

## Motivating salesperson customer orientation: insights from the job characteristics model

Mrugank V. Thakor<sup>a,1</sup>, Ashwin W. Joshi<sup>b,\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Faculty of Commerce and Administration, Concordia University, 1455 de Maisonneuve Boulevard West, Montreal, Quebec, Canada H3G 1M8

<sup>b</sup>Schulich Business School, York University, 4700 Keele Street, Toronto, ON, Canada M3J 1P3

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### Abstract

Relative to sales orientation, customer orientation requires greater expenditure of effort by the salesperson in customer-related interactions. Consequently, salespeople have to be motivated to engage in this mode of selling. In this research, we draw from the job characteristics model (JCM) to argue that (i) salesperson motivation to engage in customer orientation will be impacted by the extent to which they experience their work as meaningful and that (ii) this impact will be moderated by their affective evaluations of two aspects of their work context: their identification with the values of their organization and their satisfaction with the pay they receive. Research results from a survey of 281 salespeople show that experienced meaningfulness has a positive main effect on customer orientation and that both organizational identification and pay satisfaction enhance this positive main effect. Theoretical, managerial, and future research implications arising from the research results are discussed.

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### 1. Introduction

It has been widely noted in prior literature that customer-oriented selling (or customer orientation) creates greater long-term performance benefits for the salesperson relative to sales-oriented selling (or sales orientation) (Brady and Cronin, 2001; Goff et al., 1997; Kelley, 1992; Langerak, 2001; Reicheld and Sasser, 1990; Saxe and Weitz, 1982). Despite these benefits, there exists considerable variance in the extent to which customer orientation is practiced (Boles et al., 2001; Brown et al., 2002). A key reason for salesperson persistence with sales orientation and reluctance to engage in customer orientation is that the latter requires greater salesperson effort in customer relationship development activities (Saxe and Weitz, 1982, p. 348). Since effort is determined by motivation (Deci and Ryan, 1985), salesperson motivation to engage in customer orientation is a

precondition for its practice. Accordingly, in order to explain the variance in the practice of customer orientation, it is necessary to identify the determinants of salesperson motivation to engage in this mode of selling.

While there exists a significant body of the prior literature on customer orientation, there remain important gaps in our understanding of the factors that motivate customer orientation. First, despite considerable evidence regarding the motivating propensity of jobs (Eby et al., 1999; Hackman and Oldham, 1980), the effect of the salesperson's affective evaluation of their job on customer orientation has not been examined in prior literature (for an exception, see O'Hara et al., 1991). Given that jobs exist within organizational contexts, the salesperson's affective evaluation of their job and of their organization have interrelated effects on salesperson motivation to engage in customer orientation. The second limitation in extant customer orientation research is that the interrelated effects of these two different motivational drivers on customer orientation have not been explored. Salespeople receive compensation in exchange for the exertion of effort in their jobs. Thus, it is important to understand the interrelated effects of the salesperson's affective evaluations of their job and of the pay that they receive on their motivation to engage in customer orienta-

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1-416-736-2100x77958; fax: +1-416-736-5762.

E-mail addresses: [mthakor@jmsb.concordia.ca](mailto:mthakor@jmsb.concordia.ca) (M.V. Thakor), [ajoshi@schulich.yorku.ca](mailto:ajoshi@schulich.yorku.ca) (A.W. Joshi).

<sup>1</sup> Tel.: +1-514-848-2424x2999; fax: +1-514-848-4554.

<sup>2</sup> The authors have contributed equally to the manuscript.

tion. The third limitation of extant customer orientation literature is that the interrelated effects of these different motivational drivers on customer orientation have not been explored.

In this research, we draw from the job characteristics model (JCM) (Hackman and Oldham, 1980) to address these limitations in prior customer orientation research. JCM is especially appropriate for the purposes of our research for two reasons: one, because it explicitly focuses on the motivating potential of jobs, and two, because it explicitly identifies the affective evaluations of the organization context and pay as moderators of the relationship between the salesperson's affective evaluation of their job and motivation, thereby establishing the structure of the interrelationships among these motivational drivers.

We begin by developing the theoretical background for our conceptual framework. Following this, we define customer orientation and develop the antecedent and moderators of this construct. Subsequently, we discuss the methods used to test this conceptual framework. The results of our empirical tests are then presented. We close with a discussion of research results in terms of their implications for future research, theory, and practice.

## 2. Conceptual framework

### 2.1. Theoretical background

JCM argues that the motivation to work is a function of three critical psychological states—experienced meaningfulness of the work (or experienced meaningfulness), experienced responsibility for outcomes of the work, and knowledge of the actual results of the work activities. These three critical psychological states, in turn, are determined by five job characteristics—skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy, and feedback (Hackman and Oldham, 1980; Renn and Vandenberg, 1995).

Empirical testing of the full model has shown that experienced meaningfulness is the key mediator of all the five core job characteristics on motivation (see Johns et al., 1992), thereby making it an especially salient driver of motivation. Given that job-related effects have not been extensively examined in prior customer orientation research and given the salience of experienced meaningfulness in JCM, we focus upon the effect of this affective evaluation of the job on customer orientation. In the discussion below, the relationship between experienced meaningfulness and customer orientation is referred to as the focal main effect.

In addition to establishing that job-induced psychological states (or affective evaluations of the job) affect employee work behavior, JCM argues that this effect will be moderated by employee affective evaluations of the work context. We focus upon two aspects of the work context—organizational values and pay—and examine the moderating effects of salesperson affective evaluations of both aspects on the

focal main effect. The organizational identification construct represents the salesperson's affective evaluation with organizational values, and the pay satisfaction construct represents the salesperson's affective evaluation of their pay.

### 2.2. Customer orientation

An important part of the salesperson's function is to help customers make purchase decisions that will satisfy customer preferences (Saxe and Weitz, 1982; Spiro and Weitz, 1990). Two selling strategies are widely discussed in the literature—customer-oriented selling (or customer orientation) and sales-oriented selling (or sales orientation). These two orientations differ both in terms of their objectives and the means used to achieve objectives.

Customers have preferences both in the immediate and long term. Typically, short-term preferences (or wants) are felt and clearly articulated whereas long-term preferences (or needs) tend to be latent. A customer-oriented salesperson aims to uncover and satisfy these latent needs. Indeed, as Saxe and Weitz (1982, p. 344) state, “highly customer-oriented salespeople avoid actions which sacrifice customer interest to increase the probability of making an immediate sale.” The objective of sales orientation, by contrast, is to satisfy articulated customer preferences. As the items in the widely used SOCO scale make clear (Saxe and Weitz, 1982), the two selling orientations also differ with respect to means. Whereas customer orientation places an emphasis on listening to customers (e.g., I try to find out what kind of product would be most helpful to a customer) and dialogue (e.g., I try to get customer to discuss their needs with me), sales orientation encourages opportunistic (John, 1984) means (e.g., I paint too rosy a picture of my products to make them sound as good as possible), if these are necessary to make the sale. In this research, we focus on customer orientation, key characteristics of which are as follows: a focus on uncovering and satisfying the customer's long-term needs by listening to and working with customers.

In order to be customer oriented, the salesperson has to be motivated to expend greater effort, relative to the sales orientation, in customer-related interactions (Saxe and Weitz, 1982). Motivation to expend effort is generated through rewards, with rewards either being intrinsic to activity performance or external to the activity and whose procurement is enabled by activity performance (Deci and Ryan, 1985). The feeling of accomplishment that arises from successful activity performance is regarded as an intrinsic motivator because it is a rewarding psychological state that is directly attained through successful activity performance (Brown et al., 1993; Hall, 1976). Compensation that is received in exchange for activity performance enables the individual to obtain outcomes of value and hence is regarded as an extrinsic motivator (Lawler, 1971, 1973). As we elaborate below, experienced meaningfulness and organizational identification foster the feeling of accomplishment, thereby motivating the salesperson to engage

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