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## Sales world packed with gender stereotypes

Denver Business Journal - by [Garry Duncan](#)

Albert Einstein wrote, "Reality is merely an illusion, albeit a very persistent one."

Interviews and discussions with dozens of business-to-business buyers and sellers confirm gender perceptions are alive and well in the selling profession.

Several dozen sales-training participants from various industries were asked, "What differences, if any, do you perceive in selling to women versus men, and what differences, if any, do you perceive in male buyers versus female buyers?"

As you can imagine, the discussions were lively, passionate and surprisingly compassionate on both sides. Prevailing answers centered on relationships, assertiveness, defensiveness and credibility.

Female sellers said they had to work harder to prove their knowledge and capability to overcome female stereotypes, especially in male-dominated industries such as on Wall Street, with older male buyers and in some industrial sectors.

In female-dominated industries, female sellers voiced enjoyment working and calling on female buyers over male buyers, saying it was easier to develop more personal relationships.

Trish Brock agrees. "Selling woman to woman involves developing relationships first, and more consensus building, versus men, who are generally more focused on getting to a decision," says Brock, owner of Denver-based Trish Brock & Associates, a sales consultancy. She has written about gender differences in the workplace.

One male respondent said, "Men approach selling more as a competition while women approach it as a new relationship."

Many male sellers felt strongly that female sellers could be more assertive, especially with male buyers. They cited less pushback and resistance when female sellers asked direct or closing questions.

Numerous male sellers also said they felt that a degree of ego, competition or hierarchy exists between male sellers and male buyers, necessitating more tact and conflict aversion. In contrast, several women considered men more direct and assertive. Both genders felt women were better listeners.

A surprising number of the saleswomen assert female buyers are more defensive and cautious when making buying decisions, and say male buyers are more responsive, open and impulsive. Both genders say female buyers are more likely to be stand-offish, protective and even snippy when annoyed or unhappy with the seller, regardless of the seller's gender.

Yet the majority of both genders agreed that female sellers are more nurturing. One very successful female representative supports that perception, saying she never tries to sell a female buyer before a relationship develops.

Several of the female buyers argued that female sellers are more intuitive regarding their needs.

Some female buyers, however, took exception to another woman (or man) making assumptions about their needs, and preferred any seller who sought specific information about their needs with questions.

Though scientific studies confirm the role of emotions in buying decisions by either sex, most men and women maintain that male buyers want more facts and figures, while women prefer stories.

Most anecdotal reports and the few studies that are available show no significant difference in sales results based on gender. This leads to some important lessons for everyone.

- First, trust and rapport is always important, but seems to have greater significance to some buyers — and all salespeople should work to learn how to read people and build rapport. Not all buyers buy the same way, and the best sales professionals adapt to the fears, concerns and buying style of the prospect in front of them. The sale is doomed without seller credibility and buyer comfort with them personally.
- Second, though your intuition may be strong through experience, take the time to validate it before acting upon it. Assumptions are deal-killers, so clarify everything, even if you're sure you know. Questions are the answer, because asking solid, well-planned questions contributes to credibility more than anything you could possibly say about your expertise.
- Third, when working with groups, committees or multiple decision-makers, recognize there often are differences in how men and women perceive you and your offer. Divide and conquer by trying to access each member individually. Talk with each before and after your presentation to explore individual needs and viewpoints, so you have a better chance to gain comfort and endorsement from them.

Despite perceptions about gender differences in selling and buying, you can compensate by bringing your A game, asking great questions, and taking the time to read people and develop strong rapport.

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