

NEW RESEARCH: SHY SALESPEOPLE?

DALLAS, TEXAS, APRIL 20, 2009: It's infuriating! Having to endlessly wait— or clear your throat melodramatically— to get the attention of a salesperson is the norm at some stores. That inattention can drive sales to competitors.

Psychologist, Dr. Bill Gordon, wanted a new, top-of-the-line Lexus. When he visited his local Lexus dealership the salesperson tried to make Gordon feel like “a little lad from the country.” “I drove down the street and bought an Infiniti,” Gordon said. CEO and bestselling author, Shannon L. Goodson had a similar experience. Goodson was shopping for several high-end desktop computers systems. Responding to newspaper advertising, she visited a computer retailer only to have the sales staff ignore her as they pecked away on their desktops. Goodson did buy her computer systems— *somewhere else*. “Maybe it's because I'm a woman, I don't know. But I do know I don't have the time to shop at retailers like that. ”

Historically, retailers haven't placed as much emphasis on responsive customer engagement as their direct sales counterparts. *After all, good products and services sell themselves. Right?* Not according to a research study just presented at the April, 2009 annual convention of the Southwestern Psychological Association in San Antonio, Texas. Researchers George W. Dudley and Trelitha R. Bryant, scientists at Behavioral Sciences Research Press in Dallas, examined the customer engagement behavior of 1,160 retail salespeople in the U.S. A smaller sample of 209 non-U.S. salespeople was also examined for comparison purposes. The researchers investigated how many times the retail salespeople actually initiated conversation with “walk-in” prospective buyers during the previous work week. The results were unexpected. During the measurement period, 43.3% (502) engaged prospective walk-in customers only 1-5 times.

To find out why so many failed to engage walk-ins, the sample was further divided into groups based on the number of contacts made. Then, contacts made were correlated with scores the salespeople obtained on a diagnostic psychological test specifically designed to detect emotional discomfort associated with initiating contact with prospective buyers. “Salespeople with *under*-average customer contacts had significantly *higher* levels of Sales Call Reluctance,” Bryant said. “The low customer engagement group had higher scores on *ten* of twelve known Call Reluctance types, plus an additional overall measure. Clearly, something is limiting the effectiveness of this group.”

The results obtained by Bryant and Dudley are consistent with their recently reported multi-nation study of 199,000 salespeople scattered across companies, industries and sales settings. “That study uncovered a formerly unknown behavioral self-contradiction: People currently working in sales who don't want to talk to anyone,” Bryant said. How many? “Our data suggests 7-9% worldwide,” Bryant estimated. Among additional results, the researchers reported:

- **Gender Comparison:** 19.6% of currently employed salesmen and 16.6% of saleswomen say they are uncomfortable starting conversations with people they don't know.

- **Country Comparisons:** Canadian salespeople (19%) are more reticent than U.S. salespeople (17%) but less than U.K. salespeople (21%).
- **Faking Sociability:** 31% of the salespeople in the U.K. say they are reluctant to engage others in conversation. However, the number shrinks to 27% for applicants for sales positions. “That could indicate applicant faking,” Dudley said. “Our data shows faking sociability may not be adequately detected in the U.K., China, South Africa and other countries where we found lower scores for applicants than employed salespeople.”
- **Upward Trend:** The number of socially challenged salespeople is growing. In 2004, 17.6% of the salespeople sampled globally said they were hesitant to initiate conversation. In 2008 it was 19.7%.

“This study is loaded with practical implications for people who manage sales, customer service or other customer engagement positions,” Dudley said. “It shows downward economic pressures may be driving people who are not normally interested in selling to apply for sales positions. However, to maintain sales during extraordinarily troublesome times, retailers need to make sure they hire salespeople who can sell. Many hiring organizations, though, seem unwilling, unable or indifferent to effectively screening out applicants who are not suited for sales. To do that, they need to revisit the way they select their salespeople. The procedures they use should at least be able to screen out applicants who don’t want to talk to people.” SOURCE: Behavioral Sciences Research Press, Inc., Dallas, TX, 972-243-8543. URL: <http://www.bsrpinc.com>