

GENDER BIAS IN CONSUMER PERCEPTIONS OF SALESPEOPLE

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ABSTRACT

From the last quarter of the twentieth century until today, there has been a massive influx of women into the labor force in the U.S. and Europe (Comer et al. 1998; Piercy et al. 2003). In marketing, one issue of particular concern is gender stereotyping in personal selling. Research has shown that salespeople are perceived differently depending on their gender, and also depending on the gender of customers. While attitudes toward women in sales have become more equitable, women are still not entering professional selling in the same proportions at which they are entering the work force in general (Comer et al. 1998; Russ and McNeily 1988). Gable and Reed (1987) suggest that gender role stereotyping may be one of the major reasons for the slow pace of change. Women may still be thought of as retail sales clerks and professional selling may be perceived by some as a “man’s job.” The primary purpose of this paper is to examine and compare the stereotypes that people have toward male salespeople, female salespeople, and salespeople in general.

In this study, through a thought-listing task and evaluative scales, we have been able to generate the following conclusions about content, positivity/negativity, quantity, and homogeneity of stereotypic elaborations for salespeople. One important finding from this research is that the contents of the three stereotypes—saleswoman, salesman, and salesperson—are quite different.

Our study shows that strength and P/N analyses do not capture the same properties of stereotypes. For example, females do not have the strongest stereotypes for salespeople, but they rate them the most positively, perhaps because of the gender-free connotation. These findings indicate that these measures cannot necessarily be assumed to be negatively correlated. Also, stereotype studies should use both types of analyses to make stereotype assessment as robust as possible.

The implications of this study for stereotype researchers are that all four aspects of stereotypes—content, positivity/negativity, quantity, and homogeneity—should be studied. There are also important implications from this study for practitioners. Our findings indicate that saleswomen are viewed more positively than are salesmen amongst the respondents used in this study. This finding goes against past evidence that sales managers themselves are of the opinion that customers are negatively biased toward female salespeople. There is evidence that this perception has led to not only fewer women being hired for professional sales positions, but also at lower salaries and with less opportunities for advancement. Our results suggest that making the assumption that all customers will have a negative attitude toward female salespeople would be a serious mistake. Attitudes toward salespeople will depend on the customer since young respondents or female respondents may have very positive attitudes toward female salespeople. In addition, the overall stereotype for saleswoman is held more weakly than the stereotypes for either salesperson or salesman. Thus, the long-held bias against incorporating women in professional sales forces may be relatively easy to overcome.