

## “Where Did All The Salespeople Go?”

Dramatic changes in both retailing and technology are posing threats to traditionally important roles played by accessories industry people. A recent survey conducted by Execu-Team Resources and *Accessories* confirmed that retailers are questioning the value of salespeople. Low grades were given with regard to effective utilization of sales data, with only 30 percent of all retailers reporting that vendor salespeople do a good-to-excellent job. In addition, 45 percent indicated that their salespeople do an effective job in helping with assortment planning.

We've asked candidates to comment on the future of selling accessories as a career and about the changes to anticipate in the nature of salesmanship. In the next millennium, we see sales management faced with enormous opportunities and new sets of challenges based on the following factors:

- **Showroom selling will become a thing of the past.**

Factors such as high rents, under-utilization of showroom space, time-constraints of buyers and retailer travel budget cuts create a situation that points to the reduction of showroom buying. This, in turn, reduces the need for the salespeople who work in showrooms. When the Internet is factored in, with its incredible capabilities to present products and generate orders quickly and efficiently (which is vital to a business where newness and quick reaction time are imperative), it could become the showroom of the future. Trade shows will continue to become more efficient and effective formats as venues and visual merchandising techniques improve. They provide important showcases where buyers can touch and feel the product.

- **Emphasis on brand building (both vendor and store brands) will change the role of salespeople.**

Brand building requires added expenditures. Accordingly, vendors will reduce sales expenses in favor of increasing their brand-building merchandising and marketing investments. Some firms will re-allocate their wholesale salesforce from being order generators to "retail sell-through specialists," focusing salespeople on in-store visual merchandising, training and special events. In the case of private label selling, larger retailers will accelerate their development and sourcing of products for their own store brands bypassing the "non-value-adding" step of dealing with vendor middlemen.

- **EDI Technology (which began with large retailers) has already minimized the salesperson's role in the replenishment of "basics" and will spread to fashion products, smaller stores and small accessory firms.**

Emerging technologies will facilitate the accurate forecasting and ordering of fashion and novelty products. Additionally, EDI software and Internet buying will be standard for both small stores and small accessory firms. The last stronghold for sales reps has been in selling to small independent and specialty stores, but soon their value-adding roles will be minimized and many will ultimately be eliminated.

The following are suggested opportunities for accessory firms and salespeople to move into more productive and value-adding activities:

- **Salespeople with strong analytical abilities will be in demand.**

A vendor knows its own products better than the buyer and has more time and incentive to micro-manage its business. Accordingly, pro-active vendor salespeople using the proper analytical tools and skills will be able to maintain control over assortment and allocation plans, enabling them to react quickly to opportunities that improve space, location, inventory levels, assortments and allow for the development of new products.

- **Salespeople with strong merchant and trend-spotting skills will be needed.**

With increasingly detailed sales information comes the ability to analyze and micro-manage business. This can result in significant opportunities to customize assortments and develop products for different consumer segments based on lifestyle, local, regional and other demographic needs.

- **Salespeople with strong creative merchandising, motivational and marketing skills will be in demand.**

There will be opportunities to increase retail sales by redeploying salespeople into field positions and focusing them on increasing retail sell-throughs. The emphasis will shift to intensifying in-store merchandising, visual display, training and special events. Brand-building activities and service by vendors will become more important as retailers reduce selling expenses by reducing in-store sales help. Service-pro-active, field-oriented vendors will have a major opportunity to increase retail sell-throughs and markets share.



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