



Target and position article

More than one way to persist: Unpacking the nature of salesperson persistence to understand its effects on performance

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Salesperson persistence
Nurture-focused
Closure-focused
Social influence
Political skill

ABSTRACT

While the importance of persistence to sales success is seemingly unquestioned, anecdotal evidence suggests that the incremental business generated through salesperson persistence may be tempered by its accompanying costs (e.g., time spent pursuing noncommittal prospects). In light of this possibility, this research uses a grounded theory approach to explore the nature of salesperson persistence, its behavioral manifestations, and its impact on salesperson job performance. Consistent with social influence theory precepts, this study finds that (1) persistence manifests as a combination of influence tactics salespeople deploy to shape the responses of resistant prospects, and (2) the mix of persistence tactics salespeople employ can be nurture-focused (i.e., aimed at building the foundation for future exchange) and/or closure-focused (i.e., aimed at uncovering prospects' true intent), with each persistence approach having desirable and undesirable performance consequences. Additionally, the data reveal that political skill is an important boundary condition which determines the effectiveness of persistence attempts as it enables salespeople to identify tactics likely to be most effective in a given situation. The study's findings thus suggest that the effect of persistence on salesperson performance may not be universally positive, but rather depends on the type of tactics salespeople deploy as well as on their level of political skill.

"When I say walking the fine line about persistence, to me, you don't want to hound them so much that they just think you're another wholesaler or salesman who's just out to make a quick buck if he's getting those phone calls all day long, but you also have to stay in front of him enough so that they don't forget who you are and so that when they are trying to quote stuff, that they always remember to put you on their bids. So that's where I see the fine line."

Jerry, Product Sales Representative

1. Introduction

Persistence – the continued pursuit of a goal in the face of adversity (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 1999) – plays a vital role in the sales process. Common wisdom among managers and salespeople is that persistence leads to success. Many popular press books, publications, and corporate training programs stress the necessity of persistence in sales. For instance, Marvin Montgomery of the *Smart Business* magazine stresses: "in selling, it's the pleasantly persistent salesperson who succeeds" (Montgomery, 2012). Consistent with this proposition, salespeople are

often advised, "if at first you don't succeed, try and try again," and "don't take no for an answer." Likewise, prior research suggests persistence may be a critical driver of salesperson success alongside other well-established factors, such as customer orientation, listening skills, follow-up skills, and the ability to adapt sales style from situation to situation (Keck, Leigh, & Lollar, 1995; Marshall, Goebel, & Moncrief, 2003).

The literature to date is surprisingly silent regarding both persistence in a sales context and the impact of persistence on salesperson performance. In fact, our extensive review of the literature uncovered only three articles that have considered the role of persistence or persistence-related variables (most-notably, tenacity) in a sales context (e.g., Avila & Fern, 1986; Keck et al., 1995; Marshall et al., 2003). Of these articles, only the work of Avila and Fern (1986) empirically examines the impact of persistence (tenacity) on salesperson performance. These authors find a positive relationship between tenacity and salesperson performance in a sample of 197 salespeople employed in the computer manufacturing industry.

We surmise that the paucity of research on persistence reflects the fact that its effect on salesperson performance is assumed to be highly

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.indmarman.2018.01.002>

Received 23 May 2017; Received in revised form 22 December 2017; Accepted 2 January 2018
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intuitive. To the extent this is the case, such an assumption ignores two critical factors that are likely to diminish the upside of salesperson persistence. First, salespeople have limited time and resources in which they can pursue prospects (Ahearne, Srinivasan, & Weinstein, 2004). Hence, incremental business generated through sheer salesperson persistence may be tempered by the costs associated with devoting additional resources (e.g., time, money) in pursuit of a potential customer. Second, salesperson persistence has the potential to annoy or irritate prospects, ultimately doing irreparable damage to relationships with prospective customers. Together, this “dark-side” of persistence can undermine salesperson efforts, and, by extension, be detrimental to organizational performance. As a result, it is important for research to examine the potential dual nature of persistence, especially in sales situations where a balance in persistence is crucial (Goltz, 1999). The preceding exposition thus implies that persistence may have countervailing effects on salesperson performance, which the literature has, of yet, failed to explore. To remedy this critical knowledge gap, this research seeks answers to the following questions:

- 1: What is the nature of salesperson persistence?
- 2: How does salesperson persistence manifest behaviorally?
- 3: What are the consequences of salesperson persistence for job performance?

To find answers to these research questions we apply the grounded theory method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to telephone interviews conducted with 31 business-to-business sales professionals occupying a variety of positions (e.g., sales representative, sales manager) across a wide-spectrum of industries. In so doing, the overall contribution of this research is that it serves to meaningfully improve understanding of the salesperson persistence phenomenon, its antecedents, and performance consequences. By contributing to the literature on salesperson persistence in this way, we also advance sales theory in four critical ways, described below and summarized in Table 1.

First, this research formally introduces the notion of persistence to the sales domain, a context where the phenomenon is highly prevalent but largely unexamined. In particular, this study provides needed insight regarding the day-to-day manifestation of persistence, challenges salespeople face when being persistent, and offers guidance on how salesperson persistence should be conceptualized. In contrast to prior research in other domains, which has invoked a goal theory framework to explain the effects of persistence, this study concludes that sales persistence is best understood through the lens of social influence theory.

Second, this study contributes to the sales influence literature by advancing a set of sales-specific persistence tactics that complement existing, channel-based influence tactics (e.g., coercion, making threats) explored in prior sales research. In particular, this research responds to the concerns raised by Plouffe, Bolander, and Cote (2014) that “there is no real theory to suggest which tactics salespeople are likely to use to create certain styles or how salespeople differ in their ability to effectively use tactics” (p. 144). More specifically, we examine influence tactics in a sales context, and – in doing so – find that the salespeople use influence tactics in specific combinations and that these combinations may have varying effects on salesperson performance.

Third, this research offers insight into the complex nature of persistence and clarifies how persistence impacts salesperson performance. Specifically, this research identifies two complementary persistence approaches or archetypes (i.e., nurture-focused persistence and closure-focused persistence) that have varying effects on salesperson productivity and, ultimately, performance. On one hand, nurture-focused persistence captures salesperson tactics whose aim is to establish the foundation for future exchange with a prospect, and includes tactics such as “giving prospects space.” On the other hand, a closure-focused approach focuses on bringing the sales process to a conclusion, and may be achieved by threatening the prospect with a “break-up.” Our results

indicate that these are not mutually exclusive approaches, as the same salesperson may adopt both approaches at any given time. These findings are consistent with social influence theory, which suggests that individuals may adopt omega (indirectly sidestepping resistance) and/or alpha (directly confronting resistance) influence tactics to overcome resistance from others (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; Fennis & Stel, 2011; Knowles, Butler, & Linn, 2001).

Lastly, we contribute to the emerging, yet underdeveloped, research on political skill in sales (e.g., Bolander, Satornino, Hughes, & Ferris, 2015; Kalra, Agnihotri, Chaker, Singh, & Das, 2017). Past research on political skill has primarily existed in the management and organizational behavior literature, and thus emphasized its implications for employees in internal and intra organizational situations. Our research expands on this work by considering the role of political skill in extra-organizational situations that involve interfacing with customers. We find that political skill and its associated dimensions (social astuteness, networking ability, interpersonal influence, and apparent sincerity) is a crucial factor that conditions the effect of persistence on salesperson job outcomes (i.e., performance and productivity).

2. Persistence

Persistence is a universal phenomenon that has been studied in numerous disciplines, including education (Witkow, Huynh, & Fuligni, 2015), psychology (Walton, Cohen, Cwir, & Spencer, 2012), marketing (Fischer, Otnes, & Tuncay, 2007), management (Patel & Thatcher, 2014), sport science (Martin-Krumm, Sarrazin, Peterson, & Famose, 2003), and economics (Barañano & Moral, 2013). The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines persistence as “firm or obstinate continuance in a course of action in spite of difficulty or opposition.” Meanwhile, in the literature, persistence has been viewed in different ways. One view is that persistence encompasses behavior directed towards achieving a goal (Cheema & Bagchi, 2011; Koo & Fishbach, 2012). Others have described persistence as a process (Conlon, 1980; Meier & Albrecht, 2003). Still others have defined persistence as an individual difference variable (Cloninger, Zohar, Hirschmann, & Dahan, 2011; Garcia, 2012). As explained next, in this study we adopt a behavioral perspective on persistence.

Salespeople are often assumed to naturally possess some level of persistence in their genetic make-up, and, as such, it may not be adequate or simple to isolate the impact of a persistent disposition on salesperson performance. Instead, for salespeople, it is the choice of persistence behaviors enacted in response to resistance from prospective customers that may be most predictive of sales performance. Consequently, we define salesperson persistence here as the extent to which a salesperson continues to pursue a prospective customer in the face of passive or active resistance from that prospect (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 1999).

While most of the literature casts persistence in a positive light, several scholars acknowledge a potential “dark-side” to persistence (Cloninger et al., 2011; Holland & Shepherd, 2013; Sandelands, Brockner, & Glynn, 1988). These scholars posit that the admirable “press-on” aspect of persistence may have counterbalancing effects on desired outcomes, especially in situations where there are serious obstacles to goal attainment (Miller & Wrosch, 2007). Individuals who continue to “spin their wheels” pursuing unattainable objectives may end up damaging their egos, self-esteems, and task performance. At an extreme, those who refuse to disengage from impossible key life goals may undermine well-being and good health. Suitably, this study proceeds from the perspective that persistence should not be viewed as being inherently good or bad, but rather as a phenomenon that may have counterbalancing effects on valued performance outcomes (Cloninger et al., 2011).

It is important to establish here the difference between persistence and other seemingly related phenomena, such as grit, hardiness, perseverance, and resilience. While none of these constructs have been

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