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How psychological resourcefulness increases salesperson's sales performance and the satisfaction of their customers: Exploring the mediating role of customer-oriented behaviors

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the relationships among psychological resourcefulness, customer-oriented behaviors, sales performance, and customer satisfaction. Drawing from positive organizational behavior and broaden-and-build theory, the authors propose that (1) psychological resourcefulness positively influences customer-oriented behaviors and (2) customer-oriented behaviors mediate the influence of psychological resourcefulness on sales performance and customer satisfaction. The authors test, and provide support for, these hypotheses using a unique data set consisting of objective sales performance data and survey data collected from 175 salesperson-customer dyads from various industries within a business-to-business setting. The broader contribution of the article is that psychological resourcefulness may be central to salesperson performance and customer relationship effectiveness. Implications of the findings for theoreticians and practitioners are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Most would agree that building and maintaining strong salesperson-customer relationships remain important contributors to the performance of business-to-business (B2B) sales organizations (Palmatier, Scheer, & Steenkamp, 2007). However, an industry survey reports that approximately 50% of salespeople do not meet their annual sales targets (Ahearne, Boichuk, Chapman, & Steenburgh, 2012). Therefore, it is not surprising that sales organizations make significant investments to improve the sales performance of their salespeople. Indeed, U.S. sales organizations invested upwards of \$20 billion dollars in 2013 to increase the selling abilities and behaviors of their sales force (Association for talent development, 2013). For many of these organizations, these investments are in customer-oriented² selling behaviors (Homburg, Müller, & Klarmann, 2011; Korschun, Bhattacharya, & Swain, 2013)—behaviors designed to promote salesperson-customer relationships and customer satisfaction (Saxe & Weitz, 1982).

The aforementioned survey by Ahearne et al. (2012) also reports that salespeople perceive their position to be among the most challenging within the organization. Salespeople regularly experience high levels of pressure, adversity, conflict, and failure due to the often conflicting interests, objectives, and demands of their position, organization, and customers (Dixon & Schertzer, 2005; Homburg et al., 2011). Furthermore, the ever-evolving marketplace is influencing the importance of the various activities salespeople perform (Hartmann & Rutherford, 2015; Plouffe & Barclay, 2007), changes which may result in greater conflict (Homburg et al., 2011). For example, modern salespeople increasingly interact with customers that are better connected to sales organizations, more knowledgeable, and, thus, more powerful in B2B salesperson-customer relationships (Agnihotri, Dingus, Hu, & Krush, 2016). Salespeople must also respond to increasingly complex and unique customer demands, rates of new product/service offerings, and technological developments (Sheth & Sharma, 2008).

In response, modern salespeople collect greater information, consider more complex and wide-ranging solutions, and communicate more intricate customized value propositions that account for the more complex and unique demands of customers, among other activities, than did their predecessors. Partially attributable to these activities as well as the high levels of pressure, adversity, conflict, and failure salespeople regularly experience, psychological resourcefulness—the extent of state-like individual attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors (i.e., psychological capacities)—may be of particular importance for understanding

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² Customer orientation has been contrasted as either a trait or a set of behaviors (Korschun et al., 2013). As per prior research (Homburg et al., 2011), we adopt the view that customer orientation is a set of behaviors designed to satisfy customer needs over time.

salespersons' use of customer-oriented selling behaviors, sales performance, and their customers' satisfaction. This is because psychological capacities can expand the development and use of diverse, exploratory, and novel behaviors (Fredrickson, 2001) and aid individuals when facing pressure, adversity, conflict, and failure (Schulman, 1999; Seligman, 2011). At least partially attributable to these reasons, psychological capacities have been shown to influence individual performance and other outcomes (Luthans, 2002; Luthans, Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weixing, 2005; Youssef & Luthans, 2007).

Consistent with prior research examining psychological capacities, our examination focuses on specific psychological capacities germane to explaining the phenomena of interest. Specifically, this research focuses on the psychological capacities of optimism—“one's general expectation of successful and favorable outcomes” (Dixon & Schertzer, 2005, p. 362)—and resilience—“the capacity to overcome or bounce back from adversity, conflict, failure, or other events that induce high levels of stress or pressure” (Luthans, 2002, p. 702) for two reasons. First, prior research has linked one or both of these psychological capacities to greater mental flexibility, creativity, efficiency, and openness to information (Barnes, Ponder, & Hopkins, 2015), perceived influence over outcomes (Schulman, 1999), motivation to act (Tenney, Logg, & Moore, 2015), and persistence (Schulman, 1999). Thus, optimism and resilience may be especially valuable to salespeople in thinking of and acting out customer-oriented behaviors, thereby enhancing sales performance and customer satisfaction. Second, salespeople regularly encounter situations with uncertain outcomes and adversity, conflict, and failure. Hence, salespeople are afforded regular opportunities to act upon optimism and resilience.

Herein, we draw upon positive organizational behavior and broaden-and-build theory to position optimism and resilience as first-order factors of a higher-order latent construct termed psychological resourcefulness that influences customer-oriented behaviors. We claim that customer-oriented behaviors, in turn, influence sales performance and the satisfaction of customers. In doing so, this study makes two novel contributions to the sales literature. First, we offer the underlying theory for why and how psychological resourcefulness influences salespersons' customer-oriented behaviors. In addition to being an important theoretical contribution, this offers important implications to sales organizations and managers because psychological capacities such as optimism and resilience can be developed (Bande, Fernández-Ferrín, Varela, & Jaramillo, 2015; Youssef & Luthans, 2007). Second, by delineating the influence of salespersons' psychological resourcefulness on important outcomes through their respective influence on customer-oriented behaviors, we elucidate how and why psychological resourcefulness contributes to salespersons' sales performance and customers' satisfaction. In doing so, we answer calls highlighting the importance of mechanisms and processes to understand relationship marketing effectiveness (Palmatier, Dant, & Grewal, 2007). Specifically, we offer insight into the drivers and causal processes of both sales performance and customer satisfaction; insight that can be applied by organizations to increase sales force effectiveness and return on investments, and by theoreticians to develop more comprehensive relationship marketing models (Kumar, Venkatesan, & Reinartz, 2008).

The remainder of our paper is structured as follows. First, we briefly review positive organizational behavior and broaden-and-build theory, and use this review as the backdrop to explain why our research focuses on optimism and resilience and models these psychological capacities as dimensions of a higher-order construct termed psychological resourcefulness. Next, we introduce the conceptual model and develop a set of hypotheses regarding the relationships between psychological resourcefulness, customer-oriented behaviors, objective sales performance, and customer satisfaction. We then test these hypotheses using a unique dataset consisting of survey data from 175 salesperson-customer dyads within several B2B sectors, as well as organization-provided objective sales performance data. Lastly, we discuss our results and their implications for theoreticians, sales managers, and organizations.

2. Background

2.1. Positive organizational behavior and broaden-and-build theory

Both positive organizational behavior (Luthans & Youssef, 2007) and the broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 2001) are rooted in positive psychology. Positive psychology seeks to aid understanding of what contributes to people's flourishing and to offer insight into how these contributing factors may be developed (Fredrickson, 2001; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Positive psychology, an area of research only receiving substantive researcher interest since the early 2000's, was developed in response to the overwhelming amount of research focused on the negative aspects of psychology. One review of contemporary psychology research (Luthans, 2002), for example, found that whereas approximately 375,000 articles focused on negative (e.g., psychological disorders) aspects, only 1000 articles focused on positive aspects (i.e., states, traits, subjective experiences, and virtues that improve quality of life). These positive aspects are expansive and encompass admiration, altruism, contentment, courage, flow, forgiveness, gratitude, happiness, hope, interpersonal skill, joy, love, optimism, perseverance, pleasure, pride, resilience, responsibility, satisfaction, self-efficacy, tolerance, vocation, and wisdom among others (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Positive psychology frames these positive aspects as both contributors to and indicators of flourishing.

Positive organizational behavior emphasizes the study and application of positive psychology within the workplace. Stated more specifically, positive organizational behavior refers to “the study and application of positively oriented ... psychological capacities that can be measured, developed, and effectively managed for performance improvement in today's workplace” (Luthans, 2002, p. 59). Psychological capacities refer to state-like (versus trait-like) individual attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that influence workplace performance. The state-like (versus trait-like) nature of psychological capacities implies that they can be changed and developed. Research increasingly emphasizes the ability of psychological capacities to explain disparity in important employee outcomes, such as performance (Luthans & Youssef, 2007).

We draw from the broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 2001) to further delineate the process through which psychological capacities (e.g., optimism and resilience) influence salespersons' outcomes, such as their performance and the satisfaction of their customers. Fredrickson's (2001) broaden-and-build theory suggests that individuals have the capacity for broadening or expanding their momentary thought-action repertoires and building lasting personal resources. Specifically, positivity has “the ability to broaden people's momentary thought-action repertoires and build their enduring resources, ranging from physical and intellectual resources to social and psychological resources” (Fredrickson, 2001, p. 219). Although the broaden-and-build theory initially focused on emotions, recent work has also focused on states such as optimism and resilience (Friend, Johnson, Luthans, & Sohi, 2016; Luthans, Vogelgesang & Lester, 2006; Youssef & Luthans, 2007). This focus on states is consistent with the rationale underlying broaden-and-build theory. For example, Fredrickson (2001) indicates “positive states—like subjective well-being, optimism, and success—predict global biases consistent with broadened attention” (Basso, Scheff, Ris, & Dember, 1996; Derryberry & Tucker, 1994), and “these findings provide initial empirical footing for the hypotheses, drawn from broaden-and-build theory, that distinct types of positive emotions serve to broaden people's momentary thought-action repertoires” (p. 221). Hence, positivity (i.e., positive states) can lead to the development of diverse, exploratory, and novel behaviors. Specifically, positive states such as optimism and resilience—being malleable and open to change and development—can broaden one's course of action when faced with adversity (Luthans & Youssef, 2007). On this basis, we propose that psychological capacities aid salespeople in broadening and then maintaining customer-oriented thought-action behavior

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