



Research Article

ISSN : 0975-7384  
CODEN(USA) : JCPRC5

## Competences of frontline sales staff: A case study on a medicines sales company

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### ABSTRACT

*Frontline sale is a significant position in which one directly contacts with clients. Based on Behavioral Event Interview (BEI), the authors build a competence model of frontline salespersons, which is based on a comparison of the personalities and behaviors in significant events between successful salespersons and common ones who work for a medicines sales company. The competences include 9 personalities: perseverant, motivated, inward rectified, helpful, organized, expressive, amiable and modest. Hereinto, being perseverant motivated and inward rectified are the key to become a successful salesperson. The competence model is of significant help in guiding the recruitment, training and assessment of sales staff for a company.*

**Key words:** sales, competency, competent elements, personnel assessment

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### INTRODUCTION

Frontline salespersons are working in the frontline of the market, where they directly contact with clients. Not only do they represent the brand image of the company, but also start the first step for the recovery of funds. As the economic globalization quickens, business environment is changing dramatically. Competitions become fiercer since products and services provided by companies are similar. Therefore, responsible for the first step during which the company is directly connected to consumers, frontline salespersons play an essential role in winning customers, seizing the market, increasing sales and maintaining the brand image. Therefore, whether a company will be competitive and dominant depends greatly on the quality of frontline sales staff. Consequently, questions concerning how to identify an excellent frontline salesperson, what makes them successful and how to train them need to be addressed by each company.

In recent years, research on competence attracts attention of scholars from various fields such as management, psychology and so on. These studies provide guidance, both in theory and in practice, for talents identification. McClellan (1973) believes that one cannot predict how a person performs in complicated task at a higher standard or whether they can succeed in life through traditional tests of intelligence, personalities, school performances and scores. The most essential factors for individual performances are behaviors and personalities, which are called competency [1]. Generally, competency refers to motivation, characteristics, self-concept, attitudes or values, knowledge of specific fields, cognitive or behavioral skills, and any measurable personal features that can distinguish successful salesperson with ordinary ones [2]. In terms of a specific position, competencies can help select employees who have the personalities, behaviors and abilities fit for the job. This serves as the basis and guidance for personnel selection, assessment and training [3].

Methods used by most studies on competency are empirical induction, questionnaires and interviews. Generally speaking, the conclusion of empirical induction is difficult to be verified, and due to the lack of interaction between

researchers and participants, the results of questionnaire are easily affected by other factors [4]. On the contrary, interview, during which there are sufficient interactions between the interviewer and the interviewee is the most commonly used method in competence study. BEI is an open exploration technique, through which a researcher can find significant behavioral traits based on behavioral event review. Therefore, it is an important tool to reveal competences. Meanwhile, a review of behavior in important events can show the differences between excellent and ordinary staff, and therefore it furthers the understanding of how successful staff behaves in critical events [5].

In conclusion, this paper studies the competencies of excellent frontline sales staff, on the basis of BEI method. The study consists of two parts: one is to build an initial competence model of frontline sales staff; the other is to examine the behavioral differences in critical events between excellent and ordinary salespersons. The results serve as guidance, both in theory and practice, for recruitment, selection and training of excellent frontline sales staff.

## MODEL BUILDING

Based on BEI, researchers conduct an analysis on how the excellent group and the ordinary group perform differently facing important events. On the basis of the analysis, researchers can identify the competence of the excellent group, in order to build the competence model of frontline sales staff.

### 1. Research Methods

#### 1.1 Sample Selection

Participants are chosen from frontline sales staff in a medicines sales company. The company has already had seven stores in Beijing. According to the name list, we randomly chose about 6 to 8 staff from each store. The total number of staff is 48. Based on the sales performance in the past year, participants are divided into two groups: excellent group and ordinary group. There are 16 people in the excellent group, or 20.7% of the total; 32 in ordinary group, 79.1% of the total.

#### 1.2 Tools and Materials

A laptop computer, installed with software for recording interviews. The content of the interviews are based on the "Outlines of Interviewing Medicines sales company Staff". After referring to researches on BEI, the outline is drafted and revised for several times together with the HR department in the company and three scholars with Ph.D. in HR. The content is as follows:

Table 1 Outlines of Interviewing Medicines sales company Staff

Number	Topic	Questions for reference
1	Self-introduction	Interest and hobbies; understanding of happiness and life; shortcomings.
2	Success	What is the biggest success since you worked for this company?
3	Change	What is the biggest change in your life since you worked for this company?
4	Difficulty	What is the biggest difficulty you've been through since you worked for this company?
5	Summary	Please briefly summarize your feeling about this job.

Besides, the Competences of Sales Staff in a Medicines sales company is written upon Spencer's Competence at Work (1993), relative papers, and discussions among HR and industry experts.

#### 1.3 Research Process

The BEI is in accordance with the "Outlines of Interviewing Medicines sales company Staff". Interviews are all researchers in the field of HRM, and one interview lasts for one hour or so.

Interviews involve the following basic steps: (1) introduction and explanation; (2) to explain what an interviewee should do; (3) description of key behavioral events; (4) summary; (5) to make a memo.

Through interviews, 77 recordings are obtained, later transcribed by professionals, with a total of 990,000 words. Thematic analysis and content analysis are applied to the coding of the text so that researchers can identify certain competences [6]. Combining the text and Competences of Sales Staff in a Medicines sales company, two HRM professionals group and code the competences of frontline sales staff. Then a statistical analysis on the data provided by the two experts is conducted: to make a comparative analysis on the differences on frequency and degree for each competency between two groups, and to find out the most greatly different competences. Therefore, the competency model can be built upon the analysis. SPSS16.0 software is used for data processing.

## RESULTS

### 2.1 Tests on the Reliability of Results

The reliability of the results is tested by whether the length of interviews for two groups is the same, and whether

interviewers have reached an agreement on their opinions. According to the statistics, interviews for excellent group have an average length of 13,121 words (SD = 3012 words), and ordinary group 12,781 words (SD = 3317 words), showing no significant difference in T test ( $t = 0.67$ ). This indicates that the length of interviews for both groups is almost the same.

Study of Zhong Lifeng and Shi Kan (2004) suggests that average grade is more reliable than the total frequency and the highest grade [7]. Therefore, the authors work out the correlation coefficient, which is 0.71, of the grades given by two researchers on each competency. 0.71 is acceptable, implying two researchers are basically consistent with the grading.

## 2.2 T-test for Competencies in Two Groups

This study only conducts a T-test on the average grade of certain competence between the two groups. The results are shown below:

Table 2 T-test Results of the Grades between Excellent Group and Ordinary Group

Number	Competence	Excellent Group (n=16)		Ordinary Group (n=32)		t	df	sig
		M	SD	M	SD			
1	Achievement Motivation	3.56	0.63	3.44	0.88	0.26	46	0.61
2	Emotional Stability	3.81	0.54	3.50	0.84	1.81	46	0.19
3	Interpersonal Sensitivity	3.62	0.72	3.53	0.76	0.17	46	0.68
4	Being Helpful	3.68	0.87	3.09	0.73	6.14**	46	0.02
5	Being Expressive	3.62	0.72	3.19	0.64	4.55**	46	0.04
6	Being Amiable	4.12	0.72	3.69	0.86	3.07*	46	0.09
7	Competitiveness	3.56	0.73	3.28	0.89	1.20	46	0.28
8	Being Organized	3.81	0.66	3.31	0.78	4.85**	46	0.03
9	Independence	3.87	0.89	3.72	0.68	0.46	46	0.50
10	Self-expression	4.00	0.73	3.41	0.71	7.29***	46	0.01
11	Openness	3.87	0.81	3.72	0.96	0.31	46	0.58
12	Obedience	3.62	0.62	3.22	0.91	2.59	46	0.11
13	Modesty	3.75	0.77	3.31	0.78	3.37*	46	0.07
14	Confidence	3.68	0.60	3.56	0.72	0.36	46	0.55
15	Perseverance	3.94	0.77	2.88	0.75	20.95***	46	0.00
16	Being Optimistic	3.94	0.77	3.66	0.70	1.61	46	0.21
17	Being Attentive to Life	4.00	0.82	3.63	0.83	2.19	46	0.15

Note: \*  $p < 0.1$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$

From table 2 one can see the grades of the following competences of the excellent group are remarkably higher than that of the other group: perseverance, self-expression, being helpful, organized, expressive, amiable, and modest, among which perseverance and self-expression are the competences with the most significant differences.

## 2.3 Competence Model

The model is built upon seven competencies that have significant differences between the two groups, including perseverance, self-expression, being helpful, organized, expressive, amiable, and modest.

## DIFFERENCES IN KEY BEHAVIORS

The competence model is of great significance for identifying and selecting frontline sales staff. It includes features of personalities and abilities. In order to test the effectiveness of the model, the authors carefully examine how excellent salesperson behaves differently in critical events. It contributes to a better understanding of what makes a successful frontline salesperson.

### 1. Research Method

Two NRM professionals count the frequency of words describing key behaviors in the transcription, and then for each topic, they choose five words that are most frequently seen. A frequency distribution test is conducted on the five key behaviors of the two groups to find what the main differences are [8].

As to the selection of key behaviors, researchers focus on differences between the two groups on five aspects, that is, attitudes towards success, failure, self-description, people one likes, and people one hates.

### 2. Research Results

SPSS16.0 software is used to test whether samples are independent and identically distributed. Results are as follows:

### 2.1 Different Attitudes towards Success

The study finds that there are significant differences in their attitudes towards success between the two groups.

**Table 3 Different Attitudes towards Success in Excellent and Ordinary Groups**

Number	Competence	Excellent Group (n=16)		Ordinary Group (n=32)		$\chi^2$	df	sig
		f	Proportion	F	Proportion			
1	Sell a Product	5	0.34	18	0.56	23.974***	4	0.000
2	Returned Customer	13	0.8	3	0.09			
3	Sales Performance	1	0.02	5	0.17			
4	Making Friends	1	0.08	3	0.08			
5	Experience Gained	3	0.17	3	0.08			

Note: \*  $p < 0.1$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$

As for the attitude towards success, both groups attach great importance to whether they can successfully sell a product. But compared to sales, the excellent group put more emphasis on the number of returned customers, indicating that this group is more concerned about the long-term relationships with consumers. In addition, experience is also a focus for excellent sales person because they want to improve themselves.

### 2.2 Different Attitudes towards Failure

The study finds that there are significant differences in their attitudes towards success between the two groups.

**Table 4 Different Attitudes towards Failure in Excellent and Ordinary Groups**

No	Competence	Excellent Group (n=16)		Ordinary Group (n=32)		$\chi^2$	df	Sig
		f	proportion	F	proportion			
1	Fail to sell products	3	0.17	12	0.37	9.065*	4	0.058
2	Deal with awkward customers	3	0.17	6	0.19			
3	Lack of certain ability	5	0.33	2	0.05			
4	Faults in work	6	0.33	6	0.19			
5	Unsatisfactory work environment	1	0.01	8	0.25			

Note: \*  $p < 0.1$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$

As for attitudes towards failure, the excellent group focuses on their own problems, such as, faults in work or lack of certain ability, while the ordinary group attributes failures to some external factors, including failing to sell a product, unsatisfactory work environment or dealing with awkward customers.

### 2.3 Differences in Self-Perception

There are no significant differences in self-perception between the two groups.

**Table 5 Differences in Self-Perception between Excellent and Ordinary Group**

Number	Competence	Excellent Group (n=16)		Ordinary Group (n=32)		$\chi^2$	df	sig
		f	Proportion	F	proportion			
1	amiable	5	0.27	4	0.11	2.579	4	0.664
2	outgoing	4	0.23	10	0.32			
3	straightforward	4	0.27	6	0.20			
4	hardworking	4	0.23	3	0.09			
5	Honest	2	0.08	4	0.13			

Note: \*  $p < 0.1$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$

As it is known that being outgoing and hardworking is fundamental for a salesperson, and there is no obvious difference between two groups in the self-perception of these personalities. However, most participants in the ordinary group perceive themselves honest, while people in the other group believe they are hardworking.

### 2.4 What Kind of People They Like

There is also no significant difference in what kind of people they like between the two groups.

**Table 6 Differences in Pleasing Personalities for the Two Groups**

Number	Competence	Excellent Group (n=16)		Ordinary (n=32)		$\chi^2$	Df	sig
		f	Proportion	F	proportion			
1	Straightforward	6	0.33	9	0.27	1.259	4	0.868
2	Honest	3	0.17	6	0.17			
3	Share common topics	3	0.17	8	0.23			
4	Self-motivated	2	0.15	2	0.06			
5	Like-minded	3	0.17	3	0.10			

Note: \*  $p < 0.1$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$

In general, there aren't many differences concerning the topic of what kind of personality you like for the two groups. As a salesperson, they appreciate outgoing and straightforward people. It is in accordance with the similarity attraction theory in psychology that they like like-minded people. However, compared with the ordinary group, participants in excellent group are more likely to appreciate people with self-motivation.

## 2.5 What Kind of People They Dislike

There is also no significant difference in what kind of people they dislike between the two groups.

**Table 7 Differences in Pleasing Personalities They Dislike**

Number	Competence	Excellent Group (n=16)		Ordinary Group (n=32)		$\chi^2$	Df	sig
		F	proportion	F	proportion			
1	insincere	5	0.29	7	0.23	2.563	4	0.672
2	selfish	3	0.18	5	0.14			
3	Excessively mean	2	0.14	6	0.18			
4	Arrogant	5	0.29	8	0.23			
5	fickle	4	0.23	2	0.05			

Note: \* $p < 0.1$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$

There is no significant difference between the two groups in the personality of people do not like. As for people with some interpersonal skills to make direct contact with customers, they particularly dislike those personalities that are not conducive to social interaction. However, the excellent group expresses more antipathy to those who are not hardworking than the ordinary group.

## CONCLUSION

After a comparative study on the differences between the two groups on their key behaviors, there are three major findings. Firstly, no obvious differences exist in self-perception and perception of others; differences between the two groups mainly come from their attitudes towards success and failure. Secondly, when facing failure, excellent group tend to attribute it to their own problems, while the ordinary group is likely to find the external reasons. Thirdly, compared with the ordinary group, the excellent one gives more compliments to the personal qualities such as perseverance, amiability, self-motivation, and earnestness, among which perseverance and amiability are two competences for sales staff. Besides, the inward rectified and self-motivation are also the key factors to make a successful salesperson, so these two should also be included in the model.

Competence has long been a hot and difficult issue in the field of human resources at home and abroad [9]. The major innovations of this research lie in two aspects: the object and research method. Firstly, domestic and foreign scholars have already conducted researches on the competences of sales staff, with frontline sales staff in the furniture industry as the object. However, there is no such research on frontline sales person in general [10]. Secondly, on the basis of BEI, this study further explores the differences between excellent frontline sales staff and ordinary ones on the behavior of key events, serving as a supplement for the competence model.

These interviewees are 48 frontline sales staff coming from 7 mobile phone stores in Beijing. On the basis of BEI, this study explores the differences between excellent frontline sales staff and ordinary ones on their personalities and behaviors. A competence model of frontline sales staff is built after the interviews, including 9 features: perseverance, self-motivation, inward rectified, being helpful, self-expression, being organized, being expressive, amiability, modesty.

## DISCUSSION

Based on the process and conclusions of this research, the following three questions are discussed:

Firstly, what are the "winning points" of excellent frontline sales staff? In general, the psychological qualities of excellent salesperson are much better than ordinary ones. The most significant differences come from perseverance and self-motivation. Perseverance is shown in a persistent way of working, and self-motivation is the desire for success and achievement. As is put by a famous entrepreneur Zhang Ruimin, three kinds of qualities are necessary for a successful salesperson: a desire to succeed, self-confidence, and perseverance. This study proved the truth of Mr. Zhang's point of view.

Secondly, different styles and growing up. The study finds that excellent salespersons tend to attribute failure to their

own problems, while the ordinary ones find external reasons from the environment and others. This led to our thinking about the relationship between attribution style and personal growing up. Failures and setbacks are commonly seen in one's life. Attitudes determine whether one can learn lessons from failures, get rid of his/her shortcomings, solve problems, and improve himself. Excellent salespersons will find their own problems and adjust themselves, while those who find faults on others get nothing but comfort.

Thirdly, the impacts of attitude, ability and personality on sales perform. Among the 9 factors in the competence mode, perseverance, self-motivation, inward rectified belong to attitude, self-expression, being organized, being amiable belong to ability, being helpful, being expressive, modesty belong to personality. Obviously, all the three aspects are influencing the success of sales staff. For excellent staff, attitude is more important than ability and personality.

## 2. Suggestions on Application

This study proves that only those who have certain qualities are competent for frontline sales staff. What's more, the nine competences in the model can serve as guidance for recruitment and training of these sales staff. The above nine competences are divided into A and B groups, in the light of the differences between excellent and ordinary group, and the suggestions from HRM experts and HR managers. Group A consists of five competences: self-expression, organized, expressive, amiability and modesty, used as the basic qualities when recruiting new staff. Group B includes other 4: perseverance, self-motivated, inward rectified, and helpful. The Two groups should be applied as follows:

First and foremost, at least two targeted job interviews are necessary. The first one focus on qualities in group A, and the second one go to group B. In addition, the interviewers should better give priority to those who mention "diligent and self-motivated person" in their self-assessment, self-introduction or resume. Furthermore, applicants who put emphasis on "continuous learning" and "improving personal skills" should also be preferred.

In the second place, in terms of training frontline sales staff, Group B should be the focus in order to train them from four aspects. What's more, these four qualities should also be integrated into the group culture of sales teams, such as "being persistent, presenting you, helping others, sharing with team members".

## 3. Limitations and Future Research Direction

This study is based on BEI. Through a contrast between excellent frontline sales staff and ordinary salespersons, the authors build a competence model. There are two possible limitations: one is insufficient sample; the other is that the rationality and effectiveness of this competence model still needs to be tested more objective studies.

Future researches can further discuss in the following aspects: firstly, to increase the number of samples, to study the frontline sales staff in other fields, and to make some supplements to this study. Secondly, to test the model in this study, referring to suggestions given by managers in the company, or to conduct interviews on customers who buy the product. A more objective assessment of salesperson is helpful to test the rationality of the model. Thirdly, to conduct follow-up studies on the basis of this model; to build a system of frontline sales staff selection, assessment and evaluation; regular attention should be paid to test the rationality and effectiveness of this system.

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