



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Industrial Marketing Management



How salesperson perceptions of customers' pro-social behaviors help drive salesperson performance

Rachelle J. Shannahan^{a,1}, Alan J. Bush^{b,2}, Kirby L.J. Shannahan^{a,3}, William C. Moncrief^{c,*}

^a Faculty of Business Administration, Memorial University of Newfoundland, St. John's, NL A1B 3X5, Canada

^b Fogelman College of Business and Economics, University of Memphis, 3675 Central Avenue, Memphis, TN 38152-3120, United States

^c M.J. Neeley School of Business, Texas Christian University, Box 298530, TCU, Fort Worth, TX 76109, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 14 September 2013

Received in revised form 10 February 2015

Accepted 10 March 2015

Available online xxxx

Keywords:

B2B

Customer prosocial behavior

Customer organizational citizenship behavior

Sales performance

Personal selling

ABSTRACT

By conceptualizing customers' organizational citizenship behavior as a communication cue, a customer evaluation criterion, and a sales performance facilitator in a relational selling context, the authors empirically demonstrate the effect of salespeople's perceptions of their customers' voluntary, prosocial behavior on three components of sales performance. The authors first hypothesize and confirm that salespeople can perceive their customers to exhibit organizational citizenship behavior, and that this important customer cue can serve as a customer evaluation criterion. The authors then demonstrate how salespeople can respond to their perceptions of customers' organizational citizenship behavior in performance-enhancing ways. Results from a sample of 628 business-to-business salespeople suggest that customer-involved sales performance fully mediates the relationship between customers' organizational citizenship behavior and salesperson behavioral performance, and that salesperson behavioral performance partially mediates the relationship between customer-involved sales performance and salesperson outcome productivity. These findings highlight the important role customer-involved sales performance plays as an antecedent to a salesperson's individual performance. Support for the notion that salespeople's perceptions and interpretations of their customers' organizational citizenship behavior can facilitate personal selling and augment sales performance has implications for sales training, salesperson evaluation, and customer evaluation. The authors discuss these and other implications for B2B researchers and practitioners.

© 2015 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

As the B2B marketplace becomes more knowledge-intensive, salespeople will draw increasingly on their abilities to absorb information that helps them work cooperatively with changing buyer behaviors (Verbeke, Deitz, & Verwaal, 2011; Wiersema, 2013). In fact, Wiersema (2013) through the B2B Agenda Project identified "knowledge of customers" as one of the most important issues in today's B2B marketplace. In an increasingly complex and competitive environment, selling organizations need to identify, target, and develop deep, profitable relationships with their customers (Blocker, Cannon, Panagopoulos, & Sager, 2012; Jones, Dixon, Chonko, & Cannon, 2005).

Firms often identify "good" customers in terms of financial metrics such as sales volume, revenue, profit, or customer lifetime value (Reichheld & Sasser, 1990; Reinartz & Kumar, 2000). The use of financial

metrics such as these comprises an output approach to segmenting customers for such purposes as the allocation of salesperson time, attention, and other resources. Another way to segment customers is from an input perspective based on identifiable and beneficial presale customer behaviors that support successful selling and facilitate sales performance. From this perspective, a "good" customer may be one who is not only profitable in the long term, but who is also, from the salesperson's point of view, helpful. Such an approach, however, requires that salespeople perceive, interpret, and respond appropriately to customers and their behaviors. In responding to the "challenge to managers and scholars to uncover the potential value of helping behaviors" in a sales context (Agnihotri, Krush, & Singh, 2012, p. 220), the goal of this research is to enhance our understanding of the influence of prosocial behaviors perceived to be exhibited by B2B customers on salesperson performance by focusing on whether, and to what extent, a salesperson's perception, interpretation, and response to customers' helping behaviors (i.e., salesperson's knowledge of customers) are relevant to sales performance. Utilizing stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984) as a springboard but relying on the theory of organizing framework (Weick, 1979), our study aims to demonstrate that customers can impact a selling firm's performance through their salesperson perceived pro-social behavioral communication cues.

* Corresponding author at: Neeley School of Business, TCU Fort Worth, Texas 76129, United States. Tel.: +1 817 257 6185; fax: +1 817 257 7227.

E-mail addresses: rshannahan@mun.ca (R.J. Shannahan), alanbush@memphis.edu (A.J. Bush), kirbys@mun.ca (K.L.J. Shannahan), B.moncrief@tcu.edu (W.C. Moncrief).

¹ Tel.: +1 709 864 8210; fax: +1 709 864 7680.

² Tel.: +1 901 678 2437; fax: +1 901 678 2685.

³ Tel.: +1 709 864 8843; fax: +1 709 864 7680.

Because extant research can explain only a relatively small amount of variance in sales performance, Evans, McFarland, Dietz, and Jaramillo (2012) advocate the use of new theoretical models to advance our understanding of the sales performance construct. Therefore, we depart from the traditional perspective of personal selling as an interpersonal communication activity (Reeves & Barksdale, 1984; Spiro, Perreault, & Reynolds, 1976), and look at it from an organizational communications perspective. An organizational communications perspective of personal selling allows us to consider personal selling as an interpretation system (Daft & Weick, 1984) within which customers' helpful behavior is a form of voluntary, prosocial communication that salespeople can perceive, interpret, and respond to in performance-enhancing ways (Shannahan, Bush, Moncrief, & Shannahan, 2013). In this context and from this vantage point, we suggest that customer-involved sales performance (CISP) may be an antecedent to a salesperson's individual performance.

By adopting an organizational communication perspective of the buyer–seller interaction in a relational selling context (Shannahan et al., 2013), customers can be conceptualized as important members of a selling organization. An organizational communications perspective therefore allows customers' voluntary and prosocial organizational citizenship behavior to be conceptualized as a form of organizational communication. Drawing from the theory of organizing (Weick, 1979), we suggest that the mere perception of this customer behavior is capable of triggering the salesperson's perception, interpretation, and response process that can enhance sales performance.

For support that pro-social customer actions can impact a selling firm's performance, we point to stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984), which is a theory of organizational management and ethics. It holds that business is about how customers, suppliers, employees, financiers, communities, and managers interact and create value. The three central tenets are: 1) in the process of value creation, the stakes of each stakeholder group are multi-faceted, and inherently inter-connected; 2) businesses are human institutions comprised of actual and complex human beings; and 3) management's goal is to create as much value as possible for stakeholders without resorting to trade-offs (see Freeman, 2010). From the stakeholder theory perspective a business is understood as a set of relationships between and among groups which have a stake in the activities that make up the business. Since a stakeholder is “any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives” (Freeman, 1984, p. 46), stakeholder theory helps us convey the importance of customer actions for formally structured organizations — organizations that “are in fact meaningfully distinct” (Phillips, Freeman, & Wicks, 2003, p. 483) from other stakeholder groups and their respective formally organized corporations. Therefore, in order to allow customers to be conceptualized as members of a selling organization so that we may examine whether and to what extent customers' pro-social citizenship behaviors influence a selling firm's sales performance, we rely on the theory of organizing (Weick, 1979). This framework, which is concerned with uncertainty reduction, holds that organizational members seek to gather and interpret information to enhance understanding, maximize opportunity, and minimize cost.

Because our study rests on the premise that in relational selling situations customers are important sales organization members who can exhibit pro-social citizenship behavior, we first examine whether such behavior is perceived by salespeople to be exhibited by their customers and, if so, whether salespeople interpret and judge such behavior favorably. After establishing the existence and importance of customers' pro-social citizenship behavior in a relational selling context, we examine how salesperson perceptions and interpretations of their customers' organizational citizenship behavior (COCB) influence key aspects of sales performance that rely on customer communication and cooperation. Finally, we examine how these aspects work to influence those aspects of a salesperson's performance that are not tied to customer communication or cooperation. In conceptualizing customer-involved sales performance (CISP) as the embodiment of a

salesperson's response to the perception and interpretation of COCB, and using Fig. 1 as a guide, we demonstrate that COCB works through CISP to directly influence salesperson behavioral performance (SBP), and to indirectly influence salesperson outcome productivity (SOP).

2. Conceptual framework and research hypotheses

2.1. Personal selling and salesperson performance from an organizational communication perspective

The movement in practice toward long-term relational exchanges (Richards & Jones, 2009) calls for close attention to customers who are increasingly integral to the selling process. In fact, the “new realities of relational selling in an information-intensive environment” (Hunter & Perreault, 2007, p. 29) underline the opportunity for customers to play a crucial role in the sales process as a key provider of information. Given that relational partners have been described as being “involved in a complex network of operational and social interdependence where organizational boundaries blur as a result of converging goals” (Sheth & Shah, 2003, p. 628), customers are easily viewed as boundary-spanners (Spekman, 1979) as they work with salespeople toward mutually beneficial ends. In assuming key boundary-spanning roles on behalf of their respective organizations, customers and salespeople together *create* organization as they communicate (Weick, 1979). As such, the personal selling process is no longer adequately explained in terms of a series of compilation steps (i.e., Dubinsky, 1980/81) controlled by the selling firm, and managed by the salesperson (Macintosh, Anglin, Szymanski, & Gentry, 1992; Moncrief & Marshall, 2005). Instead, in contexts in which customers are active participants in the selling process, the process is better explained from an organizational communication perspective as an interpretation system (Daft & Weick, 1984) in which uncertainty is minimized by participants' seeking information, and then basing action on that information (Shannahan et al., 2013). Additional support for an organizational communication conceptualization of personal selling comes from McFarland, Challagalla, and Shervani (2006) who describe personal selling as an interorganizational, person-to-person relationship, in which the unit of analysis is the individual relationship.

In a relational selling context customer–salesperson interactions are undertaken in order to create understanding so that together customers and salespeople can reduce uncertainty for themselves, and arrive at a mutually beneficial solution. With repeated interactions throughout the selling process, customers and salespeople impact one another with their words and actions, as each acquires, interprets, and responds to information (Littlejohn & Foss, 2005). Because customers are important sources of information for salespeople (Hughes, LeBon, & Rapp, 2013), salespeople must pay close attention to, and make sense of all that customers say and do before responding accordingly.

The theory of organizing framework (Weick, 1979) holds that organizational members seek to gather and interpret information to enhance understanding, maximize opportunity, and minimize cost. The theory offers a useful framework to explain interpersonal communication between organizational members in one group or department, as well as communication with members of another group, organization, or external public (Smudde, 2000). Organizations are viewed as open social systems that process information from an environment that contains some level of uncertainty.

The theory of organizing (Weick, 1979) is an especially useful framework for understanding the relational selling context in the B2B marketplace where uncertainty reduction is of particular concern for salespeople who must determine—in addition to customer wants and needs—what customer behaviors and other communication cues mean so they can respond accordingly (Shannahan et al., 2013). Because organizing is an intersubjective activity through which people try to reduce the ambiguity they face through communicative action (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005), customers can be viewed as sales

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/5111181>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/5111181>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)