



Gender Differences

The Elephant That Refuses to Leave the Room

By Trish Brock

Every dealer wants to get and keep “good people,” and competes within and outside the industry for talent. There are many factors in play. How much is gender one of them? I decided to ask office furniture sales managers for their perspectives.

I talked to an equal number of male and female managers, from both the dealer and manufacturing side of the industry.

They were all highly experienced, respected, successful and seasoned managers. They were also quite personable and well liked by both genders.

They were generous with their time, interested in sharing their opinions and honest with their responses.

And because their identities would not be revealed, they spoke their minds—after all, this is a very touchy subject. Some answers were predictable, yet others were not. All are thought provoking. Here is what they had to say:

As a sales manager, do you prefer working with someone of the same gender?

Almost unanimously, the answer was no. Nearly everyone interviewed said they were more interested in professionalism, talent, attitude and capabilities. Several managers commented too that an aptitude and willingness to learn is critical when hiring or working with their sales people.

However, a female manager replied, “My first thought is not really, but after thinking ... I prefer men. They are more direct and get right to the business issues faster. But, it’s always all about them.”

Do you hire sales people with a gender preference in mind?

Answers ranged from “No” to “I don’t think so.” Several people of both genders said that the few times they may be more interested in one gender over another had to do with trying to bring balance to their team.

One male manager “likes a balanced gender team because it brings varying insights and different perspectives, allowing the opportunity to view the sale from different angles.”

Another male manager said he will often hire a sales person with his clients in mind—“It’s more about matching personalities than gender.” A female manager also commented that it “depends on the account, territory, etc.”

A male manager said that “in the back of my mind, I am always wondering if a female candidate will bring issues to the job. Women tend to have more things like family, kids, etc., that could potentially interfere with their career. Since men are usually the major bread winner, they tend to have fewer distractions and can be more focused on their career.”

Yet another male manager said that he “looks for competencies via behavior profiles and assessments, frequently seeing more qualified female candidates than male—it just seems to happen.”

A female sales manager commented that she “seems to have mostly women on our team, not necessarily by design, and would like a few more men but it’s a complicated, detailed-driven business with a bit of a fashion element to it, all of which seems to attract more women.”

Do you think there is a difference between how men and women approach sales?

Interestingly, everyone interviewed said yes, and the comments were remarkably similar.

One male manager commented, “Men approach business as business. With women, business is more personal and business should be more personal—it’s how we differentiate. We have to establish relationships.”

Another male manager feels that “women have more empathy with customers, allowing them to ‘read’ people better. They’re better at asking questions, listening and the consultative sell. Men seem to be better at the technical aspects of products, but not as good at relationships and the consultative sell. They are good at ‘showing up and throwing up.’” This phrase was used by several respondents describing the “talking too much” issue.

Another male manager commented, “Men are competitive and sometimes macho about it. They have to win. They want to move up a rung on the ladder, they want to get the order. Women want to make the client happy and give the client what they need, not just make the sale.”

A woman manager commented that “with women, it’s more about feelings, perceptions and the process of closing the sale. It’s more about long term relationships. Men are more results-oriented. Because there are so many steps in this business, sometimes men move too fast—it’s all about the win.” This same manager went on to say that she finds herself managing and coaching people differently. “With men I have to coach them to stay engaged, and with women I have to ask them where we’re going in the process.”

Echoing many of the comments above, a woman manager added, “in addition to being more detailed and relationship focused, women seem to be more energetic and have a ‘Go get ’em’ approach. Men seem to think they are smarter and have a sense of entitlement, but they are better at keeping drama and emotion out of the sales process.”

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

A woman manager commented that “women will take on the ‘I can do it all’ thing. We’re too accustomed to doing it all. We’re used to hard work and commitment to our jobs. Men are not as



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emotionally engaged. This is both good and bad.”

A male manager said, that in general, “women will sometimes feel slighted in meetings. They question decisions more. Men are less likely to complain and will do what is asked of them. They are comfortable living in a hierarchy.”

Another female manager said that “men tend to do things the same way they have done them for years. They need to be better listeners and be more receptive to coaching. Women are more coachable. But women are affected more by a loss and take it more personally.”

Is there anything that annoys you about how either gender sells?

One male manager said he feels that “women tend to be more independent and more interested in themselves than the team. They are less willing to help other women. Men will help other men.”

A woman manager commented that “men don’t want to ‘get’ the complexity of the sale, they don’t want to mess with the details. This causes them to miss information. They can be great sales people but you need a broom behind them to clean up their mess. And they expect to be excused for this.”

Another male manager observed that he is “concerned when appearance doesn’t seem to be a concern to his sales people. It’s way too relaxed at times. Often sales people aren’t thinking about how they present to our customers. The girls look like they are going on a date, and the guys will too often wear jeans. Is two days’ worth of stubble really OK?”

Do you have any advice you would like to share?

A male manager said that “everyone must be better at asking more questions. You can’t come up with solutions without first understanding the client’s problems. There is still too much assuming and guessing going on.”

Ditto by several other managers: “Sales people need to develop better listening skills.”

Another male manager said there is “too much product training and not enough sales and management training. There should be more professional development. Lack of training causes lack of success.”

Any further comments?

There were some very interesting, disturbing and thought provoking comments about the furniture industry in general that must be noted.

One woman manager said “business is not just business. There are emotional and people issues within our organizations and our customers’ organizations. Men tend to avoid them. People are people and inherently bring their stuff to the office. We must deal with it if we expect to be effective in our work lives.”

A woman commented that “the good attributes of women in sales are often held against them when they are able to get in to management. The benefits of women’s sensitivity are largely ignored then.”

Another women candidly said, “While we see a lot of successful women in sales, it’s a ‘good old boys’ club at the top. You rarely see women there. That creates a homogenous leadership style, lacking in thought and new ideas.”

The men had some powerful comments as well. Consider a large manufacturer’s national sales manager’s perspective: “I would like to give men advice that there is much to be gained by having good professional women on the team. Our market is mixed so our team should be. There is a mix of skills and there is strength in that. Women have to stop worrying about proving they are equal or better, and stop assuming they aren’t being treated equally and taking a defensive posture.

“But there are still a lot of ‘old school’ men. Many prefer having a bunch of guys around so they don’t have to worry about their behavior, comments, etc. Most men don’t care about balancing the opinions of genders and have women on staff because they have to. And just because there are women on staff, they think that is enough. It sucks. Sexism exists. It’s not talked about, but it should be. And it exists within both genders.”

I will let the reader draw his or her own conclusions. One thing is certain however: While it might appear that people are gender neutral, the reality is that there are still attitudes and issues barely beneath the surface that affect every organization. The proverbial elephant is in the room. He’s doing his thing, but many still choose to ignore it.

Whether you agree or disagree with the opinions shared in this article, maybe it will help get the conversation started. Too much talent and skills are at stake not to, particularly in these challenging economic times.

What do you think?

Does Trish have a point? Or has she spent too much time talking to people in the industry who need to get out more?

We’d love to hear what you think. Drop us an e-mail (simon@dealercentral.com) and we’ll run readers’ comments and opinion in our next issue.

