

SALES FORCE MANAGEMENT IN IRELAND

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Without careful planning, long-term focus and the specification of clear measurable objectives, a sales force can become a costly overhead rather than a net contributor to the goals of the company. Two recent Irish studies on sales force management are reviewed and yield a number of insights which ought to be noted by companies which manage their own sales force.

The first section of the article presents a summary model of sales management which provides a framework for the review that follows. The next several sections discuss the theory and research evidence from various sources pertaining to each of the main dimensions of sales management, including: sales force size and organisation, selection and training, motivation and remuneration, and performance evaluation. Finally, some observations on the key decisions facing Irish sales managers for the future are offered.

“For the first 70 years of this century the practice of sales management resembled the practice of medicine by tribal witch doctors. Sales managers had to rely on large doses of folklore, tradition, intuition and personal experience in deciding how to motivate and direct the performance of their sales forces” (Churchill, Ford and Walker, 1990, p.iii).

The quotation above, from the foremost academics in the field of sales management, seems to describe the past situation in Ireland and other European countries just as well as North America. Fortunately, things have improved considerably in the twenty years since, with an increasing volume of research evidence contributing insights into the factors that affect sales performance. It stands to reason that sales managers who try to exploit this knowledge base in carrying out their work are likely to be more effective than those who continue to rely merely on intuition. This article sets out to review the theory and research evidence that have become accepted internationally as useful guidelines for various aspects of sales force management. Two recent surveys carried out in this country are particularly relevant for Irish sales managers and these are reviewed in depth.

The first section of the paper presents a general model of the job of sales force management which identifies the main tasks involved and the critical factors for success. The second section describes the two Irish surveys and outlines the research methodology employed. Subsequent sections summarize the theory and results pertaining to

each of the main dimensions of sales force management under the headings: sales force size and organisation, selection and training, motivation and performance, remuneration, evaluation. The final section offers some conclusions and guidelines for best practice by Irish sales managers.

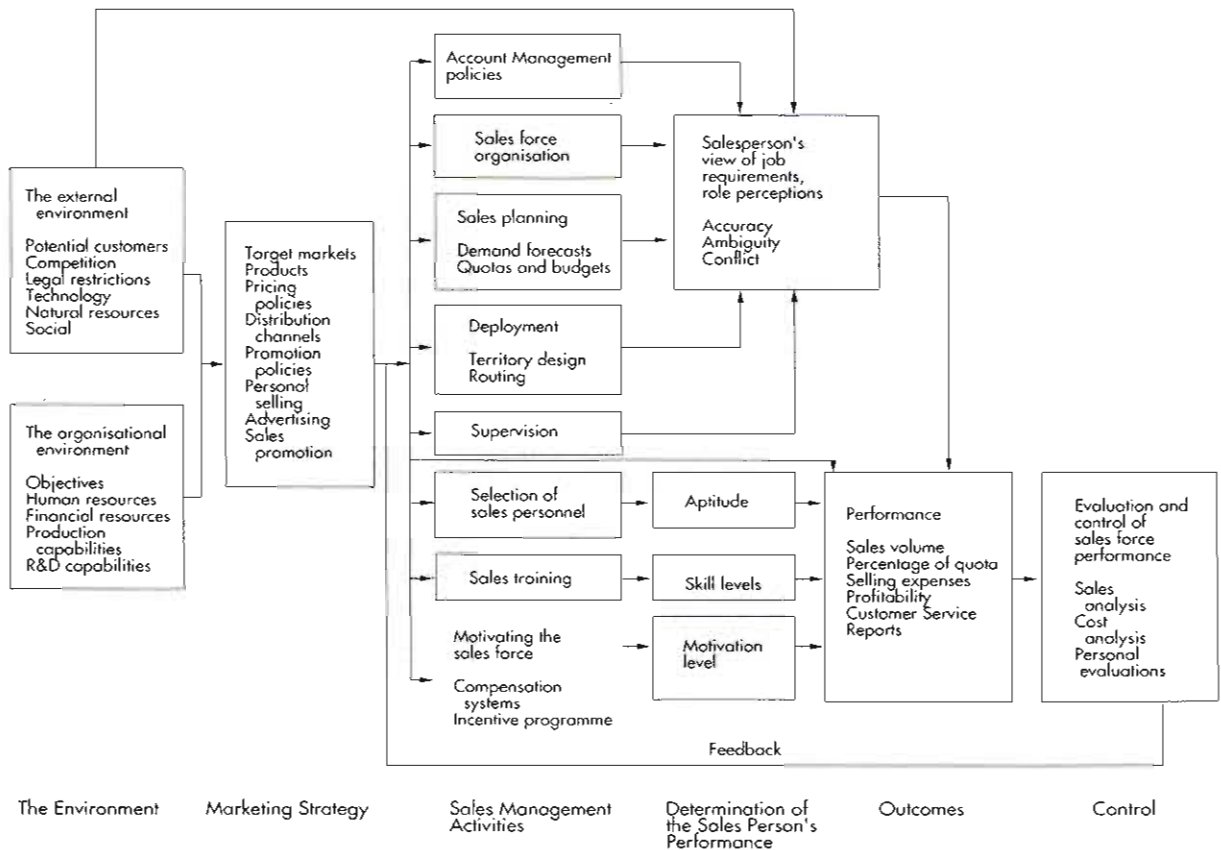
Sales Management: A Framework for Analysis

The most general and most widely accepted framework for analysing the field of sales management is that of Churchill, Ford and Walker (1990) which is shown in Figure 1. This model divides the job of sales management into three broad categories of activities: strategy formulation, implementation and evaluation.

Formulating Sales Strategy

Personal selling is only one promotional tool, and promotion is only one element of marketing strategy. The sales function must be carefully integrated with the rest of the firm's marketing strategy if it is to be effective. This requires that the sales function be managed with clearly articulated objectives based on in-depth analysis of the firm's internal and external environment and of the needs of its products and markets. Churchill, Ford and Walker (1990) suggest that a sales strategy requires answers to five major sets of questions, as follows:

Market Targeting. What customers should the firm target and what long-term objectives should be set for each of the major categories? What should be the firm's personal selling strategy?

Figure 1 An Overview of Sales Management

Source: Churchill, G.A. Jr., Ford, N.M. & Walker, O.C. Jr. (1990), *Sales Force Management: Planning, Implementation and Control*, 3rd ed., Irwin, Homewood, IL.

Account Management Policies. How can various types of potential customers best be approached, persuaded or serviced? In other words, what account management policies should be adopted?

Sales Force Organisation. How should the sales force be organised to call on and manage various types of customers as efficiently and effectively as possible?

Sales Planning. What level of performance can each member of the sales force be expected to attain during the next planning period? This involves forecasting demand and setting quotas and budgets.

Territory Design and Routing. In view of the firm's account management policies and demand forecasts, how should the sales force be deployed? How should sales territories be defined? What is the best way for each sales person's time to be allocated within his or her territory?

Implementing Sales Strategy

Implementing a sales strategy involves motivating and directing the behaviour of the sales force, which requires an understanding of how people think and why they behave as they do. The sales management model shown in Figure 1 suggests

that four factors influence a sales person's job behaviour and performance:

Selection. The sales manager must decide what kinds of aptitude are necessary for the firm's sales people to do the type of selling required to meet the sales objectives. Recruiting techniques and selection criteria can then be developed to ensure that sales people with the required abilities are hired.

Sales Training. Selling skills improve with practice and experience but, in most cases, it is not sufficient to let the sales person gain the necessary skills simply through on-the-job experience. A preferable approach is for the sales manager to decide precisely what selling skills are needed to service the firm's customers and to find appropriate courses on which to send sales personnel.

Supervision. The sales person's ability to perform is partly determined by his/her perceptions of the job that is required and of how to resolve conflicting demands between management and customers. A very important role of the sales manager is to define clearly what is required of the sales person and to provide clear, unambiguous guidelines as to the appropriate trade-offs to make in conflict situations.

Table 1 Size Distribution of the Companies in the Two Irish Surveys

Number of Employees	Profile of a Sales Force	Buyer Perceptions of Sales People
	n = 235 %	n = 208 %
1 < 99 ^a	49	42
100 - 199 ^b	26	21
200+	25	37
Total	100	100

^a The MRBI study excluded companies with fewer than 35 employees

^b The UCD study classified this group as 101-250

Motivation and Compensation. A sales person cannot achieve a high level of job performance unless he or she is motivated to expend the necessary amount of effort. Motivation, in turn, is influenced by the types of rewards expected for a given level of performance - such as payment or promotion - and by the perceived attractions of those anticipated rewards.

Evaluation and Control of Sales

Setting objectives and planning strategy is a futile exercise unless managers follow through with a regular evaluation of actual performance compared to targets. This evaluation phase provides vital feedback to enable future strategies to be more finely tuned to market needs, and for the purposes of motivating and controlling the sales force.

Performance in this context has several elements, each of which is important. Firstly, one can distinguish between the *aggregate* performance of the sales force in achieving the firm's sales targets, and the performance of *individual* sales personnel in their respective territories. Secondly, one can distinguish between *objective* (output) and *subjective* (input) measures of performance. Objective measures include such obviously important variables as sales volume and profitability, while subjective measures refer to less obvious but no less important variables such as the level of customer service provided or the number of new accounts secured.

Research on Selling and Sales Management

The discussion so far had identified the main tasks required of sales managers for the management of their sales forces, but it does not offer many insights into best practice in any of these tasks. This is the area in which research can be of help, to identify how firms typically handle the various sales management tasks and to indicate what has

been found to work best in particular situations. Much of the research on these topics has been carried out in the United States, which is a quite different market to the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland, not least because of the size disparity. Nonetheless, American studies have identified many variables affecting sales performance which have universal significance, because they refer to fundamental aspects of human behaviour, which we would ignore at our peril.

It is also useful, of course, to have local data reflecting the particular conditions in which a firm operates, and two recent studies carried out in the Republic of Ireland help to meet this need. The first of these is entitled *Profile of a Sales Force*, carried out by the authors of this article in 1991 under sponsorship from Sales Placement Ltd. The second is entitled *Buyer Perceptions of Irish and Overseas Sales People*, which was carried out by the Market Research Bureau of Ireland Ltd. (MRBI) on behalf of Creative Management Ltd., and was also published in 1991.

These studies take different but complementary perspectives and, together, they provide a comprehensive body of knowledge about selling and sales management in Ireland. The remainder of this paper sets out to review the combined contributions of these studies and to validate their findings by reference to the evidence from studies carried out in other countries. Prior to discussing research results, however, it is necessary to review the research methodology used in the two Irish studies, and the corresponding biases and limitations.

Profile of a Sales Force

This study was based on a postal survey of *sales/marketing managers*. A self-completion questionnaire was sent to the Top 1000 Irish firms listed by Business and Finance on June 14th 1991. The questionnaire was 15 pages long and contained 47 questions divided into 4 sections covering company profile, organisation for selling, recruitment, training and remuneration, and sales management.

A total of 321 companies returned their questionnaires, which represents an acceptable response rate (32% of the population). Of these, 86 companies did not have a sales force of their own, and completed only the first section of the question-

naire. The survey analysis was restricted, therefore, to the 235 companies which have a sales force and completed the full questionnaire. Descriptive statistics on the analysis sample indicated that it was biased towards relatively large (74% had more than 50 employees), long-established companies, operating mainly in the domestic market (63% of turnover on average). The results are likely to be more applicable to similar companies, and are less likely to be typical of very small or new businesses or of those operating mainly in export markets.

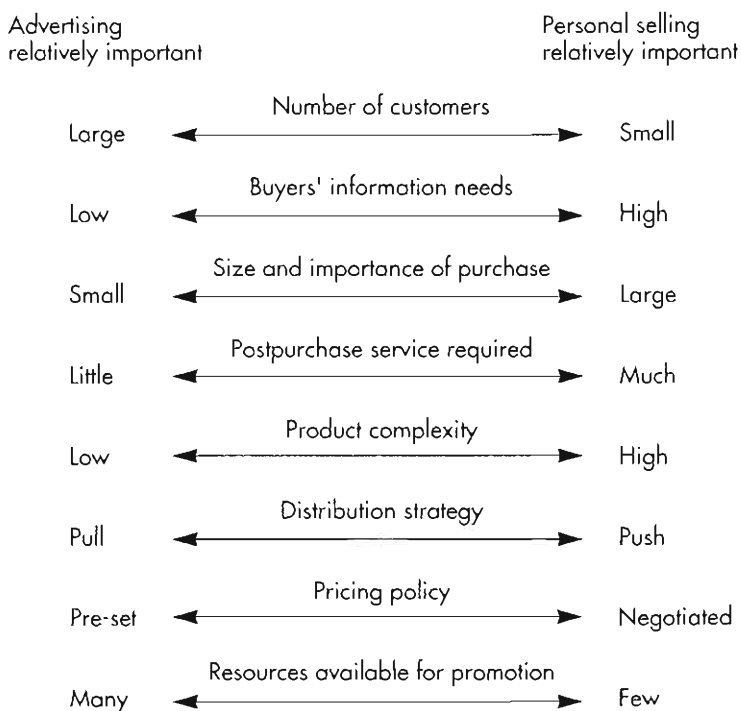
Buyer Perceptions of Irish and Overseas Sales People

The objective of this study was to determine what buyers think of sales people in the Republic of Ireland. This was achieved by means of a telephone survey of 300 purchasing managers/officers, from a random sample of companies drawn from the Top 1000 companies listed by Dun & Bradstreet and *Aspect* magazine. A total of 208 interviews was completed from the initial sample and these were carried out by MRBI Ltd between November 18 and December 2, 1991.

The sample populations for both surveys were the same therefore, and the analysis samples that emerged were also very close both in size and composition, as can be seen from Table 1. The size classification schemes differed slightly between the surveys but both were broadly similar. MRBI used a weighting scheme in their analysis to increase the representation of the smaller companies (weighting factor 1.45) and to reduce the impact of the very large companies (weighting factor 0.45), but this serves to bring their sample closer to the UCD one rather than further apart. In sum, one could argue that these surveys represent the view points of two different constituencies from a similar sample of companies, one representing the sellers and the other representing the buyers. The similarity of the basic sample of companies is convenient because it should allow comparisons to be drawn between the two groups, and for generalizations to be made within a similar range.

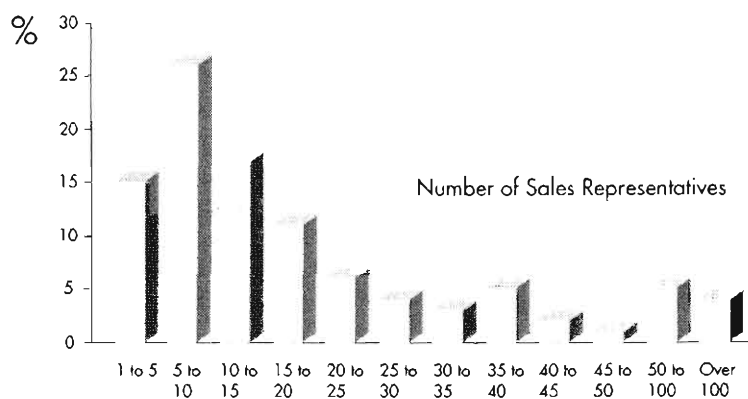
The discussion of research results below is presented under similar headings to those suggested by the Churchill, Ford and Walker (1990) framework discussed earlier.

Figure 2 Importance of Personal Selling as a Promotional Tool



Source: Cravens, D.W. (1987), *Strategic Marketing*, Irwin, Homewood, IL., p. 508.

Figure 3 Size of Sales Forces in Ireland



Source: *Profile of a Sales Force*

Research Findings on Selling and Sales Management

Sales Force Size and Organisation.

The strategic decision concerning how much emphasis to give personal selling relative to other elements of the promotional mix depends on the communication tasks that must be accomplished. Among the important characteristics to consider are: the size and nature of the target market, the complexity and service requirements of the product, and other elements of the marketing mix for that product. The impact of these factors on the relative importance of personal selling is summarized in Figure 2. In general, research evidence indicates that personal selling is more important and media advertising less important in industrial than in consumer goods companies (Udell, 1972; Harris et al, 1978). However, the same surveys emphasize that personal selling is considered the single most important promotional tool in both kinds of firms.

The size of sales forces operated by Irish companies is shown in Figure 3 (from *Profile of a Sales Force*). This shows that the most common size is between 5 and 10 (cited by 27% of respondents), with significant proportions in the 1-5 and 10-15 categories. An analysis by industry sector did not produce any clear distinctions between consumer, industrial and service firms.

The ratio of sales managers to sales representatives for this sample averaged 1 to 4, so, for a sales force of 10 representatives, it would be typical to have 3 sales managers, perhaps one general sales manager and two regional or national account managers. The average age of sales representatives in this sample was 35 and the average length of service was 10 years. This suggests a relatively low level of employee turnover, which was found to be the case (68% of respondents had a rate of turnover of less than 5%, 87% less than 10%).

Sales representatives in the surveyed companies averaged 28 calls per week, with a range from 19 to 40. This varied significantly by industry sector, however, with the agriculture and food/beverages/tobacco sectors having the largest number of calls (averages of 56 and 48 per week) and computers/information technology the lowest (8 per week). The mean number of calls per customer

Table 2 Factors Influencing Size and Organisation of the Sales Force

	Mean Score
Sales Objective/Potential	4.3
Geographic Coverage	4.2
Number of Accounts	4.1
Frequency of Calls	4.0
Cost/Profit of a Salesperson	4.0
Type of Accounts	3.7
Competitor Activities	3.7
Level of Remuneration	3.3
Turnover of Personnel	2.8

Source: *Profile of a Sales Force*

Table 3 Selection Criteria

	Mean Score
Personal Characteristics	4.6
Ambition/Potential	4.5
Sales Experience	3.9
Knowledge/Experience	3.8
Education Level	3.7
Personal Mobility	3.8
Age	3.4

Source: *Profile of a Sales Force*

for the whole sample was 25 per year which equates to a call frequency of once a fortnight. This varied significantly across industries however, with monthly calls being cited by the largest proportion of respondents (37%).

The average order size for this sample was £15,000, but this average conceals a wide degree of variation across companies and industries. The most frequently cited category was £1,000 - 5,000 (27%) and, in fact, orders of less than £5,000 were usual for over half the companies (57%).

In summary, the results of this section support the idea of a trade-off between the number and frequency of calls and average order size. The consumer goods companies conformed to the model of large numbers of customers, a high call frequency and small order sizes, while the industrial businesses had the opposite characteristics. Table 2 summarizes the views of Irish sales managers with regard to the factors influencing the size and organisation of their sales forces.

Table 4 : Factors Motivating the Sales Force

Factor	Rank Order	Mean Score
Acknowledgement of Effort	1	4.6
Achievement of Sales	2	4.4
Remuneration	3	4.3
Satisfaction of Customers	4	4.3
Being Part of a Team	5	4.1
Meeting Management Expectations	6	3.9
Improvement of Lifestyle	7	3.6
Status Symbols	8	3.3

Source : *Profile of a Sales Force*

Selection and Training

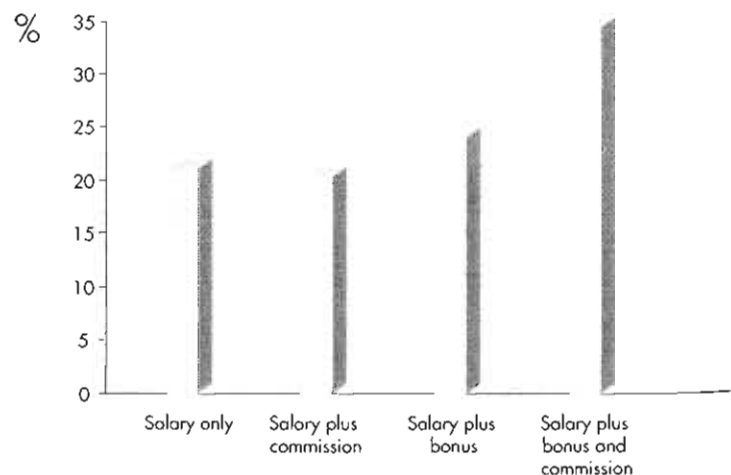
Are good sales people born or are they made? This is a crucial question, which does not have a clearcut answer. A survey of 2,000 American sales managers produced ambivalent responses on this issue (Bragg, 1988). While most of those surveyed believed that the things a company does to train its salespeople are the most critical determinant of future success, many also believed that a company cannot "make a silk purse out of a sow's ear" - that certain basic personal traits are necessary requirements. In sum, it seems that both aptitude and training are important for good performance which suggests that careful selection and suitable training are equally important variables.

Selection. Aptitude and personal characteristics are generally thought to place an upper limit on an individual's ability to perform a given sales job (Churchill, Ford and Walker, 1990, p385). The task facing companies recruiting new sales personnel is to decide which personal characteristics to look for, and how to assess aptitude. A widely accepted principle for many years was that sales people tend to be most successful when they are similar to their customers in as many dimensions as possible, such as age, sex, social status, educational attainment, etc. (Churchill, Ford and Walker, 1990). Recent research has cast some doubt on this relationship, but a review of American studies on this topic supports the general point that personal characteristics such as family background and marital status are the most important indicators of likely sales success (Ford, et al., 1988). A major conclusion from this review is that evidence of initiative, responsibility and stability in a person's past and current life are key in assessing emotional maturity and motivation which, in turn, are important predictors of sales performance.

With regard to aptitude, a survey of top sales executives in 44 major American manufacturing firms ranked *enthusiasm* as the most important characteristic to look for in new recruits, followed by *organisation, ambition, persuasiveness, general sales experience, and verbal skill* (Moss, 1978). Interestingly, *recommendations* from previous employers or teachers were not seen as very important (ranked 8 out of 10), and *sociability*, reflecting the "hail-fellow-well-met" type of personality - was ranked last on the list.

The *Profile of a Sales Force* survey shows that Irish sales managers have quite similar views to their American counterparts on this point, as shown in Table 3. *Personal characteristics* are ranked top of the list of selection criteria, followed by *ambition/potential* and *sales experience*.

Training. Training for sales people has two main dimensions: *product/market knowledge* and *selling skills*. The first of these dimensions is most appropriately provided through on-the-job training, because the requisite knowledge and information resides within the company. The second dimension may be more suited to external training, however, because professional selling can be enhanced by the application of sales techniques that may not be consciously known or practised in individual companies.

Figure 4 Composition of Sales Force Compensation Plans

Source : *Profile of a Sales Force*

Research from several sources shows, however, that on-the-job training remains the main, and often the only, training that sales people receive. For example, a survey of 1,300 American and Canadian industrial firms, showed that 43% provided no training for their sales forces, 34% relied on internally developed programmes, and only 23% used professional sales training services (*Marketing News*, 1989). The Irish evidence is very similar (*Profile of a Sales Force*, 1991). 91% of companies give on-the-job training to their sales forces while 72% provide formal courses, but a majority of the formal courses (77%) last for one week or less. It does seem, therefore, that there is scope for improvement in this area.

Motivation and Remuneration

A sales person's motivation to expend effort is determined by three sets of perceptions (Churchill, Ford and Walker, 1990, pp495-496):

1. *expectations* - the perceived linkages between level of effort and performance;
2. *instrumentalities* - the perceived relationship between improved performance and the attainment of increased rewards; and
3. *valence of rewards* - the perceived attractiveness of the various rewards available.



Table 5 : Estimated Average Cost of a Sales Representative

Basic Salary	£17,750
PRSI (12.2% of Salary)	2,355
Pension (10% of Salary)	1,780
Commission/Bonus (26% of gross earnings)	4,440
Travel Expenses	7,500
Car Purchase and Tax	6,000
Car Insurance	1,000
Service and Repairs	500
Postage & Telephone (£5 p/w; £75 p/m)	1,160
Training (1 x 1 week course)	500
Sundries (entertainment etc)	500
Total	£43,385

Source: *Profile of a Sales Force*

Historically, sales managers and writers on motivating sales people have focused mainly on the third of these points - the *valence of rewards*, and the general assumption has been that monetary rewards have the highest value for sales people. But, is this assumption correct, or is it over-simplistic?

Several recent studies of industrial sales people support the conventional view, but demonstrate that it is by no means universal, and is contingent upon many individual and organisational factors (Ingram and Bellenger, 1983; Ford et al., 1985). In particular, the value placed upon additional pay depends on the current level received, and on such factors as whether people reached their quotas and qualified for bonuses in previous years. The conclusion appears to be that the motivational effect of extra pay diminishes as the overall level of pay increases, so that highly paid sales people would be less motivated to seek extra pay than less well-paid sales people. Similarly, regular achievement of quota causes this factor to be taken for granted and to become less of a motivator, unless the quota is regularly increased to create new challenge.

The Irish study showed *remuneration* ranked third as a factor motivating sales people, after *acknowledgement of effort* and *achievement of sales targets* (see Table 4). Furthermore, factors such as *satisfaction of customers* and being *part of a team* ranked equally with remuneration. This rank order may be specific to the type of companies in this sample, however, which probably represent the top end of the remuneration scale and also provide a range of other benefits.

Table 6 Common Output and Input Factors Used by Sales Managers to Evaluate Sales People

Output Factors	Input Factors
<i>A. Sales</i>	<i>A. Calls</i>
Total Sales Volume	Number of Calls to New Customers
Total Sales Value	Number of Planned/Unplanned Calls
Sales versus Target	Number of Calls
Sales by Product	
Sales by Customer	<i>B. Time Utilization</i>
Sales by Region	Days Worked
	Calls per Day
<i>B. Orders</i>	Selling Versus Non-selling Time
Number of Orders	
Average Size of Orders	<i>C. Non-selling Activities</i>
Number of Cancelled Orders	Job Knowledge
Number of Returned Orders	Management of Territory
	Administrative Efficiency
<i>C. Accounts</i>	Advertising Displays Set Up
Number of Active Accounts	Standing with Customers
Number of New Accounts	Number of Customer Complaints
Number of Lost Accounts	Number of Overdue Acc. Collected
Number of Overdue Accounts	
Number of Prospective Accounts	<i>D. Expenses</i>
Account Profitability	Total and Type
	As a Percentage of Sales
	As a Percentage of Quota

Source: Adapted from Churchill, G. A. Jr., N.M. Ford and O.C. Walker Jr. (1990), *Sales Force Management*, 3rd ed., Irwin, Homewood, IL, pp. 731-740.

The mix of rewards provided for sales people is also an important influence on motivation. This refers to the relative emphasis on *salary* versus *incentive pay* (commission and/or bonus). The combination offered will influence the sales person's instrumentality estimates, and will help determine which work activities and types of performance will receive the greater effort from that sales person (Churchill, Ford and Walker, 1990). The question from a manager's point of view is how to design a suitable compensation plan to direct the sales force's efforts towards those activities that are most important to the overall success of the company's sales strategy.

American research indicates that most companies in that country (83%) provide combination plans, including salary plus some element of incentive pay, in the form of commission (21%) or bonus (50%), or both (11%) (Alexander Group, 1988). The evidence also suggests that the average level of incentive pay is between 20 and 25% of total pay (McAdams, 1987). This rate varies, however, depending on whether commission or bonus is the chosen form of incentive. Another survey found that compensation plans combining salary and bonus have an average of 11% incentive-related pay, while salary plus commission plans average 33% incentive pay (Peck, 1982).

Commenting on this evidence, Churchill, Ford and Walker (1990) advise that when a company's primary objectives are related to short-term sales, such as increasing sales volume, or winning new customers, a large incentive component should be offered. When long-term sales and relationship building are the key objectives, a higher salary and lower level of incentive pay tied to appropriate performance targets (bonus) would be more effective. The *Profile of a Sales Force* report showed that sales force compensation plans in Ireland are quite similar to their American equivalents. As illustrated in Figure 4, 79% of companies pay salaries plus some type of incentive payment. Of these, 21% pay commission only, 24% pay a bonus only, while 34% pay both. The average rate of commission paid is 26% while bonuses average 12% of total pay, but it should be noted that both of these figures vary widely across industries.

Taking an average rate of incentive pay of 20%, together with an average salary for sales people

(£17,750) and estimates of other costs, the authors estimated that the total annual cost of a field sales representative currently in Ireland is approximately £43,500 (see Table 5). Extrapolating a bit further, it can be seen that the cost of an average-sized sales force of 10 representatives would be approximately £435,000 per year. Add to that the cost of sales management and sales administration at a ratio of, say, .5/1 and the total annual cost of selling would be £653,000. This would be a very significant level of overhead for many Irish companies and one whose productivity requires careful scrutiny.

Evaluation of Performance

Sales managers have many variables to choose from in judging the performance of their sales force, both objective and subjective, as shown in Table 6. In practice, however, most seem to opt for the simple, objective measures of output associated with sales volume and account profitability. One American study showed that 80% of companies evaluate sales people with respect to sales volume, and 75% assess their performance relative to quota (Jackson et al., 1982; 1983). Smaller proportions also focus on order and account data using some or all of the variables listed in Table 6.

Table 7 Evaluating Sales Personnel

Factor	Rank Order	Mean Score*
Sales Volume	1	2.9
Customer Relations	2	3.5
Account Profitability	3	3.8
Professional Approach	4	3.9
Product/Technical Knowledge	5	5.3
Territory Management	6	5.6
New Customers	7	6.1
Number of Sales Calls	8	6.8
Order/Call Ratio	9	7.0

* Low mean scores indicate a high rank order and high scores mean the reverse.

Source: *Profile of a Sales Force*

Subjective measures of the quality of a sales person's work are far more difficult, which probably explains why sales managers are reluctant to emphasize them in their formal evaluation procedures (Jackson et al., 1983). However, the relative emphasis on objective and subjective measures seems to depend on the purpose for which the evaluation is being used. A study by Patton and King (1985) suggests that objective sales performance measures are more important in termination and compensation decisions, whereas subjective assessments of product knowledge and customer relations are more important in transfer and promotion decisions.

The *Profile of a Sales Force* survey shows that Irish sales managers have a fairly similar view of the criteria that are important for evaluating sales performance. As can be seen from Table 7, *sales volume* ranks top of the list of performance measures, and *account profitability* is third. *Customer relations* comes second, however, and other subjective measures such as a *professional approach* and *product/technical knowledge* are also accorded a high priority. Interestingly, *new customers* are ranked 7 out of 9 which suggests that sales managers in the large mature type of businesses in this sample give a higher priority to the maintenance of existing business than to the generation of new business; this is consistent with their emphasis on good customer relations and account profitability. It is also consistent with the advice of Tom Peters, in his book *Thriving on Chaos* (1988) who cites research showing that it costs five times as much to win a new customer as to keep an existing one.

That same research study also produced interesting evidence on the behaviour of dissatisfied customers. In particular, it showed that 95% of customers who have a bad experience with a supplier

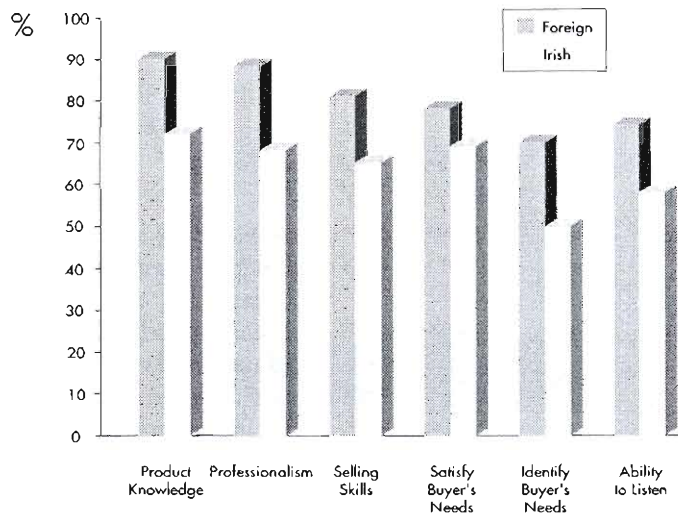
company do not complain or report it because they believe that it would not do any good. Furthermore, over 90% of those who do complain do not repurchase the product about which they had reason to complain.

The lesson from this seems to be that companies cannot afford to take their customers for granted; otherwise the first evidence of a dissatisfied customer may be a lost account. Thus, another important dimension of performance evaluation rests with the views of the customers which may not necessarily match those of the sales managers. The second Irish survey *Buyer Perceptions of Irish and Overseas Sales People* (1991) provides some useful insights on this topic. It specifically addressed the question of how purchasers evaluate sales people and, particularly, how they rate the performance of Irish sales people over those from abroad. The 208 purchasers interviewed see an average of 21 sales people per month and four out of five of these are Irish.

Table 8 Expectations of a Good Sales Person

Mentioned Spontaneously	%
Good Product Knowledge	65
Honesty/Integrity/Good Reputation	27
Reliable/Follows up on What's Agreed	21
Not Pushy/Not a Pest	20
Good Manners/Polite/Courteous	18
Well Groomed/Neatness	17
Good Personality/Good Character	16
Knows His Job/Business/Market	14
Punctuality/Time Keeping	14
Confident/Articulate/Can Communicate	12
Clear and Concise	10
Professional Approach	10
Directness/Decisiveness	9
Makes an Appointment	7
Comes Prepared	7
Good Quality Service/After-Sales	7
Understands Customer Needs	7

Source: *Buyer Perceptions of Irish and Overseas Sales People*

Figure 5 Summary Comparison of Irish and Overseas Sales Representatives: Key Skills

Source : Buyer Perceptions of Irish and Overseas Sales People

The respondents were first asked to draw upon their own experience and name up to five qualities that they expect to find in a good sales person. The combined responses to this question yielded a list of 17 qualities which are summarised in Table 8. From this it emerges that good *product knowledge* is the key quality expected of sales people, particularly in manufacturing and processing industries. Other important factors are: *honesty, reliability, courtesy, professionalism, punctuality, communication skills* and *decisiveness*.

On average, 50% of Irish sales people were said to have all or most of these qualities, but 75% of overseas sales people were said to possess them. Figure 5 provides a summary comparison of the ratings of Irish and overseas sales people on 6 key qualities. Irish sales people score less well on each of these variables but the widest margins are on product knowledge and general professionalism.

This comparison should be viewed with some caution because of the relatively limited experience of Irish purchasers in dealing with overseas sales people (1 out of 5 of the sales people they see). However, a spontaneous listing of common failings of Irish sales people identified similar points of weakness, such as lack of product knowledge (32% of respondents), turning up without an appointment (25%), lack of follow-up and back-up (16%) and failure to deliver on time/unreliable (13%).

It seems, therefore, that Irish sales managers and sales representatives would do well to question themselves on these important, although subjective points because, as we look to the future, it is obvious that Irish companies must be able to match international standards in their selling activities as well as in all other aspects of their operations.

Conclusions and Implications

At the beginning of this paper it was pointed out that selling is only one element within the marketing mix, although a high cost element, and to manage it to best advantage, it must be subject to careful planning and strategic thinking. This requires a long-term focus and the specification of clear, measurable objectives that will provide clear guidance for all of the decisions made by sales managers and for specifying the tasks of the sales representatives. Without such clarity of purpose, it is easy to see how a sales force could become a costly overhead rather than a net contributor to the goals of the company.

The research reviewed in this paper yielded a number of insights which ought to be noted by companies which manage their own sales force. Firstly, in setting objectives for their sales personnel sales managers have to decide on the relative priority to be accorded to such variables as sales volume versus sales revenue, and maintaining existing business versus building new business. The results of this survey indicate that sales managers put primary emphasis on sales volume over account profitability and on existing business over new business.

Secondly, objectives set by sales management should influence the nature and structure of the remuneration package given to sales personnel. If the emphasis is on maintenance of customer relations and sales volume, then a package based mainly on salary supplemented by a bonus tied to long-term performance targets would be optimal. On the contrary, if the objective is to build sales volume through new accounts, then a significant element of commission might be appropriate. Again care must be taken to ensure that generous incentive payments are not being paid routinely without any demonstrable effect on sales.

Thirdly, for sales personnel to perform effectively requires not only that they be remunerated adequately but also that they be equipped with skills and knowledge appropriate to their job. Research results seem to indicate that the level of formal training given to sales representatives is rather low, both in Ireland and internationally. It seems fair to argue that the increasingly professional nature of selling as a career would justify a more intensive training programme. Educators in sales and mar-

keting and those involved in training and development would do well to recognise this need.

Finally, the necessity for further research on this important topic area needs to be highlighted. This study represents a starting point rather than a conclusive review, and it is hoped that other researchers and organisations may be interested in exploring various dimensions, touched upon here, in much greater detail.

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