

## The Influence of Personal Variables on Salesperson Selling Orientation

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### **Abstract:**

Customer oriented selling, defined as practicing the marketing concept at the level of the individual salesperson and customer (Saxe and Weitz 1982), is important in selling situations yet has received relatively little attention from marketers. As such, job tenure, gender, organizational commitment, work involvement, and supervisory support are all examined as potential antecedent variables to customer oriented selling. The study, conducted on two different samples of sales personnel, revealed that organizational commitment is significantly related to selling style. However, the significance of the other variables differed among these two groups, suggesting that the antecedents of a customer oriented selling approach may indeed be product/service specific, job specific, or some combination thereof.

**Keywords:** customer oriented selling | salespeople | customers | selling orientation

### **Article:**

There is an old adage in business that "nothing ever happens until a sale is made." Inherent in that expression is the importance of the salesperson in facilitating this process. However, today's researchers and managers continue to struggle with the delineation of sales strategies that achieve both customer and supplier satisfaction. Dubinsky and Staples (1981) note that the successful salesperson is attuned to the needs and concerns of customers, frequently acting as a diagnostician of needs and problem solver. This notion is termed "customer oriented selling" (Saxe 1979) and can be viewed as the application of the marketing concept at the salesperson—customer level.

Although customer oriented selling is an acknowledged practice, a complete understanding of it is lacking. As noted by Saxe and Weitz (1982), "little empirical work has examined the effectiveness of customer oriented selling and the factors influencing the extent to which salespeople engage in it" (p. 344). We propose to build on this Saxe and Weitz (1982)

observation and examine a selected set of personal variables that may influence this important selling orientation.

## **Conceptual Background**

### Customer Oriented Selling

A review of work in the area of selling orientation/customer orientation indicates only limited research has examined the antecedents of this selling style. To date, this research has focused on situational and organizational factors which have been shown to influence the development of a customer oriented selling approach. For example, Dunlap, Dotson, and Chambers (1988) reported that compensation structure may play a role in influencing customer oriented activity.

Unfortunately, sales managers do not yet have a clear understanding of which, if any, personal characteristics influence a customer oriented selling approach. This is important because identifying personal characteristics affecting customer oriented selling can help sales managers in the selection and training of new salespeople. In addition, the need to examine personal variables is important as researchers suggest that behind an individual's behavior lie a multitude of personal factors that impact a given choice (Porter and Miles 1974).

In an attempt to facilitate research in this area, a measure of customer orientation has been developed by Saxe and Weitz (1982) called the sales orientation–customer orientation (SOCO) scale. This instrument was devised from a diverse set of sales personnel and has demonstrated a high level of internal consistency and a moderate degree of stability in a test/retest situation (Saxe and Weitz 1982). In a replication study conducted by Michaels and Day (1985), the internal consistency of the SOCO instrument was reconfirmed on a sample of purchasing agents.

### Antecedent Variables

It has been proposed that experienced salespeople will have a better understanding of their jobs, customers, and company policies (Churchill, Ford, and Walker 1976). Job tenure, defined as the length of time one has worked for his or her current company, has been studied in relation to a number of important individual variables. In various studies, job tenure has been found to influence motivation towards one's job, job skills, and role perceptions (Ingram and Bellenger 1983; Walker, Churchill, and Ford 1975).

Despite the apparent importance of this construct in influencing a wide range of attitudes and behaviors, job tenure has not been examined with respect to customer oriented selling. This is surprising in light of the situational factors that contribute to the development of customer oriented behavior identified by Saxe and Weitz (1982). For example, they suggest that the use of a customer oriented approach will most likely occur under circumstances in which repeat sales constitute an important part of the salesperson's business. Moreover, salesperson expertise and the ability to present a wide range of alternatives, another factor suggested by Saxe and Weitz (1982), could be related, at least in part, to the experience level of the salesperson with the company. In this environment, experienced salespeople, familiar with the customer's needs over a long period of time, would likely display higher levels of a customer oriented behavior than

their less experienced counterparts. Consequently, we hypothesize that greater job tenure will lead to higher levels of customer oriented selling.

Gender has been associated with a number of work outcomes. Studies conducted in the workplace have shown that women place greater importance upon both social and interpersonal components of their job than men (Bartol 1976; Schuler 1975). In the sales environment, it has been demonstrated that women, when compared to their male counterparts, place greater value on their relationships with customers (Busch and Bush 1978). These differences lead us to propose that female sales representatives will exhibit a greater customer orientation than will males.

We suggest that the degree of organizational commitment a salesperson exhibits may influence his/her orientation toward the customer. Commitment has been defined as the extent to which employees identify with organizational goals, value organizational membership, and intend to work hard to attain the overall organizational mission (Mowday, Steers, and Porter 1979). Those who value and want to maintain membership within the firm should be willing to exert considerable effort on behalf of the organization (Mowday, Porter, and Steers 1982). Specifically, it has been shown that commitment to one's organization is usually accompanied by greater work motivation (Lee 1971) and a desire to make the firm more effective and prosperous (Lawless 1979).

Despite these results, studies investigating organizational commitment in a sales environment are disappointingly few (Hunt, Chonko, and Wood 1985). However, a number of authors suggest that organizational commitment is related to several outcomes central to the organization (Lucas et al. 1987). In particular, highly committed members of the organization will work harder to carry out its goals and values (Angle and Perry 1981; DeCotiis and Summers 1987). Since companies are now actively encouraging salespeople to focus on customer service (Dubinsky and Staples 1981; Dunlap, et al. 1988; Williams and Seminerio 1985), it would seem likely that salespeople who identify with the organization, that is organizational commitment, will work hard to satisfy their customers. As a result, we hypothesize that a positive relationship will exist between organizational commitment and customer oriented selling.

Job involvement, defined as the degree to which an employee perceives job performance as central to his/her self-esteem (Blau 1985; French and Kahn 1962), may also influence the salesperson's orientation toward the customer. To salespeople with high levels of job involvement, performing well is important to their self-image (Kanungo 1982). Thus, an involved salesperson will exhibit a customer orientation because that approach can be expected to lead to higher levels of performance (Dunlap, Dotson, and Chambers 1988; Saxe and Weitz 1982; Williams and Spiro 1985). Given these findings, greater levels of job involvement can be expected to lead to sales techniques emphasizing a greater customer orientation.

Finally, the relationship between supervisors and employees may play an important role in the utilization of customer oriented behavior. The supervisor–employee relationship is essential to proper communication and role formation (Dubinsky, Howell, Ingram, and Bellenger 1986; Graen, Cashman, Ginsburg, and Schiemann 1977). However, a good working relationship is difficult to develop and is effected by the nature of the dyadic linkage between supervisor and

worker. Managers form close relationships with subordinates on the basis of high trust, interaction, support, and formal/informal rewards (Graen and Cashman 1975). This type of relationship often leads the employee to develop behaviors consistent with organizational values as demonstrated by the supervisor (Dienesch and Liden 1986). Castleberry and Tanner (1986) indicate that the quality of the relationship between salesperson and supervisor has a significant impact on individual and group performance. Consequently, we hypothesize that higher quality supervisor/employee relationships, as measured by trust and the amount of interaction, will lead to a greater customer orientation on the part of the salesperson.

## **Methodology**

### **Data Collection**

The data for this study were collected from two different samples of salespeople. The first sample, as part of an ongoing research study, consisted of the salesforce of a medium-sized advertising firm. Each respondent was asked to fill out a questionnaire and return it directly to the researchers. All participants were assured that their responses would remain confidential. Of the 142 salespeople surveyed, usable responses were obtained from 104 respondents, yielding a response rate of 73%.

Duties of salespeople working in this organization include a wide range of tasks that are generally consistent with the "institutional seller" category proposed in Moncriefs (1986) typology of selling tasks. Typical activities undertaken by these salespeople include creative selling which involves generating new customers through cold-calls, visiting former clients in hopes of regaining their business, and servicing current accounts. With respect to other characteristics, the salesforce was relatively young (average age = 27) and inexperienced (average tenure = 3.2 years). Finally, of the 104 respondents, 38 were female, 66 were male.

Sample two consists of industrial product salespeople in attendance as exhibitors at a trade show held in a midsized southwest city. This group carries out tasks consistent with Moncriefs (1986) "missionary salesperson" category, which is characterized by an emphasis on traveling and a focus on determining potential customer needs. In this sample, a profile of the average participant reveals an age of 38 and job tenure with present company of 5 years. Sales territories are typically regional, and most salespeople work for a firm whose size ranges from 100 to 500 people. Of the 202 salespeople in attendance, completed questionnaires were obtained from 96 individuals (48%). The sample consisted primarily of men, who constituted 91 of 96 participants. Utilizing the Saxe and Weitz (1982) criteria for evaluating sales environments in which customer oriented selling will likely occur, both the advertising and industrial product environments appear suitable settings for the study.

### **Measuring Instruments**

Organizational commitment was assessed through the use of the Organizational Commitment Questionnaire (OCQ) scale (Porter, Steers, Mowday, and Boulian 1974). This instrument consists of 15 items and measures the respondent's commitment as it relates to loyalty toward the organization, willingness to expend effort on behalf of the organization, and acceptance of the

organization's values. In our study, scale reliability for the OCQ, as measured by Coefficient Alpha, was found to be .83 for advertising personnel and .90 for industrial product salespeople.

With respect to the other variables, job involvement was measured via the job involvement scale developed by Lodahl and Kejner (1965). For the samples used in this study, a Cronbach's alpha of .80 for advertising salespeople and .69 for industrial product salespeople was obtained. Supervisor/employee relations were measured by the Leader Member Exchange scale (Graen, Liden, and Hoel 1982). This instrument measures the quality of the supervisor-salesperson relationship by asking the respondent to assess the amount of trust and interaction between the two individuals. The scale is based on the hypothesis that subordinate roles are divided into two categories: an in-group (characterized by high trust, interaction, and support) and an out-group (characterized by low trust, interaction, and support) (Liden and Graen 1980). The twelve item scale utilized in this study had Cronbach alphas of .85 for industrial product salespeople and .95 for the advertising personnel.

A salesperson's selling orientation-customer orientation was measured using the SOCO scale developed by Saxe and Weitz (1982). The use of this instrument requires the summation of respondent scores to arrive at an overall salesperson's SOCO score. In order to insure consistency across the samples, a reduced version of this scale consisting of 18 items was adapted for the study. Cronbach alpha estimates for these scales were .95 for industrial product salespeople, and .82 for advertising personnel.

Two other measures were used in our study. Job tenure, a continuous variable, was reported in months by respondents. Salesperson gender was coded as a dummy variable for purposes of analysis (Male=1, Female=-1). The means, standard deviations, and reliabilities of these scales are reported in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Means, Standard Deviations, and Reliabilities of Measures

	Advertising Sales Sample			Industrial Sales Sample		
	Mean	$\sigma$	$\alpha$	Mean	$\sigma$	$\alpha$
Job Tenure	3.2	3.10	---	5.0	2.10	---
Supervisor/Employee Relations	3.7	.02	.95	2.4	.49	.85
Job Involvement	3.0	.60	.80	2.7	.26	.69
Organizational Commitment	3.9	.57	.83	3.0	.27	.90
Sales/Customer Orientation	4.5	.36	.83	3.7	.27	.91

## Results

Correlations among measures used in the study are reported in Table 2. With few exceptions, the correlations are logically consistent with *a priori* expectations. However, in the industrial sales group, job tenure was found to be negatively associated with job involvement, organizational commitment, and sales/customer orientation. These correlations could be the result of the significant changes, addressed in the Discussion section, that have taken place in this particular industry.

Regression was employed to examine the proposed relationships among the two samples of salespeople. Results indicate that several factors appear to be antecedents of a salesperson's sales

orientation/customer orientation. While there were similar findings for both groups of salespeople, there were also differences between the two samples.

**Table 2.** Correlations of Constructs

	1	2	3	4	5	6
	Advertising Salespeople					
1. Job Tenure		-.16	.14	-.16	-.17	.11
2. Supervisor/Employee Relations	-.25		.19	.49 <sup>a</sup>	.03	.01
3. Job Involvement	-.74 <sup>a</sup>	.16		.31 <sup>a</sup>	.05	.01
4. Organizational Commitment	-.50 <sup>a</sup>	.64 <sup>a</sup>	.56 <sup>a</sup>		-.15	.28 <sup>a</sup>
5. Gender	.78 <sup>a</sup>	-.82 <sup>a</sup>	-.84 <sup>a</sup>		-.82 <sup>a</sup>	.45 <sup>a</sup>
6. Sales/Customer Orientation	-.75 <sup>a</sup>	.79 <sup>a</sup>	.66 <sup>a</sup>	.89 <sup>a</sup>	-.80 <sup>a</sup>	
	Industrial Salespeople					

<sup>a</sup> Significant at  $p < .05$  level.

**Table 3.** Regression Analysis of Selling Orientation-Customer Orientation Determinants

Construct	$\beta$	F Value	$\beta$	F Value
Job Tenure	.08	.88	-.18	2.58 <sup>b</sup>
Supervisor/Employee Relations	-.08	-.83	.25	3.28 <sup>a</sup>
Job Involvement	-.07	-.73	.05	0.54
Organizational Commitment	.30	2.88 <sup>a</sup>	.56	6.48 <sup>a</sup>
Gender	-.39	-4.39 <sup>b</sup>	-.11	-1.59
Sample	R <sup>2</sup>			
Advertising Sales	.23			
Industrial Sales	.70			

<sup>a</sup> Significant at  $p < .01$

<sup>b</sup> Significant at  $p < .05$

Organizational commitment is the only factor consistently associated with customer oriented selling. In both advertising and industrial sales groups, increased levels of organizational commitment are significantly related ( $p < .01$ ) to a more customer oriented selling style. On the other hand, job involvement was not significantly related to customer oriented selling in either sample. Apart from these two variables, findings from the two samples diverge.

With respect to the advertising sample, it is noted that female salespeople demonstrate a greater customer orientation than males ( $p < .01$ ). However, the hypothesized relationships of tenure and supervisory support to customer orientation were not significant. Thus, for this sample, only organizational commitment and gender are significant antecedents of a customer oriented approach. The amount of variance explained by all five factors is .23 for this sample.

For the industrial product salespeople, results indicate that in addition to organizational commitment, supervisor-employee relations ( $p < .01$ ) also are positively related to a salesperson's selling orientation. In contrast, job tenure is negatively related to customer oriented selling ( $p < .05$ ). Finally, gender appears to have no effect on the degree of customer orientation exhibited by the salesperson. However, there were only five women in the industrial products sample which could attenuate any effect associated with gender. The amount of variance explained for this group of salespeople by our five factors is .70.

## Discussion

This study examined several important personal characteristics as antecedents of a customer oriented selling approach. Results suggest that the development of a customer oriented approach to selling is influenced by personal characteristics. It should be noted, however, that there are certain limitations inherent in a study of this nature which temper the generalizability of results. Most notable is the inability to draw causal inferences since all variables were measured simultaneously. Consequently, the time sequence of the relationships among variables cannot be ascertained with certainty. Additionally, self-report measures form the basis of this study. While this technique has been extensively adopted in salesforce research, it suffers from several shortcomings, including the possible effect of lapses in memory on responses (Johnston and Futrell 1989).

Despite these limitations results of the study do provide several interesting insights into the relationship of personal characteristics and the development of a customer oriented selling approach. First, findings indicate that the antecedents of customer oriented selling may not be consistent across selling environments. Specifically, customer oriented selling may be influenced by: (1) the nature of the product or service, as our study involves service (advertising) and product (industrial) salespeople, (2) the job itself, because the typical job description among the two samples differed (i.e., trade servicers perform different tasks as opposed to missionary salespeople), or (3) some combination of the two. This is an area that warrants further investigation. For example, future studies could investigate these propositions in other industrial sales positions such as trade servicers, order takers, or missionary sellers (Moncrief 1986) to assess how the antecedents of customer oriented selling differ across selling environments. This type of replication in sales research is necessary in order to confirm or deny research findings (Johnston, Parasuraman, and Futrell 1989).

It follows from this discussion that the diversity among our samples may account for the differences in the amount of explained variance. Although the variables were able to account for 70% of the variance in the industrial sales group, personal factors appear to be much less influential in explaining a customer oriented selling approach among advertising salespeople. This, in turn, leads us to suggest that other antecedents of customer oriented selling need to be considered in future studies. For instance, machiavellianism might be one variable worthy of further investigation. One could hypothesize that individuals possessing this characteristic utilize a customer oriented approach, in addition to other methods, in their quest to achieve their goals. Other constructs that might be examined include education, and role conflict.

Second, results indicate that in both sales settings examined in this study, a salesperson's organizational commitment is significantly related to customer oriented selling. This finding is consistent with our hypothesized relationship and suggests that when salespeople are committed to their company, they are more likely to embrace a customer orientation in their day-to-day dealings with clients.

Third, a somewhat surprising finding was the negative relationship between job tenure and customer oriented selling approaches in the industrial sales setting. This relationship countervails

intuitive beliefs that as one becomes more experienced on the job, the opportunity to exhibit customer oriented selling increases. Several reasons can be offered to explain this finding. Perhaps older, more experienced salespeople become complacent in their position and, consequently, do not focus their energies on meeting customer needs as diligently as newer salespeople. A customer orientation may diminish in these cases, suggesting that its practice needs to be periodically reinforced among experienced personnel.

In addition, it is possible that the negative relationship between tenure and a customer orientation in the industrial setting could be a function of environmental changes that have occurred in this particular industry. The oil industry has recently experienced massive layoffs, salary reductions, and consolidations. These industry changes could negatively effect salespeople's relationship with both their company and customers. Indeed, other industries with these characteristics may find that experienced salespeople become disillusioned with their company and the industry in general. This may account for the negative correlations reported here between job tenure and customer oriented selling, organizational commitment, and job involvement.

Fourth, in the industrial sales setting, supervisor/employee relations marked by high trust, interaction, support, and formal/informal rewards, were found to be positively related to the use of customer oriented selling by salespeople. Thus, in this type of sales setting supervisors may want to concentrate additional effort on developing supportive relationships with their salespeople in order to foster a customer orientation.

Fifth, if, as the findings suggest, a customer orientation is influenced by personal characteristics, then it may be possible to identify salespeople with a proclivity toward a customer oriented approach to sales. The development of recruiting tool(s) (i.e., pen and paper tests) that include a SOCO instrument designed for salesforce recruiting may be appropriate in this regard. For example, the recruitment of entry level salespeople might feature the presentation of a realistic sales situation. This could be used in conjunction with a modified SOCO scale that assesses the degree of customer orientation possessed by a candidate.

Our study examined salespeople's customer orientation in two diverse samples and found that the antecedents of customer oriented selling may be situationally dependent, being a function of the sales environment. However, in order to enhance our understanding of customer oriented selling, further research is necessary. Areas that warrant further attention include the possible differences in customer orientation between men and women. While our findings suggest that men and women may, in fact, possess different orientations toward the customer, future research is needed in sales environments in which there is a larger percentage of women in the work force. In addition, future research should explore the skills necessary to become and maintain a customer orientation. For example, what role does good listening play in the development of an orientation toward the customer? Such extensions would enhance our knowledge of this critical approach to selling, which in turn would provide important insights for both marketing academicians and practitioners.

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