

PERCEPTION OF WOMEN IN THE SALES FORCE:
THE OTHER SIDE OF THE BUYER-SELLER DYAD

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Abstract

A exploratory study was developed to determine if females were perceived to be inferior to males as industrial sales representatives. Seventy-four purchasing agents were interviewed regarding their perceptions of the presence of women among sales representatives calling upon them. The results indicate that there are no significant differences in the perceptions held by purchasing agents between female sales representatives and their male counterparts.

Introduction

The emergence and presence of women in the industrial sales arena has continued to increase during the last decade. Marketers and academicians have attempted to monitor the impact that the presence of women have had upon industrial sales and the sales force infrastructure. Several studies (Robertson and Hackett 1977; Swan, Futrell, and Todd 1978; Carter and Bryant 1980) have examined the issue and have attempted to answer a number of the questions by determining: How do women compare to men in a single industry with regards to performance in the sales force? Overwhelmingly, these studies have examined the impact of women in the sales force from a seller's point of view.

The purpose of this study is to re-examine the impact and presence of women in the sales force from a buyer's perspective. Our focus is on a very fundamental issue - namely, how do women compare to men in selling to industrial buyers. It is our belief that very few differences exist between male and female industrial sales representatives.

Methodology

Data for the study was based on the responses of 74 purchasing agents from a local purchasing trade association. Only the responses from purchasing agents who had dealt with or who were currently dealing with female sales representatives were included in the current study.

A self-administered mail survey was completed by each of the respondents. The questionnaire contained a series of questions designed to obtain buyer's perceptions of female sales representatives. As in their study seven point bipolar semantic differential scales were constructed for six personality variables and five sales task related variables. Purchasing agents were asked to rate the female sales representatives on aggressiveness, extrovertiveness, trust, imagination, emotionality, open mindedness, competency, career orientation, sales technique, intelligence, and self confidence.

EXHIBIT I

Purchasing Agents Perceptions of
Male, Female, and Ideal Salesperson

Sales force Characteristic	Male	Female	Ideal
Outgoing/Reserved	5.8	5.5	4.1
Assertive/Humble	5.7	5.7	4.2
Trusting/Suspicious	4.8	5.3	4.9
Confident/Apprehensive	5.9	5.3	5.0
Unemotional/Emotional	4.7	4.1	3.9
Imaginative/Unimaginative	5.2	4.9	5.0
Competent/Incompetent	5.6	5.6	5.6
Open Minded/Close Minded	5.1	5.4	4.9
Intelligent/Unintelligent	5.6	5.8	5.0
Career Oriented/Home Oriented	5.9	5.5	4.5
Good Sales Technique/ Poor Sales Technique	5.4	5.2	4.8

Discussion

This study appears to confirm our expectation that there are no significant differences in the perceptions held by purchasing agents toward male and female salespeople. Women were perceived to be just as competent a salesperson as salesmen, and for several personality and sales task related variables were rated higher than men. Exhibit I illustrates the mean perceptions held by the purchasing agents for each of the personality and sales related task variables for both the male, female, and ideal salesperson.

Although the findings are suggestive, generalizations from these results should be made cautiously, given the study's limitations, namely, the small size of the firms examined, the type of sales task studied, and the small size and unrepresentativeness of the sample. Future research should attempt to answer such questions as: Is it important that most of the subjects had very little experience with female sales representatives? Did the forced comparison measures exaggerate the male/female differences? Would differences exist if the purchasing agents had been allowed to develop their own evaluative criteria? These questions and the managerial implications of each need to be addressed in future research.

"References"

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