

NAGGING PROBLEM OF THE PLATEAUED SALESPERSON: A META ANALYSIS

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Abstract

The study investigated the nagging problem of the plateaued Salesperson in selected manufacturing firms in Nigeria. The survey sought the causes of plateauing, symptoms, and possible solutions. Secondary and primary sources were employed to gather information for the study. SPSS for windows was used to analyse the data collected from the survey. The analysis of the study indicates that lack of upward mobility is the number one cause of plateauing. Salespeople faced with limited opportunities for promotion see their careers coming to a standstill. Other reasons are boredom, perceptions of unfair treatment, burnout, and satisfaction with income levels. The early signs of plateauing are shown when the salespeople seem to be sick or absent more often, and working fewer hours. They seem to lack energy, time, enthusiasm, creativity, and a sense of humour. The first step for a good solution is to recognize the symptoms early. Then the sales manager should discuss the situation with the salesperson. If need be, give the salesperson a new assignment. If the salesperson does not improve his performance, he should be transferred to a new territory, and under a new sales manager. Termination should be viewed as a last resort, because plateaued salespeople often have a past history of successful performance, and they are potentially too

valuable to simply dismiss without first trying to find creative ways to regenerate their energy and enthusiasm.

Research Problem

One of the most pervasive motivational challenges facing salesforce managers is the plateaued salesperson. Another motivational issue, somewhat related to that, is whether or not to segment the salesforce for the purpose of motivation, communication, and administration (Albers, 2002). A plateaued salesperson is one who has stopped improving and developing. Often these people (usually but not always in the 40 to 50 age bracket) have performed well in the past, but they reach a point where they seem to lose the drive or even the interest in striving for new goals.

A survey of sales managers reported that 18 percent of their salespeople are plateaued (Cross, Hartley and Rudelius, 2001). These plateaued people are not performing up to expectations, and it is very difficult to get them to do so. Yet managers are hesitant to terminate them. They often have developed very strong relationships with a few important customers, and they may still generate a large number of sales with these customers without trying very hard. Thus, the objective of this study was to discover the causes of plateauing, symptoms, and possible solutions.

Research Method

After considering the problem and objectives of the study, descriptive design was chosen, because it would provide answers to questions, such as who, what, where, when, why and how as they are related to the plateaued salesperson in selected manufacturing firms in Nigeria. Typically, answers to these questions are found in secondary or by conducting surveys. Therefore, two major sources were employed in the quest to gather

information for the study. They were both secondary and primary sources. Published and unpublished data were used. Published data were sourced from various publications of technical and trade journals; books, magazines and newspapers; reports and publications of various associations; reports prepared by research scholars and universities; public records and statistics, historical documents and other sources of published information. While unpublished data were found in diaries, letters, unpublished biographies and autobiographies, trade associations and labour bureaus.

Structured questionnaire was used to source the primary data. The researcher followed a sequence of logical steps to develop a good questionnaire that would accomplish the research objective. The population of the study was made up of the salesforce of Unilever Nigeria Plc, Lagos, Nigeria and PZ Industries Plc, Lagos, Nigeria. The salesforce disposition of these two giants in Lagos was three hundred and twenty. The sample size of the study was determined, using a mean. SPSS for windows was used to analyze the data collected from the survey.

Literature Search

According to Dwyer, Hill and Warren (2000), effective motivation of the plateaued in the salesforce is based on a deep understanding of the salespeople as individual, their personalities and value systems. In one sense, sales managers do not motivate the plateaued salespeople; they provide the enabling conditions in which the plateaued salespeople motivate themselves. Hence, motivation can be understood through the relationship between needs, drives and goals. Erffmeyer and Johnson (2001), stated that the basic process involves needs (deprivations) which set drives in motion (deprivation with direction) to accomplish goals (anything which alleviates a need and reduces a drive). For example, the

need for more money may result in a drive to work harder in order to receive increase pay.

Motivation has been the subject of much research over many years. Maslow, Herzberg, Vroom, and McGregor among others have produced theories which have implications for the motivation of plateaued salespeople (Herzberg, 1966; Maslow, 1954; Vroom, 1964; and McGregor, 1960). Some of their important findings are summarized here:

- (i) Once a need is satisfied, it no longer motivates;
- (ii) Different people have different needs and values;
- (iii) Increasing the level of responsibility/job enrichment, giving recognition for achievement, and providing monetary incentives work to increase motivation for some people;
- (iv) People tend to be motivated if they believe that effort will bring results, results will be rewarded, and the rewards are valued;
- (v) Elimination of disincentives (such as injustices or unfair treatment) raises motivational levels;
- (vi) There is a relationship between performance goals of sales managers and those of the salespeople they lead.

The implication of these findings is that the sales managers should:

- (a) get to know what each plateaued salesperson values and what each of them is striving for (unrealized needs);
- (b) be willing to increase the responsibility given to the plateaued salespeople in mundane jobs;
- (c) realize that training can improve motivation as well as capabilities of the plateaued salespeople by strengthening the link between their efforts and performances;

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- (d) provide targets that are believed to be attainable yet provide a challenge to the plateaued salespeople;
- (e) link the reward of the plateaued salespeople to the performance they want improved;
- (f) recognize that the rewards of the plateaued salespeople can be both financial and non-financial (e.g praise).

Churchill, Ford and Walker developed a salesforce motivation model that integrated the work of the motivational theorists, in particular Vroom and Herzberg (Churchill, Ford and Walker, 1985). This model (Fig. 2.1) suggests that there is a cycle of motivation for plateaued salesperson. The higher the plateaued salesperson's motivation, the greater the effort resulting in higher sales performance. Better sales performance leads to greater rewards and job satisfaction of the plateaued people. The cycle is completed through higher satisfaction causing still more motivation.

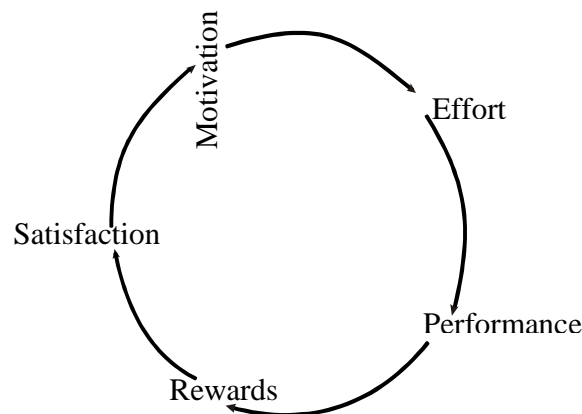


Fig. 2.1: *The Cycle of Motivation*

Source: Adapted from Churchill, Ford and Walker (1985).

The implications for sales managers are that they should:

- (i) Convince the plateaued salespeople that they will sell more by working harder or by being trained to work smarter (e.g more efficient call planning, developing selling skills).
- (ii) Convince the plateaued salespeople that the rewards for better performance are worth the extra effort. This implies that the sales manager should give rewards that are valued, and attempt to sell the worth of those rewards to the plateaued salespeople. For example, a sales manager might build up the worth of a holiday prize by stating what a good time he or she personally had when there.

Motivation of plateaued salespeople can be affected by the type of compensation plan used by a company. However, as revealed by the research of the motivational theorists, not all people are equally motivated by money. Darmon (1974) revealed that there are five types of salespeople, defined by their goal structure:

- (a) *Creatures of Habit*: these salespeople try to maintain the standard of living by earning a predetermined amount of money.
- (b) *Satisfied*: these salespeople perform at a level just sufficient to keep their jobs.
- (c) *Trade-offers*: These salespeople allocate their time based upon a personally determined ratio between work and leisure that is not influenced by the prospect of higher earnings.
- (d) *Goal-oriented*: These salespeople prefer recognition as achievers by their peers and superiors and tend to be sales-quota oriented with money mainly serving as recognition of achievement.

- (e) *Money-oriented*: These salespeople aim to maximize their earnings. Family relationships, leisure and even health may be sacrificed in the pursuit of money.

Consequently, sales managers must categorize their plateaued salespeople before deciding their motivational and compensation plan. For example, if a group of plateaued salespeople consists of creatures of habits, satisfiers and trade offers, increasing commission opportunities is unlikely to be successful. However, where most of the plateaued salespeople are goal oriented or money oriented, improving commission opportunities is likely to be effective in raising motivation and performance. Finally, compensation plans are not only determined by motivational considerations. The nature of the selling task which may determine if the payment of commission is feasible is another major factor. The three types of compensation are: fixed salary, commission only, and salary plus commission/bonus.

Results and Discussion

Plateauing, or early disengagement, is not an isolated phenomenon among sales people in manufacturing firms in Nigeria. The survey of 154 sales people in the two giant manufacturing firms in Nigeria suggests that an average of about 9 percent of a firm's salesforce can be expected to have reached a plateau, and in some companies the percentage can be higher. While this study suggests that most plateaued salespeople are in their 50s, some respondents reported that some salespeople reach a plateau while still in their 40s or even below.

The survey reported early signs of plateauing in manufacturing firms in Nigeria. The salespersons may not prospect hard enough or they may not follow through. They seem to be sick or absent more often and working fewer hours. They seem to lack energy, time, enthusiasm, and in creating a sense of humour. Their

paperwork may become sloppy, and the sales manager may get more complaints from their customers. Usually these salespersons are not keeping abreast of new products and technologies. They relish the past and resist changes.

Table 2.1: Causes of salesperson plateauing

S/N	Causes of Plateauing	Percentage of Salespeople who agree
1.	Limited opportunities for promotion	40%
2.	Perception of unfair treatment	25%
3.	Boredom	20%
4.	Burnout	10%
5.	Satisfaction with income levels	5%
	Total	100%

Source: Field Survey

Table 2.1: shows salespeople’s perceptions of the relative importance of various causes of plateauing among salespeople. The primary cause of early disengagement is the limited opportunities for the salesperson’s promotion. Among the top-ranked causes of plateauing are the perception of unfair treatment, boredom and frustration that arises when a relatively young person is kept in the same job too long and sees little likelihood of a promotion or other expansion in job responsibilities in the near future. However, the respondents did believe that simple burn out and satisfaction with the income levels may be additional causes of plateauing among salespeople in Nigeria.

Table 2.2: Possible Solutions for Plateauing

S/N	Possible solution to the problem of the plateaued salesperson	Percentage of salespeople who Agree
1.	Discuss the problem with the salesperson	35%
2.	Provide the salesperson with new responsibilities	25%
3.	Assign a new territory to the salesperson	20%
4.	Use salary and commission/Bonus plan	15%
5.	Use training/Development techniques	5%
	Total	100%

Source: Field Survey

Table 2.2 shows the possible solutions to the problem of the plateaued salesperson. The first step for a good solution is to recognize the symptoms early. Then, it is important for the sales manager to discuss the situation with the salesperson. The manager must identify the problem and set clear performance expectations.

If the salesperson does not improve his performance, then more creative solutions may be necessary. The survey suggests that one solution is to give the salesperson a new assignment, such as coaching new salespeople, gathering competitive intelligence, surveying customers for new product ideas, or developing a new territory. The new responsibilities may relieve the boredom and, or provide a challenge which would excite and motivate the salesperson. The survey suggests another alternative, to shift accounts, which forces the salesperson out of a comfortable territory that requires little to maintain into one where he or she must start over. It is the manager's responsibility to take action to get these people out of their ruts. Their experience and skills are too great to waste.

Additionally, the study suggests that other ways of reducing the plateauing problem and remotivating salespeople who have reached a plateau are to use salary and commission/Bonus plan combine; to use training/Development session; and to develop clearly defined career paths for salespeople who are good performers but are not promoted into management early in their careers. Such alternative career paths typically involve promotions to positions within the salesforce that involve additional responsibility and more demanding challenges.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The lack of upward mobility is the number one cause of plateauing. Salespeople faced with limited opportunities for promotion see their careers coming to a standstill. Other reasons

are boredom, perceptions of unfair treatment, burnout, and satisfaction with income levels.

It is recommended that the first step for a good solution is to recognize the symptoms early. Then the sales manager should discuss the problem with the salesperson. The manager must identify the problem and set clear performance expectations.

But if the salesperson does not improve his performance, then more creative solutions may be necessary. These include:

- Provide new responsibilities;
- Assign him or her to a new territory;
- Assign to a different sales manager;
- Use new compensation plan;
- Use training session; and
- Use ongoing goal assessment programme.

While these solutions vary a great deal, termination should be viewed as a last resort. Plateaued salespeople often have a past history of successful performance, and they are potentially too valuable to simply dismiss without first trying to find creative ways to regenerate their energy and enthusiasm.

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