

MALE VERSUS FEMALE SALESPEOPLE: PERCEPTUAL DISTINCTIONS CONTRIBUTING TO SUCCESS AND FAILURE IN SALES

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Women are increasingly occupying positions which have traditionally been male dominated. The influx of women selecting careers in selling may result in managerial uncertainties due to the possibility that women may possess differing perceptions regarding positive and negative aspects of sales and behaviors that may result in success or failure in sales careers. Gender differences in these areas may mandate the use of unique managerial tactics for males and females. This research examines the perceptions of male and female sales representatives as they relate to success or failure in a sales career. The results of the research provides managerial insights into distinct perceptions of work, career problems, and aspects of satisfaction. Differences and similarities are identified, then managerial implications and future research concerns are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Dual income households have become increasingly common. Moreover, women are being hired to fill positions that were previously male-dominated, such as sales and particularly the area of industrial sales (Kelley, 1991). A national study of salespeople found that women working in the area of sales had more than doubled between 1981 and 1987 (*Significant Trends* 1988). Brophy (1989) reports that the number of women in sales has nearly tripled since 1981. While it may be true that more males than females are choosing a career in sales, there seems to be an increase in the number of females expressing an interest in sales as a career (Chapman, 1990). However, despite this growth, Comer and Jolson (1991) suggest that very little is actually known about the relationship between sex type and selling behavior. As a result of this lack of knowledge, information must be extrapolated from other contexts.

The general purpose of this study is to examine a variety of issues affecting women in sales. Specifically, this study examines the aspects of a sales position that saleswomen view as being the most negative and the most positive, and their perceptions of the characteristics that help identify both successful and unsuc-

cessful sales representatives. The saleswomen's perceptions are then compared with the perceptions of their male counterparts to identify any differences that may exist. This comparison will help establish a more thorough understanding of the different perceptions men and women have concerning their sales careers and perhaps provide information which will help determine the types of sales training and management styles which are most effective and appropriate for different types of salespeople.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

It has been suggested that women lack some interpersonal and organizational skills simply as a result of their childhood experiences (Zacur and Coleman, 1982). It is possible that women suffer from biased views, and that these biases serve as obstacles for women attempting to climb the corporate ladder. For example, in 1984 the terms homebody, shy, emotional, and jealous were used at a seminar of the Sales and Marketing Executives Club of Los Angeles to describe saleswomen; while aggressive, logical, loyal, competitive and dominant were terms used to describe salesmen (*Sales & Marketing Management* 1984). Skolnik (1985) reported that male remarks such as "this business is going to hell since they let women in" were heard in the business world. The existence of these types of remarks indicate that bias was an issue which had not been resolved, at least prior to 1985.

Several factors appearing in the literature can be used to compare men and women with regard to their

careers. Some of the more important factors include attitudes and perceptions, ability, and consumer perceptions.

Attitude and Perception

Since men and women are often described as possessing different career goals and expectations, they will also tend to have varying attitudes and perceptions. When Linkemer (1989) surveyed women in sales, it was found that women had very definite fears and that specific areas of their work seemed to cause them problems. Most of the females' job-related concerns resulted from being expected to travel on business trips. Women felt such travel could lead to a variety of both personal and professional problems. First, it may be difficult to travel and leave a family at home. Also, married women may have to contend with their husbands' jealousy when traveling with male colleagues. Women were also concerned with how others view the fact that they and a colleague travel together. In a separate study, about 33% of the women surveyed felt they must counterbalance discrimination by outdoing their male counterparts. It is also possible that firms are sending different organizational signals to male and female employees which might lead to sex discrimination and different levels of performance or job switching (Finn and Moncrief, 1985).

Ability

Increasingly, companies are realizing that the sex of their employees is not as important as their performance and abilities (Kirk and Maddox 1988). Although the genders are obviously different in certain physical aspects, there is no empirical evidence to support the contention that women do not have the ability to be successful in sales. Swan and Futrell reported in 1978 that when comparing males and females on 10 performance attributes, any performance gaps could be eliminated through a sales training program. Rather than a lack of ability, women may possess varying attitudes, goals, and abilities when compared to their male counterparts. *The Sales Executive* (1978) provided an interview which suggested that women have more highly developed verbal and social skills, are more honest and ethical, and are more motivated to perform.

Linkemer (1989) found that women appear to be more interested in knowing their clients. This fulfills their need to develop the social aspect of their careers. To become better acquainted with their clients, women tend to do more research and pay greater attention to details, enabling them to be more prepared for meet-

ings or confrontations. Men usually make fewer preparations and work more impulsively. A possible result of this increased attention is that the customer tends to respect saleswomen, and are therefore more loyal to them (Skolnik, 1985).

According to Farrant (1990) women may have several positive attributes which should contribute to successful selling. They tend to have a natural ability to portray empathy. This ability may help them better understand the needs of the buyer and, unlike men, females tend to attempt to fulfill the customer's needs before fulfilling their own. Women also tend to be more capable of communicating and socializing with strangers. This is a definite advantage in the sales industry, as salespeople often must communicate with people they do not know. A potential disadvantage is that women tend to be viewed as being more passive, yet this trait may not always be a disadvantage. The sales ability of women may also be enhanced by the attention they give to details in every aspect of the sale (Farrant, 1990). A recent study examining the concept of androgyny revealed that women had significantly ($\alpha = .01$) higher mean androgyny scores than did men. This would suggest that women may be better able to adopt situational-specific behaviors and therefore perform a sales task in a superior fashion (Lagace and Twible, 1990).

The caring, trustworthy features of females may help them in negotiating a sale. One study found slight differences in the negotiating ability of salesmen versus saleswomen. Women were found to be more cooperative than men, and women also tend to avoid conflicts more often than did the men in the study (Neu, Graham and Gilly, 1988).

Men may have an advantage over their female peers when closing a sale. Women tend to take rejection at the close of a negotiation personally. Therefore, they may be more inclined to become reserved near the conclusion of a sales contact (Linkemer, 1989).

Consumer Perceptions of Salesperson Gender

There are many elements which contribute to the acceptance or rejection of an individual in sales. One potentially important factor is the gender of the salesperson. This may be especially true in certain industries which are stereotyped as being either a male-specific or female-specific work. Much of the research in this area has focused on the automobile and insurance industries. When women decide to pursue these types of occupations, they take a chance that they will not be quickly accepted.

The findings on this subject are varied and somewhat contradictory. However, one study which could be described as promoting neutrality, found that the sex of the salesperson does not greatly affect the overall satisfaction of the customer (Neu, Graham and Gilly, 1988).

Positive Response to Saleswomen. Much of the evidence suggests that there are several feminine traits viewed favorably by customers. Customers, both male and female, value the calm manner in which women tend to conduct business. Saleswomen are viewed as gentle and friendly, possessing a knack for personalizing both the sale and the product. These traits make buyers feel more important and confident about their purchases (Farrant, 1990).

Saleswomen are viewed positively by the average car buyer. Women in sales tend to be perceived as honest and trustworthy (Farrant 1990). In the automobile industry these traits may prove advantageous since car salespeople are not typically known for their honesty (Lundstrom and Ashworth, 1983).

In recent years more women are taking on the role of buying a car. Even when women do not occupy the predominant decision-making role, they have input into the final decision. Salesmen traditionally have discounted women buyers assuming they were concerned only with secondary features such as color. These attitudes have resulted in an increasing demand by women that more females be placed in sales positions (Manges, 1989). Moreover, most women buyers seem to prefer negotiating with another woman (Farrant, 1990). Women tend to view saleswomen more favorably than men, while men tend to be accepting of women in sales positions. Females are more approving of saleswomen in the areas of "gregariousness, confidence, sensibility, calmness, competency, career orientation, and good sales techniques" (Lundstrom and Ashworth, 1983).

Geographically, automobile saleswomen are generally more accepted by urban dwellers who "have a more positive perceptual image" of these women than do rural buyers. City buyers viewed saleswomen more highly with respect to "sensibility, calmness, competency, career orientation, and good sales techniques" (Lundstrom and Ashworth, 1983).

Negative Response to Saleswomen. There is little evidence which suggests buyers reject the idea of doing business with a woman. In the car business, however, some men seem to resent purchasing a car from a

female salesperson. Assuming a woman is not knowledgeable about the mechanics of a car, some male buyers may try to fluster the saleswoman by asking difficult, technical questions. They may not really want to know the answers, only wanting to prove what they think is true: that a woman does not know enough about cars to be selling them. This same buyer would probably not ask a salesman these technical questions since a male is not required to prove his expertise to this type of buyer (Manges, 1989).

The perception that women are less technologically competent extends beyond the automobile industry. Another study with conclusions similar to Manges' (1989) was reviewed. In this research it was discovered that even though women were rated very highly on many characteristics, they did not gain customer confidence in the areas of product knowledge and technical assistance. This might prove to threaten the effectiveness of saleswomen, if this deficiency outweighs women's positive attributes (Swan, 1984).

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The literature examined provided the foundation for the research purposes. In general, the purpose of this research is to compare gender differences in 1) salesperson perceptions of the positive and negative aspects of sales, and 2) salesperson perceptions of behavioral factors likely to lead to the success or failure of sales personnel. If differences are discovered in salesperson perceptions of positive and negative aspects of sales, managers should be cognizant of the possibility that these differences may result in divergent position-related factors that tend to motivate and demotivate. Thus, the manager might discover that sales representatives are motivated by different sets of variables. If the genders perceive different behaviors as leading to success or failure, then the challenge to management may be to determine which perceptions are correct. Failure to identify the proper success/failure behaviors may result in the salesperson's concentration on the "wrong" behaviors (those not contributing to success) and lack of concentration on the "correct" behaviors (those contributing to success). In addition, the research will identify gender differences in terms of such demographic characteristics as age, income, education, sales experience, and type of sales position held. This research should provide additional insights into the differing problems and perceptions held by males and females in sales, thereby indicating areas that may require managerial intervention and further research examination.

METHODOLOGY

The sample used in this study was selected from a Metropolitan Statistical Area composed of approximately 250,000 residents. Students enrolled in a Personal Selling course were selected to conduct personal interviews. Selected students were then provided training in conducting interviews. As no comprehensive list of salespeople in this geographic area is available, each interviewer was asked to submit the names and titles of salespeople from both the retail and industrial areas. Sales representatives were selected based upon the instructor's approval. This approval was contingent upon the instructor's perception that the identified salesperson was engaging in a true selling role rather than a clerical role. Once these names were approved for use, interviews were conducted. A series of 400 personal interviews were conducted during a two month period yielding 354 usable responses, which resulted in an 88.5% response rate.

To explore the various attitudes of interest in this study, non-structured statements were developed to examine positive and negative aspects of a sales position and the perceived behavior which influence success or failure. Structured questions were used to gather basic demographic information. The individual statements were then pretested and adjusted for clarity before being administered to the various sample categories.

RESULTS

Males account for approximately 70% of the sample while females account for approximately 30% of the sample. The education level of the sample was relatively high with 53.4% of the respondents holding a bachelors degree or higher. The majority of the respondents (89%) report that they are between 21 to 40 years of age. Income levels were spread over a variety of levels with no one income level being predominant. Approximately 37% of the respondents held positions selling products and approximately 63% held positions selling services.

The data were analyzed to determine if there were any significant differences between men and women in terms of education, age, income, and type of position. No significant differences were found in the level of education or age of the respondents. Significant differences were found at the .05 level in terms of both income and the type of position held. Males in this sample tended to have higher income levels and held positions in service industries. Women tended to have somewhat lower incomes and held positions in product

related industries. The average length of time employed is significantly different (.05) for the two groups. The average length of employment for males was approximately 12 years while the average length of employment for females was approximately 7 years.

The primary purpose of the study was to identify each gender's perceptions of the positive and negative aspects of sales and to determine the behaviors seen by salespeople as contributing to the success or failure of a salesperson in their industry. This objective was accomplished by the use of four open-ended questions. These included asking the respondents to list the most difficult aspect of sales, the most positive aspect of sales, the behavior most likely to assure success, and the behavior most likely to cause failure.

When asked about the most difficult aspect of a sales position, 168 different responses were given. These responses were examined and categorized by three judges. It was determined through the use of a Q-sort that the responses fell into nine specifically definable categories. Table 1 provides the categories and response profiles for each category.

While only one characteristic, customer relations, was found to be significantly different, percentage differences in perceptions do exist between male and female salespeople. In order of frequency, males found prospecting, personal problems, rejection, and time management to be the most difficult aspects of selling; females found rejection, customer relations, prospecting, personal problems, and time management to be the most difficult aspects.

Table 2 shows the perceptions of males and females in terms of the most positive aspects of a sales position. Only one characteristic, people, was found to be perceived significantly different between males and females.

In terms of response frequency, males identified income, people, freedom, and finalizing a sale as the most positive aspects. Females listed people, income, and finalizing a sale as the most positive aspects of selling. Again, while only one characteristic was significantly different, attitudinal differences seem to exist based on the percentages of each response.

No significant differences were found in the perceptions of the behavioral factors which might cause failure in the sales industry. Table 3 shows the behavioral factors salespeople felt would be most likely to cause a salesperson to fail.

TABLE 1
MOST DIFFICULT ASPECT OF A SALES POSITION

Category	Overall Frequency %	Male %	Female %	Significance
Prospecting	21.2	23.6	16.5	N.S.
Personal Problems	19.2	21.1	16.0	N.S.
Rejection	15.5	14.2	19.6	N.S.
Time Management	14.4	14.2	14.4	N.S.
Customer Relations	11.3	8.1	19.6	.03
Product Knowledge	6.2	7.0	3.1	N.S.
Closing	5.1	5.3	5.2	N.S.
Company Problems	2.8	3.2	1.0	N.S.
Income	2.0	2.0	2.1	N.S.
Missing Value	2.3	2.0	3.1	N.S.

TABLE 2
MOST POSITIVE ASPECT OF A SALES POSITION

Category	Overall Frequency %	Male %	Female %	Significance
People	29.1	24.3	41.2	.002
Income	26.3	28.3	21.6	N.S.
Getting a Sale	15.5	16.2	14.4	N.S.
Freedom	14.4	17.0	9.3	N.S.
Challenging	4.5	4.5	4.1	N.S.
Product Knowledge	4.2	3.6	5.2	N.S.
Training	1.4	1.6	1.0	N.S.
Presentation	1.4	1.2	2.1	N.S.
Respect	.8	.8	1.0	N.S.
Missing Value	2.3	2.4	-	N.S.

Lack of motivation, personality, and dishonesty were the most commonly listed "failure" factors by both males and females. It is interesting to note that while the percentages differed for each factor, the order of preference was the same for both genders.

Four behavioral factors, as shown in Table 4, were listed most frequently as causing a salesperson to be successful.

One's personality, aggressiveness, attitude, and knowledge were listed most often by both genders, and again in the same order. None of the behavioral factors thought to affect success tested significantly different between genders.

DISCUSSION

The purposes of the study entailed an examination of the differences existing between male and female sales representatives in terms of their perceptions of the positive and negative aspects of selling and the behaviors contributing to either success or failure in a sales career. In addition, the research examined a variety of demographic variables that may either contribute to or relate to differences of perceptions of male and female sales personnel.

The results of the study indicate that male and female sales representatives possess more similarities than differences.

TABLE 3
FACTORS CAUSING FAILURE IN A SALES POSITION

Category	Overall Frequency %	Male %	Female %	Significance
Lack of motivation	29.4	29.1	32.0	N.S.
Personality	15.8	13.8	17.5	N.S.
Dishonesty	12.1	10.9	15.5	N.S.
Lack of Service	7.9	7.7	9.3	N.S.
Lack of Skill	7.3	8.5	4.1	N.S.
Lack of Organization	6.8	8.1	4.1	N.S.
Appearance	5.1	6.1	2.1	N.S.
Lack of Patience	2.3	2.0	3.1	N.S.
Poor Reward	.3	.4	-	N.S.
Other	9.9	10.1	9.3	N.S.
Missing Value	3.1	3.2	3.1	N.S.

TABLE 4
FACTORS CAUSING SUCCESS IN A SALES POSITION

Category	Overall Frequency %	Male %	Female %	Significance
Personality	28.0	27.5	27.8	N.S.
Aggressive	18.6	18.6	20.6	N.S.
Attitude	17.2	16.2	19.6	N.S.
Knowledge	15.8	15.4	15.5	N.S.
Professional	9.6	10.1	8.2	N.S.
Education	6.2	7.3	4.1	N.S.
Time Management	2.5	2.0	4.1	N.S.
Know People	.8	1.2	-	N.S.
Commitment	.3	.4	-	N.S.
Missing Value	.8	1.2	-	N.S.

However, some significant differences do exist. In terms of the respondents' demographic characteristics, it was discovered that differences exist between the genders in terms of their income, type of sales position held, and length of employment. Males were found to earn higher levels of income than were females. However, this difference may be explained by an examination of the different types of sales jobs held by the two groups and their length of employment. First, it was discovered that women were more likely to be employed by retail firms engaging in the sale of products. Men were more likely to be employed by companies involved in the sale of products and services to other firms for either resale or the production of other

products and services. Secondly, it was noted that men had been employed for longer time periods than were their female counterparts. Therefore, prior to claiming pay discrimination on the basis of sex, it may be prudent to recognize that differences exist between the genders in both the positions held and in the length of employment in those positions. The differences in compensation received by the sexes may be related to both the type of sales position held and the length of employment in sales. Nevertheless, management may be well-advised to be aware that discrepancies in compensation should be attributed to 'bona fide' occupational qualifications and not to unacceptable forms of discrimination.

Many similarities were noted in the perceptions held by the genders concerning negative and positive aspects of a sales career. However, differences that were discovered supported previous research discussed in the review of the literature. For example, female salespeople were significantly more likely to identify 'customer relations' as the most negative aspect of selling. This perception is consistent with previous findings which indicate that women may take rejection more personally. The female salesperson is more concerned with building client relationships, and thus may find customer relations challenging when the inevitable customer complaints arise. Also supporting the concept that women are more adverse to rejection is the observation (albeit statistically insignificant) that women list rejection as being the most difficult aspect of a sales career more frequently than do men (19.2% compared to males who list rejection only 14.2% of time).

Other statistically insignificant, but interesting results include the discovery that men perceived personal problems and prospecting more negatively than did the female sales representatives (21.1% vs. 16.5% and 23.6 vs. 16.5%, respectively). While these findings require additional examination, the finding that males were more likely to experience personal problems that could lead to on-the-job difficulties contradicts conventional stereotypes regarding female sales problems. Also counter to stereotype is the discovery that males were more likely to report prospecting as a difficult area, while other researchers imply that the fear of rejection may create call reluctance on the part of the female salesperson.

Comparisons of the responses to the question pertaining to the most positive aspects of selling were more consistent with expectations and prior research. For example, the literature review reported that women often feel that the interpersonal aspects of a sales position are of great importance. The results of this study also indicate the present sample felt that the interpersonal aspects of selling were the most positive aspect of selling, with female sales personnel identifying 'people' as the most positive aspect of sales significantly more often than males (41.2% vs. 24.8%). Another statistically insignificant difference believed to be of interest is the observation that males are more likely to feel income and freedom derived from a sales position are the most positive aspects of the position (28.3% vs. 21.6% and 17.0% vs. 9.3% respectively).

With regard to behaviors that contribute to success and failure in a sales career, the results indicated a remarkable similarity between the sexes. No statistically

significant differences existed between the genders in terms of behavioral factors leading to success or failure. However, some of the differences that do exist as they pertain to failure may warrant examination. First, prior research has stated that women may view the sales relationship as being a critical portion of their job satisfaction. Consequently, the discovery that women are more likely to state that dishonesty would lead to failure in a sales career is not inconsistent with past research (15.5% vs. 10.9%). Also consistent with past research is the discovery that men are more likely to attribute failure to performance related characteristics such as lack of skill or organization (8.5% vs. 4.1% and 8.1% vs. 4.1%, respectively).

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

The results of the study may provide the following implications for sales and personnel managers. First, examination of hiring and compensation practices may be warranted based upon the finding that women and men are compensated differently and that they occupy different sales positions. While these differences may not be attributable to discriminatory practices, it seems that such differences might provide 'warning' signs and should be examined to prevent potential discriminatory practices. Secondly, differences in training and job assignments may be warranted based upon the discovery that women perceive the maintenance of positive customer relationships as being problematic. Perhaps additional training in the area of maintaining a positive relationship is warranted for females, or conversely, perhaps men should be sensitized to the importance of maintaining positive customer relationships in sales.

Differences in terms of the most positive aspects of a sales career also have potentially important managerial implications as they relate to motivation. Since it was discovered that women feel interpersonal relationships with their customers are the most positive aspect of their sales positions, it may be proposed that management should design their motivational programs based upon this perception. For example, the traditional motivators used in sales have related primarily to compensation, but for female sales representatives, motivational gains may be attained by emphasizing the relationship aspects of the sales position.

A critical managerial implication of the research seems to, however, reside in terms of 'what not to do.' In this category, the findings indicate that male and female perceptions of sales are more likely to be similar than different. Consequently, managerial strategies designed to 'differentiate' between the sexes by treating

each differently may be based upon erroneous assumptions. Therefore, it may be concluded that the best way of motivating and managing males and females is not

to treat them differently, but instead to provide them with the proper compensation, training, direction and leadership.

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