

An Integrated Framework to Derive Optimal Number of Sales Personnel for a Retail Store

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ABSTRACT

In brick-and-mortar retailing, sales personnel play the most important and complex role whereby they are the ones who are connected to consumers directly on a real-time basis. It is observed that majority of bricks-and-mortar retailers in India assume;(a) store size, (b) average monthly store revenue, (c) store operating hours, and (d) standard store employee cost as a proportion of store revenue are the key factors to arrive at the number of sales personnel required for a store. Such an assumption and widely followed practices have created a predisposition and mindset in store managers and they believe that their store delivers revenue and profit to the best of its potential and more importantly, all the consumers are completely satisfied and happy with the level of service offered by the sales personnel. In this research, we have analysed the existing policies and methodology of arriving at a number of sales personnel for a store, attempted to design a new framework and applied the same through an experiment to evaluate the change in (a) overall store profitability, and (b) sales personnel's attitude towards consumer orientation.

Keywords: Brick-and-mortar store; Offline store; Physical store; Salespeople; Salesperson; Sales Personnel; Customer Orientation; Number of Retail Sales Personnel.

1. INTRODUCTION :

Multi-category and multi-branded retail stores catering to multiple life-stage needs of a consumer comprise of many products/categories which are designed to serve the specific needs of consumers. Most of the retailers, classify these products into different sections either based on consumer needs (demand side) or product's behaviour (supply side) or visual appeal (communication side) or consumer life-stage (solution side) and this classification is known as categories. Each of these categories includes multiple sub-categories and each sub-category is comprised of multiple brands, models, colours and SKUs. Every product/category/brand in the entire store's product offering plays an important role with respect to consumers and retailers. It is imperative to note that, the understanding of the role played by a particular product/category/brand might not be the same among consumers, retailers and sales personnel. What is really important and of significant essence is that every sales personnel in the store is familiar with each of these product/category/brand's roles in relation to consumers explicit and implicit needs which in turn could possibly help sales personnel to enhance their own performance in a sagacious manner thereby enhancing (a) overall consumer satisfaction, (b) overall store profitability and (c) their individual performance. Unfortunately, it is not possible for every sales person in the store to have the same level of knowledge and expertise across a variety of categories/products/models/brands offered in the store. For many years it has been debated among retailing management researchers about, what is the optimal number of sales personnel a store must have, which are the key factors retailer need to consider while arriving at this number, is there a flexible way in which retailer can keep altering this number based on short-term/long-term deliverables and financial/strategical angles.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW :

Weitz (1979) [1], believes that the way in which sales personnel interact with consumers needs to be customized to each consumer and this could possibly be able to determine their success. Saxe and Weitz (1982) [2], were the first to define sales personnel's consumer orientation. This customer orientation is said to happen when the sales personnel and consumer together practice the marketing concept. They have clearly stated that just the interaction between sales personnel and consumer does not yield to this orientation, it needs to encompass most of the marketing concepts driven centrally by the company. Later, Brown et al. (2002) [3] narrowed down this definition and came up with two key constructs, the first one being sales personnel's tendency to ensure consumer needs are met and the second one being the level of sales personnel's enjoyment in doing so. Vandewalle et al. (1999) [4], believes that what can lead to sales personnel enjoy the process of interaction with consumers and ultimately selling a product is their strong orientation to learning. It also important to note, various studies have shown that 70% of the purchase decisions are made in-store by most of the customers (Liljenwall, 2004 [5]).

James L. Heskett et al. (1997) [6], argue that the profitability is significantly derived from consumer loyalty which is strongly linked to a) internal service quality and b) satisfied and productive service employee. The service-profit chain model created in their work holds true even after globalization, liberalization, and digitization of the retail market.

Understanding sales personnel behaviours has been and is one of the important fields in social science research. One of the important aspects of sales personnel behaviour which has a significant impact on consumer repeat visit intention and loyalty for a retail store is sales personnel's perception and predisposition about a consumer who he/she is attending to. The majority of sales personnel develop their mindsets to segment consumers into preferred consumers and non-preferred consumers and this mindset play an important role in the way the consumer will get treated by the sales personnel (Gills et al. (1998) [7], Singh. R et al. (2015) [8], Chen. Y et al. (2018) [9]).

In the past, various indicators which can indicate a retail sale in relation to quality and level of sales personnel involvement have been studied and analysed by many researchers. Most important indicators were (a) the amount and quality of time spent by the sales personnel with the consumer (Davis. H.L. et al (1972) [10]), (b) variety of products/SKUs/models being showcased by the sales personnel to consumer (Dawson et al (1992) [11]), (c) level of information being collected by the sales personnel on consumer needs directly from the consumer (Sharma. A. (2001) [12]), (d) sales person's efforts to understand the consumer brand preference and showcasing products/SKUs/models in relation to the preference (Pettijohn. C.E. et al. (2002) [13]), (e) sales personnel's capability to explain the features of products showcased to consumers and their confidence level while explaining the differentiation among a variety of products showcased (Aggarwal. P. et al. (2005) [14]) and (f) the range of products/SKUs/models showcased by the sales personnel in relation to price and utility expected by the consumer (Davis. D. D. (2008) [15]). All these findings are affirmative to the fact that the sales personnel's engagement with the consumer in real-time significantly influence consumer's purchase decision directly and most importantly this engagement process also indirectly influence consumer's mindset on their long-term association with the retail store or retailer.

Ganesha, H.R. et al. (2020) [16], conducted a sales personnel centric experiment by changing the sales personnel's performance measure from output driven to input driven measures and found that the input driven measures were all helping the sales personnel to understand the role of each product; be it essential, non-essential, high priced, low priced and so on and indirectly these measures were pushing them to focus on just the consumer's needs, consumer's lifetime value rather all the time thinking about just one transaction.

Ganesha, H.R. et al. (2020) [17], carried out a sales personnel centric experiment wherein they attempted to decentralize the discounting process by empowering sales personnel to decide on the type and level of discount to be offered to consumer found that, it is not just the discount level, type, duration, coverage and advertising discount offer which is important to attract more consumers and increase their intent to purchase more, what is also very important is (a) how does the sales personnel who is dealing with the consumer directly and has real-time insights about consumer's intent, needs and attitude towards a particular purchase activity communicate available discount offers to consumers with confidence, (b) does he/she believes in a particular discount offer and (c) can he/she convince the consumer about the

benefits of discount offers which are not real-time. Both these experiments in a way indicate that sales personnel need to be considered as the most important last-mile communication delivery personnel who has the capability of creating a positive perception about the retailer.

Ganesha, H.R. et al. (2020) [18], carried out a sales personnel centric experiment in which they had implemented a need-based sales pitch technique. The results were affirmative of the fact that the level and quality of interaction between sales personnel and consumers is important to understand the consumer life-stage which in turn helps the sales personnel to correctly identify the real-time need of the consumer and suggest relevant products to be purchased. This in a way raises questions about are the stores run with an optimal number of sales personnel all the time that too especially during peak sales hours.

As per Andris A. et al. (2013) [19], the majority of retailers look at sales personnel head count as a directly fixed cost component and fail to understand the possible positive implication of increasing the head count of sales personnel on overall store revenue and profitability. This attitude of looking at sales personnel head count using only the fixed cost angle is unfortunate and does not allow the retailers to make wholistic strategies. They also argue that even though the cost implications are immediate the overall store profitability can probably grow in the long run along with ensuring better consumer satisfaction level.

We were trying to find in the existing literature a framework which we would apply and evaluate if the framework is able to answer our key research questions in the Indian context. But we could not find a model/framework with which we can answer our research questions such as (a) can we believe that the existing sales personnel head count is sufficient?, (b) can we believe that the existing head count of sales personnel is able to manage all walk-ins adequately?, (c) if we cannot believe then what is the way in which we can understand the optimal number of sales personnel required in a store which shall ensure optimal consumer interaction level at the same time not impacting the overall store profit negatively. Thus, we decided to understand the existing policies and methodology which enables the store manager to decide on the adequate number of sales personnel in the store, analyse the available secondary data to understand the consumer walk-ins traffic frequency, velocity and distribution across different time slabs, days and occasions to verify the assumptions to create a new framework to derive the optimal number of sales personnel for a store, apply it over a longer period of time to evaluate the implications of the new framework on the overall store profitability and sales personnel attitude towards consumer orientation.

3. OBJECTIVES :

Key objectives of this research were to;

- (a) understand the change in overall store profitability by implementing the new framework to arrive an optimal number of sales personnel in a brick-and-mortar retail store across;
 - (i) control group
 - (ii) experimental group
 - (iii) pre-test period
 - (iv) post-test period
- (b) draw insights from the experimentation.

4. METHODOLOGY :

Stage I: One of the organized brick-and-mortar retailers in India was selected who is having stores all over India across (a) mall stores, (b) high-street stores(c) neighbourhood stores(d) tier 1, 2 and 3 cities, (e) offering multiple-categories and multiple-brands serving different consumer life-stage needs at mid to high price positioning catering to pregnant women, new moms, babies, infants and kids up to 8 years. 15 percent of these stores were exposed to decentralized discounting experimentation (experimental group) and discounting was controlled centrally in other stores (control group).

Stage II: Quantitative data for all the stores were collected prior to experimentations (pre-test). An open-ended personal interview was conducted for randomly selected (convenience sampling) sales personnel across experimental and control group stores to understand their understanding and attitude towards the existing framework in deciding the number of sales personnel for their store.

Stage III: Continuous training was conducted to all the sales personnel of experimental group including store managers, area sales managers, territory managers, regional managers and the national sales head over a period of 30 days prior to applying the new framework to impart knowledge about the new

framework, their pros and cons, implementation methodology and importantly the key goal of the experimentation. Post-training the new framework was implemented across all the stores selected for experimentation over a period of six months (experimental phase).

Stage IV: Results obtained during the experimentation stage (post-test) analysed using appropriate statistical methods and compared with the pre-test period.

Stage V: The findings from this experimentation were compared with pre-test across experimental and control groups.

Stage VI: In this stage, insights and inferences from the research findings were used to propose a way forward for brick-and-mortar retailers to enable them to decide on an optimal number of sales personnel required to enhance their overall store profitability.

5. THE NEW FRAMEWORK TO ARRIVE AT OPTIMAL NUMBER OF SALES PERSONNEL:

During the direct interview with store managers and the management team, it was noted that the factors considered while arriving at a number of sales personnel for a particular store were (a) store size, (b) number of floors in the store, (c) average monthly store revenue and (d) cost of total store employees (inclusive of store manager) not exceeding the allowed limit which was a standard proportion of store's average monthly revenue. The store managers were given authority to decide on the appropriate allocation of a number of sales personnel to be present in the store at a particular type of operational hours which was mainly dependent upon standard peak hours and type of day (weekday, weekend, or special day). Direct interview with sales personnel indicated that (a) they all were against adding extra sales personnel in their store as they all strongly believed that the additional sales personnel will significantly reduce the incentive earnings for the existing sales personnel and (b) they cannot focus on consumers in the day time and during weekdays as they have to perform other store related works and save energy for evening hours and weekends.

Multiple mystery shopping which were carried out at multiple stores as part of pre-test phase revealed that, (a) to make it simpler to manage majority of store managers were following standard shift hours and sales personnel head count allocation i.e., more sales personnel during evening time and weekends, (b) majority of day times and weekdays had less number of sales personnel in the store, (c) majority of consumers were avoiding peak sales hours to spend quality time at store and were expecting better quality of interaction with sales personnel, (d) most of the day time and weekdays sales personnel were busy in doing other store related works and the way the consumers were treated was inferior as compared to evening hours and weekends, (e) during peak hours, evening times and weekends consumers were not given due attention by the sales personnel as they were attending multiple consumers at a time and most importantly, (f) every consumer was attended by one sales personnel irrespective of his/her expert level in multiple categories and while this process is ongoing other sales personnel even if they are free have never come to give additional support to the one who is attending the consumer.

On analysing the past sales data across the day/evening hours and weekday/weekend it was noted that the average store revenue during weekends/evening hours was 62 percent higher than average store revenue during weekdays/day hours. But what is important to note that the store revenue delivered during weekdays/day hours even though it was lesser compared to weekends/evening hours was delivered by deputing just half of the total sales personnel strength. Based on all these pre-test insights we decided to create a framework which would possibly help the store manager to arrive at the optimal number of sales personnel and overcome these issues. The new framework essentially consists of;

5.1 Allocation:

Group A: 50 percent of existing trained sales personnel to be allocated for evening hours (16:00 to 21:00 hours) irrespective of day type (weekdays/weekends). As this time slot witness higher walk-ins traffic and velocity, this group shall work only for 06 hours instead of general 08 hours shift. Once the store is closed for consumers entry, this group shall set up the entire store for the next day for an hour.

Group B: another 50 percent of existing trained sales personnel to be allocated for day hours (11:00 to 16:00 hours) irrespective of day type (weekdays/weekends). As this time slot witnesses relatively lesser walk-ins traffic and velocity, this group shall work for 06 hours instead of a general 08 hours shift. This group shall come to the store an hour before the store is open for consumer entry and ensures regular store operations related works are completed.

Group C: New sales personnel to be hired who have relevant experience not exceeding 02 years

and the total number of this new group to be equivalent to at least 50 percent of the existing number of sales personnel. The time slot for this new group will be a general shift (11:00 to 19:00 hours). Hiring a new sales personnel having lesser than or equal to 02 years of relevant experience increases the probability of (a) successfully imparting the sales organization's working methodologies and culture, (b) reduces the additional cost burden by at least 30 percent, (c) reduces the insecurity level among the existing sales personnel especially over their myth which makes them believe that, additional sales personnel will eat up their existing incentive earning level.

5.2 Apportion: Allocation components of the new framework would ensure that most of the walk-ins are attended with due focus and attention to individual consumers. But it is difficult for single sales personnel attending a consumer in successfully showcasing/explaining multiple categories/products/models/brands across different categories. To overcome this issue, the new framework attempts to share a consumer among available sales personnel at any given point of time. Sales personnel who is attending a consumer, after taking them through categories/products/models/brands in which he/she has a higher level of confidence and knowledge, if consumer permits, he/she will then have to pass on the consumer to another sales personnel in the store with a brief introduction of consumer who has a higher level of confidence and knowledge in comparison to the original sales personnel in category/product/model/brand consumer has shown interest.

5.3 Appropriation: Unless every product being sold by a sales personnel to a consumer is linked to him/her, it is impossible to get the sales personnel in the store to practice apportion component of the framework as most of the sales incentives for sales personnel are directly linked to actual sales made by them and the same must be traceable through the point of sale invoices/bills. To avoid such issues the framework mandates unambiguous appropriation of sales made by each sales personnel for a single consumer by the way of linking sales personnel's unique identity number to every SKU in the invoice/bill. Prior to the experimentation, it was anticipated that conversion is going to increase significantly owing to which most of the key performance indicators which were used by the retailer to measures sales personnel performance, such as average selling price, average transaction value, and average basket size will also degrow. This hypothesis was made known to the retailer and sales personnel in the experimental group of stores well in advance to avoid any surprises for sales personnel during the experimentation phase. The new framework was applied in select stores for a period of six months to ensure that we get enough data for appropriate analysis.

6. KEY FINDINGS AND INSIGHTS :

Using pre-test post-test control group formula, we have found that the real treatment effect has shown a 58 percent improvement in the overall store profitability of the experimental group over their pre-test period. Comparative results as shown in table 1, 2, and 3 when compared with different periods indicate that in the experimental group of stores application of new framework has shown an increase in the overall employee cost and a decrease in the revenue per sales personnel as a result of increasing the sales personnel headcount by 66 percent over pre-test period. But at the same time, the increase in the headcount of sales personnel was able to convert many walk-ins to bills, thereby delivering growth in a number of invoices/bills by 90 percent and resulting in 72 percent increase in overall store revenue and 238 percent increase in the overall store profit. Moreover, the myth which all the sales personnel believed pre-test that addition of extra sales personnel in their store will reduce the incentive earning by the existing sales personnel significantly proven to be wrong as the incentive earned by the sales personnel post-test was 47 percent higher than pre-test.

Results also indicate that the correlation between a number of sales personnel in a store and overall store revenue is significantly positive at 0.921 with an adjusted R square value of 0.849 in the experimental group whereas in the control group the same was 0.136 with an adjusted R square value of -0.080. The correlation between a number of sales personnel in a store and overall store profit is significantly positive at 0.801 with an adjusted R square value of 0.606 in the experimental group compared to 0.094 with an adjusted R square value of -0.090 in the control group. A significant positive correlation and determination in the experimental group which is negative in the case of the control group affirms that it is not just about increasing the number of sales personnel in a store and a simple mathematical or financial exercise. The framework is much deeper and goes beyond numbers, wherein it takes psychological aspects of existing sales personnel into consideration. Even though we have found a negative correlation

(-0.111) between a number of sales personnel and revenue per sales personnel, it was insignificant and could not impact the overall store revenue negatively.

Table 1: Percentage change over pre-test period across key factors for control and experimental groups post-test.

Factors	Post-Test Control Group	Post-Test Experiment Group
Number of sales personnel per store	↓ 5%	↑ 66%
Total cost of sales personnel per day per square foot	↑ 68%	↓ 22%
Revenue per sales personnel per day per square foot	↑ 48%	↓ -1%
Incentive per sales personnel per day per square foot	↓ 11%	↑ 47%
Average MRP of store	↑ -2%	↓ -6%
Average selling price of store	↑ -1%	↓ -7%
Average transaction value of store	↑ -5%	↓ -9%
Average basket size of store	↓ -4%	↑ -2%
Discount per cent	↓ -10%	↑ 19%
Bills per day per square foot	↓ 65%	↑ 90%
Sale quantity per day per square foot	↓ 59%	↑ 85%
Revenue per day per square foot	↓ 57%	↑ 72%
Earning per day per square foot	↓ 80%	↑ 83%
Profit per day per square foot	↓ 109%	↑ 210%

Table 2: Percentage change across key factors between experimental group and control group pre-test phase.

Factors	Post-Test Experiment Group
Number of sales personnel per store	-7%
Total cost of sales personnel per day per square foot	600%
Revenue per sales personnel per day per square foot	662%
Incentive per sales personnel per day per square foot	684%
Average MRP of store	-5%
Average selling price of store	-4%
Average transaction value of store	-16%
Average basket size of store	-13%
Discount per cent	-17%
Bills per day per square foot	27%
Sale quantity per day per square foot	11%
Revenue per day per square foot	7%
Earning per day per square foot	15%
Profit per day per square foot	67%

As far as qualitative findings are concerned an open-ended interview was conducted with all the sales personnel of the stores under experimental group post-test and unanimously, they have all said, (a) majority of consumers were able to locate a sales personnel even during the peak sales hours of the stores, (b) enough time was available for each sales personnel to interact with consumers, (c) they were able to showcase and offer a variety of products to the consumer, (d) they were able to take appropriate information from the consumer on their real need and most importantly, (e) the chaos with which they used to operate pre-test was drastically reduced. Another key insight from these direct interviews was that the results of this experiment were clearly visible to them as they were able to get many of these consumers to return to their store more frequently which helped them to earn significantly higher incentives as compared to pre-test period.

Table 3: Percentage change across each key factor between the experimental group and control group post-test.

Factors	Post-Test Experiment Group
Number of sales personnel per store	47%
Total cost of sales personnel per day per square foot	406%
Revenue per sales personnel per day per square foot	410%
Incentive per sales personnel per day per square foot	944%
Average MRP of store	-9%
Average selling price of store	-10%
Average transaction value of store	-20%
Average basket size of store	-11%
Discount per cent	10%
Bills per day per square foot	46%
Sale quantity per day per square foot	29%
Revenue per day per square foot	17%
Earning per day per square foot	17%
Profit per day per square foot	1180%

7. CONCLUSION :

The experiment of applying the new framework of arriving at an optimal number of sales personnel for a store which is based on allocation, apportion and appropriation concepts rather than arriving at a number of sales personnel based on store size, store's average monthly revenue or restrictions over store level expenses over store employee cost has shown a significant improvement across various key performance indicators such as; (a) conversion, (b) sales quantity, (c) revenue, (d) gross margin value, (e) store profitability and most importantly, (f) sales personnel's attitude towards consumer orientation. It was evident from the results that even though adding extra sales personnel increases the store employee cost and reduces the revenue from individual sales personnel, it gives a significant boost to the overall store's revenue and profitability in the long run. It is imperative and non-negotiable to have an appropriate number of sales personnel allocated across different consumer walk-in traffic and velocity levels if the store aims at converting as many as possible new walk-ins into loyal consumers along with retaining the existing consumers for a longer term. It is not just about adding more sales personnel in a store, it is also important to ensure the grouping of sales personnel and allocating them appropriately. Brick-and-mortar retailers need to understand that the sales personnel are the ambassadors of the store/brand who are directly connected with the consumers on a real-time basis and the way in which these sales personnel interact with consumers for sale could possibly influence the retailer/brand/store image in consumers mind as far as their long-term association with the retailer/brand/store is concerned.

8. SUGGESTIONS TO BRICK-AND-MORTAR RETAILERS :

Based on this research outcome, we would like to suggest Brick-and-mortar retailers that they need to clearly understand and have visibility to consumer walk-ins traffic and velocity levels on a regular basis and align the headcount of sales personnel in a store in relation to these levels. Do not look at sales personnel as just one of the important fixed cost components, the retailer needs to also admit that sales personnel are also one of the important components of their selling proposition. This is even more important owing to the emergence of the online retailing format in India which is slowly taking away market share from brick-and-mortar retailer and sales personnel could possibly act as one of the key differentiators among retailing formats in the consumers mind.

9. LIMITATIONS OF RESEARCH :

The main limitation of this research work is the coverage of various stakeholders viz., consumers, and retailers in experimenting with this new framework. This might limit the generalizability of the research findings to another set of retailers and consumers. The second limitation would be the empirical validation is restricted to one retail format i.e., multi brand and multi category baby care stores in India and hence the generalizability of the findings and suggestions to other retail formats. The third limitation would be our ability to carry out true experimental design, at best we were able to carry out a pre-test post-test control group experimental design. However, it provides significant input regarding the ways to utilise these findings as all the findings have been derived from a pre-test post-test control group experiment spread over six months.

10. SCOPE FOR FURTHER RESEARCH :

It is recommended that the proposed framework to be experimented by researchers and finetune the framework if required for different retailing formats and verticals. Based on the key growth objectives for a specific period and specific context, brick-and-mortar retailers can implement this framework at their select stores and finetune the same based on real-time findings which can then be implemented across the entire chain of their stores.

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