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Propensity to trust salespeople: A contingent multilevel-multisource examination

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ABSTRACT

As sales strategies continue to shift toward long-term partnerships, the influence of trust between buyers and sellers as a building block that facilitates relationship development is increasingly important. While considerable work has been done on the formation of trust, scant research exists on how characteristics of the salesperson and customer jointly influence customer trust in the salesperson. In this paper, the authors investigate the role of customers' existing propensity to trust salespeople in determining their trust of salespeople in newly-formed business-to-business (B2B) relationships. The authors also examine the interactive effects of salesperson characteristics – relational customer orientation and adaptive selling – which moderate this relationship. Multilevel-multisource data from 131 newly-acquired customer key informants and 47 B2B salespeople are utilized to assess the model. Findings show a mixture of salesperson characteristics that accentuate and attenuate the association between customers' preexisting tendencies to trust salespeople and their actual trust in the salesperson.

1. Introduction

Research shows that trust within business-to-business (B2B) relationships occurs at three levels – customer's trust of (a) the selling organization, (b) products/services, and (c) front-line individuals that represent the organization (Doney & Cannon, 1997; Plank, Reid, & Pullins, 1999). Specific to the individual front-line level, customers' trust in salespeople depends on several salesperson characteristics (Wood, Boles, Johnston, & Bellenger, 2008). However, what is often overlooked is how salesperson characteristics interact with customer characteristics (e.g., propensity to trust) to impact trust formation.

Customers possess a general propensity to trust when interacting with salespeople. This propensity to trust salespeople, however, varies not only from customer-to-customer (i.e., dispositional trust; Kramer, 1999), but customers also have different levels of trust for different salespeople (Whitener, Brodt, Korsgaard, & Werner, 1998). While some literature indicates that these individual propensities create a filter that alters the customer's interpretation of salesperson motivations, which in turn has important implications in terms of how this variance influences actual trust (Colquitt, Scott, & LePine, 2007; Ferguson & Peterson, 2015), there is little research on how and why these levels of trust vary across customer-salesperson dyads. Understanding trust formation in a dyadic setting is important because customers consistently deal with different types of salespeople during their buying processes.

This study examines trust formation from the customer's perspective at the onset of the buyer-seller relationship while simultaneously accounting for matched salesperson characteristics. The objective is to understand how the relationship between customers' propensity to trust salespeople and their trust in a specific salesperson is influenced during the interaction by salesperson characteristics. While the relationship between propensity to trust and level of trust has been established, this study advances current knowledge by showing how this relationship changes in a dyadic setting. Customer trust in the salesperson is not only shaped by their individual propensities, but is also influenced by the characteristics of the salesperson with whom they are interacting.

There are myriad salesperson characteristics that may influence the relationship between a customer's propensity to trust and his/her trust in a salesperson. This study contributes to the trust literature, as well as the sales literature, by examining interactive effects of two such salesperson variables – relational customer orientation and adaptive selling. These variables were selected based on several considerations. Primarily, the salesperson's relational customer orientation and adaptive selling provide voluntary benefits to the customer which

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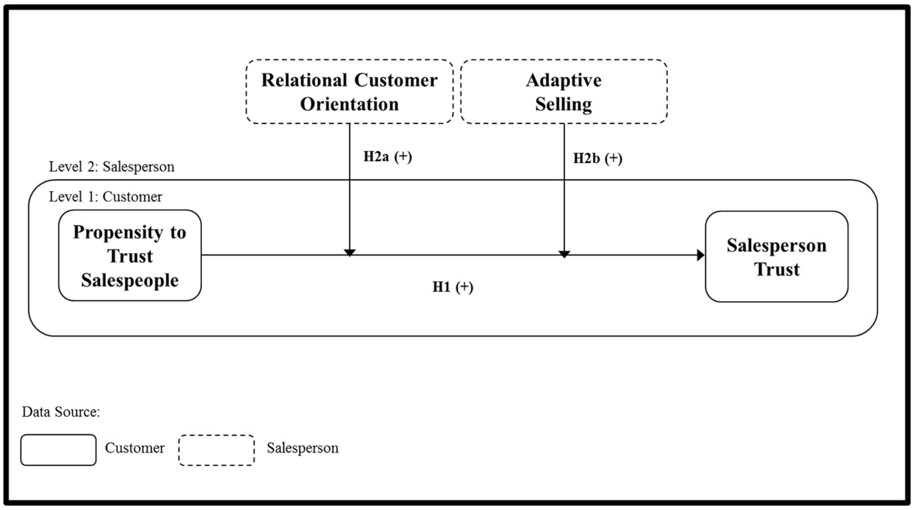

Fig. 1. Propensity to trust's contingent relationship with trust in the salesperson.

potentially strengthens the reciprocation of benefits. Thus, from a theoretical perspective, relational customer orientation and adaptive selling can convey a sense of the salesperson's motivations to the customer. However, whether or not a desirable response is invoked during the sales interaction may be contingent on the customer's interpretation of the seller's motivation, either as intrinsically motivated (i.e., activity generates its own rewards, such as social bonds) or extrinsically motivated (i.e., rewards are a result of the activity, such as financial compensation) (Rempel, Holmes, & Zanna, 1985; Whitener et al., 1998). The customer's attribution of these seller motivations is critical to developing a climate of trust (Rempel et al., 1985).

Fig. 1 shows our conceptual model. As depicted, the effect of the customer's propensity to trust salespeople on their trust in the salesperson is hypothesized to be contingent on the salesperson's level of relational customer orientation and adaptive selling. To test the hypotheses, this study uses multilevel-multisource data collected from B2B salespeople and their newly-acquired customers. Such a methodological approach to studying trust in buyer-seller relationships is novel (see the review of multilevel-multisource data in sales research; Johnson, Friend, & Horn, 2014) and provides an ideal context to assess interaction effects of variables within the trust forming process that span across the buyer-seller dyad. Results provide an understanding of how salesperson relational customer orientation and adaptive selling shape the relationship between a customer's propensity to trust and trust in the salesperson.

2. Literature review

2.1. Research framework

The theoretical foundation for our research framework is based on two well-established sets of theories – social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) and theories of economic exchange (e.g., agency theory; Eisenhardt, 1989). As per social exchange theory, trust plays a key role in social exchanges. Economic exchange theories, on the other hand, provide a foundation for structuring the economic transactions between two parties (Eisenhardt, 1989; Jensen & Meckling, 1976; Noorderhaven, 1992). Research has paired these two theories together when studying trust formation to "capture the economic context in which social exchange relationships develop" and "analyze the motivation to engage in trustworthy behavior" (Whitener et al., 1998, p. 514).

Drawing from these bodies of work, salesperson characteristics are expected to play a critical role in influencing the development of customer trust. This influence is because salespeople work in a social and economic exchange context, in which they initiate relationships by providing customers with social rewards (see Whitener et al., 1998). Past research has analyzed individual and relational factors that accentuate and attenuate trust perceptions, effectively going beyond factors which create the impression of trust to the factors which support or constrain trust (e.g., Whitener et al., 1998). Of relevance to the factors which support or restrict trust, people in general, including salespeople, have an enduring stake in how others perceive them and thus behave in a way that creates targeted impressions in others' eyes (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). Some of these behaviors for creating and maintaining impressions include exhibiting relational customer orientation and engaging in adaptive selling. Specifically, salespeople maintain a relational customer orientation and engage in adaptive selling to provide social rewards to customers and foster prosocial benefits from the customer, such as trust (Graen & Scandura, 1987; Marcus & House, 1973; Whitener et al., 1998).

2.2. Customer's trust and propensity to trust

The current study focuses on customer trust in a salesperson as the focal dependent variable because trust is a bonding factor in buyer-seller relationships and serves as a key indicator of the strength of the relationship (Chang, Tsai, Chen, Huang, & Tseng, 2015; Friend, Hamwi, & Rutherford, 2011). This bonding factor is based on expectations of long-term benefits and reduced tendencies for relational partners to take advantage of each other (Autry & Golicic, 2010). Using prior conceptualizations, Rotter (1980, p. 1) defines interpersonal trust as "a generalized expectancy held by an individual that the word, promise, oral or written statement of another individual or group can be relied on." This expectancy is reflective of an individual's (i.e., trustor's) attitude and is influenced by his/her observations of the other party's (i.e., trustee's) characteristics (Whitener et al., 1998).

Customers' propensity to trust, or customers' general expectancies about the trustworthiness of others (Rotter, 1971), is a relatively stable belief that captures an individual's initial intentions to trust (Ferguson & Peterson, 2015). The propensity to trust is especially important in situations when individuals are working with new people (Rotter, 1971), such as newly-formed buyer-seller relationships. This importance stems from the notion that trust determinations most often are made before sufficient time has passed to collect data on the other party's trustworthiness; thus, trust depends not just on past experiences, but also on individual orientations (Colquitt et al., 2007; Kee & Knox, 1970). Taken together, the customer's propensity to trust is likely to be amongst the most important predictors of trust in exchanges with unfamiliar actors (Bigley & Pearce, 1998; Colquitt et al., 2007; Valtakoski, 2015), such as a new salesperson. That said, while trust propensity is a likely antecedent of trust (Bigley & Pearce, 1998), unanswered