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**THE PERCEPTION OF A SALESPERSON OF HIS/HER ROLE
IN THE WORKING ENVIRONMENT**

by

A J GOTHAN

Script

Presented as partial fulfilment

of the

Masters degree in Consumer Science

DEPARTMENT OF CONSUMER SCIENCE

UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA

2003

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my sincerest appreciation and gratitude to the following individuals for their contribution to the successful completion of this study:

- Dr. Alet C Erasmus, promoter, for her support, inspiration and endless patience during the duration of this project.
- Prof. Piet de Kock for language editing.
- Prof. Priscilla Botha for encouragement and for opening the world of research in such a way that it did not only seem possible, but also challenging.
- My husband, Herman, and our daughters, Machsie, Adrie and Ali for their encouragement, support and for believing that I would succeed throughout the whole duration of my studies.
- Dear friends that were always supportive and encouraging.
- Above all to my Heavenly Father who carried me through every day.

ABSTRACT

A SALESPERSON'S ROLE PERCEPTION IN THE WORKING ENVIRONMENT

By **Alida Johanna Gothan** (neè De Wet)

STUDY LEADER: **Dr. Alet Erasmus** (University of Pretoria)

Department of Consumer Science,
University of Pretoria
For a Masters degree

Modern market place has increased pressure on salespeople in terms of their role in the working environment and responsibilities they are confronted with on a daily basis. The role of a salesperson in the retail environment in actual fact culminates as a perception of multiple roles (Tyson & York 1996:3) serving **customers**, acting as **employee** and **colleague** that contribute to the growth of the business as well as having **personal expectations** in terms of job fulfillment (Churchill, Ford & Walker, 1990:335).

A salesperson may thus experience *role conflict* or *role ambiguity* that could negatively impact on performance: serving the needs of customers might for example be in conflict with the interests of the business (e.g. admitting poor product performance so that a consumer refrains from an intended purchase). This contributes to imbalances and tension (Churchill *et al* 1990:334, 335).

Within a system's perspective, the role of a salesperson can be interpreted as a *process* that consists of various *elements* (role expectations) that are *transformed* (interpreted) in the work place in terms of a perceived role (*outputs*) that affects

eventual performance. A systems approach acknowledges a constant interface between different role requirements that require of the salesperson to continually adapt (act and react) to address tension (role conflict and ambiguity that may arise) as well as sacrifices required to maintain *equilibrium* (cope). In a systems approach the effect of the influencing variables, namely the employer, the customer, colleagues as well as personal expectations are acknowledged in terms of their individual as well as the eventual integrated affect on role interpretation (Spears & McVaden 1985:26).

RESEARCH PROBLEM

"*To do, or not to do, this is the question!*" The objective of the research project was to give a description - from a salesperson's point of view – of how his/her role in the working environment is collectively interpreted and how it eventually culminates as employee, consumer facilitator, colleague and in terms of personal expectations.

OBJECTIVES

The study was intended at gaining an understanding of a salesperson's interpretation of his/her role in the working environment to (*from a consumer's point of view*), contribute to an understanding of the kind and level of assistance that could be expected in the retail environment and to (*from an employee's point of view*) shed some light on a their loyalty towards the business and colleagues within the boundaries of personal needs and expectations.

RESEARCH APPROACH

An ideographic research strategy was used for an exploratory study, using qualitative techniques (individual interviews and a projective technique) in multiple stages, to gain an understanding of a salesperson's interpretation of his/her role in the working environment (Babbie & Mouton 2001:272).

SAMPLE

The chosen *sample framework* was salespeople of major household appliances, irrespective of age or gender, who have been selling appliances for at least two years - to prevent a sexist approach and to ensure experience of the situation (Babbie & Mouton

2001:173). Participants (the sample) were identified from two large chain stores and two more up market specialty stores with the approval of supervisors.

DATA COLLECTION

Data was collected in phases and data collection and -analysis were closely interwoven to detect shortcomings and to redirect data collection where necessary.

Unstructured individual interviews that are flexible and nondirective were used to encourage unconditional conversations (Kvale 1996:103). Non-verbal reactions of participants were noted to be added to the data, e.g. reluctance to answer and enthusiasm (Babbie & Mouton 2001:291). Interviews were done until it was felt that responses remained consistent and no additional information came to the fore. Five in depth interviews were eventually done.

Apart from being included for the purpose of triangulation, the *projective technique* was an attempt to enter into the private worlds of participants to uncover their inner perspectives without them feeling threatened (Donoghue 2000:47). For this particular study, participants were asked to write down parameters for a "Salesperson of the year"-award in the hypothetical capacity as store manager, salesperson and a consumer who has recently purchased an appliance.

DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Data was transcribed and analyzed after every interview to guide subsequent interviews and to determine the need for follow-up discussions to clarify data (Babbie & Mouton 2000: 490-493). Data collection and -analysis were closely interwoven to detect shortcomings and to redirect data collection where necessary. Transcriptions were analyzed: open coding and axial coding were done to organize and interpret statements in core categories in accordance with study objectives. Data collected through the projective technique was analyzed and interpreted in the same way and findings of both stages were used for a final interpretation and for the purpose of triangulation.

FINDINGS

The *collective role* of a salesperson in the working environment seems complex and stressful. Within the systems perspective it can be explained that the principle

of *equifinality* is applied: alternative routes are followed to cope. Instead of emphasis on *consumer support* that is preferred and emphasized when discussed as a separate role, *sales* are focused on for the better of the business and personal income. In so doing, consumer support is diminished. Commission based remuneration is blamed for poor relations among colleagues (another role that is neglected) because competition for sales prevent them from supporting one another. This contributes to tension in the working environment that is exaggerated by long working hours and lack of acknowledgement by supervisors.

CONCLUSIONS

The collective role of a salesperson seems problematic in terms of the discrepancy in the emphasis on the individual role perceptions by management and salespeople. As is, the consumer seems to be on the losing end and this should be further investigated as a matter of concern - especially regarding durable products such as household technology where the average consumer simply does not have the means and knowledge to make informed, responsible purchase decisions without objective assistance. It further seems as if management in retail will have to refocus in terms of how problems –of which commission based remuneration seems the worst – can be amended.

OPSOMMING

'n VERKOOPSPERSOON SE ROLBESKOUING IN DIE WERKSOMGEWING

Deur **Alida Johanna Gothan** (neë De Wet)

STUDIELEIER: **Dr. Alet Erasmus** (Universiteit van Pretoria)

Departement Verbruikerswese,
Universiteit van Pretoria
Meestersgraad

Die moderne handelwêreld plaas toenemende druk op verkoops personeel in terme van die rol wat hulle in die werksomgewing vertolk, en die verantwoordelikhede waarmee hulle daaglik gekonfronteer word. Die rol van die verkoops persoon in die handelwêreld word in der waarheid saamgestel uit die persepsie van verskeie rolle (Tyson & York, 1996:3), naamlik om kliënte te bedien, om as werknemer en kollega op te tree wat bydra tot die groei van die maatskappy, asook persoonlike verwagtinge wat gekoester word ten opsigte van werksbevrediging (Churchill, Ford & Walker, 1990:335).

'n Verkoops persoon kan dus rolkonflik en rolonsekerheid ervaar wat 'n negatiewe uitwerking op sy optrede sal hê, soos wanneer die bevrediging van die behoeftes van die kliënte bots met die belange van die maatskappy (bv. om 'n swak produk aan die kliënt uit te wys wat dan tot gevolg het dat die kliënt afsien van sy beoogde aankoop van hierdie produk). Dit dra by tot osekerheid en spanning (Churchill *et al*, 1990:334,335).

Vanuit 'n sisteembenadering kan die rolbeskouing van 'n verkoops persoon geïntrepreteer word as 'n proses waar die onderskeie elemente (rolverwagtinge) in die

werksplek saamgevoeg en verander word tot 'n uiteindelijke rolpersepsie (resultaat) wat die verkoops persoon se optrede en gedrag bepaal. Volgens die sisteembenadering bestaan daar voortdurende wrywing tussen die verskillende rolverwagtinge wat die verkoops persoon noodsaak om voortdurend aan te pas (aksie en reaksie) om sodoende spanning wat ontstaan te hanteer (rolkonflik en teenstrydighede wat ontstaan), asook opofferinge wat gemaak moet word ten einde 'n balans te handhaaf (om dit te hanteer). In 'n sisteembenadering word die invloed van die veranderlikes, naamlik die werkgewer, die kliënt, kollegas en ook persoonlike verwagtinge, erken in terme van die individuele invloed wat elkeen het, maar ook in terme van die uiteindelijke saamgestelde effek op die rolbeskouing van die verkoops persoon (Spears & McVaden, 1985:26).

NAVORSINGSPROBLEEM

Die doel van die navorsingsprojek was om 'n beskrywing vanuit die verkoops persoon se oogpunt te gee van hoe sy/haar rol in die werksplek in totaliteit geïntrepreteer word en hoe dit uiteindelik saamgevoeg word tot 'n rol, insluitend as werknemer, verbruikersfasiliteerder, kollega en ook in terme van persoonlike verwagtinge.

DOELSTELLING

Die doel van die studie was om 'n begrip te vorm van die verkoops persoon se beskouing van sy/haar rol in die werksplek ten einde (vanuit die verbruiker se oogpunt) by te dra tot die begrip van die soort en vlak van ondersteuning wat in die handelswêreld verwag kan word, en ook om (vanuit die werkgewer se oogpunt) die verkoops persoon se lojaliteit teenoor die besigheid en kollegas binne die raamwerk van persoonlike behoeftes en verwagtinge toe te lig.

NAVORSINGSBENADERING

'n Ideografiese navorsingsstrategie was gevolg vir 'n verklarende studie, deur gebruik te maak van kwalitatiewe tegnieke (Individuele onderhoude en 'n projeksie tegniek) in verskeie fases, om 'n begrip te vorm van 'n verkoops persoon se interpretasie van sy/haar rol in die werksplek (Babbie & Mouton 2001:272).

STEEKPROEF

Die gekose steekproef is geneem uit die raamwerk van verkoops personeel wat vir ten minste twee jaar groot huishoudelike toestelle verkoop het, ongeag ouderdom of geslag,

om geslagsvoorkeure te voorkom, asook om te verseker dat hulle ondervinding in die bepaalde situasie het (Babbie & Mouton, 2001:173). Deelnemers (die steekproef) is geïdentifiseer uit twee groot kettingwinkels, asook uit twee meer eksklusiewe spesialiteitswinkels, met die goedkeuring van hulle toesighouers.

VERSAMELING VAN DATA

Data was in fases ingesamel en data insameling en – analise was nou verweef sodat tekortkominge dadelik opgemerk kon word, en data insameling herbeplan kon word soos nodig.

Ongestruktureerde en individuele onderhoude wat buigbaar en nie-geforseerd was nie is gebruik om ontspanne gesprekke te voer (Kvale, 1996:103). Nie-verbale reaksies van deelnemers is ook aangeteken en by die data gevoeg, bv. traagheid om te antwoord of 'n gebrek aan entoesiasme (Babbie & Mouton, 2001: 291). Onderhoude is gevoer totdat die verkrygte inligting dieselfde gebly het en geen nuwe inligting na vore gekom het nie. In total is vyf in-diepte onderhoude gevoer.

Afgesien daarvan dat projeksie tegnieke gebruik is om inligting te kontroleer, was dit ook gebruik in 'n poging om deur te dring na die privaat wêreld van die deelnemers en om hulle diepste beskouinge bloot te lê sonder dat hulle bedreig voel (Donoghue, 2000:47). Vir hierdie spesifieke studie was die deelnemers gevra om hulle vereistes neer te skryf vir "Die Verkoopsman van die Jaar", asof hulle die toekenning moet maak as 'n hipotetiese winkelbestuurder, 'n verkoopsman en 'n kliënt wat onlangs 'n toestel gekoop het.

DATA ANALISE EN INTERPRETASIE

Na elke onderhoud is die data getranskribeer en geanaliseer om toekomstige onderhoude te rig en om vas te stel of daar behoefte is aan opvolgbesprekings ten einde data duideliker te omskryf (Babbie & Mouton, 2000:490-493). Data-insameling en – analise was ten nouste verweef, om vroegtydig tekortkominge vas te stel en om die volgende data-insameling anders te beplan, indien nodig. Transkriberings is geanaliseer: oop-kodering en sekondêre kodering is gebruik om stellings te interpreteer en in kernkategorieë te plaas, volgens die studie se doelstellings. Data wat deur die projeksie tegnieke versamel is, is ook geanaliseer en op dieselfde manier geïnterpreteer.

en die bevindinge van beide fases is gebruik vir die finale interpretasie, asook vir kontrole doeleindes.

BEVINDINGE

Die kollektiewe rol van die verkoops persoon in die werksplek blyk ingewikkeld en spanningsvol te wees. Binne die sisteembenadering kan gesê word dat die beginsel toegepas word waar alternatiewe roetes na dieselfde eindresultaat gevolg word, in 'n poging om die vereistes te hanteer. In plaas daarvan om kliëntediens te prioritiseer en te beklemtoon soos wat gedoen word as dit as aparte rol bespreek word, val die klem in verkope op die bevoordeling van die besigheid en op persoonlike gewin. Die gevolg hiervan is dat kliëntediens minder belangrik word. Die vergoedingstelsel wat op die betaling van kommissie berus word geblameer vir die swak verhoudings tussen kollegas (nog 'n rol wat verwaarloos word), aangesien die kompetisie wat tussen hulle ontstaan verhoed dat hulle mekaar help en ondersteun. Dit dra by tot spanning in die werksplek wat vererger word deur lang werksure en 'n gebrek aan erkenning deur toesighouers.

GEVOLGTREKKINGS

Die saamgestelde rol van die verkoops persoon blyk problematies te wees in terme van die teenstrydige beklemtoning van die individuele rolbeskouing deur die winkelbestuur en die verkoops personeel. Oënskynlik trek die verbruiker aan die korste end – 'n saak wat verdere ondersoek noodsaak. Aangesien dit hier gaan oor verkoops personeel van duursame huishoudelike toestelle is dit veral baie belangrik, daar die gemiddelde verbruiker eenvoudig nie die kundigheid of vermoë het om 'n verantwoordbare besluit sonder objektiewe ondersteuning te neem nie. Dit blyk ook verder dat besture in die handel hulle metodes om probleme op te los – waarvan die kommissie-gebaseerde vergoedingstelsel skynbaar die vernaamste is – in herooring sal moet neem.

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MOTIVATION AND BACKGROUND FOR THE STUDY

1

1.1 INTRODUCTION

In a world that has become technologically advanced, globally inspired and highly competitive, the consumer often depends on the salesperson to make a sensible, and satisfying product decision. From a salesperson's point of view, his role in the retail environment may culminate in terms of a combination of factors that may include a sense of responsibility towards the employer, his assistance to the consumer (customer) as well as individual needs and expectations such as job satisfaction and fulfilment. (The *salesperson* refers to both male as well as females although the masculine forms, namely *he/him/himself* have been used in this report through out).

Research that specifically focuses on the role of the salesperson in the working environment generally address specific aspects of the role orientation. It has inter alia been reported that all actions, motivations, and training of salespeople usually aim at satisfying the customer or to improve a salesperson's attitude towards the store (Reynolds & Beatty, 1999:11,13; Van Dolen, Lemmink, De Ruyter & De Jong, 2002:4). This study primarily focused on a salesperson's perception of his role in the working environment acknowledging that certain aspects have already been reported on, but assuming that the complexity of a salesperson's perception of his role is still under researched.

From existing reports it is understood that a salesperson's responsibility in terms of the employer entails the sale of goods and services to increase profit margins towards the growth of the business. For the employer, it is

important that the salesperson realizes how important his role is to ensure the success of transactions, and to stimulate a flow of goods. Salespeople are supposed to contribute to sales and profitability targets, in return for the employer's commitment to provide an environment of financial stability, job security, job satisfaction, as well as opportunities for the salespeople for personal growth (Lynch, 1990:85). In terms of serving the customer, the salesperson serves as the link between the store and the customer, attending to the customers' needs and requests. He forms the link between management's demands and customers' expectations. Serving the needs of the customer, (for example pointing out aspects of poor product performance), might even occasionally be in conflict with the primary interests of the business (Churchill, Ford & Walker, 1990:334). Salespeople are further subjected to the influences of their colleagues, while, in terms of personal expectations and job fulfilment, the salesperson may have specific wants and needs in order to perform the job satisfactorily (Churchill *et al*, 1990:335; Megginson, 1977:1). All these influences shape salespeople's behaviour in the working environment, as well as their perception of the roles they fulfil (Tyson & York, 1996:3).

A salesperson's perception of his role in the working environment eventually culminates as the integrated interpretation of his multiple roles that are a result of the various inputs (expectations, demands and pressures) formally and informally communicated to him by role players during his performance of daily duties. This consequently influences his performance and behaviour in the workplace (outputs) (Churchill *et al*, 1990:334; Kossen, 1983:36). It is inevitable that a salesperson's perception of his role and attempts to fulfil all expectations might create imbalance and tension. It is possible that the salesperson may experience role conflict or role ambiguity, and that may have a negative influence on the task performance of the salesperson (Churchill *et al*, 1990:335).

It has been found and believed for many years that job performance is the result of a combination of variables, including the influence of people (e.g. colleagues), mental cognition (e.g. understanding the formal role description),

and an individual's ability to perform and cope with the particular task (Decker, 2000:2). The action that a person will take in a specific situation will depend upon the behaviour considered to be appropriate for the given role accepted for that situation. A salient identity related to being a salesperson may encourage a person to actively seek out resources that will help him to be a better salesperson and to put in more effort during the performance of his duties (Decker, 2002:2-3; Internet: Fish, Wittman & Arnett:1-2; Internet: Marino, 2001:4).

An understanding of salespeople's interpretation of their role in the working environment will make it possible to attend to imbalances and to initiate actions to improve the performance of salespeople to benefit all parties involved. It could open the way for training programmes that address problems and shortcomings in the work situation that specifically relate to, and will affect salespeople's assistance to consumers, given the fact that consumers have specific expectations of salespeople that do not necessarily direct a salesperson's role behaviour.

1.2 THE SALESPERSON IN THE WORKING ENVIRONMENT

1.2.1 Specializing in sales of household appliances

Electrical household appliances are generally sold in a specialized store or a specialized section of a department store. Salespeople in these departments are expected to comply with the demands and expectations of their supervisors and managers and must have specific product knowledge and expertise to enable them to successfully facilitate the consumers. The job description (if any) of salespeople of electrical household appliances will inter alia include the selling of goods and services (in this instance electrical household appliances) and attending to the demands and expectations of customers (Erasmus, 1998:147; Maedke, Lowe, Boardman & Malouf, 1980:26, 27). It can be described as a highly competitive situation where salespeople are confronted with certain goals predetermined by management and by themselves. Household appliances have become extremely complex

over the years and given the financial implications of any such purchase as well as the limited product experience due to the relatively long service life of appliances, consumers rely on salespeople to assist them during decision-making. Competition among colleagues should also be taken into consideration as having an effect on role perception and job performance. All of these contribute to a salesperson's personal expectations, job fulfilment and progress, and the perception that he will have about his role in the work place (Churchill *et al*, 1990: 338).

1.2.2 The multiple role of the salesperson

Role can be defined as a set of norms or expectations applied to the present holder of a particular position by the various other role players with whom the holder must deal to fulfil the obligations of that position (Internet: Bauer & Simmons:2). The role of the salesperson can thus be described in terms of a predetermined job description and the behaviour and activities expected from the person selling household appliances. The expected behaviour is usually based mainly on the position itself, within a specific context, demanding of specific performance. The behaviour related to a specific role can either be task orientated or it can be relationship orientated (Internet:Jarvis:1). Role parameters represent the range of behaviours acceptable for a given role, and affect commitment in that specific role position. This will inter alia include and/or combine a salesperson's job description from the point of view of the employer, the customer and his colleagues as well as personal interpretation of responsibilities (Churchill *et al*, 1990: 335; Hawkins *et al*, 2001:617; Internet: The solution to the need:2; Schiffman & Kanuk, 2000:112).

This role of a salesperson represents all the activities performed by or expected of any person occupying that position (selling) in a given situation (the store). Jobber (1998:354) lists six enabling functions that are carried out by salespeople, namely prospecting, maintaining customer records and information feedback, providing service, handling complaints, self-management and relationship management. The role is defined largely

through the expectations, demands and pressures communicated to the salesperson by influential others (anyone with an interest in how the salesperson performs the job, e.g. the top management, the supervisor, customers and colleagues) in a formal or informal way (Churchill *et al*, 1990:335; Hawkins *et al*, 2001:617).

Different researchers identify different roles for salespeople (Internet: Achieve Global Research, 2001:1; Internet: Gorelick:2; Internet: Parker:1) , which will further on be discussed as *dimensions* of the integrated role of the salesperson.

1.2.2.1 As expected by the employer

Until very recently, workers in most companies in the USA had to follow the "scientific management" philosophy of Frederick Winslow Taylor who, in 1911, proposed that systemizing efficiency should be the primary focus of corporate managers. He declared: "In the past, man was first. In the future, the system will be first" (Internet: ESOP Association, 1998:1). This unfortunately dehumanized the worker and turned him/her into a disposable tool. The other danger of this system was that it left ownership, control and the distribution of profits in the hands of a small elite of managers.

Fortunately, because of global and technological change, companies are now recognizing the need for new, different ways to do business. New methods are implemented to reward and motivate workers, while controlling costs, and delivering ever-higher levels of value to their customers (Internet: ESOP Association, 1998:1; Internet: Value-based decision-making, 1998:2, 4).

Today a value-based management system is being implemented where value creation is at the core of decision-making, and every person in the company is perceived as somebody who adds value to the company. This new system combines principles of equity (justice and ownership) with principles of efficiency. The objective is to raise the performance of an enterprise and its workers to their highest potential, in order to better serve

their customers and other stakeholders. Salespeople should, within this approach, be motivated and inspired by the manager to perform to their full potential (Internet: Parker:1). Instead of acknowledging the wisdom, knowledge and creativity of only a few, the new system would implement the advantages of recognizing and using the wisdom, knowledge and creativity of every worker. This creates a new management approach that puts people first, and power and responsibility are shifted to every person in the company. Managers implementing this leadership approach tend to provide charismatic and inspirational leadership, intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration to employees. A major end result of such leadership behaviour is that subordinates assume super-ordinate goals, rather than focusing on narrowly focused personal goals (Chopp & Paglia, 2002:1; Internet: Dubinsky, 1999:5; Internet: ESOP Association, 1998:2).

Salespeople are considered as important links between the company and the customers. They play a key role in the image building and presentation of the company. A sales manager's real task is to nurture and to teach his salespeople. Theoretically he should help his salespeople perform better for the greater good of themselves and of the company (Internet: Graham, A:2-4; Jobber, 1998:372). Too much direction can be constraining, but inadequate support is an abdication of managerial responsibility (Internet: Dubinsky, 1999:9). Hal Rosenbluth ascribed the success of his company to putting his employees, rather than his customers, first (Internet: Rosenbluth, 2000:7). This resulted in salespeople giving improved service because they felt positive and inspired. In doing so, the company benefits as a byproduct of the empowering culture, it will heighten teamwork and lower turnover of personnel. It is important that the managers determine what their salespeople's Achilles' heels are, so that they can assist them in the areas that cause problems, rather than let them feel exposed and vulnerable because they know that they have certain weaknesses, without knowing how to cope with them (Internet: Chitwood, 2000:5; Internet: Fish *et al*:2; Internet: Graham:3; Internet: Musser, 1995:3; Sewell & Brown, 1990:53).

To a major extent, the above represents the ideal and does not necessarily reflect the reality.

1.2.2.2 As consumer facilitator

According to Samson and Little (1993:390), today's consumers are the best read, most informed, most intelligent and most demanding in history: "They are not just buying products, they are buying benefits". Consumers want the best value for their money. To provide for these needs, retailers must offer good products and services, via the focused contribution of efficient salespeople. The role of the salesperson becomes even more prominent in the sale of expensive durable goods such as electrical household appliances where the variety on the market and the variation in functional properties and cost complicates consumer decision-making. In order to make an informed decision, consumers need information about the ways in which a product or service will meet their needs, at a price they can afford. They may also be concerned about other factors such as the safety of the product or service, and about the care for the appliance (risk perception) (Wingate, Gillespie & Milgrom, 1975:2). The more the customer has to pay for a product, the more he might want to know about the product or service's features and consequences. Consumers purchase household appliances primarily for the benefits or utility they offer. When making a decision about which appliance to buy, the consumer is influenced by various external and internal factors. The customer's choice of retail store, and perhaps even his selection of a salesperson, may be quite intentional (Du Plessis, Rousseau & Blem, 1999: 40; Erasmus, 1998:146; Hawkins *et al*, 2001:614; Kotler, 1994:35, 172, 173). With the growing trend towards relationship marketing, many sales organizations are focusing on increasing customer satisfaction and loyalty, rather than on simply trying to increase sales (Reynolds & Beatty, 1999:13; Van Dolen, Lemmink, De Ruyter & De Jong, 2002:4). The salesperson plays an important role in building a relationship with the customer, and therefore he must be encouraged and coached towards a positive interaction that benefits the customer, the company and himself (Internet: Palit:3).

The buying process is driven by habitual behaviour and attitudes, and consumers like to do business with people they like and trust. Harvey McKay said: "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care" (Internet: Marino, 2001:4; Internet: The solution to the need 4).

Superior customer service results from proper training, dedication and commitment by salespeople (Van Dolen *et al*, 2002:4). From the manager, down to the salespeople, everyone in the organization is responsible for customer service. Sales people should be trained to provide proper assistance and information that would lead to informed decisions. The salesperson should be sensitive about customers who need an increased amount of counseling or assistance, for example young and inexperienced consumers, and consumers with limited education (Erasmus, 1998:147).

If the customer is satisfied with the information given by the salesperson, he will not look elsewhere for more information. If the salesperson appears to be an expert, the face-to-face communication with the customer will be more persuasive, and the customer will see the salesperson as a credible source of information (Internet: Blaine, 2002:2; Wish, Steely & Tritten, 1978:38-46, 126, 133). Consumer satisfaction has so many advantages that it is unnecessary to speculate about its merits. However, the complexity of the construct and the delicate way in which consumers should be guided and supported in this regard remain problematical. Consumer satisfaction could consequently be regarded as an ideal that would be difficult, although not impossible, to achieve. Taking this into account, consumer support on request, with room for personal interpretation, is perhaps the only acceptable contribution external parties could make to enhance and realize consumer satisfaction (Erasmus & Donoghue, 1998:42).

Understanding customers will contribute immensely towards the quality of service provided to customers (Brooks, 2000:1; Monroe & Cox, 2002:10-13). Customers have a tremendous amount of choice when buying today, and in many cases, customer service is the deciding factor in swinging a purchasing decision. If the salesperson can create a perception that he is really talking and listening to a real person, he will increase the satisfaction of the

customers, and helps to retain them. Superior customer service does not result from slogans or fixed guidelines, only training, dedication and commitment by the salespeople will (Internet: Graham:2-4; Internet: University of Wisconsin: 1; Internet: Weinstein, 2001:2).

In conclusion, a salesperson is expected to be in a friendly relationship with the consumer, where he focuses on interpersonal aspects of selling and the shared purpose of both (Internet: Achieve Global Research:1). The salesperson should also act as a sustaining source of information about the products and services, and he should provide easily accessible support to speed up the sales process and solve customer problems. He should therefore develop an understanding of the customer's needs by carefully extracting information from a prospective customer. The salesperson should also act as a strategic orchestrator that creates connections and manages the selling process well. Lastly the salesperson should also function as a valuable member of the staff. He should be an active member of the team that strives to increase profit and the number of potential customers for the business (Internet: Achieve Global:1; Internet: Gorelick:2).

1.2.2.3 *As colleague*

A salesperson neither works in a vacuum nor singly. To close sales and to ensure future business, they must rely on the active assistance and cooperation of numerous colleagues from every functional area in the business (McCarthy, 2002:1). The salesperson's success always rests upon the interdependent supportive roles of colleagues in the organization. Colleagues are seen as internal customers, and satisfying customer service to these customers will result in a united work force, supporting each other (Internet: Marino, 2001:2).

Nowadays the emergence of personal social networks as the main form of social organization in the workplace enables workers to connect to diverse,

far-flung social networks. The growing use of cell phones and the internet shows that technology and social change are working together to create new organizational configurations such as learning communities, quality circles, virtual teams and communities of practice. Unfortunately the employees do not always rely on one another as members of the same team. Access to information does not come from the established role-based structures in the companies any more. It comes through the employees' own social networks – structures which they must carefully propagate and cultivate themselves. Research found that employees who operated within clearly defined organizational and social roles, were highly familiar with one another and shared considerable social, cultural and organizational knowledge that served as a backdrop for work and communication. Employees working together in a company could therefore have frequent interpersonal communications that contribute to the creation of shared knowledge and facilitate the smooth execution of work tasks (Internet: Nardi, Whittaker & Schwarz:3).

The hierarchy of colleagues may be influential: One of the main roles of a supervisor is to evaluate subordinates. As a result, sales managers have a direct influence on a salesperson's personal level of job satisfaction. Job satisfaction is determined by a person's successes and achievements, by recognition from superiors, the handling of responsibilities and advancement. If role conflict and role ambiguity exists, or if the salary is poor, interpersonal relations are poor, or working conditions are bad, then job satisfaction will decrease. Low performance and dissatisfaction with the job, increase the tendency to leave the company (Internet: Fish *et al*:3; Internet: Manzanilla, Wiggs, Molinari & Rosengren:4-5; Internet: Naumann, Widmier and Jackson, 2000:1; Internet: Pettijohn, Pettijohn & Taylor, 2000:2; Internet: Tippins, 2001:1).

1.2.2.4 *As individual*

The role of the salesperson as anticipated or expected from a personal point of view is *inter alia* determined by personal needs and expectations. Usually

our basic motivation to work is to satisfy the primary needs, identified by Maslow as physiological and safety needs. When feeling safe and secure, a person will strive to reach higher levels, like belongingness and esteem, which can be topped by the ultimate need of self-actualization, only reached by some (Internet: Manzanilla *et al* :1, 2; Motivation through needs, job design and satisfaction: 2). A salesperson will primarily accept the role of employee, in order to provide for his family. This will include the role of father/mother and of provider. He will strive to play the role of a good employee in order to satisfy the employer and to enrich himself by striving to increase knowledge and abilities.

According to Herzberg's two-factor theory, (Tyson & York, 1996:10), the needs of a person can be classified into two categories: so called hygiene factors and motivators. The hygiene or environmental factors in the work situation of a salesperson, which need constant attention in order to prevent dissatisfaction, include pay, rewards, working conditions, security and supervisory styles. Here the salesperson will be a colleague, maybe a supervisor and a friend. As a colleague the salesperson may initiate socialization and he may motivate the others to work together and to decrease tension that may exist. The internal aspects of the working environment will also influence the role of husband or wife, as this will indirectly have an influence on the relationship between the salesperson and his spouse. The working situation can be the cause of much tension, like long working hours, working over weekends and public holidays, and insufficient salaries. Hertzberg says that satisfaction in this category can only come from internal sources and the opportunities afforded by the job for self-fulfilment. It therefore depends largely on the salesperson self how much job satisfaction he will experience (Tyson & York, 1996:10). If an employee is treated in a way that builds his self-esteem, he will feel better about himself, and this will result in better customer service. The better employees feel about themselves, the more effective they are in providing quality service and the better facilitators they will be for the customers. If the salespeople lack confidence in themselves and their ability to do the job, it will be noticed, raising doubts about the company. Confidence comes partly through

knowledge and partly through experience. It is also an attitude that can be nurtured and developed by managers who care about their employees' growth. (Internet: Graham:2-4; McCarthy, 2002:4).

Research has also found a link between successful performance and job satisfaction. The positive effect derived from satisfaction will result in people calculating the salience of their identities (roles). That is, the satisfaction felt by the individual reaffirms the identity, which in turn increases the salience for that identity or role. (Internet: Chitwood, 2000:5; Internet: Fish *et al*:2; Internet: Graham:3; Internet: Musser, 1995:3;).

1.2.3 Interpretation of the multiple roles of a salesperson within the systems theory

The integrated influence of the employer, demands of customers, collaboration with colleagues as well as a salesperson's personal interpretation of his role in the retail environment, represent a closely interwoven situation. The systems theory can be used to discuss the interacting variables on a salesperson's perception of his role in the working environment where specific inputs (different role expectations) are transformed and culminate in the eventual perceived role (output) of the salesperson in the working environment. The integrated interpretation of the multiple roles will eventually determine the perceptions of the salesperson (Cuff & Payne, 1981:23; Haralambos, 1983:9, 521-523).

A system is defined as a collection of interrelated parts or subsystems unified by design or purpose to obtain a certain objective. A system may either be viewed as a closed system that functions on its own, or as an open system that is constantly influenced by the environment. Because of the fact that a salesperson does not work in isolation and that within the business he has colleagues, that there are other similar businesses that provide the same service; that the salesperson has a family that exerts pressure in terms of job performance, etc. this situation can be interpreted as an open system (Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993:333). The environment of the salesperson

is seen as everything that is external to the system, but in some way in direct or indirect transaction with it. The boundaries of the system will therefore mark the interface between the system and its environment. Because human systems are embedded in and transact strongly with their environment, it is not possible to gain a full understanding of human systems apart from the context in which they are found (Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993:333). The systems approach also focuses on the whole process (in this instance role perception as a culmination of different roles), and various elements of the system (specific role perceptions). These are studied with reference to their interactive contribution to the whole system (Gestalt theory), rather than as isolated units. A salesperson's perception of his role will eventually culminate as the end product of the interactive variables (Spears & McVaden, 1985:24-29; Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993:328). It will consequently affect the salesperson's performance in the workplace where constant action between the internal and external environments of the system continually adapts (acts and reacts) to maintain equilibrium. The interdependence between the parts (different role perceptions) means different role perceptions affect one another as interactive parts in the system. Change in one part will lead to change in the other parts. In other words, if the employer has certain demands that affect the salesperson's role as employee, it will also affect a salesperson's role as consumer facilitator. In the situation of the salesperson, change will be monitored by the particular structure of the system, in order to maintain equilibrium or balance in the system among the various parts. The salesperson might for example try to satisfy the employer as well as the customer, but in doing so, he might neglect personal needs and expectations (role of self fulfilment). The objectives of the organization can best be achieved through an understanding of a salesperson's role perception to facilitate the effective use of human resources, along with its financial and physical assets (Megginson, 1977:1).

The systems theory was therefore used as the base from which to study and describe the salesperson's integrated role in his working environment. The focus was on role perception as an output of a system where the employer, the customer, colleagues and personal expectations interplay on a

salesperson's perception or interpretation of his role in the working environment. Having studied previous reports on a salesperson's responsibilities and role behaviour in the working environment, the inputs for this research projects were identified as *the employer, the customer, the colleagues and a salesperson's personal needs and expectations* and their transformation in terms of outputs (perceptions) (Megginson, 1977:12; Spears & McVaden, 1985:26).

The integrated effect of the influencing factors (inputs) is thus discussed in terms of how they are interpreted (transformed) and how they culminate as outputs (a salesperson's role perception). Areas of integration between the subsystems, e.g. between the salesperson and the employer and/or the customer and/or colleagues and/or personal expectations represent the interface of the integrated system. Overlap of these areas may be characterized by tension and friction: for example a salesperson struggles to balance and cope with the demands from various angles (Megginson, 1977:12; Spears & McVaden, 1985:24-30). A salesperson's ability to integrate and manage these variables will determine his role perception.

Control elements and the general feedback into the system affect/determine the flow of the system. The control elements may e.g. include the goals and objectives of the organization (employer). Information is traced from one point in the system, through one or more other parts of the system or its environment, and back to the point of origin. This information is transformed and ultimately fed back into the system as positive or negative feedback, resulting in certain behaviour patterns (Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993:334). Positive results/interpretations are eventually accepted or preferred, e.g. the salesperson repeats a technique to attend to an unhappy customer. Feedback provides information that is essential for the continued effectiveness of the system, and such information may even be memorized to make adjustments to the system: If a customer for example returns with a positive attitude, and if an employer expresses his satisfaction, the role perception of the salesperson will be influenced positively (Spears & McVaden 1985:36).

A salesperson can perceive his role in the working environment in various ways (equifinality). Various routes may thus be followed to achieve the same goal (Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993:334). He can see himself mainly as an employer, as a consumer facilitator or as a person whose personal needs and fulfilment is the most important, or the salesperson can perceive his role in terms of a culmination of all the above mentioned roles. In Consumer Science, the concern would be to understand a salesperson's perception of his role as consumer facilitator in terms of the other roles that have to be attended to. That would provide an understanding of the kind and level of support that could be expected during consumers' purchasing of complex durable goods, which may involve a considerable amount of risk. On the other hand, an understanding of a salesperson's perception of his role in the working environment might also provide valuable insight for employers in terms of a salesperson's contribution towards the business.

1.3 ROLE PERCEPTION IN THE WORK PLACE: THE TRANSFORMATION PROCESS

1.3.1 Perception

Perception is defined as the process by which an individual interprets and transforms stimuli through sense and experience from his environment into a meaningful and logical picture of the world. For this study it refers to an interpretation of the role that the person is fulfilling (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2000:122). It is an active process of gathering sensory information and assigning meaning to it within one's personal frame of reference. This perception is selective, as meaning is given to a limited number of sensations and experiences. A person's memory can screen out or alter conflicting stimuli, and he will selectively recall stimuli especially when the effect of the stimulus is not the same as the feelings of the person towards that subject (Internet: Anatomy of perception:1; Engel, 1968:9, 46-48; Internet: Scott & Brydon, 1996:1). Perception theories are built on the assumption that each stimulus or information input is checked against stored categories of meaning

(frame of reference). The perception of a certain object or phenomenon depends upon unique individual attitudes.

A person's physiological needs, his personal values and expectations will *inter alia* influence his perception. When information is consciously perceived, awareness of the perceived information allows individuals to use this information to guide their actions. The consciously received information greatly influences a person's perception of the world and the objects and events in the world. There is also proof that the behaviour of people can be affected in some way by stimuli that they have not seen (subliminal perception, or unconscious perception). Unconscious perception has an important influence on cognitive and affective reactions, as a person may react automatically on stimuli and this reaction cannot be controlled or even explained. Perceptions formed unconsciously have an important effect on a person's behaviour, as he may react in a way that he assumes is expected of him, without any specific stimuli leading to that conclusion (Kelly, 1974:48; Merikle & Daneman, 1998:1-7; Moore, 1992: 1).

It is important to focus also on a long-standing issue in research – the difference between uniqueness and commonness in perceptions, as both might determine the perceptions formed. In the present context, uniqueness refers to the extent the customer's or salespeople's perceptions are exclusive to their personal interaction. If a customer's perception is unique, this might reflect unique behaviour from the salesperson in a specific and rather unique situation. Commonness reflects the degree to which customers agree in their perceptions of salespeople, and to the extent salespeople are consistent in their perceptions. As such, commonness may reflect a relatively stable salesperson characteristic. When focusing on individual encounters, care should be taken to determine whether the customer's and the salesperson's evaluations of performance and satisfaction are primarily determined by commonness, or by the unique interaction between the salesperson and the customer, or by both. (Van Dolen *et al*, 2002:3,6).

The Gestalt theory serves as the base for the discussion about perception, i.e. to link relevant aspects together. The first concept of perception is sensation. Everything that the salesperson sees, hears or feels will shape his perception of the role he has to fulfil. Independent of one another, each of these sensations will not have sufficient meaning to influence the perception formed. Associations formed in the mind of the salesperson support it. The salesperson will draw from his memory facts that support the association, in order to understand or accept the perception that is formed. The last concept is attention, because without attention, all the stimuli will pass by, and no impact will result in no specific perception formed (Internet: Koffka:1).

1.3.2 Role perception of the salesperson

1.3.2.1 Introduction

Literature suggests that an employee's job performance is a function of five basic factors, namely motivation, aptitude, skills level, role perceptions and personal, organizational and environmental variables. Role perception of a salesperson can thus be defined as the salesperson's interpretation of his duties and responsibilities and personal expectations in the working environment within predetermined parameters such as a job description and a personal frame of reference, strongly influencing the actions and behaviour of the salesperson (Churchill et al, 1990:334 - 335).

The role perception of the salesperson is influenced by various factors. The various influencing factors (inputs) that combine will influence the salesperson's perception of his job performance. Some of the personal and organizational variables can be controlled or influenced by sales management policies and methods, thus allowing the sales manager to influence the performance of individual salespeople (Churchill *et al*, 1990: 336; Ditzenberger & Kidney, 1992:25). The communication between the salesperson and customers is also governed by underlying mechanisms like interpersonal perceptions. Customer's satisfaction is determined not only by

his own perceptions, but also by the perceptions of the salesperson. Similarly the employee's perceptions and satisfaction is driven by the customer's perceptions (Van Dolen *et al*, 2002:1).

Eventually organizational, environmental and personal variables such as his motivation, skills level, his abilities and self-image, influence a salesperson's interpretation of his role and strongly influence his eventual definition or description of his role in the working environment. This perception is formed by the accuracy with which he defines his role, the possible ambiguity between his role perception and the expectations of the management (Churchill *et al*, 1990:335, 359, 364).

Role accuracy experienced by the salesperson refers to the degree to which the salesperson's perceptions coincide with the perception of others. He should determine if his interpretation of the job corresponds with the actual expectations and demands of the supervisors and of the customers. Each of many individuals linked to the salesperson, from the manufacturer through marketing to the manager and the customer, has a certain perception of how the salesperson is supposed to perform. It is also true that a person attends to the beliefs and actions of others to guide his own behaviour in a specific context. If he accurately perceives what is expected of him, he will probably perform well and experience job satisfaction. Inaccurate role perceptions or misjudgments may lead to role conflict and role ambiguity that may have psychological consequences that can be very uncomfortable for the salesperson. This can produce various kinds of emotional turmoil including an overall feeling of anxiety, dissatisfaction with the employer, intolerance towards the consumers, his colleagues, and his job. He may even lose confidence in his ability to perform the sales role successfully. This might have a negative impact on his performance in terms of relations with the management, consumer facilitation, and communication with colleagues. This phenomenon of social proof is one of the most powerful forces that influences people, especially in a particular situation where they feel unsure of themselves (Churchill *et al*, 1990:335, 353, 364; Internet: Rising Star:3-4).

If a person acknowledges and values his identity (role) in the workplace, it will lead to acceptance of the role and probably to job satisfaction.

Successful performance and job satisfaction seem to go hand in hand while the positive effect of satisfaction will result in individuals feeling positive about themselves (Internet: Chitwood, 2000:5; Internet: Fish *et al* :2; Internet: Graham:3; Internet: Musser, 1995:3).

1.3.2.2 *Role conflict*

Role conflict may arise when the salesperson believes that the various roles are incompatible, for example when there is a contradiction between the demands of the customer and management policy (Churchill *et al*, 1990:336; Hawkins *et al*, 2001:155). The salesperson will probably be more susceptible to this kind of role conflict, due to his boundary position in the organization. He is the link between the policies of the firm and the expectations of the customers. If the salesperson perceives his most important role as facilitating the customer and to ensure his satisfaction, conflict may arise when the manager expects the salesperson to hold down selling expenses and customer concessions. Role conflict may also arise when the salesperson perceives his role as employee to be more important than his role in the family. The demands of the management may be in conflict with the expectations of the salesperson's family. If the management expects the salesperson to travel, to be available in the evenings and on weekends and to work flexible hours, it could cause a large amount of stress for the salesperson. Job/family conflict is not unique to salespeople, but its commonness in the sales force should be recognized as a major influence in the performance and experience of job satisfaction by salespeople (Churchill *et al*, 1990:353-359; Internet: Models of salesperson performance:1).

1.3.2.3 *Role ambiguity*

Role ambiguity occurs when the salesperson feels that he does not have all the information to perform his job adequately. He may be uncertain about the expectations that some role partners have on proceeding in certain situations, how he should go about satisfying those expectations or how his performance will be evaluated and rewarded. Role ambiguity leads to uncertainty and probably negativity. If ambiguity can be reduced, the performance will be improved due to higher levels of motivation. This will also increase job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Churchill *et al*, 1990 :336, 354; Pettijohn *et al*, 2000:2).

Apart from gaining an understanding of a salesperson's perception of his role in the working environment, it was hoped that conflicting and ambiguous aspects pertaining to a salesperson's role would also be identified.

PROBLEM STATEMENT AND CONCEPTUALIZATION

2

2.1 PROBLEM STATEMENT

Based on the multiple roles of a salesperson, the following problem statement was formulated: From a salesperson's point of view, how does a salesperson perceive his role in the working environment, acknowledging the individual as well as the integrated effect that the employer, customers, colleagues and personal aspects might have on the eventual interpretation of his role?

2.2 OBJECTIVES

To describe a salesperson's interpretation/perception of his role in his capacity:

- as employee,
- as consumer facilitator or advisor
- as colleague, and
- in terms of personal aspects

in terms of how it culminates in the work place.

To describe a salesperson's interpretation of his role in the work place as a culmination of various individual roles.

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2.3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Concepts pertaining to the research problem were integrated in the following conceptual framework that reflects a systems approach:

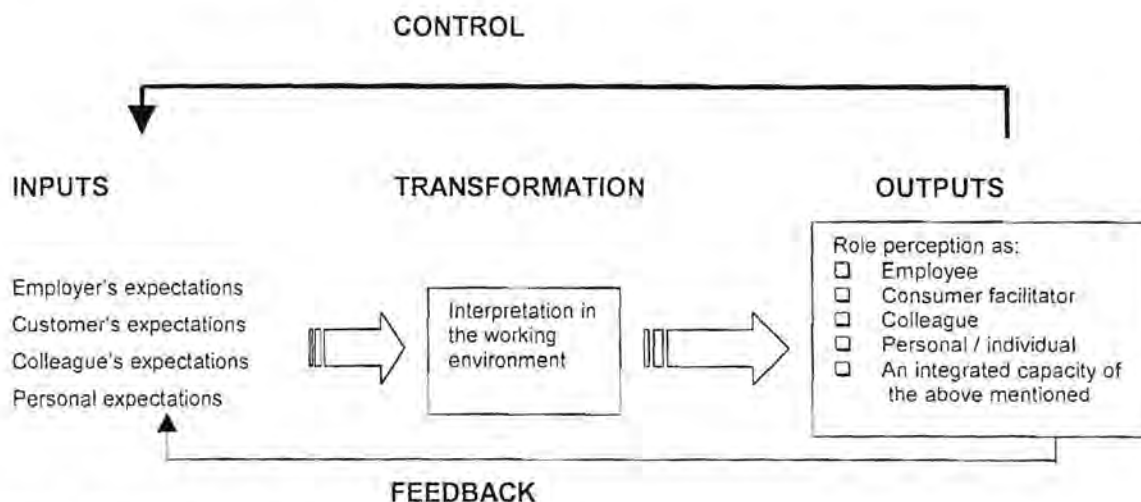


FIGURE 1: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

2.4 DEFINITION OF CONCEPTS

The **employer** is there to help his salespeople to perform better for the greater benefit of the company. He therefore communicates certain demands and expectations concerning how a salesperson as employee should behave in the working environment in order to assist in the increase of sales. This might involve pressure on the salesperson to conform to a specified role (Churchill *et al*, 1990: 235, 350; Mol, 1990:3,4). An employer aspiring for a sales team that is positive, inspired and dedicated will be rewarded with improved customer service. The salesperson in the role of employee experiences all these demands and expectations and he comes to a certain conclusion about the performance and behaviour expected from a salesperson. He forms a perception of the salesperson as employee based on the inputs from the manager and possibly also the supervisors.

Consumers/customers are value-maximizers, within the constraints, of search costs, limited knowledge, mobility and income. Customers expect maximum value for their money and a service that would ease the process of

decision-making, as well as value from the actual transaction, and require after-sales service. A salesperson facilitates consumers and assists in selling specific goods and services (in this case household appliances). Customers are the foundation of a business, keeping it in existence through the money that they spend there (Cheales, 2000:v; Kotler, 1994:37,173;). To the salesperson, the role of consumer facilitator increases in importance as he realizes that this aspect of the salesperson's task does not only consume the greater part of the day, but it is also the aspect that has the largest influence on salary and job satisfaction. Without customers there would be no need for salespeople.

Colleagues refer to salespeople in the same business environment who have a vested interest in how the salesperson performs his job because they might work towards a similar goal and can even be in competition with one another. Colleagues might further serve as role models (Churchill *et al*, 1990:335). The salesperson's personality will have an influence on whether he will give priority to the mutual communication and interaction with colleagues or not. The company's objectives will be reached easier and with much less tension if the colleagues could work together as a team, supporting each other, with less emphasis on the competition existing between them.

Personal expectations strongly influence the definition or interpretation of a salesperson's role in the company and consequently his performance or behaviour while performing the task (Churchill *et al*, 1990:335, 351). The family and the situation at home also influence personal needs and expectations. The salesperson may strive to meet all expectations communicated to him by the employer and by customers, striving to achieve specific goals and to reach job satisfaction, but he may be hampered in this by family member's negative reaction towards long and demanding working hours.

RESEARCH APPROACH

3

3.1 RESEARCH STRATEGY

The research project was exploratory in kind and intended to make an in-depth study of a smaller sample rather than to generalize about the larger population. It was meant as a pilot study that could later be extended to a quantitative survey, involving several retailers and involving of a representative sample of salespeople. An ideographic research strategy was used (Babbie & Mouton, 2001:272, 281; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995:24, 25; Mouton, 1996:78).

Qualitative techniques were used to gain an understanding of the salesperson's interpretation of his role in the working environment (an emic approach) (Babbie & Mouton, 2001:291). Individual interviews and projective techniques were used and an inductive approach was followed. The textual data was analyzed and it will be used to formulate hypotheses for further study (Babbie & Mouton, 2001:273; Mouton, 1996:80).

3.1.1 Sample framework

Salespeople were recruited from larger retail stores to participate in the research project.. Participants had to be people with more than two years experience of selling electrical household appliances to ensure experience and knowledge of the situation. It was also important that they were involved in the selling of household appliances at the time of the study, to ensure the

gathering of current and valid reports and data that apply to the situation (Babbie & Mouton, 2001:288). The sample was chosen irrespective of age or gender to prevent a sexist approach (Babbie & Mouton, 2001:173,175; Mouton, 1996:110).

3.1.2 Sampling

Three salespeople were initially recruited for the interviews. They were from different major chain stores in popular shopping centers. They were identified with the help and permission of their supervisors to ensure that they would have permission to participate and thus be at ease during the interviews (Babbie & Mouton, 2001:191, 287-292). The fourth participant was chosen from the same chain store group as the first, as the first salesperson tended to be negative, and the researcher had to ascertain whether the negativity was due to personal characteristics or to conditions in the in store environment. Interviewee number five was chosen from a chain store in a different area to prevent geographical factors from dominating the data.

3.1.3 Data collection site

The researcher approached the manager of each store to gain permission for salespeople to participate. Interviews were done with suitable, willing candidates in private offices in the stores, ensuring privacy without interruptions. The researcher also asked every participant's permission to record interviews for transcription (Ferreira *et al*, 1988: 143).

3.1.4 Data collection

Data was collected in two phases. Data collection and analyses were closely interwoven so that early analysis could detect shortcomings that could be attended to in time.

To ensure true triangulation of the study, peer debriefing was used to confirm data during phase 1 (Babbie & Mouton, 2001:277).

3.1.4.1 Phase 1: Individual interviews

Objectives: The qualitative interview is a flexible and dynamic technique and has been referred to as nondirective, unstructured, non-standardized and open-ended (Botha, 2001:13). It was therefore expected that salespeople would describe their experiences and also their perception of their experiences during an unstructured, open-ended interview. The salesperson's reactions and participation during the interview eventually resulted in them exposing their perspectives of their world and of the roles that they play in that world. The salesperson had to understand that his specific role and responses were important for the validity of the data collection process. They were asked for information about things that they were likely to know the answers to, things relevant to them. The researcher was sensitive for participants that believed they could answer any question (the omniscient syndrome). The researcher used certain pre-mediated questions during relatively unstructured interviews to mobilize and guide the discussions, ensuring that only valid answers were obtained (Babbie & Mouton, 2001:291; Fontana & Frey, 1994:366-369; Kvale, 1996:103; Mouton, 1996:149 – 157).

Procedure: As the interview is a secondary relationship entered into by the researcher and the salesperson, care had to be taken to create an atmosphere of trust and confidentiality in which the salesperson would willingly share his mind and thoughts with the researcher. The main challenge was to get close to the research subject and to create an "I – Thou" relationship, in order to generate legitimate and valid "insider" descriptions (emic approach). The valid opinions of the participant were allowed to surface in a free and objective discussion about the topic. To reach this point, the researcher had to establish rapport with the participant where mutual respect and sensitivity for differences were shown. No effect of the differences between participants, such as gender, status or race, was

emphasized. In order to get reliable answers from the participants, the researcher strived to establish the best possible interpersonal relationship with the participants (Babbie & Mouton, 2000:125; Mouton, 1996:149 - 157; Neuman, 1991:164). Anonymity of the responses and observations were emphasized to prevent participants from being reluctant to share sensitive information (Babbie & Mouton, 2001: 273; Botha, 2001:13,17; Ferreira, Mouton, Puth, Schurink & Schurink, 1988:146-150).

The manner and wording of the questions were varied to suit each situation. Opportunities suggested by the participant's replies were followed up and new categories were established in this way. Non-verbal cues of the participant were watched very carefully and interpreted and were added to the data collected verbally (Babbie & Mouton, 2001:291; Botha, 2001:13; Fontana & Frey, 1994:371). It was for example noted that the participants reacted spontaneously and with enthusiasm to questions about their facilitation of customers, in contrast to their reluctantness to talk about their relationship with their colleagues. These were noted.

The study was carefully planned to determine the specific knowledge to be obtained. Open-ended questions were formulated and put to all the participants in a fairly similar sequence, but each participant had to reply in his own words. The researcher strived to be objective and flexible and to direct the interview according to the interview guide, following up replies with open-ended questions to elicit deeper information. Follow-up (probe) questions were sometimes needed to lead participants to answer more fully or accurately, for example on the relationship with colleagues. Questions about a specific aspect were sometimes rephrased and repeated at a later phase in the interview to confirm answers and reactions given earlier in the interview. An effort was made to ensure that all topics of interest to the interviewer were covered without allowing the amount of irrelevant information to increase (Bailey, 1978:172; Botha, 2001:13-17; Ferreira *et al*, 1988:141; Fontana & Frey, 1994:365; Kvale, 1996:84; Manheim & Simon, 1977:213). During every interview questions about the various concepts were repeated in different ways to verify previous answers and opinions.

3.1.4.2 Phase 2: Written response to specific questions

To enhance the validity of the data gathered in the interview, a projective technique was used, to help the researcher to enter the private worlds of participants to uncover their inner perspectives in a way they felt comfortable with (Botha, 2001:13). Vague, ambiguous, unstructured stimuli were used to create a situation in which the participant could project his personality, attitude, opinions and self-concept. The aim was to uncover the person's characteristic modes, in which he perceives his world, as well as unconscious desires and feelings. As the participants were free to interpret and express their feelings and opinions, and as there were no right or wrong answers, it was assumed that they would project their own unconscious feelings in their answers (Donoghue, 2000:47, 48).

Further discussions were held with the same participants. In an effort to consider the responses of the previous phase for the purposes of triangulation, they were asked to write down the parameters for "Salesperson of the Year"- award if they hypothetically acted in the capacity as:

- store manager;
- a salesperson with personal experience of the work situation;
- a consumer/customer who has recently been served/assisted by a salesperson that sells electrical appliances

The idealistic perceptions of an award-winning salesperson were then compared with the perceptions formed in real life as these were portrayed during the interviews. One of the interviewees even identified one of his colleagues as being the ideal person to receive the reward of "Salesperson of the Year", describing all the desirable characteristics he possessed.

3.1.5 Data analysis

Data was analyzed to identify role perception from the different perspectives, namely from the manager's, customer's, colleague's and also from the salesperson's personal point of view. The overall meaning and consistency of the data in terms of relevant concepts were taken into consideration, to determine the transformation of the various inputs. A holistic interpretation of the conceptual data was used to describe the perspective of the salesperson about his role in the work environment. Following recommendations of Babbie and Mouton, (2000:490 – 493), data was analyzed after each interview to guide the subsequent data collection, to determine if follow-up discussions would be required to clarify any aspects (Mouton, 1996:168; Neuman, 1991:418 – 421).

The first interview was with a salesperson from a large chain store. The interview was transcribed and then analyzed with coloured markers. Using open coding, four categories were identified (Babbie & Mouton, 2000:499). Data was classified within the main concepts, namely the employer, the customer, the colleagues and the salesperson self. After identifying subcategories within the main concepts, the connections and influences of the concepts on one another were described through axial coding (Babbie & Mouton, 2000:500). The data produced by the projective technique was independently classified into the same categories and subcategories, namely the employer, the customer, the colleagues and the salesperson himself.

During the first interview tension and negativism were sensed concerning the relationship with colleagues. The second interview was held with a salesperson of another store, but in the same area. The researcher was aware of the relationship between the colleagues, and found that questions about the relationship had to be stressed and repeated to get information. The second interview was transcribed and analyzed in the same way as the first, and data from the projective technique was added according to the main concepts.

The third interview was held with a salesperson from a different store. Again the interview was transcribed and analyzed, and the data from the projective techniques was added before proceeding to interview four with an individual from the same area as number one, but from a different store. After analyzing the data collected from the fourth participant, the researcher decided that data regarding the employer, the customers and from the salesperson himself was spontaneous and a useful contribution. Data about colleagues was however more difficult to extract. With the exception of the third interviewee, participants were less anxious to elaborate and had to be encouraged. Interviewee number five was then taken from the same kind of store as number three, but from a different area, considering the possibility that the working conditions in the specific store might have contributed to more spontaneous response.

After five interviews with salespeople from different stores in different areas it became clear that the same information was repeated and the researcher decided to suspend the interviews.

RESULTS

4

PART 1: RESULTS OF THE INTERVIEW TECHNIQUES

Having coded and clustered the data as described in 3.1.4.1, it was organized under headings in accordance with the initial objectives of the study (as outlined in 2.2) and are thus presented.

Where all participants basically conveyed the same message, the statements were grouped as so called consensus statements. Slight or major differences were grouped as individual statements, to be discussed as such.

4.1 A SALESPERSON'S PERCEPTION OF HIS ROLE AS EMPLOYEE

4.1.1 Consensus statements within a task orientated context

Tasks identified and described during the interviews were grouped in terms of **organizational** or **administrative** tasks, **product knowledge** and **performance** related and summarized in the following tables in order to group similar information for the purpose of providing a coherent description of various roles.

Throughout, the exact wordings of participants are reflected in the tables.

4.1.1.1 Organizational or Administrative

The following responses gave a mutual impression that the role of a salesperson includes very specific organizational responsibilities. Participants listed the same tasks spontaneously.

Tim:	<i>You must keep the department clean; You must clean everything. You get new prices and changes the price tags with the correct credit detail. Sometimes you have to call the suppliers to get information for the customer.</i>
Bata:	<i>I clean my desk; the place (department) must be clean. Then I make sure that the prices are right. It is up to yourself to go to the computer and check the prices on your floor. I call the manufacturer to send out the technician if a customer has a problem.</i>
Suzy:	<i>I have my own cleaning equipment to keep my machines clean. They notify us if they change a price. We get a memo that from this or that day this price will be changed to that. Then we change the prices. I must see that every appliance has a price tag. I call the suppliers if a customer needs technical advice.</i>
Pete:	<i>We clean everything before the store opens. I take the prices once a week from the computer and change the prizes on the appliances accordingly. If the customers ask technical questions and I can not help them, I phone the suppliers to get the answers.</i>
Wally:	<i>We clean our department every morning. We change the prizes according to a print out that we get once a week. If needed, I will get technical information from the suppliers and call the customer back.</i>

(Abbreviations : T=Tim, B=Bata, S=Suzy, P=Pete, W=Wally)¹

4.1.1.2 Product specialist

Participants mentioned spontaneously that they have to be well informed in terms of product knowledge.

T:	<i>You have to teach yourself about the appliances. You are not trained by someone, you must teach yourself because you must know how everything works. You sometimes have to communicate with the suppliers about the appliances to get the right information for customers.</i>
B	<i>I read the manuals of the machines mainly to refresh my memory. I must know how to use them.</i>
S	<i>You must know your stuff and have to read the manuals regularly. I made it my responsibility to know how every machine works. The reps come like once a week, and I ask them, just to recap, especially about new products.</i>
P	<i>I know the appliances. The suppliers call us for training sessions on the new appliances.</i>
W	<i>Over the years I gained experience and knowledge on the appliances. You learn something new every day. You learn all the time. If someone asks you a question you cannot answer, it may cost you the sale. Product knowledge is very important. We read the manuals. The suppliers come and give us training, especially on new products. You must know your product.</i>

¹ In the rest of the document, individuals will be referred to as T (Tim); B (Bata); S (Suzy); P (Pete); W (Wally)

4.1.1.3 Performance related

Participants clearly stated that a salesperson has to contribute to increased sales for the benefit of the company as well as for personal gain in terms of incentives and commissions earned.

T	<i>You have to stand the whole day to be available at all times so that you do not loose customers and loose sales. You should not loose sales. They must give you some incentives to motivate you.</i>
B	<i>We have to sell. Extra money for a big sale would have helped.</i>
S	<i>I sell as many appliances as possible. Last month, I was tops. I wrote R450 000. So I got a television set as a reward. So now I am going to write R500 000. The salesperson creates his own income with commission.</i>
P	<i>It is important to sell something that is good for the company too. We get commission on all sales. It makes it worthwhile. The salary is not much, but if you work hard, the commission can help to make it better.</i>
W	<i>You are responsible for your own salary. You can not point fingers. If you are not satisfied with your salary, you can only blame yourself. I am up and down all the time, because if you sit down, you loose sales. You must greet the customer within five minutes after he has entered the store. I have won various competitions, like one from Defy and one from Whirlpool.</i>

4.1.2 Statements within a task orientated context that were not necessarily confirmed by all

4.1.2.1 Organizational or Administrative

Certain **positive aspects** were mentioned by some individuals, referring to their role/contribution in terms of the store's administrator.

T	<i>None.</i>
B	<i>We have meetings every Wednesday to talk about our problems; the management listens and helps us.</i>
S	<i>Every Thursday we have a meeting to discuss problems; management listens, and they do something to help. We will talk about problems. And if we think otherwise, we will say "Why can't we do it like this?" And we will talk about both sides. I was given the responsibility to represent the sales team in a work shop on salaries. I must see that my stock for deliveries are ordered and booked for deliveries.</i>
P	<i>Every week we have a meeting where we talk about our problems. The management helps us to sort it out.</i>
W	<i>Every Thursday morning we have a meeting where we talk about everything. If you do not talk, nobody will know what you are thinking. Management helps us when we have problems. They also help us to please the customers.</i>

A negative comment

T	<i>The management uses a system that makes it very difficult for the salesperson to do his job. Sometimes the system forces you to keep your customer waiting, and that is very frustrating. If the system is not efficient, it increases problems, and your clients are kept waiting. If you have a problem, you have to follow a certain line with your complaint that takes time and causes frustration.</i>
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4.1.2.2 *Product specialist*

All participants described salespeople as assistants that have to be well informed, although different options were given to obtain the relevant knowledge. It seems as if it is the salesperson's own responsibility to master the situation.

T	<i>We used to have training courses from the suppliers in the past, but not anymore.</i>
B	<i>The manufacturers come around to do training on new products.</i>
S	<i>When I became a saleslady, I had a very wonderful manager that sent me to some suppliers where I was trained. We get regular training. The reps come like once in a week, and I ask them, just to recap, especially about new products.</i>
P	<i>The suppliers invite us for training sessions, especially on new products.</i>
W	<i>Product knowledge is very important. The suppliers come and train us, especially on new products. You must know your product.</i>

4.1.2.3 *Performance related*

The important role of the salesperson in the work environment in terms of turnover became clear and included reference to acknowledgement through commission and other incentives:

T	<i>Our contribution in retail in terms of sales is not appreciated because the manager has not been a salesperson himself otherwise he would have understood us. You have to work extra ordinary hard for little commission. There is nothing that motivates you.</i>
B	<i>There are no rewards like a structure of ranks based on your work. So much work and not much commission.</i>
S	<i>We get rewards that motivate us to reach our sales goal; the commission makes your hard work worthwhile. The salesperson must be available to the customer at all times.</i>
P	<i>You get commission on sales that make the salary better. The suppliers also pay incentives for selling their products.</i>
W	<i>The customers are the backbone of the company, but without us, there will be no customers. We work on a basic salary plus commission. You create your own salary. If you have worked hard, you will see the results on your pay slip. When the company made target, they took us all for a breakfast.</i>

4.1.3 *Consensus statements within a relationship orientated context*

Statements with regards to a salesperson's role **to stand in for management** were made by all. They also mentioned that management trusted a salesperson's responsibility **to perform and manage the relevant duties relating to the job**. A salesperson seldom gets a job description as management relies on their experience and insight to do their job.

T	<i>They trust us to act on their behalf when it comes to product knowledge and redressing of customer problems. Management do not always have much knowledge about the products, they only manage. The last time when I had a job description was five years ago when I started here. Now the manager relies on me to do what I should.</i>
B	<i>I try to handle the customer's problem on behalf of the management until I cannot anymore. The right way is to let the salesman try to help the customer first. I have been in sales since 1995. I do not have a job description.</i>
S	<i>If a customer has a problem, you are expected to call the manufacturer to send out the technicians. If the appliance must be exchanged, you hand the customer over to the management to finalize that. I have a wonderful manager. She trusts me to do my job.</i>
P	<i>If the client returns a product within 14 days, I can exchange it. If I can not help a difficult client, the manager will take over. I do not have a job description. We are trusted to do our job.</i>
W	<i>It is my duty to get the appliance into the client's house and I must see that it is working to the satisfaction of my client. It is my duty to see that the client is happy. I have sold household appliances for 15 years now. I love customer service. I do not need somebody to sit on my head.</i>

4.1.4 Statements within a relationship orientated context that were not necessarily confirmed by all

- Individual statements in terms of the relationship between a salesperson and management revealed different interpretations of how they perceived **they are valued**, and these may be indicative of conflict in terms of their perceived role and the experience in reality.

POSITIVE STATEMENTS

T	<i>None</i>
B	<i>None</i>
S	<i>The commission is worthwhile, oh yes! Incentives for hard work make me try even harder. They said they were not going to accept my resignation, as they did not want to loose me, they will train me. We do get time off as a reward. And if you have reached a certain goal, you get a gift voucher.</i>
P	<i>We get commission on sales, and it is worthwhile. We also get incentives from the suppliers for selling their products. If you work hard the commission helps you to make your salary better.</i>
W	<i>We work on basic salary plus commission. You are thus responsible for your own salary. The manager does not have to sit on my head to make me work hard.</i>

NEGATIVE STATEMENTS

T	<i>Management does not care about us. Nobody takes care of incentives. A salesperson is not seen as a valuable asset to the company.</i>
B	<i>You do not get rewards for a job well done or for a good sale. There are no rewards like a rank structure.</i>
S	<i>None</i>
P	<i>None</i>
W	<i>None</i>

- Individuals differed in terms of the role of management to provide them with **support** and to cope in the work environment and whether the role of a salesperson is supposed to be that of an independent worker or assistant.

POSITIVE STATEMENTS

T	<i>None</i>
B	<i>None</i>
S	<i>I can do my job without worries, because the management supports me. My manager is very supportive. You know the customer is always right, but she always helps us when we have a problem.</i>
P	<i>Every week we have a meeting where we talk about our problems. Management helps us to sort it out. The manager will take over if I can not help a difficult client. He supports me.</i>
W	<i>Management helps us when we have problems. They care for the customer, but they help us too. Without us there would be no customers. So management assists us in pleasing the customers.</i>

NEGATIVE STATEMENTS

T	<i>If you ask for something, they say no; even if you really ask for a special favour you still don't get it. The manager did not help me when I wanted to put up a new display. It is sometimes difficult to get the management to assist.</i>
B	<i>I do not understand a problem with my salary and when I queried it, they said there is nothing to be done now. You do not always get help with a personal problem. You have to fight your own battles – they do not understand your problems.</i>
S	<i>None</i>
P	<i>None</i>
W	<i>None</i>

- Participants differed in terms of their role to give **inputs/opinions/contributions** to the management in terms of policies and procedures. This reflected instances of role conflict.

POSITIVE STATEMENTS

Some individuals mentioned that the role of a salesperson to contribute in terms of the procedures or systems of the company is important enough to be taken into account.

T	<i>None</i>
B	<i>The management listens and gives us guidelines. Yes, we have good communication with our management.</i>
S	<i>Mutual understanding creates a good relationship with the management. On a meeting we will talk about both sides. It's wonderful that they trust me to help to talk about our salaries. Management listens, and they do something to help. Problems are solved during a meeting where we have an input. Our opinion on aspects like salaries is valued.</i>
P	<i>If I have a different opinion about something in the system, management will listen, and we will talk about it.</i>
W	<i>On Thursday's meetings we talk about everything. You must express your feelings, or nobody will know what you are thinking.</i>

NEGATIVE STATEMENTS

T	<i>The management makes the decisions, our opinion do not count. You get frustrated when the system prevents you to treat your customer nicely. It is not possible for me to stress a point to the manager. Management does not listen to our complaints about the system. When anything goes wrong in your department, you are held responsible. The system makes it very difficult to be a salesperson – you cannot always keep the management and the customer happy. I try to keep the management happy, but I do not always succeed.</i>
B	<i>None</i>
S	<i>None</i>
P	<i>None</i>
W	<i>None</i>

- Participants differed in terms of their **subordination** to management, which revealed further instances of ambiguity (submissive/obedient).

POSITIVE STATEMENTS

The opinion of a salesperson on the procedures or systems of the company is important enough to be taken into account.

T	<i>None</i>
B	<i>The management listens and gives us guidelines. Yes, we have good communication with our management.</i>
S	<i>Mutual understanding creates a good relationship with the management: On a meeting we will talk about both sides. It's wonderful that they trust me to help to talk about our salaries. Management listens, and they do something to help. Problems are solved during a meeting where we have an input. Our opinion on aspects like salaries is valued.</i>
P	<i>If I have a different opinion about something in the system, the manager will listen and we will talk about it.</i>
W	<i>On Thursdays' meetings we talk about everything. You must express your feelings, or nobody will know what you are thinking.</i>

NEGATIVE STATEMENTS

Some individuals stated that their role was not perceived to be important enough to the management to be taken into account in terms of management decisions.

T	<i>Management is too scared to handle irresponsible workers. It is very frustrating, but it is no use getting angry with the management because they are superior. They accuse the salespeople of not having respect for the management.</i>
B	<i>Management does not consider our union membership to be important: if you go to the union meeting, you may not take lunch.</i>
S	<i>None</i>
P	<i>None</i>
W	<i>None</i>

4.2 A SALESPERSON'S PERCEPTION OF HIS ROLE AS CONSUMER FACILITATOR

4.2.1 Consensus statements in a task orientated context

A salesperson's role as consumer facilitator was unanimously and spontaneously described in terms of providing product information, advice on prices and financial aspects and ensuring the customer's satisfaction. There seemed to be no problems for participants to describe this specific role.

4.2.1.1 *Product advisor*

- **Product specifications**

T	<i>Basically you must tell the customers everything. Some customers do not always ask for advice, and they sometimes come back with a machine that does not suit their needs. Some customers look for a second opinion. You often have to answer enquiries from your customers over the phone. Customers must be advised on which appliance to buy, as they do not always know which one has the properties they are looking for.</i>
B	<i>I must tell the customer how to use the machine, especially a new customer with a new house who never had any machine. He wants you to tell him everything. It is your duty to warn customers if problems occur often with a specific machine.</i>
S	<i>I help the customers to choose. I give them information and advice about the appliances. I will advise a customer about the appliance he /she wants to buy, without talking bad about the other products.</i>
P	<i>I must take care of the customer, make sure he is happy. I first ask what he wants, and then I sell him something that suits his needs. They want to know the prize. Then they want to know which appliance will last the longest. They also want to know how it works.</i>
W	<i>I sell solutions. People come in here and they have a problem. They are looking for a solution. You tell the customers the advantages and the disadvantages of the product. You help them and you answer all their questions.</i>

- **Details of the guarantee and after sales service**

T	<i>Consumers are not very interested in guarantees. You have to explain the detail of the guarantees. They do not realize that the guarantee can be violated if they do something wrong. They do not know about guaranties.</i>
B	<i>Customers do not know how the guarantee works. They do not read the detail in the manual.</i>
S	<i>You have to explain the detail of the manufacturer's guarantee I have to explain to them about the extended guarantee that our company offers to customers.</i>
P	<i>I have to explain the guarantee. They know about it, but they do not always read what it says. I also have to explain about the 14 days limit for returns.</i>
W	<i>The guarantee on appliances is simple. But the client does not read the detail, and you must explain it to them. It is my duty to sell him also the extended guarantee of our company as it protects him.</i>

- **Technical advice**

T	<i>There are some customers that require technical information.</i>
B	<i>If a customer needs technical information, I will try to help him, or I will call the technicians if I do not know the answers.</i>
S	<i>I do not know much about the technical aspects, but I will help the customer as much as I can. Or I will give them the telephone number of the supplier if he wants more information, and he can talk to him.</i>
P	<i>Sometimes customers ask technical questions. I help them as far as I can. If I can not help, I phone the suppliers and ask them.</i>
W	<i>If needed, I will get the information from the suppliers and then I will call the customer back. It is important to advise the customer on all aspects.</i>

- It became clear that the role of the salesperson to act as **consumer facilitator** is his own responsibility.

T	<i>You must have the knowledge to answer the customer's questions.</i>
B	<i>I read the manuals, because I must know how to use the machines.</i>
S	<i>I made it my responsibility to know how every appliance works.</i>
P	<i>I know these appliances and how everyone works.</i>
W	<i>Over the years I have gained experience. You must learn all the time. You learn something new everyday. We read the manuals. You must know your product.</i>

4.2.1.2 Financial advisor

T	<i>Customers are very aware of prices. They also take service and other costs into consideration. You must give the customers reasons for higher prices, because they come to us for our low prices. If he has to pay more for a better product, he may need reassurance that it is worthwhile. Some consumers are willing to pay more if they think it is better quality. Customers want value for their money.</i>
B	<i>The customer is firstly interested in the price. They ask about the money they have to pay. You must explain that they also have to pay for delivery, financing, and insurance.</i>
S	<i>I do sometimes advise them about delivery costs and insurance. I do not really handle financial matters. I hand the customer over to the guys in the office who handle the money aspects.</i>
P	<i>Customers want to know the prize, and they want to know which appliance will last the longest.</i>
W	<i>If the clients are going to sign a contract, I take them to the guys at the back. They take it from there.</i>

4.2.1.3 Consumer support

T	<i>You must help an unhappy customer, but if he needs more that you may offer, you must refer him/her to the manager. You must make sure that the customer is happy by selling him what he needs. If I sell something to a customer, I want him to be happy. Customers are very hurried now adays, you should not waste their time.</i>
B	<i>I try to handle the problem of an unhappy customer. It is my responsibility to try and help him. I call my customers that had deliveries to ask if they are happy.</i>
S	<i>It is my responsibility to call customers to check if they are happy with their appliances/purchases.</i>
P	<i>I must take care of the customer, make sure he is happy. If the customer has a problem, we will sort it out. The customer must be happy. Customer satisfaction is very important. The customer must be happy.</i>
W	<i>It causes pressure for me if the suppliers let me down and I can not please the customer. People come in here with a problem. They are looking for a solution for that problem. I must sell them the solution. The customer is very important. You help the customer and answer their questions. It is my duty to see that the customer is happy.</i>

4.2.2 Statements in a task orientated context that were not necessarily confirmed by all

4.2.2.1 *Product advisor*

Some of these statements reveal slight nuances of a difference in terms of role interpretation.

T	<i>Customers must be advised on which appliance to buy, as they do not always know which one has the properties they are looking for. Some customers do not always ask for advice, and they sometimes come back with a machine that does not suit their needs. Some customers look for a second opinion. You often have to answer enquiries from your customers over the phone.</i>
B	<i>It is your duty to warn customers if problems occur often with a specific machine.</i>
S	<i>I will advise a customer about the appliance he wants to buy, without talking bad about the other products.</i>
P	<i>My job is to change the customer's mind. I must ask him what he wants, then I must sell him something that suits his needs, but something that is also good for the company.</i>
W	<i>I do not sell appliances, I sell solutions.</i>

4.2.2.2 *Financial advisor*

T	<i>You must give the customers reasons for higher prizes, because they come to us for our low prizes. If he has to pay more for a better product, he may need reassurance that it is worthwhile. Some customers are willing to pay more if they think it is better quality. Customers want value for their money.</i>
B	<i>None</i>
S	<i>I do not really handle financial matters. I hand the customer over to the guys in the office who handle the money aspects.</i>
P	<i>I do not handle financial aspects. We are a cash store, and the customers pay at the till.</i>
W	<i>Customers will come to our store, even if we are not the cheapest. They know we will look after them. A clever customer never minds to pay more for a better product.</i>

4.2.3 Consensus statements in a relationship orientated context

4.2.3.1 *Being the trusted consumer advisor*

T	<i>I have a good relationship with my customers. I talk to them as if they are my friends. If you do not talk to your customer, he is not going to buy from you. If a client talks to me, and he trusts me, I will sell something to him. Unfortunately not many people listen to us, because they do not trust us. I will sell the product that is best for the customer, because I want him to be happy. I do not want him to come back with a problem.</i>
B	<i>The customers believe me, they accept my advice. When certain machines give repeated problems, you should tell the customer. From my side that is the right thing to do.</i>
S	<i>My customers believe me and trust me. You have to be honest with your customer.</i>
P	<i>You have to talk to the customer. Greet him nicely and ask what he is looking for, then he will trust you. If we have repeatedly problems with a product, I will warn the customer to buy something else. I do not want to sell him something that will break.</i>
W	<i>In the past customers did not trust the salesperson, but nowadays they listen to you. They would even ask your advice. Maybe they trust us more. If a product gives problems, I will advise the customer to choose something else. In a professional manner you must change his mind. You must create trust by greeting him nicely and by giving him a warm smile. Talk to him in his mother tongue if possible.</i>

4.2.3.2 Supportive towards consumer satisfaction

T	<i>You must keep the customers happy – they pay your salary. It is your duty to redress customers with problems in such a way that they feel satisfied.</i>
B	<i>You must treat the customer nicely. You must keep a customer happy.</i>
S	<i>I do not want them to be back with something they are unhappy about. Sometimes we have a difficult customer here. I try to help them, but you have to control yourself.</i>
P	<i>Customer satisfaction is very important. The customer must be happy. You do not sell him something that will give problems. If a customer is unhappy and angry, I will talk to him until he is calmed down.</i>
W	<i>It creates unwanted pressure if the suppliers do not deliver on time and I cannot keep my promise to the customer. Customers are very important, they are the backbone of the company. Never tell a customer that he is wrong, and never be unfriendly to a customer.</i>

4.2.4 Statements in a relationship orientated context that were not necessarily confirmed by all

Role conflict exists where the salesperson has to keep the customer happy, but the customer does not want to be assisted.

T	<i>Some customers do not want to be assisted. It is very difficult work to keep everybody happy.</i>
B	<i>None</i>
S	<i>None</i>
P	<i>None</i>
W	<i>None</i>

4.3 A SALESPERSON'S PERCEPTION OF HIS ROLE AS COLLEAGUE

4.3.1 In a task orientated context

Statements pertaining to the salesperson's role as colleague revealed different interpretations of what is expected in reality. Some participants complained about the unacceptable behaviour from their colleagues like stealing of each other's customers and irresponsibility of some colleagues that has to be rectified by the others.

Contrasting statements were made about the role of a salesperson as team member. This appeared to be a role that is viewed with ambiguously:

T	<i>We do not act as a team. If colleagues would act as a team they can have an influence on the rules and system of the company.</i>
B	<i>We work together as a team.</i>
S	<i>We help each other.</i>
P	<i>We work together nicely.</i>
W	<i>Your colleagues do not always write up the sale for you, even if it was your customer.</i>

4.3.2 Statements in a relationship orientated context

Contrasting statements were recorded based on the perception of salespeople of their role as supportive of their colleagues. Some participants see their colleagues as friends that can be respected and that can be depended on. But others feel colleagues cannot always be trusted.

T	<i>I work with people that are absolute careless. Their irresponsibility is the reason for much tension between us. I do not get angry with them, they only frustrate me. You cannot rely on anybody to help you with a project. You're on your own, without any back-up. Unions create tension as they do not solve problems, they create differences. I will not do somebody else's job without getting commission for it. The other salespeople feel offended if I correct them in front of a customer.</i>
B	<i>We are not many salespeople in my department but we have no tensions between us.</i>
S	<i>We do not have tension between us, we assist one another. We go out as a group for brunch or something. I enjoy being with my colleagues.</i>
P	<i>We get along. We have good relationships. Sometimes after work we will have a braai.</i>
W	<i>We are working on commission and that leads to tension. We do fight. We try to work out to understand one another. We do not do much as a team. You work with people who are very negative. You must always try to be positive, but it is sometimes difficult. You must listen to other people's problems.</i>

4.4 A SALESPERSON'S PERCEPTION OF HIS ROLE AS INDIVIDUAL

4.4.1 Consensus statements in a task orientated context

- Personal concerns due to physical and psychological demands.

T	<i>You get very tired of the long hours and hard work. You have to stand all day long.</i>
B	<i>You work almost everyday the whole day.</i>
S	<i>You just have to accept the long trading hours.</i>
P	<i>You are always tired. We are working seven days a week. It is very tiring work.</i>
W	<i>The long hours are part of the job. It is not a problem as long as I get my salary at the end of the month.</i>

- The salesperson's task orientated role impacts negatively on own interests and family life.

T	<i>You do not get much time off to attend to your own interests. Sometimes your weekend off is cancelled and you have to work. The job takes up all available time. There is nothing that motivates you.</i>
B	<i>It is frustrating to work these long hours for so little money. My wife does not understand.</i>
S	<i>My children live with my mother in Middelburg.</i>
P	<i>They can not complain – I am the only one bringing in money. I only watch TV, I am too tired to do something else.</i>
W	<i>I do not mind working hard, because then I get a good salary that enables me to take good care of my family. They do not complain about my work.</i>

- Experiences of self actualization through role performance

T	<i>The customers are like my friends. I always try to gain the needed knowledge about the machines if there is something I do not know.</i>
B	<i>I like to help the people.</i>
S	<i>I love my job.</i>
P	<i>I like my job. I like to talk to the people.</i>
W	<i>You are responsible for your own salary. This job is about challenges; every day is a new challenge. It is definitely worthwhile. You must always try to be positive. At the end of the day you must be positive, otherwise you can not live.</i>

4.4.2 Statements in a task orientated context that were not necessarily confirmed by all

- In some instances the salesperson does not experience himself as a valuable asset of the company when he compares his salary to that of other jobs

T	<i>I strive to earn more commission. It is difficult to handle the nonsense of the job for so little money. I do not have security; if anything goes wrong at work I may loose my job.</i>
B	<i>So much work for so little money.</i>
S	<i>None</i>
P	<i>There are other jobs that are better.</i>
W	<i>None</i>

- Where the salary is increased with a decent commission or other rewards, the salesperson does not feel so inferior.

T	<i>None</i>
B	<i>None</i>
S	<i>I do not mind spending time at work – it is rewarding.</i>
P	<i>If you work hard, the commission helps to make the salary better.</i>
W	<i>We work on basic plus commission. You are responsible for your own salary. If you have a problem you can only blame yourself. I am quite happy with my cheque.</i>

4.4.3 Consensus statements in a relationship orientated context

- A salesperson as customer facilitator:

T	<i>I enjoy talking to people. Sales is not such a bad job - if you have it in you, you have it. It is all about you.</i>
B	<i>Hard work can be enjoyed when it is rewarded.</i>
S	<i>It is a passion to help people.</i>
P	<i>I like my job. I like to talk to people.</i>
W	<i>I have a passion for customer service, I think that is the main thing.</i>

4.4.4 Individual statements in a relationship orientated context that were not necessarily confirmed by all

- Personal job experience

T	<i>I enjoy talking to people. It makes me feel good to help the customers. (Positive) It is not a desirable career. We are important for the company, but they do not show that they value us by paying us decent salaries. (negative)</i>
B	<i>I do not really like talking to the customers. I am not happy – If I were not so old, I would have changed. The salary is too low and the hours too long. (Negative)</i>
S	<i>I want to be best salesman of the month again. I enjoy being part of this company. (Positive)</i>
P	<i>I like my job. (Positive)</i>
W	<i>It is definitely worthwhile. I do not even want to sit down, because if you sit you loose sales. (positive)</i>

- Personal enthusiasm

T	<i>I feel offended when someone corrects me. I feel frustrated when I have to battle on my own with a project.</i>
B	<i>So much work for not enough money. It is not the best career choice – My wife is upset about the long working hours.</i>
S	<i>I have a passion to help people. I love my job.</i>
P	<i>There are other jobs that are better. I am always tired. This is very tiring work.</i>
W	<i>I have a passion for people. I as a person motivate myself. I am a people's person.</i>

- Role conflict was found as the salesperson is expected to keep the management as well as the customer happy, even amidst opposing objectives.

T	<i>It is very difficult work to keep the customer and the manager happy.</i>
B	<i>None</i>
S	<i>None</i>
P	<i>I must change the customer's mind I must sell him something that is good for him, but also that is good for the store too.</i>
W	<i>None</i>

PART 2: RESULTS FROM PROJECTIVE TECHNIQUES

Participants had to identify criteria that would best describe the ideal salesperson. The intention was to determine whether the role of the salesperson surfaced in the same manner as during the interviews although this exercise expected of participants to reflect on the role of a salesperson from the perspective of different role players who were involved in the same working environment and who would have definite expectations of what the job entails. It was expected that the role would surface in terms of positive qualifiers and that fewer, but more specific parameters would be specified.

4.5 THE “IDEAL” SALESPERSON

4.5.1 From the manager's perspective

4.5.1.1 Task orientated

Criteria	Coincides with consensus statements	Coincides with individual statements that were not supported by all
<i>The manager expects the salesperson to keep his department neat and tidy</i>	✓ Administrative	
<i>Appliances should be correctly displayed and priced,</i>	✓ Administrative	
<i>The salesperson must compliment the image of the company by being neatly dressed in the company uniform.</i>		✓ Administrative
<i>It is of the utmost importance that he has the relevant knowledge to facilitate the customers</i>	✓ Product Specialist	
<i>The salesperson must get all the relevant knowledge himself to enable him/her to facilitate the customer</i>	✓ Product Specialist	

Criteria covered the prominent statements made in the interviews in terms of a salesperson's role relating to administrative tasks as well as acting as product specialist. One individual mentioned being neatly dressed and this coincided with phase 1 statements.

4.5.1.2 Relationship orientated

Criteria	Coincides with consensus statements	Coincides with individual statements that were not supported by all
<i>The salesperson must be dedicated towards the customer</i>	✓ Facilitator	
<i>The salesperson's goal should be to keep the customer happy.</i>	✓ Facilitator	
<i>Customer service must be excellent</i>	✓ Facilitator	

4.5.2 From a customer's perspective

4.5.2.1 Task orientated

Criteria	Coincides with consensus statements	Coincides with individual statements that were not supported by all
<i>The salesperson should have good product knowledge</i>	✓ Product knowledge	
<i>The salesperson must give advice that guides the customer in making a satisfying decision.</i>	✓ Consumer facilitator	
<i>The customer should not be left waiting because everybody is in a rush</i>		✓ Facilitator / Supporter

4.5.2.2 Relationship orientated

Criteria	Coincides with consensus statements	Coincides with individual statements that were not supported by all
<i>The salesperson must have a positive attitude towards helping the customer</i>	✓ Consumer facilitator	
<i>The salesperson should always be friendly</i>	✓ Consumer facilitator	
<i>The salesperson should be trusted by the customer</i>	✓ Consumer facilitator	

4.5.3 From a colleague's perspective

4.5.3.1 Task orientated

Criteria	Coincides with consensus statements	Coincides with individual statements that were not supported by all
<i>The salesperson must be dedicated towards the job and tasks must be done immediately and correctly.</i>	✓ Administrator	
<i>The salesperson should be neat and tidy</i>	✓ Administrator	
<i>Every item in the department should be priced and correctly displayed.</i>	✓ Administrator	
<i>The salesperson must have excellent product knowledge. He must have a good perspective on every item and of any add-ons available.</i>	✓ Product specialist	
<i>He / she must know how reliable a machine is.</i>	✓	
<i>The salesperson must be quick and not waste time.</i>		✓ Facilitator
<i>The salesperson must be available as much as possible</i>	✓ Facilitator	

4.5.3.2 Relationship orientated

Criteria	Coincides with consensus statements	Coincides with individual statements, not supported by all
<i>Customer service must be excellent</i>	✓ Facilitator	
<i>He must be friendly and patient with every customer</i>	✓ Facilitator	
<i>He should be positive about his job.</i>		✓ Individual

The data collected through the interviews, as well as through the projective techniques, was spontaneously given by the participants. Questions were repeated during the course of conversations, structured in a different way or from another point of view, to verify the responses.

Through the interviews, the role perception of the salesperson was determined by the employer, the customer and the colleague, as well as by himself. Interviews aimed at exposing the salesperson's own interpretation of his role as a salesperson. The projective techniques, on the other hand, aimed at describing the role of the "ideal" salesperson by the salesperson, in the capacity of other influential people in the working environment, thus from different viewpoints. It was expected that this information would reflect what a salesperson interprets as expected role behaviour.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

5

5.1 INTRODUCTION

A qualitative orientated research approach was followed for this research project with the intention to gain understanding through a thorough investigation of a smaller sample to allow for spontaneous responses of participants to premeditated aspects that were identified within the initial objectives of the study and after a proper study of relevant literature. Qualitative orientated research techniques were used, which do not allow for generalization of findings over the population. However, data generated in this manner exposes information that could complement existing theory in terms of subsequent research projects driven by quantitative techniques that involve representative samples and active participation of various interested parties and role players. Data generated in this research project, is thus presented in this context.

From the data that was collected and from the responses that were confirmed through the various data collection techniques, it can be concluded that a salesperson perceives his role - *from personal experience in the work place* - as consisting of different dimensions/elements/role orientations. Individual's descriptions of the various role orientations were spontaneous and consistent. When confronted with daily experiences, however, it became evident that a salesperson's role in the work place eventually culminates as a combination of the individual role orientations with emphasis or a stronger inclination towards certain of the role orientations depending on the context in which the salesperson operates. One dimension of his role thus generally takes precedence over other and results in a salesperson being more attentive to specific responsibilities.

When describing a salesperson's perception of his role within the systems theory that formed the theoretical framework for this research project, it could be said that individuals confirmed the same role dimensions. These were described independently quite easily and of the related responsibilities were relatively clear despite the absence of definite job descriptions that are expected to be provided by employers. Typical of the assumptions of the systems theory, the individual roles when discussed separately do however not necessarily portray the reality in terms of a salesperson's eventual actions (the total picture being different to the sum of individual parts). It was affirmed that the eventual role and performance of a salesperson in the work place is determined by the context/situation he is confronted with. It was admitted that the various role dimensions differed in terms of the impact that they have on role behaviour in the work place. It seems as if certain role dimensions dominate other in reality although this not necessarily reflects superiority of those roles and neither does it reflect what is preferred or closer at heart.

The following dimensions of a salesperson's role in the working environment were identified, defined and described:

- **Employee** The salesperson functions in an administrative and in a relationship orientated capacity that includes specific tasks and responsibilities of which administrative duties, acting as product specialist and handling of sales are prominent.
- **Consumer facilitator** The responsibility of being a product specialist and financial advisor assisting consumers towards achievement of consumer satisfaction is described with enthusiasm. This role apparently contributes to personal fulfillment and job satisfaction.
- **Colleague** Being a colleague with similar objectives as others in the job situation has positive as well as negative connotations. This role is not necessarily acknowledged with enthusiasm.
- **Individual** Having personal needs, expectations and goals in a physically demanding working environment inevitably contributes to a salesperson's perception of his integrated role and the manner in which he has to "juggle" the various roles (equifinality) as stressful and conflicting. Circumstances often

necessitate emphasis on a specific role orientation because it is inter alia expected by management to drive sales.

5.2 A SALESPERSON'S PERCEPTION OF HIS ROLE

5.2.1 As employee

In a **task orientated** context the salesperson perceives **performance in sales** as a first priority. It was evident that a salesperson perceives the selling of as many appliances as possible, a priority. Incentives increased the importance of the sales function and seem to motivate and contribute to work satisfaction because acknowledgement of his achievements by management is generally based on commission on sales. Emphasis on sales in terms of the growth of the business as well as a salesperson's personal earnings, almost automatically diminishes other task related roles. However, in an **administrative capacity**, a salesperson has specific organizational responsibilities such as cleaning the department, organizing displays and ensuring that appliances correctly priced. Adequate **product knowledge** to enable a salesperson's responsibility as a specialist in the field was mentioned spontaneously. Training in this regard, however, seems limited to sessions presented by manufacturers with the intention to announce and promote new products. Confirming what have been reported by others (Decker, 2002:2-3; Internet: Fish, Wittman & Arnet: 1-2; Internet: Marino, 2001:4), it is a salesperson's own responsibility to acquire any other product information and this is generally done by reading product manuals, acting on experience or obtaining technical information on request through telephonic interaction with manufacturers or suppliers. A salesperson further contributes to work procedures by regularly meeting with management to discuss work related problems and procedures and in so doing perceives himself to form an integral part of the company.

In a **relationship orientated** context the fact that a salesperson often stands in for, and **acts on behalf of management** results in the positive perception that a salesperson is trusted to represent management in specific situations. This coincides with a so-called value based management system that encourages a

system that results in everybody in the company perceiving himself to be a valuable asset for the company (Internet: ESOP Association, 1998:1; Internet: Value based decision making, 1998:2, 4). None of the participants in the study admitted to having a written job description: salespeople are apparently trusted to perform the array of duties relevant to their job and to manage it. Several sources report this as positive instead of negative because it encourages a salesperson to create his own guidelines based on personal experience and insight instead of focusing on narrowly focused personal goals (Chopp & Paglia, 2002:1; Internet: Dubinsky, 1999:5; Internet: ESOP Association, 1998:2).

Regarding the salesperson's role in a **relationship context**, participants differed in terms of their perception of their **value to the company**: those who perceived themselves as valuable to the company admitted to receive decent commissions and incentives for hard work. Individuals differed in their perception of having to act independently in the working environment. While some experience support and understanding from the management in coping with their daily tasks, others reported the opposite. Participants perceived their opinions and inputs as being regarded important enough to be taken into account where necessary.

Role conflict was reported in terms of pleasing management and satisfying customer needs at the same time, mainly due to **role ambiguity**: serving customers' needs not necessarily results in increased sales which is required for growth of the business and to earn higher commissions. Increased sales performance was acknowledged as important in terms of earning commission in an already exhausting and low paid job. In so doing, a salesperson's role as product specialist and consumer advisor, which often is closer at heart, is suppressed.

During the projective techniques the role of the salesperson from an employer's point of view only excluded the task of acting on behalf of management from the range of task- and relationship orientated tasks that were included previously. All the other tasks coincided with those specified during the interviews. This could be ascribed to the nature of the task: the role of a salesperson was described from the employer's point of view while an employer not necessarily realizes the responsibilities absorbed by salespeople

5.2.2 As consumer facilitator

In a **task-orientated** context participants spontaneously identified and described the most important role of the salesperson as being a **consumer facilitator**. This role was described as including assistance with product information, prices and financing procedures, client care as well as handling of complaints to ensure customers' satisfaction. **Product knowledge** (also a pre requisite as employee) was mentioned to be the most important determinant in this role although a salesperson is seldom formally supported to acquire expertise in this regard. A salesperson's role as expert and consumer advisor/facilitator is in agreement with various reports in this regard (Internet: Blaine, 2002:2; Wingate, Gillespie & Milgrom, 1975:2; Wish, Steely & Tritten, 1978:38-46, 126, 133). Samson and Little (1993:390) accentuate that today's customers are the best read, most informed, most intelligent and most demanding in history and warn that customers often know exactly what they are looking for, which require a specific competency and commitment of salespeople in general.

In the **relationship** context, the importance of creating a feeling of **trust** between the salesperson and the customer and reflecting an image of **honesty** was evident. It is known that salespeople realize that consumers will confide in them and buy from them if they are trusted (Internet: Marino, 2001:4; Internet: The solution to the need:4; Reynolds & Beatty, 1999:13). Salespeople therefore try very hard to create a feeling of trust and to build a friendship relation. This however may contribute to **role conflict**. It creates tension to have the responsibility to increase sales while realizing that consumers should be warned against products with a poor performance record. Participants in this study on the one hand emphasized their ultimate responsibility to focus on consumer satisfaction but on the other hand knew that sales figures were essential. Depending on the context, it may consequently result in a salesperson withholding certain information from a customer not to loose a sale.

The projective technique replicated the description of the tasks of a salesperson in his capacity as consumer facilitator as an verification of what was found during

interviews: words such as honesty and trust that came to the fore very prominently during interviews, were repeated during this exercise. Various sources confirm that customers expect a salesperson to be a reliable source of information that can be trusted (Internet: Blaine, 2002:2; Wingate, Gillespie & Milgrom, 1975:2; Wish, Steely & Tritten, 1978:38-46, 126, 133). According to Churchill and co-workers (1990:334), most salespeople feel it their duty to warn customers against products with a poor service record but that such information may be withheld when they are under pressure to make a deal.

5.2.3 As colleague

In contrast to the above, participants did not spontaneously discuss their role as colleagues. This was confirmed by limited responses in the projective techniques where colleagues' perception of the ideal salesperson had to be formulated. No consensus statements were made about the role of a salesperson as a colleague in a **task orientated** context: while some perceive themselves to be part of a **team** with mutual goals, others listed numerous **complaints** that included the "stealing" of each other's customers, irresponsibility and incompetence. Role conflict was evident and it was difficult to formulate any coherent statement in terms of the role of the salesperson as colleague in a task related capacity.

In a **relationship** context matters were even worse: there was also no consensus between participants' comments: while some perceived their colleagues as **friends** that are respected and trusted, other perceived their colleagues to be **fellow workers**. These were neither trusted nor perceived as part of a team.

During the projective technique the role of a salesperson was described in a more abbreviated manner than the other role dimensions although it eventually included the same parameters and detail of the tasks mentioned during the interviews *for the salesperson as employee*. Those aspects that apparently created conflict in the work situation were not mentioned per se.

It has been reported that management's relationship with salespeople apparently has a large influence on the job satisfaction and relations in a team of workers:

when the needs and satisfaction of employees are considered most important, role conflict is prevented and role ambiguity and job dissatisfaction may be reduced (Internet: Rosenbluth, 2000:7). Under such circumstances salespeople perceive themselves as a team and strive to reach mutual goals, respecting one another. It is reported that specific actions such as social occasions may be required to improve teamwork (Internet: Marino, 2001:2).

5.2.4 As individual

A salesperson's role in terms of individual/personal requirements, needs and ideals surfaced incidentally while discussing other role orientations. In a **task related** context there was consensus that a salesperson enjoys his work, especially in terms of the role of consumer facilitator. Tension however arises due to the physical demands of long working hours, which negatively impacts on family matters in a relationship-orientated context. This gives rise to *role conflict*.

In the **relationship orientated** context, role conflict was apparent. It was inter alia found that enjoyable tasks expected of a dedicated, successful and competent salesperson and which contribute to personal satisfaction, often demand so much of an individual in terms of working hours and physical energy that it negatively impacts on other personal matters (e.g. tension at home). It was also said that fear of loosing one's job, increases pressure to perform in the work place, which eventually prevents a salesperson from enjoying his job. A salesperson's passion to work with people was very apparent: it was even said that successful interaction with customers alleviated tension created by other role demands.

5.2.5 The integrated role of a salesperson

From discussions with participants it became clear that a salesperson in the actual performance of daily duties perceives his role to consist of different dimensions, of which each has definite responsibilities, connotations and outcomes. It was further concluded that, within a certain dimension, task orientated or relationship orientated activities could be distinguished which eventually merge in terms of the expected role depending on the individual or the context (equifinality). A salesperson would

thus focus more intensively on one dimension of his role while diminishing others, depending on what is perceived to be superior or preferable in terms of the desired feedback. Feedback would inter alia refer to monetary incentives, consumers' expression of gratitude or the pleasure of meeting sales targets.

Ultimately the salesperson prioritizes these roles and decides on a hierarchy in accordance with his perception of the importance of the various role dimensions/components. The various roles are then juggled to obtain the desired output: in instances where sales figures determine salaries, the role of consumer facilitator (task and relationship orientated) and colleague (relationship orientated) might be neglected in favour of increased sales (task related) which would contribute to personal satisfaction (relationship orientated), positive feedback of the management (relationship orientated) and possibly impact on positive relations at home family although conflict might occur due to increased working hours and neglect in terms of positive consumer assistance and poor relations between colleagues.

It can therefore be concluded that a salesperson's perception of his role in the working environment is influenced by various inputs (such as the demands of the employer, needs of the consumer and interaction with colleagues). A salesperson's perception of the importance of these inputs and their potential consequences determines the transformation of these inputs in terms of a hierarchy and a priority of attendance so that the role behaviour is evidence of the output that best addresses personal/individual needs. Inevitably different salespeople will interpret and thus prioritize differently.

Based on conflicting variables in the work situation, it can be concluded that the integrated role of a salesperson is far from obvious. John Donne's conclusion that "No man is an island", seems particularly true of a salesperson who *works with people, among people and in direct contact with people all day long* (Internet: John Donne Meditation XVII: No man is an island:1).

5.3 TRUSTWORTHINESS OF DATA

Trustworthiness is of utmost importance for the validity of data collection (Mouton, 1998:144). The data collection was preceded by a thorough theoretical study about the sales environment that included theory related to salespeople and their role in the retail environment to ensure a thorough knowledge and understanding of all relevant concepts and existing theory. To ensure reliability of the data, participants were only asked for information relevant to them, based on personal experience (participation in the study required a minimum level of experience).

During the collection and interpretation of data in this study, the intention was to develop an improved understanding of a salesperson's perception of his role in the working environment in order to draw objective conclusions in terms of how the consumer, the employer and personal motivational factors either benefit or suffer from specific perceptions during daily routines so that the outcomes of the research could direct other, more intensive investigations in this regard. Questions were also repeated to reflect on the responses that were given initially as a form of control. Data gathered through phase 1 interviews were thus confirmed when the researcher reflected the data to the participants during the "replay" phase of an interview session. Phase 1 data was thus immediately clarified for truthfulness before proceeding with other interviews or the following phase of data collection.

By describing the role of a salesperson from different perspectives using projective techniques in phase 2, it was possible to bring forth the various and opposing constructions of reality that exist to indicate the credibility of the study (Babbie & Mouton, 2001:277; Leedy, 1997:168). The projective techniques in itself, by requesting participants to describe role orientations from different viewpoints, contained another form of control because the basic instruction remained to be a definition of role parameters. No new information came to the fore during this procedure and as expected, only positive statements that described the ultimate of the role of a salesperson

were given. When analyzed, the data that was collected in written format in phase 2 (using projective techniques) coincided with the data gathered in phase 1, which indicate trustworthy data (Manheim & Simon, 1977:150). If various data collection techniques are used that eventually support one another in terms of the results that are obtained, the data can be regarded reliable (Babbie & Mouton, 2001:119, 276-278).

5.4 PROBLEMS RELATED TO A SALESPERSON'S PERCEPTION OF HIS ROLE IN THE WORKING ENVIRONMENT

5.4.1 *Role conflict*

A salesperson apparently does not have a problem to identify the parameters of specific dimensions of his role in the working environment but the various role orientations are not necessarily easily compatible. While working to earn an income for themselves and their families, the role parameters of a salesperson as employee resulted in the required outcomes in terms of meeting sales targets to ensure his job, to please management and to earn commission. This however demands of a salesperson to be highly competent and motivated, inevitably spending working longer hours away from home. Apart from being physically demanding, this often creates tension at home: the spouse does not always accept the implications of the job, like working over weekends and public holidays.

Role conflict was evident in terms of attending to customer's needs: participants admitted the difficulty of pleasing both the customers and management. The role of a salesperson as employer and as consumer facilitator are not always compatible.

5.4.2 *Role ambiguity*

The role of the salesperson as a colleague seems to create role ambiguity. A salesperson realizes that he is part of a team and that all salespeople in a department should be committed to meet mutual goals such as meeting sales

targets in a highly competitive environment. Competition among colleagues to clinch the most deals in order to increase commissions however creates tension and makes it difficult to work as a team.

A salesperson understands his specific responsibility of being competent and knowledgeable in order to provide proper assistance to consumers. When they withhold product information in order to boost sales for the benefit of the business and personal financial gain, they become anxious and feel guilty because consumer facilitation is generally considered very rewarding in an environment which is otherwise quite stressful and tiring.

5.4.3 Consequences of the problems

Interpreted within consumers' basic consumer rights, a salesperson of complex, durable, expensive household appliances has the specific responsibility to inform and assist consumers to make educated, responsible purchase decisions. Any situation that prevents the salesperson from fulfilling these expectations is alarming in terms of the consequences for consumers, especially the underprivileged who have limited experience and bargaining power and who can not afford to suffer from poor purchase decisions.

If the well being of consumers' takes the back seat to higher sales figures and earning of commission to increase their salaries, consumers have reason to doubt salespeople in general and to feel cheated. Especially in terms of expensive, technologically advanced products, consumers' risk perception increases and their trust in the sales environment is negatively affected with few alternatives to solve their dilemma and to address their product related needs.

Unhealthy competition between colleagues negatively impacts on the working environment, which could negatively impact on the image of the business and the retail environment.

5.4.4 Suggestions to amend the situation

An improved understanding of a salesperson's role in the working environment and problems that arise due to imbalances is needed for the better of salespeople, consumers as well as retail per se.

Low basic salaries and the need to increase salaries through increased sales with the intention to increase commissions seem to be the major cause of conflict. This was admitted to prevent salespeople from properly attending to consumers' needs and for salespeople to work as a team.

Salespeople are the backbone of business. If the sales team is positive and happy, a relaxed atmosphere will be created that will attract customers. Motivational talks to improve relations in the work place, as well as formally organized training courses might contribute to salespeople feeling appreciated and able to cope with the various role expectations. Neglect of certain role dimensions often results in feelings of guilt, which negatively affects a salesperson's perception of his ability to cope and to experience the desired outcomes of his job. Although job related stress and tension has probably become part of modern living, the consequences cannot be denied or ignored, especially if reasons for the negativities have been identified and solutions are not far fetched.

5.5 SHORTCOMINGS OF THE STUDY

Any research project should also be considered a learning process whereby new insights that develop during the execution of the research could be used to improve on other, similar or follow up research projects.

In terms of the **research procedure** and more specifically the research techniques, focus group discussions, by their nature to provide the opportunity for participants to discuss issues and viewpoints, could have been a valuable data collection procedure. Although individual interviews did provide the opportunity for discussions on sensitive issues without participants feeling threatened, open discussions on certain issues could perhaps have been done more successfully in

discussion groups. The practical problem in this regard would be to arrange a suitable time for various people from different stores for different sessions while they already experience time pressure.

In terms of the **sample**, experience of the situation was regarded more important than the age of participants. It was however sensed that older salespeople tended to be more negative in terms of younger colleagues, especially towards working hours and personal satisfaction. The possibility of age contributing to poor relationships in the work place was unforeseen and should perhaps be attended to in future studies.

5.6. SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The outcomes of this research project resulted in certain conclusions that could be explored in follow-up research projects.

In terms of salespeople involved in the selling of household appliances, a quantitative study, in collaboration with by retail and industry is suggested, including a representative sample of salespeople. The following hypotheses have been formulated for further research:

- ▷ There is a positive relationship between commission based incomes/salaries and
 - Poor collegial relations in the work place;
 - Neglect of a salesperson's role as consumer facilitator;
 - Ambiguity regarding a salesperson's multidimensional role and related role expectations;
 - Dissatisfaction regarding personal fulfillment in the capacity as salesperson.
- ▷ There is a positive relationship between the absence of job descriptions and ambiguity in terms of the various roles that a salesperson occupies in the work place.
- ▷ There is a positive relationship between a salesperson's satisfaction with his job and his communication with his employer.

In terms of salespeople in general, the following is suggested:

- ▷ Findings relating to a salesperson's perception of his role in the working environment may also be applied to salespeople in different sales environments (e.g. estate agents), where commission based incomes are earned.

A quantitative study further provides the opportunity to generate statistics that could serve as motivation to improve the working conditions of salespeople to the benefit of consumers as well as retail. The following would inter alia be useful:

- ▷ An indication of the percentage of salespeople who are employed and have to cope without proper job descriptions;
- ▷ An indication of employers' commitment to organize and facilitate formal training opportunities for employees to enable them to cope with change in the retail environment;
- ▷ An indication of salespeople's preference for the various roles in the work situation in different contexts

Salespeople has a major role to play and can make an important contribution towards informed, responsible consumer decision-making which may be regarded the ultimate in terms of the national economy and general well being of the consumer market. Any effort to understand the problems a salesperson is confronted with on a daily basis and to improve a salesperson's contribution towards responsible consumer decision-making should be encouraged. Although the discipline of consumer science is especially interested in consumer decision-making behaviour and efforts to educate and assist consumers during decision-making, proper functioning in the market place would eventually also be to the benefit of retail and industry.

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