

CAREERS FOR WOMEN IN INDUSTRIAL SELLING: PROBLEMS AND OPPORTUNITIES

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INTRODUCTION

Industrial sales (defined as selling to other manufacturers or to middlemen) is a lucrative and challenging career for women. The industrial salesperson needs to constantly change their message content, mode, sequence and selling style to fit the unique needs of the prospective customer. The seller faces strong competition from the variety of industries offering the same product. The customer will often select the salesperson on the basis of credibility, problem-solving capabilities, technical knowledge, and perceived willingness to serve the customer's needs. It is this problem solving, coupled with attendant post-transactional follow-up, that often benefits from the understanding and compassion associated with women. Women have many positive attributes to bring into the field of industrial selling. It is a career that offers ambitious, energetic, committed women a great deal of opportunities.

While the percentage of women in non-retail sales has more than doubled in the past ten years, it is still the lowest ratio of women to men in all the surveyed professions. Approximately 80% of the industrial sellers are male. In 1980, the Census Bureau stated that there were 68,694 women out of a total 433,496 salespeople in manufacturing companies. This number of saleswomen is continuously increasing as they prove that they can sell and handle accounts as well as their male colleagues.

SALES AS A ROUTE TO THE TOP

It is often difficult to reach top management in most industries without some experience in sales. The skills learned in selling--communicating, organizing, and self-motivation--are applicable to any position in management. Selling enables a person to get to know the technology and products of their company. Salespeople get a high level of training through a variety of programs offered by the companies. This product knowledge is invaluable to a person in management who needs to understand the bottom line of the company, its technological core. A salesperson, through their constant interaction with the customers, also gets to know the problem areas of a company and the different needs of the people they serve. This background is an important base upon which to draw from when making decisions as a manager.

Line jobs, such as sales and manufacturing, give a woman the chance to provide objective proof of her competence and ability. Staff departments allow for a wide scope of subjective judgments toward your accomplishments. If there is even a subconscious bias against you by your superior, your achievements may be seen as less than what they actually are. There is enough room for

ambiguity in staff jobs to question good performance if your boss wants to. Although line jobs don't completely dismiss subjective judgments, they at least provide objective data and criteria to use on your behalf. These results can't be ignored or diminished. If you track the leaders in the corporation, you'll see what the pathways are to the top and have proof that line jobs are a way to get there.

ADVANTAGES OF A SELLING CAREER

Selling allows for the saleswoman to be rewarded accordingly. Although there are some sales jobs that are salaried, the majority are based on commissions, bonuses, and other incentives. The additions of a company car, fringe benefits, and a liberal expense account bring the base salary up to a level of a high income, prestigious occupation. Selling enables the saleswoman to see her hard work and commitment pay back with high monetary rewards. It is a numbers game that works for the saleswoman. The more calls you make, the more sales you will make and, therefore, the more sales commissions to reflect this extra effort.

A career in sales offers a woman the opportunity to meet a variety of different people on a daily basis. Sales allows a person to fully utilize their communication skills and interact with people on a multitude of different levels. The salesperson must be able to adapt their sales presentation to fit the perspective customer's personality type and needs. The challenge is not only selling your product to the customer, but also selling yourself. By developing a rapport with the customer, you create a loyalty that results in repeat orders.

There is a high level of independence in selling. There is a lack of formal structure and, to a large extent, the individual salesperson sets their own schedule. This type of job requires a lot of self-discipline. Selling isn't a typical "9-to-5" job. You have to be the motivating factor that gets you out of bed in the morning to make the phone calls and customer visits. A salesperson is almost running their own small business within the larger corporation. To be successful, you need to be organized; you structure your time, not the company.

SPECIAL QUALITIES OF SALESWOMEN

Women bring in some of their own key assets to the field of selling. Many sales managers and customers feel that certain traits women make the "average" saleswoman better than the "average" salesman. Women's childhood development and social integration help them to read

people. Later, an important skill in sales. They listen to the needs of customers, often relying on intuition to find out where the problem areas lie.

Saleswomen tend to extend the extra effort which doesn't necessarily result in an immediate sale. What it does result in is a high degree of customer loyalty. They treat customers with special attention. It is this pampering by the saleswoman that pays off in the form of added respect. Women are shown to pay more attention to the services. This can further enhance the customer preference for a particular salesperson. Follow-up is one of the biggest issues. Follow-ups help to build a relationship with the customer for sales calls at a later date and deal with any problems that may have arisen. Customers can be lost if the salesperson fails to contact most of the accounts after the sales have been finalized.

Saleswomen listen to the problems and needs of their customers. It is this service orientation that makes saleswomen such a driving, advancing force in industrial sales. Women also speak well. Test scores from BFS Psychological Associates, New York City, show that on the average, women have better vocabularies and can express themselves more clearly than men (Skolnik 1985).

When saleswomen and salesmen have been rated by buyers on different attributes, women rated more favorably on 15 of the total 23 (Swan et al. 1984). Women were judged higher on such traits as understanding other people, friendliness, enthusiasm, and preparation for sales presentations. This study gives evidence that females on the sales force of a company will be accepted by the industrial buyer at least as readily as their male counterparts. Trained saleswomen should not face problems of customer acceptance.

Saleswomen also have the added benefit, since they are still a minority in this field, of getting into the prospective customer's door just by the sheer fact that they are women. The element of novelty, "what does an industrial saleswoman look like," can help to get a few minutes of the customer's time. It is then up to the saleswoman to make the best of this opportunity. Women may have the advantage of getting to the customer, but a buyer won't place an order with you if you can't knowledgeably sell him your product.

Saleswomen don't have to go out of their way to be noticed. Women can more readily make an impression on higher management. In a crowd of salesmen, one or two saleswomen are easily seen and remembered. When a woman speaks in a meeting, people will listen, if only to hear what this woman has to say. This visibility can also work in a negative way since your mistakes are noticed more and commented upon by others. The advantages and disadvantages are disappearing as more and more women enter the field of industrial sales.

SPECIAL PROBLEMS FOR SALESWOMEN

Although women have many advantages by being in industrial sales, there are also difficulties to

face. Lack of self-confidence and fear of rejection can be a problem. Often women have to prove themselves capable of doing their jobs, not only to the customer, but to their male peers. Women must be prepared to sell themselves and their knowledge, as well as their products. A saleswoman's expertise may be challenged by men who feel that women couldn't possibly know anything about their business. Once a customer finds out that a woman can handle the business area the customer is in, being a male or a female becomes secondary.

Women can often deal positively with their presence in a male-dominated industry. By having a sense of humor, it is easier to deal with the special situations they encounter as females (such as language, opening doors, picking up the check, etc.). It helps to avoid stress and tension if you see the funny side of a situation that you can't control. When men can't deal with a woman in certain situations, it is their problem. All a woman can do to help men adjust is to use patience and tolerance. Both men and women are in a different situation than they are used to, and the problems must be worked out slowly. Many women are concerned about their treatment by colleagues and customers and are willing to fight for themselves if they feel they are being discriminated against. In the business world, it helps to learn when it is best not to fight an issue just to make a point. Sometimes it is better to put energy into areas that will pay off, such as seeking people out, one-on-one, and talking about mutual concerns. Often a casual exchange of ideas will show what a person has to offer and build up the level of confidence better than a confrontation would ever do.

In many instances, women's advancement in sales has been hampered by their unwillingness to travel extensively. Women themselves have mentioned that traveling and family ties are obstacles. Yet, as roles in the family are changing and two-career families become more common, women traveling for business becomes more acceptable. The 1986 figures show that women represent approximately 40% of all business travelers, up dramatically since the 1970 figure of 10% (Gable and Reed 1987). Resistance to transfers is growing among all executives and is no longer limited to women.

Since women represent a small percentage in industrial sales, this tokenism creates a number of social and career pressures that can affect the token's performance. The lack of a support system for women, inadequate integration into otherwise all-male groups, and lack of female role models all combine to make it difficult for women in industrial sales. Being the only female among a group of men can result in discomfort, isolation, or exclusion. This can be kept to a minimum by having a good channel of communication between a saleswoman and her male colleagues. The male culture that can develop around a group (drinking, sexual references, risqué stories) can cause embarrassment for the only woman. It is often better not to compete with this type of culture. It is a matter of establishing a relationship and finding ground where both parties feel comfortable with one another.

Often a case of mistaken identity can happen when traveling in or out of the office. A woman traveling with a man may be thought to be a wife or lover instead of a professional colleague. This situation is more a source of embarrassment than a harmful reflection on their career. But when the woman traveling with the man is thought to be a secretary/subordinate, this case of mistaken identity can have business consequences. Although this can be a source of frustration for the saleswoman, it doesn't necessarily change her involvement with the account. Making comments to bring herself into the conversation may help, but it is a situation--men talking to other men as though they are in charge--that is difficult to openly fight; and it is questionable as to whether a "fight" would be worth it.

Although many believe that motherhood causes many women to abandon their careers, there has been no substantial proof to back this hypothesis. A 1980 study by Catalyst, a nonprofit organization that encourages the participation of women in business, found many saleswomen continue to work through their pregnancies and return to work after a maternity leave (Gable and Reed 1987). One of the positive aspects about selling is the fact that if you have an established track record as a saleswoman, you have the ability to take time off and later return to your career.

SOLUTIONS

Much of the sex-role stereotyping is being eliminated as more women join the sales force. Others, such as credibility and technological knowledge, are being chipped away as women go out and seek training and information about sales. Competence and knowledge about the company and the product are important facts in stating the effectiveness of saleswomen.

Networking among saleswomen helps by supporting one another's efforts and successes. It provides many opportunities to develop contacts for business and professional visibility. Informal networking, or membership in a networking organization, provides the pathway to meet and interface with other high-achieving saleswomen and discuss mutual problems and solutions. Organizations such as the National Association of Business and Industrial Saleswomen, National Association for Professional Saleswomen, and the National Network of Women in Sales enable women to find role models and develop a higher level of confidence. They provide brochures which offer helpful and useful information. This support system should be integrated into the careers of saleswomen to help get the most from their jobs.

Women's attitudes towards careers have changed over the past decade. They have more commitment and are making themselves eligible for jobs in selling and management. Industry needs good people as fast as they become available. Companies can't afford to ignore people, male or female, who can do the job. Managers need to capitalize on saleswomen's talents and help make their entrance into this male-dominated field an easy transition.

Lack of proper indoctrination and feedback are two of the main influences that harm a woman's chances to be an effective, productive salesperson. Sales managers need to be aware of the organization's norms and attitudes. Plans should be developed to incorporate saleswomen into the firm. The manager needs to stress to the existing sales force that women are a vital and important dimension to any complete organization. They are a part of the firm, not separate, and should be treated as colleagues. If done informally and with a positive attitude, resentment and tension towards saleswomen will be avoided.

If managers inspire open communication where fears and concerns can be expressed, they will be eliminating many of the problems that could potentially arise, problems such as isolation and exclusion of the saleswomen and the ill will of the existing sales force. The sales manager must encourage interaction among all the members of the firm's sales force and take steps to promote the working relationships between females and their co-workers.

Women have been found to have less confidence than men in product knowledge, sales ability, and job security. Their lack of confidence in being able to understand the product's technology and in their sales ability may be able to be controlled through proper training and supervision by the manager. The training staffs in the firms should be made aware of the apparently larger need by saleswomen for developing skills necessary in selling. If the managers of a sales force work closely with its members, they can help build a greater level of self-confidence among the women (and men). Women also appear to have a lower sense of job security. This may be attributed to their lower product and sales confidence. As confidence in these areas grows, women can develop more confidence in the security of their jobs.

Women have the same desire for success and job advancement as men. Some differences have been found to exist in the rewards desired by men and women in selling. Saleswomen have less of an interest in pay than men and are more interested in the opportunity to meet different people and the chance for independent actions. This knowledge may be useful in recruiting saleswomen and designing a reward system for the sales force. Even though women expressed a lower level of interest in pay, this should not infer that this job reward should be neglected. It is still an important reward and motivational tool.

STEPS FOR THE FUTURE

To eliminate discrimination in the work force, managers need to reevaluate their own attitudes about saleswomen and look at the data that support their entrance into this field. Saleswomen and salesmen need to be provided with the necessary sales training to perform their sales roles effectively. Additionally, managers must accept the fact that some dimensions of men's and women's personality, such as emotionality, are different. Adjustments need to be made by management in dealing with this changing work force.

SUMMARY

Industrial sales has long been recognized as offering a combination of high monetary rewards, a chance to learn about the company's technology, products and users, and a tradition of upward mobility to top management. Both salesmen and saleswomen deal with problems, such as long hours, extensive traveling, and often "not-so-polite" rejections on calls. Saleswomen, however, do face some different issues. Unwelcome sexual attention, lack of credibility, and a lack of helpful feedback are some of the special problems that they may encounter.

Sales is an excellent way for women to use their business potential to the maximum and realize visible results from their efforts. As marketing educators, we need to do our part, both in the classroom and through career advising, to make our better women students aware of the career opportunities in industrial sales. Further, to encourage them to aggressively pursue these opportunities, in spite of the perceived obstacles to their success.

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