

The effect of working relationship quality on salesperson performance and job satisfaction: Adaptive selling behavior in Korean automobile sales representatives

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Abstract

The adaptive selling behavior (ASB) concept has been the focus of significant attention in research and practice alike over the past decade. However, there has been but a few studies that have investigated this practice outside of a U.S. context. Thus, as this research stream continues to take root, significant questions relating to ASB theory, conceptualization and measurement, and generalizability remain. Given this lack of non-Western ASB research, the authors consider the implications of national culture on ASB. Next, they develop and test a model utilizing a sample of Korean automobile representatives. Salesperson working relationship quality is suggested as mediating the ASB–performance relationship and a new outcome, job satisfaction, is identified. The results serve not only to clarify previously unclear relationships, but also extend our understanding of adaptive selling practices in non-Western cultures.

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1. Issues in adaptive selling behavior research

Since Weitz (1978) first posited the relationship between adaptive selling behavior (hereafter, ASB) and performance, ASB has drawn growing interest in research and practice alike (Sujaan et al., 1994). However, of the more than 100 published empirical studies on ASB, the results of all but a small fraction are based on samples from the United States and other Western nations (Franke and Park, 2004). In countries like the United States, whose national culture is generally characterized by a high degree of individualism, neither buyers nor sellers are constrained by the need to conform to group norms (Hofstede, 1980). Similarly, in low uncertainty-avoidant

Western cultures, customers and salespeople should be relatively more receptive to varied sales approaches. Given these predominant cultural characteristics, the role of ASB in driving superior sales performance in Western cultures is not surprising. What remains less clear is how salesperson adaptiveness might lead to favorable outcomes in countries with vastly dissimilar national cultures.

While prior research has gauged the effects of national culture on innovation adoption (e.g., Van Everdingen and Waarts, 2003) and marketing decision making (e.g., Kogut and Singh, 1988; Steenkamp et al., 1999), experts note that the manner by which exogenous factors such as national culture affect the responsiveness of businesses to their customers and markets is not well understood (Kohli and Jaworski, 1994). In considering the potential effects of culture on ASB, the extent to which salesperson adaptiveness is expected, or even welcomed, in all cultures is unknown. Assuming some level of adaptation is universally

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desired, it seems likely that the manner by which salespeople adapt will vary across cultural contexts. For example, in more collectivist cultures, it may be necessary for salespeople to alter their presentation in such a way as to appeal more to the standards of the customer's in-group, as opposed to individual tastes.

As the pace of globalization accelerates, questions regarding the portability of marketing constructs and measures take on mounting importance. Indeed, Steenkamp (2001) suggests, "the further advancement of marketing as an academic discipline requires that the validity of our theories and models be examined in other cultural settings as well as to identify their degree of generalizability and to uncover boundary conditions" (p. 30). Thus, confirming the cross-cultural generalizability of ASB remains a vital step in advancing this research stream. Our study makes headway in addressing this void by testing a model involving adaptive selling practices amongst Korean automobile salespeople. As South Korea's national culture is viewed as collectivistic and as having a low tolerance for ambiguity (Hofstede, 1980), it offers a stark contrast to prior ASB research, which has been conducted mainly in Western settings.

In response to equivocal results of prior ASB–performance studies, we suggest that salesperson working relationship quality operates as a key mediating variable. We reason that while a salesperson may possess superior adaptive skills, the assistance of others is often required in fulfilling customer requirements, particularly in more complex sales. Thus, enhancements to overall performance resulting from increased ASB may be conditioned on the salesperson's corresponding ability to maintain high-quality working relationships with managers, peers, and administrative personnel. We believe that this effect should be accentuated given the collectivistic, uncertainty-avoidant nature of Korean culture. To our knowledge, no research has empirically examined the direct role of supervisor–subordinate relationship quality or the quality of other critical employee work relationships within an ASB framework. Additionally, we fill a notable gap in the literature by testing the relationship between ASB and a previously unpublished outcome: job satisfaction.

The remainder of this paper proceeds as follows. First, we discuss the conceptual origins of ASB and consider the potential influence of culture upon adaptive sales practices. Second, a theoretical model is developed, stressing the importance of working relationship quality in implementing ASB practices. Third, we detail the research methods utilized in our study, including a brief summation of our context, data collection, and measures. Fourth, the model's overall fit and each of our hypotheses are tested via a structural equation model. Finally, the paper concludes with a discussion of the findings as well as its managerial and theoretical implications. Directions for new ASB research are suggested.

2. Theory development

2.1. Adaptive selling behavior (ASB)

Adaptive selling is defined as the altering of sales behaviors during a customer interaction or across customer interactions based upon perceived information about the nature of the selling situation (Sujan, 1986). While the roots of the ASB construct are planted in early sales interaction research (e.g., Chapple and Gordon, 1947; Evans, 1963), it is the work of Weitz et al. that has invigorated this stream over the past two decades. Weitz (1981) found that salespeople face unique opportunities to adapt to each customer and to each sales situation, such that the product or service offered for sale and the salesperson were presented in the most appealing manner. Sujan (1986) found that the communicator's adaptive style had a strong positive relationship with the preference for a relational message, suggesting that salespeople can work smarter by choosing approaches that are appropriate for particular customers, or by increasing their repertoire of sales approaches. Weitz et al. (1986) proposed a conceptual model of salesperson adaptability and the relationship between knowledge structures, motivation, and the practice of adaptive selling, concluding that adaptability centers on one's ability to alter his/her own behavior when changes occur in a selling situation. Spiro and Weitz (1990) subsequently offered the 16-item ADAPTS scale, which has since served as the predominant measure of the ASB construct.

Empirical studies examining the direct relationship between ASB and performance have met with inconsistent results (Table 1). For example, Predmore and Bonnice (1994) found that salespersons' observed adaptability was

Table 1
The conflicting relationship between ASB and performance

Author(s)	Hypothesized relationship	Results
Anglin et al. (1990)	ASB items→performance items	Some significant Some not significant Some have negative correlations
Weilbaker (1990, 1991)	ASB→sales performance	Some significant Some not significant
Goolsby et al. (1992)	ASB→several types of performance	Some significant Some not significant
Lollar (1993)	ASB→sales performance	Not significant
Boorum (1994)	ASB→sales performance	Significant
Porter (1994)	ASB→sales performance	Significant
Predmore and Bonnice (1994)	Adaptability→sales success	Significant
Marks et al. (1996)	Adaptive belief→performance Adaptive practice→performance	Not significant Significant
McMurrian (1996)	ASB→sales performance	Not significant
Brown (1999)	Working smart→performance	Significant
Boorum et al. (1998)	ASB→sales performance	Significant
Li (1999)	ASB→sales performance	Significant

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