

## WHAT MAKES A GOOD SALESPERSON

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### Abstract

Today's sales managers are concerned about the characteristic traits that differentiate their most successful salesperson from their least successful. This study investigates the degree to which retail store sales managers rate their most and least successful salespeople based on sales volume and total earnings in the areas of attitude, product knowledge, and selling skills.

Prior personal selling research has used a variety of approaches in attempting to develop reliable predictors of a salesperson's success. Some have utilized batteries of psychological tests and/or biographical measures in an attempt to isolate significant correlations between the variables of attitude, product knowledge, and selling skills and selected performance criteria. These studies have concentrated on the salesperson and have examined such factors as personality, self-actualization, job satisfaction, empathy and ego drive, and attitudes as predictors of selling success.

Reviews of personal selling research have given conflicting evaluations of the success of these attempts and, in general, have done little to contribute toward the development of any comprehensive theory of sales success (Weitz, 1981). It has been very difficult to measure the vast array of abilities and aptitudes which can be used as criterion measures of success in a variety of different selling situations. Consequently, it has been established that various sales occupations are not homogeneous in nature; therefore, effective predictors for one type of sales work may be of little value in different selling situations. These findings illustrate the need to focus independently on various types of selling if more accurate predictors of selling success are to be developed.

In a study that compared differences between industrial salespeople and retail salespeople, researchers Dunnette and Kirchner (1960) found that success in selling may result from different personality attributes. They found that success in industrial selling is related to the level of the salesperson's verbal reasoning ability. The successful industrial salesperson tended to place heavy emphasis on ingenuity, inventiveness, and the exercise of his/her wits on the job. However, success for the retail salesperson is predicted not by a measure of reasoning ability, but rather by the level of motivation toward selling and gaining a dominant position in the interpersonal relationship.

Mayer and Greenberg (1964), on the other hand, concluded that a large, but balanced, amount of empathy and ego drive is what makes a successful salesperson. They based their findings on studies of over 7000 salespeople dealing with tangible and intangible products in wholesale as well as retail settings spanning a period of several years. However, in recent years, their findings have been questioned due to the methodologies they employed. For example, Lamont and Lunstrom (1977) point out that the Kerr test used by Mayer and Greenberg did not measure accurately what they intended to measure. Lamont and Lunstrom's findings

indicate that successful salespeople are high scorers on the endurance scale, low scorers on the empathy and ego-strength scales, and are not, as a rule, extensively involved in civic and professional organizations.

The personal selling literature available in the area of self-actualization also reveals conflicting findings concerning the relationship between job satisfaction and success in selling. Bruce and Bonjean (1965) interviewed 64 salespeople in seven departments of a large department store. In six of the seven departments, self-actualization was positively associated with productivity. However, in a study of 16 department stores (eight high volume, eight low volume), Donnelly and Etzel (1977) found an inverse relationship between performance and job satisfaction. Their study implied that high volume stores had forceful managers who emphasized performance at the expense of employee needs, causing high degrees of anxiety-stress and propensity to leave.

Perhaps no single area has been given as much attention as the importance of attitude in one's success in selling. Kranz (1980), Kossen (1977), Kirkpatrick and Russ (1976), and Cummings (1979) are examples of only a few authors of textbooks on selling who have addressed the subject. Each of these authors has identified the importance of positive attitudes as being a key ingredient that sets top performers apart from their less successful counterparts.

The aforementioned research already indicates that personal selling does play an important role in retail, wholesale, and industrial selling situations. However, the role of personal selling in the retail setting has been given little attention in the literature. It should be noted that it does play a vital role in many types of full-service retail stores, where salesperson-customer interaction is necessary to close the majority of sales. Retailers of big ticket merchandise such as automobiles, furniture, custom draperies, kitchen cabinets, and appliances are only a few examples of the type of full-service retailers who require salespeople capable of communicating effectively with customers in an attempt to influence them to buy. Unfortunately, little empirically-based sales literature is available to provide their sales managers with a sound basis for setting policy with respect to the selection and training of their sales forces.

In an attempt to help retail stores in the areas of selection and training of their sales forces, this study selected three factors of success in selling as identified by Kellar (1978). Kellar states that one's competence as a salesperson can be based on personal development in three primary areas: attitude, product knowledge, and selling skills. Much of the past literature places major emphasis either directly or indirectly on the aforementioned areas and, as a result, these factors will be examined as determinants of success in retail selling.

The purpose of this article is to identify the degree to which retail store sales managers rate their most and least successful salespeople based on sales volume and total earnings in the areas of attitude, product knowledge, and selling skills; to empirically validate the belief that there is a significant difference between retail store sales managers' ratings of their salespeople based on attitude, product knowledge, and

selling skills as factors of success in retail selling; and to offer conclusions and suggestions within which alternative rating methods could take place.

### Attitude

Whether a person is habitually positive or negative about life in general is an important factor in personal selling. A person who regularly displays negative attitudes is a pessimist and usually has problems at work and in personal relationships as well. An optimist shows a consistent positive attitude whether at work or at leisure. In a selling situation, attitude concerns itself with the positive or negative feelings the salesperson has toward his or her employer, job, and its responsibilities. This includes selling as a career choice, the firm one is employed by, the people one works with, the products sold, and, finally, the feelings one has for his or her customers.

A 1968 study by James Cothan, measuring job attitudes or relationships to sales floor performance that included sales volume and commissions as performance criteria, revealed that attitudes toward pay had little relationship between job satisfaction and sales performance. These findings cast some doubt on the importance of attitudes and sales success and may not be in agreement with the beliefs held by some sales managers. However, it should be noted that Cothan's measuring devices examined intrinsic feelings these salespeople had, and these may have been significantly different than the attitudes expressed outwardly to customers.

James Young (1978) (reporting on a survey conducted by Justin J. McCarthy, Director of Manpower Development for the Bulova Watch Company) discovered that retail sales clerks in general have relatively poor selling attitudes. When asked by McCarthy, "What is your attitude when a customer enters your store?", only three percent mentioned 'helpfulness' or assisting the customer in selecting the item.

If these retail salespeople outwardly reflect these attitudes to their customers, it is little wonder that retail selling is often compared to "clerking," which is considered unglamorous and attracts many low skilled employees.

### Product Knowledge

The fact that people place great emphasis on the "clerk's" recommendation when purchasing expensive durables was empirically confirmed in Busch and Wilson's "An Experimental Analysis of a Salesman's Expert and Referent Bases of Social Power in the Buyer-Seller Dyad" (1981). In this study the researchers determined that a customer's trust of a salesperson was directly related to the amount of knowledge the salesperson possessed about the products he or she sold. They also concluded that management would be well advised to design sales training programs to increase the knowledge of their salespeople and that salespeople should make thoughtful efforts to communicate information about their expertise to their customers. This would indicate the importance of the salesperson's product knowledge in effectively performing the personal selling function.

Product knowledge is, therefore, multi-dimensional. It deals with the physical product and the intangible benefits and services that accompany it. The salesperson who is able to demonstrate complete product knowledge is not only familiar with his or her own company and

its policies but also the products and policies of competitors. Stan Kossen (1977) writes:

"If Socrates had been a sales manager, his advice would have gone beyond 'know thyself.' More than likely, he would have added, 'know thy company, its products, and its competition.' Today's selling activities allow scant room for the con artist, the hit-and-run type of salesperson, who is here today and gone tomorrow. To his or her customers, the salesperson is the company, and, as a result, must be amply prepared with facts BEFORE seeing customers."

### Selling Skills

Olshavshy's 1973 comprehensive study, which analyzed salesperson-customer interaction in appliance retailing through the actual purchase or either a refrigerator or color television, was able to break the sales transaction down into three distinct phases.

Phase one, identified as the orientation phase, involved gaining information that pertained to customer needs (qualifying). This information was either gathered by the salesperson through the use of questions or from unsolicited comments made by the customer.

Phase two began after the salesperson selected a brand or model to show the customer and was called the evaluation phase (presenting and handling objections). This phase was characterized by the exchange of information relating primarily to the specific alternative available.

The third stage, called the consumption phase, was characterized by an exchange of information relating to non-product attributes. It typically began with an announced decision by the customer that he or she would purchase, or when the salesperson had exhausted all possible alternatives (closing).

Most fundamental in developing successful retail selling skills is the ability to communicate accurate information to the customer in an understandable style. For this reason, salespeople must be aware that certain information is more vital in one situation than another and they must be given the opportunity to recognize these differences (Harris and Spiro, 1981). According to Olshavshy's study of the retail setting, it is the salesperson, not the customer, who determines the extent of search and evaluation of alternatives. He further concludes that the salesperson influences the evaluation process significantly with respect to style appropriateness, brand quality, capacity or size requirements.

### Study Design

Stemming from the literature, a study was designed to test the following hypotheses: Retail sales managers' ratings of these salespeople they judge to be most and least successful will not be different based on

- Step 1. Attitude
- Step 2. Product Knowledge
- Step 3. Selling Skills.

In developing a data collection instrument, it was necessary to construct a set of statements based on the three primary areas under study so that the most and

least successful salesperson characteristics could be measured.

A questionnaire, cover letter, and postage-paid return envelope were sent to a random sample of 90 retail hard line stores. With a 66 percent return, the t-test was applied to the data to test the statistical significance of the difference between the means for each of the statements in relation to attitude, product knowledge, and selling skills as success factors in retail selling.

Results

Tables 1, 2, and 3 summarize the results of Steps 1, 2, and 3, respectively, of this study. All experimental treatments indicated that there are significant differences among the characteristics of attitude, product knowledge, and selling skills when measuring retail sales managers' perceptions of their most and least successful salespeople.

When measuring attitude over a set of positive statements about salesmanship, Table 1 shows a mean score of 1.8333 which indicates that sales managers agree a positive attitude is important in a successful sales career. Results also show (2.5556) that sales managers were somewhat uncertain about the influence of attitude on the least successful salesperson.

Table 2, in summarizing the attribute of product knowledge as a measurement of difference between the most and least successful salesperson, also indicates that sales managers agreed ( $\bar{m}$  1.8944) that a firm understanding of company policies, competitive offerings, and the ability to relate technical features and benefits to the customer all contribute to a successful salesperson. When analyzing the least successful salesperson, sales managers found themselves between uncertain and agree ( $\bar{m}$  2.6839) as to whether poor product knowledge created a weaker salesperson.

In analyzing Table 3, sales managers agreed ( $\bar{m}$  1.9190) with statements that measured the successful salesperson's ability to use the question approach, know when to stop talking and start listening, understand the presentation process, and other such statements. As was true in the aforementioned Tables, the sales managers had difficulty in stating that poor selling skills contribute to an unsuccessful salesperson.

TABLE 1

COMPOSITE RATINGS: ATTITUDE STATEMENTS

Most Successful Group			
<u>N</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>S.D.</u>	<u>S.E.</u>
30	1.8333	.39340	.71824
Least Successful Group			
<u>N</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>S.D.</u>	<u>S.E.</u>
29	2.5556	.62292	.11567
Rating Scale:		t-test scores:	
1 = SA - Strongly Agree		t = -5.34	
2 = A - Agree		degrees of freedom = 57	
3 = U - Uncertain		sig. level $\leq$ .001	
4 = D - Disagree			
5 = SD - Strongly Disagree			
N = Population		S.D. = Standard Deviation	
		S.E. = Standard Error	

TABLE 2

COMPOSITE RATINGS: PRODUCT KNOWLEDGE STATEMENTS

Most Successful Group			
<u>N</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>S.D.</u>	<u>S.E.</u>
30	1.8944	.49613	.90581
Least Successful Group			
<u>N</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>S.D.</u>	<u>S.E.</u>
29	2.6839	.62576	.11620
Rating Scale:		t-test scores:	
1 = SA - Strongly Agree		t = -5.38	
2 = A - Agree		degrees of freedom = 57	
3 = U - Uncertain		sig. level $\leq$ .001	
4 = D - Disagree			
5 = SD - Strongly Disagree			
N = Population		S.D. = Standard Deviation	
		S.E. = Standard Error	

TABLE 3

COMPOSITE RATINGS: SELLING SKILLS STATEMENTS

Most Successful Group			
<u>N</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>S.D.</u>	<u>S.E.</u>
30	1.9190	.33856	.61813
Least Successful Group			
<u>N</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>S.D.</u>	<u>S.E.</u>
29	2.8448	.72143	.13397
Rating Scale:		t-test scores:	
1 = SA - Strongly Agree		t = -6.34	
2 = A - Agree		degrees of freedom = 57	
3 = U - Uncertain		sig. level $\leq$ .001	
4 = D - Disagree			
5 = SD - Strongly Disagree			
N = Population		S.D. = Standard Deviation	
		S.E. = Standard Error	

An effort was made to determine what sales managers like best and least about their successful salespeople.

These results are reported in Tables 4 and 5, respectively. Attitude and aggressiveness are two areas sales managers agree contribute most to what they like about their most successful salespersons. However, when analyzing characteristics least liked about their most successful salespersons, sales managers rated "oversell" and "late for work" as the two most common.

It would seem that even though sales managers desire aggressive salespeople, they want that trait central to the level of not being overly aggressive so as to oversell themselves or their proposition.

TABLE 4

AREAS MOST LIKED ABOUT  
MOST/LEAST SUCCESSFUL SALESPERSON

	Most Successful		Least Successful	
	N	Percent	N	Percent
Positive Attitude	8	15.38	2	3.85
Listens to Customer	1	1.92	1	1.92
Puts Customer at Ease	3	5.77	0	--
Honest	3	5.77	4	7.69
Helps Sales Associates	2	3.85	0	--
Aggressive	6	11.54	1	1.92
Product Knowledge	3	5.77	2	3.85
Hardworker	2	3.85	0	--
Sincere	0	--	2	3.85
Nice Person	0	--	3	5.77
Reliable Employee	0	--	4	7.69
Other	0	--	5	9.62

Chi Square = 28.3447      Degrees of Freedom = 11  
Significance Level = .00284

TABLE 5

AREAS LEAST LIKED ABOUT  
MOST/LEAST SUCCESSFUL SALESPERSON

	Most Successful		Least Successful	
	N	Percent	N	Percent
Late for Work	3	6.67	0	--
Oversells	5	11.11	1	2.22
Makes Excuses	0	--	2	4.44
Poor Product Knowledge	0	--	4	8.89
Not Aggressive	0	--	1	2.22
Poor at Closing	1	2.22	2	4.44
Lacks Enthusiasm	0	--	1	2.22
Slow Starter	1	2.22	2	4.44
Lacks Confidence	0	--	1	2.22
Easily Confused	0	--	1	2.22
Other	11	24.44	8	17.78

Chi Square = 7.48520      Degrees of Freedom = 5  
Significance Level = .18699

## Discussion and Conclusions

This study has proven to be consistent with other studies (Kellar, 1978) which reinforce the belief that sales managers are concerned about the different characteristic traits between their most and least effective salesperson. When asked to rank in order of importance the three variables investigated in this study, they identified the salesperson's attitude as being the most important predictor of selling success,

followed in order of importance by product knowledge and selling skills. It can be further drawn that these sales managers believe that if a salesperson has a positive attitude to begin with, he or she will be better able to acquire other skills needed to succeed in sales.

On the issue of product knowledge, the least successful salesperson was not ranked as high in his or her understanding of store policies and rules, the products he or she sells, product relationships to customer benefits, and familiarity with competitive product strengths and weaknesses. This lack of knowledge on the part of the least successful salesperson could be one of the main reasons for poor performance. Generally, customers like dealing with salespeople who demonstrate knowledge of the products they sell, and it is reasonable to assume that they may be reluctant to buy from someone who does not demonstrate this knowledge effectively. With this information, sales managers should realize that thorough training in the aforementioned areas could result in increased productivity on the part of their salespeople.

When analyzing effective selling skills in the area of greeting customers promptly and courteously, recognizing what motivates people to buy, delivering the sales presentation, handling objections, and closing the sale, the most successful salesperson does a much better job than the least successful salesperson. Sales managers noted that the most successful salesperson combined these selling skills into an orderly process by which to place the customer at ease and sell more than anyone else in the store. It is reasonable to assume that these skills can be learned. Sales managers could, through training programs, help other salespeople acquire these skills which would allow them to be more successful in their sales careers.

In conclusion, this study has provided some useful insights about what sales managers consider important traits in determining the difference between their most and least successful salespeople - an area that will gain increasing importance as more efforts are made to employ salespeople who will provide a greater likelihood of success in selling. Based upon the results of this research, the author would suggest that when screening future sales applicants, sales managers utilize techniques that will help to ascertain attitudinal as well as occupational familiarity with the position.

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