

Customers' evaluation of Saudi female as Sellers

[Hanan Saidi & Yosra Missaoui]

Abstract—Salespeople in many countries especially the developing ones are just telling about their companies 'products because they are unaware of the real role of sellers. In Saudi Arabia, labor market is totally for men with minor segments for women especially in education and health sectors. Recently Saudi government has taken a number of promising legislative steps to promoting women's employment and to increasing the presence of women in many domains that she couldn't enter to it before. Now, Saudi women are taking salesmen positions in many stores especially those specialized in women' goods and services. This new experience for Saudi women has not been evaluated from consumer point view. So, the aim in this paper is to explore the problems that Saudi female customers are facing with these new sellers. After discussing the salespeople' characteristics in the light of the previous academic researches and the depth interviews with seven focus group of Saudi women customers, this study finds that the male sellers in Saudi Arabia are more professional than the female Saudi Sellers and that the Saudi female customers prefer to deal with a female sellers for just psychological and cultural reasons, especially when they buy makeup and women' clothes. Therefore it is recommended to companies to distinguish more their female sellers, to employ young women and to develop the professionalism of the female sellers by intensive trainings which will enable the female seller to understand and valorize their job, to respect their work place, to give the right information about products and alternatives, to communicate correctly and modestly with the local and the foreign customers, to intervene in the right time as well as to deal with many customers.

Keywords—Salespeople, Specific characteristics, Saudi female sellers, customer's evaluation, professionalism, trainings.

I. Introduction

In today's business environment, having professional sales force is an extremely valuable advantage to any organization. This professional sales force enables the company to satisfy, attract and retain customers.

In spite of the importance to gain and to develop a professional salespeople. However, in many countries and especially the developing ones there is a spread misconception that seller is teller due to the unawareness about the real role of seller who solves problems more than giving information (Levine, 2000).

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In fact the seller profession has been exclusively for men since its appearance. It is in 1970s that women in the world entered into male dominated sales organizations and the female salespeople of the 1990s have achieved success in a variety of previously male- oriented industries. So the rapid increase in the number of women employed as salespeople over the past 25 years has had an important impact in the sales profession (Moncrief, Babakus, Cravens, Johnston, 2000). So the Academics and researches focused on studying the performance of the sales force, the experience of female seller in many countries and on comparing male and female sellers' performance (Patton and Sardar, 2002).

Concerning Saudi Arabia's women, it is very recent that the Saudi female work force enters to the retailing sector as sellers. In 2011, Saudi government has taken a number of promising legislative steps through the "feminization" program which stated in 2011, to promoting women's employment and to increasing the presence of women in many domains that she couldn't enter to it before such as: banking sector and retailing markets. This program concentrated on recruiting women in the retailing sector and especially in the makeup and lingerie stores (Al-Takhifi. Fahad, Assistant Deputy Minister of Development, 2014).

Despite of the importance of the new Saudi experience allowing women to work in the retailing sector as sellers. However, the evaluation of the Saudi Female sellers has never been investigated by academics, scholars and researchers.

Consequently, this study aims to explore the problems that Saudi female customers are facing with the Saudi female sellers and to give suitable recommendations.

II. Literature review

A. *The characteristics of a superior salespeople*

A professional sales force is an extremely valuable advantage to any organization. To satisfy, attract and retain customers, the gaining and the development of professional salespeople is actually a priority and not an option. The question is, how to distinguish performant salesperson from non-performant ones.

Firstly, there is a wide spread misconception that seller is teller, because his work is related to the way by which he presents the product to customers. It's incorrect. The difference between seller and teller (Levine, 2000) is that seller solves problems more than giving information. The seller gains prospect's conviction while the teller leaves decision to him. The seller is proactive and the teller is

reactive. The teller tries to win by showing knowledge when the seller wins by closing sales.

Many determinants were associated to top seller, professional seller or performant seller. Authors Patton and Sardar, (2002) define five related qualities for a successful salesperson: high energy level, self-confidence, hunger for money, well-established habits of industry, and the ability to see obstacles as challenges. In their popular book, *Conceptual Selling*, Miller and Heiman (1987) highlight the critical role of perceived honesty and trustworthiness in sales success.

B. Women and salespeople profession

In spite of the difficulty that Women in the world experienced in the 1970s and 1990s to gain entry into male dominated sales organizations, the female salespeople of the 1990s has achieved success in a variety of previously male-oriented industries. So the rapid increase in the number of women employed as salespeople over the past 25 years has had an important impact in the sales profession (Moncrief, Babakus, Cravens, Johnston, 2000).

In Saudi Arabia the salesperson's profession has been exclusively for man until 2011, when the Saudi government decided to feminize the retailing sector and to replace the male sellers by Saudi female sellers especially in the makeup and lingerie stores.

The importance of salespeople's role, The sales people's characteristics, the effect of gender on sales management processes, the differences between male and female salespeople as well as the evaluation of salespeople have been investigated during the past two decades in many countries (Fugate, Decker and Brewer, 1988) (Patton and Sardar 2002). However, the evaluation of Saudi female sellers as a new experience has never been done.

C. The Saudization of Saudi labor market and the feminization program:

The Saudi economy has been dependant on the foreign workers for years, so the unemployment rate among Saudi people is high. Therefore displacing foreign workers by the appropriate nationals in the public and private sectors through the "Saudization" was a major challenge facing the kingdom in the latest twenty years (Looney, 2004).

In fact the Saudization is an incremental program which started in 1990 with the fifth Saudi development program and focused essentially on the public sector. It was in 2011 that the Kingdom introduced the program called "Nitaqat," which aims to offer job opportunities to nationals and demands that private companies operating in the kingdom increase the numbers of nationals' workers.

In spite of the saudization program which increase the number of Saudi workers in both public and private sector. However the Saudi labor market is totally for men with minor

segments for women especially in education and health sectors. In fact the situation of females' employment in Saudi Arabia is a popular subject in the Kingdom and around the world (Booz and Co, 2010). Thus, Saudi government has taken a number of promising legislative steps through the "feminization" program which stated in 2011, to promoting women's employment and to increasing the presence of women in many domains that she couldn't enter to it before such us: banking sector and retailing market concentrated on recruiting women in the retailing sector. Also, this program has launched throughout the Kingdom and the Minister of development has provided sufficient time to clothing shops in the country to gradually implement the program (Al-Takhifi. Fahad, Assistant Deputy Minister of Development, 2014). Now, Saudi women are taking now salesmen positions in many stores especially those specialized in makeup and lingerie stores.

III. Methodology

A. Research design and Instrument for data collection

This research was based on qualitative data collection method using seven focus groups. Each group contains twelve women who share common interests. Also those women had different ages, educational levels, positions and marital status as indicated in the tables 1, 2, 3, 4).

The focus groups' discussions were based on the structured interview "See table 5" with a high moderator involvement (Morgan, 1997). The Moderator created an environment that encouraged participants to share their perceptions and points of view.

B. Findings

Qualitative data analysis revealed six crucial themes across the seven focus groups. Themes address both the qualities and disadvantages of the Saudi female Sellers. Also those themes concentrate on the customers' readiness to deal with Saudi female sellers.

• Theme 1: Product Inquiries:

Across many focus groups, participants reported dissatisfaction with the poor quality of female sellers work and negative feelings about it. Participants claimed a lack of product's information, and many reported that the female sellers ignore in general the products' benefits and characteristics, the competitive advantage, and the prices of the items.

As reported by the respondent: "When i ask a female seller, for example, in cosmetic store, every time I go there I feel like they are look inexperienced and naive ...and don't know anything about the product, the price ...anything. And sometimes when I ask for a certain

product and they didn't know it, instead of telling me, they just grab something similar and think I didn't notice.

Another respondent discussed a similar experience: "Personally I love seeing male workers at makeup stores; I feel that they are better to explain things. I've experienced that many female workers is trying too hard to sell you the things without giving enough information about the product."

A perceptible sub-theme identified was that many respondents stated that female sellers are not able to present substitute products to them and ignore in general the new product in their area. There were also instances in which participants seen female sellers asking help from their male supervisors to answer the customers' questions about products.

Discussing how she felt about this situation the respondent stated: "Personally I have had many bad experiences when I was in a cosmetic store I asked the female seller about a new product; she brought me another one totally different"

Another participant reported "Oh, I noticed that female seller don't know anything about new products in the store and asked every time the male supervisor to answer my questions ...that made me crazy every time and I am asking myself why I am losing my time here ?"

• **Theme 2: Time Management:**

In all focus groups, participants discussed a frequent tardiness of female sellers to answer their demands. Respondents raised concerns about time value in shopping claimed the loose of time when dealing with Saudi female sellers both when purchasing and returning product.

One respondent reported "Personally I have lost much time when I was in a lingerie shop. Every Saudi female seller there talked to me about products and repeated the same words of their colleagues"

Another participant explained angrily "One time I was in a cosmetic shop to return back certain products. The female seller didn't know how to do it and spent much time asking for help. So I left the shop.

• **Theme 3: Seller Professionalism:**

Many respondents talked about leaving a variety of issues when dealing with Saudi female sellers who were poorly-trained, lowly professional. For many, the lack of professionalism was directly related to the subjectivity of those female sellers when they advise the customers and the degree to which respondents felt understood by the sellers .

One participant explained "Personally I love seeing male workers at makeup stores, I feel that they are better to explain things, they talk with objectivity, however the Saudi female sellers are subjective ...most of them ...want to impose their opinion to the customer "

Another sub-theme identified was that many respondents who reported lack of honesty and sincerity of some Saudi female sellers when they communicate and serve the customers.

Discussing how she felt about this situation the respondent stated: "One Time, I asked for advice to purchase a good foundation, so the Saudi female seller provided me intentionally with wrong information to convince me to buy a bad item , which I bought it and I discovered after that is unsuitable for me It happened many times for me"

A lack of respect was one such factor. In many focus groups, several respondents discussed some Saudi female sellers making many mistakes such as bringing to customers wrong product and being unable to correct their mistakes.

One respondent said "I think that they didn't treat their customers with respect and kindness, they don't have etiquette when they deal with customer ...For example one time I asked a female seller about a product she told me : Go over there ...maybe you'll find itImagine it ..."

Also, respondents discussed a variety of additional issues related to professionalism and across most focus groups, respondents noted that many Saudi female sellers don't respect the work rules and ignore the shop policies for example the cash refund conditions and exchange policies.

Further, many noted that not respecting the place work is too frequent when sellers are Saudi female. Many respondents noticed that many Saudi female sellers drunk coffee and tea in any time and that they didn't really want to help them. Some respondents talked about Saudi female sellers who care about their children during the work.

As stated by one respondent: "personally, I don't want to deal with the Saudi female seller, too much, because they are slow and always busy, and either eating or drinking coffee, or sitting in the ground, for example when I enter to the lingerie shop, every time , every time , I find many Saudi female sellers, all sitting on the floor, eating their lunch or drinking coffee or talking , it's too scarce, it's too scarce to find one seller disposable to serve customers....I feel shy to ask her stop eating to serve me ..It's impossible that I demand from her anything if she is eating "

Another respondent discussed a similar experience:" 99 %, yes, believe me 99 % of Saudi female sellers drink coffee and tea in the workplace. And some of them don't know why they are in the store??" "

• **Theme 4: Communication Barriers**

The first barrier emerged as a central sub-theme was the Saudi female seller's appearance in all focus groups. Participants insisted on the difficulties to distinguish the female sellers from others women in the store. This confusion is due to the uniformity of women wearing in Saudi Arabia which is related to the Saudi culture (All Saudi women must wear Black Abaya and Black Nikab in the public place) .

One participant noted: “the last year, I Thought going to a store to buy foundation and the ladies totally ignored me. So, I take the initiative to ask one lady, and I was surprised that she was a customer and not the female seller ...I felt very shythe problem is that sellers wear like all other women ‘black abaya and black nikab, without any distinction ...”

It’s notable, that some respondents said that in some stores, they can distinguish easily the female seller from their appearance because they have badges or colored scarves.

Language barriers emerged as a prominent sub-theme in some focus groups. Participants with high education level discussed difficulties they had when they talk in English with the majority of Saudi female sellers. Further, many noted that those sellers don’t know when they must intervene to help customers and when they have to keep distance.

As noted by one respondent: “ I asked one time the seller for an ‘eye liner’ , and It was the only English word during the conversation , she told me that she didn’t understand me and ask me to talk in Arabic ...”

Concerning the body language, many participants claimed the Saudi female seller’s closeness which makes them feeling stressed, angry and annoyed.

Discussing a similar experience, respondent noted feelings of embarrassment when she enters to the store :“ it’s really too fun how the Saudi female sellers react ...hhh when I enter to one store , they came immediately , surround me , and they stay too close to me which make me feeling embarrassed and in general I left the store immediately

Another participant noted an opposite experience: “usually, I was completely ignored while the girls stood there talking and laughing...I felt like I was transparent “

• **Theme 5: The cultural effect**

Most of respondents discussed the Saudi culture’s effect on the job commitment. Many participants noted the majority of Saudi women neglect the job of seller and accept it only for financial reasons. Because in Saudi culture some jobs are sub estimated by the society such as: the job of seller.

One Respondent described her experience: “Onetime, I asked the Saudi female seller for help, and guess what?? She ignores me totally and left meOh my god ...I felt like I’m nothing ...so I left the store and never return “

Another said: “I asked a female seller about a product she told me: Go over there ...may be you’ll find it”

The age of seller was emerged as a communication’s barrier in some focus groups, many respondents have discussed the presence of old Saudi female sellers in some stores. The problem to deal with those sellers is related to the cultural values, because according to respondents it is not acceptable to ask old women for service.

One Respondent described her experience: “One time, I entered to one store where I found an old Saudi female seller, so I felt shy to ask her for a product and I left the store”

Another said: “One time, I asked an old female seller about a product she looked at me with a great arrogance and she said: I don’t know”. Imagine, she ignore me totally, so I left the store and never return “

• **Theme 6: The psychological convenience when dealing with female sellers**

The psychological convenience is a theme that emerged in all focus groups. All of participants noted that it’s more comfortable to deal with female seller than with male seller especially in the lingerie and makeup store for cultural reasons.

Expressing her satisfaction, this respondent noted that she was very excited when she found female seller in lingerie store, this participant stated: “I really enjoy my experience with female seller especially in lingerie store; because seller welcomed me friendly and helped me to find the suitable itemsshe was speed, professional and helpful.”

Some respondents noted many similar situations in which they had feeling good when dealing with women.

Further, many participants noted that at times they felt comfort; they were disappointed off the lack of experience and professionalism. One respondent discussed a situation in which she felt psychological convenience when she met a female seller but dissatisfied with their service.

As she said: “For me, it’s very comfortable to deal with a Saudi female seller, ok it’s comfortable , but it don’t t mean that I would be satisfiedand usually I wasn’t satisfied because they didn’t serve you correctly and quickly .”

C. **Discussion of findings**

Six overarching themes are discussed which summarize a range of positive, as well as negative, Saudi female sellers experiences. Concerning the positive experiences, the findings in this report highlight that most of the participants prefer to deal with female seller if only they became more professional. However, other respondents are actually satisfied with the professionalism level of the current Saudi female sellers and have enjoyed their experiences with them.

Further, it is important to note that the negative experiences discussed show that:

- The female sellers are not professional. So, they are not able to:
- Understand and valorize their job.
 - Respect their work place

- Give the right products'informations and alternatives to customers
 - Communicate correctly and modestly with the local and the foreign customers.
 - Intervene in the right time.
 - Deal with many customers.
- The Saudi female sellers are not distinguished from other ladies in the stores because all the women in Saudi Arabia have to wear" black abaya and black nicab".
 - The companies employ some old women who are unable to satisfy customer needs.

The female sellers problems may not their fault but because of the quality of training from their employers who are originally not interested to hire female in their business. In fact, they hire them because of the government enforcement.

D. Recommendations

Given that the customers have justifiably complained the lack of Saudi sellers' professionalism, many communications and cultural problems; it is strongly recommended to develop the professionalism and the communication skills of Saudi female sellers by intensive trainings. Those trainings will enable the Saudi female sellers to understand and valorize their job, to respect their work place, to give the right informations about products and alternatives, to communicate correctly and modestly with the local and the foreign customers, to intervene in the right time as well as to deal with many customers.

Due to the difficulty that found customers in distinguishing the most of Saudi female sellers from the other women in the stores, the study recommends that the companies have to distinguish more their female sellers by for example: a sticker, colored scarves, colored Abaya to use inside the stores.

iv. Conclusion

Saudi Arabia's feminization program is a real challenge for the kingdom .It has influenced the private sector as well as the society culture. It's a real opportunity for Saudi women to enter intensively in the Saudi work force especially in retailing market which has been occupied exclusively by man for a long time.

However, this qualitative study revealed that feminization program could be a threat in the retailing sector if companies don't plan an intensive training for the Saudi female sellers to target the customer satisfaction ...

The final impression is that our theme seems to be barely studied because it's recent and original. However, this work would be completed by others researches which investigating the customer's evaluation of female sellers by quantitatives methods, also it could open other research fields investigating

the environmental and motivational factors that could influence the Saudi female seller performance.

A. Figures and Tables

TABLE I. THE DISTRIBUTION OF INTERVIEWED WOMEN BY AGE

Age Groups	Less than 18 years old	18 - 39	40 -60	total
G1	4	4	4	12
G2	2	5	5	12
G3	5	4	3	12
G4	3	4	5	12
G5	6	4	2	12
G6	4	4	4	12
G7	5	4	3	12
Total	29	29	26	84

TABLE II. THE DISTRIBUTION OF INTERVIEWED WOMEN BY EDUCATIONAL LEVEL

level Groups	Secondary level	bachelor	Master	total
G1	6	4	2	12
G2	2	5	5	12
G3	5	3	4	12
G4	3	4	5	12
G5	6	2	4	12
G6	4	4	4	12
G7	4	5	3	12
Total	30	27	27	84

TABLE III. THE DISTRIBUTION OF INTERVIEWED WOMEN BY POSITION:

Position Groups	laborer	student	employee	other	total
G1	4	6	1	1	12
G2	2	2	5	3	12
G3	3	3	4	2	12
G4	2	2	3	5	12
G5	2	2	2	6	12
G6	4	3	3	2	12
G7	3	3	3	3	12
Total	20	21	21	22	84

TABLE IV. THE DISTRIBUTION OF INTERVIEWED WOMEN BY MARITAL STATUS

Ms Groups	single	married	divorced	widow	total
G1	6	3	2	1	12
G2	5	4	1	2	12
G3	4	5	2	1	12
G4	3	2	3	4	12
G5	7	2	2	1	12
G6	6	4	1	1	12
G7	2	6	3	1	12
Total	33	26	14	11	84

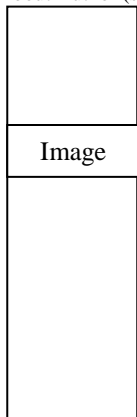
TABLE V. FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW

1. Tell us about your personal experience with Saudi female sellers?
2. What is your personal opinion about Saudi female sellers?
3. What are the problems you have faced while dealing with Saudi female sellers?
4. What are the qualities of Saudi female sellers?
5. What are the fears that you feel before dealing with Saudi female sellers which make you hesitated in dealing with them?
6. What do you need from Saudi female sellers when you enter a store?
7. How can a female seller help you to make buying decision?
8. What is the importance of seeing the face of the female seller when dealing with her?
9. What do you expect from a good female seller in a store?
10. Do you prefer to deal with a Saudi female sellers or male sellers?

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