

Gender Differences in Salespeople: Implications for Sales Organizations

By Subhra Chakrabarty

A national random sample of insurance salespeople was surveyed to assess their selling skills and theory of mind capabilities including rapport building, taking a bird's-eye view, detecting nonverbal cues, and shaping the interaction. The purpose of the study was to explore gender differences in insurance salespeople. An email survey was sent to 9,735 members of the National Alliance for Insurance Education and Research. After several waves of follow-up emails, 324 responses were obtained. The results indicated that female salespeople were better in nonverbal communication than their male counterparts and possessed significantly higher levels of interpersonal skills. The female respondents also self-reported their performance was higher than male salespeople. Based upon these findings, sales organizations should strongly consider hiring female salespeople when selling services. Also, female salespeople may be more advantageous in functional sales organizations compared to the traditional geographic sales organizational structure.

INTRODUCTION

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2016), 49% of sales and related occupations are held by women. The percentages varied widely from 14% of parts salespeople, 29% of wholesale and manufacturer sales representatives, 48% of retail salespeople to 85% of travel agents. With such a large percentage of women in the sales force, the marketing/sales literature is silent on whether there are any advantages to hiring women. Do these numbers reflect the relative proportion of women in the labor force, or are there sales roles in which women are likely to perform better than men? The current study explores gender differences in the minds of salespeople to determine whether women are likely to perform better in certain sales roles. The findings have managerial implications regarding how salespeople should be staffed. That is, the commonly used geographic organizational structure may be less effective for sales organizations.

Looking at the overall employment figures, nearly half or more of sales employees are women in retail, advertising sales, counter and rental clerks, insurance sales, travel agencies, door-to-door sales, and real estate (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2016). However, the percentage of women working as sales representatives of wholesale, manufacturing, services, securities, commodities, financial services, and parts are very low. Although half

of sales-related occupations are held by women, the percentage varies widely by specific sales categories. The current study seeks to shed light on whether gender differences matter for sales organizations, and if so, to identify the underlying reasons.

PERCEPTIONS OF GENDER DIFFERENCES IN THEORY OF MIND

Studies on gender differences in sales have a rich tradition in the marketing literature (e.g., Moncrief et al., 2000; Siguaw & Honeycutt, 1995; Schul & Wren, 1992; Swan & Futrell, 1978; Busch & Bush, 1976). However, these studies report mixed results. For example, Schul and Wren (1992) surveyed the total sales staff of a large national over-the-counter drug and skin care product company and concluded that male and female salespeople differ with regard to preference for extrinsic rewards, role conflict, self-rated performance, and turnover intentions. Siguaw and Honeycutt (1995) also reported gender differences in role perceptions and selling behaviors among sales forces of firms listed in the membership roster of the Association for Information and Image Management. In contrast, among salespeople selling services, Moncrief et al. (2000, p. 255) found gender differences only for role conflict, met expectations, and turnover intentions and concluded that "gender appears to be a much less important sales management concern than indicated in previous research." Swan and Futrell (1978) reported differences in sales performance between male and female salespeople working in pharmaceutical and hospital supply firms. Similarly, Busch and Bush (1978)

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found differences in role clarity and turnover intentions among male and female sales representatives of three pharmaceutical companies with nationwide distribution.

There are several gender-based factors that might lead saleswomen to have an advantage over their male counterparts in certain selling situations. First, female strengths with regard to sensitivity to others and relational communication skills may make women more adept in selling situations requiring interpersonal skills (Eagly, 1987). Second, attractive saleswomen may “stimulate attributions of desirable personality characteristics such as social competence, interpersonal abilities, and likeableness” (Reinhard, Messner, & Sporer, 2006, p. 250), resulting in persuasive influence.

The third gender-based factor is that female salespeople may be better than their male counterparts in theory of mind capabilities. Theory of mind (ToM) refers to the ability of an individual to place himself/herself in the mind of another person and look at the world from his/her point of view. Salespeople with high ToM can understand unobservable mental states, such as: belief, desire, and knowledge of customers (Samson & Apperly, 2010). Thus, salespeople with high ToM are expected to be better performers than their low ToM counterparts. While analyzing gender differences in creative thinking, Abraham et al. (2014) concluded that the brains of women were more engaged than men during speech processing and social perception. Women have been found to be better than men in decoding non-verbal cues (Hall, 1978) even under conditions of minimal stimulus information (Hall & Matsumoto, 2004). Since men tend to be less accurate in encoding emotions compared to women (Hall, 1984; Wagner, MacDonald, & Manstead, 1986), there may be gender differences in the social-perceptual component of ToM. Gender differences in ToM have also been related to social behavior (Thompson & Thornton, 2014; Walker, 2005), and social competence (Putallaz, Hellstern, Sheppard, Grimes, & Glodis, 1995). Social behavior refers to how individuals behave in a group setting; for example, social loafing where individuals are less motivated and effortful when working in groups rather than working individually (Karau & Williams, 1993). Thus, in team selling, individual salespeople may exert less effort since that is undetectable. Social competence of salespeople

refers to their capacity to adjust their cognitive abilities based on their perceptions of the selling situation (Verbeke, Belschak, Bakker, & Dietz, 2008). Thus, socially competent salespeople will be more adept at interpreting customers’ intentions, goals, and needs. The current study adds to this growing body of literature by exploring whether ToM is relevant to gender differences in sales performance. Formally stated:

H1: There is a significant difference in the theory of mind capabilities of male and female salespeople.

PERCEPTIONS OF GENDER DIFFERENCES IN SELLING SKILLS

Selling skills of salespeople have been found to be significantly related to buyer satisfaction (Anselmi & Zemanek, 1997). However, few studies explored gender differences in salespeople’s selling skills. In general, women are more affiliative, less dominant, and more accommodating in social interactions than men (Weitz, 1976). The ability of women to recall emotional information is higher than men (Bloise & Johnson, 2007), and girls develop stronger perspective taking abilities than boys (Graaff, Branje, Wied, Hawk, Lier, & Meeus, 2014). Therefore, saleswomen may be more interpersonally oriented than salesmen.

In a study of the impact of supervisory gender on salesperson performance, Piercy, Cravens, and Lane (2003) found no difference in outcome performance of male and female salespeople despite superior sales unit effectiveness of sales organizations led by female sales managers. However, Sharma, Levy, and Evanschitzky (2007) reported that knowledge structure differences in declarative and procedural knowledge explained more variance in male salespeople than their female counterparts. Among men, 71% of the variance in sales performance was explained by knowledge structures compared to 47% in women. The knowledge structures measured included the number and richness of customer categories and the distinctiveness of sales strategies. Previous studies have also noted gender differences in networking behavior (Macintosh & Krush, 2017) and peer mentoring (Fine & Pullins, 1998) of salespeople. These differences are important since networking and peer mentoring can affect sales performance. Thus, we proffer the second hypothesis:

H2: There is a significant difference in selling skills between male and female salespeople.

METHODS

The data was obtained by an email survey of the members of the National Alliance for Insurance Education and Research. This organization creates, develops, and delivers continuing education programs for insurance and risk management professionals. The survey recipients were randomly drawn from National Alliance for Insurance Education and Research's membership database. Out of the 9735 email surveys that were sent out in several waves, 324 responses were obtained resulting in a response rate of 3.3%. Non-response bias was unlikely to affect the study findings since a comparison of early and late respondents on the study variables indicated no statistically significant difference (Armstrong & Overton, 1977).

On average, the agencies represented by the respondents had three to four million dollars in annual revenues. They were located in large metro areas, big cities, medium sized cities, and small towns. Demographically, 60.8% of the respondents were college graduates and 66% of the respondents were male. On average, they were 48 years old and had 19.39 years on insurance selling experience. Forty one percent of the respondents had ownership in their agency and the ownership percentage ranged from 1% to 100%. Ninety-seven percent of the respondents were directly involved in selling insurance. Thus, although the response rate was low, the respondents were mature, well educated, experienced, and represented a wide variety of geographical areas. Also, the gender profile was comparable to the national average as 47% of the insurance sales agents were female (Bureau of Labor statistics, 2016).

RESULTS

Salespeople's theory of mind was measured with the 13-item Sales Force-Specific Theory-of-Mind (SToM) scale (Dietvorst et al. 2009). The scale measured four dimensions of theory of mind, namely, rapport building, taking a bird'-eye view, detecting nonverbal cues, and shaping the interaction. Salespeople's selling skills were measured by the 15-item selling skills scale developed by Rentz, Shepherd, Taschian, Dabholkar,

and Ladd (2002). The scale measured three dimensions of selling skills, namely: technical skills, salesmanship skills, and interpersonal skills. Salespeople also indicated their performance on a three-item scale. The endpoints for these scales ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The scale items are displayed in Table 1.

The psychometric properties of the scales were examined by confirmatory factor analysis. The data fit the 13-item SToM scale very well ($\chi^2 = 21.64$, $df = 16$, $p = 0.15$, CFI = 0.99, RMSEA = 0.04). The fit statistics for the selling skills scale was also satisfactory ($\chi^2 = 236.24$, $df = 87$, $p = 0.00$, CFI = 0.89, RMSEA = 0.07). Table 1 displays the ANOVA results of the effects of gender on sales performance, selling skills, and theory of mind.

As Table 1 indicates, gender differences exist among salespeople with regard to sales performance, detecting nonverbal cues, interpersonal skills, salesmanship skills, and product knowledge. Thus, both H1 and H2 were supported. The items for which statistically significant difference exists are in bold. Cell means indicate that female salespeople scored higher than their male counterparts in each of these characteristics.

Although the cross-sectional design of the study limits any causal conclusions, the underlying reasons for these apparent gender differences can be gleaned from Table 1. Female salespeople were better in reading customers' nonverbal communications and in sending nonverbal messages. Since 93% of communication is nonverbal (Leigh & Summers, 2002), female insurance salespeople may have an advantage over their male counterparts in selling tasks, such as, actively listening to customers' needs, engaging the customer, responding appropriately to customer cues, and fully understanding customers' needs while paying attention to the big picture.

CONCLUSIONS

Past studies on gender differences in nonverbal communication expertise advanced two theories on why women may outperform men. First, women have more knowledge of nonverbal cues than men and therefore are more accurate in decoding nonverbal cues (Rosip & Hall, 2004). Second, women are more motivated

Table 1 (Gender Differences)

	Item	Gender	Mean	Sig.
Rapport Building	When I am with a customer (e.g., in the elevator before a sales meeting), I can easily kindle a small conversation.	Male	5.77	NS
		Female	6.03	
	I find it difficult to talk to a customer about topics that are not business-related.	Male	5.93	NS
		Female	5.98	
	When at a business meeting or a reception, I can easily start off a conversation on a general topic such as weather.	Male	5.59	NS
		Female	5.76	
Detecting Nonverbal Cues	I find it difficult to discern the nonverbal cues of customers during a conversation.	Male	5.50	NS
		Female	5.41	
	At times I realize that I may not have picked up some hints in sales conversations; after the meeting, colleagues explain to me what happened during the conversations. Only then am I aware of those hints.	Male	5.25	Sig 0.01
		Female	5.79	
	During a sales conversation, if customers hint of something, I do take that into consideration as we are speaking together.	Male	5.48	Sig. 0.10
		Female	5.87	
Taking a Bird's-Eye View	When I realize that someone does not possess the right amount of knowledge in or during a sales conversation, I can easily add some information to bring focus to the conversation, thus making it easier for people to understand what I want to say.	Male	5.95	NS
		Female	6.03	
	When I realize that people do not understand what I am saying, I put what I want to say in a broader perspective in order to explain what I mean.	Male	5.93	NS
		Female	6.03	
	I always try to understand the industry context in which a customer operates, and by using examples from that context, I add any missing information.	Male	5.92	NS
		Female	5.76	
	Sometimes I summarize for customers what has been said up to that point in the meeting; this makes for a smoother conversation.	Male	5.46	NS
		Female	5.66	
Shaping the Interaction	I make sure that I positively influence the atmosphere in a sales conversation.	Male	5.65	NS
		Female	5.80	

	I can easily act in ways that gives a sales conversation a positive twist.	Male Female	5.63 5.73	NS
	I can easily make people feel more comfortable during a sales conversation.	Male Female	5.69 5.74	NS
Sales Performance	My performance is very high in terms of sales growth	Male Female	5.06 5.59	Sig. 0.01
	My performance is very high in terms of profit growth	Male Female	5.26 5.78	Sig. 0.00
	My performance is very high in terms of overall profitability	Male Female	5.45 5.88	Sig. 0.05
Interpersonal Skills	I have the ability to express myself nonverbally	Male Female	5.55 5.89	Sig. 0.05
	I have the ability of general speaking skills	Male Female	5.98 6.33	Sig. 0.05
	I have the ability of be aware and understand the nonverbal communications of others	Male Female	5.68 6.00	Sig. 0.05
	I have the ability to control and regulate nonverbal displays of emotion	Male Female	5.27 5.30	NS
	I have the ability to manipulate others to control the situation	Male Female	3.93 3.75	NS
Salesmanship Skills	I have the ability to prospect for customers	Male Female	5.59 5.42	NS
	I have the ability to qualify prospects	Male Female	5.95 5.88	NS
	I have the ability to close the sale	Male Female	6.05 6.26	Sig. 0.10
	I have the ability to present the sales message	Male Female	6.14 6.34	NS
	I have the ability to service the account	Male Female	6.36 6.70	Sig. 0.00
Technical Skills	I have knowledge of customer needs	Male Female	6.24 6.32	NS
	I have knowledge of my own agency's procedures	Male Female	6.38 6.53	NS
	I have knowledge of competitors' products, services, and sales policies	Male Female	5.57 5.62	NS
	I have knowledge of product lines, including product features and benefits	Male Female	6.24 6.44	Sig. 0.05
	I have knowledge of selling strategies	Male Female	5.90 5.98	NS

to perform better in nonverbal communication to fit their stereotypical image of being more interpersonally sensitive (Ickes, Gesn, & Graham, 2000). Regardless of the underlying reason, the superiority of female salespeople in encoding and decoding nonverbal messages has important implications for sales organizations.

In the current study, female salespeople reported higher performance than their male counterparts in regard to sales growth, profit growth, and overall profitability (See Table 1). Since the product was insurance services, saleswomen may be better suited to sell this intangible product as first impressions are very important in services selling (Naylor, 2007). This implies sales organizations may benefit by employing women to sell service products, as well as, after sales services. Sales organizations should utilize the natural superiority of women in detecting nonverbal cues from customers.

Since salespeople's ability to detect nonverbal cues is positively related to sales performance (Agnihotri, Vieira, Senra, & Gabler, 2016), saleswomen can use their natural ability to read nonverbal cues of customers who are approaching them. Thus, the percentage of saleswomen in retailing and travel agencies is relatively high. Most retail customers and travelers approach the salesperson and initiate the sales interaction. In contrast, sales representatives of manufacturers and wholesalers call on customers and initiate the sales interaction.

The wide variation in the percentage of saleswomen in different industries can also be explained by the access and legitimacy paradigm (Thomas & Ely, 1996). According to this theory, salespeople are more comfortable interacting with prospects who are similar to them. Thus, selling organizations often match salespeople to the buyer demographics. Since the majority of industrial buyers are male, the majority of the sales representatives of manufacturers and wholesalers are also male. In contrast, women constitute a larger percentage of decision makers for retail purchases. Accordingly, more females are employed as retail salespeople.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

Sales organizations should utilize the SToM scale for salesperson selection and training. Although the current

study revealed gender differences only in detecting nonverbal cues, each of the four dimensions of the SToM scale has been found to be positively related to sales performance (Agnihotri, Vieira, Senra, & Gabler, 2016). Thus, the SToM scores can be used to screen salespeople. Further, as the study results indicate, male salespeople may need special training in detecting nonverbal cues from customers.

In this study, the interpersonal skills of female salespeople were significantly higher than their male counterparts. They were also better in nonverbal communication. Since interpersonal skills are positively related to sales performance (Vilela, González, Ferfin, & Araújo, 2007), training programs for male salespeople should emphasize the development of their interpersonal skills. Sales organizations may also consider using female salespeople in selling situations involving extensive bargaining. The success of win-win negotiations require strong interpersonal skills and expertise in nonverbal communication. Sales women's expertise in nonverbal communication will enable them to actively listen to customer's needs, engage the buyer, respond appropriately to buyers' nonverbal cues, pay attention to the big picture, and fully understand customer needs.

The current study challenges the notion of homophily in organizing the salesforce. "Homophily is the degree to which individuals who interact are similar in identity" (Jones, Moore, Stanaland, & Wyatt, 1998, p. 74). Sales organizations use homophily by matching salespeople to customers, thereby increasing customers' perceptions of similarity with the salespeople. This might increase sales since customers are more comfortable in working with salespeople who are similar to them. Moncrief et al. (2000) referred to this as a gender-balanced sales organization where male dominated customer bases are called on by male dominated sales force, and female dominated sales force works with female dominated customer bases. However, as the results of the current study indicate, ToM capabilities such as detecting nonverbal cues should be given more importance in organizing a sales force, rather than demographics and perceived similarity.

The findings of the current study suggest that it might be advantageous for sales organizations to execute

a functional organizational structure where female salespeople are assigned to develop new accounts. Since saleswomen are more adept in nonverbal communication, assigning them to develop new accounts may be more prudent for several reasons. First, developing rapport with new customers and making positive first impressions is crucial for new account development. Since nonverbal cues are important in judging rapport (Grahe & Bernieri, 1999), the superiority of saleswomen in encoding and decoding nonverbal cues will facilitate rapport development. The halo effect of these positive first impressions may result in superior customer evaluations of saleswomen's subsequent selling strategies resulting in improved persuasion (Naylor, 2007). The nonverbal cues expressed by female salespeople may achieve regulatory fit with the motivational orientations of customers resulting in increased persuasion (Cesario & Higgins, 2008).

Lastly, the study has several limitations: Since the study was conducted on insurance salespeople, caution should be exercised in generalizing the findings to other categories of salespeople. More research is needed to confirm the validity of the study findings. Also, since the response rate was low, caution should be exercised in interpreting the study results.

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