

Relationship selling behaviors: antecedents and relationship with performance

By: [James S. Boles](#), Thomas Brashear, Danny Bellenger, and Hiram Barksdale Jr.

Boles, James S., Thomas G. Brashear, Danny N. Bellenger, and Hiram C. Barksdale, Jr., "Relationship Selling Behaviors: Antecedents and Relationship with Performance," *Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing* 15 (2/3, 2000), 141-153.

<https://doi.org/10.1108/08858620010316840>

© 2000 MCB UP Limited. This author accepted manuscript is deposited under a Creative Commons Attribution Non-commercial 4.0 International ([CC BY-NC](#)) license. This means that anyone may distribute, adapt, and build upon the work for non-commercial purposes, subject to full attribution. If you wish to use this manuscript for commercial purposes, please contact permissions@emerald.com.

Abstract:

Examines the effect of relationship selling activities on salesperson performance. It further explores the link between demographic selection criteria and the propensity of a salesperson to perform relationship selling behaviors. Relationship selling behaviors as examined in this study include interaction intensity, mutual disclosure, and cooperative intentions. The study was based on a sample of 487 business-to-business insurance salespeople. Findings indicate that interaction intensity and mutual disclosure have a significant effect on salesperson performance. Cooperative intentions do not influence performance. Results further demonstrate that some demographic criteria appear to be related to a salesperson's likelihood of engaging in relationship selling.

Keywords: selling | sales methods | business-to-business marketing | relationship marketing

Article:

Enhancing the performance of salespeople is perhaps the most important task facing sales managers in the current business environment. Given the importance of salesperson performance, it is not surprising that the existing body of salesforce performance research is quite large. Churchill *et al.* (1985) gathered over 400 studies for their meta-analysis of salesperson performance.

Relationships with customers

Recently, sales practitioners and academic researchers have begun examining the importance and value of building relationships with customers (Callahan, 1992; Crosby *et al.*, 1990). An analysis of salesperson scripts indicates that rapport building activities are considered an integral part of the early sales process that can aid in future communication (Leigh and McGraw, 1989). Findings from several studies suggest that building relationships with buyers/customers is one possible way to improve sales performance (Macintosh *et al.*, 1992).

Research examining the effect of buyer-salesperson relationships on outcomes of the sales encounter has addressed several aspects of salesperson effectiveness. Macintosh *et al.* (1992), found that top performing salespeople tend to initially spend more time building relationships with buyers than attempting to gain a quick sale. Research also indicates that relationship quality between a buyer and salesperson is indirectly related (through relationship quality) to a customer's intention to do business with the salesperson in the future (Crosby *et al.*, 1990) and to customer willingness to provide referrals (Boles *et al.*, 1997). Thus, while the information on buyer-salesperson relationships is limited compared to studies examining salesperson performance in general, it appears a salesperson who spends time performing behaviors that build strong relationships with customers, will improve his/her performance.

Performance

One research approach that has been used to examine performance is to compare the activities of high sales performers and low sales performers with regard to the types of activities they perform (e.g. Macintosh *et al.*, 1992; Szymanski and Churchill, 1990). There is some evidence that high performers will spend their time differently than low performers (Sujan *et al.*, 1994). Crosby *et al.* (1990) examined the relationship between three categories of selling behaviors and relationship quality. They found that these selling behaviors could indeed improve relationship quality.

The current research has two goals. First, it will determine if selling behaviors aimed at building buyer-salesperson relationships are related to performance. In addition, this study will explore some of the characteristics and attitudes of salespeople that are related to the performance of selling behaviors designed to build relationships. The paper begins by offering a brief review of the salesperson performance literature. It then presents hypotheses related to relational selling activities. A third section presents methodology and results. Following a discussion of results, the managerial and theoretical implications of this research are presented.

Salesforce performance

A large body of research has examined the determinants of salesperson performance (e.g. Brown and Peterson, 1994; Churchill *et al.*, 1985; Cravens *et al.*, 1993). Much of this research has been based on the framework proposed in the Walker *et al.* (1977) model. While other models exist, this approach appears to provide a meaningful perspective regarding some of the determinants of sales performance.

Meta-analysis

The Churchill *et al.* (1985) meta-analysis of salesperson performance was based on the Walker *et al.* (1977) mode. It examined the effects of six categories of constructs on salesperson performance. These categories include:

1. role,
2. skill, and
3. motivation, as well as

4. personal factors,
5. aptitude, and
6. organizational/environmental factors.

After the mean correlations were corrected for sampling error, the construct with the highest correlation with performance was personal factors. The personal factors category included items such as: age, gender, weight, race, appearance, education, and marital status to mention a few. Following personal variables in order of importance were skill and role variables. Aptitude, motivation, and organizational and environmental factors had the smallest correlations with performance. These results indicate that personal factors play an important role in determining which individuals will be effective performers. Churchill *et al.* (1985) note that the type of product or industry may play a critical role in developing performance predictors.

Salesperson behaviors and sales performance

While personal factors were the most important determinants of performance in the Churchill *et al.* (1985) meta-analysis, even this category did not consistently account for over 10 percent of the variance in salesperson performance. A review of the meta-analysis, shows that there was no mention of salesperson behaviors. Salesperson behaviors include salesforce activities required in the sales process and activities related to the development of ongoing relationships with customers/buyers.

Framework

Weitz (1981) proposed a contingency framework that linked selling behaviors to salesperson effectiveness in the dyad. The relative effectiveness of various salesperson behaviors is hypothesized to be contingent on factors in the dyad such as customer demands, resources of the salesperson, characteristics of the buying task, and characteristics of the buyer-salesperson relationship. Weitz (1981) also noted that salesforce research needs to examine actions that directly affect the nature of the sales dyad because actions and behaviors of salespeople during a sales call can be critically important to the quality of dyadic interaction with the buyer. Thus, examining these behaviors may be of great importance in determining sales performance (Castleberry and Shepard, 1993; Plank and Reid, 1994).

Empirical research examining the effect of salesperson behavior on performance, though somewhat limited, suggests that there is a linkage between salesperson behavior and sales performance. Salesperson effort is directly related to superior performance (Brown and Peterson, 1994). The Macintosh *et al.* (1992) study reported that top performing salespeople spend more time in the initial sales call in building rapport and starting relationships with a buyer. Adaptive selling behaviors also have been linked positively with performance (Spiro and Weitz, 1990) as have customer-oriented selling behaviors (Saxe and Weitz, 1982). Results from these studies indicate that a variety of salesperson behaviors affect performance.

Behavior

One relatively unexplored type of salesperson behavior involves activities that lead to customer relationships. These activities and behaviors can be referred to as relationship selling behaviors (Crosby *et al.*, 1990). While these behaviors do not completely capture the wide range of salesperson behaviors that have been examined, they have been linked to buyer-seller relationship quality. Relationship selling comprises three dimensions: interaction intensity, mutual disclosure, and cooperative intentions (Crosby *et al.*, 1990).

Interaction intensity refers to the level of interaction between the salesperson and the buyer. As interactions become more frequent the level of trust and understanding between parties develops. Mutual disclosure (the sharing of personal and organizational information) likewise helps develop trust as personal and/or business information is exchanged between the buyer and salesperson. This information can be used to aid in problem solving or in better understanding the dyad partner. Both of these can enhance the exchange relationship. The final dimension is cooperative intentions. Salespeople who adopt a cooperative selling style, gain respect and trust from their buyers (Crosby *et al.*, 1990).

Relationship selling behaviors are intended to develop and maintain a strong buyer-seller relationship (Crosby *et al.*, 1990). The link between relationship selling behaviors and performance may be, at least in part, based on the development of trust between the exchange partners (salesperson and buyer) (Dwyer *et al.*, 1987). The role of these behaviors is distinct from the traditional sales process activities, such as handling objections and closing. Instead, relationship selling behaviors focus on the development of dyadic personal relationships between the salesperson and buyer that are mutually beneficial. A stronger relationship between the two exchange partners allows for greater trust and communication, thereby leading to lower customer turnover (Crosby *et al.*, 1990) and more referrals and recommendations (Boles *et al.*, 1997). These outcomes can result in superior salesperson performance. Therefore, we hypothesize:

H1: Salesperson performance will be positively related to the relationship selling behaviors of:

- interaction intensity
- mutual disclosure
- cooperative intentions.

Selection criteria

Selection process

The ability to identify promising salespeople early in the selection process is an issue that is of considerable interest to managers (Ford *et al.*, 1987). The cost of conducting the hiring and training of a new salesperson are substantial. Estimates of the cost of the first year training alone average over \$6,000 per salesperson across a variety of industries (Heide, 1994). Thus, identifying traits and/or characteristics associated with a firm's successful salespeople may be one way of increasing selection success in the hiring process and minimizing training and turnover costs associated with poor hiring practices.

Existing research indicates there is value in determining the relationship between various actionable selection criteria and salesperson performance (Ford *et al.*, 1987; Gable *et al.*, 1992; Lamont and Lundstrom, 1977). Overall, results from these studies provide support for a direct relationship between salesforce selection and sales performance. In addition, these variables may influence performance indirectly through salesperson behaviors that are themselves directly related to performance. For example, the effect of selected personal variables on the practice of adaptive selling has been examined (Levy and Sharma, 1994).

Criteria

Selection criteria can be divided into several general topics. Churchill *et al.* (1997) suggest the following categories: physical traits, individual behaviors, psychological traits, and aptitude. Three sub-categories exist for the physical and behavioral variables. One of these categories contains demographic information such as age and gender. Another includes education, employment status, and previous work experience. The third area pertains to the current status and lifestyle of the individual.

Skill levels and personality variables form the subcategories contained under the psychological traits and aptitude categories. Examples of personality variables include the need for intrinsic and/or extrinsic rewards. Skill level contains constructs such as vocational esteem variables. These vocational esteem variables refer to the degree of liking or preference for various activities associated with the sales job. Note that vocational esteem and task-specific self-esteem are related concepts in that one (vocational esteem) deals with the preference for various activities and the other (task specific self-esteem) with a person's belief about his/her ability to perform those activities. Higher estimates of ability may well yield higher levels of preference for various sales-related activities.

Previous studies examining the relationship between selection criteria variables and the level of salesperson behaviors have not hypothesized the direction of the relationship (Ford *et al.*, 1987; Gable *et al.*, 1992). Churchill *et al.* (1985) also indicate that the importance of personal factors may vary depending on the industry where the salesperson works. Consistent with prior research, and in keeping with the exploratory nature of the current study, we do not hypothesize a sign (either positive or negative) for the relationships. We hypothesize (Figure 1):

H2: Salesperson relational selling behaviors are related to:

- Age
- Sex
- Education
- Previous employment
- Sales experience
- Marital status
- Intrinsic reward orientation
- Extrinsic reward orientation
- Vocational esteem.

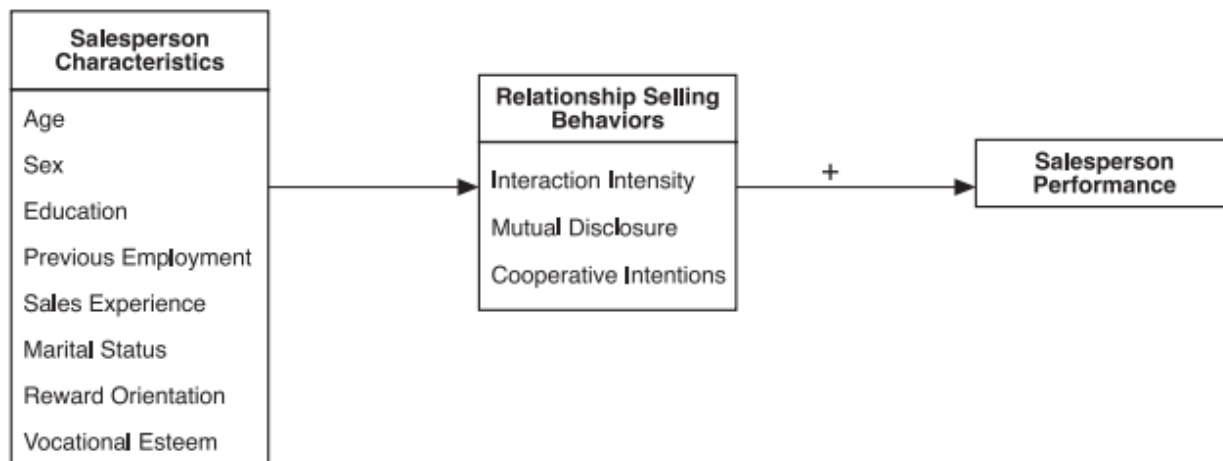


Figure 1. Conceptual model

Methodology

Ongoing study

Sample

Data for this study were collected as part of a larger ongoing study conducted by the Life Insurance Marketing Research Association (LIMRA). The sample includes full-time insurance agents in North America selling to business and corporate customers. Data concerning relationship selling behaviors, performance, and vocational esteem were collected during the third year of employment. Information concerning intrinsic and extrinsic reward orientation and demographic data was gathered at the time the individual was hired.

Responses

A total of 487 usable responses were obtained from a sample of 742 salespeople. This represents a 64 percent response rate. Participation was voluntary, but was encouraged by LIMRA. Sample demographics indicate that participants were 84 percent male and averaged 37 years of age. Study participants reported an average of 12 years of previous work experience prior to beginning their life insurance career. Fifty-nine percent of the sample had no previous sales experience. Seventy-six percent of the respondents were married and 87 percent had a college degree.

Measures

Single item categorical measures were used to measure demographic variables such as gender, education level, and employment experiences. Age was self-reported by the respondent. Vocational esteem was measured by asking the salesperson to rate his/her preference for and/or enjoyment of a variety of sales-related activities. Those activities listed in the survey included: prospecting, fact-finding and needs analysis, selling/closing, policy service/administration, planning/goal setting and person/professional development. Respondents rated their preference

for and/or enjoyment in performing each of these activities on a five point rating scale where 1 = Never and 5 = Always.

Rewards

Reward orientations consisted of intrinsic and extrinsic rewards. Respondents were asked to rate the desirability of each outcome on a five point scale where 1 = Not Desirable and 5 = Extremely Desirable. These rewards are similar to those listed in Churchill *et al.* (1997). Extrinsic rewards include: recognition, power and authority, prestige, money, and advancement. Intrinsic rewards included: security, personal growth, achievement, self-esteem and mastery of skills and tasks. The items were subjected to a principal components analysis and two factors were extracted with the projected values loading on the expected factors. The reward orientation measures are composites of the individual reward means. Reliability measures for the intrinsic and extrinsic reward orientation measures are 0.78 and 0.75 respectively.

The relationship selling measure was adapted from Crosby *et al.* (1990) to reflect the salesperson's self-reported performance of the particular action. Respondents responded on a one to five point scale ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree. The reliability assessments for these measures indicate that all three had acceptable reliability: interactional intensity 0.83; cooperative intentions 0.70; and mutual disclosure 0.84.

Output performance was measured using a self-reported measure of the number of policies sold in the past 12 months. This is an industry standard measure of salesperson performance and productivity. Self-report measures have been used in previous salesforce research (e.g. Busch and Bush, 1978; Sujan *et al.*, 1994). Churchill *et al.* (1985) indicate that there does not appear to be any upward bias in salesperson self-report performance measures. When the analysis required categorical data, salespeople were divided into high and low performers using a median split.

Results

First analysis

The first analysis examined the influence of relationship selling behaviors on performance. Regression analysis of this relationship produced mixed results. Interaction intensity ($p < 0.01$) and mutual disclosure ($p < 0.05$) had significant, positive influences on sales performance as predicted. Cooperative intentions, however, were not significantly related to performance. The results of this analysis are shown in Table I.

Table I. Dependent variable performance

| Relationship selling | Performance |
|-------------------------|--------------------|
| Interaction intensity | 0.21 ^a |
| Mutual disclosure | 0.11 ^b |
| Cooperative intentions | 0.01 |
| R ² | 0.07 |
| Adjusted R ² | 0.06 |
| F (3, 483) | 10.88 ^a |

Notes: ^a Significant ($p < 0.01$) ^b Significant ($p < 0.05$)

A comparison of the differences in mean values for the top and bottom performance quartiles of the sample show significant differences in the levels of relationship selling behaviors. These results can be viewed in Table II. As expected, given the relationship of interaction intensity and mutual disclosure with performance, high performers had significantly higher mean levels of both of those relationship selling constructs. There was no difference between high and low performers on the cooperative intentions measure, with both groups reporting that they exhibited cooperative intentions.

Table II. Hi-low performers differences comparison

| Salesforce activities | Means | |
|------------------------|-------------------|------|
| | Hi | Low |
| Interaction intensity | 3.74 ^a | 3.51 |
| Mutual disclosure | 2.19 ^a | 1.97 |
| Cooperative intentions | 4.23 | 4.30 |

Note: ^a Significant ($p < 0.01$)

Antecedents

The next level of analysis looked at the relationships between antecedents, which could be used as selection criteria, and salesperson behaviors. Table III shows the MANOVA results comparing differences in the mean levels of relationship selling variables with respect to demographic variables. Since the overall effect of demographic variables as predictors of relationship selling behaviors was significant ($p < 0.01$), univariate effects were analyzed for each of the selling behaviors. Demographic variables were significantly related to mutual disclosure and cooperative intentions, but not interaction intensity.

Table III. Relationship of demographic variables and performing relationship selling behaviors

| | Interaction intensity F-value | Mutual disclosure F-value | Cooperative intentions F-value |
|---------------------------|----------------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Main effect | 0.14 | 12.34 ^a | 5.89 ^b |
| Previous sales experience | | 0.17 | 0.26 |
| Education | | 3.29 ^b | 2.03 ^c |
| Gender | | 0.61 | 0.00 |
| Marital status | | 0.07 | 0.30 |

Notes: ^a Significant $p < 0.01$ ^b Significant $p < 0.05$ ^c Significant $p < 0.10$

Education

Education was the only demographic variable significantly related to mutual disclosure and cooperative intentions. College graduates were significantly higher on both of those behaviors than the levels reported by salespeople with only a high school education. None of the other univariate effects for the demographic variables was significant.

Regression

Simple OLS regression was used to test the influence of age and years of previous work experience on levels of relationship selling behaviors (see Table IV). Previous work experience had no effect on the dependent variables. Age, however, was negatively related to mutual disclosure ($p < 0.01$) and positively related to cooperative intentions ($p < 0.05$).

Table IV. The relationship of age and experience to performance of relationship selling behaviors

| Independent variable | Interaction intensity | Mutual disclosure | Cooperative intentions |
|---------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|------------------------|
| Age | 0.01 | -0.19 ^a | 0.09 ^b |
| Years of sales experience | -0.05 | -0.03 | 0.03 |

Notes: ^a Significant $p < 0.01$ ^b Significant $p < 0.05$

Multiple regression was used to test the influence of vocational esteem on the level of relationship selling undertaken. The results in Table V show that the level of vocational esteem a salesperson gave to prospecting, servicing clients, planning, and personal development increases the salesperson's level of interaction intensity with the buyer. Esteem for fact finding, servicing clients, and personal development increase the level of cooperative intentions. Selling/closing was the only esteem factor that influenced the level of mutual disclosure between the salesperson and customer.

Table V. Vocational esteem

| Vocational esteem | Interaction intensity | Mutual disclosure | Cooperative intentions |
|-------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------|------------------------|
| A Prospecting | 0.09 ^b | 0.03 | 0.00 |
| B Fact finding | -0.02 | 0.03 | 0.13 ^b |
| C Selling at closing | 0.02 | 0.10 ^b | 0.09 |
| D Servicing clients | 0.21 ^a | 0.08 | 0.11 ^b |
| E Planning | 0.10 ^b | 0.03 | -0.04 |
| F Personal development | 0.11 ^b | 0.08 | 0.12 ^b |
| F-value | 9.92 ^a | 1.99 | 5.93 ^a |
| R ² | 0.11 | 0.02 | 0.06 |
| Adjusted R ² | 0.10 | 0.01 | 0.05 |

Notes: ^a Significant ($p < 0.01$) ^b Significant ($p < 0.05$)

Reward orientations

The final analysis examined the influence of intrinsic and extrinsic reward orientations on the level of relationship selling behaviors. Using multiple regression, the relationship selling behaviors were regressed on the two reward orientations. The results of the analysis are shown in Table VI. Cooperative intentions is positively influenced by an intrinsic orientation but negatively influenced by the extrinsic orientation. Interaction intensity and mutual disclosure were not significantly influenced by either orientation.

Table VI. Reward orientation

| | Interaction intensity | Mutual disclosure | Cooperative intentions |
|-----------------|-----------------------|-------------------|------------------------|
| EXT orientation | 0.09 | 0.07 | -0.14 ^a |
| INT orientation | 0.09 | 0.00 | 0.25 ^a |

Note: ^a Significant ($p < 0.01$)

Discussion and implications

The first finding of interest in the current study involves the direct relationship between both interaction intensity and mutual disclosure with salesperson performance. Crosby *et al.* (1990) found that positive buyer-salesperson relationships were positively related to future purchase intentions as reported by buyers. This study goes one step further by providing direct evidence that relationship selling behaviors can influence a salesperson's level of sales performance as assessed by a quantitative measure of performance (number of policies sold).

Interactions

These results indicate that it is extremely important for a salesperson to maintain regular contacts with customers and to disclose information about himself/herself. Regular interactions, as well as the disclosure of personal/firm information, are related to increased sales. While the mechanism(s) whereby these two types of behaviors influence performance was not examined, it may be that the increased levels of information exchange assist the salesperson in providing good, timely advice to the customer based on his or her needs.

While previous studies tend to link the results of these three relationship selling constructs together, our findings demonstrate that cooperative intentions may not be as strongly associated with performance as indicated in previous research (Crosby *et al.*, 1990). Of course, that could be industry specific (Crosby *et al.* examined consumer life-insurance sales while our study examines sales to businesses and corporations). Once again, an important difference between the current research and former studies of relationship selling behaviors is that previous studies were typically from the customer perspective. The current study examines the relationship selling-performance link from the viewpoint of the salesperson and selling firm. It is possible that the non-significant relationship between cooperative intentions and sales performance is due to self-report bias. Perhaps less effective salespeople over-estimate their performance of activities that indicate cooperative intentions.

Communication

From a managerial perspective, these results emphasize the importance of communication between the salesperson and buyer. Furthermore, they suggest that there is value in basing some of a salesperson's evaluation on his/her performance of relationship selling behaviors. Research also suggests that better buyer-salesperson relationships may lead to increased customer loyalty (Crosby *et al.*, 1990). Given the relationship discovered in this study between relationship selling behaviors and performance, relationship selling activities may be a short-term behavioral measure of long-term sales performance.

Results from this study indicate that models attempting to predict salesperson performance without including relationship selling may be incomplete. This view is certainly true for some insurance sales settings (Crosby *et al.*, 1990), and may be true for many business-to-business sales settings (Macintosh *et al.*, 1992). Future models of salesperson performance in sales environments where there is a considerable level of repeat purchases may need to measure the

strength of the buyer-salesperson relationship and/or the salesperson's performance of relationship selling behaviors.

The second key finding of this research involves the identification of various selection criteria that can be used to select salespeople who are most likely to engage in relationship selling behaviors. First, interaction intensity, the strongest predictor of performance is not related to any of the demographic variables. In fact, previous sales experience, salesperson gender, and marital status have no effect on any of the relationship selling behaviors. Thus, demographic selection items are not particularly useful in identifying salespeople that are likely to engage in relationship selling.

Demographic

Education level is the only easily identifiable demographic that can be used as a salesperson selection criteria. Salespeople with higher levels of education are more likely to engage in mutual disclosure and to express cooperative intentions. One reason for this may be that better educated salespeople have better communication skills and feel more comfortable sharing various types of information about themselves and their firm. Since mutual disclosure is related to salesperson performance, education is one criterion that sales managers may want to consider when hiring new salespeople.

Age of the salesperson was negatively related to mutual disclosure. Evidently older salespeople are less likely to disclose information to the client about themselves. Perhaps, this stems from these people being socialized in a different way than younger salespeople – either in their early lives or in their early employment experiences. However, age also was positively related to cooperative intentions. Older salespeople believe that they express cooperative intentions to a greater degree than younger salespeople. Again, this may just represent a difference in self-reported behaviors or it may be a real difference in younger and older salespeople.

Disclosure

Mutual disclosure was significantly related to vocational esteem for selling/closing. A salesperson that feels comfortable in the selling/closing aspects of the sales job also appears to be more likely to disclose information about him/herself and the selling firm. This disclosure of information can lead to a stronger relationship between the salesperson and customer and to superior sales performance and may make it easier to ask for the sales, since the buyer-salespersons have developed some level of rapport through mutual disclosure.

While the issue of vocational esteem may not be a selection criterion for inexperienced applicants, it can be used to identify experienced salespeople who are more likely to engage in relationship selling. A salesperson's rating of his/her preference for and enjoyment of prospecting, planning, personal development, and providing high levels of client service is related to interaction intensity. This suggests that the more enjoyment a salesperson derives from these aspects of the sales job, the more likely he/she is to maintain a high level of interaction with customers. This level of interaction, in turn, is related to increased performance.

Salesperson preference/enjoyment in the areas of fact finding, providing service and personal development are all significantly related to cooperative intentions. A salesperson who feels positive about these activities is more likely to approach clients from a cooperative perspective. While not directly linked to performance in this study, the quality of the buyer-salesperson relationship may be related to levels of cooperative intentions. The buyer-salesperson relationship, in turn, can increase the likelihood of the customer doing business with that salesperson in the future (Crosby *et al.*, 1990).

These findings regarding vocational esteem have significant implications for hiring and sales training. A firm hiring experienced salespeople should attempt to obtain an accurate measure of the sales activities that a salesperson enjoys or prefers. Those with generally high levels of esteem for the various aspects of the sale job that are related to relationship selling will be more likely to engage in relationship selling and, thereby, exhibit better performance. When hiring new salespeople, the manager should recruit with relationship selling skills in mind and/or ensure that each new salesperson receives sufficient training and management assistance to develop confidence in his/her ability to perform the various selling functions.

Generally, most people appear to enjoy doing those work-related activities about which they feel confident. Thus, developing confidence in new employees regarding selling behaviors may lead to greater use of relationship selling. For some hires, this may require more training than is normally provided for a new salesperson.

Factors

The final factors examined as a correlate of relationship selling were intrinsic and extrinsic levels of motivation. Extrinsic and intrinsic motivation are both related to cooperative intentions. Intrinsic motivation is positively related to that construct while extrinsic motivation is negatively related to cooperative intentions. Salespeople with a strong extrinsic motivation appear unlikely to engage in high levels of cooperative behaviors since this behavior does not appear to be clearly and directly linked to performance. Perhaps, these individuals are more inclined to look for other clients who may be easier to sell to. Another explanation may be that extrinsically oriented individuals are not interested in expending the time required to demonstrate cooperative intentions. On the other hand, intrinsically motivated salespeople are more likely to express cooperative intentions to their customers. These salespeople may be motivated more by doing what they think the job requires than are extrinsically oriented salespeople. While cooperative intentions may not be as important as the other relationship selling behaviors, they are linked with relationship quality which can influence future business intentions of the customer (Crosby *et al.*, 1990).

Future research

Selling behaviors

Findings from the current study indicate that two of the three relationship selling behaviors examined are related to performance. Results reported in this research also indicate that few demographic criteria can be used to hire individuals who are more likely to engage in

relationship selling behaviors. While finding that relationship selling behaviors are related to a quantitative measure of performance is significant, additional research is needed to more clearly ascertain the exact nature of the relationship between performance and relationship selling. For example, does relationship selling work in all big-ticket purchases? Does it work best in regularly repeated purchase situations such as those found in many business-to-business sales settings? Does it work better with consumers than with more professional buyers?

Another area of future research lies in identifying other selection criteria that are related to relationship selling behaviors and can be legally justified as valid hiring criteria. Further, are findings from this study generalizable to other sales settings? The issue of how much training is required to produce feelings of vocational esteem also is an area that needs further research. Determining the type of training salespeople require to become proficient in relationship selling is another area that has not been previously examined.

The current study did not examine the process(es) through which relationship selling behaviors affect performance. This topic would appear to be of considerable importance, particularly in relation to training issues. For example, is listening the key factor that makes for good interaction intensity or is it some other factor such as number of contacts, context of the communication, and/or length of those contacts? Similar questions relate to mutual disclosure. Does it occur simply because the salesperson develops a better personal relationship with the buyer? Or, does it affect sales performance because the buyer has a higher level of trust for the salesperson after the seller has revealed things about him/herself to the buyer? These issues may be very important in furthering our understanding of the buyer-salesperson relationship building process and the role relationship selling behaviors play in enhancing performance.

Selling literature

While the results of this study are of interest to the relationship selling literature, the research has several limitations. First, the sample, though quite large, is composed only of insurance salespeople selling to buyers. Results for another business-to-business salesforce may be quite different. This may be particularly true for firms selling tangible or technical products rather than intangible products such as insurance and investments. Further, the study is based on the Crosby *et al.* (1990) definition of relationship selling behaviors. This list is probably far from exhaustive. Another limitation is that the demographic constructs studied may not be of interest in other types of sales settings.

Finally, this research does not address the issue of the importance of relationship selling behaviors relative to other attitudinal constructs that have been linked to sales performance in previous studies. While the current study and previous works examining the linkage of relationship selling behaviors with various aspects of performance have demonstrated that these behaviors are important, it is possible that other factors such as role perceptions and effort interact with relationship selling behaviors. Perhaps, by examining these effects of relationship selling on the salesperson's attitudes, in addition to the buyer's attitudes, we can arrive at a better understanding of their importance.

Conclusion

Interaction intensity

The study found that interaction intensity and mutual disclosure in a business-to-business buyer-seller dyad were positively related to salesperson performance. In addition, several individual characteristics were identified that can be used as selection criteria in choosing new hires that will be more likely to utilize a relationship selling approach. Finally, various aspects of vocational esteem and the salesperson's level of intrinsic motivation were found to positively influence the use of relationship selling behaviors.

References and further reading

- Boles, J.S., Barksdale, H.C. Jr and Johnson, J.T. (1997), "*Business relationships: an examination of the effects of buyer-salesperson relationships on customer retention and willingness to refer and recommend*", *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, Vol.12 No. 3/4, pp. 248-58.
- Brown, S.R. and Peterson, R.A. (1994), "*The effect of effort on sales performance and job satisfaction*", *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 58, April, pp. 70-80.
- Busch, P. and Bush, R.F. (1978), "*Women contrasted to men in the industrial salesforce: job satisfaction, values, role clarity, performance and propensity to leave*", *Journal of Marketing Research*, Vol. 15, August, pp. 438-48.
- Callahan, M.R. (1992), "*Tending the sales relationship*", *Training and Development*, December, pp. 31-6.
- Castleberry, S.W. and Shepard, D.C. (1993), "*Effective interpersonal listening and personal selling*", *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management*, Vol. 13, Winter, pp. 35-50.
- Churchill, G.A., Ford, N.M. and Walker, O.C. (1997), *Sales Force Management*, 5th edition, Richard D. Irwin, Chicago, IL.
- Churchill, G.A., Ford, N.M., Hartley, S.W. and Walker, O.C. (1985), "*The determinants of salesforce performance: a meta-analysis*", *Journal of Marketing Research*, Vol. 22, May, pp. 103-18.
- Cravens, D.W., Ingram, T.N., LaForge, R.W. and Young, C.E. (1993), "*Behavior-based and outcome-based salesforce control systems*", *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 57, October, pp. 47-59
- Crosby, L.A., Evans, K.R. and Cowles, D. (1990), "*Relationship quality in services selling: an interpersonal perspective*", *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 54, July, pp. 68-81.
- Dubinsky, A.J., Howell, R.D., Ingram, T.N. and Bellenger, D.N. (1986), "*Salesforce socialization*", *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 50, October, pp. 192-207.
- Dwyer, F.R., Schurr, P.H. and Oh, S. (1987), "*Developing buyer-seller relationships*", *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 51, April, pp. 11-27.

- Ford, N.M., Walker, O.C. Churchill, G.A. and Hartley, S.W. (1987), "*Selecting successful salespeople: a meta-analysis of biological and psychological selection criterion*", in Houston, M.J. (Ed.), *Review of Marketing*, American Marketing Association, Chicago, IL, pp. 90-131.
- Gable, M., Hollon, C. and Dangelo, F. (1992), "*Increasing the utility of the application blank: relationship between job application information and subsequent performance and turnover of salespeople*", *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management*, Vol. 12, Summer, pp. 40-55.
- Heide, C.P. (1994), *Dartnell's 28th Salesforce Compensation Survey, 1994-1995*, The Dartnell Corporation, Chicago, IL.
- Lamont, L.W. and Lundstrom, W.J. (1977), "*Identifying successful industrial salesmen by personality and personal characteristics*", *Journal of Marketing Research*, Vol. 14, November, pp. 517-29.
- Leigh, T.W. and McGraw, P.F. (1989), "*Mapping the procedural knowledge of industrial sales personnel: a script-theoretic investigation*", *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 53, January, pp.16-34.
- Levy, M. and Sharma, A. (1994), "*Adaptive selling: the role of gender, age, sales experience, and education*", *Journal of Business Research*, Vol. 31 No. 1, pp. 39-47.
- Macintosh, G., Anglin, K.A., Szymanski, D.M. and Gentry, J.W. (1992), *Relationship Development in Selling: A Cognitive Analysis*, Vol. 12, Fall, pp. 23-34.
- Plank, R.E. and Reid, D.A. (1994), "*The mediating role of sales behaviors: an alternative perspective of sales performance and effectiveness*", *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management*, Vol. 14, Summer, pp. 43-56.
- Saxe, R. and Weitz, B.A. (1982), "*The SOCO scale: a measure of the customer orientation of salespeople*", *Journal of Marketing Research*, Vol. 19, August, pp. 343-51.
- Spiro, R.L. and Weitz, B.A. (1990), "*Adaptive selling: conceptualization, measurement, and nomological validity*", *Journal of Marketing Research*, Vol. 27, February, pp. 61-9.
- Sujan, H., Weitz, B.A. and Kumar, N. (1994), "*Learning orientation, working smart, and effective selling*", *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 58, July, pp. 39-52.
- Szymanski, D.M. and Churchill, G.A. (1990), "*Client evaluation cues: a comparison of successful and unsuccessful salespeople*", *Journal of Marketing Research*, Vol. 27, May, pp. 163-74.
- Walker, O.C., Churchill, G.A. Jr and Ford, N.M. (1977), "*Motivation and performance in industrial selling: present knowledge and needed research*", *Journal of Marketing Research*, Vol. 14, May, pp. 156-68.
- Weitz, B.A. (1981), "*Effectiveness in sales interaction: a contingency framework*", *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 45, Winter, pp. 85-103.