

Sex and Sales



More News from Mars and Venus

by Trish Brock

“He can’t relate to women” or “She hates men.” We have all heard these comments and maybe even have had occasions when we also felt them to be true. Are they real or just perceived barriers? Do buyers in 2008 have gender biases when dealing with salespeople?

To find out, I interviewed an equal number of men and women buyers and got some candid, personal and sometimes not so politically correct perspectives. And while this was not a scientific process, their preferences and opinions might suggest more widely held beliefs.

Their feedback will hopefully reveal some additional insights into the needs and preferences of the people of both genders who buy your products.

So salespeople and sales managers listen up! Here is what your buyers have to say about salespeople—both men and women.

Do you prefer to buy from someone of the same gender?

Before anyone answered the question, they all responded that they want a salesperson to be competent and a good listener. They should “know their stuff.” They should be honest.

Each of the men interviewed said they had no real preference and commented that they had never really given it much thought. One male buyer said that he buys mostly from women however, because “more women walk

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through his door—it isn’t necessarily a conscious choice.” He also commented that he likes buying from women because he has six sisters and simply enjoys being in the company of women. Another man also commented that there seems to be more female salespeople in office furniture than male.

Women on the other hand had given this question a lot of thought and had opinions to share without much hesitation. Half the respondents said they had no preference but the other half felt strongly about wanting to buy from women. They too remarked that there are more women than men calling on them.

Do you think there is a difference between men and women, and how they sell and work with their customers?

Answers ranged from “absolutely” to “probably.” One male buyer felt that “in general, men are more aggressive and very competitive, sometimes even with him.”

He said he feels some men are more interested in “being right” and winning the sale than in the needs of his

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company. This same buyer feels women tend to try to get you what you need, listen better and take the time to help solve your problem.

Another male buyer had similar views and said he felt women are more attentive and are much better in their follow up. His experience with men is that when the sale is made, "there is a hand shake, a pat on the back and they are gone."

Another male buyer commented, "Women will stay in touch after the sale, but men disappear—it's all about the sale to them."

One female buyer had a different perspective and said that even though she felt women are better at taking care of the details, women also "tend to take things more personally if their product is not specified or purchased. It is a real weakness," she argued. "Just because you might have a good relationship doesn't mean the sales person should expect special treatment." This same female buyer's perspective is that men are better listeners and get "the big picture" on projects.

Is there anything that annoys you about how men or women sell?

Interestingly, all the comments were very gender-neutral and quite similar. Lack of competency was mentioned repeatedly by both the men and women interviewed.

In addition, "shooting straight" and being honest were very important factors, as well as the desire to work with "people who are straightforward and helpful." It is annoying when salespeople do not have these characteristics, male and female buyers agreed.

One male buyer mentioned he gets annoyed when salespeople "pester him" after he has received requested information. Another male buyer mentioned he "doesn't like aggressive salespeople who call constantly and stop by unannounced, regardless of their gender."

What strengths and weaknesses have you experienced that you may consider gender based?

Here is where a double edged sword showed up. While respondents mentioned that women in sales often attend to their customers in a more personal way, some also felt women take it personally when they lose a sale or when things don't necessarily go their way.

Even though it was the perception of all the people interviewed that men in sales are not as thorough in the details, most also felt that men do not take things personally and "let it go" when they lose a sale.

As a man/woman, do you have a preference for which gender you work with?

Most men and women interviewed replied that they really didn't have a preference. One male buyer said that 20 years ago he may have answered that question differently, but he has come to view both genders equally.

One female buyer however, was quite specific; "I like working with women," she said candidly. "They pay more attention to the details, can do many things at once, are better communicators, are better listeners and will get back to you. You don't have to track them down."

One of the male buyers also felt women are "better listeners, and are better at assessing the situation before making recommendations. Men want to fix the problem and are more interested in just selling their products." For this reason, he prefers working with women.

However, one male buyer mentioned that he likes working with men on a "man to man" basis and that his business relationships often turn into friendships.

Another male buyer commented that he doesn't like it when men try to use the country club, boy's network or tickets to sporting events to try to get his attention. He said he feels like they think that "as a man, I'm going to fall for this stuff."

Do you have any advice that you would like to give men/women about selling?

I had a resounding YES from everyone. There were multiple comments but they were not gender based. The most frequently offered suggestions: Be honest and follow up. Be authentic not only about your product, but about who you are personally regardless of gender. Communicate – if there are problems or new information, let the customer know immediately. Even if the news is bad, tell the truth and tell it quickly.

And we couldn't have a discussion about gender differences without a comment or two regarding sex. One man mentioned he still sees a bit of lingering "sex sells" attitude from women. Don't do that. Even some men are starting to act that way around women buyers. It's not professional and it doesn't work."

One female buyer wants salespeople to stop "talking down or being condescending to buyers—women can be as bad as men about that."

The bottom line: As long as there are men and women, there will always be differences. But understanding how gender differences impact sales effectiveness will clearly make it possible to bridge those gaps.

And it's nice to know that even though a few had preferences, the buyers I spoke with were not particularly biased towards either gender. They were more interested in sharing their experiences and wanted to let salespeople know that all in all, they are more interested in their professional sales expertise and their ability to help than they are in their gender.

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