Impact of Quality Improvement in a Department Store by Sales Associates on Customer Loyalty

Oh Dani · Lee Seunghee⁺

Dept. of Clothing & Textiles · Sookmyung Women's University

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to identify how to improve the quality of department store's sales associates for customer loyalty. This study examines the importance of sales associates' education, skills, and customer service towards customer loyalty. The questionnaire survey was conducted to collect data from 220 clothing sales associates working in department stores. This survey was paper- based. The participants were asked about the questionnaires; sales associates' education, sales associates' ability, customer service, and customer loyalty. General demographic characteristic of participants in the study are as follows; females (72.27%) participated the survey more than males (27.73%). With the age ranging from early 20s to over 40s, most people who took the survey ranged from early 30's to mid 30's with 33.64%. The result indicated that sales associates' education, and customer service skills were significantly corelated to each other. Sales associates' education had no co relation to customer loyalty. In applying the research findings, department stores can design their training contents to offer better training quality. Education of sales associates can be focused by providing various training contents, exercise, effective options, along with the opportunity to improve the qualities of training.

Key words : sales associates' ability, sales associates' education, customer loyalty, customer service

Ⅰ. Introduction

A department store, which is regarded as a representative of the retail distribution market, has been a major retail organization in today's life.

A sales associate is considered to be the most effective and most expensive communication medium in providing an appropriate message to each consumer and to have the flexibility to adjust depending on the consumer's response to the message in a department store (Levy & Weitz, 1998).

Corresponding author: Lee Seunghee, Tel. +82-2-710-9857, Fax. +82-2-2077-7324
E-mail: leeseu1@sm.ac.kr

Researches were conducted in the mid-1990 on the relationship between customers and sales associates, but most studies reported one - time relationship with consumers from the sales associates' aspect. Therefore, they focused customer satisfaction with the interaction between customers and sales associates (O'Mally & Tynan, 2000). There seemed to be a lack of ongoing relationship between customers and sales associates. According to (Burnett, Amason, & Hunt, 1981), feminists have great expectation towards a sales associates' appearance, costume, and positive attitude, but they feel that sales associates are not kind and do not have enough knowledge about the products. However, a consumer's expectation of a sales associate is generally high. As a result, sales associates can be a useful source to a consumer if better services were provided.

Currently, each of sales associates' education, ability, and customer services have been studied (Davis & Alvin, 1972; Ames & Archer, 1988; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Lovelock, Patterson, & Walker, 1998), but there is few studies connecting the sales associates' education, ability, and customer service. Also, the importance of philosophy of understanding consumer's aspect has been studied. However, it is urgent to review of the current situation and the points to be improved in terms of the sales associates. Thus, before connecting with consumers, understanding and improving the qualities of sales associates will help consumers in the long run. Therefore, the purpose of this research was twofold;

(a) To analyze current sales associates' education, education contents of future training, sales associates' ability, and customer service to improve the quality of the sales associates.

(b) To propose and test a theoretical model integrating these variables toward customer loyalty.

II. Conceptual Framework

1. Sales Associates' Education

The importance of sales associate's education is having the knowledge of products, which helps her (him) to sell in department stores. Sales associates' training provides prediction of the behavioral changes of customer's. Thus, sales associates learn mental preparation and behaviors associated with sales situations. Also, sales associates, who pursue professional designations, have the motivation to improve their selling skills. Other motives for acquiring professional designations include seeking a promotion, satisfying a career objective and enhancing one's self-esteem. Professional education is needed to accrue to members of sales-agency organizations through taking courses and passing a series of exams designed to demonstrate a high level of proficiency in the profession (Izzo & Vitell, 2003).

Previous researches have shown that particular sales associates tend to seek relatively challenging situations have a greater understanding of the selling environment and knowledge of appropriate sales strategies (Ames & Archer, 1988; Dweck & Leggett, 1988). It has shown that a learning orientation tends to motivate sales associates to work longer hours and persevere more because they are more likely to enjoy the selling process and strive for excellence in the face of adversity. Due to the importance of sales associates' education, and its effects, it may affect sales associates' ability, customer service, and customer loyalty positively in a significant level. Therefore, the following hypotheses were proposed:

Hypothesis 1 : Sales associates' education will have a positive impact on sales associates' ability.

Hypothesis 2 : Sales associates' education will have a positive impact on customer service.

Hypothesis 3 : Sales associates' education will have a positive impact on customer loyalty.

2. Sales Associates' Ability

Sales associates should know the products being sold and its functions in order to perform effectively. In addition, they should use selling techniques to provide customer's satisfaction. Their ability is a crucial and an integral aspect of personal selling. Weilbaker (1990) defines selling ability as the capability or potential that allows sales associates to perform certain sales-related activities. He further argues that it develops over time as a function of sales associates' experiences and aptitude.

Literature in interaction and influence processes in personal selling suggests that the greater the perceived similarity between a sales associate and a prospect, the more the prospect like the sales associates, and, therefore, the greater the sales associates ' influence has (Davis & Alvin, 1972). No other sales associates characteristic has received as much recognition and as little academic attention as professionalism. In the current competitive marketplace, sales professionalism is essential to success for sales associates including the overall conduct of the sales associates including gestures, mode of communication, and manners and movements. A sales associate professionalism is perceived by buyers and employers as a holistic pattern or an interdependent set of behaviors which goes beyond her (his) sales-related abilities.

Professionalism is likely to be a critical determinant of sales effectiveness. This expectation is due to two reasons. First, sales associates professionalism, an implicit buying criterion (Sheth, 1973), is likely to have a greater impact on individual retail buyers' predispositions and approach behaviors toward sales associates than it would on the collective judgments of buying center groups. Second, differences in the nature of products purchased by retail buyers and industrial buyers might affect sales transactions and outcomes. Thus, sales associates' ability, which can lead to long-term relationship with customers, may affect to customer service and customer loyalty. To examine this relationship, the following hypotheses were developed.

Hypothesis 4 : Sales associates' ability will have a positive impact on customer service.

Hypothesis 5 : Sales associates' ability will have a positive impact on customer loyalty.

3. Customer Service

Customer service is a part of increases in sales so it is a mean of communication of soliciting companies' products and service face to face between the customer and the sales associates. Traditionally, it has been easy for service managers to claim that the unique characteristics of customer services precluded any attempt at measurement; however, the competitive nature of the present day business environment has forced a serious reconsideration of this aptitude (Lovelock et al., 1998).

Leading customer service organizations strive to maintain a superior quality of service in an effort to gain customer loyalty (Zeithaml, Berry, & Parasuraman, 1996). Therefore, a customer service organization's long-term success in a market is essentially determined by its ability to expand and maintain a large and loyal customer base. More importantly, the relationship between

perceived service quality and customer loyalty had remained relatively underdeveloped (Gremler & Brown, 1996). Also, it is necessary for retailers to be aware of the customer service quality dimensions which are crucial in the eyes of the consumer, as this enable them to optimize the allocation of organizational resources. As a result, a hypothesis was developed to explore this relationship.

Hypothesis 6 : Customer service will have a positive impact on customer loyalty.

4. Customer Loyalty

According to previous research of customer loyalty, the definition of customer loyalty is divided into behavioral approaches, attitudinal approaches, integrated approaches and get customers to refer others, who also become customers (Dick & Basu, 1994; Middleton, 2003). Firstly, behavioral approach is defined to customer loyalty which orientates the ongoing purchases of a customer over a certain period of time. Secondly, attitudinal approach means preference or psychological commitment of specific products and service of customer loyalty. This approach is that customer loyalty is having the intent to purchase, thus it identifies as potential future purchases (Andreassen & Lindestad, 1998; Lee & Cunningham, 2001). Lastly, customer loyalty takes the meaning of comprehensive concept of customer's attitudinal and behavioral components for integrated approaches.

A highly satisfied customer is a loyal customer and satisfaction presents the antecedents of loyalty. In addition, satisfaction of the shops bring store loyalty, sales associates' loyalty is a factor of store loyalty in Macintosh and Lockshin (1997) 's study. Loyalty for sales associates leads to word of mouth and repurchase intention. As a result, enhancing customer loyalty and maintaining existing customers is more important compared to aggressive marketing strategy such as attracting new customers and expanding market share.

Therefore, in this study, sales associates' education, ability, and customer service were explored in relation to customer loyalty. The theory of literature served as the theoretical framework for examining the effect of sales associates' training, ability and customer service with customer loyalty in Figure 1. And all hypotheses are as follows:

H 1 : Sales associates' education will have a positive impact on sales associates' ability.

H 2 : Sales associates' education will have a positive impact on customer service.

H 3 : Sales associates' education will have a positive impact on customer loyalty.

H 4 : Sales associates' ability will have a positive impact on customer service.

H 5 : Sales associates' ability will have a positive impact on customer loyalty.

H 6 : Customer service will have a positive impact on customer loyalty.

III. Method

1. Sample

A sample of sales associates working at department stores of Seoul and Busan in Korea were chosen for this study. The two areas were chosen for this study for several reasons. In Seoul, there is a high-end department store called Galleria, and middle level stores called Shinsegae, Lotte, and Hyundai followed by Aekyung, Grand and New-core. A luxury trend has been set at partial by department stores in Seoul.
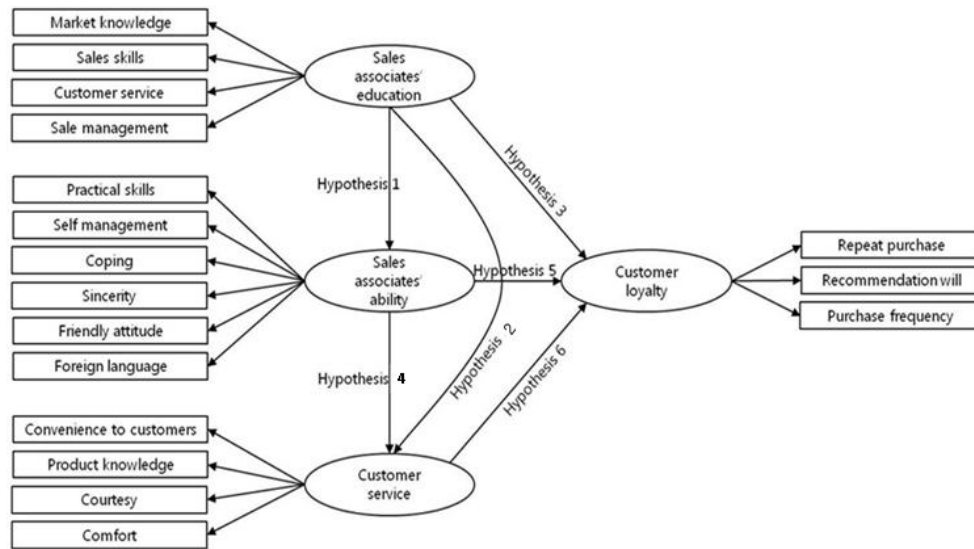
Figure 1. Proposed Model

It gives identity and has an effect of rising image of both a department store and luxury goods. In addition, due to aggressive international recognition, fashion goods continuously expend and promote strategy with differentiated MD (Merchandising). Shinsegae Department Store, Centum City in Busan is the world's largest department stores. There are saunas, an ice rink, theatre, golf driving lounge, and observatory besides the shopping stores. The Shinsegae Department Store, Centum City was listed in the Guinness Book of world record in June 2009 and still continues to be the world's largest.

Of 250 surveys distributed to the participants, 226 (91%) were collected. Of 226 respondents, 6 were excluded as they missed some questions and they could not finish the survey due to busy work. This resulted in 220 usable responses and a usable response rate of 98%. 130 participants were from Seoul and 90 participants were from Busan.

General demographic characteristic of participants who participated in the study are as follows; females (72.27%) participated to the survey more than males (27.73%). In marital status, there were more singles (68.64%) compared to married (31.636%). With a range from early 20s to over 40s of age, most people who took the survey ranged from early 30s to middle 30s with 33.64%. More than half (58.18%) had graduated high school and another 30% had completed college. 32.7% had between 1 to 5 years of work experience. The next order was between 5 to 10 years (27.73%). Most worked for the women's wear (35%) department and menswear (33%) department. The majority of the sales associates (68%) worked for women's wear or menswear. 21% was casual wear. When asked about salary type, more than half of sales associates worked off monthly salary (53.64%).

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2. Questionnaire

This survey was paper based. The researcher pilot tested the instrument to ensure the clarity of item wording and appropriateness of modified items in the department store context. To initiate the survey, a survey provided the definition of sales associates' education, sales associates' ability, customer service, and customer loyalty.

Sales associates' education contents are based on the questionnaire used from Kim (1995) and Park (1994). It consists of a total of 18 questions and 5-point Likert Scale ranging from 1 (*did not learn at all)* to 5 (*learned a lot*). In addition, sales associates were asked about market knowledge, sales skills, customer service and sales management.

Fifteen questions assessing sales associates' ability were selected from questions developed by Choi, Lee, Choi, and Shin (2006) and Lee (2006). Sales associates answered these questions based on their experiences while working in a department store. For this content, practical skill, self management, coping, sincerity, friendly attitude and foreign language were included.

Customer service was measured using twelve questions from service of apparel scale developed by previous researchers (Hong, 2000; Hwang et al., 2000; Kim, Kim, & Lee, 1999; Lee, 2003). Convenience to customers, product knowledge, courtesy, and comfort were divided from this question. Three questions were developed to measure customer loyalty. Finally, demographic questions asked about gender, marital status, age, education, working period, work department, and salary type.

IV. Results and Discussion

1. Structural Equation Modeling

Development and testing of the hypothesized model. The first step in testing the hypothesis was to specify and test the measurement model. All variables, except sub-variables were latent variables. The number of items in each scale varied from 3 to 18. Grouping of items as indicator of variable, rather than using individual items, has been widely discussed (Little, Cunningham, Shahar, & Widaman, 2002); grouping is customary in psychological research and reduces the likelihood that results could be distorted by possible idiosyncratic characteristics of individual items (Russell, Kahn, Spoth, & Altmaier, 1998). Parceling is assessed to make scales uni-dimensional, and has been identified as superior for improving the overall fit of data in model testing (Takahashi & Nasser, 1996).

To develop three measurement indicators for each measure, exploratory factor analyses were first conducted separately for each measure. A single factor was extracted for each item using principal-component extraction; loading of the items on each factor are presented in Table 1. Next, the factor loadings for items from each measure were arranged in descending order. The items were then divided into four groups such that the average factor loading for each group would be approximately equal. Finally, the four scores for each circle were created by averaging the responses to each set of items. The factor loadings for all circles were significantly different from 0 ($p < .05$).

Among sales associates' training contents, factor analysis by principle component analysis and varimax rotation to bind similar questions was conducted. As a result, similar contents

Table 1. Factor Loadings for Items from Sales Associates' Education, Ability, and Customer Service

			Loading
Sales associates' education	Market knowledge	Competitive comparison	.78
		Ability to control	.77
		Communication	.73
		Distribution environment	.72
		Marketing knowledge	.60
		How to coordinate	.52
		Fixed customer care	.51
	Sales skills	Product knowledge	.83
		Product on stock management	.73
		Sales techniques	.69
		How to exhibit	.66
	Customer service	Telephone response	.76
		Hospitality training	.73
		Returns treatment	.64
		Computerized credit processing	.55
		Complaints treatment	.53
	Sales management	Sales policy	.57
		Customer care	.55
Sales associates' ability	Practical skills	Do you set specific goals and try to achieve them?	.771
		Are you good with sales techniques?	.769
		Do you have an ability to display?	.621
		Do you have sophisticated manners and skills to treat customers?	.556
		Do you have a strong desire to improve your fault when you make a mistake?	.540
	Self management	Are you seeking to develop future-oriented thinking and skills?	.740
		Can you control your feelings well when you get stress out?	.735
		Do you work with confidence and pride when performing tasks?	.675
	Coping	Do you respond quickly without panic in unexpected circumstance?	.830
		Do you have an ability to encourage and coach juniors?	.708
	Sincerity	When performing tasks, do you perform consistently by standards and principles?	.724
		Do you faithfully perform your duties?	.588
	Friendly attitude	Do you try to accommodate a positive situation in difficult situations?	.705
		Do you try to build friendly relation with people?	.688
	Foreign language	Can you speak a foreign language necessary for work?	.856

Table 1. Continued

			Loading
Customer service	Convenience to customers	Do you quickly find sizes and items needed by customers?	.720
		Do you always pay attention to customers while they shop?	.677
		Do you show a variety of designs and colors to customers?	.622
		Do you solve the problems and customer's dissatisfactions kindly?	.568
	Product knowledge	Do you explain products in a simple and understandable manner?	.754
		Do you know clothing's fabrics, designs, and sewing techniques?	.746
		Do you have the ability to coordinate clothes variously?	.696
	Courtesy	Do you greet your customers when they visit your shop?	.749
		Do you serve customers fairly without prejudice and anti-relationship?	.696
		Do you dress up neatly and have a neat appearance?	.676
	Comfort	Do you not burden customers even though they do not purchase items?	.738
		Do you provide comfort when customers are choosing clothes?	.517

were combined and four factors were extracted in Table 1. The range of factor loading was between .51 and .83. In sales associates' ability, the number of factors that derived were determined with at least 1 criterion eigen value using the cumulative distribution. Factor loading was selected when it was over 0.5. Six variables; practical skills, self management, coping, sincerity, friendly attitude and foreign language were extracted in Table 1. The loadings ranged from .54 to .85.

All multi-item variables were subjected to reliability (cronbach's *alpha*) analysis.

Reliabilities, means, standard deviations, and number of items included in each of the measures are reported in Table 2. The results indicated that each of the measures were sufficiently reliable for use in the subsequent analyses.

Cronbach's alphas for all measures were above .60 (see Table 2), indicating strong convergent validity. The reliability of sales associates' education was the highest with the average mean of .95. The reliability of sales associates' ability is .90. Moreover, customer service's reliability range was high with .90

Table 2. Measurement of Reliabilities Using Cronbach's α

Variable	α	*M*	*SD*	Number of items
Sales associates' education	.9523	3.61	.74	18
Sales associates' ability	.9058	3.59	.57	15
Customer service	.9038	3.87	.56	12
Customer loyalty	.6851	3.83	.72	3

average mean. Although the reliability of customer loyalty is lower than the others, it is still a significant value.

Factor 1 included convenience to customers and product's features and product knowledge focused for factor 2. Kindness and these related questions were comprised for 'Courtesy' in factor 3. Factor 4 was determined 'Comfort' which involved of does not try to persuade or burden customers.

Analysis of the hypothesized model. Using path analysis, six hypotheses in the conceptual model were tested. The hypothesized model provided a good fit to the data, = 158.140, p<.001, Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = .961, Standardized Root Mean-Square Residual (SRMR) =.026, Root Mean-Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) = .063. Path analysis was conducted by a Maximum Likelihood Estimation procedure using AMOS 18.0. The path coefficients and t- values along with their significance and associated statistics are indicated in Figure 2. All measures were subjected to confirmatory factor analysis for issues of dimensionality, convergent, and discriminant validity.

All categories of four variables (sales associates' education, sales associates' ability, customer service and customer loyalty) had positive influence (p <.001). The proposed positive relationship between sales associates' education and sales associate's ability Hypothesis 1 was supported (t = 7.780, p <.001). Hypothesis 2, predicting a positive effect between sales associates' education and customer service, was provided (t = 5.391, p <.001). However, the analysis showed that proposed positive relationship between sales associates' education and customer loyalty Hypothesis 3 did not have a relationship (t =

0.055, p <.05). Therefore, Hypothesis 3 was not supported.

A significant positive relationship between sales associates' ability and customer service was found (Hypothesis 4; t = 6.715, p <.001). Hypothesis 5 proposed that sales associates' ability and customer loyalty had a positive relationship. Significant relationship was found between sales associates' ability and customer loyalty (t = 2.740, p<.01). Hence, Hypothesis 5 was supported. Among the subcategories in sales associates' ability, coping (see Figure 2) was the most reflective factor to sales associates' ability. Practical skills, also, resulted in positive relationship toward sales associates' ability, but foreign language was the weakest associated within the subcategories.

Consistent with hypothesis 5, hypothesis 6 predicted positive effect on customer service and customer loyalty. The result showed significant effect on relationship between customer service and customer loyalty (t =4.036, p< .001).

Overall, sales associates' education had significantly affect to both sales associates' ability and customer service. There was, also, positive relation between sales associates' ability and customer service. Analysis of the hypothesized model showed a significant effect of sales associates' ability and customer service on customer loyalty. In contrast, sales associates' education did not relate to customer loyalty.
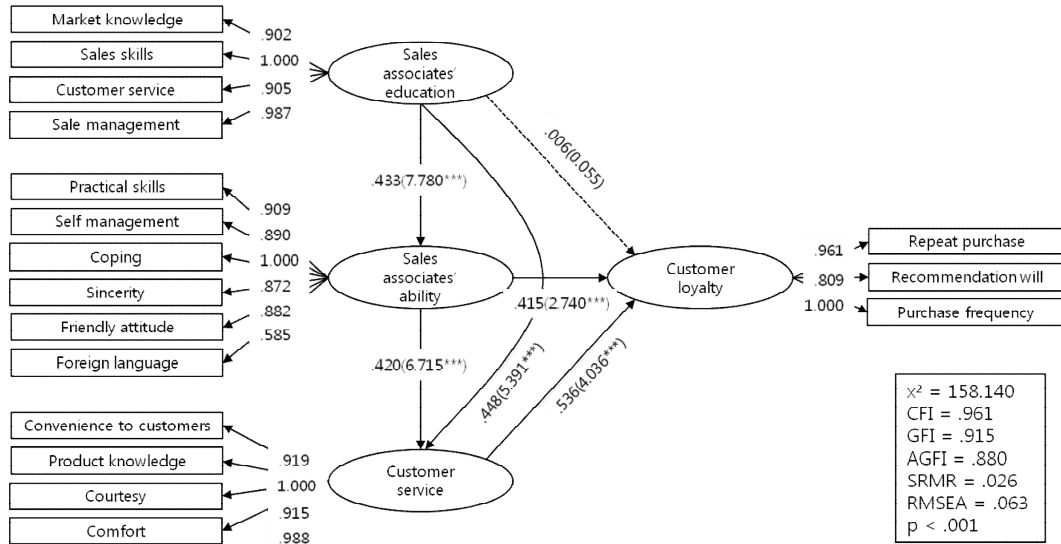
Figure 2. Results of Proposed Model

Ⅴ. Conclusions

The findings of this study revealed that sales associates' education was significantly related to sales associates' ability and customer service. Also, it appeared that sales associates' ability had significant influence on customer service. Moreover, sales associates' ability and customer service were positively related to customer loyalty, but sales associates' education had no influence on customer loyalty. Customer service was the highest among the three predictors for customer loyalty. This implies customer service delivers through interaction with customers directly so it can be seen how important customer service is. This result supports the finding from the studies of Saxe and Weitz (1982) who reported that service creates satisfaction of customer needs and long- term relationship in the process of interaction between employees and customers. Sales associates' education did not relate to customer

loyalty in the research. This finding conflicts with that of Anderson and Dubinsky (1999) who reported that sales training is generally considered as a basic requirement for success in personal selling, some companies take steps to measure their sales training investments. However, sales associates' education did not relate to customer loyalty properly. Lorge (1999) explains that top corporate leaders and their sales departments generally fail to recognize the need for training, sales coaching, and management. Also, more than one -half of firms surveyed failed to provide any sales management training for sales associates (Anderson & Dubinsky, 1999). Without continuous proper sales management training, sales associates find it difficult to prioritize their activities in terms of importance and suffer from role ambiguity. Sales managers are sometimes overly confident about their abilities, which can make them less inclined to seek training.

All sub-categories of sales associates' ability

are positively related to get customer loyalty. Among them, coping is the most important variable for sales associates' ability. This is consistent with previous research of (Goff, Boles, Bellenger, Danny, & Stojack, 1977). In his study, he comments that sales satisfaction through improvement of sales associates' ability is an important fact to customer loyalty. Accordingly, companies should perform to activities to gain, to administrate and to maintain excellent sales associates.

The variables of customer service have been a positive influence on customer loyalty. Product knowledge is the highest category of service. The finding is consistent with previous studies that examine product knowledge in customer service (Hong, 2000). It implies that sales associates need to know product features, functions, materials, and detailed information. Also, they have to check the products before customers visit a shop. Product knowledge is the basic study to know in customer service as a sales associate. If sales associates do not answer the questions or give the wrong information when customer asks about the products, there is no reason to work in the department. Moreover, it is hard to recover the relationship back and this cannot lead to customer loyalty.

In sales associates' ability, friendly attitude and foreign language are currently weak compared to other variables. To improve these skills, remarkable sales associates know how to ask questions that help to indentify a prospect's needs and motivations for marking a purchase. These sales associates present themselves as caring, warm, sensitive and friendly individuals who project that their primary concern is making sure their product or service meet the needs of their prospect (Gregory, 1998). Making a commission is always secondary to customer satisfaction. Accordingly, managers should check their sales associates regularly whether they are friendly to customers and help them to improve their weakness. Furthermore, sales associates need to study foreign languages to communicate with foreigners for a number of reasons. Good communication in foreign language becomes crucial today due to the impact of globalization. Also, practitioners can run businesses more smoothly with the use of foreign languages (Peh, 2005) and their foreign customers feel more comfortable. Even though politeness is the basic in service categories, it is the weakest variable in current customer service. It is important to successful sales associates to balance their techniques depending on sales circumstance and customer's taste.

For future education contents, sales associates want to learn more about sales techniques, problem solving, customer relationship management, and display method. Thus, sales associates not only just want to sell products, but want to have multi-tasking abilities. As a result, these contents need to be focused specially and be developed professionally. Furthermore, companies should check regularly what sales associates need and overcome deficient contents to improve training.

Intensive research on sales associates was limited in fashion retail market, but it is significant to know self-assessment of sales associates, the interaction of sales associates, and attempts to future relationship through this study. A department store is capable of impacting on other markets nowadays. As a result, it provides a number of chances to show the solutions when department store need proper strategies to lead sales associates and run the business.

Implication for Department Stores to Train Salespeople

This research provides the impact on customer loyalty by quality improvement of sales associates. The research gives attentions to sales associates' training, sales associates' ability, and customer service that have not been researched together before relating to customer loyalty.

The research tended to be mostly women participated. Moreover, there were the ages of between early 30s and middle 30s. As a result, department stores need to focus on these categories particularly and train them to be qualified sales associates. In further applying the research findings, department stores can design their training contents to offer better training quality. Education of sales associates can be focused by providing various training contents, exercise, effective options, along with the opportunity to improve the qualities of training.

The kinds of variables of sales associates' ability can be specialized so the details of this content may support in actual working life for sales associates. In addition, sales associates need to have professional attitude and mind. With different customers, and their needs, customer service should be changed properly with comfort. It would be exercised in a number of ways to make it natural. Various characteristics of customers can be divided; age, gender, job, personality, and appearance. Thus, sales associates need to understand and examine these categories not only to improve sales circumstance but also to satisfy customer's needs.

Limitation and Future Research

The target of the study was the sales associates, who work in Seoul and Busan. As a result, future research needs to include other areas as well to gather complex and objective data. In addition, comparison between regions is able to be added for future studies.

In this study, education of sales associates was not reflected to customer loyalty even though other variables were significant to get customer loyalty so the variables of education should be refined and reconsidered in future work.

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