

TOP SALES

# MAGAZINE



## The Dirty Secret About Women in Sales

An Article by Michelle Vazzana, CEO of Vantage Point Performance

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## The Dirty Secret About Women in Sales



When I first contemplated what to write for Top Sales World's women in sales edition, my mind immediately went to the unique attributes typically associated with the female gender. I began to consider our tendency to be good listeners, show empathy, and patiently guide our clients toward solutions.

However, this line of thinking was largely unsatisfying because it doesn't accurately reflect the very unique challenge we face as women in sales. The biggest and most poignant challenge we face is the very real problem of being treated in ways that are less than professional and personally demoralizing, not only by men in the companies in which we work, but also by men in the client organizations to whom we sell.

While I truly believe women in today's sales

forces have it better than I did, it is still a tale that needs to be told and a problem that needs attention. Yes, I'm talking about sexual harassment. Although I would need more than a mere blog to regale the unwanted attention I received, I'll share a few thorny examples of the challenges I faced as a woman in sales.

I remember entering the workforce eager, excited to be in sales, and completely unprepared for what I was about to encounter. I accepted my

first sales job as a sales representative for a telecommunications company selling telephone systems. I had a wonderful female sales manager who coached me and helped teach me the ins and outs of selling in the telecom world. I was excited, working hard, and soaking up as much as I could from this heroine of sales. I made my first few sales very quickly and was on my way to a successful year. Unfortunately, that year was cut short when the president of the company propositioned me, indicating that my future success could be strongly impacted by a personal relationship with him. I was stunned. This man was married and more than twice my age, but there it was. I had a situation to deal with and my path was clear: Have an affair or move on. I moved on. A bit worse for the wear, but still hopeful.

Next, at the tender age of 22 and still naive and hopeful, I had the good fortune to land a job as a marketing representative with a large technology company. This was the perfect venue in which to cut my teeth and learn to survive and thrive as a woman in sales. My first real surprise at occurred while I was on a sales call. I inherited a territory from a very successful female sales representative who had been promoted to a major account role. One of our primary sources of revenue was to upgrade equipment in our existing account base. It was from one of these “existing accounts” that the worst surprise was delivered. About 15 minutes into my sales call, I learned that two men I was meeting with were quite fond of the prior salesperson. When I inquired what she had done to earn their trust and admiration, they responded by telling me that she was quite adept at performing a particular sexual act. I was speechless. Once I got my bearings, I told them that I was going to pretend that this hadn’t happened, then I cut the call short and returned to the office. When I returned for my next sales call, I had my male sales manager in tow. Although one of the men pulled me aside and apologized, it was too late. The damage was done. My scars were adding up.

Another nasty surprise came when I was promoted to a sales training position at the same large technology company. My beloved sales manager revealed to me that he been waiting for the time I’d no longer report to him so that we could proceed with the affair he knew we both wanted. - When I expressed my surprise and dismay at his big reveal, he proceeded to chase me around a table. This marked a new low point in my career. I cared deeply for this man, whom I admired, looked up to, and thought the world of. I just didn’t care for him in the same way he professed to care for me. I was devastated. How could I handle this situation with grace, maintain my dignity, and not crush him? I decided honesty was the best policy and let him down gently. As you might imagine, our relationship was never the same. I felt I’d lost my mentor and one of my best friends. It was truly heartbreaking. Although none of my other harassment encounters were as devastating as the ones I’ve shared, they were frequent and unrelenting. And I know my experience is, sadly, far from unique. As women, we’ve had to navigate and endure situations that leave us vulnerable and belittled.

I believe one of the most positive changes I’ve seen in the business environment recently is a dedication to sexual harassment training. The old days when “anything goes” seem to be dwindling, and a new respect for boundaries is emerging. My hope for women entering the sales profession today is that they encounter a more dignified environment where they are valued more for their contributions than their measurements. I have seen a positive trend toward respectful sales environments and a lower tolerance for inappropriate behavior. I sincerely hope that this trend continues so that women can breathe a sigh of relief and get down to the business of selling. ■

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