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Salesperson improvisation: Antecedents, performance outcomes, and boundary conditions

Abena Yeboah Banin [a], Nathaniel Boso [a,*], Magnus Hultman [a], Anne L. Souchon [b], Paul Hughes [c], Ekaterina Nemkova [d]

[a] Leeds University Business School, University of Leeds, Leeds LS2 7JT, UK
[b] School of Business & Economics, Loughborough University, Ashby Road, Loughborough, Leicestershire LE14 3PE, UK
[c] Durham University Business School, Durham University, Mill Hill Lane, Durham DH1 3LB, UK
[d] Nottingham University Business School, University of Nottingham, Wollaton Road, Nottingham NG8 1BB, UK

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ABSTRACT

Premised on the idea that not all salesperson behaviors can be pre-scripted and that, increasingly, salespersons must find ways to respond to unexpected but urgent market conditions, this study theorizes the drivers, outcomes and boundary conditions of salesperson improvisation. Using primary data from industrial salespersons, the study examines how perceptions of resource availability and customer demandingness drive salesperson improvisation and condition its sales performance effects. Findings show that higher levels of salesperson improvisation are associated with increased sales performance. Additionally, a heightened perception of resource availability and greater customer demandingness are associated with increases in salesperson improvisation. Furthermore, findings indicate that the salesperson improvisation–sales performance relationship is strengthened when resource availability is greater and when customer demandingness is lower.

1. Introduction

Research on industrial sales suggests that firms should develop market responses to satisfy evolving customer demands, address competitive moves, and minimize the impact of other exogenous market forces on their bottom-line (Helm & Gritsch, 2014; Kumar, Subramanian, & Strandholm, 2011). To this end, the industrial sales management literature suggests that firms must rely on their salespersons to maximize their chances of quickly detecting and responding to marketplace uncertainties (Lambert, Marmorstein, & Sharma, 1990). The logic is that salespersons have first-hand knowledge of customers' evolving needs and preferences and are therefore best positioned to respond (Wang & Netemeyer, 2004). Additionally, given salespeople's direct access to key competitor intelligence, they represent the 'database' of firms' intelligence and should therefore be involved in the design and execution of competitive strategies (Hughes, Le Bon, & Rapp, 2013).

Scholarly research examining salesperson behavior suggests a planning-based approach to decision-making, whereby selling decisions are argued to be predicated on rationality and sequential market information processing/optimization (Moncrief & Marshall, 2005). While this planning-based approach has advanced knowledge on the industrial selling process, it is important to bring to fore the apparent lack of knowledge on a descriptive approach to selling. Particularly in the contemporary fast-paced and unpredictable business world where customers define satisfaction by timely responsiveness (Tom & Lucey, 1997), the need to understand variations in salesperson behaviors as a function of contextual requirements has heightened. As Singh and Koshy (2010) argue, the situation-specific nature of contemporary selling demands that models of effective selling account for specific types of sales situations, choosing only those variables (specific set of skills) that explain performance in those situations.

As such, we specifically argue that not all industrial selling behaviors are pre-scripted and that in the increasingly uncertainty-laden competitive landscape, the role of more emergent selling behaviors may be more relevant. Given that salespersons are normally pressured to respond in the moment to market conditions (Chonko, Jones, Roberts, & Dubinsky, 2002), this study argues that the litmus test for sales success may not only lie in how much sales planning is done, but also by the extent to which salespersons can generate and implement context-relevant solutions when it matters most.

Different options exist for achieving such contextual relevance and subsequent sales success. First, salespersons may employ adaptive selling approaches by varying their sales presentations based on customer characteristics (Sujan, Weitz, & Kumar, 1994). A second option is the

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: bnaay@leeds.ac.uk (A. Yeboah Banin), n.boso@leeds.ac.uk (N. Boso), M.Hultman@leeds.ac.uk (M. Hultman), a.l.souchon@lboro.ac.uk (A.L. Souchon), paul.hughes@durham.ac.uk (P. Hughes), ekaterina.nemkova@nottingham.ac.uk (E. Nemkova).

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application of real-time creativity during customer interactions (Strutton, Pentina, & Pullins, 2009; Wang & Netemeyer, 2004). While both approaches have been proven useful (Franke & Park, 2006; Martinaityte & Sacramento, 2013; Spiro & Weitz, 1990; Wang & Miao, 2015), theory and empirical evidence are lagging with regard to how salespersons act under conditions of surprise and exigency. To this end, this study investigates the question: what happens when salespersons must think and act on their feet when faced with unexpected and urgent situations for which they have no clear strategy? To shed light on this question, we propose the notion of salesperson improvisation, and identify its antecedents, outcomes and boundary conditions.

We define salesperson improvisation as a behavior (exhibited in sales situations) that is not 'pre-scripted' but rather conceived and implemented extemporaneously. Through the lens of descriptive decision-making theory we link salesperson improvisational behavior to sales performance. Given that the sales literature points to emergent behavior as a direct outcome of customer-related, (Wang & Netemeyer, 2004) and firm-related (Bonney & Williams, 2009) environmental drivers, we examine how salespeople's perception of customer demandingness and resource availability give rise to salesperson improvisation and condition improvisation's effect on sales performance. In doing so, our study makes several contributions to the industrial sales management literature.

First, our conceptualization of the salesperson improvisation construct within the individual selling context helps broaden knowledge of the improvisation phenomenon that until now has largely been studied at the broader organizational level (e.g.Moorman & Miner, 1998; Nemkova, Souchon, & Hughes, 2012; Nemkova, Souchon, Hughes, & Micevski, 2015; Vera & Crossan, 2005). Second, by viewing the salesperson improvisation–sales performance linkage from a descriptive decision-making lens we expound an alternative mechanism connecting salesperson behavior to performance. Third, by examining resource- and customer-related drivers and boundary conditions of salesperson improvisation, this study provides fine-grained recommendations on how sales organizations can engender improvisation in their sales force, and the conditions under which improvisation helps or hinders sales. Finally, given that improvisational behavior in the selling process may be driven by a lack of primary and enabling infrastructure such as communication channels and regulatory discipline (Sheth, 2011), and in view of scarce emerging markets sales scholarship (Panagopoulos et al., 2011), we broaden existing perspectives on industrial selling research by testing our theoretical framework (Fig. 1) in an emerging market setting.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

2.1. Salesperson improvisation: its definition and distinctiveness

Improvisation draws its roots from 'proviso', which means a provision made in advance of the occurrence of an event (Weick, 1998). The prefix 'im' negates the structured orientation of 'proviso' to create the opposite which is 'improvise'. As such, improvisation refers to behaviors that occur in the absence of predetermined stipulation. Whereas a typical behavior composition is thought to precede its execution, in improvisation, the time gap between the two is narrow and hardly separable; hence their convergence (Moorman & Miner, 1998). Accordingly, improvisation has been defined as a convergence of behavior composition and execution reflecting the conception of action as it unfolds (Cunha, Cunha, & Kamoche, 1999). This definition of improvisation is rooted in jazz music and theatrical performance. In jazz music, improvisation is often viewed as "the creation of music in the course of performance" (Nettl & Russell, 1998, p. 2) or as composing and performing in real time by reworking pre-composed material in a new creative way (Kamoche, Cunha, & Cunha, 2003). Specifically, jazz music performance research suggests that the creative process of composing music and the resulting jazz music product co-occur. Studies focusing on the creative processes during jazz performance indicate that the jazz musicians' cognitive processing capacity during real time jazz performance is constrained, to the extent that the amount of time available for decision making during a composition and performance is minimal (e.g., Gabrielsson, 2003). Accordingly, scholars have developed psychological models of jazz improvisation to argue that jazz performance is characterized by a note-by-note process of musical decision making that occurs spontaneously (e.g., Johnson-Laird, 2002; Pressing, 1988). In theatrical improvisation viewers' immediate reactions replace a predetermined plot (Barrett & Peplowski, 1998). Instead actors continuously work with the audience, process real-time information flow and react accordingly; actors see the audience's feedback and amend their performance in response. When the theatrical improvisation metaphor is mapped onto an organizational context, similar logic applies: "In business, customers are like the audience. Improvisational processes can affect customer satisfaction when work teams deal with customers' requirements and handle unexpected problems or unreasonable requests" in real time (Vera & Crossan, 2004 p. 739).

Therefore, in moving beyond the jazz music and theatrical performance contexts, organizational scholars (e.g., Meyer, 1998; Nemkova et al., 2015) have relied on the core tenet of the improvisation construct

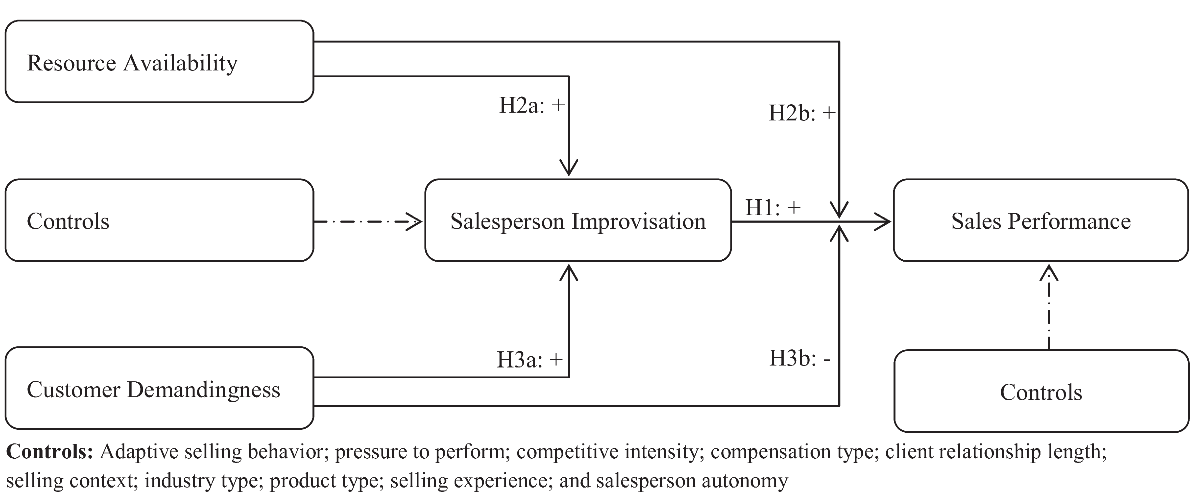

Fig. 1. Conceptual model. Controls: adaptive selling behavior; pressure to perform; competitive intensity; compensation type; client relationship length; selling context; industry type; product type; selling experience; and salesperson autonomy.

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