students making fake sales calls on Thursday moved on to a second round of mock meetings on Friday.

In between the role-playing exercises, students also participated in a speed-sell competition in which they had two minutes to convince executives they were worth hiring.

After each so-called elevator pitch, students receive one minute of blunt feedback and then move to the next table to start over.

By Friday evening, the judges had named Brian Curlett of Western Michigan University as the overall winner.

Despite the stiff competition, the atmosphere in the cafeteria was collegial. It was hard to get within a few feet of a student without being pulled into a firm handshake and handed a business card.

A few tables down from Zurlini, the regional vice president for Tennessee-based suit manufacturer Tom James was looking for talent too.

"We've been a sponsor from the beginning," said Tim Hunt, who works in the company's Manhattan office. "We provide suits to two of the winners of

the overall competition. And we're also here looking for potential hires."

## GETTING RESPECTABLE

Prabakar Kothandaraman, executive director of the Berrie institute, said he knows that for people outside the profession, the word "sales" evokes images of smarmy car dealers or the sound of breathless telemarketer pitches.

"Even within business schools, it was never a popular major or area of study. No one could walk into their parents' house and say, 'I'm majoring in sales' and expect to get a good reaction," he said. "Russ Berrie wanted to make sales a respectable discipline, like accounting, law or medicine."

Kothandaraman cut his teeth by selling paint and then computer software. He remembers being trained in role-play situations, like the competition's sale calls, but none of it was grounded in academics.

He said companies save money when they recruit students who dedicate the better part of four years to studying and practicing sales. It eliminates the need for what's sometimes a whole year of paid training.

For John Burkay Kaplan, a WPU senior and one of two students selected for the school's home team, sales has always seemed like an obvious choice.

His head-to-toe royal blue suit and matching shoes drew lots of attention, but he used his skills as a salesman to turn them into conversations that ended with warm handshakes and exchanged business cards.

"I've always had a passion for selling. When I was 17 years old, I worked for a company called Vector Marketing and sold Cutco products. They were kitchen knives," Kaplan said. "Their sales associates averaged \$10,000 a month. I did \$20,000 and realized I was doing really well. For you to get someone engaged in a conversation is crucial."

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Above, Michael Gatlin monitors the video feeds from each of the rooms during the National Sales Challenge.

Ben Watson of Baylor University is seen through a two-way mirror giving a sales pitch to Steve Charron.

