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# Students' Perceptions of Personal Selling

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*A word association approach was used to determine the salient thoughts students have with regard to personal selling. Examining the very first thought that comes to mind when exposed to the words "personal selling" revealed that, despite the efforts of some companies and educators, the stereotypical view of selling as a "door-to-door" profession (often comprised of less-than-professional salespeople), remains quite prevalent in the minds of college students. Recommendations to assist college recruiters in overcoming these negative perceptions and improving their recruitment efforts are discussed.*

## INTRODUCTION

America's well-trained labor force and modern mass production capabilities have culminated in a large capacity to produce goods and services. Consequently, the need to locate and persuade buyers to consume these goods and services (in order to maintain the balance between production and consumption) has resulted in an ever-increasing demand for qualified salespeople [11].

In order to meet this demand, companies have often

turned to the nation's universities as a pool of potential sales recruits. Unfortunately, corporate recruiters often find it difficult to persuade students to interview for sales positions as well as accept job offers. This has resulted in firms not being able to attract and hire as many qualified students as they'd like, and may be a contributing factor to the rising costs of training and retaining salespeople.

Recognizing the existence of this problem, academic researchers over the last three decades have attempted to develop a better understanding of students' perceptions of personal selling, often with the intent to aid corporate recruiters in their hiring efforts. Results of these studies reflect the fact that personal selling is not often held in high esteem [5, 8, 9, 12, 14, 17, 19, 20], though more recent studies [1, 6] have reported some improvement. Given that students often lack a complete understanding of selling's role [1, 7, 14-17], humor (jokes), novels, short stories, stage productions, television programs, and newspaper comics have merely reinforced and perpetuated the often negative stereotype of salespeople [20].

The fact that sales occupations are held in low regard by the public in general and students in particular extends beyond being just a problem for sales managers to being a problem for the entire business community. For example, Thompson [20] contends that salesmen are a personification of just about everything that young people

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find most distasteful about the "Establishment" and its perceived way of life. As a result, he believes highly educated and intelligent young people are downgrading careers in business in general, whereas previously the sales field had been most affected. Such findings obviously lend strong support for the continued need to find better ways to understand students' perceptions of personal selling and to determine what U.S. industrial corporations can do to improve the situation.

With the exception of a study conducted nearly 30 years ago by Staunton [19] who asked students to list five words they associated with the word "salesman," most studies have examined students' perceptions primarily through the use of forced-choice types of survey items [1, 6, 7, 14-17]. The position in this paper, is that a word association technique identifies underlying perceptions of selling. The technique is designed to capture the most salient thoughts individuals have about a subject. To improve the validity of such reports, only the "first thoughts" (rather than all thoughts) should be examined. Support for isolating and examining initial thoughts is found in the psychology literature:

When a series of association is demanded and the subject is requested to produce all his associations without stopping, the intrusion of more or less conscious purposes cannot, as a rule, be prevented. A mass of valueless co-ordinations and coexistences occur. It is, therefore, well to demand only *one* association to the given percept, and at the same time to exclude the introduction of any directed thought by requesting as quick a reaction as possible ([2], pp. 5-6).

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Thus, one might conclude that the first thought is the most salient thought, and thereby provides the truest representation of a student's perception of personal selling. Conversely, if students are given an opportunity to report many thoughts, it is conceivable that they will resort to a more conscious approach as the task continues, resulting in the reporting of thoughts that are less valid indicators of their perceptions of selling. In any event, it was felt that a word association approach would provide a simple means of discovering how college students of the 1980s perceive personal selling. The results of such a study may provide sales recruiters with useful insight that can be used to overcome the reluctance college students have toward entering the sales profession.

Therefore, the purposes of this study are: (1) to determine students' perceptions of personal selling, by examining the "first thought" to come to mind in a word association task, and (2) to translate these findings into recommendations industrial sales recruiters can incorporate into their recruiting strategies.

## METHODOLOGY

### Sample

The sample consisted of 300 Introduction to Marketing students, 156 (52%) males and 144 (48%) females, the majority (75%) of whom were business majors. Given that corporate recruiters hire both business and nonbusiness students for sales positions, it was felt the sample provided a fairly representative breakdown of students who may even remotely be considering a sales-related position upon graduation. Furthermore, the results of recent studies by Bellenger, Bernhardt, and Wayman [1] and Dubinsky [6], indicate that students from different disciplines or at different levels of their college education do not vary with respect to their perceptions of selling. Subsequent analysis of the pattern of thoughts in this study verified the fact that there were no significant differences in perceptions as a result of college major

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# Word associations identified underlying perceptions of selling.

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or sex. Therefore, the results of this study should be fairly generalizable.

## Procedure

As part of a larger study dealing with students reactions to personal selling, a word association technique was used to determine the one word (or phrase) students most commonly associate with personal selling. Before performing the task, students were given a "trial run" activity on an unrelated topic to ensure they understood the researchers' requests. Employing a format often used by cognitive response researchers [3, 4, 10, 21], students were asked to respond to the words "personal selling" by writing all thoughts that came to mind about the topic in 1" x 7" boxes provided on the first three pages of a questionnaire. Students were given 3 minutes to perform the task, after which they were instructed to evaluate each written thought as being either positive (in which case a "+" was written in the margin to the right of the thought), negative (represented by a "-"), or neutral (represented by a "0"). Students were then instructed to complete the remaining items on the questionnaire, including items dealing with demographic information.

## Analysis

In order to facilitate the analysis of the freely associated thoughts, it was necessary to develop a coding scheme. After reviewing a sample of written thoughts, the investigators identified eight distinct categories that represented the majority of thoughts. (Each category was further broken down according to the valence of the thought, i.e., whether the thought was considered positive, negative, or neutral.)

The first category (labeled "Advantages/ Disadvantages-related" thoughts) contained thoughts dealing with the self-perceived advantages and disadvantages of being in a sales job. Examples included "making money" and "success," as well as "high rejection rate" and "long hard hours."

The second category (labeled "Specific Product/Company/Individual-related" thoughts) contained thoughts about specific products, companies, or personalities (individuals) students associated with personal selling. Examples included "Avon lady," "car salesmen," "vacuum cleaner salesmen," as well as names of specific sales personalities in the region.

"Characteristic-related" thoughts comprised the third category of thoughts and included thoughts dealing with how

salespeople act and/or look. Statements such as "friendly," "outgoing personality," "pushy," "obnoxious salesman," and "sometimes offensive for customers," exemplified the types of thoughts contained in this category.

The fourth category (labeled "Door-to-Door-related" thoughts) contained thoughts dealing with the environment in which salespeople sell, more specifically, the door-to-door environment. All of the statements placed in this fourth category contained specific reference to "door-to-door" selling.

Any statements alluding to a student's future employment plans or preparations were placed in the fifth category of thoughts (labeled "Future Employment-related" thoughts). Thoughts such as "resume writing," "job interviews," and "selling yourself to a future employer" were typical of the thoughts contained in this category.

Students' perceptions of what individuals actually do in a sales job represented the sixth category ("Task-related" thoughts). A few of the statements contained in this category included: "selling by word of mouth," "face-to-face interaction with customers," "answering objections," and "knocking on doors."

The seventh category was labeled "Business-related" thoughts and included references to personal selling's role in relation to other elements of business, or reference specifically to the other elements. Examples included "profit making," "advertising," and "marketing," among others.

Any thoughts, such as "slow," "MTV," and "what's personal selling," that were difficult to categorize made up the final "Miscellaneous-related" thoughts category. Table 1 summarizes the categories used in this study.

To help guard against inconsistencies or personal biases that may manifest themselves when only one person is given the task of assigning thoughts to categories, three judges, working independently, were used to code the thoughts. The three judges unanimously agreed upon the category assignment of 83% of the "first-thoughts." Ninety-eight percent of the time, at least two of the three judges were in agreement, in which case the majority decision was used to assign a thought to a category. When there was disagreement among each of the three judges (which happened less than 2% of the time) one of the investigators (always the same person for consistency) made the final category assignment.

## RESULTS

Table 2 provides a percentage breakdown of students' most salient thoughts about personal selling, using the

**TABLE 1**  
**Categories of First-Thoughts**

Category	Description
Advantages/disadvantages	Thoughts dealing with self-perceived advantages and disadvantages of being in a sales job (as seen through the eyes of a salesperson)
Specific product/company individual	References to specific products, companies, or personalities (individuals)
Characteristics	Thoughts dealing with the personal, physical, and behavioral aspects of sales people (how they act and look)
Door-to-door	Thoughts dealing specifically with the door-to-door environment of sales
Future employment	Thoughts dealing with a student's future employment plans or preparations
Tasks	The specific job tasks performed by salespeople
Business	Thoughts dealing with personal selling's role in relation to other elements of business, or specific reference to these elements
Miscellaneous	Thoughts difficult to interpret, not falling into one of the other categories

categorization scheme discussed above. If one were to examine only the signs (i.e., positive, negative, or neutral) of all of the "first-thoughts," it would appear that students are only slightly more negative than positive in their perceptions of selling (41% of first-thoughts were negative; 39% were positive; and 20% were neutral).

However, by examining the eight categories more closely, an interesting pattern emerges. First of all, nearly one-fourth of all thoughts were direct references to the door-to-door aspect of selling, most (68%) of which were negative. In other words, of all first-thoughts and images that could come to student's minds, the one most prevalent associates selling in a negative way with door-to-door sales. Very few students (1% of the total) associated personal selling with door-to-door sales in a positive manner.

The next most abundant thoughts were contained in two categories: the "Specific Product/Company/ Individual-related" category and the "Characteristics-related" category, each comprising 20.3% of the first-thoughts.

**TABLE 2**  
**Summary of First-Thoughts about Personal Selling**

Category	Frequency	Percent Within Category	Percent of Total Thoughts
Door-to-door-related thoughts	75	100.0	25.0
Positive	3	4.0	1.0
Negative	51	68.0	17.0
Neutral	21	28.0	7.0
Specific product/company/ individual-related thoughts	61	100.0	20.3
Positive	21	34.4	7.0
Negative	22	36.1	7.3
Neutral	18	29.5	6.0
Characteristic-related thoughts	61	100.0	20.3
Positive	21	34.4	7.0
Negative	36	59.0	12.0
Neutral	4	6.6	1.3
Task-related thoughts	45	100.0	15.1
Positive	35	77.8	11.7
Negative	2	4.4	0.7
Neutral	8	17.8	2.7
Future employment-related thoughts	20	100.0	6.6
Positive	13	65.0	4.3
Negative	6	30.0	2.0
Neutral	1	5.0	0.3
Advantages/disadvantages-related thoughts	17	100.0	5.7
Positive	9	52.9	3.0
Negative	5	29.4	1.7
Neutral	3	17.7	1.0
Business-related thoughts	14	100.0	4.7
Positive	11	78.6	3.7
Negative	0	0.0	0.0
Neutral	3	21.4	1.0
Miscellaneous-related thoughts	7	100.0	2.3
Positive	2	28.6	0.7
Negative	3	42.8	1.0
Neutral	2	28.6	0.6

While thoughts in the Product/Company/Individual category were nearly evenly divided between positive and negative thoughts (34% and 36%, respectively), a majority of thoughts (59%) in the Characteristics category were of a negative nature. Taken together, however, it appears that a negative source effect may be present when students are asked to think about personal selling. In other words, rather than thinking about what personal salespeople do, or how personal selling may benefit consumers, students are very likely to associate personal

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selling with personalities (general and specific) as well as the products and companies salespeople represent. More importantly, these associations, like the ones for door-to-door selling, are very often negative.

Less prevalent first-thoughts, consisting of thoughts about the tasks performed by salespeople (15.1% of all thoughts), the advantages/disadvantages of being in selling (5.7% of all thoughts), and the role of selling in business (4.7% of all thoughts), were, on the other hand, predominantly positive. For example, 78% of all "Task-related" thoughts, 53% of all "Advantages/Disadvantages-related" thoughts, and 79% of all "Business-related" thoughts were positive. It appears, then, that some students associate selling with positive images, recognizing the benefits selling, or salespeople, provide to the business, economy, and customers. Unfortunately for those concerned with improving selling's image, these types of positive thoughts are definitely in the minority.

Not necessarily related to a career in sales, students' thoughts that dealt with future employment plans or preparations accounted for only 6.6% of all the thoughts. The interesting finding here, however, is that students generally seem to be quite optimistic about their future employment opportunities (65% of their thoughts being positive).

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

It appears that college students of the 1980s, much like students of previous generations [5, 8, 9, 12, 14, 17, 19, 20], often hold a stereotypical view of personal selling. The rather alarming finding that nearly a third of all first-thoughts (29%) associated selling in a negative fashion with door-to-door activities, or with less than desirable personal traits, such as being pushy, obnoxious, or out of style, reflects the pervasiveness of this stereotype. It also makes it quite apparent that much more needs to be done in terms of informing students of the realities of personal selling.

The Social Learning Theory [13] can be used to help explain how this stereotype has emerged as well as how

recruiters might attempt to change it. The theory posits that an associative learning experience occurs when individuals associate some previously affectively neutral stimuli such as meeting a door-to-door salesperson, with an emotionally laden stimuli such as recognizing that the salesperson has misrepresented his/her company in some way (most often to the consumer's detriment). This process is referred to as stimulus pairing. The process results in the observer changing his or her original neutral perception of door-to-door salespeople to a negative one. Hence, through social interaction (actual or vicarious experiences) people tend to form occupational stereotypes. The stereotype emerges when individuals generalize their views of one type of individual (e.g., a door-to-door salesperson) to all sales positions. By pairing the sales profession with pleasant events, or by introducing new positive information about personal selling, the pervasive negativism toward salespeople can be combatted [13].

The position in this paper is that any effort to change students' negative stereotype of salespeople will require a concerted effort by major corporations, professional sales associations, and academic institutions. Over 20 years ago, the editors of *Sales Management* [18] argued for a similar systematic approach. However, it appears that proposal never went beyond the planning stage. The pervasive negative attitudes toward selling, and the length of time they have been held, makes it imperative that a well-planned strategy be developed and implemented. Otherwise, students' perceptions may continue to be misperceptions.

The objective should be to educate students (high school and college-aged) as well as individuals who may influence them (such as parents and counselors) about many issues regarding personal selling. Through this educational process, an attempt must be made to illustrate how door-to-door sales are not representative of most types of selling jobs; in fact, they are a slim minority. This can be shown through a review of job functions that are associated with salespeople employed by major producers of consumer durables and nondurables. Examples of advancement opportunities for individuals who are

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**Nearly a third of all first thoughts associated selling in a negative fashion.**

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successful in sales positions should also be discussed. Further, a new profile of the typical salesperson should be placed in the minds of students. This profile must include characteristics of salespeople that students may not be totally aware of, such as the fact that many are college educated professionals, possessing communications and problem-solving skills, as well as creative abilities. Hopefully, this will begin to clear up the misconceptions of students regarding the characteristics of salespeople.

Next, the strategy should focus on reinforcing the positive perceptions students hold toward personal selling, such as the tasks salespeople perform, and how personal selling fits within the business structure. During this process it is also recommended that an effort be made to explain how personal selling contributes to society in general. For example, one should illustrate the contribution sales makes to the economic development of the U.S. economy and how this is translated into a higher standard of living for U.S. citizens. This should help improve the public's perception of the occupational prestige of selling, and result in improving the likelihood that the brightest university graduates will be willing to seriously consider a sales career.

It is suggested that both a personal and mass appeal be used to accomplish the above objectives. Salespeople and sales managers should attempt to become more involved in speaking to student organizations (marketing clubs, other business clubs, and even fraternities and sororities), business and nonbusiness classes (especially introductory classes designed for freshmen), fraternal/civic organizations (such as Rotary and Lions clubs), and other community organizations (e.g., Chambers of Commerce). An effort should also be made to establish a closer working relationship with the university community. Individuals involved in sales can aid professors in informing students of the realities of personal selling, and emphasize the important role personal selling plays in society. Finally, corporate representatives should attempt to revise their interviewing approaches so that they not only contain information about the specifics of a company, but also "sell" students on a career in sales.

The mass appeal will communicate the same message, but will rely on school newspapers, brochures available in campus placement offices, films (produced and sponsored by companies or sales organizations), and additional information made available, upon request, through the mail.

The findings of this study indicate that the negative

stereotype of personal selling is still very much alive and well in the minds of college students. It is no wonder then, that many qualified students are reluctant to pursue a career in sales. Though past studies have recommended plans to educate students, it appears that very little has changed in terms of students' perceptions of selling. It is imperative that sales companies take an even more active role in altering the misperceptions students have about selling. With a concerted effort to incorporate the strategies outlined above, it is hoped that by the turn of the next decade, the first thoughts to come to mind when students are exposed to the words "personal selling" will be thoughts such as "professional," "problem-solver," and "expert."

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