



Xavier University Boosts Students' Selling Skills with Second Nature

The organization | Xavier University in New Orleans, LA (XULA) is a historically black college with a popular course in selling skills. Every semester, students learn how to hold complex B2B sales conversations and the semester culminates in an external sales competition against students from other institutions.

The problem | Students lack opportunities to practice sales conversations

XULA students need to practice their selling skills and sales conversations, but they lack sufficient and appropriate opportunities. Practicing a pitch in the mirror only goes so far, as students can't gain experience in responding to a lead, listening to buyer questions, or handling objections. Ideally, students would practice with professionals, who are volunteer mentors from companies that work with the university, or with their professor, Amanda Helm, Assistant Professor of Sales at Xavier University and who has been teaching this course for several years. But because of time constraints, this is rarely possible. Instead, students typically use each other as role play partners and give each other feedback, with the professor also delivering her feedback when she reviews recordings of conversations.

Overview

Company

Xavier University Louisiana runs a selling skills course for students.

Problem

- Students are not able to practice their skills and sales conversations sufficiently, due to a lack of knowledgeable and available practice partners.
- Students have to wait for professional feedback, and feel nervous about practicing in public.
- The professor is burdened with a massive number of role play recordings to listen to and grade.

Second Nature Benefits

- Students enjoy a safe, non-judgmental practice space.
- Over two-thirds of students practice more often.
- All XULA entrants in an external sales competition reached the semifinal stage for the first time.
- Over two-thirds of students said that Jenny made them more effective at sales conversations.
- Students overwhelmingly preferred to receive timely, objective, and comprehensive feedback from Second Nature than from their peers or professor.
- 85% of students found Second Nature's feedback valuable.
- Professor's time is freed up for other tasks.

However, this has been less than ideal for several reasons:

- The student role play partner isn't always available
- The student role play partner may not be knowledgeable enough to serve as an effective practice foil
- When practicing with their peers, students focus on many factors, and may not be able to pay enough attention to assessing their own or their partner's performance
- The professor has many students to assess, so there's a delay before she can send feedback
- It's difficult for any human judge to deliver objective feedback

Additionally, students feel nervous about practicing in public and getting judgment from their peers or professor. This affects their performance and holds them back from practicing as often as would be desired.

Professor Helm looked for a solution that would allow students to practice more often and receive more timely feedback. The problem facing Professor Helm and the students at XULA has broader implications. Sales is one of the least diverse sectors in the US, with [only 11.2% African American employees](#). Tech sales is even less diverse, as one technology salesperson [noted](#), "I just noticed across all of tech that it's predominantly white, and its customers are predominantly white." One of the major challenges identified by Black sellers is that they lack quality feedback. Training Black students to become effective salespeople early in their careers can have a positive impact on diversity in the wider tech sales ecosystem.

The solution | Second Nature's AI-powered sales training platform



In 2022, Professor Helm suggested that her students use Second Nature, an AI-powered interactive sales training platform, to give students more opportunities to practice. She introduced her students to Jenny, its AI sales trainer, and encouraged them to practice with Jenny in class time and in their free time.

With Jenny, students could practice as many times as they liked, in total privacy. Jenny gives the user hints within the session and provides timely feedback on their knowledge and delivery. Students and Professor Helm could see the breakdown of their scores and learn what needs to be improved and where their strengths and weaknesses lie.

The results → Students practiced more

Because it's so easy to practice with Jenny, students were able to practice far more often. Professor Helm surveyed 2022's and the previous year's students about their learning experience and the survey included questions about using an AI-powered sales training simulation.

Over two-thirds of students said they practiced more when working with Jenny, and 85% said they liked having a practice partner available 24/7.

“

I definitely practiced more with Jenny just because she was always available.

**Aryn Frazier,
XULA Student**

Aryn Frazier, a XULA student, said “I definitely practiced more with Jenny just because she was always available. Sometimes my classmates weren’t in the mood but Jenny was always there.” According to Professor Helm, prior to implementing Second Nature’s AI role play solution, only four students out of 20 did any kind of practice where the words left their mouths before their first in-class role play, and that includes one who was talking to the mirror and one talking to someone who wasn’t paying attention.

Another reason that Second Nature encouraged an increase in practice time is that Jenny serves as a knowledgeable practice partner, allowing students to work on their skills more thoroughly than when practicing with other students. Kaelyn Moore, another XULA student, observed that “Jenny was consistent and knew a lot about the topic we were selling. If I role play with someone who didn’t study as much as I did, or didn’t know the product as well as I did, that can get frustrating.”

Additionally, Jenny gave students a safe space for practice, which further boosted practice frequency. “Working with Jenny made me feel that there was time to practice without getting any negative feedback,” said Kaelyn, adding “It really did give space for you to feel safe and learn your sales skills.”

| Student performance improved

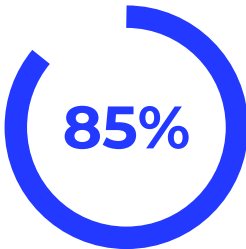
The 2022 class which worked with Second Nature showed a noticeable and significant improvement in their sales conversations, which was emphasized by their performance in the annual sales competition. “In the external sales competition in 2022, all the students made the semifinalist round, which has never happened before in all the years we’ve been competing,” said Professor Helm, adding “I was very proud they all went straight to round two. Second Nature provided transferable skills that showed up well.”

Over two-thirds of students said that Jenny made them more effective at sales conversations, and the same number agreed that it was more efficient than practicing alone. Aryn said, “Not only did Jenny give me feedback, but she also helped me get my words together better, finding better ways to articulate what I want to say.”

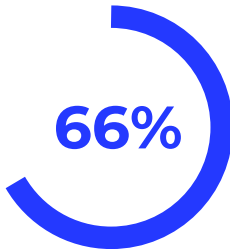
More than three-quarters said it was more realistic than imagining the buyer’s side of the conversation, and over half felt that practicing with Jenny was more realistic than when the buyer is played by fellow student.



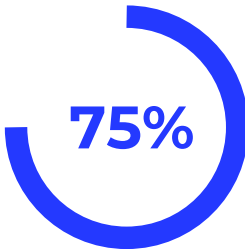
Reached 2nd stage
in sales competition



Found instant feedback
from Jenny valuable



Jenny made them
more effective



Role plays with Jenny
are more realistic

Students received more timely and objective feedback

Students overwhelmingly preferred to receive feedback from Jenny than from any other source, thanks to it being both timely and non-judgmental. Second Nature's instant feedback was the most highly appreciated feature, with 85% saying they found it valuable.

Professor Helm acknowledges that unlike Jenny, she's not able to be objective. "I'm not able to norm my grades, and it's likely that I'll grade a top student more harshly so they're motivated to improve. It may not even be conscious," she said, adding that students "view Jenny's feedback as objective and unarguable. When Professor Helm says it, that's just her opinion about their natural style. But Jenny is not their professor. She doesn't judge them."

Jenny's feedback is also more comprehensive than the insights that Professor Helm can provide, giving them scores for their vocal fluency, energy, and confidence as well as knowledge and general expressiveness.

"Simply because my professor has so many other students, feedback would come back within a week or so, so getting the feedback instantly from Jenny was very beneficial," observed Aryn. "When I looked at what Jenny said, I saw there were things I didn't even realize I did, or selling points I didn't realize I missed."

Professor was freed from watching endless webcam recordings

Professor Helm explained that usually, grading student role play recordings was "a nightmare," sucking up a massive amount of her time, but with Second Nature's help, she had far more time to invest in other aspects of the course.

Students submitted their best sales conversation recording and Second Nature score to Professor Helm, but she knew that they had been practicing many times, and had access to all their Second Nature scores.

Both the professor and her students emphasized that Second Nature complemented the existing parts of the course like in-person role plays and the external competitions, rather than potentially replacing them. For example, checking students' Second Nature scores helped Professor Helm give better support and guidance to her students. She could see where their strengths and weaknesses lay, and tailor her in-person advice and teaching accordingly.

Reviewing role play recordings was "a nightmare" in the past, sucking up a massive amount of time. but with Second Nature's help, Professor Helm had far more time to invest in other aspects of the course.

Looking ahead | Second Nature rounds out the course experience

Through its availability, timely and objective feedback, and privacy, the students and their professor found that Second Nature improved both the course experience and student skills. Kaelyn points out that having Jenny as part of the overall course made it far more effective. “I found I was practicing more with Jenny to make sure I knew what I was saying, and then I would go back to a real person situation. I feel like they complement each other,” she said.

XULA and Professor Helm have no plans to abandon in-person practice, especially when it can take place with a professional, but Second Nature is a very important addition that improves the course experience. Professor Helm plans to use it for the next three years for which she has funding for it, and hopes to keep using it “forever” as long as she can obtain future funding.