



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Technology in Society

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/techsoc

Unleashing salesforce performance: The impacts of personal branding and technology in an emerging market

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 22 September 2017
 Received in revised form
 27 December 2017
 Accepted 17 January 2018
 Available online xxx

Keywords:

Sales force
 Personal branding
 Technology-enabled sales
 Emerging market
 Structural equations modelling

ABSTRACT

Today's sales force play crucial roles and are considered essential and strategic for enhancing competitiveness and sales growth. Thus, effective management of the sales force has assumed top priority for the marketing function in organizations, particularly in emerging markets to capture the millions of newly affluent consumers. This paper assesses how sales force management leverages the dynamics of personal branding and technology-enabled sales tools in the emerging market context to improve sales force productivity and performance. Using structural equation modelling with SmartPLS, responses from 209 sales executives in the insurance and fast moving consumer goods sector in the Greater Accra region of Ghana were analysed. Results highlight the relevance of appropriate training, motivation and recruitment processes on sales force ability to develop personal branding and use of technology to facilitate sales.

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1. Introduction

Emerging markets are countries that are undergoing transition in their political or economic systems and experiencing rapid economic development. According to Lagarde [49], the combined contribution of emerging and developing economies to global GDP has increased from just about half a decade ago to almost 60%. Lagarde [49] further credits emerging and developing economies as drivers behind the significant reduction in global poverty and the resurgence in global economic growth since the 2008 financial crisis.

Many authors including [1] and [42] have studied Ghana as an emerging market economy. They note that Ghana's economy is benefiting from liberal economic reforms which coupled with political stability have led to a vibrant private sector and spurred Ghana's rapid growth and development. The economy, thus, continues to portray characteristics consistent with an emerging market; attaining lower-middle income status with a vibrant consumer segment.

Due to their characteristic rapidly growing middle-class and affluent consumers, emerging markets are fast becoming home to a

new generation of multinational companies [16]. But these markets are immensely diverse and complex – culturally, geographically and even economically, and requires effective marketing strategies to improve sales performance and firm profitability. Today's sales force play crucial roles and are considered essential and strategic for enhancing competitiveness and sales growth. For this reason, effective management of the sales force has assumed top priority for the marketing function in several organizations [3]. for instance attest to the positive correlation between effective sales force management and sales maximization. *Owing to the complexity of emerging markets, the first objective of this paper is to examine how organizations facilitate personal branding to improve sales force ability to function effectively and generate high sales.*

The Internet has given sales representatives a range of innovative alternatives to facilitate the completion of different stages of the purchase process by means of the Internet channel or physical shops [9]. This is because the online environment influences the general purchase-related factors that affect how customers construct their decision-making processes [47]. To enhance the purchase experience of customers; first, sales representatives ought to understand the needs and concerns of customers in this online environment and secondly, provide immediate product/service personalization based on this knowledge to customers [43,48]. *Therefore, the second objective of this paper is to ascertain how the sales force utilize technology-enabled sales communication*

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tools to navigate and facilitate the sales process for improved performance.

2. Managing the sales force

Today's sales force play crucial roles and are considered essential and strategic for enhancing competitiveness and sales growth. They are the individuals or group with the responsibility to champion the sale of products or services to customers in assigned sales territories delineated by geographic locations, market segments, and product lines or by specific customers/prospects [22]; [40]. Several authors [3,14,25] and [18] contend that effective management of the sales force goes beyond equipping them with the basic skills in salesmanship (pushing sales people to sell the firm's products and services). In fact, it entails planning, implementing, and controlling personalized programs designed to achieve the sales and profit objectives of the firm.

As such, effectively managing the sales force through appropriate recruitment and selection processes, adequate training and suitable motivation are crucial in directing the sales force towards increased sales growth and superior performance. The paper investigates how effective sales force management impacts the productivity and performance of sales representatives in fast-retail companies in Ghana with emphasis on personal branding and technology-enabled sales. Three components of sales force management are assessed: sales force motivation, sales force training, and sales force recruitment and selection process. This section presents a review of previous research and develops theoretical propositions to guide the empirical analysis.

2.1. Personal branding and the sales force

In his seminal article titled 'The Brand Called You', Tom Peters brought the concept of personal branding to the mainstream and pointed out the need for everyone to understand the importance of branding regardless of age, position, or business orientation. Peters [38] defined personal branding as the discovery, understanding and marketing of an individual's unique attributes. Individual sales professionals may never have the financial power to build an enormous brand image like companies such as Coca cola, MTN, Vodafone, Barclays Bank and UT Bank. Yet, it is imperative that all salespeople develop and build their personal brands to be successful. A good personal brand enable the sales person to deliver his/her message clearly; connect to target prospects emotionally; motivate the buyer and generate customer loyalty purchase [24]. As stated by Ref. [2]; individuals who make the effort to build their personal brands are likely to achieve greater output in individual or personal performance, workforce productivity and great career successes.

The recruitment and selection process is at the heart of an effective sales force, yet, often a neglected area in sales management. In fact, it would be difficult to manage sales force that is poorly screened, recruited and selected to meet sales target and goals for superior firm performance. According to [45]; there are many qualified applicants in the job market, hence the best way to get past them and be selected is to impress recruiters with the "unique" and "authentic" you. Recruiters are looking for candidates who know their strengths and how to leverage such strengths appropriately to the benefit of the company. Thus, by standing out and clearly delivering your personal brand [38] tells your story and matches it to the recruiter expectation; creating a memorable experience in their minds. The paper, therefore, posits that:

H1. The sales force recruitment process positively induces personal branding

Basically, sale training is meant to increase sales force performance. In this regard, it is important to design and implement training programs that enable sales people to develop distinct personal brands to effectively market their products and services and induce purchase decision [24]. Effective personal branding could yield benefits to both the company and the sales person: by opening new business opportunities to the company and positioning the sales person as a top performer in the organization. Indeed, successful sales persons are those who know how to leverage their strengths and key attributes. The paper contends that with the appropriate and adequate training, sales people are able to understand, discover and develop core personal brands that distinguishes them from others in the same domain. Hence,

H2. Training leads sales persons to develop unique personal brands

Certainly, by motivating sales force is to help them establish tangible goals, which offers each sales person something to look forward to and to focus their efforts in attaining such goals, even in the face of frustrations and hindrances. Incentives play major role in sales force management for optimum performance results as it directly influences the level of sales force enthusiasm in selling products and services to prospects. Adequate and suitable motivation is key to building commitment and developing core personal brands of sales force that ensures continuous and steadfast support towards attaining sales targets. Hence, the study posits that:

H3. Adequate and suitable motivation relates positively to personal branding of sales force

2.2. The impact of technology on the selling-buying process

The Internet influences all phases of the consumer buying process by offering consumers diverse channels and tools to search for information, evaluate different options, and make a purchase [11,37]. The Internet also allows for cross-channel buys where the purchase process may occur by means of the Internet channel or physical shops [9]. However, previous studies indicate that a fundamental issue concerning online buying decisions is that the amount and type of information accessible online is different [5]. As there is a huge amount of information available on the Internet, consumers are unable to evaluate all the alternatives in depth prior to making a choice. This has the tendency to create confusion and lower the decision satisfaction [36]. It is, therefore, essential to understand the necessities and concerns of customers in the online environment. This knowledge can then be utilized to enhance the shopping experience and provide instant personalization based on the knowledge of consumers [43,48]. In so doing, consumers are helped to make product evaluations more quickly and improve their satisfaction with purchase decisions.

Sales people are embracing technology-mediated sales communication (STMC) tools such as videoconferencing systems, cell phones, websites, and EDI in an attempt to control selling costs and maintain a personal touch [31] with business buyers. Internet integration into the buying and selling process can affect every aspect of a consumer and sales person's decision making process and can therefore have a major effect on sales performance. The internet can provide opportunities to improve sales person efficiency. It can provide representatives with easier access to information, faster communications with customers, simpler alternatives to premise visits, labour saving opportunities to outsource simple tasks (e.g., research) and options for automating mundane chores (e.g., pre-call planning and post-call reporting).

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