



Expanding the sales professional's role: A strategic re-orientation?

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ABSTRACT

Based in social exchange theory, this study empirically examines a model of salesperson participation in strategic communication activities. Results show that performance of sales professionals often stems from roles and activities that extend beyond the traditional selling function. Findings indicate that managers' orientation toward change, the firm's selling strategy, and salesperson's trust in their manager all play an important role in the salesperson's likelihood to engage in greater strategic communication activity. Participation in these activities is linked to individual selling performance. Thus, the study provides evidence that expanding the salesperson's role beyond the selling function can add firm value.

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Over the course of the past decade, the role of marketing strategy within the broad domain of strategic management has gained credence (Slater & Olson, 2000). Researchers have increasingly emphasized the importance of pursuing a market orientation, customer orientation, and/or a customer mind-set (Kirca, Jayachandran, & Bearden, 2005). Accordingly, firms have pursued an organization-wide focus on both understanding the customer and disseminating this knowledge to employees throughout the organization (Deshpande, 1999; Kennedy, Lask, & Goolsby, 2002). In order to improve performance, employees must understand customer expectations and requirements and also commit to creating satisfied customers (Day, 1994).

Many researchers recognize that salespeople play an important role in accomplishing a customer mind-set (Chonko, Tanner, & Smith, 1991). In fact, Webster (1965) went as far to suggest that the salesperson's ability to gather information is perhaps an even more critical capability than their ability to promote. Research has supported the notion that salespeople can be used to promote a customer orientation. As boundary spanners, salespeople have access to external information that they can use to shape strategy internally (Hutt, Reingen, & Ronchetto, 1988; Slater & Olson, 2000). Furthermore, salespeople are well-positioned to communicate strategic information generated at the point of customer contact to key managers within the company (Swanson, Kelly, & Dorsch, 1997).

Still, *how* firms utilize specific sales knowledge of the customer to gain advantage remains poorly understood. In some companies,

salespeople are not always encouraged to serve a strategic communication role, i.e., generate new knowledge and disseminate it to managers (Floyd & Lane, 2000). Practitioners, as well as some academics, have even questioned whether sales force participation in strategic communication will have a positive impact on performance. Critics suggest that as salespeople engage in more diverse roles, such activity may take time away from selling (Jones, Roberts, & Chonko, 2000).

In order to better understand the salesperson's role in strategic communication (and ultimately in developing a customer mind-set throughout the organization), this paper (1) identifies potential antecedents of salesperson participation in strategic communication activity, and (2) attempts to clarify the nature of the relationship existing between salesperson participation in strategic communication and the individual's performance. Based in principles of vertical dyad linkage theory (Graen, 1975; Lagace, 1990), we develop and empirically test hypotheses concerning whether the firm's selling strategy, orientation toward change, and the salesperson's reported level of trust in the manager affect the extent of communication-based strategic activity performed by the salesperson. Further, we investigate whether an increased level of strategic communication influences individual sales performance (refer to Fig. 1 for a depiction of these relationships).

1. Strategic communication

The notion of strategic communication is not new in the strategic management literature. Within this stream of research, a long list of specific roles at each level of management has been identified. According to Floyd and Lane (2000), top managers engage in decision-making roles; middle managers engage in strategic communication roles, and finally, the operational-level employees engage in roles

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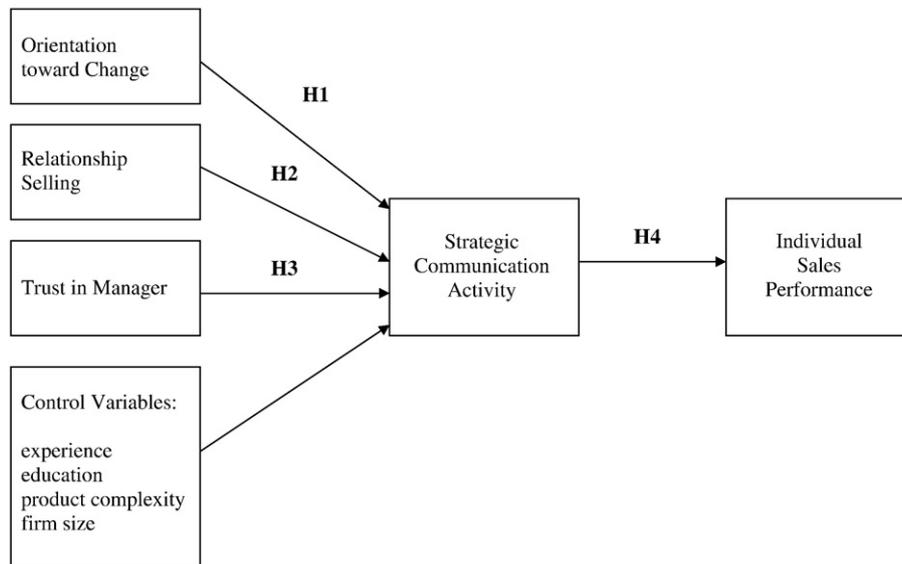


Fig. 1. A model of the strategic communication activities of salespeople.

focused on reacting to information and conforming to upper-management. While this literature suggests that decision-making activity, communication activity, and reacting can occur across levels (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992; Dutton & Ashford, 1993), it does not empirically test the nature and extent to which communication activity (traditionally reserved for mid-level managers) may take place at the salesperson-level or its impact on performance. Our study begins to fill this gap by considering some potential conditions under which salespeople may be more likely to participate in strategic communication roles traditionally reserved for operational-level employees. In particular, we focus our investigation on upward-oriented communication, i.e., salespersons communicating to mid- and upper-management, rather than downward, i.e., salespersons communicating to peers or operational-level employees.

Examples of upward-oriented communication activities from the literature include championing and synthesizing (Floyd & Lane, 2000; Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992). *Championing new ideas* is the successful promotion of strategic initiatives to superiors leading to the development of new organizational capabilities or to changes in the use of existing capabilities. By championing alternative ideas, employees have the potential to re-shape the strategic thinking of executive management by selling to them strategic initiatives that diverge from their current conception of strategy (Currie & Procter, 2005). *Synthesizing information* is the subjective process by which strategic meaning is combined with current operating information and an interpretation of this knowledge is communicated to managers within the organization (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992). By synthesizing information, employees may affect upper-management's view of the organization which, in turn, can determine how limited resources are allocated (Dutton & Ashford, 1993).

Given their position as boundary spanners, salespeople are in a good position to communicate initiatives and ideas sparked by dealings with customers to mid- and upper-management (Currie & Procter, 2001). As such, they have the ability to influence the strategic focus of the firm and change the strategic thinking of top management (Burgelman, 1994; Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992). For instance, a salesperson may propose that their company host a community or charitable event that clients have expressed an interest in. In doing so, the salesperson 'sells,' or champions, this initiative internally leading to its adoption. Or, upon hearing of a client's inventory management problems, a salesperson might 'reframe' the issue to top managers within their own company

(i.e., synthesizing). Doing so often provokes top managers to alter strategy internally (Burgelman, 1994; Dutton & Ashford, 1993).

Until recently, championing new alternatives and synthesizing information were often considered to be management roles or activities that extend far beyond the traditional sales role. We suggest that salespeople diverge from the 'selling function' and begin to participate in these vital management activities that may ultimately re-shape strategy or improve the organization's product-market mix. We propose that some salespeople may influence strategy by increasing the likelihood that new strategic initiatives will be identified, accepted, and/or properly executed. In the next section, we develop hypotheses that explore the conditions under which this is most likely to occur, and we consider the consequence of participation in upward strategic communication on selling performance.

2. Development of hypotheses

Prior sales research has utilized various exchange models to better understand why some salespeople experience greater success than others. Blau (1964) detailed that when one employee performs a task that is beneficial to another, there is an expectation of a reciprocal arrangement. The obligation to reciprocate creates balance in the exchange relationship between employees. Furthermore, the stronger the exchange relationship, the stronger is the opportunity for continued benefit to the organization (Shore & Shore, 1995). Similarly, vertical exchange theory suggests that dyadic relationships (i.e., the relationship between the manager and the salespeople) are likely to vary on a continuum ranging from high quality relationships (i.e., "cadres") characterized by reciprocal trust to low quality relationships (i.e., "hired hands") characterized by a reliance on formal job contracts and/or descriptions (Castleberry & Tanner, 1986; Lagace, 1990). From the manager's perspective, "cadres" have solid skills, can be trusted without monitoring, and are motivated and able to assume greater responsibilities beyond those specified in their formal job descriptions (Liden & Graen, 1980). These salespeople are given increased job latitude and support from their manager (Castleberry & Tanner, 1986). Conversely, the "hired hands" receive little support or latitude. They perform routine tasks and tend to have a more formal exchange with their manager (Liden & Graen, 1980). Building on previous work in the sales management literature, we form hypotheses regarding the influence of antecedent factors on

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