

The Influence of Salesperson Skill, Motivation, and Training on the Practice of Customer-Oriented Selling

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ABSTRACT

Why is customer-oriented selling not practiced widely? The purpose of this research was to identify the relationships between factors that may be related to the practice of customer-oriented selling: Salesperson job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and skills. A survey of 109 retail salespeople provided insights into the relationships between these variables. The findings focused on the importance of the relationships existing between salesperson skills, training, organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and salesperson customer orientation. © 2002 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

INTRODUCTION

Customer satisfaction is frequently regarded as a crucial determinant of a business's long-term success. The customer-satisfaction/business-success relationship is often attributed to the positive relationship that exists between customer satisfaction, customer loyalty, word-of-mouth communications, and profitable sales volume (Anderson & Sullivan,

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1993; Fierman, 1994; Reichheld & Sasser, 1990; Reynolds & Arnold, 2000). To receive these benefits, firms often invest considerable resources in the development of customer satisfaction programs. Guarantees, consumer hotlines, market research, and product design modifications are often used to increase the degree to which customers experience satisfaction with a particular supplier. Unfortunately, many of the factors that ultimately lead to customer satisfaction are often beyond the marketer's direct control (e.g., customer expectations, customer perceptions, and environmental factors). Nevertheless, the marketer may influence the customer's buying experiences and thus affect this portion of the customer satisfaction equation.

According to Williams and Attaway (1996), the firm's marketing success is largely dependent upon the sales force, because these individuals are the ones who have the most "immediate influence on customers." One method by which the marketer may manage the "buying experience" is through the implementation of customer-oriented sales tactics (Crane, 1991; Grewal & Sharma, 1991; Sharma, 1997). It has been stated that firms will increasingly move toward "relationship selling," because customer satisfaction is a significant purchase criteria for many firms (Ingram, 1996) and because customer satisfaction affects loyalty, which in turn provides numerous positive outcomes (Reynolds & Arnold, 2000).

The basic premise of this research is that if companies recognize the value inherent in the development of satisfied customers, it would seem that these companies would also readily recognize the myriad of benefits that may be realized as a result of having a sales force that engages in customer-oriented sales activities. In this circumstance, firms would be willing to invest their organizational resources in a manner conducive to the encouragement of customer-oriented selling. However, as with all investments, uncertainty exists with regard to the exact variables that will contribute significantly and positively to the practice of customer-oriented selling. The purpose of this research is to empirically examine the relationships that exist between the various psychological dimensions of customer orientation, organizational commitment and job satisfaction, and organizational factors such as sales training and salesperson skills.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Previous research has assessed antecedents of customer-oriented selling by examining the relationships between customer-oriented selling and salesperson job tenure, gender, job involvement, role conflict, role ambiguity, and supervisor/employee relationships (Flaherty, Dahlstrom, & Skinner, 1999; O'Hara, Boles, & Johnston, 1991; Pettijohn, Pettijohn, & Parker, 1997). Research has shown that age (Pettijohn, Pettijohn, &

Parker, 1997) and gender (O'Hara, Boles, & Johnston, 1991) may contribute to the practice of customer-oriented selling.

Customer-oriented selling has been advocated for years (Allesandra, Wexler, & Barrera, 1987; R. T. Peterson, 1988; Sonnenberg, 1988). Yet seemingly little is known about the factors that affect a salesperson's predisposition and/or ability to engage in such behaviors (Macintosh, Anglin, Szymansky, & Gentry 1992; Williams & Weiner, 1990). One might suggest that consumer-oriented selling is an outgrowth of a satisfied and committed employee. A salesperson who experiences job satisfaction may be described as a salesperson who has positive attitudes regarding four basic characteristics of the job, the information, variety and freedom, ability to complete tasks, pay, and security. Thus, a salesperson who experiences "job satisfaction" is one who feels positively about these dimensions of his/her job (Wood, Chonko, & Hunt, 1986). Organizational commitment may be defined as the degree to which a salesperson wants to continue to work for a particular firm, given an opportunity to gain another position in a different organization (Hunt, Chonko, & Wood, 1985). Based on these definitions, one might assume that higher levels of salesperson job satisfaction and organizational commitment will lead a salesperson toward undertaking the greater efforts required to provide customers with greater levels of satisfaction. Perhaps this greater effort might be ascribed as being the result of a salesperson who is motivated to provide customers with a more satisfying ownership experience. Thus, job salesperson satisfaction and organizational commitment might be requisite ingredients to customer-oriented sales activities in firms that are customer-oriented themselves.

It seems that the importance of satisfaction and commitment in the sales force can be attributed to the relationships between these variables and other important outcomes. Some research argues that relationships exist between variables such as salesperson job satisfaction, organizational commitment, motivation, performance, effort, and lower levels of turnover (Babakus, Cravens, Johnston, & Moncrief, 1996; Babin & Boles, 1996; Bagozzi, 1980; Bashaw & Grant, 1994; Brown & Peterson, 1993; Johnston, Varadarajan, Futrell, & Sager, 1987; McNeilly & Russ, 1992). Research has also uncovered a positive relationship between customer-oriented selling and organizational commitment (Hoffman & Ingram, 1991; Kohli & Jaworski, 1990; O'Hara et al., 1991; Siguaw, Brown, & Widing, 1994). It has been concluded that salespeople who are committed to their employers would be more likely to support the organization's goals regarding the development of customer satisfaction (O'Hara et al., 1991).

Thus, based on research that has indicated that individuals scoring high in organizational commitment also tend to have higher scores on customer-oriented selling scales (Hoffman & Ingram, 1991; Siguaw et al., 1994), one could anticipate that committed employees will be more

customer oriented. This perception may be based on the fact that highly committed individuals are more likely to support the organization as it attempts to build long-term customer relationships, profitability, and market share. This support may then be reflected in the salesperson's willingness to engage in activities that may, in fact, require a short-term sacrifice in rewards as well as requiring an investment of additional energies. Thus, Hypothesis 1 states:

H1: There will be a positive relationship between salespeople who exhibit high levels of organizational commitment and those individuals' customer-orientation levels.

The second hypothesis is drawn from research findings showing an association between salesperson job satisfaction and the practice of customer-oriented selling (Siguaw et al., 1994). Flaherty et al. (1999) concluded that job satisfaction was related to the salesperson's practice of customer-oriented selling. The customer-orientation/job-satisfaction relationship may be attributed to the concept that before an employee is motivated to work toward a customer's satisfaction, that employee must be satisfied. In addition, one might argue that a salesperson's job satisfaction may lead to a greater psychological predisposition to sacrifice short-term sales gains for the longer-term benefits antecedent to customer satisfaction. Consequently, it may be hypothesized that the greater a salesperson's job satisfaction, the greater that person's customer orientation. Thus, Hypothesis 2 states:

H2: There will be a positive relationship between salespeople who exhibit high levels of job satisfaction and those individuals' customer-orientation levels.

The relationship between sales skills and customer-oriented selling has not been explicitly researched. However, some research has indicated that training may have an impact on the salesperson's degree of customer orientation (Chonko, Enis, & Tanner, 1992). It has been suggested that firms should engage in training their salespeople to build customer satisfaction, because the customer's level of satisfaction results in significant benefits to the salesperson's employer (Reynolds & Arnold, 2000). One study that examined the relationship between training and customer-orientation scores used bank presidents as their sample. Bank presidents were asked to evaluate their perceptions of the customer orientation of sales personnel by rating their sales personnel on the SOCO scale (G. Brown, Parker & Widing, 1987). The results of the research indicated that banks providing sales training either do not focus on customer orientation in their training or do a poor job of training their sales personnel in customer-oriented selling. Grewal & Sharma (1991) suggest that more highly trained salespeople should be

more capable of providing higher levels of customer satisfaction. Pettijohn et al. (1997) discovered that sales training in specific topical areas was significantly and positively related to the salesperson's level of customer-oriented selling, leading to the conclusion that more professional managerial tactics might contribute to a customer orientation.

A salesperson who is lacking basic sales skills may be ill-equipped to engage in activities likely to lead to customer satisfaction due to the fact that this individual is incompetent to perform the tasks to which he or she has been assigned. Salesperson skills may be defined as the salesperson's capabilities regarding his or her sales presentations, need identification, suggestive selling, product knowledge, time allocations, and orientation toward assisting the customer. Thus, additional tasks (e.g., customer-oriented selling) could be well beyond the unskilled individual's capabilities. Conversely, salespeople who have a well-developed array of sales skills may be assumed to be more capable of engaging in customer-oriented sales activities. Individuals with a wide array of well-developed sales skills should also be more willing to engage in customer-oriented sales activities because these individuals would be able to adopt a longer-term orientation and sacrifice short-term results. Most research has suggested that customer satisfaction may result from the salesperson's "courtesy, attentiveness, ability, accuracy, and professionalism" (Nicholls, Roslow, & Taelikis, 1995). Additional research has argued that customer satisfaction is largely attributed to the salesperson's "warmth factors," which include the person's friendliness, customer knowledge, and listening skills (Reynolds & Arnold, 2000; Rust & Zatorik, 1993). Correspondingly, research indicates that training leads to the practice of customer-oriented selling (Brown et al., 1987; Pettijohn et al., 1997; Reynolds & Arnold, 2000). Research has also suggested that more highly trained salespeople should have a greater ability to engage in customer-oriented selling (Grewal & Sharma, 1991).

Thus, the third research hypothesis is founded on the exploratory premise that highly skilled salespeople will be more capable of engaging in customer-oriented selling. Hypothesis 3 may be viewed as consisting of two separate hypotheses, the first a revisiting of the issue of the proposed linkage between training and customer orientation. The second portion of the hypothesis evaluates the concept that training should lead to higher levels of sales skills, and these higher skill levels will enhance the salesperson's ability to engage in customer-oriented selling. Thus, Hypothesis 3 states:

- H3:** (a) There will be a positive relationship between salespeople who have received sales training and those individuals' customer-orientation levels. (b) There will be a positive relationship between salespeople who exhibit high levels of sales skills and those individuals' customer-orientation levels.

METHODOLOGY

The completion of the research required a sample that was engaged in personal selling activities that may affect customer satisfaction levels. It was thought that this sample should also be composed of salespeople employed by a variety of employers to ensure that the results are not organizationally specific and to insure that the sample has adequate variability to facilitate an examination of the relationships between customer orientation, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, sales training, and sales skills. Based on these criteria, the researchers identified 25 retail businesses that employed the specified type of salesperson. The researchers then contacted each of these retailers and requested their participation in the study. Twelve of the retailers agreed to participate. These firms included five upscale apparel retailers, one national department store location, four franchised automobile dealerships, and two appliance retailers. These firms provided their entire sales staff as potential respondents, and the total number of salespeople included in the sampling frame was 220 salespeople.

The questionnaires were delivered by the drop-off method (Williams & Attaway, 1996); then each salesperson was provided with a questionnaire by his or her sales manager. Included with the questionnaire was a return envelope to help ensure the respondent's anonymity. A total of 122 surveys were returned, and 109 surveys were deemed usable, for a response rate of just less than 50%. The characteristics of the sample are provided in Table 1. As shown in this table, the majority of the respondents were male (68.8%) and most had previous sales experience (65%). Over two-thirds of the salespeople had been with their current employers for over one year (68%) and were over 30 years of age (70%). This table also shows that the vast majority were provided with beginning sales training (88.9%) and also received continual ongoing training (89%).

Well-established scales were available to facilitate the assessment of the sample's customer orientation, organizational commitment, and job satisfaction. Customer orientation was assessed by using a 24-item scale (SOCO scale—selling orientation/customer orientation) developed by Saxe and Weitz (1982). The results of various studies indicate that the scale possesses the following characteristics: reliability, content validity, convergent and discriminant validity, and known group validity. The reliability and validity of the scale has been established for use with either consumer or industrial sales personnel and industrial buyers (Dunlap, Dotson, & Chambers, 1988; Michaels & Day, 1985; Tadepalli, 1995; Williams & Attaway, 1996). The coefficient alpha for the SOCO scale used in this study was .93, and a mean of 180.7.

The job satisfaction scale developed by Wood et al. (1986) provided the estimates of the respondents' levels of job satisfaction. This scale consists of 14 items scored with a 7-point Likert-type scale. This scale

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Sample.

Characteristic:	Percent (<i>n</i> = 109)
Gender	
Male	68.8%
Female	31.2%
Age	
<23	10.0%
23–30	25.7%
31–40	27.5%
41–50	22.0%
>50	14.7%
Education	
<High school	13.7%
High school graduate	33.9%
Some college	31.2%
College degree	20.2%
Graduate degree	.9%
Previous sales experience	
None	34.9%
<1 year	8.0%
1–3 years	25.5%
4–7 years	11.7%
8–10 years	3.7%
>10 years	16.2%
Sales experience with present employer	
<1 year	32.1%
1–3 years	22.0%
4–7 years	20.2%
8–10 years	10.1%
>10 years	15.6%
Annual hours devoted to beginning sales training	
None	21.1%
1–4	9.2%
5–8	6.4%
9–15	11.9%
16–25	7.3%
26–40	16.3%
41–60	10.1%
>60	15.6%
Annual hours devoted to ongoing sales training	
None	11.0%
1–4	14.0%
5–8	10.1%
9–15	11.0%
16–25	14.0%
26–40	8.0%
41–60	9.2%
>60	22.7%

has been used previously in a marketing context and has an established reliability level, with an alpha coefficient of 0.89 for the scale (Wood et al., 1986). The alpha coefficient in the present study was 0.92, with a mean score of 75.8.

Organizational commitment was measured by using a four-item scale developed by Hunt et al. (1985). This scale has been used in other contexts with respondents from the field of marketing and has a demonstrated reliability, with an alpha coefficient of 0.85. In the current analysis, the scale had an alpha coefficient of 0.73 and a mean value of 17.2.

Determining the sales skills of the sample provided more of a challenge. To facilitate the measurement process, a scale developed by Chonko, Caballero, & Lumpkin (1990) was used. This scale consists of 19 items evaluated by a 7-point Likert-type scale. The scale was previously used to identify whether salespeople engaged in certain activities/behaviors. However, the scale items were easily adapted to the present study and used as a self-assessment measure of the degree to which salespeople either engaged, or had the predisposition to engage, in behaviors that could be regarded as important sales behaviors. In addition to the fact that the scale had been used previously, the Chonko et al. (1990) scale was also used because it seemed to measure the customer-oriented behavior criteria suggested by numerous researchers (cf. Nicholls et al., 1995; Reynolds & Arnold, 2000; Rust & Zahorik, 1993). These authors argue that customer satisfaction may result from the sales representative's courtesy, attentiveness, ability, accuracy, professionalism, friendliness, customer knowledge, and listening skills. Each of these items seem to be a part of the 19-item scale used in this analysis. The sales skill scale had an alpha coefficient of 0.88, well within the boundaries specified by Nunnally (1978). The mean value for the scale was 84.0.

The training dimension was evaluated in two ways. First, salespeople were asked to indicate the number of hours of beginning sales training they received upon starting their sales jobs. To facilitate the statistical analysis of the relationship between this variable and the customer-orientation levels of the sales force, the data pertaining to the beginning sales training variable were collapsed to provide three groups beginning sales training. The first level included all salespeople who received less than 9 hours of introductory sales training. The second beginning sales training variable included those salespeople who received between 9 and 25 hours of training. The third level included all salespeople who received over 25 hours of introductory sales training. Salespeople were also asked to identify the number of hours of ongoing training they have received on an annual basis. In order to conduct the appropriate statistical analysis, data pertaining to this variable too had to be collapsed into three groups of approximately equal size. The first group consisted of those salespeople who received fewer than 16 hours of ongoing sales training. Group 2 was comprised of salespeople who had between 16

and 40 hours of ongoing sales training. The third group contained salespeople who received over 40 hours of ongoing sales training.

RESULTS

Multiple regression analysis was used to evaluate the validity of the hypotheses. As discussed previously, the psychological dimensions of salesperson job satisfaction and organizational commitment were independent variables in the analysis. In addition, the salesperson's sales skills and sales training were also independent variables. Because sales training was a categorical variable measured by different levels of sales training, dummy variables were developed. The three levels of both introductory and ongoing sales training were thus evaluated with the use of indicator variables. Additionally, another variable was created to assess the interaction of sales training and salesperson motivational levels. This variable, "motivation/skill," was created by multiplying the salesperson's score on the selling skills scale by the salesperson's job satisfaction and organizational commitment scores. Finally, because length of employment is frequently related to salesperson performance, it was determined that the length of employment would provide an additional variable for analysis.

Table 2 indicates that the full regression model is significant, and the adjusted R^2 value is 0.166. As shown in the table, the following variables we found to be significantly related to the salesperson's level of customer orientation: the salesperson's job satisfaction, organizational commitment, selling skills, the interaction between selling skills and salesperson motivation, and the highest level of the salesperson's ongoing training. Variables that are not significantly related to the salesperson's customer-orientation level include beginning sales training, the first two levels of ongoing sales training, and the length of employment with the firm. Thus, the analysis of the full regression model provides support

Table 2. Full Model: Customer Orientation, Skills, Training, Commitment, and Satisfaction F Value: 2.98, $p < .004$.

	Beta	t Value	p
Selling skills	3.9	3.26	.002
Organization commitment	4.1	2.6	.01
Job satisfaction	3.8	2.7	.01
Motivation/skill	0.04	2.7	.01
Beginning training level 1	-7.8	1.3	.20
Beginning training level 2	-8.6	1.2	.25
Ongoing training level 1	-1.4	0.24	.81
Ongoing training level 2	-15.8	2.25	.03
Employment	0.45	0.24	.80

Table 3. Reduced Model Customer Orientation, Skills, Training, Commitment, and Satisfaction *F* Value: 4.93, *p* < .0005.

	Standardized Beta	<i>t</i> Value	<i>p</i>
Selling skills	1.6	3.4	.001
Organization commitment	1.0	2.7	.01
Job satisfaction	2.0	2.7	.01
Motivation/skill	3.2	2.7	.001
Ongoing training level 2	0.21	2.1	.04

for the hypothesized positive relationships between job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and sales skill.

A stepwise regression model was implemented to provide a more parsimonious model to estimate the relationship between the criterion variable and the independent variables. The final stage of the stepwise regression model is shown in Table 3. As shown in this table, the reduced model is significant at the $p < .0005$ level, and the adjusted R^2 value increased to 0.17. The standardized regression coefficients indicate the relative impact of each of the variables in the model. These variables include the “motivation/skill” variable, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, selling skills, and the highest level of ongoing sales training.

Thus, the findings lend support for Hypotheses 1 and 2. It seems that both organizational commitment and job satisfaction are necessary requisites for customer orientation. Additionally, support is provided for the third hypothesis, especially that portion of the hypothesis related to sales skills. Findings indicate that the salesperson’s ratings on the sales skill scale is significantly related to his/her customer orientation scores.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of the study was to evaluate the relationship between four salesperson characteristics and the salesperson’s level of customer orientation. The four independent variables were salesperson job satisfaction, organizational commitment, sales training, and sales skills. The criterion variable was the salesperson’s customer orientation score. The results indicate that the psychological dimensions of salesperson job satisfaction and organizational commitment are significantly related to the level of customer orientation exhibited by the salesperson. However, the results also indicate that the salesperson’s exposure to the top level of ongoing sales training, the salesperson’s skill level, and the interaction between salesperson “motivation and sales skills” are also significantly related to customer-orientation levels.

These findings provide support for the notion that a salesperson’s customer orientation level is related to that person’s psychological pre-

disposition to engage in customer-oriented selling (e.g. motivation, as indicated by his or her job satisfaction and organizational commitment scores), sales skills, a combination of the salesperson's motivation/skills, and high levels of ongoing sales training.

The finding that a critical determinant of one's level of customer orientation is that person's skill level reinforces the contentions of Saxe and Weitz (1982) relating to the premise that customer-oriented selling is more likely when salespeople have the expertise necessary to assist customers. One might argue that the practice of customer-oriented sales techniques is a long-term strategy that is accompanied by some level of risk. This risk is associated with the fact that salespeople engaging in customer-oriented selling are likely to be making short-term sacrifices in their current sales results. Consequently, it seems reasonable to assume that only the more confident and competent salespeople would have either the predisposition or the ability to engage in this risky practice. Thus, the skill levels of salespeople relate positively to their predisposition to engage in customer-oriented selling tactics.

This conclusion leads to the proposition that firms that want their sales forces to engage in customer-oriented selling must be certain that their salespeople have the requisite sales skills necessary to allow them to engage in this behavior and are motivated to engage in this activity. Without the necessary skills, it is likely that salespeople will revert to the old techniques of selling that have generated the sales results necessary for them to maintain their current positions and standards of living. As the findings indicate, the more skilled the salesperson, the greater that individual's customer-orientation scores.

Concurrently, the salesperson must also be motivated to engage in customer-oriented selling. Thus, the firm should attempt to build both sales-force job satisfaction and organizational commitment to support the practice of customer-oriented selling. Without this type of motivation, it may be concluded that only one-half of the puzzle has been completed. The satisfaction/commitment relationship supports the work of previous research, which has concluded that job satisfaction and organizational commitment are related to customer-oriented selling (cf. Flaherty et al., 1999, O'Hara et al., 1991; Siguaw et al., 1994).

Moreover, the relationship between the highest level of ongoing sales training and customer-oriented selling indicates that one factor that should lead to the maintenance of sales skills is also related to customer-oriented selling: training. One might also speculate that the relationship between the highest levels of sales training and customer-oriented selling may be more complex than the simple training-skills relationship. In fact, the relationship could be a complex one which may be attributed to the perception that high levels of ongoing training relate to high levels of corporate investment in the salesperson. This type of investment may lead to increasing a salesperson's motivation to engage in customer-oriented selling.

Although the findings do provide insight into the customer-orientation, satisfaction, commitment, skills, and training relationships, certain limitations should be identified. First, it should be noted that the sample is engaged in retail selling activities. This may mean that the results are not as strong or as direct as they could be in situations such as the following:

1. Salespeople can offer their customers a range of alternatives.
2. Customers are engaged in complex buying tasks.
3. Cooperative relationships exist between the buyer and the seller.
4. Repeat sales and referrals are important sources of business.

These situations are those that are described as being most conducive to the practice of customer-oriented selling (Saxe & Weitz, 1982). Thus, the results in this study actually understate the relationships that may be found in those situations that are more conducive to the practice of customer-oriented selling practices.

A second limitation relates to the measures of both sales skills and sales training. The scale used to measure sales skills was adapted from an existing scale and provided a reasonable alpha coefficient. However, limitations may exist relating to the true measurement of one's sales skills, given the subjective nature of this type of variable. Correspondingly, the training variable was assessed by asking salespeople to indicate the number of hours of training provided. This measure could be supplemented by gathering information related to the type and content of training provided, as well as information that relates to the relative emphasis provided to different training topics.

Finally, social desirability biases may affect the degree to which the findings are accurate. Because the study is evaluating variables that may have a value orientation associated with them (e.g., customer orientation, job satisfaction, selling skills, organizational commitment), it may be assumed that not all respondents were perfectly candid. Thus, future research may be developed to include checks to determine the degree to which the respondents provide candid answers to the questions.

Although limitations clearly exist, this study does provide insight into some of the relationships that may predict the predisposition of a salesperson to engage in customer-oriented selling. The findings also provide insight for sales managers regarding the fact that the practice of customer-oriented selling is not likely to occur if salespeople do not possess the entire package necessary for them to undertake both a difficult and long-term sales strategy. This package refers to the motivation, skills, and training necessary to support a customer-oriented selling strategy. Thus, managers who want their salespeople to be more customer ori-

ented should provide the salespeople with the training and the skill levels that will facilitate the adoption of this strategy.

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