



Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing

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Article information:

To cite this document:

Ramendra Singh Gopal Das, (2013), "The impact of job satisfaction, adaptive selling behaviors and customer orientation on salesperson's performance: exploring the moderating role of selling experience", Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing, Vol. 28 Iss 7 pp. 554 - 564

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/JBIM-04-2011-0121>

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The impact of job satisfaction, adaptive selling behaviors and customer orientation on salesperson's performance: exploring the moderating role of selling experience

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to investigate the moderating effects of selling experience on the relationship between job satisfaction and sales performance, customer orientation and sales performance, and adaptive selling behaviors and sales performance, taking the context of B2B insurance selling.

Design/methodology/approach – Using a sample of 380 business-to-business insurance salespersons from an emerging market (India) to validate their model, the authors tested several hypotheses using structural equation modeling (SEM).

Findings – The results suggest that experience works with customer-oriented selling in making the more experienced salespersons better performers. It was also found that for less experienced salespersons, the impact of job satisfaction on performance is weaker than for more experienced salespersons. In addition, it was found that more experienced salespersons' performance is better explained using job satisfaction and customer-oriented selling rather than their adaptive selling behaviors.

Research limitations/implications – The study contributes by explaining the mechanism for the above relationships. The study also contributes to knowledge by showing that more experience may not be always good for sales performance. Since the sample comes from an emerging market, the paper extends the knowledge from developed markets, and by testing in emerging markets.

Practical implications – The managerial implications of this study lie in explaining those situations where experience can make salespersons more productive. The current sales literature on B2B selling contexts falls short of explaining this mechanism in salesperson performance.

Originality/value – This study contributes to knowledge uniquely by extending the body of empirical evidence that suggests that for experience, more is not always better. The study also shows that a more experienced salesperson does not improve his/her performance by adopting adaptive selling strategies. Such adaptive selling strategies are probably more suitable for younger salespersons, given different expectations from them by customers. For experienced salespersons, job satisfaction and customer-oriented selling are more important than adaptive selling. This study explains the mechanism for the above relationships.

Keywords Sales force, Customer orientation, Emerging markets, Experience, Job satisfaction, Selling, Sales performance, India

Paper type Research paper

An executive summary for managers and executive readers can be found at the end of this article.

Introduction

Explaining sales performance has always intrigued researchers. There have been several studies that have looked at important antecedents of sales performance, especially, customer-oriented (CO) selling, job satisfaction (JS), and adaptive selling behaviors (ASB) (e.g. Bateman and Organ, 1983; Hoffman and Ingram, 1991; O'Hara *et al.*,

1991; Dadzie *et al.*, 1999; Boles *et al.*, 2001). However, the number of studies looking at the impact of selling experience been very few in comparison (e.g. Scheibelhut and Albaum, 1973; O'Hara *et al.*, 1991; Siguaw and Honeycutt, 1995). However, a recent meta-analysis by Franke and Park (2006) based on 155 samples of more than 31,000 salespeople was largely inconclusive on the nature of ASB-CO relationship, and CO-sales performance (SP) relationship. The meta-analysis also shows that selling experience increases sales performance; however, it is silent on the moderating impact of selling experience on each of these relationships.

The purpose of this study is to fill this void in literature on sales performance by investigating the moderating effects of selling experience on the relationship between, job satisfaction

The current issue and full text archive of this journal is available at www.emeraldinsight.com/0885-8624.htm



Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing
28/7 (2013) 554–564
© Emerald Group Publishing Limited [ISSN 0885-8624]
[DOI 10.1108/JBIM-04-2011-0121]

Received 24 April 2011
Revised 7 December 2011
25 May 2012
Accepted 7 August 2012.

and sales performance; customer orientation and sales performance; and adaptive selling behaviors and sales performance (JS-SP; CO-SP; and ASB-SP respectively henceforth). By studying the impact of experience on the crucial relationships, we can obtain some clues about the sales performance relationships with its key antecedents, which may have useful implications for managing and enhancing sales performance of salespersons. Thus, examining this mechanism of enhancing the performance of salespeople would contribute to sales performance research.

India forms an interesting context to study, as it is not only a growing emerging market, but also being a collectivist culture, presents a unique contrast to individualist western culture. Moreover, selling in such context makes salespersons more risk averse (Lewicki and Bunker, 1996), specially given the social stigma associated with the profession of selling, which also affects the motivation of a salesperson in India. Also, in most emerging markets, the sales force is not well trained, particularly insurance (Singh and Koshy, 2011).

The rest of the paper is structured as following. We first provide a theoretical background for the study, followed by development of theoretical model and hypotheses. We then describe the methodology used for testing the proposed structural model, discuss results, suggest managerial, and research implications of the study, and conclude the paper with its limitations, and directions for future research.

Theoretical background

Adaptive selling

Adaptive selling as a distinctly defined selling approach (Weitz, 1981) has been well documented in selling literature. Developed at the conceptual level by Weitz and his colleagues, it has been related to other behaviors and positive sales outcomes (e.g. Withey and Panitz, 1995; Park and Holloway, 2003). Adaptive selling has been defined as, “the altering of sales behaviors during a customer interaction or across customer interactions based on perceived information about the nature of the selling situation” (Weitz *et al.*, 1986, p. 175). This selling strategy enables salespeople to tailor messages to fit individual customers' needs and preferences.

Customer-oriented selling

Along with adaptive selling behaviors and almost at the same time, another stream of selling strategy namely, the customer-oriented selling strategy was developed again by Weitz and colleagues, and defined as, “the practice of the marketing concept at the level of the individual salesperson and customer” (Saxe and Weitz, 1982, p. 343). For next many decades, Saxe and Weitz's (1982) propose a mechanism for measuring the salespersons' customer orientation through the selling vs customer orientation (SOCO), which has been widely researched in the personal selling literature (Brown *et al.*, 1991; Brady and Cronin, 2001; Kennedy *et al.*, 2002; Brown *et al.*, 2002; Singh and Koshy, 2011).

Job satisfaction

Job satisfaction is a widely studied construct in sales force research (Brown and Peterson, 1993). Churchill *et al.* (1974) define it as, “all characteristics of the job itself and the work environment which the salesman find rewarding, fulfilling and satisfying or frustrating and unsatisfying”. Following this study, there have been several studies (e.g. Bagozzi, 1980;

Behrman *et al.*, 1981; Behrman and Perreault, 1984) which have looked at job satisfaction as antecedents to salesperson's performance.

Sales performance

Walker *et al.* (1979), define sales performance as “behavior that has been evaluated in terms of its contribution to the goals of the organization” (pp. 33, 35). According to them, sales performance results from “carrying out a number of discrete and specific activities which may vary greatly across different types of selling jobs, and situations” (p. 22). Salesperson's sales performance measures have been for quite some time now been based on achievement of sales quotas, and comparative performance of a salesperson within his/her sales unit (e.g. Cravens *et al.*, 1993; Babakus *et al.*, 1996;).

Hypotheses and model development

We now develop our hypotheses and proposed a structural model to test the hypotheses. The proposed model is shown in Figure 1.

Main effects

Since adaptive selling involves tailoring one's own behaviors to adapt to the selling context, it entails focusing on customers' individual needs and preferences, which may lead to a customer centered, problem-solving orientation. For example, showing empathy with customers to develop a relationship and to better understand his/her needs may lead to high customer orientation of the salesperson. As Siguaw (1991) suggests, an empathetic relationship between the salesperson and the customer may also result from adaptive selling behaviors. Therefore, we suggest the following:

H1. Adaptive selling behaviors increase customer-oriented selling.

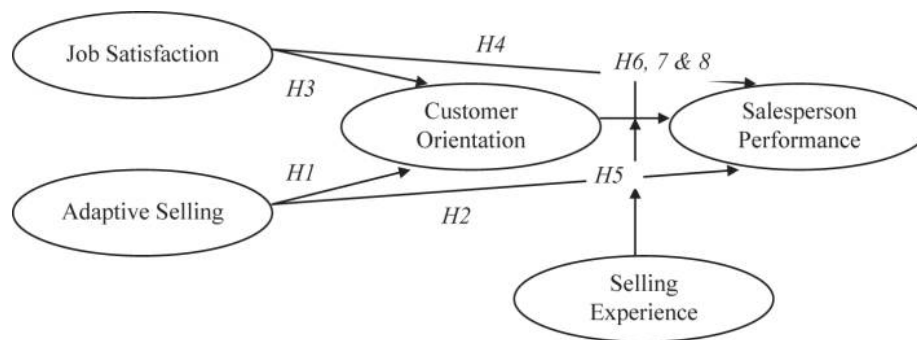
A large body of research also supports the positive relationship between adaptive selling behaviors, ASB and salesperson performance across different selling contexts (e.g. Weitz *et al.*, 1986; Spiro and Weitz, 1990; Boorum *et al.*, 1998). The underlying logic is that adaptive selling behaviors help the salespersons to adopt a selling strategy that tailors their messages to bring a greater fit with the customers' needs and preferences. Therefore, we propose the following:

H2. Adaptive selling behaviors increase salesperson performance.

Few studies already suggest the positive correlation between customer orientation and job satisfaction of salespeople (e.g. Brown *et al.*, 2002). It is also argued that the satisfied salespersons are those have better understanding about their expected service role and experience reduced role conflict and ambiguity (e.g. Saxe and Weitz, 1982). Reduced job stress, lower role ambiguity, and higher satisfaction makes the salespersons to enjoy their work, as well as interaction with customers, which is likely to make them exhibit customer-oriented selling behaviors. Therefore, we propose the following:

H3. Job satisfaction of salespersons increases customer-oriented selling.

It is also very well documented that sales performance leads to desired outcomes, such as salary, recognition, and promotion, which in turn lead to satisfaction (Yilmaz, 2002). It is argued that for an effective salesperson, his/her job performance

Figure 1 Structural model with proposed hypotheses

should be intrinsically satisfying, and it should also be extrinsically rewarding (Franke and Park, 2006). The contrary view is that job satisfaction affects job-related attitudes and emotions, which in turn influence performance (Franke and Park, 2006). Although the direction of the relationship between job satisfaction and performance is controversial, and despite the majority view being that performance leads to satisfaction (Yilmaz, 2002), the recent meta-analytic results from Franke and Park (2006) suggests that in fact job satisfaction leads to sales performance, than the reverse. Therefore, we propose the following:

H4. Job satisfaction increases salesperson performance.

Although recent studies, including few meta-analytic studies (e.g. Joshi and Randall, 2001; Holmes and Srivastava, 2002; Franke and Park, 2006; Jaramillo *et al.*, 2007) suggest that self-rated measures of sales performance have weak or no association with salesperson's customer orientation, there is some empirical evidence to the contrary. For example, few scholars argue for a positive effect of CO on salesperson performance (e.g. Keillor *et al.*, 2000). Schwepker (2003) also concludes from review of the literature that this relationship holds in different selling contexts. Therefore, we propose the following:

H5. Customer-oriented selling increases salesperson performance.

Moderating effects

It is well-documented in sales literature that with selling experience, salespeople get to face many different sales encounters, different customers, and selling situations, which develops their skills, and a broad repertoire of selling strategies, which they apply appropriately in the given selling situation. For insurance salespeople, Hofmann *et al.* (1993) found that selling experience in the company significantly increased sales performance growth rates. In a different context too, Deadrick *et al.* (1997) also found that experience was related to the rate of performance improvement over time. Therefore, we propose the following:

H6. Adaptive selling behaviors-salesperson performance (ASB-SP) relationship is moderated by selling experience, such that for more (less) experienced salespersons, the ASB-SP relationship is stronger (weaker).

For reasons similar to adaptive selling, for customer-oriented selling too, with increase in selling experience, the salespersons adapt behaviors to tailor to the needs and preferences of the customers become more customer-oriented. Therefore, we propose the following:

H7. Customer-oriented selling-salesperson performance (CO-SP) relationship is moderated by selling experience, such that for more(less) experienced salespersons, the CO-SP relationship is stronger (weaker).

Franke and Park (2006) found a non-significant association between selling experience and job satisfaction. The study speculated that the more dissatisfied salespeople become less satisfied over time, with promotional opportunities or financial recognition (Churchill *et al.*, 1974), and may eventually leave the sales profession, leaving the remaining salespersons to have higher levels of satisfaction. However, we argue that with increased experience, some salespersons may also become satisfied from dissatisfied, and therefore more experienced salespersons are likely to show stronger relationship between job satisfaction and sales performance. It is also likely that since the motivational factors for less experienced salespersons are different from more experienced one, the less experienced salespersons may always be in search for better opportunities, and therefore even satisfied salespersons may be inclined to leave (Purani and Sahadev, 2008). Although success breeds satisfaction, yet we model that a job-satisfied salesperson is more likely to perform better. Therefore, we propose the following:

H8. Job satisfaction-salesperson performance (JS-SP) relationship is moderated by selling experience, such that for more(less) experienced salespersons, the JS-SP relationship is stronger (weaker).

Method

Insurance sector was chosen as the context of our study since insurance products are widely purchased by customers in India. Most Indian households buy different insurance products such as life insurance, investment-linked products, and health insurance. However, insurance as a product is difficult for customers to evaluate, even after purchase and use (Zeithaml, 1981).

India's cultural values, in contrast to most developed western societies, are known to affect the interests, priorities,

and strategies used in business negotiations (Brett, 2000), that eventually impacts an individual's approach towards selling relationships (Shi, 2001). India is known to be a society characterized by a collectivist, high-context, strong uncertainty-avoidance, and large power-distance culture (Hofstede, 1981). The Indian insurance industry is highly competitive, given the presence of more than 20 insurance companies, and therefore, customer-oriented selling becomes important in such an environment. The insurance industry is also characterized by cross-selling different services to the existing customers (Chen and Mau, 2009; Huang, 2008; Verhoef, 2003; Verhoef *et al.*, 2001), by a single agent or salesperson (Jeng, 2008).

The data for this study were collected using a questionnaire survey from business-to-business insurance salespersons in India. The sampling was done based on a list of insurance salespersons made available to us by a market research agency. Respondents were randomly called by us on telephone, and the interested respondents were then administered the questionnaire in person, using paper and pencil. The questionnaires were administered in English to 525 salespersons, but only 380 (72.3 percent) responses were found usable for data analysis. Data were collected between September and November 2009. The mean age of the respondents was 28.2 years. Average selling experience of the respondents was found to be 5.2 years (median = 5 years). The sample consisted of respondents from 17 private sector companies, and two public sector insurance companies: 91.3 percent respondents were male; 17.5 percent respondents were in the age group 20–24 years; 35.2 percent in the age group 25–30 years; 26.2 percent between 31–35 years; 9.2 percent between 36–40 years; and the remaining 11.7 percent were more than 40 years old. All respondents have completed graduate degrees.

Measures

We used all established measures in the study, adapted these measures in the context of the study, i.e. insurance salespersons. All measures were then pretested before collecting the final data. We used a small randomly selected sample of 28 salespersons for the pre-test. The profile of the pre-test sample was similar to that of the final sample. The objective of the pre-test was to refine the measure items iteratively using qualitative feedback in each round of pre-test, to finally arrive at the set of items for each measure that was not only fully adapted for the context of our study, but is also meaningful for the respondents. A five-point Likert scale with anchors ranging from (1) strongly disagree, to (5) strongly agree, was used for all measures, except for the sales performance measure, which had anchors ranging from (1) to least extent, to (5) to greatest extent. The details of all measures used in the study are available in the Appendix (Table AI).

The measures of all hypothesized study variables were first subjected to an exploratory factor analysis (Principal components) with varimax rotation to purify the measures. The analysis yielded a four-factor solution based on based on the Eigenvalue greater than 1 and Scree plot criteria. These factors collectively explained 75 percent of total variance. We then purified measures to get unidimensional measures for each constructs, by dropping items in each construct measure that did not load substantively to its intended factor, and

chose only items with factor loading greater than 0.5 according to Hair *et al.* (1998).

Testing for common method variance

In general all self-report scales face some threat from self-report biases including that from common method variance (in case of single respondent). We take sufficient steps to ensure that social desirability effects do not threaten the reliability and validity of the new scale. Our measures of reliability using Cronbach's alpha and construct reliability, and those for validity show robust results to validate this point. Assessment of the common methods variance (CMV) using Harman's one-factor test shows that the first factor accounted for only 23.5% of the overall variance (75.2%) in the unrotated factor solution, which indicates that common method bias may not be a problem (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). We also took sufficient care while designing the questionnaire, to remove CMV bias by randomizing the sequence of the independent, moderating, and dependent measures.

The Cronbach's alpha values for all measures were in the range 0.77–0.89, therefore indicating high reliability. Table I shows the correlations, means, standard deviations, and Cronbach reliabilities for all measures.

Analysis and results

Multivariate normality was assessed using Mardia's coefficient (Mardia, 1970), as a rule of thumb, should be within the range of even ± 2.0 (Schumacker and Lomax, 1996). However, Mardia's coefficient suggested moderate multivariate non-normality (Mardia's coefficient = 42.26; critical ratio = 25.337). Presence of outliers also leads to deviation from normality in the data, however, removal of outliers did not significantly affect the normality of the data. For non-normal data, bootstrapping is a preferred method as it uses empirical resampling with replacement of the data to generate information on the variability of parameter estimates or of fit indexes. Given the non-normal distribution of the data in the sample used for CFA, we used Bollen-Stine bootstrapping method for parameter estimation with maximum likelihood estimation method. To test for the model identification in SEM (Hair *et al.*, 1998) we observed the degrees of freedom, which were found to be positive, suggesting that it is an over-identified model.

Power analysis is also an important consideration in SEM analysis since power can influence values of the test statistics, and modification indices (e.g. Browne and Cudeck, 1993; MacCallum *et al.*, 1996). However, calculation of power is complicated as it varies with several factors such as reliability of variables, magnitude of error variances, number of manifest indicators per construct, magnitude of the covariances among

Table I Inter-correlations, means and standard deviations of all measures

Constructs	Mean	Std				
		deviation	AS	SP	CO	JS
AS	13.28	1.72	<i>0.80</i>			
SP	7.86	1.69	0.267*	<i>0.77</i>		
CO	17.62	2.17	0.625*	0.326*	<i>0.83</i>	
JS	12.06	2.39	0.437*	0.437*	0.520*	<i>0.89</i>

Notes: *Significant at 0.01 level (2-tailed); Cronbach alpha values are shown italicised

variables, and the estimation method used (e.g. Browne *et al.*, 2002; MacCallum *et al.*, 1996). As simple rule of thumb, Barrett (2007) therefore suggests that a sample size of 150-200 gives adequate power in the sample. Therefore, power in our sample was deemed to be adequate for the analysis. Finally, multicollinearity was also ruled out using an OLS regression, as VIF was within the acceptable limit of 8.

Measurement model results

We used AMOS 18 to test the measurement model as well as the structural model. According to Hair *et al.* (1998), item reliability, construct (composite) reliability (CR), and AVE, should support the convergent validity of the measurement model's result.

In order to check the measurement model, we take three pairs of constructs at a time. The overall fit of the structural model of the study is checked initially by examining the Chi-square statistics. Although we got a non-significant chi-square value ($p = 0.065$), yet rejection of a model on the basis of Chi-square evidence is not enough as the statistic is sensitive to sample size and the model complexity. Therefore, we looked at other measures of fit compensating for sample size and complexity of model. Hair *et al.* (1998) recommended acceptance of good fit to a model requires that the obtained TLI, NFI, CFI values should be greater than or equal to 0.90 and the RMSEA should be in the range from 0.05 to 0.08. For all runs of measurement sub-models, we got values of fit indices above these threshold values (values between 0.90-0.95, and RMSEA between 0.051-0.072). According to Fornell and Larcker (1981), since AVE is greater than 0.5 for all variables, convergent validity was established. Using the shared variance test for testing discriminant validity (AVE should be greater than shared variance between two variables), discriminant validity was established. Therefore, discriminant validity was also established. The measurement model is thus validated. Table II provides the results in detail.

Structural model fit results

The proposed structural model in our study is tested by using four constructs (except sales experience, which is the moderating variable). Results indicate (Chi-square = 139.78 at $p = 0.0$; $df = 48$, RMSEA = 0.071, TLI = 0.965, NFI = 0.962, CFI = 0.974) a very good fit for the structural model.

Test for mediation effect

In our proposed model, customer orientation is working as a mediator variable. In order to test this mediating relationship, we first run the model without the CO-SP link (no mediation between CO and SP). The model fit indices indicates (Chi-square = 142.4 at $p = 0.0$; $df = 49$, RMSEA = 0.082, TLI = 0.83, NFI = 0.89, CFI = 0.92.) a reasonable fit but worse than a mediated model. Thus, we establish that there is a partial mediation between JS and SP, as well as AS and SP, where CO (customer orientation) is the mediating variable.

Tests for alternate structural models

We test three alternate models to check for the robustness of our proposed structural model. In order to check these models, we run three different models with different linkages between constructs. Model 1, consists of linkages between JS → CO, AS → CO, and CO → SP. Model 2 consists of linkages between JS → CO, AS → SP, and CO → SP and model 3 consists of JS → CO, JS → SP, and CO → SP. The overall fit of the structural model of the study is checked initially by examining the Chi-square statistics. We also look at the other measures of fit compensating for sample size and complexity of model. The fit indices results of each model show that all the three alternate models have poor fit compared to the proposed structural model. These models were tested to look for alternate ways of explaining the relationships between these variables. All fit indices in all alternate models were valid (fit indices more than 0.9), however, the fit indices of each alternate models were less than the proposed model in our study.

Hypotheses testing results

All our main effects hypotheses, i.e. H1-H5 were supported, as shown in Table III.

Our results indicate the relative strength and significance of the direct and indirect relationships between customer orientation and salesperson performance, as well as job satisfaction and salesperson performance. Our results from the test of partial mediation suggests that indirect relationship between adaptive selling and sales performance (via customer-oriented selling) is stronger than the direct relationship between the two constructs (0.786 compared to 0.063). In addition, the indirect relationship between job satisfaction and sales performance is stronger than the direct relationship

Table II Construct reliability average variance extracted, standardized loadings the proposed structural model

	Items	Standard loadings	Average variance extracted (AVE)	Construct reliability (CR)	t-values *
AS	AS1	0.71	0.65	0.85	122.71
	AS2	0.76			166.57
	AS3	0.83			146.68
JS	JS1	0.65	0.70	0.78	87.02
	JS2	0.72			83.38
	JS3	0.73			75.95
CO	CO1	0.77	0.65	0.80	130.95
	CO2	0.78			117.68
	CO3	0.71			129.96
	CO4	0.73			141.77
SP	SP1	0.99	0.53	0.67	91.31
	SP2	1.01			89.57

Note: * $p < 0.01$

Table III Hypotheses testing results

Relationship tested	Hypotheses	Std path coefficients	t-value	Test results
AS ⇒ CO	H1	0.598	−30.48*	Accepted
AS ⇒ SP	H2	0.063	43.74*	Accepted
JS ⇒ CO	H3	0.320	27.97*	Accepted
JS ⇒ SP	H4	0.181	−27.97*	Accepted
CO ⇒ SP	H5	0.188	−69.10*	Accepted

Note: **p*-value < 0.01

between the two constructs (0.508 compared to 0.181). These results indicate that job satisfaction and adaptive selling impacts salesperson performance strongly through the mediation impact of customer orientation, than directly, although both indirect as well as direct effects are significant.

Moderating role of selling experience (SE)

In order to test the moderating effects, we split the sample based on the median value of selling experience. We run the structural model on both sub-samples (group 1 – below median sample, and group 2 – above median sample) separately, and results for model fit indices as shown in Table IV, indicates that the proposed model fits well in both sub-samples.

We then compare the beta coefficients of the proposed paths in either sample, and results as shown in Table V indicate that the beta values of both the models are significant. But the beta values are different for both the models which show that the selling experience is acting as a moderating variable, and thus the hypotheses *H6*, *H7* and *H8* are also supported. In the AS → SP relationship, there is a shift in the sign of the beta coefficient (changes from +ve to −ve) from below-median to above-median sample (relationship weakens as selling experience increases). In the CO → SP relationship, the relationship strengthens as selling experience increase. The same is observed in the JS → SP relationship.

Discussion

All proposed hypotheses were supported in the study. Therefore, the results present interesting insights about salespersons' adaptive selling behaviors, and job satisfaction as predictors of sales performance via the mediation of their

customer orientated selling. However, the highlight of the paper is on the moderating impact of selling experience on CO-SP, JS-SP, and AS-SP relationships. The construct of selling experience is not widely studied in sales literature, more so as a moderating variable. Although in a selling context, declarative knowledge, and procedural knowledge increase with selling experience, partly explaining the increase in sales performance (Weitz *et al.*, 1986), yet few studies (e.g. Matsuo and Kusumi, 2002; McDaniel *et al.*, 1988) have suggested that experience may play an ambivalent role in explaining sales performance. However, evidence from our study clearly shows that selling experience enhances each of the three relationships. In other words, the three key antecedents of sales performance-job satisfaction, adaptive selling, and customer-oriented selling boosts salesperson's performance, and for a more experienced salesperson, each of these three antecedents impact more strongly, as compared to a less experienced salesperson.

Our study's results also suggest new interesting insights. First, the results show that adaptive selling behavior is a stronger predictor of customer orientation, than job satisfaction. In other words, for a salesperson, adaptive his/her behaviors to suit customer needs and preferences in selling situations is more important for performance, than being satisfied with what is doing on the job. The test of partial mediation between adaptive selling and sales performance (via customer-oriented selling) also suggest that partially-mediated relationship between adaptive selling and sales performance is stronger than the direct relationship between the two constructs (0.786 compared to 0.063). Similarly, the partially-mediated relationship between job satisfaction and sales performance is stronger than the direct relationship between the two constructs (0.508 compared to 0.181).

Table IV Results of moderating impact of selling (model fit indices)

Group	Chi-square value	RMSEA	TLI	NFI	CFI
Group 1 (below median sub-sample)	73.4, df = 48, <i>p</i> = 0.0	0.069	0.962	0.925	0.972
Group 2 (above median sub-sample)	123.1, df = 48, <i>p</i> = 0.0	0.076	0.962	0.956	0.973

Notes: RMSEA: Root mean square error of approximation; TLI: Tucker-Lewis Index; NFI: Normed Fit Index; CFI: Comparative Fit Index

Table V Path coefficients of proposed structural model in below-median and above median sub-samples (group 1 and group 2 respectively)

Proposed hypothesis	Beta value (Group 1)	t-value	<i>p</i> -value	Beta value (Group 2)	t-value	<i>p</i> -value
AS ⇒ SP	0.30	−22.26	0.00	−0.09	−37.74	0.00
CO ⇒ SP	0.09	37.51	0.00	0.26	58.09	0.00
JS ⇒ SP	0.14	14.82	0.00	0.20	27.75	0.00

For the moderation results, we found a reversal of the valence of relationship between adaptive selling and sales performance. The results indicate that for more experienced salespersons, the AS-SP relationship weakens, and is rather, negatively related. In other words, more experienced salespersons showing adaptive selling behaviors need not necessarily perform well. This can be explained intuitively too, since experienced salespersons have longer relationships with their customers, there is a tacit understanding that makes their adaptiveness less important than customer oriented selling or other behaviors important in the relationship. It can also be conjectured that more experienced salespersons enjoy a more privileged status from their customers, by virtue of their age, and duration of their relationship, and may almost take each other for granted. However, for customer-oriented selling as well as for job satisfaction, more experience is better than less experience in enhancing sales performance. We also note that in the overall model, the AS-SP direct relationship is weak (path coefficient of 0.063), but in the less experienced sample this association is higher (0.30). These results suggest that adaptive selling in itself is not a very productive selling strategy, unless it leads to customer-oriented selling which improves sales performance. For more experienced salespersons, adaptive selling has almost no relationship with sales performance, and the AS-SP relationship is almost fully mediated through customer-oriented selling.

Theoretical contributions

Our study contributes to knowledge by extending the body of empirical evidence that suggests that for experience, more is not always merrier (Matsuo and Kusumi, 2002; McDaniel *et al.*, 1988). Our study shows that a more experienced salesperson does not improve his/her performance by adopting adaptive selling strategies. Such adaptive selling strategies are probably more suitable for younger salespersons, given different expectations from them by customers. For experienced salespersons, job satisfaction and customer-oriented selling are more important, than adaptive selling. Our study contributes by explaining the mechanism for the above relationships, and probably also suggest that adaptive selling may not lead to improvement of customer-oriented selling in more experienced salespersons.

Our study also contributes by suggesting that younger salespersons (with less experience) despite being satisfied lack role clarity as their experienced counterparts, and their performance reduces due to such role ambiguity and role conflict. Alternately, it is also possible that a more experienced salesperson is satisfied with different aspects of the job compared to his/her less experienced counterpart and therefore the results are ambiguous. Our results therefore find support from Purani and Sahadev (2008), which mentions that a sales person with higher levels of experience will be more refined in his reaction to various attributes of job satisfaction.

Extending the results from Weitz *et al.* (1986), our study also suggests that although with experience knowledge increases which should lead to higher performance, but the mechanism of increased sales performance taking job satisfaction, customer-oriented selling and adaptive selling as predictors tells a different story. Experience tempers the adaptive selling behaviors, and boosts up customer-oriented selling behaviors.

Managerial implications

This study has several meaningful managerial implications. Our study shows that selling experience is not always useful or productive, and therefore, managers should look at those relationships where experience can make salespersons more productive. Experience works with customer-oriented selling, in making experienced salespersons higher performers. When dealing with experienced salespersons, a job satisfied salesperson is seemingly a better performer than one who can adapt his behaviors to suit the needs of the customers. Although experience brings with itself more clarity, and knowledge in dealing with customers, yet it should be used with caution when hiring and training experienced salespersons. Our study also suggests that with less experienced salespersons, the impact of job satisfaction on performance is weaker than for more experienced salespersons. This implies that no matter how satisfied younger salespersons are, they are always looking for newer opportunities, and their performance is affected due to this.

Before its extensive application on the organizational salesforce, our results should be used first to calibrate to establish an initial baseline level of salesperson's adaptive selling within the sales unit. During implementation of the intervention programs, the sales units can quantitatively chart its progress using against this baseline, and chart the progress at the frontline salesforce level. Comparative measurements of different sales units would enable the organization to identify, and isolate concerns related to dimension/s of salesperson's customer orientation, and address these deficiencies in future interventions. Similarly, selling experience should also be calibrated against performance within the sales unit, to establish its threshold levels, beyond which the nature of relationship with these predictors of performance change. Such sales force profiling would enable the managers to anticipate, and account for performance drops in their salespeople at threshold levels of their age, experience, as well as sales career stages.

We also suggest that our study can provide key inputs for sales training programs, as well for internal marketing concerning the organization's salesforce. Job satisfaction for example, can be increased through sustained internal marketing to salespersons. For example, many firms have recently initiated programs where they motivate the employees to participate in sharing new ideas, and give suggestions that has a positive impact on the employees' job satisfaction. Higher job satisfaction is beneficial to increase the salesperson's performance, especially in case of experienced salesperson. Similarly, use of adaptive selling among salespersons can be increased by training programs, as it is seen to have a greater impact than job satisfaction on salesperson performance. Use of role-plays, and sales simulation tools such as practiced by Miller Heiman can be useful.

Limitations of the study and future research

This study has several limitations too. First, the sample comes from a single industry, i.e. insurance industry, although from a large cross section of firms. The findings from this study may not be generalizable to other industries. Therefore, future studies should validate the findings in other industries, and even in other markets, such as developed ones, since our

sample came from an emerging market. Second, we have taken only one threshold value of selling experience to categorize the salespersons as having high or low experience. Future studies should look at experience from multiple perspectives rather than as a dichotomous value of high/low, and explore possible curvilinear relationships with AS, JS, and CO. Curvilinear relationships if existing, can throw up interesting new insights for the sales researchers and sales managers alike. We have also not tested for other possible relationships of salesperson performance with job satisfaction, customer orientation, adaptive selling, and sales experience that could be more intuitively explained in other contexts. For example, quality of sales experience rather than quantum of experience may be a better variable to study for its ability to explain other potential relationships[1]. Finally, being a cross sectional study, it has inherent limitations, and therefore, future research must look at longitudinal data specially that of sales performance.

Note

1 We thank an anonymous reviewer for flagging this as potential limitation of our study.

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Further Reading

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Appendix

Table A1 Measures used in the study

Measure	Items
Job satisfaction (adapted from Wright and Cropanzano, 1998)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Overall, I am satisfied with my work 2. Overall, I am satisfied with my supervisor 3. Overall, I am satisfied with the promotional opportunity in this job
Adaptive selling (adapted from Spiro and Weitz, 1990)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. I experiment with different sales approaches 2. I adapt selling approaches from one customer to another 3. I vary sales style from situation to situation
Customer orientation (adapted from Saxe and Weitz, 1982)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. I try to help my customers achieve their goals 2. I try to achieve my customers’ goals by satisfying them 3. I try to offer the product that is best suited to my customer 4. I try to find out what kind of product would be most helpful to my customer
Sales/selling experience (adapted from ADAPTS scale by Spiro and Weitz, 1990; Rapp et al., 2008)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How much experience do you have in a sales job? ____ years ____ months 2. How long have you been with the company? ____ years ____ months
Sales performance (adapted from Babakus et al., 1996; Cravens et al., 1993)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Total insurance premium collected (sales) comparing to the top performing insurance salesperson in your unit 2. Total insurance premium collected (sales) with respect to your sales quota <p>The salespersons were asked to rate their own sales performance (in the previous 12 months), compared to the top performing salesperson in their sales unit (comparative performance), and on their achievement of individual sales quotas</p>

Executive summary and implications for managers and executives

This summary has been provided to allow managers and executives a rapid appreciation of the content of the article. Those with a particular interest in the topic covered may then read the article in toto to take advantage of the more comprehensive description of the research undertaken and its results to get the full benefit of the material present.

Cross, M., Brashear, T.G., Rigdon, E.E. and Bellenger, D.N. (2007), “Customer orientation and salesperson performance”, *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 41 Nos 7/8, pp. 821-835.

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Why some salespeople perform better than others is not so much a mystery, more a challenge: a challenge of ensuring the right people, with the right experience, right attitude and right skills – and right training – make up the salesforce. Even then some will perform better than others because salespeople are people and people are different.

Then there’s the matter of different aptitudes and attitudes. For example, adaptive selling behavior in which a salesperson

alters his or her behavior depending on the feedback he or she is getting from the customer, is a useful skill which can be profitable to the company. The underlying logic is that adaptive selling behaviors help the salespeople to adopt a selling strategy that tailors their messages to bring a greater fit with the customers' requirements. Since adaptive selling involves adjusting one's own behaviors to the selling context, it entails focusing on customers' individual needs and preferences, which may lead to a customer-centered, problem-solving orientation. For example, showing empathy with customers to develop a relationship and to better understand his/her needs may lead to high customer orientation of the salesperson.

An empathetic relationship between the salesperson and the customer may result from adaptive selling behaviors. However, adaptive selling behaviors might not perform well simply because of a salesperson's longer relationship with a customer. That relationship may make the adaptiveness less important than customer-oriented selling or other important behaviors within the relationship. A more experienced salesperson does not improve his/her performance by adopting adaptive selling strategies. Such strategies are probably more suitable for younger salespersons, given different expectations from them by customers. For experienced salespersons, job satisfaction and customer-oriented selling are more important than adaptive selling.

Another complexity is job satisfaction. It is argued that for an effective salesperson, his/her job performance should be intrinsically satisfying, and it should also be extrinsically rewarding. But, while job satisfaction might have a big impact on experienced salespeople's performance, that might not be true for younger salespeople who, no matter how satisfied they are in their current job, might be looking for new opportunities elsewhere.

Explaining sales performance has intrigued researchers for a long time. By studying the impact of experience on crucial relationships we can obtain some clues about the sales performance relationships with key antecedents, which may have useful implications for managing and enhancing sales performance of salespersons.

Rising to the challenge of discovering those clues, in "The impact of job satisfaction, adaptive selling behaviors, and customer orientation on salesperson's performance: exploring the moderating role of selling experience", Ramendra Singh and Gopal Das investigate the moderating effects of selling experience on the relationship between: job satisfaction and sales performance; customer orientation and sales performance; and adaptive selling behaviors and sales

performance (JS-SP, CO-SP, and ASB-SP respectively). The study suggests that adaptive selling may not lead to improvement of customer-oriented selling in more experienced salespersons.

They conducted their study in the emerging market of India which, being a collectivist culture, presents a contrast to individualist western culture. Additionally, in most emerging markets, the salesforce is not well trained. Their results show that adaptive selling behavior is a stronger predictor of customer orientation than job satisfaction. In other words, for a salesperson, adapting his/her behaviors to suit customer needs and preferences in selling situations is more important for performance than being satisfied with the job.

The results also indicate that for more experienced salespersons, the AS-SP relationship weakens, and is rather negatively related. In other words, more experienced salespersons showing adaptive selling behaviors need not necessarily perform well. As suggested earlier, since experienced salespersons have longer relationships with their customers, there is a tacit understanding that makes their adaptiveness less important than customer oriented selling or other behaviors important in the relationship.

It can also be conjectured that more experienced salespersons enjoy a more privileged status from their customers by virtue of their age and duration of their relationship, and may almost take each other for granted. However, for customer-oriented selling as well as for job satisfaction, more experience is better than less experience in enhancing sales performance. Study results suggest that adaptive selling in itself is not a very productive selling strategy unless it leads to customer-oriented selling which improves sales performance. For more experienced salespersons, adaptive selling has almost no relationship with sales performance, and the AS-SP relationship is almost fully mediated through customer-oriented selling.

Evidence from the study clearly shows that selling experience enhances each of the three relationships. In other words, the three key antecedents of sales performance – job satisfaction, adaptive selling, and customer-oriented selling – boosts salesperson's performance, and for a more experienced salesperson, each of these three antecedents impact more strongly, as compared with a less experienced salesperson.

(A précis of the article "The impact of job satisfaction, adaptive selling behaviors and customer orientation on salesperson's performance: exploring the moderating role of selling experience". Supplied by Marketing Consultants for Emerald.)

This article has been cited by:

1. Gopal Das. 2014. Linkages of retailer awareness, retailer association, retailer perceived quality and retailer loyalty with purchase intention: A study of Indian food retail brands. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services* **21**, 284-292. [[CrossRef](#)]