

# PERCEPTIONS OF THE CONTRIBUTION OF FEMININITY TO THE PERFORMANCE OF TRADITIONALLY MASCULINE SELLING

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## ABSTRACT

The many women currently entering traditionally male sales forces have reportedly brought many strengths that impact upon their performance of the job (e.g., listening ability, service orientation, understanding others). These strengths are consistent with the female gender role which involves nurturing others and caring for the psycho-social needs of families. Feminine qualities such as sympathy, sensitivity to the needs of others, eagerness to soothe hurt feelings, and gentleness, are likely to have desirable behavioral correlates on the sales job. This paper, therefore, focuses on the feminine qualities of saleswomen. It examines the way sales managers believe they relate to effective performance in traditionally masculine types of selling.

Two research questions are addressed: (1) do sales managers perceive that saleswomen's feminine traits contribute to their selling effectiveness? and (2) do managers in two contrasting types of jobs differ in their perceptions of the relationship between femininity and selling effectiveness? The sales jobs of interest, direct sales and trade sales, represent two ends of a performance continuum. In direct sales, salespersons typically interact with many customers on a relatively short-term basis and have minimal contact with them after the sale. In trade sales, salespersons deal with fewer customers, strive for repeat business, and foster long-term customer relationships.

A convenience sample of 29 sales managers in trade sales and 26 sales managers in direct sales described 66 and 62 subordinate saleswomen, respectively, on a short form of the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI), also rating their performance. An analysis was performed separately for each selling situation with the managers' ratings of quality of performance of five functions of selling and non-selling activities as

dependent variables. The analysis was conducted: (1) with femininity alone as a predictor, and (2) including masculinity as a covariate. Analysis by multivariate regression suggested that the managers perceived a relationship between femininity and selling effectiveness in both type jobs. Managers in direct sales, however, saw a relationship only when masculinity was present. Overall, the managers in trade selling perceived a greater contribution by femininity to effectiveness than did their counterparts in direct selling.

There was a dramatic contrast in the way the two sets of managers perceived feminine traits to relate to selling performance. Managers in direct selling saw a relationship only when femininity was accompanied by masculinity and associated it exclusively with "stimulating desire" (giving sales presentations). Managers in trade selling associated feminine qualities with the functions of "contacting," "probing for needs," and "retaining." This was true whether or not masculine traits were present. There was agreement between managers about the way femininity related to performance of only two activities: "closing" and "non-selling activities." Managers did not associate femininity with closing in either situation, but did see a relationship between femininity and the performance of non-selling activities.

While feminine qualities did not always relate to quality of performance, they also never emerged as negatives, suggesting that saleswomen need not suppress them in situations where they don't directly contribute to effective performance (e.g., when closing). On the basis of these findings, it appears that the sensitive, nurturing tendencies that are ingrained in saleswomen by their sex-role socialization, will be perceived by their managers as assets, not as liabilities on the job.