

PERCEPTIONS OF SALESPeOPLE: IMPLICATIONS FOR SALES MANAGERS AND SALES TRAINERS

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An investigation was undertaken to determine the public's image of salespeople as portrayed in the popular press. A thorough understanding of the public's image of salespeople provides an indication of areas where sales training should be concentrated. Negative and positive sources of salesperson image are disclosed, and training and socialization tactics for enhancing salesperson image are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

A strong positive image is believed to be important to a company's success (Caminiti 1992; Knoll and Tankersley 1991; Lamons 1992; Rohrer 1989; Russell 1992). It often results in higher market shares, lower selling costs and higher profits (Lamons 1992). A recent survey found that CEO's and personnel directors believe that corporate image directly impacts the bottom-line profitability of their companies (Knoll and Tankersley 1991). Eighty-six percent of the CEO's and eighty percent of the personnel directors surveyed believed their company could benefit from a better image among clients. Respondents also indicated that a successful image is most important for positions in sales and marketing (Knoll and Tankersley 1991).

As boundary spanners, salespeople are instrumental in affecting the images of their companies. The images salespeople project are likely to be transferred to their companies. A recently developed model of service quality suggests that a firm's image affects buyers' expectations with regards to the firm (Kurtz and Clow 1991). Buyers are likely to form expectations of the firm and its ability to deliver a quality product and service based partially on the image projected by its salespeople. This is critical given that perceived service quality affects purchase behavior (Bitner 1990; Zeithaml, Berry and Parasuraman 1988).

Unfortunately, through the years, personal selling has been plagued by a poor public image which has been reinforced repeatedly through stage productions, television shows, comic strips, and political commentary, as well as anecdotes, novels, short stories, and newspaper reporting (Hequet

1989; Senne 1988; Thompson 1972). A common perception is that sales jobs have relatively low occupational status (Ditz 1967; Gamble 1990; Graham 1989; Mason 1965; Salkin 1988). Also, it is often thought that success in sales requires low ethical standards (Bragg 1987; Holley 1987). Given the increasing importance of personal selling in determining the overall success in many companies (Ingram 1990), sales managers cannot afford to staff a sales force which has a negative image. Recent research indicates that salespeople with negative perceptions of the public image of their job have lower job satisfaction and tend to be more prone to quit the job (Wotruba 1990). Turnover is extremely costly, with recent statistics indicating it costs the average company nearly a quarter of a million dollars a year (Coleman 1989). According to one major survey, the average turnover rate in U.S. and Canadian firms is 27% (*Marketing Times* 1990). Besides the severe financial consequences of turnover, managers are expected to face an unprecedented shortage of skilled, educated workers by the year 2000 (Leibowitz, Schlossberg and Shore 1991). Based on these findings, it is apparent that reducing turnover is critical to most firms. Improving the image of a salesforce may reduce salespeople's tendencies to seek other employment.

Increasingly, customers are demanding more professionalism from salespeople. Sales professionalism has been defined as, "a customer-oriented approach that employs truthful, nonmanipulative tactics to satisfy the long-term needs of both the customer and the selling firm (Ingram and LaForge 1989, p. 21)." Practicing sales professionalism is likely to lead to higher customer-retention. Research by consulting firm Bain Company indicates that increasing a company's customer retention rate two percent has the same effect on profits as cutting costs by ten percent (Power, Driscoll and Bohn 1992). Understanding the roots of negative sentiments towards salespeople in general may help address these issues so that a more professional image can be fostered.

Considering the importance of image for sales

TABLE 1
IMAGE STUDY SAMPLE:
TYPES OF SALESPeOPLE DISCUSSED IN THE POPULAR PRESS

<u>Type of Sales</u>	<u>Number of Articles</u>
General ^a	62
Financial Services ^b	39
Direct Sales (i.e., door-to-door)	23
Automobile	20
Industrial	18
Retail	16
Telemarketing	12
Real Estate	9
Various Services ^c	10
Total	209

^a Discusses salespeople in general.

^b Includes stockbrokers & insurance agents.

^c Services other than those listed.

positions, firms would be well-served to take actions to overcome a negative salesforce image and create or reinforce a more positive one. Sales managers are in a position to address image-related problems and perhaps circumvent costly dissatisfaction and turnover, thereby improving overall sales performance. This may be accomplished through properly structured socialization and training programs designed to address image-related issues. Through the process of socialization, salespeople acquire the knowledge, skills, and values to perform their jobs (Dubinsky et al. 1986). Necessary knowledge, skills and values can all be acquired by well executed training programs.

Before designing programs to deal with the salesperson's public image, it is necessary to have a thorough understanding of the manner in which salespeople are perceived by the public. An important source of information shaping the salesperson's, the buyer's, and the public's image of the salesperson is the popular press. Research suggests written mass media is a powerful means by which public perceptions, attitudes, and opinions are influenced (cf. Chen and Meindl 1991; Roberts and Maccoby 1985). Salespeople, buyers, and the public may develop positive attitudes towards salespeople as a result of articles portraying salespeople in a positive light. Furthermore, a positive portrayal may help to enhance the professional image of all salespeople. Conversely, articles portraying salespeople negatively are likely to have an adverse effect on attitudes. Such articles may hurt the image

of salespeople in a particular field, as well as the image of salespeople in general. In addition to shaping attitudes, the popular press serves as a source of useful information. It provides a means for learning sales behaviors to be avoided, and those to be reinforced. By illustrating proper sales behavior through training, it may be possible to avoid a negative image for the salesforce, and subsequently the company. Given the potentially important management implications, a research project was undertaken to determine the image of salespeople as portrayed in the popular press. The objectives of this article are twofold: (1) to report perceptions of salespeople as portrayed in the popular press, and; (2) to translate these findings into recommendations which can be incorporated into salesforce socialization and training programs.

METHOD

The sample consisted of 209 articles from the period 1982-1991. Articles were collected over several years by marketing students as part of a class project. Each student was required to find a specified number of magazine or newspaper articles that portray either a positive or negative aspect of the image of salespeople. Students were not permitted to utilize readings from academic journals, trade publications, newsletters, or company-sponsored publications. The final sample was derived by eliminating duplicate articles, and those that expressed nothing positive or negative about salespeople.

These articles were drawn from 72 different popular press periodicals covering the categories of business, consumer, and newspaper. Table 1 provides the types of sales jobs examined. As each article was analyzed, the following information was recorded: (1) periodical title; (2) year of publication; (3) type of sales to which the article was referring, and; (4) positive and/or negative references (words) to salespeople. Whether a word was recorded as a positive or negative reference was determined by the context in which the word appeared. Any positive or negative reference mentioned more than once in an article was recorded only once per article.

RESULTS

Approximately 58% of the articles contained at least one positive reference to salespeople, while nearly 62% contained at least one negative reference. Surprisingly, however, there were 522 positive mentions and only 385 negative mentions. While salespeople have traditionally been plagued with a negative image, there is an indication that positive things are now being written about salespeople. A majority of the positive aspects mentioned are traits and behaviors desired for improving the image of salespeople. Methods for enhancing a positive image would therefore be consistent with those suggested for overcoming a negative image. Thus, only the negative aspects associated with salespeople's image and methods for dealing with them will be discussed. Table 2 highlights the sources of a negative image, possible responses, and corresponding negative words mentioned most often.

OVERCOMING A NEGATIVE IMAGE

Some salespeople are unethical and dishonest.

There is a clear indication that salespeople are often viewed as unethical and dishonest. This is evidenced by the number of mentions of words such as *deceptive/deceive/deceit, hustle/hustler/hustling, scam, and unscrupulous*.

The importance of behaving ethically and honestly should not be overlooked. Honesty, a form of ethical behavior, is a key criteria for establishing customer trust (Swan, Trawick and Silva 1985). Customer trust is an important factor affecting the ability of a salesperson to influence a prospect (Peterson 1978). Moreover, it helps to establish long-term customer relationships (Ingram and LaForge 1989).

As part of the socialization process, it is important to define the work to be done, work priorities, and how time should be allocated on the job (Dubinsky et al. 1986). This is referred to as role definition. In defining the salesperson's role, it should be made clear to salespeople how the firm stands with regards to ethics. A code of ethics should be adopted and clearly communicated to salespeople (Murphy and

Laczniak 1981). It is critical that salespeople thoroughly understand the code and the consequences for violating it, or its chances of being implemented will be significantly diminished. Research indicates that corporate codes of conduct and policy, if enforced, can influence ethical behavior (cf. Tsalikis and Fritzsche 1989). It is also important that the job demands placed upon the salesperson are consistent with the ethical guidelines put forward. In other words, salespeople should not be placed in a position where they feel the only way to succeed is by turning to unethical behavior. Additionally, ethical behavior can be enhanced by insuring that salespeople are knowledgeable of the products they sell and the firm's policies and procedures (Bellenger and Ingram 1984). This allows salespeople to give honest answers to buyers' inquiries.

Besides communicating and teaching codes, policies, procedures and product knowledge, training in ethical practices may be accomplished through the use of ethical scenarios. Salespeople can be given written case scenarios of situations involving an ethical dilemma. They are then asked how they would respond in the situation. The sales manager or trainer can then discuss the responses given by the salespeople, particularly in light of company codes, policies and procedures. This helps salespeople become acclimated to potentially troublesome situations prior to their actual occurrence. Salespeople may then feel more comfortable in dealing with a similar situation should it arise.

Some salespeople are involved in illegal activity.

Generally related to the issue of ethics is the legality of certain business practices. The image of salespeople has been tarnished by the participation of some salespeople in illegal activities. Articles in which salespeople were connected to words such as *illegal, con artist, fraud, indicted and lawsuits* were found.

While there are potentially many reasons why a salesperson may participate in illegal behavior, two in particular stand out. First, salespeople may simply be unaware of the laws pertaining to the selling practices of their firm. In this case, the salesforce must be educated as to the particular laws which would apply. Salespeople should be given classroom lectures on the law and then be tested on the material. This type of training should take place during the role definition stage of salesforce socialization so that the salesperson is made clearly aware of what is expected. Secondly, the salesperson's illegal behavior may stem from the perceived opportunity for doing so. Research suggests that the opportunity to behave unethically increases the chances for such behavior (Ferrell and Gresham 1985). Perceived rewards, coupled with few severe consequences for partaking in illegal activity, provide the unethical salesperson with an incentive to do so. This issue can be addressed by clearly outlining and communicating the consequences of illegal behavior, such as termination from the

TABLE 2
SOURCES OF THE NEGATIVE IMAGE OF SALESPEOPLE
AND POSSIBLE RESPONSES

<u>Sources of Image Problems</u>	<u>Words Often Mentioned</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Possible Responses</u>
1. A lack of honest and ethical sales practices by some salespeople has resulted in salespeople often being viewed as unethical or dishonest.	Deceptive/Deceive/Deceit Hustle/Hustler/Hustling Scam Unscrupulous	12 7 14 5	Develop, communicate and enforce codes of ethics. Teach policies, procedures and product knowledge to aid salespeople in providing honest responses to customer queries. Point out that it is important to build long term relationships with customers through trust building.
2. Salespeople unaware of the laws or only concerned about their own well being sometimes become involved in illegal selling activities.	Fraud/Defraud Con Artists/Con Man Illegal	26 4 3	Inform salespeople about the laws concerning the products or services your company is selling. Moreover, make sure they are aware of the laws concerning selling practices. Communicate consequences of illegal behavior.
3. Eager to make a sale, some salespeople tend to come off as overbearing.	Pushy/Pushing Hard Sell Fast Talking High Pressure/Pressured	13 8 6 7	Achieve realism in recruiting to ensure recruits are aware of the actual role of salespeople. Develop salespeople's probing and listening skills so they can ascertain and better solve customer problems. Stress the importance of showing concern, courtesy and politeness towards the customer.
4. Salespeople lacking product knowledge give salespeople in general, as well as the company, a poorer or unprofessional image.	Unknowledgeable	3	Make sure salespeople thoroughly understand the product or service before they begin selling. They must also be aware of company terms and policies applicable to any sale.
5. Salespeople who are not properly trained in selling techniques are frequently not taken seriously and are looked down upon by prospective buyers.	Acting/Theatrics/Showman Peddle/Peddling	5 8	Train the salesforce in customer oriented in selling. Salespeople should avoid gimmicks and other techniques which would be considered unprofessional. Encourage salespeople to join professional associations and to become involved in community activities.
* Frequency of Mentions. Does not equal the total number of negative mentions because all of the negative words mentioned are not included in this frequency count.			

company and criminal prosecution. It is perhaps best to cover these issues when conducting ethics training.

Salespeople are frequently accused of using high-pressure selling techniques.

Selling situations typically call for an individual who is assertive (Bellenger and Ingram 1984). However, salespeo-

ple are often viewed as being overbearing as indicated by words such as **pushy, fast talking, hard sell and high pressure**. With the increase in trained and knowledgeable buyers, coupled with intense competition for customers' salesperson must have the ability to probe the buyer's needs and then actively listen to those needs. Listening has recently been identified by both buyers and marketing executives as one

TABLE 3
NEGATIVE AND POSITIVE INDICATORS OF TRUST COMPONENTS

<u>Trust Component</u>	<u>Negative Words</u>	<u>Freq*</u>	<u>Positive Words</u>	<u>Freq*</u>
Honest	Deceptive/Deceive/Deceit	12	Honesty	9
	Unscrupulous	5	Trust/Trusted/Trusting	11
	Fraud/Defraud	26		
	Con Artists/Con Man	4		
	Illegal	3		
	Lawsuits	4		
	Indicted	3		
	Hustle/Hustler/Hustling	7		
	Scam	14		
Competent	Unknowledgeable	3	Knowledge/Knowledgeable/	
	Acting/Theatrics/Showman	5	Know Products	25
	Peddle/Peddling	8	Professionals/	
			Professionalism	24
			Train/Trained/Training	16
			Educated/Education	9
Customer-Oriented			Informed/Provide Information	9
	Hard Sell	8	Soft Sell	7
	High Pressure/Pressured	7	Helpful/Help Customers	12
			Listen/Listener/Listening	13
			Serve/Satisfy Customer Needs	13
			Problem Solver	6
Likable			Consultant/Consulting	8
	Fast Talking	6	Friendly	4
	Pushy/Pushing	13	Patience	7
			Empathy	6
			Relationship	21
			Hard Worker/Hard Working	14
Dependable			Motivated	7
			Follow-up/Follow-through	4
			Good Service	4

*Frequency of mention. Frequency of mentions does not equal total mentions for either positive or negative words because not all mentions are included in the table.

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business, the "hard sell" can no longer survive in today's marketplace. Fortunately, there are means for addressing this image-related problem.

As a result of inaccurate perceptions of sales jobs, the newly hired salesperson may be under the impression that selling requires the use of high-pressure sales techniques. During the recruiting and selection stage of salesforce socialization, it is important that sales recruiters depict a realistic picture of what is involved in sales. Preconceived notions of

high pressure selling should be eliminated. Achieving greater realism, or ensuring that the salesperson has an accurate perception of the job, may lead to better job performance, greater satisfaction, and less turnover (cf. Dubinsky et al. 1986).

The image of the salesperson as an overbearing product-pusher can further be addressed by realizing that today's salesperson must be more of a problem-solving consultant. Acting as a consultant, today's problem-solving of

the most critical skills for salespeople (Bragg 1990; *The Wall Street Journal* 1990).

Listening is an active process which requires hard mental work. The key to listening is devoting full attention to the speaker. Salespeople must be taught to focus solely on what the prospect is saying. Taking a few notes when the prospect is speaking may aid the salesperson. Probing skills may be improved by proper preparation before a sales presentation so that important questions can be addressed. Through the use of role plays, in which the salesperson is required to take notes and then ask relevant questions of the buyer, listening and probing skills may be enhanced.

Another method for overcoming an overbearing image is to practice proper business etiquette. Sales managers must stress the value of showing concern, courtesy and politeness towards customers. Such practices are likely to enhance salesperson likability, which in turn results in greater customer trust (Swan, Trawick and Silva 1985). Sales etiquette can perhaps best be taught by outlining a list of do's and don'ts and presenting them to the salesforce. For instance, salespeople should arrive on time for appointments, treat secretaries with courtesy and respect, and thank prospects for their time. Salespeople should be periodically reminded of the need for proper etiquette.

Some salespeople are unknowledgeable about the products or services they sell.

Professionalism requires a certain degree of competency in an area. As problem solvers, salespeople must be knowledgeable about the products they sell. However, as indicated by several occurrences of the word **unknowledgeable**, salespeople are repeatedly portrayed as being incompetent. Clearly, an adequate understanding of the product, including its benefits, applications, competitive strengths, and limitations, is necessary to sell it. Moreover, product/market knowledge is considered to be one of the most important criteria in determining customer satisfaction with salespeople (*Sales & Marketing Management* 1985). Likewise, research indicates that competency, which would include knowledge, is important for gaining customer trust and enhancing relationship quality (Swan, Trawick and Silva 1985). Besides improving relationship quality, knowledge may give the salesperson the ability to confidently interact with prospective customers. This can strengthen salesperson self-esteem, which is considered to be a reflection of one's felt degree of competence in performing a task (Bagozzi 1978). Research suggests there is a positive relationship between self-esteem and sales performance (Bagozzi 1978).

Ensuring that the salesforce is knowledgeable should begin with the socialization process. An important socialization function during the recruiting and selection stage is to achieve

congruence, in which the capabilities of the recruit must be matched to the demands of the job (Dubinsky et al. 1986). Therefore, it is important to hire individuals who are willing and able to learn the necessary product and company knowledge needed to be competent in selling. Aptitude and motivation tests may be utilized during the selection process to assist in hiring qualified applicants. Having hired individuals with the motivation and aptitude to learn, the use of lectures, demonstrations, and group discussions can all be useful in training salespeople in product or service knowledge.

Salespeople are sometimes not taken seriously.

Perhaps due to some salespeople's overzealous desire to put on a "song and dance" in attempting to make a sale, the salesperson is not always taken seriously. Such words as **acting**, **theatrics**, **showman**, and **peddling** have been used to describe salespeople's behavior. Acting refers to representing something which one is not, while the term peddling typically carries a negative connotation.

To be taken seriously, the salesperson must build the image of being a professional. The truly professional salesperson: (1) has a mission of service to the customer; (2) has an adequate and evolving knowledge base; (3) advances the profession through behavior, and; (4) behaves in a legally and ethically acceptable manner (Ingram and LaForge 1989). As professionals, salespeople should employ a customer-oriented approach which attempts to satisfy the long-term needs of both the customer and the selling firm. By doing so, the salesperson increases the chances of building productive long-term relationships which are beneficial to both the buyer and the seller (Swan, Trawick and Silva 1985). Through the training and socialization procedures previously outlined, it is possible to achieve these criteria and develop a customer-oriented approach. Additionally, by encouraging salespeople to join professional associations and to become involved in community activities, the profession of sales may be strengthened.

Fostering Customer Trust

Our findings can be related to the concept of trust-earning in a buyer/seller relationship. Earning a buyer's trust is important for several reasons. Most importantly, buyers tend to buy from salespeople they trust (Bingham and Dion 1991). Research indicates that buyers put a heavy emphasis on their perceptions of the salesperson's expertise in the purchase decision, and that trust in the salesperson is strongly related to buyers' perceptions of salesperson product expertise (Bingham and Dion 1991). Apparently, buyers who view salespeople as trustworthy, perceive them to possess greater product expertise. In general, trust has been found to facilitate cooperation, buyer commitment to a salesperson, and the development and maintenance of long-term buyer-salesperson relationships (cf. Hawes, Mast and Swan 1989). All are critical to the firm

attempting to maximize long-term profits.

Swan, Trawick and Silva (1985) found that customer trust is based on the salesperson being perceived as: (1) dependable; (2) honest; (3) competent; (4) having a customer orientation; and (5) being likable. Suggestions have been made for overcoming a negative image by developing these characteristics. In the articles examined, several instances of positive words were found which relate to each component. By concentrating on socialization and training tactics which foster these positive behaviors and attributes, a more professional image of the salesperson may emerge. Table 3 provides negative and positive indicators found in the literature for each of the trust components.

CONCLUSIONS

While strides have been made toward overcoming the negative stereotypical image of the salesperson, there is room for improvement as evidenced by the bad press still given salespeople. Perhaps more comforting is the finding that the

positive aspects associated with salespeople do not go unnoticed. This is important since sales managers and sales trainers are in a position to address the issues contributing to salespeople's negative image. In doing so, the positive aspects will be given at least some recognition. Positive portrayals of salespeople in the press should in turn help change public perceptions of salespeople. This is good for individual salespeople, selling firms, and the sales profession in general, as it can enhance the professional image of salespeople.

Given that a firm's image is important to its success, it is crucial that all functions and aspects of the firm be perceived favorably. As boundary spanners, salespeople have contact with those outside the firm. Thus, as representatives of the company, it is imperative that the salesforce is perceived positively. Finally, in light of recent findings suggesting that the salesperson's perceived image is related to job satisfaction and turnover, it appears that a more positive image may reduce salesperson dissatisfaction and turnover. Clearly, attempts to rectify negative salesperson image should be undertaken.

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