

Ethics in Retailing: Perceptions of Retail Salespeople

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Within the past twenty years, the general public has become increasingly interested in the ethical conduct of business and government. Collateral with this concern has been an increased incidence of research on the topic. Prior research has generally examined one of three areas: (1) the overall ethical climate in which business and/or government operates (Baumhart 1964; Bowman 1976; Brenner and Molander 1977; Carroll 1975; Newstrom and Ruch 1975); (2) potentially ethically-troubling situations faced by various types of personnel, such as marketing managers (Ferrell and Weaver 1978), marketing researchers (Crawford 1970), purchasing managers (Rudelius and Bucholz 1978), and industrial salespeople (Dubinsky, Berkowitz, and Rudelius 1980); and (3) college students' perceptions of potentially questionable general business practices (Goodman and Crawford 1974), marketing practices (Hawkins and Cocanougher 1972; Shuptrine 1979), or sales practices (Dubinsky and Rudelius 1980).

One group of employees whose ethical perceptions have received only scant research attention is retail sales personnel. Previously published research concerning retail salespeople has generally examined such topics as correlates of success in retail selling (French 1960); store performance and salespeople's job satisfaction (Donnelly and Etzel 1977); salespeople's role conflict and ambiguity (Dubinsky and Mattson 1979); bargaining behavior of the salesperson and the customer (Pennington 1968); effects of salesperson expertise on customer purchasing behavior (Woodside and Davenport

1976); effects of salesperson and customer similarity on customer purchase behavior (Churchill, Collins, and Strang 1975); retail cashier accuracy (Zabriskie and Welch 1978); methods for improving selection tools (Spivey, Munson, and Locander 1979); factors affecting salespeople's job satisfaction (Teas 1981); and predictors of sales performance (Weaver 1969). Only minimal research attention, however, has focused on retail salespersons' ethical beliefs. In fact, a review of relevant literature uncovered only two studies (Fitzmaurice and Radolf 1961; Tatham 1974) that explored retail salespeople's ethical perceptions. These two investigations, though, examined only a narrow aspect of retailing ethics: theft in retailing. This article attempts to extend prior research by investigating several issues related to ethical beliefs of retail sales personnel.

Ethical issues abound in business, and retail salespeople, like other kinds of personnel previously studied, are likely to encounter situations that could be ethically troublesome. Retail sales was selected as an especially important frame of reference for several reasons. First, retail salespeople are in a boundary-spanning role (Belasco 1966; Donnelly and Ivancevich 1975; Hise 1970; Pruden 1969; Walker, Churchill, and Ford 1972) where they interact with individuals from outside the store--customers--as well as with members from within their own organization. These individuals with whom salespeople interact are likely to have disparate needs and problems that salespeople might satisfy or resolve. Because these individuals want the salespeople to help foster their own need-satisfaction or problem solution, the demands communicated to salespeople by these individuals are likely to be diverse and often incompatible. Consequently, retail sales personnel may often face ethical dilemmas when torn between short-run pressures from management (to achieve a sales quota or some other objectives) and long-run goals of achieving customer confidence and goodwill. The second reason for studying ethical issues of retail salespeople is that their environment is conducive for the development of ethical problems because of the variety of tasks they perform (Crissy, Cunningham, and Cunningham 1977), from "ringing up" a sale to handling a customer return or exchange. Third, the nature of the job itself could foster ethically-troubling situations for retail salespeople. That is, the pressures of the job and the need to be a consistent producer (Young and Mondy 1978) may place salespeople in uncomfortable situations that might be expediently addressed using questionable behavior. Last, previous research has found that retail salespeople tend to receive little formalized sales training (Burstiner 1975). As a result, they may not know how their company would like them to act in a poten-

tially ethically-troubling situation because they have not been adequately instructed about company policies.

Retail sales managers or department managers should be especially concerned with ethically-troubling situations facing their salespeople. A retail salesperson's inability to handle such situations, and to resolve the conflicts inherent in the situations, is likely to result in lower job performance, unhappy customers, or ridicule from his or her manager. To help retail salespeople and management address ethical problems, this article reports results of a study that identified situations in which salespeople see such problems, discovered whether salespeople believe stated company policies exist that apply to such situations, and determined whether sales personnel want such stated policies. This information can then point out areas for management concern and action. The remainder of this paper presents a typology of ethical problems in retail sales, describes a field study, and offers implications.

TYPOLGY OF ETHICAL PROBLEMS IN RETAIL SALES

Retail sales personnel confront numerous situations that may pose potential ethical problems. The potential ethical problems they face will most likely be generated from the diverse individuals with whom the salespeople interact. For retail salespeople, the key individuals who may engender (either intentionally or unintentionally) ethical problems generally will be the salespeople's customers, peers, and management. Consequently, when using these three groups as a frame of reference, retail salespeople's ethical problems can be classified into three broad areas: customer-, peer-, and work-related situations.

Customer-related situations encompass those situations that entail involvement with customers and have direct impact upon customers. Examples of such situations may include failing to assist customers or intentionally giving them incorrect change. *Peer-related* situations involve interaction with salespeople's non-work peers (friends and relatives) and fellow employees (non-managers). Examples of such situations may include offering, or being pressured, to give a friend an employee discount. *Work-related* situations entail circumstances that may be precipitated by company operating procedures, practices, or directives, or are fostered by the work environment. Examples of such situations may include failing to obtain a check authorization or selling a product as an exclusive when it is not. The preceding typology will be used in the Results section to classify the situations examined in the present study.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

The sample consisted of 122 retail salespeople from a number of different firms located in one of the top ten metropolitan areas in the United States. Only individuals holding retail sales positions that involved much personal selling were included in the sample. This restriction was invoked because it was believed that such jobs have more of a potential for ethically-troubling situations to arise than positions where the employee is primarily a check-out clerk or some other kind of "non-sales" retail salesperson (as in convenience, grocery, or variety stores). Consequently, the sample is comprised solely of sales personnel employed in department stores and specialty stores (e.g., men's clothing, shoes, sporting goods outlets).

Salient demographic characteristics of the sample are as follows: 66 percent of the respondents are female and 34 percent are male; 35 percent have been in retail sales for more than one year; and 46 percent have worked for their present company for more than one year.

Questionnaire

Data were collected using a self-administered questionnaire containing situations or practices that may be ethically troubling for retail salespeople. These situations conform to the typology described above and are classified in the Results section of this paper. The items were initially generated using the Nominal Group Technique (NGT) (Delbecq, Van De Ven, and Gustafson 1975) with retail sales personnel as participants.

NGT was conducted in four stages. First, a group of twelve retail salespeople met with a moderator to generate individually and silently ethical issues they confront on their jobs and to record these on a sheet of paper. Second, the moderator recorded the issues on a flip chart in a round robin fashion until all problems had been listed. The group members were allowed to add items to the list during this stage. Next, each issue was discussed by group members for purposes of clarification and amplification. Finally, the group voted on the relevance of each issue. Those issues receiving positive votes constituted the initial list. The final set of issues was derived with assistance from department store management in various department stores and from a questionnaire pretest.

Alternative methods for generating items include focus groups, depth interviews, Delphi, or brainstorming. NGT, however, was chosen for the following reasons. First, it balances participation among group members.

Second, the method is believed to increase individual participation. Finally, a discussion of each ethical issue provides a preliminary pretest of the wording and relevance of each item (Delbecq, Van De Ven, and Gustafson 1975). The use of NGT is not prevalent in the marketing literature (Levy 1981 is an exception). Its use, however, is well documented in the social sciences (Delbecq, Van De Ven, and Gustafson 1975).

A final set of 37 situations was identified through the use of NGT and management assistance. For each situation, respondents were asked the following three questions:

1. Do you believe the situation presents an ethical question for you? That is, do you feel the situation pressures you into taking actions that are inconsistent with what you feel to be right?
2. Does your firm have a stated policy--either written or oral--that addresses the situation?
3. Regardless of your answer to Question #2, do you feel it is a good idea for a firm to have a stated policy that addresses the situation?

Respondent answers to Question #1 and #3 were recorded on a seven-point scale where 1 = "definitely no" and 7 = "definitely yes." Possible responses to Question #2 were "yes," "no," and "don't know."

Data Analysis

Frequency distributions were used to examine aggregate responses for each of the 37 situations across the three major questions posed to respondents. In addition, chi-square tests were performed to determine whether retail salespeople's ethical perceptions were related to sex of respondent, retail sales experience (less than one year/one year or more), and time with company (less than one year/one year or more). Because previous research has found that men and women tend to view their jobs and work environments somewhat differently (e.g., Robertson and Hackett 1977; Swan, Futrell, and Todd 1978; Walker, Tausky, and Oliver 1982) and that length in position affects employees' abilities to cope with job conflicts (e.g., Walker, Churchill, and Ford 1975), it was believed to be necessary to investigate the impacts of these variables in the present study.

RESULTS

The results of the study are summarized in Tables 1, 2, and 3. Table 1 presents findings for the customer-related situations; Table 2, findings for the peer-related situations; Table 3, findings for the work-related situations. Each table describes the respective situations or practices evaluated by the

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TABLE 1

RETAIL SALESPEOPLE'S VIEWS OF CUSTOMER-RELATED SITUATIONS OR PRACTICES

SITUATION OR PRACTICE	PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENTS WHO DEFINITELY BELIEVE SITUATION POSES AN ETHICAL PROBLEM	PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENTS WHO BELIEVE THEIR COMPANIES HAVE POLICIES ADDRESSING SITUATION	PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENTS WHO DEFINITELY BELIEVE SITUATION SHOULD BE ADDRESSED BY COMPANY POLICY
1. Charge full price for a sale item without the customer's knowledge.	62%	43%	72%
2. Give incorrect change to customers on purpose.	62	52	73
3. Don't tell the complete truth to a customer about the characteristics of a product.	59	41	60
4. Customer damages product in the store and wants a markdown.	54	45	80
5. Make a promise that you cannot keep regarding when something will be ready to pick up.	47	37	51
6. Hoard free samples which were meant for customers.	45	25	58
7. Pressure customers into making a purchase.	44	28	33
8. Ignore a prospective customer for one you believe will be better.	44	43	53
9. Refuse returns from customers when you think the item should be accepted.	43	59	70
10. Don't assist customers you believe are less likely to buy.	42	42	51
11. Make excuses when merchandise is not ready for a customer to pick up.	40	27	42
12. Telephone customer wants help, but you decide not to assist him/her.	40	51	59
13. Sell a more expensive product when a less expensive product would be better for the customer.	38	18	28
14. Don't offer information to the customer about an upcoming sale which will include merchandise the customer is planning to buy.	38	24	41
15. Make excuses to customers about unavailable merchandise when merchandise is not yet in stock or is sold out.	36	49	43
16. Take returns from customers when you believe the item should not be accepted.	34	68	70
17. Give preferential treatment to certain customers.	33	30	38
18. You buy merchandise before it is available to the customer.	25	24	32

TABLE 2
RETAIL SALESPeOPLE'S VIEWS OF PEER-RELATED SITUATIONS OR PRACTICES

SITUATION OR PRACTICE	PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENTS WHO DEFINITELY BELIEVE SITUATION POSES AN ETHICAL PROBLEM	PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENTS WHO BELIEVE THEIR COMPANIES HAVE POLICIES ADDRESSING SITUATION	PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENTS WHO DEFINITELY BELIEVE SITUATION SHOULD BE ADDRESSED BY COMPANY POLICY
1. Pressure from fellow employees not to report employee theft.	63%	62%	83%
2. Pressure from a friend to give him/her your employee discount.	55	66	74
3. Take sales away from a fellow salesperson.	49	31	58
4. Try to get an employee to quit.	39	9	32
5. Salesperson not working or selling up to his/her potential so as not to offend another employee.	38	15	33
6. Offer to give a friend an employee discount.	38	70	71
7. Peer pressure not to say anything to management about other employees' personal problems.	28	68	29
8. Date or socialize with management.	16	16	29
9. Date or socialize with fellow employees who are not in management.	9	9	16

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TABLE 3
RETAIL SALESPEOPLE'S VIEWS OF WORK-RELATED SITUATIONS OR PRACTICES

SITUATION OR PRACTICE	PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENTS WHO DEFINITELY BELIEVE SITUATION POSES AN ETHICAL PROBLEM	PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENTS WHO BELIEVE THEIR COMPANIES HAVE POLICIES ADDRESSING SITUATION	PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENTS WHO DEFINITELY BELIEVE SITUATION SHOULD BE ADDRESSED BY COMPANY POLICY
1. Cheat on the time card.	57%	59%	72%
2. Inexperienced salesperson receives an unfair workload.	50	25	53
3. Sell merchandise that is not of good quality.	47	40	63
4. Sell the product as if it were an exclusive, when in fact it is available in other stores.	41	18	34
5. Perform your job with inadequate job information or training.	40	38	54
6. Hide merchandise in the store that you want and are waiting for the store to mark down.	36	38	52
7. Don't sell the last unit of a particular product since you, the salesperson, want to purchase it.	35	24	40
8. Don't get a check authorization when required.	35	76	76
9. Use of sales contest for salespeople in order to generate sales from customers.	31	34	48
10. Have to sell non-sale items at full price when the items were accidentally placed with sale merchandise.	26	42	68

respondents, as well as reports the percentage who definitely believe a situation poses an ethical problem, whose companies are believed to have a policy addressing the situation, and who definitely believe a company policy should address the situation. The items in each table are arranged in descending order by the percentage responding that they definitely believe the situation poses an ethical problem. A number in parentheses in the following discussion refers to the situation with that number shown in the pertinent table.

Before reviewing the results, it should be noted that when examining the relationships between salespeople's personal characteristics (sex, retail sales experience, and time with company) and salespeople's beliefs about the thirty-seven situations across the three questions posed to them, no statistically significant differences ($p < .05$) were found.¹ Consequently, only aggregate findings are presented. In presenting the results, the situations which pose ethical problems, which are addressed by company policy, and which should be addressed by company policy are discussed below.

What Are Ethical Problems?

Of the thirty-seven situations evaluated by respondents, only eight are seen by one-half or more of the retail salespeople as being ethical issues. Four of the eight are customer-related situations; two of the eight, peer-related; and two of the eight, work-related. As shown in Table 1, the customer-related situations are incorrectly charging full price for a sale item (#1); giving incorrect change (#2); misinforming customers about a product (#3); and giving a markdown to a customer who damages a product in the store (#4). Table 2 indicates that the two peer-related situations are being pressured not to report employee theft (#1) and to give a friend an employee discount (#2). The two work-related situations, as evidenced in Table 3, are cheating on the time card (#1) and receiving an unfair workload (#2). The remaining customer-, peer-, and work-related situations evaluated by respondents do not appear to be ethical problems for the majority of salespeople surveyed.

Where Do Policies Exist?

Nine of the thirty-seven situations evaluated by sales personnel are believed to be addressed by policies in more than 50 percent of the respondents' companies. The twenty-eight remaining situations, however, are not believed to be covered by policies in the majority of the salespeople's firms. More than one-half of those surveyed said that their companies have policies

addressing four of the eight situations that are seen as ethical issues. These four situations are comprised of one customer-related, two peer-related, and one work-related situation. The four situations are giving incorrect change (Table 1; #2); being pressured not to report employee theft and to give a friend an employee discount (Table 2; #1,#2); and cheating on the time card (Table 3; #1).

In some instances, there are dramatic disparities between situations retail salespeople see as presenting ethical problems and those they believe are addressed by company policy. These disparities cut across customer-, peer-, and work-related situations. For example, over 50 percent of the respondents reported that their firms have policies addressing the following situations: refusing returns that should be accepted, failing to assist a telephone customer, and accepting returned merchandise when it should not be accepted (Table 1; #9, #12, #16); offering a friend an employee discount and failing to say anything about an employee's personal problems (Table 2; #6, #7); and failing to get a check authorization (Table 3; #8). These same items, however, are not perceived to be ethical problems by over one-half of the respondents.

Also, incorrectly charging full price for a sale item, misinforming the customer about a product, giving a markdown to a customer who damages a product in the store (Table 1; #1, #3, #4); and receiving an unfair workload (Table 3; #2) are believed to be covered by policies in less than one-half of the salespeople's companies. Yet, the majority of respondents see these four situations to be ethical issues.

Where Are Policies Needed?

This study also investigated which situations salespeople believe should be addressed by company policies, regardless of whether policies already exist. Sales personnel appear to want company guidelines on 22 of the 37 situations evaluated by respondents. In fact, they want policy help on all eight of the situations that pose ethical problems (Table 1: #1, #2, #3, #4; Table 2; #1, #2; Table 3; #1, #2). Furthermore, on all eight situations, the percentage of salespeople who want policies is greater than the percentage of respondents who believe that their firms have a policy.

In some instances, the majority of respondents want policy help on situations that currently are believed to be covered in only a minority of the respondents' firms. In each case, however, the situations are seen as being ethical issues by less than 50 percent of those surveyed. These situations include customer-, peer-, and work-related situations. The situations that

manifest the above disparity are as follows: inaccurately hedging on a pick-up date, hoarding samples, ignoring one customer for another, and failing to assist a customer (Table 1; #5, #6, #8, #10); taking sales away from a fellow salesperson (Table 2; #3); and selling low quality merchandise, performing the job with inadequate information, hiding soon-to-be reduced merchandise, and selling non-sale merchandise at full price when the merchandise was accidentally placed with sale merchandise (Table 3; #3, #5, #6, #10).

In five cases, *more than one-half* of the salespeople reported that their firms have a policy *and* should have a policy to address the situations, but only a *minority* of respondents see the situations as being ethical problems. These five situations are refusing customer returns that should be accepted, failing to assist a telephone customer, and accepting customer returns that should not be accepted (Table 1; #9, #12, #16), offering a friend an employee discount (Table 2; #6), and failing to get a check authorization (Table 3; #8).

LIMITATIONS

The results of this study should be viewed in light of some important limitations. First, because the sample used was narrow in geographic scope (only one city was used) and was not probabilistic, broad generalizations from the results should be viewed cautiously. Second, although the impact of three demographic variables (sex, retail sales experience, time with company) on retail salespeople's ethical beliefs was examined, other factors may well affect salespeople's ethical perceptions. Such variables include respondent age, department employed, span of control, and company size (sales and number of salespeople), and should be considered in future research. Third, because of proprietary reasons, no information was collected about *actual* company policies; only salespeople's *perceptions* about company policies were obtained. If such information had been acquired, actual policies could have been compared with perceived policies to determine if salespeople's perceptions are accurate. Finally, because the questionnaire addressed a sensitive topic--ethics in retail sales--respondents may have shown socially desirable responses. The questionnaire, however, could be adapted and used by retailers for developing their own corporate ethics policies. Despite the above limitations, the following implications are offered.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The present investigation suggests that retail salespeople apparently do not see many of the situations examined to be ethical issues. Only eight of thirty-seven situations are considered to be ethically troublesome by the majority of those surveyed. Four of the eight are customer-related situations; two of the eight, peer-related situations; the other two, work-related situations.

Most situations (twenty-eight) are not believed to be addressed by policies in over one-half of the respondents' firms. Only four of the eight situations that pose ethical problems are believed to be covered by company policies in the majority of respondents' organizations. In some instances where policies exist, salespeople do not see the situations as being ethical issues. In still other cases, situations that are seen as ethically troublesome are not believed to be addressed by stated policies.

Retail salespeople also seem to want more policy help than they presently have. More than one-half of the respondents believe twenty-two of thirty-seven situations should be covered by company policy. They desire guidelines on those situations that are seen as ethical issues, on certain situations that are not regarded as being ethical problems, and on some situations that are already addressed by company policies.

Also, when testing whether salespeople's sex, retail sales experience, and time with company are related to their ethical beliefs, no significant differences were found. Evidently, then, these three variables are not related to salespeople's beliefs about which situations pose ethical problems, are believed to be addressed by company policy, and should be addressed by policy.

In attempting to resolve ethical questions facing retail salespeople, retail managers should take several steps. Management should seek to identify situations that pose ethical problems for salespeople. Based on this study, special concern should be shown towards situations that are customer-, peer-, and work-related. Where ethical issues exist, a policy should be formulated and clearly communicated to help salespeople deal effectively with the situations.

In some instances, management may want a company policy to address a situation that sales personnel do not believe is an ethical issue. For example, salespeople did not see a failure to get a check authorization as being an ethical problem. Respondent firms, however, apparently invoke a company policy that addresses this issue so as to reduce the number of bad checks received. In such cases where disparate views exist, management

should explain the rationale and importance of the policy to salespeople so that they do not disregard it.

When establishing policies, companies often make them too ambiguous and inflexible. To overcome these twin deficiencies, policies should be put in writing to avoid the ambiguity often accompanying word-of-mouth directives. In addition, the policies should not be too detailed; rather, latitude should be provided to retail salespeople so that they can perform their jobs effectively. Thus, the vital issue in formulating a policy is to have one that is helpful for sales personnel.

To decrease the chances that salespeople will forget--or continue to be unclear--about company policies, periodic review sessions should be held with sales personnel. The review sessions can provide a forum where management can carefully explain the policies and reiterate their benefits to the sales staff.

Management should also monitor the success of the policies, as well as the conditions that currently prevail. As new situations arise that pose ethical issues, policies may have to be added. Conversely, when existing guidelines become inappropriate or too cumbersome, they may have to be modified or dropped.

Finally, management can lead by example. Company personnel get ambiguous signals when managers pay lip service to one set of ethical standards and practice another. Thus, in their dealings with store personnel, other upper-level managers, and extra-organizational members, retail sales managers should maintain a highly ethical posture.

In conclusion, retail salespeople--like other boundary-spanning personnel--face certain ethical dilemmas. To deal with ethical issues, sales personnel should benefit from company policies that address those situations posing ethical problems. In the final analysis, however, such policies cannot be willed or wished. Rather, they require a concerted effort on the part of management to examine, formulate, and execute policies that are a help--not a hindrance--to the sales staff.

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FOOTNOTES

¹Simultaneous tests of hypotheses were performed using the Bonferonni Principle (Morrison 1976) to provide a more conservative estimate.

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