



RETAIL SALES WORKERS

NATURE OF THE WORK

Consumers spend billions of dollars daily on merchandise and often rely on a store's sales force for help. Whether selling shoes, computers, or autos, retail salespersons assist customers in finding what they are looking for and try to interest them in buying the merchandise. Most are able to describe a product's features, demonstrate its use, or show various models and colors.

In addition to selling, most retail salespersons—especially those who work in department and apparel stores—make out sales checks; receive cash, checks, debit, and charge payments; bag or package purchases; and give change and receipts. Depending on the hours they work, retail salespersons may have to open or close cash registers. This work may include counting the money in the register; separating charge slips, coupons, and exchange vouchers; and making deposits at the cash office. Salespersons often are held responsible for the contents of their registers, and repeated shortages are cause for dismissal in many organizations.

Retailers stress the value of providing courteous and efficient service to remain competitive. For example, when a customer wants an item that is not on the sales floor, the salesperson may check the stockroom, place a special order, or call another store to locate the item.

For some sales jobs, particularly those involving expensive and complex items, retail salespersons need special knowledge or skills. For example, salespersons who sell automobiles must be able to explain the features of various models, the manufacturers' specifications, the types of options and financing available, and the warranty.

Salespersons also may handle returns and exchanges of merchandise, wrap gifts, and keep their work areas neat. In addition, they may help stock shelves or racks, arrange for mailing or delivery of purchases, mark price tags, take inventory, and prepare displays.

Frequently, salespersons must be aware of special sales and promotions. They also must recognize security risks and thefts and know how to handle or prevent such situations.

WORKING CONDITIONS

Most sales workers work in clean, comfortable, well-lighted stores. However, they often stand for long periods and may need supervisory approval to leave the sales floor. The Monday-through-Friday, 9-to-5 workweek is the exception rather than the rule in retail trade. Most sales personnel work evenings and weekends, particularly during sales and other peak retail periods. Because the holiday season is the busiest time for most retailers, many employers restrict the use of vacation time from Thanksgiving through the beginning of January.

This job can be rewarding for those who enjoy working with people. Patience and courtesy are required, especially when the work is repetitious and the customers are demanding.

EMPLOYMENT

Retail salespersons hold nearly 5 million jobs. They work in stores ranging from small specialty shops with few workers to giant department stores with hundreds of salespersons. In addition, some are self-employed representatives of direct-sales firms and mail-order houses. The largest employers of salespersons are department stores, clothing and clothing accessories stores, building material and garden equipment and supplies dealers, other general merchandise stores, and motor vehicle and parts dealers. Because retail stores are found in every city and town, employment is distributed geographically in much the same way as the population.

TRAINING, OTHER QUALIFICATIONS, AND ADVANCEMENT

There usually are no formal education requirements for salespeople, though at least a high school diploma is preferred. Employers look for those who enjoy working with people and have the tact and patience to deal with difficult customers. Among other desirable traits are an interest in sales work, a neat appearance, and the ability to communicate clearly and effectively. Before hiring, some firms do a background check, especially for jobs selling high-priced items.

In most small stores, an experienced employee or the proprietor instructs the newly hired sales personnel in making out sales checks and operating the cash register. In larger stores, training programs are more formal and usually are conducted over several days. Topics usually discussed are customer service, security, the store's policies and procedures, and how to work the cash register. Depending on the type of product they are selling, they may be given added specialized training by manufacturers' representatives. Those working in cosmetics receive instruction on the types of products available and for whom they would be most beneficial.

Likewise, sales workers employed by auto dealers may be required to participate in training programs designed to provide information on the technical details of standard and optional equipment available on new models. Because providing the best service to customers is often a high priority, employees may be given periodic training to update and refine their skills.

As salespeople gain experience, they often move to positions of more responsibility and are given their choice of departments. This may mean moving to areas with potentially higher earnings and commissions. The highest earnings potential is usually in selling big-ticket items. This requires the most knowledge of the product and the greatest talent for persuasion.

Traditionally, capable sales workers without a college degree could advance to management positions, but today, large retail businesses generally prefer college graduates as management trainees, making a college education increasingly important. Despite this trend, capable employees without a college degree are still able to advance to supervisory work in large stores. Retail selling experience may be an asset when applying for sales positions with larger retailers or in other industries, such as financial services, wholesale trade, or manufacturing.

JOB OUTLOOK

Employment is expected to grow by 7 percent from 2014 to 2024. In fact, due to the size of this occupation, retail salespersons will have one of the largest numbers of new jobs arise This growth reflects rising retail sales. Many retail establishments will continue to expand in size and number, leading to new retail sales positions.

Since retail salespeople often must be available to assist customers in person, this is not an occupation that will suffer negative effects from advancements in technology. To the contrary, software that integrates purchase transactions, inventory management, and purchasing has greatly changed retailing, but retail salespersons continue to be essential in dealing with customers. There will also be an increased demand for retail salespersons in warehouse clubs and supercenters, which sell a wide assortment of goods at low prices, since they continue to grow as many consumers prefer these stores.

Despite the growing popularity of electronic commerce, the impact of electronic commerce on employment of retail salespersons is expected to be minimal. Internet sales have not decreased the need for retail salespersons. Retail stores commonly use an online presence to complement their in-store sales; there are a limited number of Internet-only apparel and specialty stores. Retail salespersons will remain important in assuring customers, providing specialized service, and increasing customer satisfaction. Most shoppers continue to prefer to make their purchases in stores, and growth of retail sales will continue to generate employment growth in various retail establishments.

As in the past, employment opportunities for retail salespersons are expected to be good because of the need to replace the large number of workers who transfer to other occupations or leave the labor force each year. Warehouse clubs and super centers are expected to have excellent job prospects as they continue to grow in popularity with consumers. In addition, many new jobs will be created for retail salespersons as businesses seek to expand operations and enhance customer service.

Opportunities for part-time work should be abundant, and demand will be strong for temporary workers during peak selling periods, such as the end-of-year holiday season. The availability of part-time and temporary work attracts many people seeking to supplement their income.

During economic downturns, sales volumes and the resulting demand for sales workers usually decline. Purchases of costly items, such as cars, appliances, and furniture, tend to be postponed during difficult economic times. In areas of high unemployment, sales of many types of goods decline. However, because many retail salespersons constantly transfer to other occupations in search of better pay or career opportunities, employers often can adjust employment levels simply by not replacing all those who leave.