



The role of humor usage on creativity, trust and performance in business relationships: An analysis of the salesperson-customer dyad



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ABSTRACT

Using humor wisely is known to have many benefits in a work-related setting. Despite these potential benefits, there is limited research on this phenomenon in a business-to-business selling context. In light of this absence, the authors introduce a theoretical model explaining the role of humor usage in a salesperson-customer encounter. Specifically, the purpose of this paper is to examine the simultaneous influence of salesperson humor usage on creativity and customer trust, which in turn affect objective sales performance. Using 149 salesperson-customer dyads from a cross-industry survey, the results indicate that (1) salesperson humor usage positively influences salesperson creativity and customer trust, (2) which in turn mediates the influence of humor on objective sales performance. In addition, (3) customer trust also influences word-of-mouth propensity and expectation of relationship continuity. The article's broader contribution is that humor usage may be a fundamental human ability that is central for enhancing creativity and developing strong relationships in a business-to-business setting.

1. Introduction

The importance of building strong salesperson-customer relationships in a business-to-business (B2B) context is widely recognized by both sales researchers and managers (Palmatier, Scheer, Evans, & Arnold, 2008). It is also well known that the benefits of investing in relationship marketing activities typically result in increased customer trust (Palmatier et al., 2008). In fact, trust—for many relationship marketers—is the cornerstone of the most successful relationship marketing strategies (Doney & Cannon, 1997; Sirdeshmukh, Singh, & Sabol, 2002). For instance, customers with high levels of trust are more likely to spread positive word-of-mouth (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, & Gremler, 2002), and these individuals have higher expectations of continuity (Crosby, Evans, & Cowles, 1990). In turn, these positive outcomes should result in increased sales and profit levels (Palmatier et al., 2008).

In parallel with building strong relationships, researchers and practitioners also argue that salesperson creativity is a critical success factor leading to sales performance (Groza, Locander, & Howlett, 2016; Lask & Shepherd, 2013). Recent management research has shown that one way of increasing creativity is through humor usage (Mesmer-Magnus, Glew, & Viswesvaran, 2012)—which we define as the ability to perceive, create and express a message or idea with the ingenuity,

verbal skill and incongruity that can produce a smile or laughter (Bergeron & Vachon, 2008). In a related way, humor usage was also found to have a positive impact on customer trust in a business-to-consumer (B2C) context (Bergeron & Vachon, 2008). In light of these studies, the current research highlights the importance of simultaneously examining the effects of humor usage on both salespersons' creativity and customer trust in a B2B setting. We argue that having a better understanding of the effects of humor usage (and its underlying processes) could provide new insights to salespersons about building stronger relationships and being more performant.

The benefits of using humor have been thoroughly studied in the organizational behavior literature. For example, having a sense of humor decreases anxiety and stress as well as increases one's mood and overall life satisfaction (Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, & Weir, 2003). In addition, a recent meta-analysis on management has shown positive associations between a sense of humor, creativity and employee relationships (Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012). Given these findings, it is surprising that, in marketing, humor usage has been mainly studied in advertising (Schultz, 1996). Only a few studies have addressed the effectiveness of humor usage in a sales context, and this stream generally finds that salespeople with a humoristic approach have a competitive advantage over others (Bergeron & Vachon, 2008).

To benefit fully from strategies that incorporate humoristic and

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creative solutions, businesses need to better understand the process at play and how salesperson humor usage can influence creativity and trust, which in turn should influence “real” sales and profits (and not just intentions). With this general purpose in mind, our research makes three key contributions.

First, although research generally recognizes the beneficial effects of humor usage (Avolio, Howell, & Sosik, 1999), we still have an imperfect view of its underlying processes—that is, the way that humor can be translated into superior performances. We still need to understand better the different ways that humor can influence different outcomes of interest. In terms of key process variables, this research examines how humor usage can *simultaneously and independently* affect salespersons' creativity and customer trust. Although prior work has individually examined these two paths, we believe there is a need to integrate these two “routes” within the same model. By doing so, we will have a better understanding of the process (i.e., going through “salesperson creativity” or “customer trust”) that has the most influence on sales performance; this insight would be very useful for managers. In terms of beneficial outcomes, this research also examines the effect of humor on a large set of practical outcomes, including objective sales performance but also customers' word-of-mouth and expectation of continuity. In sum, we believe this research offers a comprehensive model of salesperson humor usage that precisely unveils its complex processes and its effects on a large set of outcomes.

Second, “research on the role of humor in real organizational settings remains sparse” (Lehmann-Willenbrock & Allen, 2014, p. 1278). Specifically, the effects of humor usage in a sales context have been rarely studied at a dyadic level (including both salespersons' and customers' judgments) and by using objective sales performance data. Overall, it appears important to test our theory of humor with multiple sources and objective data so that we can obtain more confidence in our empirical results. Accordingly, we test our theory with a unique dataset in which humor usage was measured by asking salespeople, the relational outcomes were measured by surveying customers, and the performance was captured from objective sales performance data provided by the firms.

Third, it remains unclear whether the outcomes of humor usage in the organizational literature (e.g., Martin et al., 2003; Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012) or in a B2C context (Bergeron & Vachon, 2008) can be extended to our B2B setting. This focus on B2B is important; sales organizations need guidance to understand whether humor usage is an advantage (or a disadvantage) in a more complex and arguably “serious” B2B selling context. The B2B context—compared to B2C—possesses particularities that could influence the effects of humor usage. Indeed, B2B transactions are much larger in terms of sales volumes, take more time to unfold, are more relationship-based, and are much more critical to the success of firms (Palmatier et al., 2008). In light of these differences, our research allows a better understanding of which route or process is most important for B2B salespersons. Is it because humor allows building stronger relationships based on trust? Or it is because humor makes salespersons more creative and able to provide innovative solutions? The current model—developed in a B2B sales context—allows answering these key questions for managers.

The paper is organized as follows. First, drawing on the broaden-and-build theory, we begin with a literature review of the key concepts, thus setting the stage for our research that incorporates salesperson humor usage, creativity and customer trust. Second, we present the research model and hypotheses. Third, we provide the methodological and measurement-related details along with the descriptions and characteristics of the studied salesperson-customer dyadic samples. Next, we highlight the findings of the research and the testing of our hypotheses. Lastly, we articulate the theoretical and managerial contributions and limitations of our research.

2. Literature review

2.1. Broaden-and-build theory

We draw on the broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 2001) to ensure a strong theoretical basis to integrate logically our key constructs of interest. Even if broaden-and-build theory has mainly focused on emotions, recent work using this theory has also focused on positive affect (Barnes, Ponder, & Hopkins, 2015) and creativity (Lin, Kao, Chen, & Lu, 2016). In that regard, this theory appears a useful starting point for studying the effects of humor usage on creativity.

According to this theory, an individual in a positive state-of-mind possesses a greater ability to broaden his or her horizons (in terms of thought processes), which would make him engage in favorable actions resulting in beneficial outcomes. In other words, a positivity state (generated through humor usage, for instance) could lead to the development of a new thinking process (e.g., being creative) and new related actions (e.g., offering an innovative solution). In turn, such new “thought-action” associations should lead to durable positive outcomes (i.e., a greater ability to generate sales). In parallel, a positive state could also help an individual to build stronger personal resources—ranging from physical, intellectual and social to psychological (Fredrickson, 2001) that will help him or her to cope with challenges in a B2B sales context (Lussier & Hartmann, 2017).

Broaden-and-build theory provides initial theoretical footing to understand how salesperson humor can lead to a variety of beneficial outcomes. Specifically, we argue that both salespeople and customers derive positivity from a proper usage of humor. This positivity makes salespersons more creative (i.e., a thought process), which leads them to propose novel and innovation business solutions to their customers (i.e., an action). This positivity will also help salespeople to better manage pressure situations, adversity, conflicts and failures associated with B2B selling, which should result in the development of stronger relationships based on trust. Here, trust is an important social resource for a salesperson. Ultimately, this improved sense of creativity and these enhanced resources (i.e., trust) should lead to superior lasting positive outcomes, such as the ability to generate greater sales. On the basis of this logic, we posit that humor usage helps salespeople in strengthening their *creative* “thought-action” responses and building enduring customer trust, thereby increasing desired outcomes such as sales performance.

It should be noted that support for the broaden-and-build theory is found in recent marketing literature. For instance, a recent study used this framework to show that positivity (conceptualized as optimism and resilience) experienced by B2B salespeople is positively linked to important sales-related resources and outcomes such as customer-oriented behaviors, customer satisfaction and sales performance (Lussier & Hartmann, 2017).

In summary, building on this theory, the current research examines whether salespeople who are able to maintain elevated humor usage (i.e., a positive construct) are better in adopting lasting “thought-action” responses (e.g., increased creativity) and building enduring resources (i.e., customer trust) that improve not only their personal outcomes (e.g., sales performance) but also customers' relational outcomes (e.g., word-of-mouth and expectation of continuity). This research extends the applicability of the broaden-and-build theory by incorporating within it the notion of salesperson humor usage in a B2B selling context. Based on this theory, Fig. 1 provides an overview of our conceptual framework. In the next sections, we provide a literature review on our two core constructs: humor usage and creativity. Because the other constructs are better established in the literature, these constructs are defined later when the model is presented.

2.2. Humor usage

Humor is a surprisingly complex concept, for it can be (1) a

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