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DOES SALESPERSON PERCEPTION OF THE IMPORTANCE OF SALES SKILLS IMPROVE SALES PERFORMANCE, CUSTOMER ORIENTATION, JOB SATISFACTION, AND ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITMENT, AND REDUCE TURNOVER?

Charles E. Pettijohn, Linda S. Pettijohn, and A.J. Taylor

This research was designed to determine whether salesperson perceptions regarding the importance of specific sales skills and behaviors relate positively to sales performance, customer orientation, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and lower levels of turnover intentions. The development of the sales skill measure resulted in the creation of two different scales, one focused more on traditional *sales skills* and the second on more consulting-oriented *sales behaviors*. The results and conclusions provide support for the concept that skill/behavior development and assessment are worthy pursuits for sales managers and their organizations.

A widely held belief is that improved sales skills will produce a myriad of potential benefits to the employing businesses. In fact, arguments for training salespeople include not only the enhanced development of skills and improved levels of performance but also tangential factors such as reduced turnover, increased organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and customer orientation. Yet research that examines these relationships seems to be limited. In fact, a review of the literature reveals few articles that explicitly examine the sales skill–sales performance relationship.

Why is research limited with regard to the relationships between sales skills and performance levels? While no answer has been found, it might be theorized that challenges are faced by researchers as they attempt to empirically evaluate such relationships. For example, what skills are important to salespeople, how does one measure performance, and are different skills necessary for different situations? As sales training has increasingly moved from the province of businesses (both

employers and specialized training firms) to the academic world (approximately 14 sales centers exist in U.S. universities), questions continue to exist with regard to the importance of alternative skills and skill development. Nevertheless, the importance of this line of study is indicated by Weilbaker, who suggests that the ability construct is an important determinant of performance. However, Weilbaker also states that sales ability has received “relatively less research attention” (1990, p. 46).

If relationships between specific salesperson skills and important outcome variables such as performance, customer orientation, organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and turnover can be uncovered, then one may be in a better position to prescribe training programs and topics specifically designed to improve these factors. Further, such relationships may then be used to justify ever-increasing expenditures on sales skill development. Moreover, if a skill–outcome relationship can be empirically established, then perhaps those who feel that born salespeople are the norm and that selling is not amenable to education and training will be quieted and greater focus can be placed on skill transfer and education. Based on these factors, the purpose of this research is to evaluate, empirically, the relationships existing between salesperson selling skills and critical outcome variables for the sales force—performance, customer orientation, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and turnover.

RELATED LITERATURE

Perceptions of Skills/Behaviors and Performance

Although the literature has examined many sales issues, research pertaining to the relationships between specific

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salesperson skills and sales performance is limited. Nevertheless, some research has addressed this issue at least peripherally. One study examined what was termed *critical success factors*. In this research, sales skills, tasks, and behaviors were identified that influenced performance. The findings indicated that differences existed in terms of tactics used by high and low performers. For example, the findings revealed that low performers tended to use cold calling and other impersonal prospecting techniques. Conversely, high performers were described as being more likely to use interpersonal prospecting methods (centers of influence, seminars, etc.). Moreover, low performers used the product benefit approach, more standardized sales presentations, and more “manipulative sales tactics.” High performers, on the other hand, tended to use more visualization in the sales process and tended to use silence in selling. The research concluded by noting that high performers met their client’s needs by being more personal and customer oriented. Poor performers took a more *traditional/sales-oriented approach* (Dwyer, Hill, and Martin 2000).

Other studies have examined sales skills from the perspective of the buyer. DelVecchio et al. (2002–3) examined relationships between buyers’ perceptions of alternative sales tactics and their perceived effectiveness. The results indicated that buyers responded differently to many sales tactics based upon differences in the buyers’ characteristics. The study also discovered that buyers tended to respond similarly to what were termed *product-focused* techniques. In using product-focused techniques, the salesperson engaged in discussions of product applications, demonstrations, and product uses. The research also contended that when salespeople meet with buyers with authority to purchase, the salesperson should use “a benefit approach, ask confirmation or clarification questions, directly address the buyer’s objections, and finally, clear the path to closing the sale” (DelVecchio et al. 2002–3, p. 45). These techniques were termed *customer-focused selling techniques*. Competitive selling techniques (comparisons with either the buyer’s or seller’s competitors) were responded to equally by both types of buyers analyzed. In a separate study, buyers were asked to identify the characteristics they desired from salespeople. This study found that buyers preferred salespeople who had expertise in their own product lines and the market. Buyers also wanted salespeople who could communicate well, expedite orders, solve problems, understand their needs, and who could get their needs satisfied (Garver and Mentzer 2000). Williams and Seminerio (1985) also evaluated the importance of salesperson behaviors from the buyer’s perspective. Their findings indicated that buyers sought salespeople who were thorough, knowledgeable, willing to represent the buyer, and had market knowledge.

Rentz et al. (2002) evaluated the degree to which salespeople perceived their skill levels in the areas of interpersonal skills, “salesmanship” skills, and technical knowledge. The findings

of this study, using 106 food brokers as a sample, indicated that high rankings in the three skill dimensions identified were positively related to self-rated levels of sales expertise and to the achievement of a higher percentage of sales quota. Wilson, Strutton, and Farris (2002) suggest that salespeople may need more skills to comprehend their roles and apply their skills in a specific situation. Their research suggests that salespeople who are confident in their selling skills are more likely to use the training regarding product knowledge. Salespeople who are in possession of sales skills may also discover that training is more meaningful and more likely to be applied, which, in turn, leads to improved levels of performance. Thus, the concept that more highly skilled salespeople should outperform less-skilled salespeople leads directly to the central hypothesis of this research, which states:

Hypothesis 1: Salesperson perceptions of the importance of the use of sales skills and behaviors will be positively related to salesperson performance.

Perceptions of Skills/Behaviors and Customer Orientation

Certainly, sales performance is an important outcome dimension for most businesses. But, over the long term, customer satisfaction and retention are also critical determinants of success. Firms are increasingly focusing on the customer and engaging in consulting in the buyer–seller relationship. The salesperson’s degree of customer orientation has been described as being a critical determinant of the customer’s satisfaction with a retailer. Stanforth and Lennon’s statement exemplifies the important role of the salesperson in delivering customer satisfaction, “As retailers strive to develop customer-oriented environments, the delivery of quality and value to the customer through improved customer service has been identified as a potential competitive advantage” (1997, p. 115). Research has indicated that satisfied customers are more likely to purchase from a particular supplier and that existing customers are easier to maintain than are new customers (Anderson and Sullivan 1993; Fierman 1994). Zane (2000) argues that the motivation to enhance levels of customer satisfaction has been the result of the determination that increased levels of customer satisfaction will provide the firm with a more loyal customer base and higher levels of corporate profitability.

According to Williams and Attaway, “The marketing success of a firm is highly dependent upon its sales representatives since they have the most immediate influence on customers” (1996, p. 34). This argument may be particularly valid in the case of retailing establishments that provide a marketing mix that is based on more than just the product/price components of the marketing mix. For example, full-service retailers who are engaged in the marketing of consumer shopping products

have found their positions challenged by both discounters and category killers. In both cases, the competition has been largely based on the dimensions of product and price (Pettijohn and Pettijohn 1994). Thus, the traditional full-service retailer is confronted with a choice, either compete on the same dimensions as the category killer and discounter, or compete on an alternative dimension, such as customer service (Kerr and Burzynski 1988). One promotional mix factor that has been identified as influencing customer satisfaction is the salesperson (Jap 2001). The salesperson's role in determining customer satisfaction is attributed to the fact that the salesperson creates customer expectations, the salesperson provides customer service, and the salesperson provides solutions that all combine to influence the degree of satisfaction experienced by the customer (Pilling and Eroglu 1994).

Many salesperson behaviors may affect the degree of customer satisfaction experienced by buyers. For example, buyers contend that salespeople have a significant role in determining satisfaction, as they report that they are increasingly seeking salespeople who are knowledgeable, honest, attentive, and conduct follow-up activities (Kaydo 2000). Similarly, research has shown that customer satisfaction is derived from the salesperson's "courtesy, attentiveness, ability, accuracy, and professionalism" (Nicholls, Roslow, and Taelikis 1995, p. 44). Rust and Zahorik (1993) discovered that customer satisfaction is largely based on "warmth factors" that include the customer contact person's friendliness, customer knowledge, and listening skills. The perception that the salesperson has an important role in determining the degree of satisfaction experienced by the customer led to the development of the selling orientation–customer orientation (SOCO) scale (Saxe and Weitz 1982). According to Saxe and Weitz (1982), a salesperson is customer oriented when he or she engages in behaviors designed to build customer satisfaction. Salespeople are described as exercising customer-oriented sales tactics when they are genuinely interested in their customers and when they develop solutions with the customers' needs in mind (Dubinsky and Staples 1981; MacKay 1988).

In an evaluation of the influence of sales skills on consulting, Pelham (2002) contends that consulting-oriented evaluation programs should assess salespeople based on their abilities to engage in strategies to promote customer understanding, including questioning, listening, problem diagnosis, and problem-solving skills. Pelham concludes by stating that a sales management program that emphasizes consulting-oriented skills will result in sales growth for industrial firms where buyers are more likely to be relationship oriented. This suggests that firms move away from traditional emphases on the selling process and presentation techniques and redirect their focus toward questioning and listening, particularly in an industrial sales environment.

While customer orientation is an important factor in determining both customer satisfaction and retention, the ability to engage in customer-oriented selling has also been linked to salesperson performance (Donavan, Brown, and Mowen 2004; Rozell, Pettijohn, and Parker 2004). In fact, Donovan, Brown, and Mowen (2004) contend that higher levels of salesperson customer orientation lead to correspondingly higher levels of salesperson job satisfaction and organizational commitment.

Thus, salespeople seem to be a significant factor in determining buyer satisfaction and, ultimately, firm performance. However, the issue of factors that influence the degree to which salespeople will be customer oriented remains unresolved. Learning orientation, competitiveness, and materialism have been shown to be related to the salesperson's customer orientation levels (Harris, Mowen, and Brown 2005). According to Boles et al. (2001), other factors affect the degree to which a salesperson may be customer oriented. These factors include the salesperson's skills, training, and organizational commitment, among others (Flaherty, Dahlstrom, and Skinner 1999; O'Hara, Boles, and Johnston 1991; Pettijohn, Pettijohn, and Taylor 2002; Siguaw, Brown, and Widing 1994). Thus, a salesperson's skills may be one variable that affects the degree of customer satisfaction realized. However, it seems that existing research has not assessed the degree to which salesperson skills actually influence the practice of customer orientation. Schwepker (2003) seems to agree, suggesting that additional research is needed to explain the skills necessary for the implementation of customer-oriented selling. Thus, the next hypothesis addresses this issue.

Hypothesis 2: Salesperson perceptions of the importance of the use of sales skills and behaviors will be positively related to the practice of customer-oriented selling.

Perceptions of Skills/Behaviors and Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction is a variable that has received considerable attention in the management literature. Yet its relationship with numerous variables is often debated. For example, job satisfaction and performance have been found to be both related and unrelated in alternative studies (cf. Brown and Peterson 1994; McNeilly and Goldsmith 1991; Shipley and Kiely 1986; Simantiras and Lancaster 1991). Nevertheless, satisfaction continues to be evaluated due to its relationship with organizational commitment, turnover, and perhaps performance. Some research has uncovered a link between satisfaction and turnover (Cotton and Tuttle 1986). Other research supports the inverse relationship between satisfaction and turnover, but adds a relationship between performance satisfaction and job satisfaction (Fern, Avila, and Grewal

1989). Research has also uncovered a relationship between customer-oriented sales strategies and job satisfaction (Harris, Mowen, and Brown 2005). McNeilly and Goldsmith (1991) found many relationships between satisfaction, turnover, and, indirectly, performance. They found that for high performers, job satisfaction did not seem to manifest itself as significantly in turnover intentions as it did for low performers. This finding leads to the argument that job satisfaction for low performers would tend to be a motivating factor in turnover, which indicates that performance could be a factor that indirectly affects satisfaction. Perhaps, this means that “unskilled” salespeople will face greater challenges in terms of satisfaction than will more highly skilled salespeople. Such an argument might be based on the premise that people who are unskilled in any occupation are unlikely to derive satisfaction from their work. Therefore, the more highly skilled the salesperson, the greater his or her level of job satisfaction. This contention leads to the establishment of the third hypothesis.

Hypothesis 3: Salesperson perceptions of the importance of the use of sales skills and behaviors will be positively related to salesperson job satisfaction.

Perceptions of Skills/Behaviors and Organizational Commitment

Organizational commitment is a characteristic of sales employees that has been deemed important for a variety of reasons. One primary reason is attributed to the fact that committed salespeople are less likely to leave the organization and committed employees are typically higher level performers (Bashaw and Grant 1994). Numerous other researchers have investigated the effect of organizational commitment on salespeople (Cotton and Tuttle 1986; Ingram and Lee 1990; Sager 1991). For example, Ingram and Lee (1990) found that organizational commitment was a significant factor in understanding sales force behavior. McNeilly and Russ (1992) found that commitment was negatively related to turnover intentions, particularly in low sales performers. Based on these findings, it could be argued that one who scores highly in organizational commitment would be more predisposed to stay with the organization over the long term and would thus have higher levels of performance and correspondingly greater sales skills. Because it has been hypothesized, and because some research has shown a connection between salesperson skills and customer orientation, it may be argued that a relationship between commitment and customer orientation would also suggest a skill–commitment relationship. For example, in a study of retail salespeople, the level of customer orientation was significantly related to organizational commitment (Pettijohn, Pettijohn, and Taylor 2002). Similarly, in a study of two separate sales groups, organizational commitment was

the only variable found to be significantly related to customer orientation in both groups (O’Hara, Boles, and Johnston 1991). Other research has also found a relationship between commitment and customer orientation scores (cf. Hoffman and Ingram 1991; Kelley 1992; Siguaw, Brown, and Widing 1994). Thus, based on the literature that suggests a linkage between commitment and performance, it would seem logical that salespeople with greater skill levels would also possess greater levels of organizational commitment (Hawes, Rao, and Baker 1993). Such a link is based on the presumption that skills accompany commitment, which leads to the next hypothesis.

Hypothesis 4: Salesperson perceptions of the importance of the use of sales skills and behaviors will be positively related to salesperson levels of organizational commitment.

Perceptions of Skills/Behaviors and Turnover Intentions

The relationship between sales skills and turnover intentions has been addressed very indirectly. Turnover intentions have been shown to be causal factors in reducing job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Tyagi and Wotruba 1993). Another study attempted to predict performance and turnover from items listed on the application blank. While indirectly related to the current study, some research has discovered that performance and turnover might be predicted from the applicant’s degree of understanding of the sales job and by the quality of their selling experiences in their previous positions (Gable, Hollon, and Dangelo 1992). Ingram and Lee (1990) seem to support the concept that one’s skills affect intentions to leave. They conclude that people who “enjoy selling” are less likely to leave the organization. These findings suggest that applicants who understand the sales job and who have greater levels of experience are less likely to leave the firm and are more likely to perform at higher levels. While the supporting literature is limited, it may be suggested that turnover will be lower for those who possess the requisite skills necessary to perform the sales job. Thus, the fifth hypothesis evaluates the degree to which turnover is affected by the salesperson’s sales skills as follows.

Hypothesis 5: Salesperson perceptions of the importance of the use of sales skills and behaviors will be negatively related to salesperson intentions to leave the organization.

METHODOLOGY

Because minimal research was found that specifically addressed the relationships between sales skills and other variables, the first step in the research project required the development of a data collection instrument. As noted in the literature, relevant

sales skills have been identified in a variety of fashions. Many of the studies examined differences from the buyers' perspectives (cf. DelVecchio et al. 2002–3; Garver and Mentzer 2000; Williams and Seminerio 1985).

However, while it is difficult to dispute the importance of the buyer in the sales relationship, it may be noted that asking the buyer for his or her preferences may be somewhat misleading. For example, one could argue that buyers want salespeople who “really don't sell.” This may be based on the buyer's perceived self-interest “not to be persuaded.” But, not being persuaded may actually not be in the buyer's long-term interest, particularly in situations where the buyer may be better served by following the salesperson's advice or suggestions.

Other research has attempted to identify sales skills by comparing the activities of consumer and industrial salespeople (Hite and Bellizzi 1985). This research identified some differences between the two groups, suggesting that consumer salespeople used more personal techniques in prospecting and were more involved in the community. Consumer salespeople were identified as using more standardized approaches, using assumptive closes, and using questions to answer objections. Industrial salespeople preferred more tailored approaches, more cold calling, and greater emphasis on trial uses of the products to answer objections. However, both consumer and industrial salespeople were described as using tailored presentations; asking questions; speaking the prospect's language; giving demonstrations; using direct answers and compensation in answering objections; and using direct, summary, and single obstacle closes. Another set of skills was suggested by Weilbaker (1990). The most important of these skills include adaptability, ability to learn, communication skill, comprehension, and interrogation.

Based on the input from these studies, combined with items developed by Chonko, Caballero, and Lumpkin (1990) and Pettijohn, Pettijohn, and Taylor (2002), 30 separate sales skills were identified. The use of specific skills was measured by asking salespeople to identify the relative importance of the application of these skills and behaviors in their sales activities. Importance was assessed by using a seven-point Likert-type scale (7 = most important and 1 = not important at all). Thus, the importance of alternative sales skills and behaviors was evaluated by the degree to which salespeople perceive them to be important as they engage in their sales activities.

The second component of the survey included an evaluation of the respondents' degree of customer orientation. The scale used in this evaluation is the short form of the SOCO scale originally developed by Saxe and Weitz (1982). The SOCO scale has been used in numerous types of research and has been found to be a valid and reliable measure of salesperson selling/customer orientation levels (Michaels and Day 1985; Williams and Attaway 1996). Thomas, Soutar, and Ryan

(2001) developed a condensed and more parsimonious version of the original SOCO scale. This version was found to be a valid and reliable measure of both the salesperson's customer and selling orientation levels. Their condensed scale used five items to assess customer orientation and five items to assess selling orientation. Subsequent research seemed to confirm the validity of the condensed scale by concluding that “reducing the SOCO scale sacrificed little information” (Periatt, LeMay, and Chakrabarty 2004, p. 51). This research also stated that prior research, in which the SOCO scale had been modified, seemed to provide effective use in spite of the modifications. The current research uses the five items to measure customer orientation identified by Thomas, Soutar, and Ryan (2001), but due to the responding firms' perceptions of the time required to complete the survey and duplicate questions, the selling-orientation portion of the scale was reduced from five to three items (two items that seemed redundant were eliminated). Thus, the respondents' customer orientation levels were evaluated using the eight questions included on this scale and responses were provided using a seven-point Likert-type scale (7 = strongly agree to 1 = strongly disagree).

The third portion of the survey involved the measurement of salesperson performance. Performance was assessed using the seven-item scale developed by Sujan, Weitz, and Kumar (1994). Five of the items used in this scale were developed by Behrman and Perreault (1982), and these items focus on sales objectives. The revised scale evaluates performance from different dimensions and is measured by comparing the respondent's performance to those of other sales representatives on a seven-point Likert-type scale (7 = much better than others to 1 = much worse than others). The performance scale has been used in numerous sales research studies and has been found to be a valid and reliable measure of salesperson performance in a variety of sales settings (cf. Behrman and Perreault 1982; Challagalla and Shervani 1996; Sujan, Weitz, and Kumar 1994).

Job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and intent-to-leave measures constituted the fourth portion of the survey. Respondent job satisfaction was assessed using a modified version of the 15-item scale developed by Wood, Chonko, and Hunt (1986). Nine items were used in this research, to increase the parsimony of the survey instrument and to reduce the duplicative nature of the questions in the research. Organizational commitment was measured using the 15-item scale developed by Mowdy, Porter, and Steers (1982). The respondents' intentions of leaving were used as a surrogate measure of turnover. This scale was a four-item scale developed by O'Reilly, Chapman, and Caldwell (1991). Each of these scales used a seven-point Likert-type scale (7 = strongly agree to 1 = strongly disagree) to assess the degree of respondent agreement with a series of statements. Specific scale items and their relevant factor loadings are presented in the Appendix.

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

Characteristic	Percent (n)
Age	
< 24	22.5 (32)
25–35	25.4 (36)
36–50	29.6 (42)
51–65	18.3 (26)
> 65	4.2 (6)
Education	
High school	57.9 (81)
College degree	20.7 (29)
Graduate degree	4.3 (6)
No response	17.1 (24)
Sales Position	
Retail	86.3 (120)
Business-to-business	3.6 (5)
No response	10.1 (16)
Compensation	
Fixed	31.2 (42)
Variable	68.8 (97)
Current Employment	
< 1 year	37.6 (53)
Between 1 and 3 years	14.2 (20)
Between 3 and 5 years	17.0 (24)
Between 5 and 10 years	17.7 (25)
10 years and greater	13.5 (19)
Income	
< \$20,000	25.3 (35)
\$20,001–30,000	13.8 (19)
\$30,001–40,000	16.7 (23)
\$40,001–50,000	11.6 (16)
\$50,001–70,000	14.5 (20)
> \$70,000	18.1 (25)
Gender	
Male	64.8 (83)
Female	35.2 (45)

The final portion of the survey involved the identification of the salesperson's demographic characteristics. Demographic factors included age, gender, education, type of sales job, and experience in their current jobs.

The next step in the research required the development of a sample. One might argue that certain sales skills might be more or less important in different types of sales roles. Therefore, it was felt that sample homogeneity was a desirable trait. Based on this proposition, and due to the fact that the research is largely exploratory in nature, the sample was identified to include retail salespeople. Retail salespeople were selected primarily because they are a sample that is relatively simple to identify, and their roles seem somewhat similar. In addition, retail salespeople are described as being important components of the retailer's promotional mix, comprising one-third of the retailer's operating expenses, providing the retailer with a differential advantage, and creating an image of the customer's perception of the retailer. Further, it has been

stated that when "good selling practices are implemented," customer satisfaction, sales, and profits increase (Chonko, Caballero, and Lumpkin 1990, p. 36). Thus, 15 businesses were identified that engaged in the sale of shopping goods. Each of these firms was personally contacted by one of the primary researchers and their participation solicited. Nine of these businesses agreed to participate and they offered each of their salespeople as potential respondents. These firms employed a total of 210 salespeople and provided access to these individuals via a drop-off method of questionnaire distribution. The use of the drop-off method involved having the researchers provide the participating businesses with an adequate number of surveys to distribute to their sales forces. Each survey was distributed with a return envelope addressed to one of the researchers' institutions. The return envelope was used to ensure that responses were both voluntary and anonymous. It was felt that while this return technique might reduce response rates, this method would result in more accurate responses than would requesting employers to require responses and collect responses from their employees. A total of 148 responses were returned, of these, 141 were deemed to provide usable responses, for a response rate of 67 percent.

The respondents' demographic characteristics are shown in Table 1. As indicated in the table, approximately 52 percent of the respondents were more than 36 years old. The majority of the respondents were male, with high school diplomas and had been employed with their firms for more than one year. Also shown in the table, 86 percent stated that they were engaged primarily in retail sales and only 4 percent in business-to-business sales.

Because the sales skill section of the survey had not been used extensively, factor analysis was undertaken to determine if separate dimensions were assessed by the skills section of the survey. The initial factor analyses revealed that ten of the skill dimensions had either low factor loadings (less than 0.40) or high cross-loadings. Thus, these items were omitted from the study. Table 2 provides the factor dimensions of the remaining 20 scale items. As shown in the table, two separate factors were uncovered. Based on the items included in the two factors, factor 1 was labeled "sales skills" and factor 2 was labeled "sales behaviors." The sales skills factor seemed to include aspects of sales that reflect specific skills and skills that are amenable to training and development. For example, approach techniques, prospecting, negotiating, product knowledge, and questioning would seem to be specific sales skills that can be developed through training and practice. The sales behaviors factor seemed to display factors that reflect beliefs about salesperson behavior and may be more consulting oriented. For example, the salesperson is always courteous, listens, makes customers feel appreciated, and so on. These behaviors seem to be less amenable to training and development, but more related to consultative sales behaviors. Based on the discovery of two

Table 2
Skill Dimensions and Factor Analyses

Skill Category	Question	Sales Skills	Sales Behaviors
SK1	I always approach customers using the proper approach techniques.	0.66	0.01
SK2	Prospecting is a regular activity.	0.62	-0.12
SK3	Most prospects are gained through referral-based methods.	0.68	-0.18
SK4	I am capable of resolving most objections.	0.71	-0.01
SK5	I am a skilled negotiator.	0.69	-0.11
SK6	Asking for the order is an important part of my success.	0.57	-0.10
SK7	If customers hesitate to buy, I try to encourage them to purchase.	0.50	-0.10
B1	I am always polite and courteous to my customers.	0.07	0.79
B2R	What I say is more important than what the customer has to say.	-0.21	0.82
SK8	I know the products that I sell.	0.43	0.08
B5	I listen to what the customer has to say.	0.07	0.72
SK9	I ask customers questions to get them to talk.	0.51	0.28
SK10	I learn as much as possible about my customers' needs prior to suggesting solutions.	0.52	0.23
SK11	I use leading statements to get customers to talk.	0.65	0.08
SK12	I am able to help customers understand how they would benefit from using products/services.	0.73	0.08
SK13	I am able to make clear and complete presentations.	0.78	-0.04
SK14	I am able to demonstrate products/services to customers.	0.72	0.07
SK15	I learn about customers' needs prior to suggesting products/services.	0.57	0.07
B17	I work to make customers realize that they are appreciated.	0.15	0.65
B18R	I am often snobbish and condescending to my customers.	-0.09	0.65

Notes: Sales skills = SK1 + SK2 + SK3 + SK4 + SK5 + SK6 + SK7 + SK8 + SK9 + SK10 + SK11 + SK12 + SK13 + SK14 + SK15. Sales behaviors = B1 + B2R + B5 + B17 + B18R. R = reversed questions. Numbers in bold represent the items that were assigned to a particular factor (sales skills or sales behaviors).

alternative sets of sales skills, the five hypotheses were divided into two segments. The first segment, "a," was designed to evaluate the hypotheses as they pertained to the "sales skill" dimension. The second segment, "b," was developed to assess the validity of the hypotheses as they related to the "sales behavior" factor.

The scales, scale means, coefficient alphas, and their correlations are shown in Table 3 (Cronbach 1960). The sales skills scale has 15 items, a mean value of 85.3, and an alpha coefficient of 0.90. The sales behaviors scale contains five items, has a mean of 29.3, and an alpha coefficient value of 0.78. The other scales have been used in previous research and have been found to be valid and reliable measures of customer orientation, performance, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and intent to leave the organization. As shown in Table 3, the coefficient alpha values for these scales ranged from 0.89 to 0.72; each of the scales exceeds the 0.70 alpha value recommended by Nunnally (1978).

RESULTS

Univariate regression was used to analyze the data. Because the purpose of the study was to evaluate the effect one's sales skills had on a series of "dependent" variables that possess significant

relationships (collinearity) among themselves (i.e., job satisfaction, organizational commitment, turnover), it was determined that this represented the most parsimonious research design. The findings associated with the regression analyses conducted to evaluate the validity of the research hypotheses are shown in Table 4. H1a, which stated that the ratings regarding the perceived importance levels of sales skills would be positively related to salesperson performance is supported, as sales skill ratings are significantly related to performance ($p < 0.01$). In fact, the sales skills equation explains 34 percent of the variance in this particular regression model. H1b is not supported, as salesperson ratings of the importance of certain sales behaviors are not significantly related to sales performance. Thus, results are mixed as they relate to H1. In one case, it appears that the perceived importance ratings of sales skills are strongly related to sales performance. However, sales behavior ratings are not significantly ($p < 0.05$) related to sales performance.

H2 is fully supported by the findings. H2a, which stated that the ratings regarding the perceived importance levels of sales skills would be positively related to customer orientation is supported, as the results show that the regression equation for these two variables is significant ($p < 0.01$). H2b is also supported, as salesperson customer orientation levels are significantly ($p < 0.01$) related to the salesperson's ratings of the

Table 3
Scale Means, Alpha Coefficients, and Correlations

Scale	Mean (sd)	Alpha	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Sales Skills	85.3 (13.1)	0.90	1.0						
2. Sales Behaviors	29.3 (5.9)	0.78	0.25*	1.0					
3. Organizational Commitment	76.2 (11.9)	0.79	0.33*	0.24*	1.0				
4. Job Satisfaction	48.2 (9.8)	0.87	0.57*	0.20**	0.54*	1.0			
5. Intent to Leave	12.5 (6.1)	0.74	-0.31*	-0.08	-0.68*	-0.58*	1.0		
6. Customer Orientation	44.5 (6.3)	0.72	0.49*	0.37*	0.44*	0.32*	-0.29*	1.0	
7. Performance	36.4 (8.4)	0.89	0.58*	-0.10	0.15	0.40*	-0.27*	0.09	1.0

** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$.

Table 4
Sales Skills, Sales Behaviors, and Outcome Variables

Variable	B	t-Value (p)	F-Value (p)	R ²
Sales Skills				
Performance	0.43	7.6 (0.0001)	58.3 (0.0001)	0.34
Customer orientation	0.26	6.3 (0.0001)	39.0 (0.0001)	0.24
Job satisfaction	0.48	7.5 (0.0001)	55.8 (0.0001)	0.32
Organizational commitment	0.47	3.8 (0.0002)	14.4 (0.0002)	0.12
Turnover intentions	-0.17	3.7 (0.0004)	13.4 (0.0004)	0.10
Sales Behaviors				
Performance	0.26	1.6 (0.11)	2.6 (0.11)	0.02
Customer orientation	0.63	6.7 (0.0001)	44.6 (0.0001)	0.25
Job satisfaction	0.25	1.5 (0.14)	2.2 (0.14)	0.02
Organizational commitment	0.12	4.2 (0.0001)	17.4 (0.0001)	0.13
Turnover intentions	-0.16	1.5 (0.14)	2.2 (0.14)	0.02

importance of certain sales behaviors. This indicates that both the skills dimension of the scale and the behavior dimension of the scale are significantly related to salesperson customer orientation levels.

H3 is partially supported by the findings. H3a, which argued that the ratings regarding the perceived importance

levels of sales skills would be significantly related to salesperson job satisfaction, is supported, as the results show that the equation of sales skills and job satisfaction is significant ($p < 0.01$). However, H3b is not supported, as job satisfaction is not significantly related to the salesperson ratings of the importance of certain sales behaviors. So, in this case, the findings

are again mixed. The hypothesis supporting the relationship between the sales skill dimension and job satisfaction is supported, but the hypothesis supporting a relationship between the salesperson's sales behaviors and job satisfaction is not supported ($p < 0.05$).

H4 is supported by the findings. H4a and H4b are significant. The ratings regarding the perceived importance levels of sales skills are significantly related to organizational commitment ($p < 0.01$). Moreover, salesperson ratings of the importance of certain sales behaviors are significantly related to organizational commitment ($p < 0.01$). In this case, it appears that the stronger relationship is between the sales behaviors dimension and organizational commitment. However, both relationships indicate support for the hypotheses predicting a significant relationship between organizational commitment and one's sales skills and sales behaviors.

H5 is partially supported by the findings. H5a, which argues that the salesperson's ratings regarding the perceived importance levels of sales skills are significantly related to his or her intentions of leaving the organization is supported as the equation is significant ($p < 0.01$). However, H5b is not supported, as salesperson ratings of the importance of certain sales behaviors are not significantly related to sales force turnover intentions. Thus, a salesperson's sales skills are significantly related to his or her leaving intentions, supporting the H5. But, the second segment of the hypothesis is not supported, as the salesperson's sales behaviors are not significantly ($p < 0.05$) related to his or her intentions of leaving the organization.

In summary, the findings lend support to each of the "skill-related" hypotheses. In each of the five cases examined, the salesperson's ratings regarding the perceived importance levels of sales skills were significantly related to his or her performance, customer orientation, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and turnover intentions as predicted in the hypotheses. However, only two of the five hypotheses are supported as they relate to the sales behavior component of the research. Sales behaviors are related significantly ($p < 0.05$) to both customer orientation and organizational commitment.

Although the findings generally support the stated hypotheses, additional analyses were conducted to provide greater insight into the relationships existing between the salesperson's perceptions of the importance of specific sales skills and behaviors, and that salesperson's performance, customer orientation, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and turnover intentions. This analysis was conducted to provide information that could be used in either the selection process or in training and development activities. For example, if the research shows that courtesy, one of the identified sales behaviors, is related to performance, then that variable may be emphasized more in the selection and training programs due to its perceived importance. However, if it is discovered that the skill pertaining to closing is not related to any of the desired outcome variables,

then the training emphasis as it pertains to closing might be reduced. Thus, Table 5 provides the results of correlation analyses between salesperson perceptions of the importance ratings of the sales skills and behaviors and the salesperson's levels of performance, customer orientation, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and turnover intentions.

As shown in Table 5, performance is significantly correlated with each of the identified "skill" variables. The greatest correlations are found between performance and "traditional" skills variables such as the approach, prospecting, need identification, presentation, negotiating objections, and closing. Other significant correlations exist between salesperson knowledge levels and the "behavioral" dimensions that seem most related to need identification.

A different set of variables was found to be "highly correlated" with customer orientation levels. As shown in Table 5, the behavior-based dimensions seem to provide some of the highest correlations with salesperson customer orientation levels. The results show that the following variables are correlated at levels exceeding 0.40 with the salesperson's level of customer orientation: B1 (courteous), B17 (appreciated), B18R (condescending), B2R (importance of what is said), SK10 (learn needs), SK12 (help customers understand), SK14 (ability to demonstrate), and SK4 (ability to resolve objections). In fact, a review of the correlations indicates that only one variable is not significantly correlated with salesperson customer orientation levels, SK2 (prospecting). While many of the correlations may seem rather surprising, it may be recalled that Saxe and Weitz (1982) contended that in order for a salesperson to engage in customer-oriented selling, the salesperson must be skilled in the realm of selling. Thus, it may be argued that the "most talented" salespeople are most capable of investing in the long-term activities related to the practice of customer-oriented selling activities.

With regard to salesperson job satisfaction levels, the results indicate that the greatest correlations are with those variables most related to the salesperson's skills. The skills pertaining to the approach, prospecting, and the presentation provide the highest correlations with salesperson job satisfaction. Although several behaviors are related to job satisfaction, the correlations are not as high as with the skill-based variables.

Organizational commitment levels are significantly correlated with the behavior-based variables examined. In fact, the behaviors that reflect salesperson attitudes toward their customers (i.e., B17—appreciated, and B18R—condescending attitudes) seem to provide the strongest correlations with organizational commitment.

Salesperson turnover intentions are significantly related to a variety of variables. However, the highest correlations seem to exist between turnover intentions and salesperson skills, particularly closing skills. This finding may suggest that lower-skilled salespeople may engage in a process of

Table 5
Correlations: Skills, Performance, Customer Orientation, Job Satisfaction, Commitment, and Turnover

Variable	Performance	Customer Orientation	Job Satisfaction	Commitment	Intent to Leave
B1: Behavior	-0.05	0.48**	0.21*	0.25**	-0.19*
B17: Behavior	0.07	0.49**	0.24**	0.45**	-0.16*
B18R: Behavior	0.03	0.52**	0.05	0.45**	-0.18*
SK1: Approach	0.31**	0.36**	0.47**	0.23*	-0.15
SK2: Prospecting	0.31**	0.19	0.46**	0.26*	-0.32**
SK3: Prospecting	0.51**	0.23*	0.42**	0.23*	-0.30**
B2R: Behavior/Need Identification	0.20*	0.43**	0.17*	0.30**	-0.22**
B5: Behavior/Need Identification	-0.14	0.28**	0.06	0.10	-0.02
SK9: Need Identification	0.21**	0.34**	0.31**	0.13	-0.19*
SK10: Need Identification	0.30**	0.42**	0.35**	0.12	-0.18*
SK11: Need Identification	0.33**	0.33**	0.34**	0.14	-0.16*
SK15: Need Identification	0.21*	0.37**	0.28	0.19	-0.11
SK8: Knowledge	0.22*	0.31**	0.36**	0.08	-0.02
SK12: Presentation	0.31**	0.40**	0.48**	0.34**	-0.29**
SK13: Presentation	0.47**	0.37**	0.48**	0.28**	-0.28**
SK14: Presentation	0.43**	0.43**	0.42**	0.25**	-0.21**
SK4: Objections	0.38**	0.42**	0.34**	0.09	-0.08
SK5: Objections	0.43**	0.22**	0.21*	0.09	-0.02
SK6: Closing	0.38**	0.20*	0.30**	0.27**	-0.31**

** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$.

“voluntary” turnover due to the recognition that they lack specific sales skills.

A review of Table 5 also reveals potentially critical salesperson skills/behaviors. The results show that five of the skill variables and one of the behavioral variables are significantly related to each of the five outcome variables studied. The five skills include SK3 (referral-based prospecting), SK12 (help customers understand), SK13 (clear and complete presentations), SK14 (demonstrate), and SK6 (asking for the order—closing). The behavior-based dimension that is significantly correlated with each of the five outcome variables is B2R (what the customer says is *most* important).

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

A widely held assumption is that the greater the skills available to the salesperson, the greater his or her performance. While some contrarians may argue that sales success is largely related to luck and one's personality, sales trainers and educators would tend to argue that salespeople are *made and not born*. However, do skills lead to results? Will more highly skilled salespeople achieve not only greater results but also greater levels of customer orientation, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and lower levels of turnover? The purpose of this study was to address these questions in an empirical fashion.

The findings indicate that the level of the salesperson's perceptions of the importance of the application of specific sales skills and behaviors is significantly and positively related

to each of the described *dependent* variables. The salesperson's perceptions regarding the importance of *traditional* salesperson skills and behaviors (i.e., prospecting, approach, demonstrating and presenting, negotiating, closing) are positively related to desirable sales outcomes. This finding suggests that sales managers should be most interested in making certain that their salespeople are highly developed in the “traditional” skill areas of sales as they apply to their particular area of business. Corresponding levels of skill development tend to translate into higher levels of sales performance, but also into other significant sales outcomes. For example, skilled salespeople are significantly more customer oriented (as predicted by Saxe and Weitz 1982). The findings here could be based on the fact that because skilled salespeople have greater abilities, these salespeople are capable of perceiving that their long-term rewards are positively related to their customer's well-being. Because such salespeople are both skilled performers and high achievers, they have the ability to wait for investments in customer interactions to accrue and thus do not have to coerce customers into making unwise purchases by implementing a selling orientation. This argument suggests that for salespeople to engage in customer-oriented selling, they must possess the requisite skills.

In addition to relating positively to performance and customer orientation, it should also be noted that sales skills are significantly related to job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and lower turnover intentions. Job satisfaction and organizational commitment are both important for organizations. These variables are related not only to morale

in the firm but also to enhanced levels of recruiting. Turnover is also a behavior that is problematic to many sales organizations. Costs associated with “undesirable” turnover are very high. The discovery that skilled salespeople have significantly lower levels of intentions of leaving should be good news to the sales manager. This means that the manager may be largely absolved of concerns about losing his or her best salespeople to the competition because these highly skilled people are satisfied, committed to the organization, and have lower levels of turnover intentions. While these three variables are admittedly related, the findings showing that these three variables are positively related to sales skills were not unexpected. One may easily argue that as skills (in most jobs) develop, job satisfaction is likely to follow. Correspondingly, as a salesperson becomes more proficient in his or her job, organizational commitment tends to increase and turnover intentions tend to decline.

The findings reveal that sales managers can obtain numerous benefits by ensuring that his or her salespeople possess high levels of the requisite sales skills. Therefore, managers would be well advised to invest their resources in helping their salespeople develop and hone their respective skill levels. Whether investments accrue through traditional sales training, on-the-job training, managerial coaching, or through other means, it seems that such investments will yield significant benefits to the manager and the organization.

While the findings relevant to the relationships existing between traditional sales skills and the critical outcome variables seems clear, the relationships existing between salesperson perceptions of the importance of certain sales behaviors and the outcome variables is not quite as clear. The sales behavior component was described as including aspects of a salesperson’s feelings or behaviors that relate more to the “softer side” of sales, or perhaps “consultative sales approaches.” These items include being courteous, genuine, making customers feel appreciated, and so on. Each of the items in the scale seems important, but the indications are that being “nice and liking customers” is not significantly related to higher levels of sales performance, job satisfaction, or lower levels of turnover intentions. These findings were somewhat unexpected. However, on further examination, it may be rationally explained. Perhaps these findings imply that positive intentions may not always lead to positive results. Thus, one should recognize that positive sales behaviors are only a portion of sales success.

While sales behaviors were not positively related to sales performance, job satisfaction, and turnover; it should be noted that they were positively and significantly related to both customer orientation and organizational commitment. Thus, firms that want committed employees who are positively oriented toward customers will discover that those with high levels of sales behaviors would provide those critical benefits. Therefore, development of positive sales behaviors would be a worthwhile goal of both organizations and sales managers.

LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study provides insights into areas that have been seemingly neglected, including the relationships between a salesperson’s skill level and that individual’s performance, customer orientation, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and turnover intentions. While many might contend that an obvious relationship should exist between these variables, some might argue that extraneous factors are more likely to be relevant.

Nevertheless, this research has basic limitations that should be addressed. One of the limitations is the sample—retail sales personnel. Some may feel that retail sales may be the most demanding *sales skill* profession in the area of sales. However, it may be argued that sales requirements in areas such as industrial sales and service sales may require greater relationship skills. Thus, the study should be extended to other types of sales professions.

A second limitation revolves around the measurement of sales skills and sales behaviors. Because no established scale was found, scales were developed to measure these attributes. Thus, the scales should be reassessed to determine their validity and reliability. Related to this issue is the fact that the survey represents salespersons’ self-ratings of the relative importance of their skills and behaviors. This limitation reflects the fact that actual skills and behaviors may not be revealed by the responses. However, it may be argued that this limitation is partially mediated by the fact that salespeople are describing whether they feel the skills and behaviors are important in their jobs—thus, their responses reflect that they feel that they use these skills and behaviors in their work. Thus, the measures may be conservative measures of their actual skill and behavior levels.

Future research should be designed to resolve limitations of the present study. First, research may evaluate skills and behaviors of other categories of salespeople. Different activities may mediate the importance of particular skill sets. Second, the survey may be adapted to reflect different skills and attitude measures. Finally, the research could be extended to assess whether training affects skill development.

Regardless of the avenues taken in future research, this study provides insight into an important area of sales for practitioners and researchers alike. The results show that the greater the importance ascribed by the salesperson to specific sales skills and behaviors, the greater that person’s level of desirable outcomes. For the dimension focused on sales skills, the results were consistently positive with regard to the dimensions of performance, customer orientation, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and turnover intentions. While the results were not as consistent, the findings show that sales behaviors are also important as they relate to two

critical organizational outcomes—customer orientation and organizational commitment. Therefore, this study provides a starting point for future analyses of the relationships between salesperson skills and positive organizational results.

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APPENDIX
Scale Items and Factor Loadings

Scale Item	Factor Loadings
Organizational Commitment Scale	
I am willing to work hard to make this organization successful.	0.46
I tell friends this is a great organization for which to work.	0.74
I feel very little loyalty to this organization.*	0.32
I would accept any type of job assignment to keep working in this organization.	0.35
I find that my values and the organization's are very similar.	0.70
I am proud to tell others that I am part of this organization.	0.70
The type of work I do is more important to me than the organization I work for.*	0.30
This organization inspires the best in me in job performance.	0.57
I would leave this organization with very little change.*	0.64
Over other organizations I considered for employment, I am glad I chose this organization.	0.69
There is little to be gained from staying with this organization.*	0.65
I find it difficult to agree with this organization's policies on employee matters.*	0.61
I have a stake in the fate of this organization.	0.22
I believe this is the best organization for which to work.	0.60
Deciding to work for this organization was a mistake.*	0.65
Job Satisfaction Scale	
My superiors provide enough information about my job performance.	0.69
My direct supervisor provides enough information about my performance.	0.71
I am satisfied with the variety of activities my job offers.	0.74
I am satisfied with the freedom I have to do what I want on my job.	0.67
I am satisfied with the opportunities my job gives to interact with others.	0.77
My job has enough opportunity for independent thought and action.	0.77
I am satisfied with the opportunities my job gives to complete tasks.	0.74
I am satisfied with the compensation I receive for my job.	0.64
I am satisfied with the security my job provides me.	0.53
Intent-to-Leave Scale	
There are other jobs more preferable to the one in which I now work.	0.77
I have thought about changing organizations since beginning to work here.	0.44
I intend to remain with this organization for a long time.*	0.86
I intend to be working for this organization three years from now.*	0.88
Customer Orientation Scale	
A salesperson should have the customer's best interest in mind.	0.69
I offer the product that is best suited to the customer's problem.	0.91
I try to find out what kind of product would be most helpful to a customer.	0.93
I try to resolve a customer's problem with an appropriate product.	0.94
I try to determine the customer's needs.	0.65
I try to sell a customer all I can, even if it is more than he or she should buy.*	0.76
I only present the customer products I believe he or she will buy.*	0.55
I exaggerate when describing products to make them more appealing.*	0.78
Sales Performance (compared to others in firm) Scale	
Your contribution to your company's market share.	0.71
Selling high profit margin products.	0.59
Generating a high level of dollar sales.	0.88
Quickly generating sales of new company products.	0.80
Identifying and cultivating major accounts in your territory.	0.76
Exceeding sales targets.	0.83
Assisting your sales supervisor in meeting his or her goals.	0.75

Notes: * Reverse-scored questions. Some items are abbreviated versions of questions.