



7. Diversity in distribution and sales teams

Does your sales team reflect the diversity of your customer base? Does a possible lack of gender diversity among your sales force limit how effectively your organization reaches to broader set of market segments? Could your lack of sales force diversity limit its productivity, ability to exchange and learn from various approaches and experiences, and overall creativity in identifying new roads to market? Are you struggling with diversifying your sales team?



What do we mean by diversity in distribution and sales teams?

Diversity in the distribution and sales force refers to the deliberate and conscious effort made by organizations to build teams with members from various backgrounds, including different genders, as well as varied ethnicities, ages, and cultural backgrounds. It involves recognizing the value of having a diverse range of perspectives and approaches that can enhance how sales representatives can relate and connect with a broad client base, improving communication and understanding of/ with customers, but also trigger more learning and diversity internally in finding effective approaches to market.

Why do non-gender-diverse distribution and sales teams happen?

The sales function is often perceived as a high-pressure, cutthroat, if not transactional environment. This perception reinforces the belief that success in sales requires traits traditionally associated with masculinity, such as assertiveness, dominance, and a focus on targets and money. It is also associated in some cultures with the image of physical mobility and independence, as women cannot always easily leave and move around to conduct professional activities. On the other hand, women dominate sales in some sectors where the focus is on selling to women and mothers (e.g. child nutrition, homecare). These stereotypes contribute to very strong biases regarding what gender can succeed in sales. This bias can be further reinforced by the use of masculine language in job descriptions and the prioritization of candidates with more competitive profiles. Additionally, assumptions about women's marital status and availability to travel further limit their opportunities. Women also receive less support in career development, with fewer training opportunities and less visibility at industry conferences, which stunts their professional growth. As a result, women are underrepresented in the sales workforce, comprising only 39%, with just 21% holding senior positions [1]. As such, a gender-balanced composition of one's sales force aims to prevent these traditional or unconscious notions of certain roles being more suitable for one gender over others. It involves conscious efforts to challenge these stereotypes and eliminate unconscious biases throughout the hiring and promotion processes in order to attain a balanced distribution of talent in the sales function.

Why is diversity in distribution and sales teams important?

Diversity in sales teams is essential for several reasons, starting with its positive impact on team's morale, productivity, as well as sales performance. Having gender-balanced sales teams helps better reflect the diversity of the customer base, enabling a more empathetic and tailored approach to client interactions. In men-dominated industries, women often excel in building trust, nurturing relationships, and listening to customer needs, often essential to sell larger or more complex ticket items; in contrast, in women-dominated industries, men sales representatives can more easily connect with men and fathers, who may have been left out of the targeting of your organization, while still having a strong say in how the household's money is being spent. Practically, sales organizations that prioritize diversity and inclusion see significant gains, including 28% higher conversion rates, 12% higher sales attainment, and 6% improved customer satisfaction [2].

How does one foster diversity in distribution and sales teams?

One of the easiest ways to rebalance one's sales team composition is to apply gender-inclusive hiring. Fortunately, there are many easy steps that one can apply to adopt more inclusive and

[1] <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesbusinessdevelopmentcouncil/2018/01/17/why-we-need-more-women-in-sales/>

[2] <https://learning.linkedin.com/content/dam/me/business/en-us/amp/sales-solutions/pdf/forrester-diversity-report-2021.pdf>

unbiased recruitment policies and promotion practices for sales representatives. These include:

1. **Address stereotypes and language in sales job descriptions:** Start by reviewing and revising job descriptions to remove masculine-coded language like "hunter," "aggressive," and "driven," which can discourage women from applying. Instead, emphasize qualities that align with modern sales success, such as relationship-building, collaboration, and empathy, which are skills that women are often stereotyped as excelling in, but which are essential in today's customer-centric sales environment. The opposite is true if your organization recruits women more easily for sales roles. To learn more, see our [resource #1 - Gender-balanced hiring](#).
2. **Avoid segmenting your customers based on gender:** Encourage your sales team to break free from traditional gender-based customer segmenting. Instead of targeting specific genders for products commonly associated with them (e.g., cars/tools for men or jewellery for women), adopt a broader, more inclusive approach. Sales teams should explore new opportunities by marketing products to all customer segments, regardless of gender, and challenge assumptions about who buys certain products. Similarly, sales force should try different sales strategies to sell to same gender or different gender customers. For instance, a man sales person can sell convincingly to a woman using arguments that confer him more trustworthiness (e.g. knowledge of the product), while that same sales person can also sell convincingly to a man, possibly using other arguments (more emotional or more personal ones). In the process, the sales force acquires a much larger pallet of arguments and sales methods, for a wider range of customers' profiles.
3. **Offer flexible and inclusive work environments:** Offer more flexible working arrangements that allow employees to manage their personal lives while excelling in their sales roles, which are often rather taxing on one's personal life. This could include flexible hours and minimizing the emphasis on travel as a critical part of the job, as, in many cultures, travel can be challenging for women, due to family responsibilities, societal expectations, or safety concerns. Offering alternatives such as virtual meetings, local assignments, or assistance with secure transport options can help make sales roles more accessible and inclusive. To learn more, see our [resource #3 - Gender-sensitive HR policies and practices](#).
4. **Track and analyse performance metrics by gender:** Regularly review key performance indicators, such as quota attainment, conversion rates, and client satisfaction, and break these down by gender and other demographic factors to identify any disparities and ensure that you support and evaluate your sales representatives in a granular, focused and personal fashion.
5. **Expose your sales team to diversity:** Encourage cross-learning within your sales team by fostering collaboration across genders and backgrounds. Sales approaches can vary significantly between individuals, with each team member bringing unique strengths. Promote knowledge-sharing through mentorship programs and peer learning sessions, emphasizing how diverse perspectives can enhance relationship-building, innovation, and problem-solving in sales.
6. **Ensure equal growth opportunities:** To ensure equal opportunities, create a structured career progression plan and systematic evaluation process. To learn more, see our [resource # 2 - Gender-balanced promotion and retention](#).

How to measure progress and success?

Through our own, LeFil's [research](#), we identified a number of metrics that can be improved through gender-focused initiatives, and which are meaningful to track as you progress with the implementation of your efforts. For some of these metrics, we provide a benchmark value, which is the average that close to 100 ventures like yours recorded after having worked on this topic. These metrics are:

Metric	Benchmark
Annual percentage increase in number of customers/ users/ end beneficiaries	81% [3]
Proportion of men/ women among customers/ users/ end beneficiaries	40% women
Proportion of women customers/ users/ end beneficiaries who feel empowered by your product/ service	62%
Annual growth rate in earned revenue	N/A
Proportion of men/ women among staff	42% women
Staff satisfaction	82%
Staff productivity	N/A
Customer/ user/ end beneficiary acquisition costs	N/A
Proportion of staff trained in gender mainstreaming	59%

[3] With outlier. without outlier 154%

Increasing sales from women producers by ConSuma Conciencia

ConSuma Conciencia adapted the support it gives to its women producers so as to help them address the specific hurdles they were facing when trying to increase sales. It provided trainings on marketing and sales and offered follow-on advisory support that led to an increase in sales of 11% for women producers within only 1 year.

ConSuma Conciencia is social venture based in Mexico offering a digital marketplace for healthy, organic, artisanal and fair-trade products sourced from local producers. It works closely with its suppliers, offering them support and (digital) tools to help them access new online marketing and sales channels, and hence sell more of their production. As a result, ConSuma Conciencia both facilitates responsible consumption alternatives for end buyers, and helps increase the income of the producers on its platform.

ConSuma Conciencia's team took part in our Gender Mainstreaming Workshop and realized that while 55% of the supplying companies they worked with were led by women, 67% of the sales came from companies headed by men. Looking closer, it also became apparent that women-led companies were usually smaller, and their potential was possibly dwarfed by their dual responsibilities at home and at the workplace. The team decided to address this gap by first understanding the specific hurdles that women producers were facing, and then adapting its support to better help them overcome these hurdles and increase sales. To do so, ConSuma Conciencia:

- ran a survey and conducted desk research to understand the gender-specific challenges faced by women producers on marketing and sales. ConSuma Conciencia found out that lack of knowledge and resources were the main barriers faced by women suppliers. For instance, only 24% of them had received some kind of training in marketing (vs. 43% among men suppliers); only 24% had received external funding (vs. 52%). Women also suffered from lack of time. For instance, ConSuma Conciencia learned about a producer who was about to drop her venture due to time constraints, but after the team proposed to shoulder her more closely, she decided to keep it going
- re-designed its internal planning and support processes for women producers, including increasing their visibility through social media, placing promotions on their products, inviting them to promote their products in person, helping them rework their promotional material, etc. It also created simple best practice guides on logistics, customer service, sales, etc., which it made available as online resources to its suppliers
- developed a pilot program to offer further tailored support to women producers to overcome the barriers identified. The pilot was delivered to 10 women, who received 1-on-1 training on client analysis and segmentation, competitive analysis, and optimization of communication strategy and sales approach.

As a result, the share of sales generated by women-led suppliers increased by 11% (from 33% to 44%) in just 1 year. The 10 women producers who participated in the pilot increased their own sales by 120% on average. The pilot also fostered connections between the participants, which helped them collectively identify and pursue ideas about how to address their challenges, such as for instance sharing space and equipment. ConSuma Conciencia plans to keep increasing the visibility of women producers on social media, and scale up the pilot to 20 additional suppliers, who will receive 1-to-1 support on the design and implementation of a sales strategy, including development of new B2B markets, improvement of B2B client relationships, and a manual of good practices for the B2C sales channel.



Empowering women vision entrepreneurs by Vision RB

Vision RB managed to increase the success rate among women participants of its entrepreneurship training program by redesigning the recruitment process and course content.

Vision RB facilitates access to visual health for underserved populations in Yucatan, Mexico, by providing free diagnostics and affordable eyeglasses. Besides running its own shop and delivering visual health services in companies and communities, Vision RB also operates through a network of entrepreneurs, called Visual Ambassadors, training them in visual health and sales skills and equipping them to open their own shop under the Vision RB brand.

Vision RB's team took part in our [Gender Mainstreaming Workshop](#), and realized that there was a gender imbalance in the success rate of its Visual Ambassador training program. Only 40% of women participants were completing the course, and only 29% of them actually started a business, whereas all men participants completed the course and opened a shop. The venture identified 3 main reasons for this: women's lack of time due to household duties, their lack of confidence on technical and sales aspects, and their hesitance toward the income uncertainty of running their own business (versus receiving a stable salary). To address this imbalance, Vision RB decided to improve the recruitment process and structure of its Visual Ambassador program, with the goal to increase the share of women participants who become successful entrepreneurs. To do so, Vision RB:

- redesigned its selection criteria for Visual Ambassadors with the help of a gender consultant, to better identify women with a strong desire and potential for entrepreneurship (e.g. by assessing their current responsibilities, financial independence, and willingness to invest time and effort into the training)
- redesigned training contents, increasing the focus on managerial and financial skills, while also providing a simple methodology to conduct vision assessments through home visits
- hired 5 optometrists to support the entrepreneurs on more technical aspects of eyecare.

After these changes, the women's dropout rate decreased from 60% to 48%, while the entrepreneurship rate among women who completed the course increased from 29% to 83%.

All women entrepreneurs also reported feeling empowered by being able to generate their own income while serving their communities. A more gender-balanced and motivated team of entrepreneurs led to more sales, contributing to a 25% increase in Vision RB's revenue. The venture was also able to establish new partnerships with local municipalities and businesses, further boosting the reach and impact of the entrepreneurs. Furthermore, the success of the initiative prompted the venture to expand its gender inclusion efforts to other areas of its operations; for example, it partnered with a local university to recruit women optometrists from its graduates.