

Assessing the evolution of sales knowledge: A 20-year content analysis

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Abstract

1012 articles appearing in 15 prominent journals over the period 1983–2002 were content analyzed in order to assess the state of published research in the domain of selling and sales management. The results provide a comprehensive, two-decade look at the key topical, theoretical, and methodological patterns prevalent at the aggregate level as well as within selected journals. Without question, the sales field has generated a considerable body of knowledge representing a range of issues, empirical approaches, and conceptual foundations. However, this review reveals several longer term trends that may challenge the sales community to consider new approaches to designing and executing sales research. Implications of these findings for researchers and industrial marketing practitioners are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Systematically analyzing the state of knowledge development in an academic field is a critical step in any discipline's growth and maturity. Reviewing published research in peer-reviewed journals is one of the most useful and relevant approaches for evaluating a field's accrued knowledge. Although time consuming and data intensive, journal content analyses can mark a discipline's progress, while simultaneously providing direction into future areas of needed inquiry. In addition, reviews that cover extended time periods are especially helpful because they offer insight into a research community's longer term topical, methodological, and theoretical trends. Given that so much of the effort of individual researchers focuses on purposefully restricted studies and research questions, taking the time to consider a discipline's broader knowledge output can make future research investments more productive to both academics and managers. In many ways, a comprehensive content analysis of published research encourages scholars to step

back from their individual “trees” in order to assess the entire “forest” of knowledge generation within a discipline.

The sales literature is ripe for such a review. Over the last two decades, sales has emerged from its historical roots as a narrow, tactically focused marketing specialty to become a topic of strategic importance within the industrial marketing field (Hon-eycutt, 2002). During this period, the sheer volume of published sales articles has also increased substantially. In response to this evolving landscape, a number of prominent scholars have observed, at least anecdotally, that sales research should break new ground, make use of new theoretical perspectives, and employ new methods in order to continue its advancement (Leigh & Tanner, 2004; Marshall & Michaels, 2001). Likewise, a casual review of managerial publications reveals that sales professionals continue to struggle with a set of enduring issues that have yet to be addressed adequately by academics (e.g., Gallanter, 2003; Marchetti, 2004). Although a few comprehensive reviews of the business-to-business (B2B) literature have been conducted (e.g., Reid & Plank, 2000), their focus has been somewhat general with little attention given to detailing and classifying the various aspects of all published articles. Within the sales field specifically, a number of limited content reviews have been published (e.g., Moncrief, Marshall, & Watkins, 2000), but unfortunately, the conclusions from the last major

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study—a four-journal content analysis by Bush and Grant (1994)—are now well over a decade old.

This paper presents the results of a comprehensive content analysis covering two decades of research on the domain of industrial selling and sales management. Our review, which evaluated more than 1000 articles published across 15 key journals, provides a descriptive snapshot of the status of contemporary sales research, including the patterns that have characterized its development over a recent two-decade period. After a brief background review and methodological summary, we present the major findings of the analysis. Included in these results are details regarding the most dominant topical issues, theoretical foundations, and empirical research approaches appearing within the sales literature from 1983 to 2002. In addition, journal-level statistics reveal trends across the range of reviewed publication outlets. Beyond its primarily descriptive reporting, a major aim of this paper is to encourage reflection and dialogue among industrial marketing and sales scholars into ways to advance future sales research. We conclude by discussing implications of these findings for researchers, managers, and other stakeholders.

2. Background

Journal content and publication trend analyses have been conducted at the overall discipline level (e.g., Baumgartner & Pieters, 2003) and within specific streams of marketing (e.g., Helgeson, Kluge, Mager, & Taylor, 1984; Yale & Gilly, 1988). Sales research is no different in this respect. Swan, Powers, and Sobczak (1991) offered one of the first formal attempts to study sales publishing trends by reviewing a set of articles appearing during the period of 1980–1990. Their effort, which focused on manuscripts published exclusively in the *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management* (JPSSM), categorized 175 articles by topic and analyzed the degree to which JPSSM articles were cross-cited in *Journal of Marketing* (JM), *Journal of Marketing Research* (JMR), and *Industrial Marketing Management* (IMM). That same year, Bush and Grant (1991) identified the leading contributors to sales research published in JM, JMR, JPSSM, and IMM during the decade of the 1980s. Later, Moncrief et al. (2000) evaluated authorship trends for approximately 250 articles appearing in 16 marketing journals during the 1993–1997 time period. Although Moncrief et al.'s findings did include the frequency of sales articles appearing in the examined journals, they gave primary attention to tracking the doctoral training and current institutional affiliation of publishing researchers during the 5-year timeframe.

The most comprehensive analysis of sales publication trends to date is the work of Bush and Grant (1994), which examined sales research published in JM, JMR, JPSSM, and IMM over the period of 1980–1992. This study identified 358 articles, which were classified according to topical categories first used by Swan et al. (1991), plus two additional categories. Also reported in this analysis were the number of articles published by year in terms of journal outlet, empirical method, sampled unit, statistical analysis approach, target audience, and theoretical/conceptual foundation utilized.

While these previous reviews provided an invaluable understanding of the sales field's evolution, their somewhat restricted scope is worth noting. No doubt, for reasons of practicality, each of the previous analyses incorporated a relatively limited set of journals and thus excluded many key journals that regularly publish sales manuscripts. For example, the industrial–organizational (I/O) psychology field has generated a notable body of research on salespeople, yet journals from areas outside the core marketing discipline were not included in prior reviews. Similarly, the *European Journal of Marketing* was not analyzed in previous studies, potentially giving past results an overly North American-centric perspective. A review incorporating a broader collection of journals, especially over a longer period of time, can provide a more complete understanding of the field's knowledge development, even in the years covered by previous studies. Given the dual importance of assessing: (1) a larger and more diverse collection of journals and (2) the most recent decade's worth of sales research published since the last large-scale review, a new content analysis can provide a greater understanding of the sales field's evolution, current status, and future direction.

3. Methodology

To uncover the major trends within the selling and sales management literature, we content analyzed sales articles appearing in the following 15 journals during the 20-year period of 1983–2002: *Journal of Marketing* (JM), *Journal of Marketing Research* (JMR), *Marketing Science* (MS), *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* (JAMS), *Journal of Retailing* (JR), *Journal of Business Research* (JBR), *Industrial Marketing Management* (IMM), *Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing* (JBIM), *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management* (JPSSM), *European Journal of Marketing* (EJM), *International Journal of Research in Marketing* (IJRM), *Marketing Letters* (ML), *Psychology and Marketing* (P&M), *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice* (JMTP), and *Journal of Applied Psychology* (JAP). Included in this selection are the most prestigious journals within marketing (JM, JMR, MS, JAMS, JR), the more prominent field journals focused on B2B and industrial marketing (IMM, JBIM, JPSSM), a number of notable, but more secondary marketing journals (JBR, ML, P&M, JMTP), a representative set of non-U.S.-based journals (EJM, IJRM), and the premier I/O psychology journal (JAP). A 16th journal, *Journal of Consumer Research*, was included in the original journal sample, but was not incorporated into the subsequent analysis because it contained only four articles specifically focused on selling or sales management over the studied timeframe. This selection of journals appears to represent the vast majority of published sales-related research during this period.² The specific timeframe of 1983–2002 was chosen to provide a long-term (20-year) view of sales research through

² Four journals (IJRM, JBIM, JMTP, and ML) commenced publishing at some point after 1983; therefore, the analysis does not include a full 20 years of coverage for these journals.

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