

Exploring the relationship of perceived automotive salesperson attributes, customer satisfaction and intentions to automotive service department patronage: The moderating role of customer gender

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Abstract

This study examines the relationship of perceived automotive salesperson attributes and customer satisfaction behavior in the purchase experience leading to the patronage of a service department in an automotive dealership. Logistic regression analyses indicate that gender moderates the relationship of the perceived salesperson attributes and customer satisfaction as well as intentions for service department patronage. The model distinguishes users from non-users of the service department and does this better for females than for males. Finally, the paper concludes with a discussion of the managerial implications and directions for future research.

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0. Introduction

Over the last couple of decades, the service sector has increasingly dominated the United States economy in terms of share of the gross domestic product and the number of jobs generated (Lohr, 2006). Of particular interest in this study is the automobile industry, in general, and the automotive service and repair (ASR) industry, in particular. In the retail automotive sector, about 70% of the dealership's gross profit comes from service, parts and body operations (Kachadourian, 2005). ASR is big business and an important component of the economy. Since individuals associate products and services with global affective evaluations that they recall from memory when making a choice (Hoyer and MacInnis, 2004), it seems likely that consumers' prior experience with a dealership or feelings engendered from the interactions

with the automotive sales representatives will impact the dealers' potential profitability and future sales (Goff et al., 1997).

Notwithstanding the foregoing, the link between the car purchase experience and the patronage of the service and repair department of the car dealership is not fully understood. Whereas a considerable body of knowledge exists concerning post-purchase satisfaction, in general, very little attention has been directed towards the influence of (a) perceived automotive salesperson attributes on patronage and (b) how customer satisfaction and intentions affect the patronage of a dealership's service department in the ASR industry. Neither is the moderating role of gender in the aforementioned relationships clearly understood in an automobile post-purchase context. Exploring issues related to gender, in general, and in this setting, in particular, is of great interest to both academics and practitioners (Darley and Smith, 1995; Meyers-Levy and Sternthal, 1991).

J.D. Power and Associates report that more than a quarter of those who leave a dealership without buying do so primarily because they do not like the way the sales staff handle their business, and about one-half of shoppers who

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leave a dealership unhappy with their sales experience do not buy from another dealer selling the same brand (Automotive News, 2003, p. 50). This reflects the important role of sales people in the automobile industry and their potential impact on service department patronage. Thus, salespeople serve as an important link between the manufacturer and the consumer, and their perceived attributes should influence customer satisfaction and future sales.

Further complicating the choice decision is the likely moderating role of gender in the car purchase and post-purchase experience. Gender has been found to be an important predictor of differential service evaluations (Iacobucci and Ostrom, 1993) and a critical variable in the segmentation process (Darley and Smith, 1995; Arnold et al., 2004, pp. 511–512). In addition, anecdotal evidence suggests that women and men perceive the automobile marketplace differently. Industry research by Ford Motor Company indicates that women influence 80% of automobile purchases, and further research by the National Institute for Automotive Service Excellence states that between 65% and 80% of automotive service customers are women (http://www.vmrintl.com/Ref_art/women_buy.htm). Thus, gender is certainly a relevant variable for inclusion in future research in the automotive service area. However, few academic studies have examined the role of gender in the car purchase and post-purchase situation.

This study examines (a) the relationships of perceived salesperson attributes, perceived dealer attributes, customer satisfaction and intentions to recommend to a friend or relative to service department patronage and (b) the moderating role of gender in the aforementioned relationships in the post-purchase process. Sales managers and salespeople should find this study interesting and beneficial because women are important influencers and purchasers of this particular product, and because customer equity feelings toward the new automotive salesperson have yet to be fully explored. Also, a study of service department patronage should add to our knowledge of the service sector.

1. Conceptualization

1.1. Perceived salesperson attributes, customer satisfaction and intentions to recommend

Several studies have examined the importance that consumers place on salesperson attributes in the retail industry (see, for example, Hawes et al., 1993) and have investigated the effects of salesperson attributes on satisfaction and patronage intentions (see, for example, Grewal and Sharma, 1991; Humphreys and Williams, 1996). Darian et al. (2001) found that the salesperson's respect for consumer knowledge and responsiveness are important salesperson attributes that impact consumer patronage intentions. The salesperson was found to be one of the underlying factors important to customer satisfac-

tion (Anselmsson, 2006; Grewal and Sharma, 1991). Also, significant positive correlations between salesperson interpersonal process and the consumer's overall satisfaction have been reported (Humphreys and Williams, 1996). Hence, it is reasonable to conclude that salesperson attributes impact service quality, and that service quality will affect consumer satisfaction (Foster and Cadogan, 2000; Lambert et al., 1997; Mittal and Kamakura, 2001; Sharma, 1997; Sivadas and Baker-Prewitt, 2000).

Sales force behavior can have a significant effect on perceived customer satisfaction (Grewal and Sharma, 1991). In fact, in a national sample of new car purchasers, Goff et al. (1997) find that the salesperson's selling orientation–customer orientation (SOCO) affects not only customer satisfaction with the salesperson and the car dealer, but indirectly, satisfaction with the product and the manufacturer. Thus, consumer product satisfaction may be affected through indirect peripheral influence routes such as interaction with the salesperson (Petty et al., 1983; Goff et al., 1997).

Blackwell et al. (2006) and Sivadas and Baker-Prewitt (2000) note that satisfaction leads to future intentions. In fact, research by Grace and O'Cass (2004) shows that store service provision is positively related to customer satisfaction, which in turn, is positively related to repatronage intentions. Satisfaction with the salesperson also leads to increased positive word-of-mouth publicity (Day et al., 1981), and satisfaction impacts the likelihood of recommending the salesperson to friends and family (Johnson et al., 2002). Satisfied customers are more likely to be repeat customers and are valuable messengers for reaching new prospects and increasing profitability (Blackwell et al., 2006; Reichheld, 2006; Reichheld et al., 2000). Favorable behavioral intentions are associated with a service provider's ability to get its customers to (a) say positive things about them, (b) recommend them to other consumers, (c) remain loyal to them, and (d) spend more with the company (Zeithaml et al., 1996; Cronin et al., 2000; Reichheld, 2006). Thus, customer satisfaction in the automobile industry may be expressed not only in the form of actual patronage of a dealer's service department but may have as important antecedents the willingness to use the service again, increased word-of-mouth, and willingness to recommend the service (Grewal and Sharma, 1991; Cronin et al., 2000).

Customer perceptions of interpersonal service quality have a direct effect on patronage intentions (Baker et al., 2002). Buyer equity perceptions and degree of fulfilment of expectations influence purchase satisfaction and act to enhance intentions to deal with the salesperson again (Oliver and Swan, 1989; Swan and Oliver, 1991), as well as retail patronage intentions (Darian et al., 2001, 2005). Further, Oliver and Swan (1989) and others report that the customer's perception of the salesperson's efforts have a positive influence on their post-purchase satisfaction with the product (Sharma, 1997; Grewal and Sharma, 1991). Also, perception of equity by the consumer is said to

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