
The Use of Job Titles for Automotive Salespeople: A Content Analysis and Survey of Consumer Impressions

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Research has shown that job titles can influence attitudes and opinions. Similar to brand names, job titles that project an undesirable image become candidates for change. In this regard, surveys have shown that the public has a generally low opinion of automotive salespeople. Assuming that automobile dealers are rational, one course of action would be to use job titles that project a more positive impression. To determine the extent that this has been done, an audit was conducted at 109 dealerships throughout the state of Utah. Approximately 45 percent of the dealerships report using the term consultant as part of the job title. Results of a perception survey showed that the term consultant did not significantly influence perceptions. Managerial implications for the automotive industry as well as directions for future research are discussed.

Key Words: Job title, Impressions, Selling, Automotive, Sales consultant

Introduction

Research has shown that job titles can influence the impressions and opinions that individuals have of a particular job (Bem and Bem 1973; Lau, Sears, and Centers, 1979; Adkins and Swan 1980; Lipton et al. 1991; St. Pierre and Herenden 1994; McConnell and Fazio 1996; Wright, Wood and Lee, 1996; Liben, Bigler and Krogh 2002). Barnard (1974), for example, maintains that “titles of status have the effect of credentials. They create a presumption with respect to the character, ability, and specific skills or functions of individuals.” (p. 3, as quoted in Adkins and Swan 1980) Similarly, Meister (2005) notes that “job titles demonstrate a wealth of information about what organizations value, how they structure themselves for success and what their current business strategies are” (p. 62). Business scholars and marketing professionals have long believed that when job titles project an undesirable image, they become candidates for change (Adkins and Swan 1980; Beck and Jones, 1988; St. Pierre and Herenden, 1994; Carlson 2005).

One such candidate is the *automotive salesperson*, given that the title has evoked a negative impression among the consuming public. For example, a recent

Gallup poll asked respondents to judge the honesty and ethics of 21 vocations. Automotive salespeople ranked 20th (as reported in Bernstein 2003a). Similarly, a J.D. Power and Associates survey found that “more than 25 percent of respondents had walked out of a dealership without buying because of perceived lousy treatment by salespeople” with about half of those prospects abandoning the brand entirely (p. 12, as reported in *Automotive News* 2003a). Given these perceptions, it would appear that the use of the title “salesperson” (or some close derivative) would elicit negative impressions on the part of the consuming public.

The question that this study addresses is whether the automotive industry has adopted terminology that suggests a more positive impression of salespeople and if so, does the title influence public perceptions? Although Adkins and Swan (1980) advocated a new title for salespeople due to the negative connotation, no study has examined titles that are actually being used and the extent they elicit positive impressions. If the market is rational, one would expect that at least some market participants would use titles that describe automotive salespeople in a more positive

manner. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to examine the use of job titles for automotive salespeople and to test the influence they have on consumer perceptions.

This paper begins with a review of the literature related to job titles in the general field of personal selling jobs. This provides the foundation for proposing terminology that might be used in the field of automotive selling. From here, a survey of job titles used by automotive salespeople is conducted. A public perception survey then tests the hypothesis that more prestigious titles influence public perceptions. The paper concludes with managerial implications and directions for future research in this area.

Literature Review

To develop a better understanding of job titles used to identify salespeople, the *Dictionary of Occupational Titles* (DOT) was consulted. Four titles relevant to automotive salespeople are: sales agent, sales associate, salesperson, and sales representative. These are fairly common titles and as such, would be placed in the category of *traditional* titles. A further review of the auto industry literature provided little indication that job titles in automotive selling positions are varied or even what types of job titles are used. Instead, salespeople were referred to as just that; salespeople.

More than two decades ago, Adkins and Swan (1980) made an argument for changing the job title for salespeople by replacing it with the word *marketing*. In a survey of 600 adults, they found that the substitution resulted in a significant increase in perceptions of prestige. Other scholars have similarly proposed alternative titles although none have conducted empirical investigations on their influence. Webster and Wind (1972), for example, referred to the industrial salesperson as an *account executive*. A review of the trade literature indicates that *account executive* has been used to describe salespeople in such diverse areas as engineering (McKew 1998), computers (Whitford, 1998), advertising (Jones, 1993), and financial services (Marshall and Hollenbeck, 1981). The appeal of the title of *account executive* would appear to stem primarily from the use of the term *executive*, which connotes prestige. Additionally, the absence of the term *sales*

may serve to evoke a more positive impression. In a similar sense, Pruden (1969) recommended that salespeople be given titles that reflect greater prestige as a way of improving sales performance. His recommendations included *senior field representative* and *assistant sales manager*.

Two additional terms might also project a more positive impression of salespeople. First, the job title of *sales specialist* has been used for commercial truck sales in Great Britain (Banner, 2005), the rug industry (Wyman, 2003), the furniture industry (Edmonds, 2002), real estate (O'Toole, 2002), the heating and cooling industry (Johnson, 2000), and the energy industry (Woods 1998). Second, the term *consultant*, when used in conjunction with selling (i.e., consultative selling), "involves proactive communication by salespeople with their customers to facilitate the identification and solution of customer problems (Graham 1996; Tyler 1990; Chevalier 1993; Dunn, Thomas, and Lubawski 1981)" (p. 147, Liu and Leach 2001). In this sense, a sales *consultant* is intended to serve more as a valued advisor than someone merely trying to promote a product (Liu and Leach 2001).

This review suggests that a variety of job titles have been proposed as alternatives to traditional titles. Although the literature currently presents no compelling argument for the use of one alternative title over another, the fact that the alternatives have been strongly promoted suggests that some level of adoption can be expected. The purpose of the following survey, therefore, is to examine the extent to which alternative titles have been adopted.

SURVEY OF JOB TITLES IN AUTOMOTIVE SELLING

Method

To facilitate data collection, the investigation was limited to the state of Utah. Since the data needed for the analysis consisted only of the job title, a phone survey was used in conjunction with personal visits to dealerships (in order to obtain actual business cards). A list of new-vehicle dealerships was obtained from an Internet reference source, Car Dealers USA (www.cardealersusa.com/uta1.htm). Dealers from this list were surveyed by phone or in person and asked to provide the titles used on their

business cards. The results from the phone and in-person interviews were comparatively evaluated in order to determine consistency across the two data collection methods.

Results

Job titles were obtained from 109 dealerships. Although the directory of dealerships provided by the Internet source was helpful, some of the listed dealerships had either gone out of business, had changed ownership, or were identified as used car dealerships, wholesalers, or some other entity that did not denote new-car retail selling. As such, they were not included in the sample frame. The *National Automobile Dealers Association* (NADA) estimates that 150 new car dealers operate in Utah (www.autoexecmag.com 2005). Hence, the sample of 109 represents about 73 percent of new car dealers.

Of the 109, 65 were contacted by phone and 44 were contacted directly. A summary of the results is present in Table 1. As the Table reveals, 12 different titles (including the use of no title), were identified through the phone survey. In the business card sample, 14 different titles (including the use of no title), were identified. A comparative examination between the two groups revealed a few differences. In particular, the number of responses for *sales consultant* totaled 44.6 percent for the phone sample and 18.2 percent for the business card sample. The only other difference of note is that the telephone sample included an incident where salespeople were referred to by a title that was not gender neutral; in essence, *salesman*. Because the two sets of data were not demonstrably different, they were combined into one set.

Table 1
Distribution of Job Titles Used at New Car Dealerships

Job Title	Phone Survey		Business Cards		Total	
	Number	Percent*	Number	*Percent	Number	Percent*
Sales Consultant	29	44.6%	8	18.2%	37	33.9%
Sales and Leasing	13	20.0	10	22.7	23	21.1
Sales and Leasing Consultant	6	9.2	5	11.4	11	10.1
Sales	3	4.6	5	11.4	8	7.3
Sales Representative	5	7.7	3	6.8	8	7.3
No title	3	4.6	4	9.1	7	6.4
Sales Associate	1	1.5	2	4.5	3	2.8
Sales Professional	1	1.5	1	2.3	2	1.8
Sales and Leasing Representative	1	1.5	1	2.3	2	1.8
Sales and Leasing Specialist	0	0.0	1	2.3	1	0.9
Certified Sales Consultant	0	0.0	1	2.3	1	0.9
Salesman	1	1.5	0	0.0	1	0.9
Sales Department	0	0.0	1	2.3	1	0.9
Salesperson	1	1.5	0	0.0	1	0.9
Sales Advisor	1	1.5	0	0.0	1	0.9
Client Advisor	0	0.0	1	2.3	1	0.9
Buyers Guide	0	0.0	1	2.3	1	0.9
Totals	N=65	99.7%	N=44	100.2%	N=109	99.7%

*The percentages do not total 100 percent due to rounding errors

The terms *consultant* and departmental designations (i.e., *sales* or *sales and leasing*) were the most common. The term *consultant* was used in 44.9 percent of titles (including *sales consultant*, *sales and leasing consultant*, and *certified sales consultant*). The departmental designation was second with 28.4 percent of the total. The remaining titles account for 26.7 percent of the total with the titles of *sales representative*, *sales associate*, and no title at all, accounting for approximately 62 percent of this figure (i.e., $16.5/26.7 = 61.8$ percent). No other individual title accounted for more than 1.8 percent of the total.

Results indicate that the term *consultant* has become the single most common designation used in the state of Utah for job titles at new car dealerships. Now, the question is whether this term evokes a positive response among the public when compared to a more traditional-sounding title; namely *salesperson*.

PUBLIC PERCEPTION SURVEY

Method

To measure the influence of job titles, a survey design was used and the titles used in the questionnaire items were manipulated. All questions contained identical wording except for a change in title. This ensured that any differences found in the study could be attributed to the title and not extraneous wording differences. In one set of questions, the questionnaire items used the title *salespeople*. The alternative questionnaire used the title *sales consultants*. Both versions of the questionnaire were administered to a convenience sample of 236 upper-level business students at a University located in the inter-mountain west. The questionnaire was administered in class and the versions were alternated so that every other student received a different version. Students were provided with nominal extra credit points for their participation in the survey.

Sample Characteristics

Although student samples have been criticized as not representative of the population of consumers, they remain a convenient group for market research. The sample included respondents who had a reasonable involvement with automobiles and were relatively mature with respect to the overall population of students in terms age, marital status, and class level (see Table 2).

Table 2
Characteristic Profile of Respondents

Have a car that you drive regularly?	
Yes = 96%	No = 4.0%
Shopped for a car in the last 6 months?	
Yes = 76.7%	No = 23.3%
Have gone to a dealership to look at cars during the past 6 months?	
Yes = 58.1%	No = 31.9%
Plan to buy a car in the next 12 months?	
Yes = 73.6%	No = 26.4%
Age	Percent
<20	3.0%
20	10.6
21	15.4
22	14.1
23	14.1
24	18.9
>24	23.9
Gender	
Male	60%
Female	40
Marital Status	
Single	62.5%
Married	36.6
Other	0.9
Class Level	
Sophomore	2.6%
Junior	39.7
Senior	57.3
Graduate	0.4

Regarding involvement with automobiles, 96 percent of the sample reported that they had a car and drove regularly. Nine respondents did not have a car that they drove regularly and were omitted from the sample, leaving an effective sample size of 227. Of the 227, 76 percent reported having shopped for a car in the last six months and nearly 60 percent said they had visited a dealership to look at cars during that time. Approximately 74 percent reported that they were planning to buy a car within the next 12 months.

The average age of the sample is 23.5 and approximately 37 percent of the sample report being married. All students in the sample were sophomores or above with approximately 97 percent of the respondents at the junior level or higher. Sixty percent of the sample was male and 40 percent female. This ratio reflects the population of the business school from which the sample was obtained.

Question Development

The questions were developed using scale items adapted from Saxe and Weitz (1982). The scale was originally developed to measure the *self-assessed* customer orientation of individuals employed in selling occupations. In particular, it measured the degree to which salespeople perceive that they “practice the marketing concept by trying to help their customers make purchase decisions that will satisfy customer needs” (468, Bearden and Netermeyer 1999). Since the scale appears to reflect the essence of what a good salesperson should be, the wording of the original items was adjusted to represent an *other* assessment (i.e., the public’s assessment of salespeople) rather than a *self* assessment (i.e., how salespeople assess themselves).

The scale items are presented in Table 3. A review of the item content suggests three components: (1) honesty, (2) concern for the customer, and (3) the use of pressure tactics. Each item was measured on a 7-point scale, with response categories ranging from 1=strongly disagree to 7=strongly agree.

Table 3
Scale Items*

Component 1: Concern for Customer¹

1. I think that most automotive sales consultants try to understand customers’ needs
2. I think that most automotive sales consultants generally have the customer’s best interest in mind
3. I believe that most automotive sales consultants try to help customers
4. I think that most automotive sales consultants genuinely try to meet a customer’s needs

Component 2: Honesty¹

1. I believe that most automotive sales consultants are honest
2. I believe that most automotive sales consultants can be counted on to be honest
3. I believe most automotive sales consultants genuinely try to give accurate information about the cars they are selling

Component 3: Pressure Tactics¹

1. I feel that many automotive sales consultants use pressure tactics on customers
2. I think that automotive sales consultants often try to pressure people into making quick decisions
3. I think that automotive sales consultants often use pressure tactics to sell cars

*Questions are adapted from Saxe and Weitz (1982).

¹The titles were alternated in the two versions of the questionnaire. In the alternate version of the questionnaire, the title “sale people” was used in place of “sales consultant”.

Analysis

Although Saxe and Weitz (1982) originally designed the scale to be unidimensional, it was believed that the scale would more likely be multidimensional given the item content. To explore this proposition, a common factor analysis with maximum likelihood estimation and a Varimax rotation was conducted for each sample group (see Tables 4 and 5). The results suggest a 2-factor solution for each group with variance explained at 100 percent. Although a 3-factor solution was originally expected, the items for honesty and concern share sufficient common variance to accept a 2-factor solution. The first factor was labeled “honesty/concern” and the second factor “pressure tactics”.

Table 4
Factor Analysis for Sales Consultant Title
N=114

Scale Item	Factor 1	Factor 2
1. I think that most automotive sales consultants try to understand customers’ needs.	0.60	-0.20
2. I believe that most automotive sales consultants are honest.	0.84	-0.20
3. I think that most automotive sales consultants generally have the customer’s best interest in mind	0.63	-0.31
4. I believe that most automotive sales consultants try to help customers	0.61	-0.17
5. I believe that most automotive sales consultants can be counted on to be honest	0.79	-0.35
6. I think that most automotive sales consultants genuinely try to meet a customer’s needs	0.65	-0.04
7. I believe most automotive sales consultants genuinely try to give accurate information about the cars they are selling	0.52	-0.24
8. I feel that many automotive sales consultants use pressure tactics on customers	-0.16	0.97
9. I think that automotive sales consultants often try to pressure people into making quick decisions	-0.31	0.72
10. I think that automotive sales consultants often use pressure tactics to sell cars	-0.25	0.87
Eigenvalues =	10.8	3.8
Variance explained =	85%	15%
Alpha reliability =	.86	.92

X² test that more factors are needed = 73.7 with 26 degrees of freedom (p<.01)

Tucker and Lewis’s Reliability Coefficient = 0.87

Table 5
Factor Analysis for Salespeople Title
N=113

Scale Item	Factor 1	Factor 2
1. I think that most automotive sales consultants try to understand customers' needs.	0.68	0.03
2. I believe that most automotive sales consultants are honest.	0.66	-0.24
3. I think that most automotive sales consultants generally have the customer's best interest in mind	0.57	-0.18
4. I believe that most automotive sales consultants try to help customers	0.76	-0.01
5. I believe that most automotive sales consultants can be counted on to be honest	0.62	-0.18
6. I think that most automotive sales consultants genuinely try to meet a customer's needs	0.83	-0.09
7. I believe most automotive sales consultants genuinely try to give accurate information about the cars they are selling	0.75	-0.13
8. I feel that many automotive sales consultants use pressure tactics on customers	-0.05	0.87
9. I think that automotive sales consultants often try to pressure people into making quick decisions	-0.10	0.71
10. I think that automotive sales consultants often use pressure tactics to sell cars	-0.21	0.93
Eigenvalues =	15.5	6.7
Variance explained =	70%	30%
Alpha reliability =	.86	.88

X² test that more factors are needed = 74.5 with 26 degrees of freedom (p<.01)

Tucker and Lewis's Reliability Coefficient = 0.85

A review of the fit diagnostics reveals that the factor structure is well-defined. All eigenvalues are above the 1.0 cut-off, providing further support for the factor structure. A chi-square test to determine if more factors are needed was rejected for both groups (i.e., p<.01) indicating that the 2-factor solution was sufficient. The internal consistency of the scales, as measured by Alpha, is above the recommended cut-off of .70 for each construct (Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994). Although the Tucker and Lewis reliability coefficients are slightly below the .90 cut-off, the factors appear acceptable given the totality of the analysis.

The results of the t-tests are presented in Table 6. They show that the mean levels do not differ regarding either perceptions of care/concern or pressure tactics; in essence, the use of the job title of

sales consultant does not contribute to more favorable impressions. In order to determine if other potentially relevant variables might affect the perceptions, we conducted a supplemental analysis controlling for marital status, gender, and involvement (as measured by having reported shopping for a vehicle in the past six months). The results of the analysis of variance indicate no significant results with an F-value of 0.58, a p-value of .63, and an r-square of .01.

Table 6
Test for Mean Differences in Perceived Honesty and Concern

Questionnaire Version:	Mean	Standard Error	T-Value
Sales Consultant	3.81	0.09	.38(p=.70)
Salespeople	3.75	0.09	

Test for Mean Differences in Perceived use of Pressure Tactics

Questionnaire Version:	Mean	Standard Error	T-Value
Sales Consultant	5.50	0.10	-.21(p=.83)
Salespeople	5.53	0.10	

Discussion

This study sought to provide insights into the use of job titles for automotive salespeople and the influence that such titles have on impressions of automotive salespeople. Regarding the use of job titles, the results suggest that there is considerable variance although the term *consultant* is the most common for respondents in this study. We attribute this to the growing popularity and acceptance of the consultative selling approach; in principle, if not in practice. The distinction between principle and practice is important because this study examined only the use of job titles and not the underlying premise; namely, that titles reflect a salesperson's philosophy. Future research should explore if the title of *consultant* actually reflects a consultative selling approach.

The study also found that the use of different titles did not influence people's impressions of salespeople. Hence, there is some evidence to suggest that using the term *consultant* to influence the way salespeople are perceived by consumers might not be effective. It is possible, however, that a more robust test would provide different results. In this sense, at least three issues should be addressed in future research. First, since the sample used in this study

was comprised of university students, future research should use a cross-sectional sample of consumers. While the use of a student sample is not a disqualifying factor in terms of overall validity, a more diverse sample of consumers based on demographic and geographical characteristics would provide greater external validity. Second, since the measurement instrument included the use of the terms *automotive* and *sales*, it is possible that the affective responses were triggered more on the basis of these terms (which were common to both versions of the questionnaire) than by the use of the treatment term, *consultant*. In order to provide a more robust test, future research will want to examine perceptions in the absence of terms that could potentially overwhelm the treatment effect by introducing confounding vocabulary. Third, it may be that the term *consultant* has become so over-used that consumers do not attach any meaningful or distinguishing significance to it. To better address this proposition, future research should examine the prevalence of its use in job titles, particularly with regard to selling positions.

Finally, while this study focused on the evolution of a title resulting from a negative connotation of perceived behaviors, job titles undoubtedly change for a variety of other reasons as well. With regard to the current study, it might be that the use of the term *consultant* results from an internal preference of the dealership or its salespeople rather than an attempt to persuade consumers to think more positively about the salesperson. Anecdotal examples from other business domains provide some support for this proposition. Specifically, Disney refers to its employees as *cast members* and Walmart uses the term *associate*. Future research should examine if there is an internal preference for such titles as opposed to an external preference to influence consumer perceptions.

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