

# Are Women's Sales Skills Better Than Men's?

## OUTSTANDING ABSTRACT – Professional Sales/Sales Management

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### Abstract

Over the past 40 years, a significant amount of research has examined whether differences exist between men and women salespeople. Researchers have examined a variety of variables including job satisfaction, role ambiguity, confidence, and self-reported measures of performance. While the studies did find differences between men and women in some of these areas, most of the evidence suggests little difference exists between men and women salespeople. However, none of the studies have examined in-call sales behaviors (e.g., questioning, listening, handling objections, etc.) to see if women and men perform at the same level. This study reviews the sales competition scores of men and women competing in the National Collegiate Sales Competition. The competitors at this event are judged on a set of 25 different criteria. The results indicate women outperform men in in-call sales behaviors.

### Introduction

A half-century ago, b2b sales was generally considered a profession for men. The term “salesman” was the standard reference for this position and continued to remain so, generally for the remainder of the 20th century. In the 1970s and 80s, the number of women in b2b sales positions began to grow, and with that growth came questions regarding how they compared with men in terms of sales performance and other related dimensions. Early studies seemed to indicate men could sell better than women, however, the research was not conclusive. As relationship selling grew in popularity, a few studies found that women outperformed men and had, in general, an advantage when it came to forming relationships. Now, in the era of more assertive sales approaches (e.g., the Challenger model) that seemingly rely less on warm relationships, one wonders if the performance difference between men and women will once again change. The challenge with evaluating sales performance differences between men and women is that it is difficult to get detailed data. Results from previous research are based on self-report, outcome, or buyer-perceptions along a limited set of criteria. For good reasons, no

one has taken the time to observe men and women salespeople as they interact with their customers in order to evaluate their relative sales skills. In contrast, collegiate sales competitions are based on detailed evaluation of sales skills and offer the opportunity to begin assessing whether women and men differ in their sales skills. The purpose of this study is to examine a select group of college students already expressing an interest in sales and examine if they differ in terms of their sales performance as indicated by a 25 item sales call skill rubric.

## Literature Review

For most of the 20th century, an overwhelming majority of the b2b and related non-retail sales positions were held by men. In the latter half of the century, the number of women in those roles began to increase. “The number of women working in industrial sales has increased significantly from 6.6% of nonretail sales positions in 1970, to 21% in 1993.” (Siguaw and Honeycutt, Jr., 1995, p. 45). The number of women in non-retail sales roles continued to increase over the years. The Bureau of Labor and Statistics established sub-categories of non-retails sales positions and Tracks the percentage of women in those roles. That data provides some interesting insight into the growth in the number of women in non-retail sales roles.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics’ 2017 Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey, the number of women in non-retails sales is on par with men in some areas and still below men in others. Table 01 shows the 2007 and 2017 statistics for non-retail sales (sub-categories of the “Sales and Office Occupations” category) sorted by 2017 percent of the total employed in the respective category that are women.

“Models, demonstrators, and product promoters” contained the highest percentage of women in both 2007 and 2017. It’s difficult to know the extent to which these roles were directly involved in selling, but it’s clear that women substantially outnumbered men, notwithstanding the decrease to 78.4% in 2017 from 83.4% in 2007. Women and men are equally represented in Insurance sales, advertising sales, and the catch-all – “sales and related workers, all others.” However, 10 years earlier (2007) women outnumbered men in advertising sales and “sales and related workers, all others” by 7 – 10 percentage points. Of particular note is the relatively low representation of women in the other remaining categories. In those types of sales, men continue to outnumber the women.

<b>Table 01</b>			
<b>Occupation</b>	2017 Total Employed (thousands)	% of total employed that are women (2017)	% of total employed that are women (2007)
Models, demonstrators, and product promoters	61	78.4	83.4
Insurance sales agents	624	51.8	45.4
Advertising sales agents	241	50.4	57.5
Sales and related workers, all other	276	50.3	60.9
Securities, commodities, & financial services sales agents	262	34	31.2
First-line supervisors of non-retail sales workers	1,220	30	28.2
Sales representatives, wholesale and manufacturing	1,264	28	27.1
Sales representatives, services, all other	525	27.1	36.2
Sales engineers	35	-	-

### Differences Between Women and Men in Sales

Research on differences between men and women in sales began increasing in the 1970s and 80s as the number of women in non-retail sales also grew. The research has continued, and has looked for differences in a variety of areas including job satisfaction, role ambiguity, job clarity, competence, confidence, performance, and so forth. Although not looking at outcome measures such as ability to hit quotas, analysis of many (if not most) of the variables revealed little differences between men and women. Nevertheless, some difference have been found.

In the latter half of the 1970s, several article were published discussing potential differences between women and men in sales. Busch and Bush (1978) conducted a study pharmaceutical salespeople to assess whether women and men differed with respect to job satisfaction, values, role clarity, performance, and propensity to leave. Their analysis found women had slightly lower job clarity than men and had a slightly stronger link between job clarity and propensity to leave. They also found that men placed a greater value on promotion than men, and that women placed a greater value on coworkers and customers than did men. The authors' analysis of the other variables suggested no differences between women and men exist. The authors also suggest that the few differences found could be a function of the pharmaceutical industry (at the time of the study) being male-dominated.

Robertson and Hacket (1977) examined salesmen and saleswomen's perceptions of salesmen and saleswomen. They found that while saleswomen perceived few differences between salesmen and saleswomen, salesmen perceived saleswomen as possessing poorer sales technique, less career-oriented, less open-minded, more emotional, and less self-confident. However, both salesmen and saleswomen perceived salesmen and saleswomen as equally competent.

Swan, Futrell, and Todd (1978) studied pharmaceutical salespeople and found that women had lower job satisfaction related to their supervisors and co-workers, but not with the job itself (similar to Busch and Bush, 1978). They also found that women had lower levels of job-related self-confidence. Like Busch and Bush (1978), the authors attributed their findings to the industry being male-dominated.

In a survey of Vice Presidents of Sales for industrial companies, Kanuk (1978) found respondents perceived women and men performed equally well, but that women may be better able than men to initiate relationships with prospects. Nearly 20 years later, Dion, Easterling, and Javalgi (1997) found the purchasing agents perceived women and men equally in terms of overall performance. However, they found that purchasing agents perceived salesmen as more professional than saleswomen, provided better customer service, and were likely to give salesmen a greater portion of business.

The presence of women in sales positions is no longer uncommon. As a result, gender differences research conducted in the 70s and 80s may no longer be relevant (Moncrief et. al, 2000). Research in the 1990s and early 2000s found that women had an edge over men with respect to relationship building and attending to customers (Lane & Crane, 2002). Siguaw and Honeycutt, Jr. (1995) found no differences in job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and performance, but that relative to women men experienced greater role ambiguity and role conflict. In addition, they found that women had higher levels of customer-orientation. “This finding supports the conclusions of earlier studies that women place greater emphasis on customer relationships. In other words, women are more likely to serve as problem-solving consultants and to assist their customers in achieving their goals rather than just attempting to make the sale regardless of customer needs” (Siguaw & Honeycutt, Jr. 1995 p.50).

Studies on how men and women differ with respect to sales performance have used self-report or other forms of performance perceptions rather than objective data. However, recently Orlob (2018) presented findings from an analysis of available sales activity data showing that women closed more sales than men, and are perhaps are better communicators. In addition to counting the number of successful closes, the sales activity data included time-based measures of salesperson talk time, listening time, and frequency of interrupting the buyer. The data showed men spent more time listening, less time talking (monologue) and interrupted the buyer less. The authors suggest that women listen more intently, and are therefore more efficient and effective listeners. They also suggest that when talking (monologues) women were more persuasive and focused than men. The combination of better listening and more persuasive talking explains why women closed more sales than men. The problem (as the authors point out) with the data is that measuring the time spent on a particular task/ability (e.g., listening) isn't a measure of effectiveness. Such measure would come only from direct observation of the interaction between the seller and buyer. This study is an attempt to address that shortfall by evaluating the sales communication between sellers and buyers, albeit in role-play setting.

## Method

The National Collegiate Sales Competition (NCSC) is the largest and longest-running and collegiate sales role-play competition in the world. Each year, up to 144 students representing 72 universities compete in this double-elimination style tournament. The competitors are typically seniors and juniors who have already been recognized by their respective schools for possessing superior sales competence relative to other students in those programs.

The host school provides competitors a sales-call scenario (buyer background and selling situation) in advance of the competition. In addition, a wealth of product training resources, including webinars, training videos, and sales support material, are available to help competitors prepare for the competition.

The format of the competition is a 20-minute face-to-face sales call during which the salesperson must engage a buyer (role played by sales professional) in an attempt to sell the designated product (good or service). The competitors are evaluated by 5 - 7 industry professionals using a sales skills rubric. The sales skills rubric contains 25 different items representing seven different categories, including approach, needs identification, solution presentation, overcoming objections, closing, communication skills, and an overall assessment. For each item, competitors were scored on a scale of 0 to 8. After each sales call role-play, checks were made to ensure judges scored each of the 25 items on each competitor they evaluated.

The score sheets (sales skills rubric) used by the competition evaluators or judges, was developed in the 1990's by various scholars and sales experts. Since that time the instrument has been vetted by hundreds of other scholars and sales experts, as well as thousands of salespeople and sales leaders from industry and has become the standard for a number of other university sales competitions across the U.S.

For this study, we used data from the 2017 and 2018 NCSC. Those are the only two years for which we have reliable data regarding the gender of each of the competitors. During registration, the competitors were asked to identify their gender. None of the competitors opted not to designate their gender.

Table 02 shows the breakdown of competitors by year and by gender. While in both years slightly more competitors were male, the split between males and females is nearly 50-50. Each of these competitors competed in the first round of the competition under the same basic conditions and within a 12 hour time frame.

Gender	Year		Total
	2018	2017	
Female	33 (47%)	34 (49%)	67 (48%)
Male	37 (53%)	36 (51%)	73 (52%)
Total	70	70	140

Each student’s role play was judged live by 6-7 judges resulting in 980 individual score sheets spread across 140 competitors. For each competitor, the scores on each of the items was averaged across judges. This reduced the sample size to 140.

Next, the means for women and men on each of the 25 items were compared using independent sample t-tests. To make it easier to review, the results are presented in seven different tables (Tables 03a – 03g) below, each containing the items associated with their respective sales rubric category.

The results of the difference between means analysis show two notable findings. First, for each item, the women’s mean score was higher than the men’s. Second, each of the differences in means is statistically significant.

	Gender	n	mean	Diff
Professional Introduction	m	73	5.530	-.509*
	f	67	6.039	
Gains Attention	m	73	5.216	-.563*
	f	67	5.780	
Builds Rapport	m	73	5.043	-.574*
	f	67	5.617	
Smooth Transition	m	73	5.199	-.603*
	f	67	5.802	
* statistically significant (<.05)				

	Gender	n	mean	Diff
Uncovered Decision Process	m	73	5.087	-.756*
	f	67	5.844	
Effectively Determined Relevant Facts	m	73	5.446	-.547*
	f	67	5.993	
Effectively Uncovered Needs	m	73	5.663	-.507*
	f	67	6.170	
Asked Effective Questions	m	73	4.913	-.637*
	f	67	5.550	
Gain Pre-commitment	m	73	4.919	-.857*
	f	67	5.776	
* statistically significant (<.05)				

Table 03c – Present Solutions	Gender	n	mean	Diff
Presented Benefits Based Upon Needs	m	73	5.273	-.548*
	f	67	5.820	
Logical Convincing Presentation	m	73	5.204	-.614*
	f	67	5.818	
Used Appropriate Professional Visual Aids	m	73	5.544	-.666*
	f	67	6.210	
Effectively Demonstrated Product	m	73	5.425	-.652*
	f	67	6.077	
Effectively Involves The Buyer	m	73	5.343	-.601*
	f	67	5.944	
Effective Use of Trial Closes	m	73	4.767	-.828*
	f	67	5.595	
* statistically significant (<.05)				

Table 03d – Handling Resistance	Gender	n	mean	Diff
Gains Better Understanding of Objection	m	73	4.887	-.593*
	f	67	5.480	
Effectively Answers The Objection	m	73	5.047	-.686*
	f	67	5.733	
Confirms Objection is No Longer a Concern	m	73	4.438	-.756*
	f	67	5.194	
* statistically significant (<.05)				

Table 03e – Gaining Commitment	Gender	n	mean	Diff
Persuasive in Presenting a Reason to Buy	m	73	4.780	-.798*
	f	67	5.578	
Asked for Business or Commitment	m	73	4.579	-.964*
	f	67	5.543	
* statistically significant (<.05)				

The items in Tables 03f and 03g are not specific task associated with the sales process, rather they are global evaluations of skills/characteristics associated with sales call effectiveness. Whereas the preceding 20 items were associated with the progression of the sales call (approach – establish need – present solutions – handle resistance – gain commitment), the following five items are typically scored immediately following the respective competitor’s completion of the role-play.

Table 03f – Communication Skills	Gender	n	mean	Diff
Effective Verbal Communication Skills (e.g., listening)	m	73	5.795	-.514*
	f	67	6.309	
Appropriate Nonverbal Communication	m	73	5.899	-.552*
	f	67	6.451	
Verbiage (clear, concise, professional)	m	73	5.886	-.474*
	f	67	6.360	
* statistically significant (<.05)				

Table 03g - Overall	Gender	n	mean	Diff
Salesperson Enthusiasm and Confidence	m	73	5.881	-.649*
	f	67	6.530	
Product Knowledge	m	73	5.982	-.463*
	f	67	6.445	
* statistically significant (<.05)				

## Discussion

The results of this study indicate women outperform men in behaviors associated with effective sales call performance. In each category, Approach, Establishing Needs, Presenting Solutions, Handling Resistance, and Gaining Commitment, women outperformed men. The three greatest differences in means are “Asked for Business or Commitment” (-.964), “Gain Pre-commitment” (-.857), and “Effective Use of Trial Closes” (-.828). Each of these three items is associated with the seller asking the buyer to express at least some favorable disposition to the sales process moving forward. These questions involve a certain amount of risk because they offer the buyer the opportunity to say “no.”

The data presented in Table 03f indicates women are better communicators than men. The judges rated women higher than men in all three assessments of communication skills. These findings provide support for suppositions by Orlob (2018) that women are better listeners and more persuasive when talking. The judges also perceived women as having more enthusiasm and projecting greater confidence than the men (Table 03g). These characteristics help contribute to more effective persuasive communication.

## Limitations

While determining sales performance (revenue generated, number of units sold, new accounts acquired, profitability, etc.) can be straightforward, identifying the variables that affect overall sales performance is not. In this study, we examine the specific sales skills that are pertinent to the actual face-to-face interactions between salespeople and buyers. Additionally, the data examines sales role-play incidences, rather than live sales interactions. Sales role-plays do not carry the weight of losing the sale. However, while these situations are somewhat “contrived,” they are, none-the-less, realistic in the sense that there is a reward at stake and the pressure of performing in a setting where the salesperson is being evaluated on his or her performance. Note: Women and men did not differ with respect to willingness to compete against self, but men had a greater preference relative to women for competing against others (Apicella, Demiral, & Mollerstrom, 2017).



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## Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and Practitioners:

This study explores the influence that gender wields in a competitive sales environment. Emphasis is placed on performance outcome rankings from a buyer or seller being of the same gender vs them being of different genders in order to determine the propensity for females to outperform men in selling products and services. Conclusions and generalizations from this study will propel gender-related research in sales.

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