

# **Exploring Students' View of Sales Profession in Lebanon**

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## **Abstract**

An understanding of the perceptions of students towards personal selling is an important area of study. Personal selling is a critical marketing activity that accounts for a major portion of the revenue generation for any company. Those who sell the products are the life blood of the organization. The sales profession is the major source of revenue and stability for any organization. Absent the ability to sell products and services, a company is in serious jeopardy of losing its competitive edge and its worth as a company. Personal selling is represented at many levels in a company and in various business dealings. Recruiting future sales professionals is vital to the continued success and sustainability of business entities. The purpose of this study is investigates students' perceptions of personal selling as a career in the developing nations – Case of Lebanon. Studies in United States highlighting the negative perception of sales profession by people are numerous, especially when it comes to issues of ethics and honesty (Futrell 2007). Lee et al (2007) argued that students generally try to avoid salespeople as best as they can; in the addition, the lack of information about the profession perpetrates the negative image in their minds. Research methodology used in this study is made of factor analysis, chi square, interval estimate of sample means, and Marketing Lens Model (MLM). Research output showed that Lebanese students have a biased perception about sales as career; however, interestingly few dimensions showed significant effect.

## **Introduction**

Building a strong sales force requires talented salespeople and the university is one source for this potential talent (Terpstra and Sarathy 1997). There are many business students who, at the start of their career entered the workforce through the sales field. Because this field has been a major source of sales talent there has been a continued interest in measuring students' perceptions of the sales field as a career direction. Stevens and Macintosh (2002-2003, 23), indicate that "interest is fueled by the fact that college students make up a large and attractive pool of job candidates," recruiting companies "would like to know the reasons why students are or are not attracted to sales" and professors want to "know what role education plays in students' attitudes and perceptions of sales as a career." Competing in the global marketplace requires companies to have well-trained sales forces that include diversity training as a major component.

Companies need to recruit salespeople from different ethnic/racial backgrounds. In particular, what are the attitudes of African-American students toward personal selling? Are these "minority" students interested in sales careers at all?

Most people view sales people as pushy, dishonest, aggressive and annoying. In fact, according to a study done by Gallup (as cited by Futrell 2007), it was found that insurance salespeople, advertising practitioners and used car salespeople ranked among the lowest in terms of ethics and honesty, with car salespeople placed at the lowest rung. The roots of this 'negative' attitude towards salespeople can perhaps be traced back to the Industrial Revolution, when factories developed tremendous manufacturing capabilities, leading to a huge surplus of inventories that posed problems to manufacturers (Lamb et al. 2007). As a consequence, salespeople were hired to sell as much of the products as possible as well as quickly as possible.

To achieve their sales ‘target’ these salespeople had to adopt an extremely aggressive approach, which is often referred to as ‘sales (as opposed to ‘market’) orientation in marketing theory (Bristow et al. 2006). It is this contradictory attitude towards the sales profession in general and the salesperson that motivated our current research. Specifically, what we are interested in finding out is whether students brought up and educated in vastly different cultures and education systems also harbor different feelings towards the salespersons and choosing the sales profession as a career. The following section provides a review of the relevant literature. In the next section, we develop the conceptual framework for our analysis, which is based on the Marketing Lens Model (MLM henceforth) (Bristow 1998, Bristow et al. 2006, Licatta et al. 1995). The penultimate section of this study describes the implications for the study. At a minimum, the findings can be used by sales managers, salespersons and marketing educators to make a conscious effort in eliminating the misguided notions that students have about the role of salespersons in our society. The concluding section acknowledges the limitations and provides suggestions for advancing the current line of research.

### **Literature Review**

Salespeople have been traditionally considered to be money-hungry, aggressive, eager-to-sell, hardworking, ambitious people. Such stereotypes and preconceived notions of salespeople are further fuelled by statistics. A 1995 Gallup poll, for example, found that car sales was considered the least ethical occupation among 26 careers considered, with insurance salespeople voted 23<sup>rd</sup> (as quoted in Butler 1996). And such perceptions are prevalent not just in the US but in other countries as well. In some cultures, as a matter of fact, evidence suggests that the profession of ‘selling’ is used as an insult or to designate a show off (Butler 1996).

Research shows that students' negative opinion about salespeople is also engendered by the negative experience many of them have had with salespeople (Jolson 1972). As Dubinsky (1981) notes, most customers consider salespeople as lowly-paid, monotonous, uneducated, high-pressure phony individuals who they would never want to meet again. Even for students who have actually not had any first-hand interaction with a salesperson tend to harbor and nurture such negative opinions. Such negative students' opinion of salespeople and the sales professions perhaps results from the low prestige status traditionally assigned to a sales job (Mason 1965, Ditz 1968). In other words, since salespeople come from diverse backgrounds and academic qualifications, as well the fact that the profession typically endows very little authority to the person, all these factors result in the sales profession as being considered as one of the lowliest of its kind among comparable professions, even within the same organization.

Finally, research suggests that recruiters fail to adequately articulate the qualifications for, demands, responsibilities and rewards of a sales profession in their recruitment efforts. Consequently, the ingrained negative perceptions in the students' mindset remain 'untouched' (Kurtz 1972, Dubinsky 1981). The repercussions of such a phenomenon are twofold: first, students shy away from applying for sales jobs and second, those who do accept sales jobs behave in a manner that conforms to such preconceived notions and hence, further perpetrates the negative perception towards sales (Lee et al. 2007).

### *Comparative Studies*

The second category of studies in this field draws comparison between different sets of factors such as perceptions of male/female, business/non-business, enrolled/not-enrolled in selling course and student/salesperson. A series of studies conducted by the Sales Management

journal (1962 a, b, c) concluded that the underlying attitudes of males towards sales was “...forceful, deceitful, holding positions with low status and prestige, with little security (Swenson et al. 1993, p-53). Paul et al. (1970) on the other hand, found that comparing students across different college majors, there was universal negative feelings about sales careers. Dubinsky (1980) compared students’ perceptions of sales careers with other vocational needs to conclude that majority of the respondents harbor a positive feeling toward sales positions. In another study, Dubinsky (1981) compared salespeople’s perception with students’ perception of selling and found that students had misconceptions about sales positions when compared with that of sales people. Dubinsky et al. (1983) found preferential differences also exist among students in terms of seven sales jobs. In terms of comparison of the sexes, conflicting findings exist. While Cook et al. (1986) found that females are more reluctant than their male counterparts to accept sales positions, Muehling et al. (1988) found college women to be more favorably opinionated towards personal selling than males. Bristow et al. (2006) significant perceptual differences between students who had completed personal selling courses and those also had not. Harmon (1999) used a randomized block design to conclude that depending on whether students were provided a general or a specific description of the sales job, attitude towards the sales job varied between the sexes. Based on the above review, therefore, we frame the following hypotheses:

Based on these findings, therefore, we frame the following hypothesis:

**H1: Are knowledge, experience, and expectations significant factors in shaping Lebanese students’ perception about sales career?**

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The research methodology is made of two steps. In the first step, a modified version of the Marketing Lens Model (MLM) is used. The Lens Model was first used by Brunwik (1952) in psychological research, which was later adopted by Bristow (1998, 2006) in marketing research; the model investigates the influence of experience, expectations, and knowledge on perception. In this study, in an attempt to capture the effect of other influences 13 attitudinal statements of Kavas (2003) were added, in addition to the three other statements recommended by Lucas (1996). In the second step, t (student) tests is performed to check the significance of the statements that were identified by the factor analysis.

### **Data Collection**

The data was collected from a sample of 156 students taken at random from Lebanese universities through a questionnaire. The instrument used a mix of statements and Likert scale rankings of attributes and was made of three parts. In the first part, students were asked to make three statements about their perception of sales profession (Weeks et al. 1987) and also to evaluate thought as being either “positive,” “neutral” or “negative” by checking the appropriate cell. In the second part, students were asked to provide statements about answers in the form of agreement or disagreement to express their attitude (expectations) towards the sales profession. A Likert scale was used so that the respondent can select a numerical score ranging from 1 to 5 for each statement to indicate the degree of agreement or otherwise, where 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 denote “Strongly Disagree”, Disagree”, “Neither Agree nor Disagree (Neutral)”, “Agree”, and “Strongly Agree”, respectively. In the third part, students were asked to provide demographic information like age, gender and education.

## **Analysis of Data Reliability**

In the first step, the factor analysis is used and the following tests were done.

### **Bartlett's Test of Sphericity**

Factorability of the data is tested by using "Bartlett's test of sphericity", which calculates the determinate of the matrix of the sums of products and cross-products (S) from which the inter-correlation matrix is derived and then, converts the matrix S to a chi-square statistic and tested for significance. The null hypothesis is that the inter-correlation matrix comes from a population in which the variables are non-collinear (i.e. an identity matrix) and that the non-zero correlations in the sample matrix are due to sampling error.

The computed Chi-square of data is 822.77, which is highly significant (P value < .000000). The inter-correlation matrix of data is not an identity matrix and data is factorable.

### **Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy (KMO)**

The sampling adequacy is tested using the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure, which measures the proportion of the observed correlation coefficients to the partial correlation coefficients. A KMO measure of 0.7 or greater indicates that the factor analysis of the variables is a good idea.

The computed KMO measure is 0.813, which supports the research concept.

### **Cronbach's Alpha Reliability Test**

Cronbach's alpha determines the internal consistency or average correlation of items in a survey instrument to gauge its reliability. It is commonly used as a measure of the internal consistency or reliability of a psychometric test scores. Survey statements produced a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.8450, which is highly significant. A study with a coefficient 0.65 or better is considered reliable (Girden, 2001).



A factor analysis of the modified MLM statements was conducted, the resultant factor matrix was rotated using Varimax rotations. The analysis produced three factors, which explained 33.28 percent of the total variance. Only those factors with an eigen value greater than 1.00 and more than variable were retained. Table 1 summarizes the factor loading and the three factors.

**Table 1: Factor Analysis of Statements (Varimax Rotation)**

<b><u>Factors and Characteristics</u></b>	<b><u>Factor Loading</u></b>	<b><u>% of Explained Variations</u></b>
<b><u>Factor 01 - Experience</u></b>		
Low Security	0.56	
Frustration	0.76	
Insincerity	0.70	
Forcing People to Buy	0.60	<b>14.95%</b>
<b><u>Factor 02 - Knowledge</u></b>		
Uninteresting Unchallenging	0.64	
No Need for Creativity	0.69	<b>9.63%</b>
<b><u>Factor 03 - Expectations</u></b>		
Job not a Career	0.55	
Difficult to Advance	0.75	<b>8.71%</b>
<b><u>Total Explained Variations</u></b>		<b>33.28%</b>

Table 1 includes only those statements that have a factor loading of greater than 0.5 on their respective factors. The first factor loadings show statements that reflect students' own experience about selling as a career. Factor explained 14.95% of the total variance. Factor included four statements, which are low security, frustration, insincerity, and forcing people to buy.

The second factor reflects students' knowledge of selling career. Factors explained 9.63% of the variance. Two statements were included, which are job is unchallenging and uninteresting.

The third factor explained highlights students' expectations. Factor explained 8.71% of the variance. Two statements were included, which are 1- Job is not a career and 2- it is difficult to advance.

What is really interesting was that general demographic variables didn't show any significant effect in any of the factors in the analysis.

In the second stage, the significance of the statements of the three factors was tested by constructing the confidence interval at a level of 5%. Statements are measured on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree) with 3 standing for neutral perception. The following table output reflects the mean scores of the statements that were reported by all respondents compared to score 3 (neutral) and their confidence interval. If the lower limit and upper limit of mean difference are of different signs, it means that the average perception significantly neutral; if the lower limit and the upper limit of the difference have both negative signs, it means that the perception is significantly negative; and if the lower limit and the upper limit of the mean difference have both positive signs, it means that the perception is significantly positive.

**Table 02: Testing the Significance of the Neutrality of the Statements**

					<b>CI 95% Confidence</b>	
	<b>T</b>	<b>DF</b>	<b>Sig of 2 tails</b>	<b>Mean Diff</b>	<b>Lower</b>	<b>Upper</b>
<b><u>Factor 01 - Experience</u></b>						
Forcing People to Buy	2.05	154	0.04	0.19	0.01	0.38
Low Security	0.22	155	0.83	0.02	-0.15	0.19
Frustration	-1.92	152	0.06	-0.19	-0.38	0.01
Insincerity	-1.99	153	0.05	-0.17	-0.34	0.00
<b><u>Factor 02 - Knowledge</u></b>						

Uninteresting Unchallenging	-5.71	153	0.00	-0.54	-0.73	-0.35
No Need for Creativity	-6.64	155	0.00	-0.63	-0.82	-0.44
<b><u>Factor 03 - Expectations</u></b>						
Job not a Career	2.24	155	0.03	0.22	0.03	0.42
Difficult to Advance	2.49	153	0.01	0.25	0.05	0.44

Analyzing factor one “experience” statements showed that three statements out of four have different signs in the their lower and upper limit intervals, which means that have neutral perception at a level of significance of 5%; only one statement, which is “Forcing People to Buy” is significantly different from neutral. In checking the second factor “Knowledge”, two statements which are “Uninteresting and Unchallenging” and “No Need for Creativity” both showed negative signs in their upper and lower limits; this means that they are both statistically different from neutrality. However, in checking factor three “Expectations”, it showed that both statements have positive signs in there lower and upper limit intervals and they are statistically significant from being neutral.

### **Conclusions, Limitations, and Recommendations**

Results showed significant evidence that Lebanese students’ perception of the sales job and sales people is not neutral. However, their perception is driven by ideas / concepts that are different from what have been documented. Gender, major, and class were not significant. In the same direction of other research, our analysis supports the hypothesized relationships pertaining to cultural and sociological differences. From this perspective, the current study not only vindicates and strengthens existing research in this field but also provides substantial contribution to the literature, because Lebanon is a middle eastern country where culture and social values play a major role in individual’s life.

Study has one limitation, which is the sample size; it was limited because of time and logistical requirements. As for recommendations for future research, it is recommended to conduct future studies on the same group to find whether the students' perception changes as they progress in their college education and to explore students' perception in other countries of the Middle East.

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