



Exploratory navigation and salesperson performance: Investigating selected antecedents and boundary conditions in high-technology and financial services contexts

Christopher R. Plouffe ^{a,*}, Srinivas Sridharan ^b, Donald W. Barclay ^b

^a College of Business, Florida State University, United States

^b Ivey Business School, The University of Western Ontario, Canada

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ABSTRACT

Salesperson behavior aimed at improving internal company response to customer requests has received little attention in the industrial marketing literature in comparison to external, customer-directed behaviors. In this study, the phenomenon of “salesperson navigation” (SpN) is developed within the context of a research model of selected antecedents and boundary-conditions that influence a primary form of navigational behavior, or “exploratory navigation”. The research model's utility in predicting sales performance is tested empirically with data from two Fortune 500 sales forces. The findings show that the traits of competitiveness and expert power significantly enhance the salesperson's propensity to engage in exploratory navigation behavior. Exploratory navigation, in turn, is found to have a significant and positive association with salesperson job performance, contingent upon specific boundary conditions within the salesperson's own organization (i.e., sales management support and internal competitive climate). The article concludes by offering sales researchers and industrial marketing managers implications derived from the study as well as directions for further work.

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Interest in the sales role and the management of the sales function has seen an increase in both academic (e.g., Franke & Park, 2006; McFarland, Challagalla, & Shervani, 2006) and managerial audiences (e.g., Stevens & Kinni, 2007; Stewart, 2006). Despite this renewed emphasis on sales, research has lagged in its ability to shed sufficient light on the drivers of sales performance at the individual level of analysis. Typical studies explain a relatively modest 10-to-20% of the variance in salesperson performance (Churchill, Ford, Hartley, & Walker, 1985; Rich, Bommer, MacKenzie, Podsakoff, & Johnson, 1999; Vinchur, Schippmann, Switzer, & Roth, 1998). Further, if one considers research examining behavioral determinants of salesperson job performance, the field has had an almost exclusive focus on the salesperson's “externally-directed” behavior – how the salesperson acts and what strategies and tactics he/she employs in dealing with customers and prospects. Even within this context, there is little-to-no consensus amongst scholars or supporting empirical work in the industrial marketing literature to definitively show that any one such externally-directed selling perspective is superior to another, or that different types of sales skills may actually be required for different

types of selling contexts (Cron, Marshall, Singh, Spiro, & Sujan, 2005; Franke & Park, 2006; Vinchur et al., 1998).

This work begins from the premise that the “internally-directed” dimension of the sales role – salesperson behaviors and job functioning inside one's own organization – has an important influence on salesperson performance. This is consistent with some early perspectives on the sales role (Walker, Churchill, & Ford, 1977; Weitz, 1981) as well as with practitioner and anecdotal accounts (Rasmusson, 1999; Stevens & Kinni, 2007). However, other than a few isolated conceptual pieces (e.g., Sujan, 1999; Weitz & Bradford, 1999), the sales literature has not explicitly paid much attention to the internally-directed dimension of the sales job or the drivers of such behavior (Williams & Plouffe, 2007). The broad phenomenon of interest in this research is labeled *salesperson navigation* (or SpN, Plouffe & Barclay, 2007). It describes the act of a salesperson purposefully exploring their own organization to interact with key others. These key others may have resources, decision-making authority, and/or the ability to shape policy in the salesperson's favor, all of which could be important influences on the salesperson's ultimate success in dealing with customers and prospects.

The specific goal of this paper is to empirically demonstrate the significance of one form of navigational behavior – “exploratory navigation” (as articulated by Plouffe & Barclay, 2007, pp. 531–532) – on salesperson performance, as well as to explore selected individual-level antecedents to this behavior. In terms of antecedents, we focus

* Corresponding author. College of Business, Florida State University, Rovetta Business Annex, 403, Tallahassee, FL USA 32306-1110, United States. Tel.: +1 850 597 9235; fax: +1 850 644 4098.

E-mail address: cplouffe@cob.fsu.edu (C.R. Plouffe).

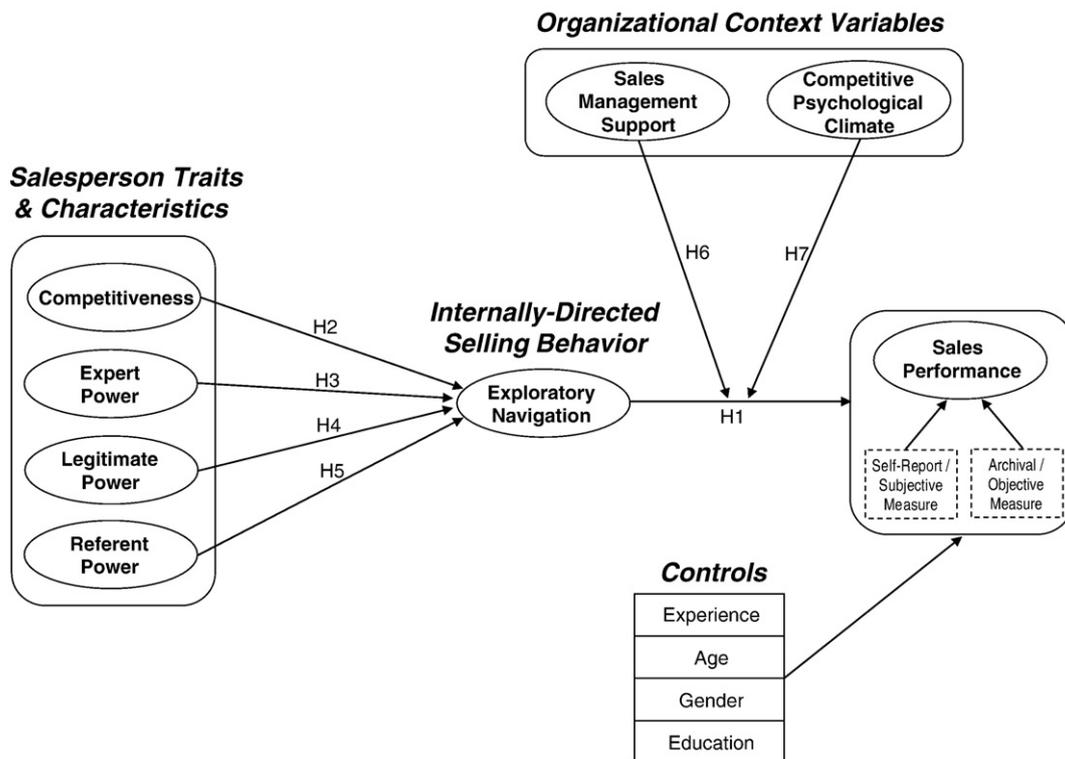


Fig. 1. Research model.

on some commonly-studied salesperson traits (e.g., competitiveness. Brown, Cron, & Slocum, 1998; Harris, Mowen, & Brown, 2005) and characteristics (e.g., interpersonal power. Busch & Wilson, 1976; Comer, 1984). A secondary objective is to simultaneously explore whether specific characteristics of the sales context might act as boundary conditions on navigation. From a managerial standpoint, the expected utility of this research is two-fold: (i) helping sales managers better understand an overlooked salesperson competency (i.e., internal behaviors) which might, for example, enable better hiring decisions, while also (ii) helping industrial salespeople themselves better understand the types of behaviors which might underlie exemplary sales performance.

The balance of the paper is organized as follows. First, since the notion of salesperson navigation is relatively new, a review of relevant literature is undertaken to place the concept within the broader context of work on salesperson traits and performance. Next, the research model and hypotheses driving the study are explicated. The model is then tested using both primary and archival data collected from two Fortune 500 sales organizations. The paper concludes with a discussion of the findings, their implications for sales management research and marketing practice, and directions for future work in this area.

1. Literature review

1.1. Internally-directed selling behaviors and salesperson performance

The buyer-seller interface has become more complex today, with customers increasingly demanding integrated cross-functional solutions to business problems (Tuli, Kohli, & Bharadwaj, 2007). As a consequence, the salesperson in many industries has evolved into a customer relationship manager (Weitz & Bradford, 1999), with research showing that firms who best cater to how their customers wish to purchase tend to perform better (Ahearne, Jelinek, & Jones, 2007). This notion of the salesperson as a relationship manager has become all the more acute given the prevalence of national, global,

and major (or key) account selling (e.g., Jones, Dixon, Chonko, & Cannon, 2005; Workman, Homburg, & Jensen, 2003). A pivotal task underlying the success or failure of salespeople focused on solutions and key accounts selling is their ability to identify and subsequently marshal needed resources from key others across their own organization (Rackham & DeVincentis, 1999; Sujan 1999; Weitz & Bradford, 1999). The implication of this is that salespeople need to be able to work well within their own organizations in order to get what they need to satisfy the ever-increasing demands of their customers and prospects (McGregor, 2006). Work in the practitioner realm further informs these trends. For instance, a recent large-scale study of salespeople by consultancy HR Chally found that top-performing salespeople “work” the systems, people, and processes of their own organization to their customer’s advantage (Stevens & Kinni, 2007, Ch. 5, p. 89+).

Collectively, the research above highlights the emerging importance of internally-directed selling behavior and related activity. It seems reasonable to expect that salespeople who proactively work through the challenges and constraints that their own work environments pose may be more successful than those who do not. The operative questions, then, are what form(s) of internally-directed selling behavior are relied upon by salespeople today, and might this behavior impact sales performance? To effectively answer these questions, stock must be taken of the broader heritage of sales research, and in particular, work which has delineated various traits of the salesperson as antecedents to performance.

2. Research model and hypotheses

The constructs and hypotheses in the research model are supported with theory where possible (primarily Social Cognitive Theory, or SCT. Bandura, 1977; Wood & Bandura, 1989). But as the literature reminds us, theory may not be all that useful or compelling a guide when the broader research domain (i.e., that of “internally-directed” selling and salesperson job functioning) is largely uncharted

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