

Customer-directed selling behaviors and performance: a comparison of existing perspectives

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Abstract Sales researchers have spent decades developing and empirically testing various scales that reflect distinct theoretical perspectives of salesperson behavior and job functioning. Despite extensive research in this area, little comparative work has been done to assess the relative effectiveness of these different scales in explaining salesperson performance or to explicate whether or not they are best considered in isolation or as working together—even potentially interacting—to influence sales success. We examine four established scales related to customer-directed salesperson job functioning, and look at how well they relate to both self-reported and objective job performance measures. Our analyses are based on responses from 524 salespeople drawn from three different firms. The results show that two scales (ADAPTS, Selling Skills) outperform the others. Furthermore, we find an important interaction between ADAPTS and Selling Skills that helps to predict superior objective performance.

Keywords Salespeople · Salesperson performance · Sales process · Measurement scales

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Of all the roles in a typical firm, the sales position is perhaps the most multi-faceted. Salespeople need to excel at many different types of activities and behaviors in order to be successful. Among other things, salespeople must prospect for new customers (Riordan et al. 1977; Strout 2003), influence decision-makers to consider and ultimately select their products or services (McFarland et al. 2006; Spiro and Perreault 1979), and also retain existing customers (Reinartz et al. 2004). To better understand which characteristics trigger (or support) selling success, the past 25 or so years have seen marketing researchers propose and test various theoretical perspectives that attempt to delineate what it takes to “make it” in the sales role (i.e., perform at a high level. See Ahearne et al. 2007; Keillor et al. 2000; Rentz et al. 2002; Saxe and Weitz 1982; Spiro and Weitz 1990).

Despite this intense research attention, several vital questions remain largely unanswered. First, do the existing measurement scales have acceptable psychometric properties? Scales that appear sound when developed under highly controlled initial conditions may or may not hold up in other contexts. Second, are all of the extant perspectives equally useful for predicting salesperson performance, or are some better than others? Expanding this further, do these scales relate to actual salesperson performance—that is, outcome performance—and not just self-reported, subjective assessments of sales-related behaviors (e.g., Behrman and Perreault 1982; Cravens et al. 1993)? While past studies have often looked at how sales perspectives are related to outcome variables such as job satisfaction and organizational commitment, less work has been done to link them to actual salesperson performance, despite the fact that performance is an important variable for both managers (Crom et al. 2003; Stevens and Kinni 2007) and academics (Churchill et al. 1985; Jones et al.

2005; Rich et al. 1999). Third, do these perspectives of salesperson job functioning perform best when deployed in isolation, as has traditionally been the case in marketing (e.g., Franke and Park 2006; Schwepker 2003), or are there perhaps interactions between them that need to be tested and further explored?

This paper seeks to address all three of these research gaps. We examine the relationships between, and relative efficacy of, different selling perspectives that have been proposed in the marketing literature. The unifying glue that links them together is the fact that each scale, in one way or another, speaks to what the salesperson does (or “should be” doing) when interacting with customers and prospects. Thus, the focus of this research is on the salesperson’s behavior and job functioning beyond the boundaries of their own firm (i.e., the “customer-directed”). Second, each scale identified in the literature is modeled as a predictor of both salesperson self-reported performance as well as objective sales performance data (Rich et al. 1999). By directly confronting these scales against one another within the context of the same controlled study, we control for possible methodological differences that may have been present in past work while also positioning the achieved data to comment on the relative efficacy of each such perspective. In this light, what the study and results ultimately demonstrate is that: (i) some existing customer-directed selling perspectives may not be as efficacious in predicting job performance in the sales role as newer, less well-examined perspectives; (ii) that important synergies appear to exist between selected perspectives; and (iii) that the variance explained in salesperson job performance is maximized when such synergies (i.e., interactions) between specific sales perspectives are considered in conjunction with one another.

The balance of this paper is organized as follows. First, we conduct a review of the marketing literature and identify four distinct customer-directed sales perspectives. Next, we describe the empirical setting and methodological procedures used to investigate the relationships between each of the four perspectives and salesperson job performance. Specifically, the analysis examines, in turn, each perspective’s discrete (i.e., individual) effect on performance, as well as their incremental effects when all four perspectives are considered simultaneously. Once the most efficacious sales perspectives are identified in terms of their predictive power on salesperson performance, follow-on analyses are then conducted to determine whether or not there are synergistic relationships between them. The article concludes by discussing the study’s implications for managers and practicing salespeople, as well as suggesting opportunities for further research.

Customer-directed aspects of the sales role

In identifying potential customer-directed sales perspectives to include in the study, two criteria were applied. First, the perspective in question had to have theoretically evolved to the point where a scale has been developed based on well-accepted scale development principles (e.g., Churchill 1979; DeVellis 1991). This is because both Nunnally (1978) and Bagozzi (1984) note the critical importance of initially developing, and subsequently continuing to apply and test, valid and reliable scales which possess sound psychometric properties. By focusing here on those scales with adequate measurement properties, our study is in a better position to assess which perspectives are “best-in-class” in natural field settings. The second criteria for inclusion in the study is that the scale must be appropriate for strategic, long-cycle, consultative types of sales positions (as per Rackham and DeVincentis 1999; Weitz and Bradford 1999). While retail-level sales jobs are of course important and share many of the same characteristics as consultative sales positions (e.g., Sharma and Stafford 2000), there are a few selling scales that have emerged in the literature that speak solely to the specific skills, aptitudes or behaviors that are required in the retail domain (e.g., Chonko et al. 1990). With this in mind, the second criteria for inclusion in the present study is that each sales perspective to be included in the study must speak to the specific behaviors, aptitudes, and skills required for success in longer cycle, relationship-oriented, consultative sales contexts as opposed to retail (such as B2B, high-tech, industrial products and components, professional services, health care and pharmaceutical, etc. See Moncrief et al. 2006; Williams and Plouffe 2007). These are settings where salesperson performance plays a critical role in affecting firm performance (Palmatier et al. 2006), and gaining a better understanding of which scales are useful in predicting performance in these settings is our primary goal.

With these criteria in mind, we identified four customer-directed selling perspectives for more detailed examination in this study.¹ Two are well established: (i) sales orientation/customer orientation (i.e., SOCO Saxe and Weitz 1982); and (ii) Adaptive Selling (Spiro and Weitz 1990). The other two are relatively new: (iii) Selling Skills (Rentz

¹ A fifth selling perspective was also originally included in the study design—the “Service Orientation in Sales” (SOS) proposed by Keillor et al. (2000). The five item SOS scale was developed to take “into account the seller’s willingness to engage in both selling and non-selling tasks throughout the buyer-seller relationship.” (2000, p. 10). However, based on data collected from salespeople in the first firm we studied (CleanCo), the psychometric properties of this scale were found to be unacceptable (i.e., $\alpha = .39$; the construct did not appear to be unidimensional; and the resulting loadings were poor). Therefore, this perspective was omitted from subsequent phases of the study and analyses.

et al. 2002); and (iv) Sales Service Behaviors (Ahearne et al. 2007). The defining characteristics of each of these scales are reviewed next.

(1) Sales Orientation/Customer Orientation (SOCO)

Saxe and Weitz (1982) introduced a conceptualization of the sales role which has as its key tenet that the successful salesperson might sacrifice immediate, short-term sales (and perhaps income, in the form of commissions, etc.) in favor of the establishment and/or maintenance of long-term, mutually-beneficial customer relationships (Schwepker 2003). With this, they offered their 24-item, two dimensional SOCO scale, which distinguishes between the practice of a traditional, self-serving “sales orientation” that attempts to maximize the salesperson’s short-term sales performance (12 items) versus a “customer-orientation” approach that favors the customer’s best interests and selling product offerings that directly address their needs (12 items).

The majority of work with SOCO has focused either on how the customer orientations of sales personnel affect various firm-level outcomes such as customer loyalty (DeVecchio 1998) and customer satisfaction (Johnston et al. 1989; Siguaw and Honeycutt Jr. 1995). Surprisingly, the impact of SOCO on individual salesperson performance has received relatively scant attention (for exceptions, see Boles et al. 2001; Brown et al. 1991). While a few studies have shown some evidence in support of the claim that a customer orientation positively impacts individual sales performance outcomes (e.g., Keillor et al. 2000), the manner in which performance has been modeled in these studies has generally been as a self-reported measure from the salesperson themselves (Franke and Park 2006).

(2) Adaptive Selling

Successful salespeople readily acknowledge that different approaches are needed for different customers. It seems logical, therefore, that those salespeople with a strong ability to perceive situational differences and those who are capable of adjusting their customer interactions based on the requirements of different selling situations will achieve greater success. Weitz (1978, 1981) was the first to formally incorporate this technique into a conceptual model of salesperson performance. Later, Spiro and Weitz (1990) proposed and tested a 16-item “adaptive selling” scale comprised of five sub-dimensions. While they found that the ADAPTS scale exhibited reasonable convergent and discriminant validity, its relationship with performance was more equivocal. Specifically, they noted that while ADAPTS was significantly correlated with salesperson self-reported performance, a non-significant relationship was found between ADAPTS and sales managers’ assessments of salesperson performance.

Follow-up work with the ADAPTS scale by Marks et al. (1996) and Robinson et al. (2000) found the original scale

to be psychometrically suspect, containing only four of the five underlying scale sub-dimensions that were originally proposed. With somewhat inconsistent results, adaptive selling has been empirically linked to salesperson performance (most commonly vis-à-vis self-reported performance from the salespersons themselves), explaining as much as 20% of the variance in performance (Giacobbe 1991). A shortened version of ADAPTS that utilizes just five of Spiro and Weitz’s (1990) original 16 items was introduced by Robinson et al. (2000). Their findings, from a large sample of salespeople across multiple industry settings, showed comparable results for this reduced scale to those generated by the original instrument. Thus, we focus here on Robinson et al.’s (2000) five item short form of the ADAPTS scale.

(3) Sales Service Behaviors

The “sales service behaviors” perspective proposed by Ahearne et al. (2007) identifies a set of salesperson service behaviors that are customer-directed in their orientation, and are designed not to “close initial sales ... {but are instead} behaviors salespeople engage in after the point of the initial sale. These behaviors are ongoing and aimed at nurturing and developing the exchange relationship” (Ahearne et al. 2007, p. 604).

There are five sub-dimensions of the Sales Service Behaviors scale: (1) “diligence” (being responsive and reliable in catering to customer needs and requests); (2) “information communication” (the regular relay of important information to the customer in a clear and timely manner); (3) “inducements” (behaviors aimed at personalizing the buyer-seller relationship, such as jointly attending sporting or social events); (4) “empathy” (the salesperson’s interest in and concern for the welfare of the customer); and (5) “sportsmanship” (the salesperson’s tolerance of needy or exceptionally demanding customers or customer requests). Ahearne et al. (2007) tested this perspective empirically, finding the sub-dimensions to be differentially related to the customer’s satisfaction with, and trust of, the salesperson. Performance was not a dependent variable studied in the scale’s initial development, though it seems a logical outcome of superior service behavior, and is thus examined here.

(4) Selling Skills

So-called “selling skills” are one of five critical determinants of effectiveness in the sales role (Walker et al. 1977). In their meta-analysis of sales performance research, Churchill et al. (1985) found that what they had characterized as selling skills were, on a substantive basis, the largest single determinant of salesperson performance. Curiously, though, very little empirical work has been done in the ensuing two-plus decades to either substantiate

or refute this claim. Furthermore, there has been no systematic attempt to more deliberately operationalize the notion of “selling skills” until recently. Rentz et al. (2002) proposed and tested a scale incorporating three sales skill-based sub-dimensions: (1) “interpersonal skills” (e.g., verbal and non-verbal communication proficiency); (2) “salesmanship skills” (e.g., sales presentation abilities); and (3) “technical skills” (e.g., the salesperson’s knowledge of the technical capabilities and features of his/her products and product portfolio). These three skills assess competencies long-espoused by practitioners to be important drivers underlying exemplary salesperson performance today (e.g., Crom et al. 2003; Stevens and Kinni 2007).

Rentz et al. (2002) provided five empirically validated measures for each of the three selling skills scale sub-dimensions, and subsequently tested these against several other variables (e.g., empathy), descriptive characteristics of the salesperson (e.g., experience in the sales role), and two self-reported measures of performance, which both correlated significantly with all three selling skills scale sub-dimensions ($p < .01$).

More recently, Pettijohn et al. (2007) used the Selling Skills scale in conjunction with the customer orientation half of SOCO to determine their univariate effects on self-reported salesperson performance, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and turnover intentions. They found that Selling Skills explained a significant portion of self-reported performance in a homogenous sample of retail salespeople ($n=141$). Wachner et al. (2009) also used the Selling Skills scale to examine its interplay with SOCO in affecting subjective salesperson performance, and found that Selling Skills had a main effect on subjective performance, but also an interaction effect with SOCO.

Summary

Both SOCO and ADAPTS have been widely used in past work, and are thus well established. The two other perspectives—sales service behaviors and selling skills—are relatively new and have seen little additional application in marketing research. Furthermore, while there have been a few isolated attempts to simultaneously assess customer-directed perspectives of the salesperson’s job functioning and behavior (e.g., Kidwell, McFarland, and Avila 2007; Swenson and Herche 1994, both of which consider just SOCO and ADAPTS), previous studies have neither systematically nor exhaustively assessed the relative merits of the customer-directed scales described above in either psychometric or predictive terms. We address this gap by comparing these sales perspectives to one another within the context of a single study.

Method

Overview

A survey questionnaire including measures for all four of the scales reviewed above plus a commonly-used, self-reported (subjective) performance scale was developed. This survey was then sent to the sales personnel in three large organizations, each of which operates in a different industry: (i) CleanCo; (ii) rHouse; and (iii) RentCar.

The design and execution of the survey in all three companies followed Dillman’s (2000) tailored design method (TDM). Guidance also came from work on online data capture and e-mail administered surveys (e.g., Couper 2000). All responses were recorded through a secure third-party survey web-hosting service. At all three firms, senior management supported the study both by pre-announcing the survey and by agreeing to provide independent, objective measures of sales performance for each responding salesperson. The salespeople were offered an executive summary of the survey findings as well as entry in a drawing for one of four portable music players as incentive to complete the survey.

In general, missing data were not a significant issue, and the recommendations of Hair et al. (1995, pp. 43–57) and Allison (2002) were followed whenever possible to impute missing values. To assess non-response bias, the procedures recommended by Armstrong and Overton (1977) were used to compare early versus late respondents. No significant differences were found for any of the key constructs across all three companies.

Samples

Three distinct samples were collected for the purposes of this research, with a total of 1,013 salespeople invited to participate. CleanCo is a large Fortune 500 provider of cleaning and laundry services as well as uniforms and work-wear to customers globally. The survey was administered to their entire customer account management sales force worldwide ($n=360$). rHouse is a large division ($n=320$) of one of the USA’s leading residential real estate firms (i.e., real estate agents). The survey was administered to all agents operating in a division that covers a multi-state area in the Pacific Northwest of the USA. Finally, RentCar is one of the world’s largest car rental agencies. The survey was administered to all of their corporate and key account managers across the USA ($n=333$).

As noted earlier, the primary focus of this research is on the application of salient customer-directed scales in the context of longer-cycle, consultative type sales positions. As Rackham and DeVincentis (1999) and Stevens and Kinni (2007) have noted, an excellent proxy for the degree

to which a specific type of sales position (or industry setting) is strategic and consultative is the total length of time—or the “sales cycle”—from first contact with a prospect through the securing (i.e., closing) of the first order, contract etc. Discussions with the senior management teams at each of the three participating firms indicated that, on average, the typical time taken to move a prospect through the sales cycle was: about 3 months at both CleanCo and rHouse, and about 6 months at RentCar. A further indicator of the consultative nature of the sales task facing the salespeople in the studied firms is that they often have to orchestrate a comprehensive “solution” (Tuli et al. 2007) for each customer in conjunction with other business partners (e.g., the rHouse real estate agents often partnered with mortgage salespeople; legal personnel; contractors and home services providers all in the name of offering their customer a “turn-key” solution). Also, there was a high level of behind-the-scenes coordination occurring internally at each of these firms (e.g., marketing, finance, legal staff etc. See Plouffe and Barclay 2007), with this again being indicative of a consultative type of sales task (Weitz and Bradford 1999). The preceding converges to suggest that the salespeople in each of the three studied firms: (i) are not engaged in purely retail-level sales positions, and (ii) are undertaking strategic, consultative selling.

Measures

Scale measures were all taken from the published studies referenced above, with specific details offered below (see Appendix for all measurement items). Unless noted otherwise, all constructs were measured using 7-point “agree/disagree” Likert scales.²

SOCO We used the empirically-validated short form of the SOCO scale developed by Thomas et al. (2001) and further validated by Perriatt et al. (2004). The nine-point agree/disagree item response format originally employed by Saxe and Weitz (1982) was utilized, ranging from 1 = “never” to 3 = “rarely” to 5 = “sometimes” to 7 = “usually” to 9 = “always.”

² While all major construct measures were included in all three survey administrations, slight variations existed. Specifically, for the CleanCo survey, the full scales for both SOCO and ADAPTS were employed. However, our subsequent analyses of that data showed that the newer short forms of both of these scales exhibited superior measurement properties, so only the short forms were used for the rHouse and RentCar studies (which came after the CleanCo study). All of the analyses reported in the manuscript are thus based on these shorter forms. In addition, the measures of trait competitiveness and self-efficacy (which are discussed later in the manuscript) were included only in the RentCar survey. Finally, and as is noted in more detail in the text, the objective performance measures were different across the three companies.

Adaptive selling Here we used the empirically-validated short-form of Spiro and Weitz’s (1990) original ADAPTS scale (i.e., Robinson et al. 2000).

Selling skills Selling Skills were measured as recommended by Rentz et al. (2002). Each of the three skill sub-dimensions includes five items anchored by self-rated skill assessments of 1 = “highly unskilled” through 7 = “highly skilled.”

Sales service behavior The five sub-dimensions of this scale (Ahearne et al. 2007) each contain between three and seven items. Because the scale was originally developed for the pharmaceutical/physician industry context, a few minor item modifications were required to properly operationalize this scale for use in more general sales contexts. The developers of this scale were contacted before conducting our study to ensure that our modifications were appropriate.

Performance Despite a growing recognition that subjective and objective measures of salesperson performance are not interchangeable, and that each has strengths and weaknesses (e.g., Rich et al. 1999), researchers generally continue to use only one or the other in their studies. At the same time, more recent research shows that relying solely on subjective, self-reported measures of performance from salespeople may be problematic because of the so-called “performance effect” (i.e., low performers overestimate while high-performers underestimate their actual performance. See Jaramillo et al. 2003).

Because our interest is on assessing the relationships between the aforementioned selling perspectives on both subjective and objective salesperson performance, we measure both types of performance. Subjective performance is assessed using six self-reported performance measures collected from salespeople as part of the questionnaire administration ($\alpha = .92$). These items were based on Johlke et al.’s (2000) operationalization of Behrman and Perreault’s (1982) scale. Their scale employs an 11-point Likert format, where respondents rate their performance from—5 “much worse than the other salespeople in this company” to “average” to + 5 “much better than the other salespeople in this company”. Objective salesperson performance measures were solicited from the management teams at all three firms for all survey respondents upon the closing of each survey.

Survey results, sales performance measures, & epistemic orientation of constructs

Table 1 reports the number of initially surveyed salespeople by firm, as well as the number of completed useable, responses. Table 1 also reports key descriptive data for each sample. As

can be seen, the samples exhibit a wide range of respondent ages, a reasonable gender mix, high levels of educational attainment, and substantial experience in the sales role.

Unfortunately, the objective performance measures supplied by rHouse senior management were incomplete for many of its salespeople. As a result, we are only able to examine the links between the various sales scales and objective performance for CleanCo and RentCar. The measures of objective salesperson performance for both CleanCo and RentCar are detailed next. However, different metrics are used by the two firms, so the objective performance measures cannot be directly compared across companies.

For CleanCo, the objective performance measures are: (1) Plan % (a measure reflecting the salesperson's dollar sales versus an annual plan target set for that individual); and (2) AWRV (the average weekly rental value, in dollars, generated by the salesperson). CleanCo's sales management leadership group relies heavily on these measures to both reward and manage their salesforce. These two objective performance measures were combined using factor analysis to create a single overall objective performance measure for CleanCo. For RentCar, management uses the following measures to evaluate their sales personnel: (i) % annual growth in overall sales revenues; and (ii) % annual growth in existing customer accounts. Once again, these measures were combined using factor analysis to create a single overall objective performance measure.³

³ For objective performance, we use a formative epistemic relationship between the measures and its underlying construct. As Diamantopoulos and Siguaw (2006, pp. 266–267) note, a Type 1 error (the underestimation of explained variance on the dependent variable of interest—in this case, performance) may occur if the researcher specifies formative measures in a reflective manner (Law and Wong 1999). Furthermore, the measures of performance reported by the firms we study appear to capture distinct facets of the sales task, and a formative perspective is better suited (than a reflective perspective) to this type of context.

We also considered subjective performance as a formative construct. However, all six subjective performance items are highly correlated with one another, and the loadings that result from a reflective model are all quite large (.8 or higher). Furthermore, running a factor analysis yields a single factor solution, with all loadings .84 or higher. As a result, using a formative epistemic relationship for the subjective performance measures leads to virtually identical results as those obtained when it is reflective. We therefore decided to keep subjective performance as a reflective construct, for three reasons. First, most of the past work that has looked at selling scales has utilized a reflective (rather than formative) presentation of subjective performance, and thus our results are more directly comparable with past work when we also employ a reflective approach (see Franke and Park 2006; Schwepker 2003). Second, the results we obtain using either a reflective or formative approach are essentially the same. Third, we agree with Cohen et al. (Cohen et al. 1990) that when researchers utilize formative indicators they must base their choice of measures on strong theory, and with Bollen and Lennox (1991) that researchers using a formative approach need a “census” of potential measures rather than a “sample” (Hulland 1999). In the present work, we have neither.

Analysis & results

Measurement models

In order to best assess the quality of the measures employed in the study, all available survey responses across the three studied firms were pooled ($n=524$) for the analyses reported next. To assess the overall measurement quality of the four sales scales as well as subjective performance, we estimated separate confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) models for each construct using EQS (version 6.1). (Both firm-specific and aggregate models were estimated, but we focus here on the aggregate results.). If a model was not initially acceptable (i.e., fit values below generally accepted levels), poorly loading items were dropped and the model was re-estimated. However, at least three items were retained for each scale (or sub-scale) both to ensure reasonable content validity and to avoid indeterminate solutions. The results of these analyses are discussed, by scale, in the paragraphs that follow.

SOCO

There has been considerable debate in the literature as to whether the SOCO scale should be considered unidimensional (with the “Selling Orientation” and “Customer Orientation” sub-scales viewed as two ends of a continuum), or two-dimensional (see Periatt et al. 2004; Schwepker 2003; Wachner et al. 2009). In order to address this issue, we estimated both one and two factor CFA models. (The selling orientation items were reverse-coded prior to actual estimation of the one factor model). It soon became clear that customer orientation item 6 (see Appendix) exhibits a consistently low loading, so this item was dropped from all subsequent analyses, leaving four items for the customer orientation dimension, and five for the selling orientation dimension. The resulting one factor CFA model provides a poor fit to the data (χ^2 (df=27)=277.18, $p<.001$; NFI=.758; CFI=.778; AGFI=.772; RMSEA=.128). In contrast, the two factor CFA fits the data quite well (χ^2 (26)=55.78, $p<.001$; NFI=.958; CFI=.977; AGFI=.960; RMSEA=.047). Furthermore, the improvement in χ^2 in moving from a one factor to a two factor model is significant (χ^2 (1)=221.40, $p<.001$), and the estimated phi value (for the correlation between the customer orientation and selling orientation latent constructs) is $-.360$ (with standard error .052), a value significantly less than one. Thus, the evidence here strongly supports a two-dimensional view of SOCO, which we use in our subsequent analyses. (We also examined the effects of using a unidimensional SOCO measure; in all cases, the results are weaker than when a two-dimensional perspective is employed.)

Table 1 Survey response rates and descriptive characteristics, by sample

	CleanCo	rHouse	RentCar
Outbound sample (n)	360	320	333
Completed surveys (n)	202	117	218
Firm-specific response rate	56.1%	36.6%	65.5%
Useable responses (n)	195	111	218
Pooled responses (Response Rate), all firms→524 (51.7%)			
Age (mean; S.D.)	33.5 (5.6)	42.4 (4.1)	28.1 (3.0)
% of sample with University degree	62.8%	87.4%	92.1%
Gender mix (% male/female)	75/25	42/58	56/44
Years selling experience (mean; S.D.)	5.2 (2.1)	7.7 (3.4)	6.2 (1.4)

ADAPTS

As noted earlier, the short form of the ADAPTS scale was found to provide a better fit to our data than the long form for the CleanCo sample, so we subsequently employed only the short form of this scale. Looking at the data in aggregate, a one factor CFA model provides good overall fit to the data ($\chi^2(5)=4.03$, ns; NFI=.995; CFI=.999; AGFI=.991; RMSEA=.001).

Selling skills

A three factor CFA model was fit to the fifteen item scale proposed by Rentz et al. (2002). To improve model fit, the fifth item for the “salesmanship skills” dimension was dropped due to an unacceptably low loading ($\lambda=.54$). In the revised model, all remaining loadings were acceptable. The overall fit of this latter model is somewhat lower than is generally desired, but approaches acceptable levels ($\chi^2(74)=293.90$, $p<.001$; NFI=.894; CFI=.918; AGFI=.891; RMSEA=.075). Furthermore, a three dimensional model is strongly supported by the data. Comparisons between the three factor CFA model and all potential two-factor alternatives indicated a significantly better fit for the former ($p<.001$ in all cases). In addition, all of the inter-construct correlations are significantly less than one (ϕ (interpersonal/salesmanship)=.340 (se=.037); ϕ (interpersonal/technical)=.290 (se=.039); ϕ (salesmanship/technical)=.429 (se=.044)).

Sales service behaviors

We estimated Ahearne et al.’s (2007) scale using a five factor CFA model. A number of items demonstrated weak loadings (i.e., $\lambda<.7$), and were dropped. (Specifically, diligence item 1; information communication item 4; sportsmanship items 2 and 5; and inducements item 2 were all dropped from the original model.). The revised five-dimensional CFA model provides a somewhat weak fit to the data ($\chi^2(160)=480.00$, $p<.001$; NFI=.857;

CFI=.899; AGFI=.886; RMSEA=.062). However, the five-dimensional model offered a significantly better fit than all potential four factor solutions ($p<.001$ in all cases).

Subjective performance

The six items used to measure self-reported sales performance provided a relatively strong fit for a unidimensional CFA model ($\chi^2(9)=7.05$, p ns; NFI=.875; CFI=.978; AGFI=.894; RMSEA=.095).

Sales perspectives: internal consistency and correlations with subjective performance

Table 2 reports the final number of measurement items retained for each dimension of each sales perspective, coefficient α by scale (or sub-scale) for each of the three companies, and the simple bivariate correlation between each scale (or sub-scale) and subjective performance. Nunnally (1978) recommends that α should exceed a threshold value of .70. As Table 2 shows, the two dimensions of SOCO, ADAPTS, and all three dimensions of the Selling Skills scale exceed (or come very close to reaching) this threshold. In contrast, only the diligence and inducements dimensions of the Sales Service Behaviors scale reach (or nearly reach) this level, while the other three dimensions consistently fall short of the mark.

Table 2 also shows the correlations between each scale (or sub-scale) and subjective performance, for all three firms, while Table 3 shows the bivariate correlations between each selling perspective (or sub-scale of each perspective, if applicable). As was evidenced in the preceding review of the literature, each of these scales has been proposed as a predictor of sales performance. Thus, to demonstrate nomological validity, the reported correlations with subjective performance should all be significant and positive (except for SOCO’s selling orientation sub-scale, which should be negative). As Table 2 shows, all three dimensions of the Selling Skills scale are strongly, positively, and consistently related to subjective perfor-

Table 2 Internal consistency and univariate correlations with subjective performance, by scale and firm

	n _i	α			Correlation with SubPerf		
		CleanCo	rHouse	RentCar	CleanCo	rHouse	RentCar
1. SOCO							
Selling orientation	4	.82	.76	.78	-.16 [#]	-.18 [#]	-.07
Customer orientation	5	.74	.69	.68	.16 [#]	.24 [#]	.13
2. Adapts							
	5	.73	.81	.80	.26 ^{**}	.26 ^{**}	.32 ^{**}
3. Selling skills							
Interpersonal	5	.74	.73	.75	.28 ^{**}	.36 ^{**}	.35 ^{**}
Salesmanship	4	.80	.83	.83	.60 ^{**}	.54 ^{**}	.42 ^{**}
Technical	5	.79	.86	.79	.46 ^{**}	.50 ^{**}	.38 ^{**}
4. Sales service quality							
Diligence	7	.82	.79	.81	.18 [*]	.15 [#]	.28 ^{**}
Info communication	3	.74	.63	.56	.23 ^{**}	.22 [*]	.20 ^{**}
Sportsmanship	3	.72	.64	.52	.08	.15 [#]	.23 ^{**}
Inducement	4	.69	.73	.68	.19 ^{**}	.23 [#]	.24 ^{**}
Empathy	3	.52	.40	.61	.26 ^{**}	.09	.16 [*]

*denotes $p < .05$; **denotes $p < .01$; ***denotes $p < .001$; #denotes $p < .10$

mance, as is the ADAPTS scale. In contrast, the results for the SOCO and Sales Service Behaviors perspectives are more variable. In addition, the relatively low correlations reported in Table 3 between different scales suggest that they can adequately be distinguished from one another. (Some of the correlations between dimensions of the same scale are more highly correlated with one another, but this is taken into account in the CFA model estimations.)

To summarize, the relatively new Selling Skills scale appears to have solid measurement properties while also demonstrating good nomological validity with subjective performance, as does the well-established ADAPTS scale. The SOCO scale appears to be more weakly linked to subjective performance, although its measurement properties are sound. Finally, the newer Sales Service Behaviors scale, while showing some promise, is the weakest of the

four, both in terms of its measurement properties and its link to subjective performance. For these reasons, we focus the remainder of this paper on a more detailed examination of how Selling Skills compares to—and complements—the more established SOCO and ADAPTS scales.

Multivariate effects on performance

As described earlier, a primary interest of this research is to examine not only how these scales relate to subjective performance but also to objective measures of salesperson performance. Furthermore, we assess the extent to which the newer Selling Skills perspective can augment the predictive effects of SOCO and ADAPTS. We used the subjective and objective performance measures from both the CleanCo and RentCar samples to address these issues.

Table 3 Correlations between scales/scale sub-dimensions (all three samples)

	SO	CO	Adapt	IS	SS	TS	SSQ (Dil)	SSQ (Ind)	SSQ (IC)	SS (Sprt)	SS (Emp)
SO	1.00										
CO	.40	1.00									
Adapts	.00	.22	1.00								
IS	-.04	.18	.39	1.00							
SS	-.09	.22	.40	.52	1.00						
TS	-.19	.22	.28	.41	.56	1.00					
SSQ (Dil)	-.31	.31	.22	.23	.26	.36	1.00				
SSQ (Ind)	.01	.15	.24	.20	.17	.28	.09	1.00			
SSQ (IC)	-.20	.33	.22	.23	.24	.31	.29	.26	1.00		
SSQ (Sprt)	-.20	.28	.24	.27	.22	.24	.37	.18	.26	1.00	
SSQ (Emp)	-.22	.33	.19	.15	.18	.22	.34	.27	.32	.30	1.00

All coefficients are significant at $p < .01$, except for those shown in bold ($p < .05$) and those that are of absolute magnitude less than .05 (n.s.)

Table 4 reports the results for four models that regress the performance scores on the three selling scales. Models A and C include only the effects of SOCO and ADAPTS, while models B and D add the effects of the Selling Skills scale as well. (All coefficients are standardized, and the results for RentCar are shown in brackets beside the CleanCo results.)

For subjective performance, when only SOCO and ADAPTS are included (i.e., model A), the overall proportion of variance explained is relatively small ($R^2=.085$ for CleanCo $R^2=.105$ for RentCar), with ADAPTS significantly and positively related to performance. However, the two dimensions of SOCO are found to have no significant impact. Once the effects of all three scales are taken into account (i.e., model B), for CleanCo, only the salesmanship and technical skills dimensions of the Selling Skills scale are found to be significant (and positively related to performance). For RentCar, the effect of ADAPTS is significant and positive, as is the salesmanship skills dimension of Selling Skills. In both cases, the overall proportion of variance explained when Selling Skills is included in the analysis is significantly higher {i.e., $R^2=.394$ for CleanCo and $R^2=.233$ for RentCar} than when it is not included, { $F(3, 188)=49.93, p<.001$, and $F(3, 211)=11.74, p<.001$, respectively}. The R^2 of .394 for the full subjective performance model for CleanCo (Model B) is notably higher than has been found in past sales performance research studies in marketing (i.e., these types of R^2 values are more typically in the 10–20% range, see Churchill et al. 1985; Rich et al. 1999; Vinchur

et al. 1998). Similarly, the R^2 of .233 for RentCar is also slightly above the historical norms achieved in the sales performance stream, while the R^2 values for the other models are in line with previous work. The higher R^2 values for the subjective performance models suggests that more fully considering specific combinations of the selling perspectives tested in this work may enhance the overall variance explained in sales performance over and beyond what can be achieved by employing individual scales in isolation.

For objective performance, neither SOCO nor ADAPTS significantly affect performance for either company when the Selling Skills scale is not included (i.e., model C, $R^2=.017$ for CleanCo, and $R^2=.010$ for RentCar). When the effects of Selling Skills are included, however, both ADAPTS and the technical skills dimension of Selling Skills are found to be significant for CleanCo (i.e., model D). Somewhat surprisingly, however, the effect of ADAPTS becomes negative in sign. Furthermore, the improvement in variance explained for the more complete model ($R^2=.091$) is significant versus the reduced model { $F(3, 188)=51.77, p<.001$ }. (For RentCar, none of the effects for objective performance are significant.)

The results from both sets of regressions and for both companies suggest that SOCO does not play a strong role in predicting either subjective or objective performance. The subjective performance results indicate that both the ADAPTS and Selling Skills scales play a predictive role, but that their effects may be intertwined and context-

Table 4 Multivariate effects of sales scales on subjective and objective performance, for cleanco (and rentcar)

	Subjective		Objective	
	Performance		Performance	
	Model A	Model B	Model C	Model D
SOCO				
Selling orientation	-.11 (-.21)	.01 (.02)	-.05 (.07)	.01 (.06)
Customer orientation	.12 (.05)	-.02 (.01)	-.11 (.08)	-.09 (.09)
ADAPTS	.23** (.30***)	.01 (.19**)	-.12 (-.06)	-.16* (-.02)
Selling skills				
Interpersonal		-.01 (.08)		-.03 (-.07)
Salesmanship		.49*** (.23**)		.03 (-.02)
Technical		.23*** (.13)		.28*** (-.05)
R²	.085 (.105)	.394 (.233)	.017 (.010)	.091 (.022)
CleanCo				
F (3, 191)	5.95***		1.11	
F (6, 188)		20.41***		3.13 **
RentCar				
F (3, 214)	8.40***		0.69	
F (6, 211)		10.66***		0.78 **

Table entries are standardized regression coefficients
The first reported value is for the CleanCo sample ($n=195$). The second value (in brackets) is for the RentCar sample ($n=218$)
*denotes $p<.05$; **denotes $p<.01$; ***denotes $p<.001$

Table 5 Main and interaction effects of adapts and selling skills scales on subjective and objective performance (RentCar)

	Subjective Performance		Objective Performance	
	Model E	Model F	Model G	Model H
	Adapts	.06	.07	-.03
Selling skills				
Interpersonal (IS)	.02 [#]	.03	-.07	-.01
Salesmanship (SS)	.19 [*]	.17 [*]	-.02	-.07
Technical (TS)	.12	.12	-.05	-.05
Adapts * selling skills				
Adapts * IS		.10		.25 [*]
Adapts * SS		-.08		-.33 ^{**}
Adapts * TS		-.02		-.08
Controls				
Gender (Female = 1)	-.16 ^{**}	-.16 ^{**}	.02	.03
Experience	.24 ^{***}	.24 ^{***}	-.02	.01
Trait competitiveness	.16 [*]	.15 [*]	.06	.06
Self-efficacy	.18 ^{**}	.18 ^{**}	-.01	-.02
R²	.347	.348	.020	.094
F (8, 208)	15.71 ^{***}		0.50	
F (6, 188)		11.49 ^{***}		1.93 [*]

Table entries are standardized regression coefficients

[#] denotes $p < .1$; ^{*}denotes $p < .05$; ^{**}denotes $p < .01$; ^{***}denotes $p < .001$

specific. This suggests a possible interaction between ADAPTS and Selling Skills. We explore this possibility—using data from RentCar—in the next section.⁴

Selling skills and the ADAPTS—performance relationship

As noted earlier, the Selling Skills scale has been found to not just predict self-reported salesperson performance (Pettijohn et al. 2007), but has also exhibited an interaction effect with SOCO (see Wachner et al. 2009). Furthermore, the multivariate results reported in the preceding section point to a possible interaction between ADAPTS and Selling Skills. From a theoretical perspective, such an interaction seems quite plausible. The practice of adaptive selling is, by definition, behavior that relates to the in-person, dyadic interactions which characterize the relationship between the salesperson and the customer and includes prospecting, qualifying, interacting with, and presenting to them (see Spiro and Weitz 1990; Weitz et al. 1986). However, in the *absence* of specific sales skills (i.e., Rentz et al. 2002), the ultimate effectiveness of an adaptive selling behavioral orientation on performance may be attenuated.

⁴ This is not the result of high inter-correlations between ADAPTS and the three dimensions of the Selling Skills scale, however. As shown in Table 3, the ADAPTS correlation with interpersonal skills is .39; .40 with salesmanship skills; and .28 with technical skills. Furthermore, multicollinearity diagnostics from the regression models did not indicate any problems.

Thus, we predict a positive interaction between ADAPTS and Selling Skills.

To further explore this possibility, the RentCar salesforce survey was expanded to include several additional explanatory variables that might provide alternative explanations for the results obtained to this point: (i) gender; (ii) industry experience; (iii) trait competitiveness; and (iv) self-efficacy. Each of these control variables has been shown in previous sales research to be empirically linked to salesperson performance (Brown et al. 1998; Churchill et al. 1985; Ingram and Bellenger 1983; Levy and Sharma 1994; Wang and Netemeyer 2002). Table 5 reports results for four regression models, with both measures of performance regressed on either the main effects of ADAPTS and Selling Skills alone (models E and G), or the main effects plus their interactions (models F and H). Both ADAPTS and Selling Skills were mean-centered before calculating the interactions. The reported coefficients in Table 5 are standardized values.

For subjective performance, the main effects-only model (model E) explains 34.7% of the variance, with the main effects of interpersonal skills and salesmanship skills having a significant, positive impact. In contrast, none of the interactions in the expanded model (model F) are significant, and this model does not represent a significant improvement in R² over the main effects-only model. In both models, gender, industry experience, trait competitiveness, and self-efficacy are all significant control variables.

Subjective performance is significantly lower for women than for men, while more years of experience, greater trait competitiveness, and superior self-efficacy translate into significantly higher self-reported performance.

The results for objective performance provide an interesting contrast. First (and somewhat surprisingly), none of the covariates significantly affect objective sales performance. Second, the main effects-only model (model G) is not significant overall, and none of its parameters are significant. However, when the interactions are added (model H), both the ADAPTS * salesmanship skills and ADAPTS * interpersonal skills interactions are significant ($p < .01$ and $p < .05$ respectively). In order to better interpret the implications of these interaction effects, we followed the procedure recommended by Cohen et al. (2002). Standardized values of -1 and 1 were used in the regression model for all interacting predictors, and the predicted values of sales performance were plotted. Figure 1 summarizes these results.

The top panel of Fig. 1 shows that when salespeople have limited salesmanship skills (low SS), the greater their adaptability, the better their resulting objective performance. Conversely, when they have superior salesmanship skills (high SS), a greater level of adaptability is actually counter-productive in terms of objective performance. (We explore why this might be so in the ensuing Discussion section.)

As shown in the lower panel of Fig. 1, high levels of interpersonal skills (High IS) combine with higher levels of adaptive selling to positively affect objective sales performance. Conversely, high levels of interpersonal skills combined with low levels of adaptive selling yield poorer salesperson performance. In contrast, a salesperson who has lower interpersonal skills benefits in terms of objective performance from limited adaptability. As his or her adaptability increases, objective performance tends to suffer.

Discussion

The value of multiple perspectives

Historically, marketing researchers have tended to not only to develop, but more importantly, apply individual-level, customer-directed selling perspectives in isolation from one another (e.g., Franke and Park 2006). Presumably, the assumptions that underpin this approach are: (i) that any incremental variance in sales performance which might be explained by simultaneously considering additional perspectives is negligible, and/or (ii) that there is no theoretically compelling reason to examine selling perspectives in conjunction with one another. The results reported

Adapts * IS and Adapts * SS Interactions (RentCar)

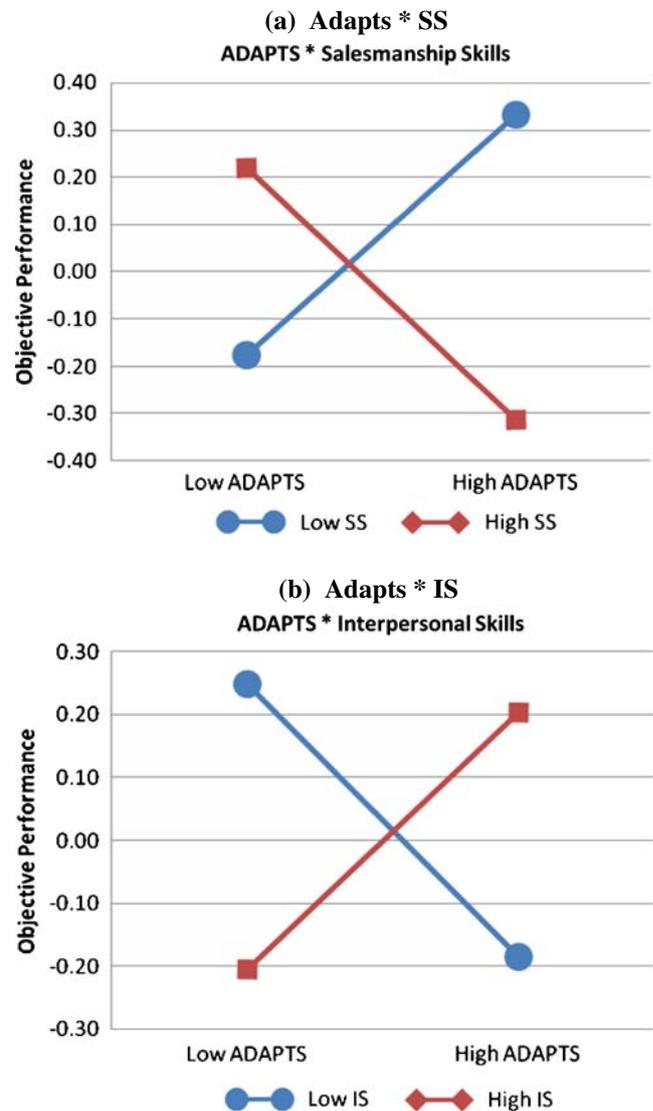


Figure 1 Adapts * IS and ADAPTS * SS interactions (RentCar).

earlier (Tables 4–5) suggest otherwise, and lead us to recommend the simultaneous use of multiple scales in sales performance research. In particular, the relatively new Selling Skills scale proposed by Rentz et al. (2002) shows promise, especially in conjunction with the long-standing adaptive selling model. However, the exact nature of the relationships between these different perspectives (and their corresponding scales) are not yet fully understood, although findings both here and elsewhere (i.e., Wachner et al. 2009) point to interactions between them. More work is clearly needed to better understand these inter-relationships.

Our results also suggest several implications for future applications of the four scales studied here. Somewhat disappointingly, the Sales Service Behaviors perspective (Ahearne et al. 2007) has suspect measurement properties

and exhibits weak effects on performance. Similarly, SOCO is only weakly linked to subjective performance across our samples (i.e., the correlations reported in Table 2), and is not at all related to objective sales performance. Given SOCO's rich heritage and the prevailing wisdom in both the sales research community and amongst the ranks of practicing marketing managers that this selling perspective is integral to effectiveness in the sales role (for example, see Schwepker 2003), these results are unexpected, surprising, and beg for further scrutiny in future research.

In contrast, the effect of ADAPTS on the various measures of salesperson job performance showed somewhat more promise. In the multivariate regression models, ADAPTS is significantly related to both subjective and objective performance across samples. Similarly, the Selling Skills scale proposed by Rentz et al. (2002) exhibits strong measurement properties, is significantly related to both subjective and objective performance, and incrementally provides explanatory power when combined with other scales.

Franke and Park's (2006) recent review helps to better contextualize the various sales performance model R^2 results obtained across the analyses reported here. In their meta-analysis of ADAPTS' and SOCO's effects on sales performance and salesperson job satisfaction, they found that neither SOCO nor ADAPTS account for much explained variance in salesperson performance, regardless of how it is operationalized (i.e., less than 7% for any single predictor, and no more than 18% variance explained for any of the meta-analytic structural models they tested). They also find that ADAPTS is more strongly related to self-reported measures of performance than to other performance measures. Franke and Park's (2006) findings are generally consistent with the results reported here; however, the R^2 values in our study tend to exceed the values they report. For example, the self-reported performance models reported in this research exhibit R^2 values in the 30% to 40% range. These results on self-reported performance are higher than is typically achieved in salesperson performance research (see Churchill et al. 1985; Jaramillo et al. 2003; Rich et al. 1999; Vinchur et al. 1998). What is different, of course, is the important incremental role played by the relatively new Selling Skills scale in predicting performance. As for the objective performance measures, our results are basically in-line with past work.

Inter-relationships between sales perspectives

Closer scrutiny of the multivariate results reveals that ADAPTS' ability to predict objective sales performance is muted until the salesperson's selling skills are also considered. This finding is actually consistent with past research, because in those cases that have documented a

significant relationship between ADAPTS and performance, the results in virtually all such instances have been achieved using subjectively-assessed performance measures collected from salespeople themselves (Franke and Park 2006). This research therefore complements past work by not only showing that ADAPTS can influence objective sales performance, but that its effect is also moderated by the salesperson's selling skills. Thus, the presence (or absence) of specific selling skills (e.g., interpersonal skills) can act as a critical boundary-condition in the ADAPTS→salesperson job performance relationship.

Looking more closely at the interaction effects between ADAPTS and selling skills, the first set of significant interactions were between ADAPTS and the salesmanship skills dimension. Performance is low when there are low levels of both adaptive selling and salesmanship skills. And this makes sense—if the salesperson is not catering to (i.e., adapting to) current customers *in conjunction with* exhibiting lower levels of basic salesmanship skills (e.g., prospecting for, and qualifying, new customers), their performance should logically suffer. Interestingly, a high level of either ADAPTS or salesmanship skills—but critically, *not* both at the same time—yields superior performance. This finding could signal that adaptive selling and salesmanship skills are both needed “tools” within the salesperson's broader portfolio, but that the specific instances in which each is most prudently employed might vary—for example, depending upon the life stage of the products the salesperson is representing (i.e., introduction, growth, maturity, or decline. See Zoltners et al. 2006) or where the salesperson is within the context of the overall sales cycle (i.e., prospecting vs. ‘presenting’ vs. closing. Crom et al. 2003). This type of thinking would also help to explain the finding that high levels of both ADAPTS and salesmanship skills simultaneously leads to lower performance, the supposition here being that the salesperson's performance can be better optimized if they focus on one or the other. It may be that salespeople overload (or excessively burden) themselves in attempting to pursue high levels of both ADAPTS and salesmanship skills simultaneously, thus hampering their performance. There is a rich literature within the sales stream on role-overload (e.g., Singh 1998) and salesperson burnout (e.g., Low et al. 2001) that supports this type of conjecture. If this type of interpretation is correct, it suggests that sales managers may need to better coach their salespeople to understand that attempting to simultaneously do “too much” may actually be counter-productive in terms of performance.

The ADAPTS * interpersonal skills interaction also provides some important insights. First, low interpersonal skills coupled with high adaptive selling *or* high adaptive selling coupled with low interpersonal skills yields lower job performance in the sales role. This is logical, since

attempting to sell adaptively *without* matching interpersonal skills simply would not work, much the same as high levels of interpersonal skills that *are not* manifested through an adaptive selling orientation will ultimately be wasted. High performance in this instance stems from a combination of both high interpersonal skills and high ADAPTS. From a theoretical perspective, this may well be because as salespeople evolve through their careers (e.g., Cron 1984), they eventually come to the realization that the optimal pathway to high performance is through a combination of both high interpersonal skills and adaptive selling. Or it could be that perhaps they have somehow become more competent at these things through trial and error, over successive sales campaigns and deals, etc.

One curious result with this set of interactions is that low interpersonal skills and low adaptive selling can also yield high performance (top left-hand corner of the ADAPTS * interpersonal skills interaction plot). This is a puzzling and unexpected result. We suggest two possible explanations for this, both of which are predicated upon the notion that there may be unique characteristics inherent in the samples we examined. First, it may be that salespeople who fit this profile (i.e., low ADAPTS and interpersonal skills) are receiving ample support internally from their selling peers, 1st level sales managers, and/or key others (such as personnel in the marketing dept.; order support; financing etc.) such that they end up performing at a high level despite the fact that they are low on both of these dimensions (see Plouffe and Barclay 2007; Sujan 1999; Weitz and Bradford 1999). A second explanation for this might be found within the social styles congruency literature (see Forgas 2001). As a backdrop, the sales stream has provided a rich discourse on the fact that buyers and sellers often have similar communication styles (Boorum et al. 1998; Castleberry and Shepherd 1993), and that when a high degree of congruency exists in this regard, a foundation for exemplary salesperson performance is created (Seligman and Schulman 1986). If this is true, interpersonal skills would be less important, because a common foundation for making the buyer-seller relationship work (i.e., similar communication and social styles) would already exist (Mikulincer et al. 1998). Therefore, salespeople could actually perform at a high level with lower levels of interpersonal skills, and since they would be calling on buyers with largely the same social style, the need for employing an adaptive selling orientation might also be ameliorated since the buyer and salesperson are so similar.

While both of the above explanations are plausible, they raise additional questions which future research would do well to untangle (e.g., by pursuing dyadic research designs which simultaneously examine both buyer and seller in concert. See Williams and Plouffe 2007). In the end, there

are obviously many “moving parts” to being successful in the sales role, and it is entirely conceivable that other elements not captured in the present study may also help explain these results.

Managerial and practical implications

This work provides several important implications for salespeople and those that manage them. A first set of implications surrounds the broader utility of Rentz et al.’s (2002) Selling Skills perspective. The three skills offered in this scale capture key elements at the heart of the sales job today that neither entrenched (e.g., SOCO) nor emerging (e.g., Sales Service Behavior) sales perspectives in marketing speak to. Furthermore, it is worth taking stock of the fact that although managers have long suggested that selling skills are critical to success in the sales role (e.g., Crom et al. 2003), it was not until recently that a valid measurement instrument was developed to tap this domain (i.e., the work of Rentz et al. 2002). Understanding the role of selling skills within the context of salesperson performance becomes an a critical issue because of the commonly held belief that high levels of selling performance can be achieved by simply adapting to the customer (e.g., Burrus 2008; Gedney 2003) or focusing on proactive, long-term relationships with them (Briggs 2008). While doing these things is of course important, our results suggest that other elements within the overall fabric of the sales job (e.g., interpersonal and salesmanship skills) also seem to play a role in shaping the salesperson’s performance. Therefore, the skills and competencies required for success and high performance as a consultative salesperson today may well be: (i) greater in number than previously thought, while (ii) exhibiting complex yet enlightening linkages (i.e., interactions) between them. As such, managers need to be apprised of this expanded set of behavioral skills which seem to underlie high performance in the sales role such that they can incorporate these into the front-line coaching, mentoring, and development of their salespeople (Rackham and DeVincentis 1999). In a similar light, marketing researchers should be apprised that more robust and richly specified models of customer-directed salesperson job performance are possible by simultaneously considering selling skills and adaptive selling (i.e., model variance explained in terms of sales performance rose from 8% to 39% at one firm, and 10% to 23% at another).

A second set of implications emerging from this work surrounds the hiring, retention, and training of salespeople today. Correctly identifying salespeople with the potential to succeed is a chronically acute and pressing problem for sales managers (Marshall et al. 2003). And yet, this work showed that the effects of each of the tested sales perspectives on the different measures of selling perfor-

mance tended to vary somewhat by firm or industry. The data also showed that the selling skills and ADAPTS perspectives had the most promise, with SOCO and sales service behaviors exhibiting poorer results. Therefore, managers may well want to focus more on selling skills and ADAPTS, given their showing in this research. Pushing this notion further and from a very pragmatic perspective, sales managers (and/or the human resources personnel who assist them) could replicate the basic approach outlined here to determine which of the various sales perspectives are most important in their competitive or industry context (e.g., which of the perspectives/scale dimensions are significant determinants of performance for, say, the top quartile of their salesforce). In terms of new hires coming over from other firms or industries, managers could screen potential sales candidates through the filter of those specific behaviors and skills (or desirable combinations thereof) which were identified as being vital to peak performance in their industry. And as for incumbent and veteran salespeople inside the organization, in a similar light, sales managers could attempt to coach or retrain low or more marginal performers on the missing or weak dimensions. With the costs associated with hiring and ramping-up a single salesperson often spiraling into the hundreds of thousands of dollars and the time required to break-even on that investment pushing into years-long increments (Stein 2006), the approach outlined here would cost little, and in fact, could be integrated into already existing data collection efforts (e.g., regularly scheduled surveys of salesforce sentiment or marketplace dynamics).

A third and final set of implications emerging from the study concerns linkages back to commonly-accepted tenets within the community of practicing sales managers, consultants, and salespeople themselves. Consider the enormously popular SPIN[®] selling methodology (i.e., Situation, Problem, Implications, Needs/Payoff. See Rackham 1988). At its core, this widely-accepted approach to the sales role proposes that high performance will be achieved by those who can accurately diagnose the sales situations within which they find themselves and understand both the unique problems (and opportunities) the customer is facing, and how these might be best tackled (Rackham and DeVincentis 1999). These fundamental tenets of the SPIN[®] approach are therefore really tantamount to adaptive selling, at least as it has been articulated and examined in the marketing literature to this point. And yet, the ability to correctly position the right product/service recommendation for the customer (i.e., the “needs/payoff” dimension of SPIN[®]) is a specific behavioral skill that is completely absent within the adaptive selling paradigm. However, when we simultaneously consider adaptive selling in conjunction with the newer selling skills perspective, this research shows that the latter actually complements the former by underscoring that

the salesperson must also possess salesmanship and technical skills for optimized job effectiveness and performance. Thus, the in-the-field practice of SPIN[®] selling seems to imply the need for both adaptation on the part of the salesperson as well as more discrete types of selling skills and knowledge.

Limitations & future research directions

We recognize that there are limitations with this work. One such limitation pertains to the nature of the samples which were examined. Although the achieved response rates were good (51.7% across the three samples) and helped provide a degree of generalizability for the findings, the samples are still relatively homogeneous. Because the skills required for sales effectiveness will tend to vary across industry contexts (Rackham and DeVincentis 1999), future work would do well to more systematically incorporate variables that capture unique industry effects into sales behavior models such as those tested here, as these, in turn, might reveal other important boundary conditions.

A second limitation stems from the fact that we largely assume only direct effect relationships between each of the studied selling perspectives and performance. In terms of performance itself, future research is needed that might more fully consider behavioral measures of sales performance, as opposed to outcome measures (Behrman and Perreault 1982; Cravens et al. 1993). Additional work is also needed that examines alternative types of relationships between the perspectives (including mediation and other moderating effects). For example, future work could attempt to create a richer nomological network between the perspectives (e.g., Bagozzi 1984). As Franke and Park (2006, p. 21) note, such new work “...could help justify the causal interpretation and clarify the directions of the relationships between ADAPTS, SOCO, and other variables...{and} how relationships between certain variables are mediated or moderated by other variables.” Along these same lines, Stock and Hoyer’s (2005) recent delineation between customer-directed selling *behaviors* and salesperson *attitudes* (not measured in our study) could also be an excellent departure point to further develop this notion.

A primary objective of the present study was to identify and test in a head-to-head manner various “customer-directed” perspectives of the sales role. These perspectives each possess an underlying theoretical orientation focused on the salesperson’s behaviors and activities beyond the boundaries of their own organization. Recently, Plouffe and Barclay (2007) argued that the salesperson’s “internally-directed” interactions with co-workers, support staff, selling peers, and management inside their own firm may also critically shape achieved salesperson performance. This view suggests that there is a largely uncharted domain of

salesperson behavior and job functioning—the intraorganizational—that has little or nothing to do with customers or prospects *per se*, yet which could potentially be as important a driver of selling performance as the customer-directed one which was the focus of this research (see also Plank and Reid 1994; Stevens and Kinni 2007; Sujan 1999). As noted above, attempting to incorporate such an internally-directed selling orientation may help to clarify some of the intriguing—but theoretically complex—interactions between ADAPTS and the various Selling Skills dimensions which were identified in this work.

Conclusion

This research sought to identify and compare various customer-directed perspectives of the sales role within the context of the same controlled study, on multiple measures of job performance, across multiple types of sales (i.e., industry) contexts. In so doing, it not only provides some initial insights into which perspectives are most efficacious in terms of predicting salesperson performance, but also shows the value of simultaneously examining the predictive capabilities of customer-directed selling perspectives in conjunction with one another as well as considering interactions between them.

Appendix

Scale items used in study

SOCO^a

Customer Orientation

6. I try to figure out what a customer's needs are.
7. A good employee has to have the customer's best interest in mind.
8. I try to bring a customer with a problem together with a product/service that helps solve that problem.
10. I offer the product/service that is best suited to the customer's problem.
12. I try to find out what kind of products/services will be most helpful to a customer.

Selling Orientation

3. I try to sell as much as I can rather than to satisfy a customer.
7. It is necessary to stretch the truth in describing a product to a customer.
9. I try to sell a customer all I can convince them to buy, even if I think it is more than a wise customer would buy.

10. I paint too rosy a picture of my product/service to make them sound as good as possible.

11. I decide what product/service to offer on the basis of what I can convince customers to accept, not on the basis of what will satisfy them in the long run.

ADAPTS^a

2. When I feel that my sales approach is not working, I can easily change to another approach.
3. I like to experiment with different sales approaches.
4. I am very flexible in the selling approach I use.
7. I can easily use a wide variety of selling approaches.
14. I try to understand how one customer differs from another.

Selling Skills

Interpersonal Skills

1. Ability to express yourself nonverbally
2. Ability in general speaking skills
3. Awareness and understanding of the nonverbal communication of others
4. Ability to control and regulate nonverbal displays of emotion
5. Ability to manipulate others and control the situation

Salesmanship Skills

1. Ability to prospect for customers
2. Ability to qualify prospects
3. Ability to close the sale
4. Ability to present the sales message
5. Ability to service the account

Technical Knowledge

1. Knowledge of the customers' markets and products
2. Knowledge of your company's procedures
3. Knowledge of competitors' products, services, and sales policies
4. Knowledge of product line, including product features and benefits
5. Knowledge of customers' operations (e.g. store and shelf layout, employee training, etc.)

Sales Service Behaviors

Diligence

1. I am often too busy to respond promptly to customers' special requests.
2. I always make sure that I can be reached whenever a customer needs something important.
3. I return customers' calls promptly.

4. I provide the information customers request in a timely manner.
5. I always make sure that customers are able to see me as often as they need to.
6. I always make sure that customers can reach me within 24 h.
7. I always provide services to customers at the time I promise to do so.
8. I keep good records of my past interactions with customers.

Information Communication

1. When selling to a customer, I frequently make objective comparisons between products.
2. When selling to a customer, I frequently use reprints to support my claims.
3. When selling to a customer, I use company brochures to emphasize points.
4. When selling to a customer, I acknowledge both the strengths and weaknesses of my products.

Sportsmanship

1. I wait patiently to speak with physicians, decision makers, or staff at my customers.
2. I do not badmouth competing reps or their firms' products.
3. I do not get upset when sales calls or appointments end prematurely.
4. I maintain composure when others are critical of my products or firm.
5. I always follow office procedures while on the premises of my customers.

Inducements^b

1. I will do the occasional favor for customers, such as providing tickets for a sporting event or play, books they like, etc.
2. I will help out in a pinch even if it is not technically part of my job.
3. I will sometimes do little things like give out holiday presents.
4. I regularly provide lunch or snacks for customers' staff.
5. I regularly take customers out for dinner meetings.

Empathy

1. I demonstrate a sincere interest in my customers.
2. I display a caring attitude toward customers.
3. I am always ready to help when customers encounter non-job related problems.

Self-Reported Performance

1. My ability to sell products with higher profit margins.
2. My ability to generate a high dollar amount of sales in my territory.

3. My ability to quickly generate sales of new company products.
4. My ability to produce a high market share for my company in my territory.
5. My ability to exceed the sales targets and objectives that are assigned to me.
6. My ability to identify and sell to major accounts in my territory.

Notes

^aThe items listed for SOCO and ADAPTS are for the reduced scales. The numbering associated with these items refers to their original numbering in the full scale.

^bThe items employed here for the "Inducements" dimension of the "Sales Service Behaviors" scale differ somewhat from the items reported in the published version of Ahearne et al. (2007). The items we use empirically were drawn from an earlier version of their paper.

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