



# Women outperform men in collegiate sales competitions: Are women's sales skills better than men's?

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## ABSTRACT

Since the early 1970s, sales and marketing academicians have been researching the influence of gender on sales performance and sales management. This paper presents a study examining the extent to which men and women college students differ in sales role-play competition performance. The results show women performed better than men in every sales skill dimension measured. These findings share some consistency with gender effects found in previous research.

## 在大学销售竞赛中, 女性的表现要好于男性: 女性的销售技巧是否优于男性?

半个世纪前, b2b销售通常被认为是男人的职业。“推销员”一词是这一职位的标准参考词, 一般在20世纪剩下的时间里继续保持这一地位。20世纪70年代和80年代, 担任b2b销售职位的女性人数开始增长, 随之而来的问题是, 她们在销售业绩和其他相关方面与男性相比如何。早期的研究似乎表明男人比女人卖得好, 然而, 这项研究并不是决定性的。随着人际关系推销越来越受欢迎, 一些研究发现, 女性在建立人际关系方面的表现优于男性, 总体而言, 女性具有优势。如今, 在一个越来越自信的销售方式(如挑战者模式)似乎不再依赖亲密关系的时代, 人们不禁要问, 男女之间的业绩差异是否会再次改变。评估男女销售业绩差异的挑战在于很难获得详细的数据。先前研究的结果是基于自我报告, 结果或买家的感知, 并遵循一套有限的标准。出于充分的理由, 没有人花时间观察男女销售人员与客户互动的情况, 以评估他们的相对销售技能。相比之下, 大学销售竞赛的基础是对销售技能的详细评估, 并提供机会开始评估男女销售技能是否不同。

本研究的目的是调查一组对销售有兴趣的大学生, 并根据25个项目的销售电话技能表, 考察他们的销售表现是否存在差异。

20世纪70年代初以来, 市场营销学界一直在研究性别对销售绩效和销售管理的影响。本文研究了男女大学生在销售角色扮演竞争绩效上的差异程度。结果显示, 女性在每个销售技能维度上的表现都优于男性。这些发现与先前研究中发现的性别效应有一定的一致性

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## Introduction

A half-century ago, b2b sales was generally considered a profession for men. The term “salesman” was the standard reference for this position and continued to remain so,

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generally for the remainder of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the 1970s and 80s, the number of women in b2b sales positions began to grow, and with that growth came questions regarding how they compared with men in terms of sales performance and other related dimensions. Early studies seemed to indicate men could sell better than women, however, the research was not conclusive. As relationship selling grew in popularity, a few studies found that women outperformed men and had, in general, an advantage when it came to forming relationships. Now, in the era of more assertive sales approaches (e.g., the Challenger model) that seemingly rely less on warm relationships, one wonders if the performance difference between men and women will once again change. The challenge with evaluating sales performance differences between men and women is that it is difficult to get detailed data. Results from previous research are based on self-report, outcome, or buyer-perceptions along a limited set of criteria. For good reasons, no one has taken the time to observe men and women salespeople as they interact with their customers in order to evaluate their relative sales skills. In contrast, collegiate sales competitions are based on detailed evaluation of sales skills and offer the opportunity to begin assessing whether women and men differ in their sales skills. The purpose of this study is to examine a select group of college students already expressing an interest in sales and examine if they differ in terms of their sales performance as indicated by a 25 item sales call skill rubric.

## Literature review

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

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics’ 2017 Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey, the number of women in non-retails sales is on par with men in some areas and still below men in others. [Table 1](#), shows the 2007 and 2017 statistics for non-retail sales (sub-categories of the “Sales and Office Occupations” category) sorted by percent of the total employed in the respective category that are women – 2017.

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

**Table 1.** Changes in the percentage of non-retail sales roles held by women (2007–2017)

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

### ***Differences between women and men in sales***

Research on differences between men and women in sales began increasing in the 1970s and 80s as the number of women in non-retail sales also grew. The research has continued, and has looked for differences in a variety of areas including job satisfaction, role ambiguity, job clarity, competence, confidence, performance, and so forth (e.g., Bellizzi & Hasty, 2002; Lane & Crane, 2002; Moncrief et al., 2000; Robertson & Hacket, 1977; Schul et al., 1990; Siguaw & Honeycutt, 1995; Swan et al., 1978). Although not looking at outcome measures such as ability to hit quotas, analysis of many (if not most) of the variables revealed little differences between men and women. Nevertheless, some difference have been found.

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

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

Swan et al. (1978) studied pharmaceutical salespeople and found that women had lower job satisfaction related to their supervisors and co-workers, but not with the job itself (similar to Busch & Bush, 1978). They also found that women had lower levels of

job-related self-confidence. Like Busch and Bush (1978), the authors attributed their findings to the industry being male-dominated.

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

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

Pinar et al. (2011) examined gender bias with respect to salesperson preference for male or female buyer. In particular, they wanted to assess whether salespeople expected to perform equally well with male or female buyers. The authors surveyed a random sample of business students (from multiple universities), asking them to put themselves in the role of a salesperson and answer questions tied to execution of the sales process. The questions were designed to assess effects on each stage of the sales process. The results showed both male and female students (placing themselves in the role of a salesperson) expressed a preference for working with female buyers. Other results of gender bias were mixed or otherwise inconclusive. In totality, the results suggest men and women will perform equally well overall, and equally well when working with male or female buyers (i.e., no buyer-seller gender matching effect).

The finding that male and female business students, when placed in the role of a salesperson, had a preference for female buyers, may be a function of the students being in college rather than being related to the role of a salesperson. A longitudinal study examining the extent to which those preferences and perceptions change as students transition into, and then gain experience in the role of a salesperson.

Studies on how men and women differ with respect to sales performance have used self-report or other forms of performance perceptions rather than objective data. However, recently Orlob (2018) presented findings from an analysis of available sales activity data showing that women closed more sales than men, and are perhaps are better communicators. In addition to counting the number of successful closes, the sales activity data included time-based measures of salesperson talk time, listening time, and frequency of interrupting the buyer. The data showed men spent more time listening, less time talking (monologue) and interrupted the buyer less. The authors suggest that women

listen more intently, and are therefore more efficient and effective listeners. They also suggest that when talking (monologues) women were more persuasive and focused than men. The combination of better listening and more persuasive talking explains why women closed more sales than men. The problem (as the authors point out) with the data is that measuring the time spent on a particular task/ability (e.g., listening) isn't a measure of effectiveness. Such measure would come only from direct observation of the interaction between the seller and buyer. This study is an attempt to address that shortfall by evaluating the sales communication between sellers and buyers, albeit in role-play setting.

## Method

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

The format of the competition is a 20-minute face-to-face sales call during which the salesperson must engage a buyer (role played by sales professional) in an attempt to sell the designated product (good or service). The host school provides competitors a sales-call scenario (buyer background and selling situation) in advance of the competition. In addition, a wealth of product training resources, including webinars, training videos, and sales support material, are available to help competitors prepare for the competition.

As they engage in their sales call role plays, five to seven industry professionals evaluate the competitors using a sales skills rubric. The sales skills rubric contains 25 different items representing seven different categories, including approach, needs identification, solution presentation, overcoming objections, closing, communication skills, and an overall assessment. For each item, competitors are scored on a scale of 0 to 8. Immediately after each sales call role-play, competition staff check each rubric to ensure the judges evaluated their respective competitors on each of the 25 items.

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

For this study, we analyzed scores from the first round of the 2017, 2018, and 2019 NCSCs. The NCSC is a single elimination tournament, so the first round is the only round in which every competitor competes. [Table 2](#) shows the breakdown of competitors by year and by gender. Although there is some difference between the number of men and women competing, that difference was less than 6% of the total for each year. In 2019, more women competed than men did, and that brought the three-year split between males and females to nearly 50–50. Each of these competitors competed in the first round of the competition under the same basic conditions and within a 12 hour period.

**Table 2.** Competitor gender by year.

Gender	Year			Total
	2019	2018	2017	
Female	74 (51%)	66 (47%)	67 (47%)	207 (49%)
Male	70 (49%)	74 (53%)	75 (53%)	219 (51%)
Total	144	140	142	426

Each student's role play was judged live by 6–8 judges resulting in 2992 individual score sheets spread across 426 competitors. For each competitor, we averaged the individual item scores across judges. This gave us one aggregated score sheet for each of the 426 competitors.

Next, the means for women and men on each of the 25 items were compared using independent sample t-tests. To make it easier to review, we present the results in seven different tables (Tables 3–9) below, each containing the items associated with their respective sales rubric category.

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

The items in Tables 8 and 9 are not specific tasks associated with the sales process, rather they are global evaluations of skills/characteristics associated with sales call effectiveness. Whereas the preceding 20 items were associated with the progression of the sales call (approach – establish need – present solutions – handle resistance – gain commitment), the following five items are typically scored immediately following the respective competitor's completion of the role-play.

**Table 3.** Approach.

	Gender	n	Mean	Diff
Professional Introduction	m	219	5.789	–.302*
	f	207	6.091	
Gains Attention	m	219	5.460	–.349*
	f	207	5.809	
Builds Rapport	m	219	5.352	–.255*
	f	207	5.607	
Smooth Transition	m	219	5.511	–.320*
	f	207	5.831	

\* statistically significant (<.05).

**Table 4.** Establish needs.

	Gender	n	Mean	Diff
Uncovered Decision Process	m	219	5.394	–.473*
	f	207	5.867	
Effectively Determined Relevant Facts	m	219	5.674	–.235*
	f	207	5.909	
Effectively Uncovered Needs	m	219	5.868	–.153*
	f	207	6.021	
Asked Effective Questions	m	219	5.166	–.259*
	f	207	5.425	
Gain Pre-commitment	m	219	5.299	–.386*
	f	207	5.685	

\* statistically significant (<.05).

**Table 5.** Present SOLUTIONS.

	Gender	n	Mean	Diff
Presented Benefits Based Upon Needs	m	219	5.494	-.246*
	f	207	5.740	
Logical Convincing Presentation	m	219	5.430	-.284*
	f	207	5.714	
Used Appropriate Professional Visual Aids	m	219	5.841	-.376*
	f	207	6.217	
Effectively Demonstrated Product	m	219	5.620	-.375*
	f	207	5.995	
Effectively Involves The Buyer	m	219	5.550	-.388*
	f	207	5.938	
Effective Use of Trial Closes	m	219	5.094	-.420*
	f	207	5.514	

\* statistically significant (&lt;.05).

**Table 6.** Handling resistance.

	Gender	n	Mean	Diff
Gains Better Understanding of Objection	m	219	5.019	-.337*
	f	207	5.356	
Effectively Answers The Objection	m	219	5.215	-.370*
	f	207	5.585	
Confirms Objection is No Longer a Concern	m	219	4.639	-.523*
	f	207	5.162	

\* statistically significant (&lt;.05).

**Table 7.** Gaining commitment.

	Gender	n	Mean	Diff
Persuasive in Presenting a Reason to Buy	m	219	5.020	-.450*
	f	207	5.470	
Asked for Business or Commitment	m	219	4.888	-.590*
	f	207	5.478	

\* statistically significant (&lt;.05).

**Table 8.** Communication skills.

	Gender	n	Mean	Diff
Effective Verbal Communication Skills (e.g., listening)	m	219	5.901	-.250*
	f	207	6.151	
Appropriate Nonverbal Communication	m	219	5.945	-.327*
	f	207	6.272	
Verbiage (clear, concise, professional)	m	219	5.956	-.209*
	f	207	6.165	

\* statistically significant (&lt;.05).

**Table 9.** Overall.

	Gender	n	Mean	Diff
Salesperson Enthusiasm and Confidence	m	219	6.020	-.386*
	f	207	6.406	
Product Knowledge	m	219	6.094	-.199*
	f	207	6.293	

\* statistically significant (&lt;.05).

## Discussion

The results of this study indicate women outperform men in behaviors associated with effective sales call performance. In each category, Approach, Establishing Needs, Presenting Solutions, Handling Resistance, and Gaining Commitment, women outperformed men. Given the large sample size, relatively small differences between means will be statistically significant. While for most of the individual items, the difference in means between men and women may be substantively small, the compelling finding is women scoring higher than men on each of the 25 items.

The differences between means were greatest for items “Asked for the Business” (–.590) and Confirms Objection is No Longer a Concern (–.523). Each of these items is associated with the seller asking the buyer to express at least some favorable disposition to the sales process moving forward. These questions involve a certain amount of risk because they offer the buyer the opportunity to say “no.” The findings suggest women may be more assertive than men and are consistent with Orlob (2018).

The data presented in Table 8 indicates women are better communicators than men. The judges rated women higher than men in all three assessments of communication skills. These findings provide support for suppositions by Orlob (2018) that women are better listeners and more persuasive when talking. The judges also perceived women as having more enthusiasm and projecting greater confidence than the men (Table 9). These characteristics help contribute to more effective persuasive communication.

## Conclusions

The results of this study do not indicate women are better salespeople than men. The findings do indicate that women exhibit better sales skills than men do during sales competitions. To the extent buyer-seller interactions in the competition role-plays reflect real-world buyer-seller interactions, the study offers evidence that women outperform men in at least some sales skills. While these findings are consistent with Orlob (2018), they do not encompass the totality of skills (e.g., prospecting) necessary for success in a sales role.

## Limitations

While determining sales performance (revenue generated, number of units sold, new accounts acquired, profitability, etc.) can be straightforward, identifying the variables that affect overall sales performance is not. In this study, we examine the specific sales skills demonstrated in sales call role-plays to assess differences between men and women. While the findings may provide insight into whether differences in sales performance exist between men and women in sales jobs, it's worth noting the following limitations.

- (1) Judges are evaluating the students, not the buyers. It's possible that buyers may feel differently than do the judges with respect to how well the student performed.
- (2) By definition, the sales call role-plays are contrived and do not represent real-world sales call situations, nor do they carry the weight of losing the sale. However, while these situations are somewhat “contrived,” they are, none-the-

less, realistic in the sense that there is a reward at stake and the pressure to perform is significant.

Finally, these results may be a function of gender differences in preparation diligence among the competitors. It's possible that women take the competition more seriously or work harder to prepare than do men. If so, those characteristics may explain the gender differences uncovered in this study.

## **Future research**

The results of this study, or any study of sales call competitions or other forms experiential exercises, are managerially relevant only to the extent that those findings are generalizable to the "real-world." For example, do top performers in sales competitions become top performers in sales roles after graduation? Do sales competition competitors outperform non-competitors after graduation? Longitudinal studies are necessary to test for generalizability of the findings and to provide answers to these types of questions. For example, examining the career progressions of collegiate sales competition competitors, especially within the first two years after graduation, would provide insight into the predictive value of these competitions. Finally, it would be insightful to examine the extent to which difference exist between men and women in how they prepare for the sales competition and how seriously they take such preparation.

## **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.


## **Relevance to marketing educators, researchers and practitioners**

The study examines differences between men and women on sales skill performance in a sales role-play competition. The findings indicate women consistently outperformed men on every skill/item measured. The nature of the study precludes drawing conclusions regarding differences between men and women in terms of overall sales performance. Nevertheless, the findings do provide evidence that women outperform men in sales role-play competitions and, to the extent performance in these competitions is transferable to real-world selling, that women may perform certain sales skills better than men. Conclusions and generalizations from this study will propel gender-related research in sales.

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