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Is it better for salespeople to have the highest customer orientation or a strong fit with their group's customer orientation? Findings from automobile dealerships

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine how retail salesperson-group fit on customer orientation impacts sales performance. Customer orientation fit will be compared against the amount of customer orientation to answer the question of whether it is better to have higher customer orientation or consistent customer orientation. This study shows that fit with the group's customer orientation is more important than having a high customer orientation; individuals who deviate from the group's customer orientation have lower performance than individuals who fit their group's customer orientation. Although previous research finds that group-level performance is stronger in groups that have consistently high customer orientation, we find that individual sales performance depends on fit with other group members, regardless of the orientation of the group.

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1. Introduction

Salespeople who have a customer orientation—i.e., those who attempt to learn about and satisfy customer needs—tend to build stronger customer relationships than less customer-oriented salespeople (Boles et al., 2001; Lopez et al., 2005; Stock and Hoyer, 2005). Those stronger relationships, in turn, lead to increased repeat sales, word-of-mouth referrals, and a more desirable brand image for the selling firm (e.g., Boles et al., 2001). Unfortunately, while some researchers have found a positive link between a customer orientation and performance (e.g., Dunlap et al., 1988; Swenson and Herche, 1994), many others have failed to find a direct effect between customer orientation and performance (e.g., Franke and Park, 2006). Grizzle's et al (2009) findings help to explain this inconsistency by showing the both the amount *and* the consistency of a group's customer orientation culture impact customer orientation behaviours and performance. Along the same lines, Ahearne et al. (2010) shows that sales teams which act consistently have better performance. Hence, the consistency of a group impacts the performance of the group. We argue this should be particularly true in a retail context where the behaviours of other salespeople are easily observable.

From the perspective of the salesperson, a consistent group is one in which each salesperson is a good fit with the group. While the findings from Grizzle's et al. (2009) suggest that consistency of customer orientation increases unit level performance, it is not clear whether individual salespeople who have poor fit with their group's customer orientation also have lower performance. For example, if a group has a consistently low customer-orientation, will individual salespeople who have a strong customer orientation perform better than the group because their customer orientation is higher or will they perform worse because they have a poor fit with the group? Conversely, if the majority of a group is consistently customer-oriented, will a single salesperson with a strong sales orientation still receive the performance advantage of the otherwise consistently customer-oriented group? This question is particularly relevant to understanding 'lone wolves,' salespeople who purposefully deviate from the group because they believe their own methods are superior to those of the group (Dixon et al., 2003; Feldman Barr et al., 2005). Lone wolves tend to be highly involved in their sales career (Dixon et al., 2003) and are likely to select the amount of customer orientation shown to be the most effective, even if it does not conform to the group. This raises the question, is it better to have a higher customer-orientation or to be a good fit with the group's customer orientation?

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine how fit between a salesperson's customer orientation and the sales group's customer orientation impacts sales performance. We begin by reviewing relevant customer orientation literature and

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the extant research on person-group fit. Then, we develop hypotheses examining the effects of fit with the group's customer orientation on individual sales performance, and compare those effects with other measures of customer orientation. After testing these hypotheses, this article concludes with a discussion of the results, theoretical and managerial implications and potential research directions.

2. Background

2.1. Customer orientation

Customer orientation is the degree to which salespeople try to help customers make purchase decisions that satisfy the long-term wants and needs of customers (Boles et al., 2001). Conversely, a sales orientation is the degree to which salespeople place their own needs and/or the needs of the firm over the customer, generally by attempting to sell customers as much as possible (Jones et al., 2003; Saxe and Weitz, 1982). Customer-oriented selling emphasises empathy, low-pressure selling, and problem–solution selling approaches (Franke and Park, 2006).

Customer orientation has been linked to a number of positive individual and firm outcomes. For individual salespeople, customer orientation has been shown to enhance job satisfaction, customer satisfaction, customer trust, and relationship development (Franke and Park, 2006; Stock and Hoyer, 2005; Williams and Attaway, 1996). Salespeople with a strong customer orientation enjoy the process of satisfying customer needs and feel less role stress than salespeople with a weaker customer orientation (Boles et al., 2001). For firms, the degree to which salespeople satisfy long-term customer needs and build effective relationships has a direct impact on firm image (Homburg et al., 2009), brand image, customer satisfaction, loyalty to the selling firm, and repeat sales (Goff et al., 1997; Jones et al., 2003; Walsh and Beatty, 2007). Table 1 shows a sample of articles linking customer orientation to performance.

In retailing, it is common for salespeople to have the highest amount of face-to-face contact with customers, and therefore, salespeople generally have a direct impact on customer satisfaction and brand image (Homburg et al., 2009). Salespeople implement policies and strategies of the firm to make sales and develop mutually beneficial buyer-seller relationships (Boles et al., 2001). Through interactions with the customer, salespeople signal the identity and customer orientation of the selling firm to the customers (Ahearne et al., 2005; Liao and Chuang, 2004).

2.2. Person-group fit

Person-group fit is the congruence between an individual's values and those of the group (O'Reilly et al., 1991). It represents compatibility between an employee and the group to which they belong on key characteristics, such as values, culture, and goals (Jansen and Kristof-Brown, 2006; Kristof-Brown and Stevens, 2001; Kristof, 1996; Lopez and McMillan-Capehart, 2009). It is not uncommon for customers to perceive little differentiation between the salespeople and the selling firm (Goff et al., 1997), particularly when the purchase is expensive or associated with greater risk to the purchaser (Boles et al., 2001). A strong fit between employee and group environment has been shown to improve employee job satisfaction, firm commitment, and performance (Hoffman and Woehr, 2006; Kristof-Brown et al., 2005; Kristof-Brown et al., 2002). However, according to Kristof-Brown et al. (2005, p. 286), only a 'handful of published studies have examined [person-group] fit on characteristics such as goals or values'. Donavan et al. (2004) found that service workers whose customer orientation fit with their job task had higher job satisfaction
and firm commitment. From another perspective, Harris and Metallinos (2002) explored how store managers could attempt to alter the customer orientation of frontline employees. However, to our knowledge, the impact of person-group customer orientation fit and its′ impact on sales performance has not yet been examined. Therefore, our study addresses a gap in the literature by examining salesperson-group fit on customer orientation.

3. Hypotheses

3.1. Customer orientation fit

Extant literature supports a positive relationship between a person's fit with their group and their performance for both objective and subjective performance measures (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005; Kristof, 1996; Lopez and McMillan-Capehart, 2009). Indeed, the link between person-job, person-firm and person-group fit and individual performance is supported in two separate meta-analyses by Hoffman and Woehr (2006) and Kristof-Brown et al. (2005). Kristof (1996) explains that individuals require certain resources from their group and the group's ability to provide those resources impacts employee outcomes, such as performance. Resources can include formal inputs such as time, expense accounts, task-related opportunities, assistance on selling activities, and advertising or informal inputs such as psychological support, social opportunities, and word-of-mouth promotion. We contend that the resources salespeople demand from the group will be different for implementing a more customer-oriented selling strategy than a more sales-oriented selling strategy.

Groups can provide a number of resources to salespeople with a similar orientation. For example, Deshpande et al. (1993, p. 27) explain a group's culture of customer orientation provides 'deeply rooted set of values and beliefs that are likely to consistently reinforce′ an individual's customer orientation. Thus, the group's culture of customer orientation provides psychological support to salespeople who have consistent beliefs with the group. Additionally, employees who are customer-oriented must spend more time asking customers questions about their needs than sales-oriented employees (Franke and Park, 2006). A salesperson's group environment can inhibit the amount of time salespeople spend with customers by scheduling frequent mandatory meetings, pressuring salespeople to focus on time efficiency or by teasing salespeople who are 'too soft' on customers. If salespeople do not have enough time to adequately assess customer needs they may not be able to effectively implement a customer-oriented selling strategy. Therefore, we expect that fit between a salesperson's customer-orientation and the group's customer-orientation will impact salesperson performance positively.

H1. The better the fit between the salesperson's and the group's customer orientation, the higher the salesperson's objective sales performance.

Although many authors have posited that customer orientation should have a positive effect on objective sales performance in both a business-to-business and retail context (e.g., Boles et al., 2001; Jaramillo et al., 2007), empirical findings have been inconsistent and limited (see Table 1). Some researchers have found evidence to support a positive relationship. For example, Dunlap et al. (1988) find that top-performing residential real estate salespeople report a stronger customer-orientation than other realtors. Similarly, Swenson and Herche (1994) find that stronger customer orientation in industrial salespeople was related to having a better