

THE RISE OF THE SALES WOMAN

Women contribute close to 50 per cent of B Schools graduates- yet hardly 10% take up sales as a career, But with the above changing scenario, organisations would do well by recognizing the rising power of the women in the function.

By Dr Rajeshwari K

Sales management has always witnessed a gender bias and has traditionally been a men's forte. I remember during my stint of being an Area Sales Manager of Hindustan Unilever Limited, back in the late 1990s, I was the only female in that position, amongst a group of 33 sales managers across the country. It was not easy. I travelled for four days a week out of the headquarters, away from home, for four continuous years. A typical day would start at 6.00 AM and my car with a sandwich and a mineral water bottle as my company, as I drove through the rural hinterland of India for hours and hours together. The physical arduity of long hours and extensive travel can make sales management a women unfriendly profession. Added to these is the very different profile of trade that one encounters by way of retailers and wholesalers. These have contributed to the low women representation in sales across industries (30% in financial services and 27% in manufacturing).

Despite the low female representation in sales, the women have excelled using an approach different from that of men. Xactly (a solution provider) reported that 86% of women accomplished sales targets compared to 78% of men. This is especially true in B2B where women are better equipped to connecting and shaping solutions rather than just focusing on outcomes (a popular method followed by men). As far as skills like analyzing and influencing go, there is very little to choose between the genders.

However, times are now changing to make the sales arena more women-friendly. Here are some reasons why :

1. Post-COVID-19 era has witnessed a lot of remote selling using videos and digital platforms. Organisations have understood and tasted business using technology as a tool, with limited personal travel or interaction. Women stand to gain in such a scenario - as now they can balance their family and personal needs better. Technology allows them to carry out tasks such as lead generation, follow up, information provision, referral etc - at the click of a mouse from the comfort of their homes.
2. The customer today is far more well informed on his/her choices- thanks to the internet. This has shifted the role of the salespeople to being "consultants" rather than "decision-makers" for

the clients. The advisory roles in financial investments can now be done using robots- based on the historical purchase patterns that reflect a certain risk profile of the individual. Short term transactions are done online by the customers themselves. So the role of the salesperson is largely in the long term portfolio decisions – that are complex, emotional and personal. Trust, empathy and perspective sharing are the key requirements in this scenario. And these come easily to women.

3. High tech sales are also becoming more subscription-based and this is changing the trend for the sales management function. Instead of focusing on that 'one-time' closure, customers now need to renew every month. The customer lifetime value is better influenced by factors such as loyalty and retention. The customer success managers (CSM - a new designation - in this context), encourages collaboration and continuous relationship building with clients. This is what makes organisations like Oracle and Salesforce stand out from the rest- given that these have women leaders at the helm.

4. Informal socializing and client entertainment is a familiar situation in sales management function. This has been a deterrent for women to break into a sales career. But now with social distancing, the scenario is bound to be different. Organisations are having structured timed meetings that are more planned and organized – leading to more efficiency. And this kind of work discipline makes it more women-friendly as that frees up her time – she can spend that with her family.

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A few ways in which women can be motivated to apply for sales positions include:

Job descriptions being more gender-neutral - moving away from using words like 'aggressive', 'competitive' etc - to phrases like 'customer-focused' and problem-solving. More women can be on the interview panel to provide a gender sensitivity of the role. There could be female mentorship programs in the organization that help women set realistic career paths, given the multiple roles she plays. Organisations can also give women leaders more visibility (another area women shy away from) - and facilitate/create a culture where stigma associated with gender bias can be openly shared.

Diversity is about counting the numbers while inclusion is about making the numbers count. If more women are in sales, it will lead to heightened long term organizational performance, with better quality customer retention.

Link: <http://www.businessworld.in/article/The-Rise-Of-The-Sales-Woman/19-06-2020-289136/>