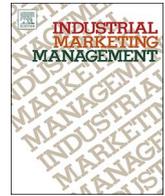




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The role of humor usage on creativity, trust and performance in business relationships: An analysis of the salesperson-customer dyad

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ABSTRACT

Using humor wisely is known to have many benefits in a work-related setting. Despite these potential benefits, there is limited research on this phenomenon in a business-to-business selling context. In light of this absence, the authors introduce a theoretical model explaining the role of humor usage in a salesperson-customer encounter. Specifically, the purpose of this paper is to examine the simultaneous influence of salesperson humor usage on creativity and customer trust, which in turn affect objective sales performance. Using 149 salesperson-customer dyads from a cross-industry survey, the results indicate that (1) salesperson humor usage positively influences salesperson creativity and customer trust, (2) which in turn mediates the influence of humor on objective sales performance. In addition, (3) customer trust also influences word-of-mouth propensity and expectation of relationship continuity. The article's broader contribution is that humor usage may be a fundamental human ability that is central for enhancing creativity and developing strong relationships in a business-to-business setting.

1. Introduction

The importance of building strong salesperson-customer relationships in a business-to-business (B2B) context is widely recognized by both sales researchers and managers (Palmatier, Scheer, Evans, & Arnold, 2008). It is also well known that the benefits of investing in relationship marketing activities typically result in increased customer trust (Palmatier et al., 2008). In fact, trust—for many relationship marketers—is the cornerstone of the most successful relationship marketing strategies (Doney & Cannon, 1997; Sirdeshmukh, Singh, & Sabol, 2002). For instance, customers with high levels of trust are more likely to spread positive word-of-mouth (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, & Gremler, 2002), and these individuals have higher expectations of continuity (Crosby, Evans, & Cowles, 1990). In turn, these positive outcomes should result in increased sales and profit levels (Palmatier et al., 2008).

In parallel with building strong relationships, researchers and practitioners also argue that salesperson creativity is a critical success factor leading to sales performance (Groza, Locander, & Howlett, 2016; Lask & Shepherd, 2013). Recent management research has shown that one way of increasing creativity is through humor usage (Mesmer-Magnus, Glew, & Viswesvaran, 2012)—which we define as the ability to perceive, create and express a message or idea with the ingenuity,

verbal skill and incongruity that can produce a smile or laughter (Bergeron & Vachon, 2008). In a related way, humor usage was also found to have a positive impact on customer trust in a business-to-consumer (B2C) context (Bergeron & Vachon, 2008). In light of these studies, the current research highlights the importance of simultaneously examining the effects of humor usage on both salespersons' creativity and customer trust in a B2B setting. We argue that having a better understanding of the effects of humor usage (and its underlying processes) could provide new insights to salespersons about building stronger relationships and being more performant.

The benefits of using humor have been thoroughly studied in the organizational behavior literature. For example, having a sense of humor decreases anxiety and stress as well as increases one's mood and overall life satisfaction (Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, & Weir, 2003). In addition, a recent meta-analysis on management has shown positive associations between a sense of humor, creativity and employee relationships (Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012). Given these findings, it is surprising that, in marketing, humor usage has been mainly studied in advertising (Schultz, 1996). Only a few studies have addressed the effectiveness of humor usage in a sales context, and this stream generally finds that salespeople with a humoristic approach have a competitive advantage over others (Bergeron & Vachon, 2008).

To benefit fully from strategies that incorporate humoristic and

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creative solutions, businesses need to better understand the process at play and how salesperson humor usage can influence creativity and trust, which in turn should influence “real” sales and profits (and not just intentions). With this general purpose in mind, our research makes three key contributions.

First, although research generally recognizes the beneficial effects of humor usage (Avolio, Howell, & Sosik, 1999), we still have an imperfect view of its underlying processes—that is, the way that humor can be translated into superior performances. We still need to understand better the different ways that humor can influence different outcomes of interest. In terms of key process variables, this research examines how humor usage can *simultaneously and independently* affect salespersons' creativity and customer trust. Although prior work has individually examined these two paths, we believe there is a need to integrate these two “routes” within the same model. By doing so, we will have a better understanding of the process (i.e., going through “salesperson creativity” or “customer trust”) that has the most influence on sales performance; this insight would be very useful for managers. In terms of beneficial outcomes, this research also examines the effect of humor on a large set of practical outcomes, including objective sales performance but also customers' word-of-mouth and expectation of continuity. In sum, we believe this research offers a comprehensive model of salesperson humor usage that precisely unveils its complex processes and its effects on a large set of outcomes.

Second, “research on the role of humor in real organizational settings remains sparse” (Lehmann-Willenbrock & Allen, 2014, p. 1278). Specifically, the effects of humor usage in a sales context have been rarely studied at a dyadic level (including both salespersons' and customers' judgments) and by using objective sales performance data. Overall, it appears important to test our theory of humor with multiple sources and objective data so that we can obtain more confidence in our empirical results. Accordingly, we test our theory with a unique dataset in which humor usage was measured by asking salespeople, the relational outcomes were measured by surveying customers, and the performance was captured from objective sales performance data provided by the firms.

Third, it remains unclear whether the outcomes of humor usage in the organizational literature (e.g., Martin et al., 2003; Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012) or in a B2C context (Bergeron & Vachon, 2008) can be extended to our B2B setting. This focus on B2B is important; sales organizations need guidance to understand whether humor usage is an advantage (or a disadvantage) in a more complex and arguably “serious” B2B selling context. The B2B context—compared to B2C—possesses particularities that could influence the effects of humor usage. Indeed, B2B transactions are much larger in terms of sales volumes, take more time to unfold, are more relationship-based, and are much more critical to the success of firms (Palmatier et al., 2008). In light of these differences, our research allows a better understanding of which route or process is most important for B2B salespersons. Is it because humor allows building stronger relationships based on trust? Or it is because humor makes salespersons more creative and able to provide innovative solutions? The current model—developed in a B2B sales context—allows answering these key questions for managers.

The paper is organized as follows. First, drawing on the broaden-and-build theory, we begin with a literature review of the key concepts, thus setting the stage for our research that incorporates salesperson humor usage, creativity and customer trust. Second, we present the research model and hypotheses. Third, we provide the methodological and measurement-related details along with the descriptions and characteristics of the studied salesperson-customer dyadic samples. Next, we highlight the findings of the research and the testing of our hypotheses. Lastly, we articulate the theoretical and managerial contributions and limitations of our research.

2. Literature review

2.1. Broaden-and-build theory

We draw on the broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 2001) to ensure a strong theoretical basis to integrate logically our key constructs of interest. Even if broaden-and-build theory has mainly focused on emotions, recent work using this theory has also focused on positive affect (Barnes, Ponder, & Hopkins, 2015) and creativity (Lin, Kao, Chen, & Lu, 2016). In that regard, this theory appears a useful starting point for studying the effects of humor usage on creativity.

According to this theory, an individual in a positive state-of-mind possesses a greater ability to broaden his horizons (in terms of thought processes), which would make him engage in favorable actions resulting in beneficial outcomes. In other words, a positivity state (generated through humor usage, for instance) could lead to the development of a new thinking process (e.g., being creative) and new related actions (e.g., offering an innovative solution). In turn, such new “thought-action” associations should lead to durable positive outcomes (i.e., a greater ability to generate sales). In parallel, a positive state could also help an individual to build stronger personal resources—ranging from physical, intellectual and social to psychological (Fredrickson, 2001) that will help him or her to cope with challenges at in a B2B sales context (Lussier & Hartmann, *in press*).

Broaden-and-build theory provides initial theoretical footing to understand how salesperson humor can lead to a variety of beneficial outcomes. Specifically, we argue that both salespeople and customers derive positivity from a proper usage of humor. This positivity makes salespersons more creative (i.e., a thought process), which leads them to propose novel and innovation business solutions to their customers (i.e., an action). This positivity will also help salespeople to better manage pressure situations, adversity, conflicts and failures associated with B2B selling, which should result in the development of stronger relationships based on trust. Here, trust is an important social resource for a salesperson. Ultimately, this improved sense of creativity and these enhanced resources (i.e., trust) should lead to superior lasting positive outcomes, such as the ability to generate greater sales. On the basis of this logic, we posit that humor usage helps salespeople in strengthening their *creative* “thought-action” responses and building enduring customer trust, thereby increasing desired outcomes such as sales performance.

It should be noted that support for the broaden-and-build theory is found in recent marketing literature. For instance, a recent study used this framework to show that positivity (conceptualized as optimism and resilience) experienced by B2B salespeople is positively linked to important sales-related resources and outcomes such as customer-oriented behaviors, customer satisfaction and sales performance (Lussier & Hartmann, *in press*).

In summary, building on this theory, the current research examines whether salespeople who are able to maintain elevated humor usage (i.e., a positive construct) are better in adopting lasting “thought-action” responses (e.g., increased creativity) and building enduring resources (i.e., customer trust) that improve not only their personal outcomes (e.g., sales performance) but also customers' relational outcomes (e.g., word-of-mouth and expectation of continuity). This research extends the applicability of the broaden-and-build theory by incorporating within it the notion of salesperson humor usage in a B2B selling context. Based on this theory, Fig. 1 provides an overview of our conceptual framework. In the next sections, we provide a literature review on our two core constructs: humor usage and creativity. Because the other constructs are better established in the literature, these constructs are defined later when the model is presented.

2.2. Humor usage

Humor is a surprisingly complex concept, for it can be (1) a

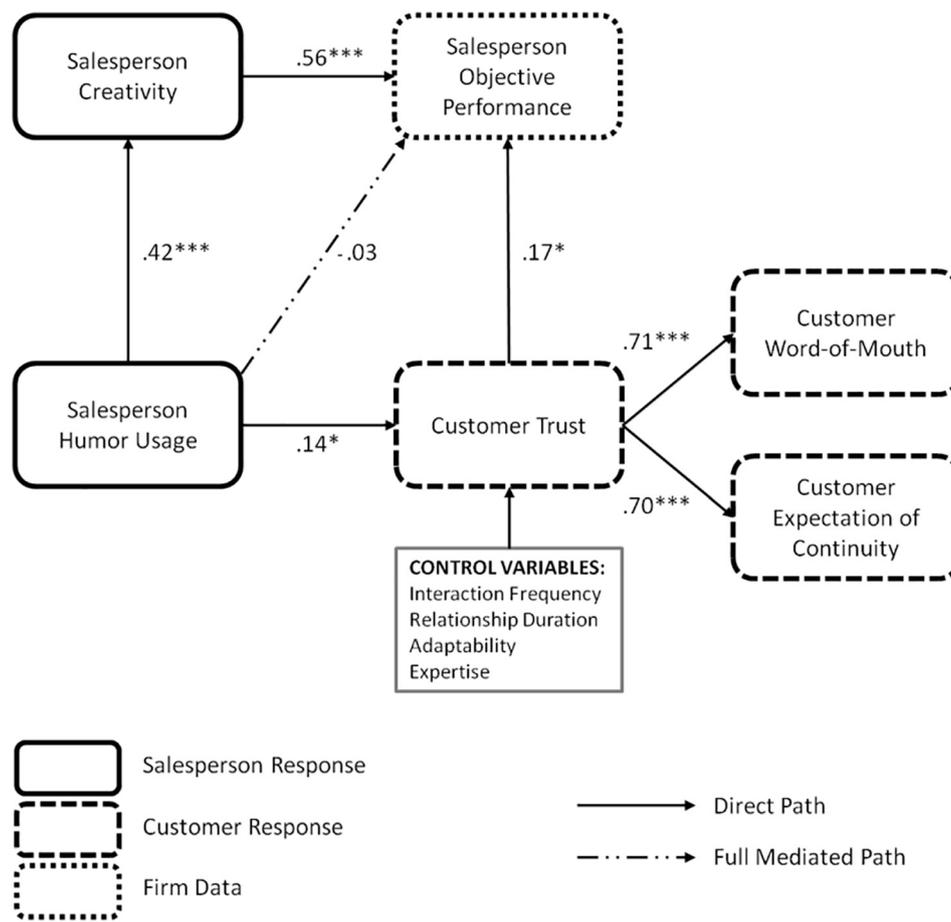


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework.

stimulus, like a narrative joke told to evoke laughter; (2) a mental process implying perceptions of what is funny; and (3) an ability to use incongruity or verbal skills (Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012). In the B2B sales literature, humor—mainly defined as an ability—has been documented as an effort to get customers' attention, develop their interest and improve relationships through every phase of the selling process (Wagle, 1985).

For a salesperson, this soft skill can be linked to emotional intelligence and social competence expressed through social interactions (Yip & Martin, 2006), and may be used to increase persistence behavior (Cheng & Wang, 2015). According to Martin et al. (2003), there are four humor styles to consider within a relationship: affiliative, self-enhancing, self-defeating and aggressive. The two latter are associated with sarcasm, teasing and saying funny things at one's expense (Martin et al., 2003), whereas the two former are more constructive and likely to be used in a sales context. Affiliative humor is related to making humorous comments to put others at ease, which enhances interpersonal cohesiveness and attraction (Martin et al., 2003). Self-enhancing humor is about the regulation of negativity through humorous perspective-taking (Martin et al., 2003), which may be useful in dealing with customers' objections or an unfavorable economic environment. Here is a content conversation that introduces how using humor wisely may be employed in a salesperson-customer dyad:

Customer: I still have not received the order. The order is one day late!

Salesperson: Oh, I'm sorry to hear that and feel for you. I will place a call and make sure the shipment is on its way today.

Customer: That's good news. Now, give me the bad news.

Salesperson: The bad news is that I'm supposed to let you vent and not offer you business solutions [smile]. Quite frankly, I would take

the order to you myself right now if I could [smile]!

Customer: I appreciate your initiative. You are effective, I must say [smile].

Salesperson: Thank you. Effective is my middle name [eye wink and smile].

The appreciation of humor is context-specific, however; and negative consequences may emerge from its indelicate use (Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012). On the one hand, using humor in a wrong setting could negatively impact relationships (Martin et al., 2003). On the other hand, the benefits of humor usage are numerous: increased well-being (Martin et al., 2003), the counterpart's credibility (Lyttle, 2007) and creative and innovative thinking (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). The flexibility and innovation promoted by humoristic individuals has been documented in different management settings (e.g. Avolio et al., 1999). In addition, humoristic individuals diffuse tensions in relationships (Martin et al., 2003). By ultimately improving the relationship, humor is likely to help improve customer trust in the process, which may be especially important in the highly complex B2B selling context (Palmatier et al., 2008). As a result, salesperson humor usage—when used wisely—is expected to have a positive effect on relational outcomes (Bergeron & Vachon, 2008). The examination of the simultaneous effects of humor usage on creativity, trust and performance remain largely unexplored in the sales literature, and the current model aims to address this issue.

2.3. Creativity

In today's increasingly competitive B2B context, it has become a necessity for sales organizations to invest in salespeople's creative potential to make a profit, or simply to survive (Lassk & Shepherd,

2013). The new environment drives salespeople to engage in creative problem-solving activities (Wang & Netemeyer, 2004). Indeed, it is broadly accepted that creative organizations tend to have distinct advantages in the marketplace over their competition (Oldham & Cummings, 1996). Recognizing this new imperative, researchers often list creativity as an essential characteristic of successful salespeople (Lassk & Shepherd, 2013).

According to Zhou and George (2001), originality or novelty is a prerequisite for an idea to be recognized as being creative. The authors add that the ideas also need to be useful to be considered creative. Thus, we define salesperson creativity as the generation of novel and useful ideas or solutions in a selling context (Lassk & Shepherd, 2013; Zhou & George, 2001). The main goal of investing in creative employees is to solve customer problems and provide unique solutions, to create new ways of presenting products and services, to take advantage of business opportunities, and to improve an organization's effectiveness (Rego, Sousa, Pina e Cunha, Correia, & Saur-Amaral, 2007). Research in psychology has revealed that cognitive styles such as increased interest, attraction to complexity, intuition and self-confidence are positively linked to creativity (Oldham & Cummings, 1996). Oldham and Cummings (1996) add that highly motivated individuals tend to be more creative in general. For example, a salesperson motivated to do a specific task in a sales context (e.g., presenting a new selling tool to a customer) "is more likely to stay focused on the task, to work longer on a problem, and to be more likely to take a risk" (Lassk & Shepherd, 2013, p. 26).

In line with this discussion, empirical sales research has established a positive linkage between salesperson creativity and (1) adaptive selling behaviors, (2) job satisfaction, (3) sales performance and (4) likelihood for promotion to sales management (Dubinsky & Ingram, 1983; Wang & Netemeyer, 2004). However, to the best of our knowledge, there is limited research in a B2B environment that has shown the influence of salesperson creativity on objective sales performance using a salesperson-customer dyadic design. While research has provided evidence on the influence of salespeople's creativity on relationship marketing outcomes, little research has focused on the antecedents of salespeople's creativity (for two exceptions, see Groza et al., 2016; Lassk & Shepherd, 2013). Prior research on organizational behavior identified that humoristic individuals in the workplace are more likely to engage in creative problem solving (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006), and the current research builds on this finding in developing our hypotheses. With this selling context in mind, we now turn to the conceptual framework and its hypotheses.

3. Research model and hypotheses

3.1. Main effects in the model

In the first part of the model (see Fig. 1), we test the effects of salesperson humor usage on salesperson creativity, customer trust and objective sales performance. Then, we examine the effect of salesperson creativity on objective sales performance. Finally, we formulate hypotheses about the effects of customer trust on objective performance (salesperson-focused outcome) as well as word-of-mouth and expectation of continuity (customer-focused outcomes).

3.1.1. The effects of humor usage

The initial part of the model is derived from the logic presented by Lang and Lee (2010) and other management researchers who have contributed to the literature on workplace humor and organizational creativity (e.g., Avolio et al., 1999; Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012). This stream of research would predict that a more humoristic salesperson (as opposed to a less humoristic salesperson) should be more creative. Specifically, when a salesperson uses humor wisely with his/her customer, this can lead to or "broaden" lasting actions such as providing creative and innovative business solutions to customers.

Drawing on the broaden-and-build theory, we argue that salespeople with higher humor usage levels are better (versus salespeople with lower humor) at adopting lasting favorable actions, including increased creativity. Specifically, when a salesperson uses humor wisely with his or her customers, this can lead to "broadening" lasting actions in a way that goes beyond salespeople's usual "call of duty." Through the use of humor, salespeople become more inclined to provide creative and innovative business solutions to customers. Although the effect of humor may be temporary, its impact may become durable through the offering of a well-designed solution, which will be lasting for customers (Wright, 2003). Indeed, humor can have a positive influence on creative and innovative thinking, which helps to expose discrepancies in logic and to discard preconceived ideas (Lang & Lee, 2010). In fact, having a good sense of humor can stimulate unconventional or "outside the box" thinking (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). The use of humor—where timing is everything (Vaillant, 2000)—is also linked to the increased levels of fun an employee has on the job (Martin et al., 2003; Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012). A lighter atmosphere at work is known to foster collaborative discussions and new problem-solving perspectives (Avolio et al., 1999). For these reasons, we expect a direct positive link between salesperson humor usage and creativity:

H1. Salesperson humor usage will have a direct positive effect on salesperson creativity.

As for the effects of salesperson humor usage on customer trust, few studies have examined these two constructs together in a sales context (e.g., Bergeron & Vachon, 2008). Yet recent academic research in management has provided evidence that workplace humor is effective for developing and building lasting work relationships (Cooper, 2005; Lehmann-Willenbrock & Allen, 2014). Indeed, the concept of trust is at the heart of healthy business relationships, and this notion is perhaps the most important relational factor for developing strong relationships (Palmatier et al., 2008). In our research, we define customer trust as the confidence in salespeople's credibility (i.e., how reliable a salesperson is) and benevolence (i.e., how concerned a salesperson is about customers' welfare) (Doney & Cannon, 1997; Palmatier, Dant, Grewal, & Evans, 2006).

The B2B sales literature provides some evidence that the judicious use of humor favorably influences the overall salesperson-customer relationship (Wagle, 1985). In line with this finding, workplace research argues that thoughtful and responsible use of humor may increase an individual's credibility (Lyttle, 2007). When correctly used, humor may be perceived as a demonstration of a salesperson's capacity to adapt to a new context (Martin et al., 2003) and to be effective in building social relationships (Cooper, 2005; Lehmann-Willenbrock & Allen, 2014), which may also reflect his or her concern for customers. The stress and tensions that are regularly part of B2B relationships may also be diffused by humor (Martin et al., 2003), which indicates a salesperson's sense of caring, or benevolence, for his or her customers.

Using the broaden-and-build theory, we posit that salespersons' humor makes them more trustworthy for their customers in a B2B setting; trust is an important social resource here. Building on research on workplace leadership, a salesperson's appropriate sense of humor should be interpreted by his or her customers as a reassuring signal that the salesperson is in control. By using appropriate humor, the salesperson shows he has sufficient confidence to say something funny in stressful situations, and he therefore shows that he can find the right words to diffuse the tension (Avolio et al., 1999). For these reasons, we formulate the following hypothesis. As illustrated in Fig. 1, it should be noted that the robustness of this hypothesized path is tested by controlling for a variety of variables, including salesperson expertise (Doney & Cannon, 1997; Palmatier et al., 2008), salesperson adaptability (Chakrabarty, Brown, & Widing, 2013), length of relationship and interaction frequency (Palmatier et al., 2008).

H2. Salesperson humor usage will have a direct positive effect on

customer trust.

The benefits of maintaining long-term salesperson-customer relationships are widely recognized by marketers (Palmatier, Dant, & Grewal, 2007). Research has shown that relationship marketing efforts produce stronger customer relationships—based on trust—that increase salesperson performance outcomes, including sales growth, share and profits (Palmatier et al., 2008). Indeed, organizations can augment profits by almost 100% by building stronger relationships and retaining an additional 5% of their current customers (Reichheld & Sasser, 1990). In line with this research stream, we provide new insights to help salespeople increase their objective performance outcomes; this is why we pay special attention to the linkage “humor usage → objective sales performance.”

The management literature shows a positive linkage between workplace humor and job performance (Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012). In addition, Avolio et al. (1999) found that humor usage is positively related to individual and unit-level performance. Building again on the broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 2001; Wright, 2003), positive constructs (e.g., salesperson humor usage) should help “broaden” the salesperson’s lasting behaviors (e.g., salesperson creativity) and “build” relevant outcomes—the most important for salespeople being their sales performance. Affiliative humor and self-enhancing humor foster positivity (Avolio et al., 1999), which are recognized as playing an important role in job satisfaction and performance (Barnes et al., 2015). Extending these general results to our B2B sales context, we expect that salesperson humor usage should have a direct positive effect on performance. So, we predict:

H3. Salesperson humor usage will have a positive effect on objective performance.

3.1.2. The effects of salesperson creativity

Prior research in management has shown a positive relationship between creativity and job performance (Oldham & Cummings, 1996; Zhou & George, 2003). In accord with prior sales research (Groza et al., 2016; Lask & Shepherd, 2013), we expect that a salesperson’s creativity will positively affect his or her outcome performance. The broaden-and-build theory again provides a convincing logic for explaining this linkage. The appropriate use of humor creates a positive environment that stimulates an enduring engagement in creative behavior (see H1). Because of their heightened sense of creativity, these salespersons become more resilient to the pressure of selling in a B2B context. In addition, this positivity and creativity make them more resistant to objections; they are more predisposed to generate different alternatives to solve a problem. Because of their general ability to think “outside the box,” these salespersons are more performant and more likely to achieve their final objectives. Consequently, we expect salesperson creativity to be positively linked with objective performance:

H4. Salesperson creativity will have a direct positive effect on objective sales performance.

3.1.3. The effects of customer trust on different outcomes

We examine the effects of customer trust on two groups of relational outcomes: objective performance (salesperson-focused outcome) and customers’ word-of-mouth and expectation of continuity (customer-focused outcomes). Although the importance of examining different relational outcomes has been highlighted in a recent meta-analysis (Palmatier et al., 2006), there is still limited empirical research that simultaneously includes these two groups of outcomes (i.e., salesperson-focused and customer-focused) in a B2B dyadic context.

First, the effect of trust on spreading positive word-of-mouth is well established and logical—the more a customer trusts his or her salesperson, the more likely this customer is to recommend the firm and the sales professional to others. Second, we expect a similar prediction when the dependent variable is customer expectation of continuity—which is defined as the likelihood of continued purchases from the

salesperson (Crosby et al., 1990). When their trust increases, customers have greater intentions to maintain their relationships in the future and to continue purchasing from the salesperson. Finally, and as is consistent with a greater likelihood of continued business between the buyer and seller, we also expect that trust should directly result in superior objective performance. Formally:

H5. Customer trust has direct positive effects on (a) objective sales performance, (b) customer word-of-mouth, and (c) customer expectation of continuity.

3.2. Mediating effect of salesperson creativity and customer trust

In this section, we have formulated hypotheses about the processes that explain the effects of salespersons’ humor usage on their objective performance. Based on our prior hypotheses (H1–H5), our model highlights the importance of two central mediators—customer trust and salesperson creativity—to explain the process at play. Unveiling this dual process represents our core theoretical contribution.

First, research suggests that customer trust could play an important role of mediation in the process of interest (Palmatier et al., 2006). Our model argues that customer trust resulting from a humoristic salesperson should ultimately lead to an increase in sales performance. This indirect effect of humor usage on sales performance through customer trust highlights the importance of building strong relationships in a B2B context. This sequence (i.e., “humor usage → customer trust → sales performance”) is consistent with the broaden-and-build theory. The positivity triggered by humor should lead to developing lasting behaviors, such as the development of interactions leading to customer trust. Then, the enduring aspect of this desired behavior should help salespersons to achieve their sought outcomes, that is, the realization of their sales objective (Fredrickson, 2001; Wright, 2003). Formally:

H6. Customer trust mediates the relationship between salesperson humor usage and objective performance.

Second, Lask and Shepherd (2013) provide important insights that justify the relevance of our second mediator: salesperson creativity. These authors show that creativity in a sales context has a direct positive effect on perceived performance, and that creativity is the key mediator explaining the influence of emotional intelligence on performance. Adapting this logic to our context, we expect humor usage (rather than emotional intelligence) to influence objective sales performance through the mediating effect of salesperson creativity. Again, this logic is consistent with the broaden-and-build theory, which argues that the positivity created by humor usage encourages the development and duration of favorable behaviors—such as creative—which become instrumental in helping salespersons to achieve their performance goals. Therefore:

H7. Salesperson creativity mediates the relationship between salesperson humor usage and objective performance.

4. Method

4.1. Collection of dyadic data

First, we tested our model using a dataset that includes matched salesperson-customer surveys and actual sales as a percentage of set objectives; these last data were provided by cross-industry sales organizations in a B2B environment. Specifically, we performed the analysis on salesperson-customer dyads in the pharmaceutical ($n = 67$), food and beverage ($n = 38$), industrial ($n = 34$) and financial ($n = 10$) industries. The 149 salespeople and customers were randomly selected to take part in the study; each salesperson managed a portfolio of clients in a given territory and was responsible for ongoing customer relationship building. Before data collection, two surveys (one for salespeople and one for customers) were constructed

and a pretest of the surveys was done with a total of 26 salespeople-customer dyads. The participants were asked to point out any scale items they found confusing, repetitive or not relevant. During this pretest, a few refinements were made to clarify some of the scale items.

Next, we administered the surveys using two different methods: face-to-face and via the Internet by means of a marketing research firm.¹ The first set of surveys ($n = 103$ dyads) was administered at the end of regularly scheduled meetings with a response rate of 84% (123 salespeople where initially contacted). The second set of surveys ($n = 56$ dyads) was collected through the Internet following the salesperson-customer appointment with a response rate of 100%. After a scheduled encounter, an e-mail with the link to the survey was sent to each of the 56 salespeople and an arbitrary selected customer. Once collected, the surveys were carefully screened for missing values. After removing incomplete surveys, 149 of the 159 initial salesperson-customer dyads remained. As a result, 149 B2B salesperson-customer dyads were employed to test the hypothesized pathways.

Finally, we obtained firm-supplied objective sales performance data for each of the salespeople, collected within a 90-day timeframe after completing the survey from the firm archives. After gathering all the objective performance data, salesperson responses were matched with the responses of their respective customers and their objective sales performance data. In order to properly analyze the data set, we coded each salesperson survey with the appropriate customer survey and objective performance data. Of the 149 salespeople used for analysis, 63.1% were male, mostly in the 40 to 49 age range. As for customers, 81.9% were male, and most of them were in the 50 to 59 age range.

4.2. Measures

All measures used in this study were adapted from prior research. The constructs were assessed using five-point Likert-type scales ranging from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (5) (see Appendix A for details).

4.2.1. Salesperson humor usage

To capture salesperson humor usage, we used a 4-item scale combining the work of Avolio et al. (1999), Bergeron and Vachon (2008), and Martin et al. (2003). Specifically, we used two established items measuring affiliative humor (Bergeron & Vachon, 2008; Martin et al., 2003) and two validated items for self-enhancing humor (Avolio et al., 1999; Martin et al., 2003). For the affiliative dimension, we used the items: “I am a humorous individual” and “I tell jokes to make my clients laugh.” For the self-enhancing dimension, we used the items: “I use funny stories to defuse conflicts” and “I use humor to take the edge off during stressful situations.”

Although these two styles of humor are conceptual distinct, they are also highly correlated as both styles can be regrouped under the umbrella of “constructive” humor usage. Researchers argue it is appropriate to combine them within the same construct for at least three reasons (Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012). First, when people have a good sense of humor, they possess the ability to use both humorous styles. In that regard, these two styles of humor are not mutually exclusive, but rather highly complementary. Second, these two styles of humor do not change the fundamental nature of humor usage—that is, uttering mutually amusing communications. In that regard, these two styles tap into the same overarching construct: constructive humor usage. Third, these two humor styles have the same effects in our model, which suggests that they are conceptually close to each other.

4.2.2. Salesperson creativity

To measure salesperson creativity, we used a 5-item subset of the

¹ The market research firm—MD Analytics Inc.—specializes in health-related industries.

original 13-item two-dimensional scale developed by Zhou and George (2001) that was used recently in a sales context by Lassk and Shepherd (2013).² Our scale consisted of 2 items for useful ideas and 3 items tapping into creative ideas. This scale included items such as “I suggest new ways to achieve goals or objectives” and “I have new and innovative ideas.” As is consistent with the literature, this scale is modeled as a higher-order factor reflecting two first-order dimensions (i.e., creative ideas and useful ideas), and this conceptualization is captured by using structural equation modeling (SEM) techniques (Kumar, Scheer, & Steenkamp, 1995). This approach allows salesperson creativity to vary along a unidimensional continuum (weak vs. strong). Our preliminary analyses confirmed that salesperson creativity could be modeled as a higher-order, unidimensional factor; our confirmatory factor analysis for this construct provided satisfactory results ($\chi^2(5) = 16.22$, $p < 0.0001$; comparative fit index [CFI] = 0.97; root mean square error of approximation [RMSEA] = 0.12; and standardized root mean square residual [SRMR] = 0.03). The salesperson creativity scale also produced a good reliability indicator (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.88).

4.2.3. Customer trust

For the measurement of customer trust, we used a well-established and robust 5-item scale (Garbarino & Johnson, 1999). As mentioned previously, customer trust refers to the customer's view of the salesperson's credibility (how reliable a salesperson is) and benevolence (how concerned about a customer's welfare a salesperson is). This 5-item scale included items such as “This salesperson performs with integrity” and “This salesperson's company is reliable.” The instrument yielded good reliability indices (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.91).

4.2.4. Customer word-of-mouth

Customer word-of-mouth—defined as the likelihood of a customer to positively refer the salesperson to another potential customer (Palmatier et al., 2006)—was measured using the 3-item scale originally developed by Hennig-Thurau et al. (2002). This scale included items such as “I often say positive things about this salesperson to other colleagues” and “I often recommend this salesperson's product(s) to colleagues.” This measure generated satisfactory reliability (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.87).

4.2.5. Customer expectation of continuity

Defined as a “customer's intention to maintain the relationship in the future, which captures the likelihood of continued purchases from the seller” (Palmatier et al., 2006, p. 139), customer expectation of continuity was captured using a 4-item subscale (Román & Iacobucci, 2010). This 4-item instrument included items such as “It is probable that I will see this salesperson again” and “I will buy the product(s) from this salesperson again.” The customer expectation of continuity scale produced satisfactory reliability (Cronbach's alpha = 0.87).

4.2.6. Salesperson's objective sales performance

In this study, outcome performance was measured using both perceived (self-ratings) and objective sales performance data (firm data) to allow for a more complete understanding of the performance

² We measure salesperson creativity from the perspective of the salesperson. From our definition of creativity, we argue that salespeople are in a better position to assess their own ability to “generate novel and useful ideas or solutions.” In the relevant literature, the notion of creativity tends to be assessed from the perspective of the individual under scrutiny (i.e., the salesperson), rather than being evaluated from the perspective of an external observer (i.e., a customer). Here, we assume that a salesperson is a reasonable judge of his/her own skills, given his/her extensive knowledge of his/her job, strengths and weaknesses. The literature supports this way of measuring creativity. For instance, in the management literature, team creativity has been previously measured by the perception of a team's employees (Barczak, Lassk, & Mulki, 2010). In the sales literature, salesperson creative performance has been typically measured by salespeople (Lassk & Shepherd, 2013). Likewise, a recent business-to-business sales article conceptualized and measured creativity from the perspective of salespeople (Groza et al., 2016).

construct (Churchill, Ford, Hartley, & Walker, 1985). For the subjective performance, we used a 4-item subset of Sujan, Weitz, and Kumar's (1994) scale, which included "I generate a high level of sales" and "I exceed all sales targets and objectives in my territory during the year" (Cronbach's alpha = 0.85). However, consistent with Churchill et al.'s (1985) meta-analysis, our results show that subjective and objective performance are highly correlated ($r = 0.89$; $p < 0.001$), which is above the recommended 0.80 cut-off value (Brown, 2006). As a result, we use *only* objective performance to test our hypothesized paths.

Salesperson objective sales performance—which represents the actual sales revenue achieved as a percentage of the objectives set by the organizations—was obtained for each salesperson over a 90-day timeframe. It should be noted that sales as a percentage of sales target is a strong measure of objective sales performance because it controls for potential external factors such as competitive actions or territory size (Churchill et al., 1985). To ensure comparability, the same timeframe was used for all respondents. The 90-day timeframe is often used in sales academic research (Brown, Cron, & Slocum, 1998). The average objective sales performance was 89.6% with a standard deviation (SD) of 12.7%.

All items (after purification), factor loadings and literature sources are presented in the Appendix A. All multi-item measures show satisfactory reliability as the Cronbach's alphas are 0.79 or above (Nunnally, 1978). All loadings are greater than the 0.50 value, and most of the loadings exceed the 0.70 value. Lastly, all constructs exceed the threshold values of 0.50 for the average variance extracted (AVE) (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988). AVE estimates for all respective pairs of constructs in the model are greater than their matching squared correlations (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Overall, our scales show evidence of convergent and discriminant validity. The descriptive statistics and correlations matrix are presented in Table 1.

4.2.7. Control variables

To be consistent with previous sales research, we controlled for established variables that could explain the variance in customer trust and objective performance. First, prior research indicates that interaction frequency and relationship duration are important factors to consider as they could have an impact on customer trust (Palmatier et al., 2008). Second, we controlled for two well-established antecedents of trust found in the sales literature to establish greater confidence in our prediction about the linkage "humor usage → customer trust." Previous research indicates that salesperson expertise

(Doney & Cannon, 1997; Palmatier et al., 2008)—defined as the "knowledge, experience, and overall competency of a seller" (Palmatier et al., 2006, p. 138)—and salesperson adaptability (Chakrabarty et al., 2013)—defined as the capacity to change sales behaviors during customer interactions on the basis of perceived information (Weitz, Sujan, & Sujan, 1986)—are important variables that could have an influence on customer trust. The results of two meta-analyses support the choice of these two constructs. First, Palmatier et al. (2006) found that salesperson expertise is among the most effective predictors of customer trust in a sales context. Second, adaptability also appears to be a judicious choice, as this construct represents one of the most studied and influential competencies in the sales literature (Franke & Park, 2006). Last, we also controlled for sales experience as a factor that could potentially impact performance outcomes (Wachner, Plouffe, & Grégoire, 2009).

4.3. Method of analysis

4.3.1. Measurement validation

We conducted the reliability and validity examination of the constructs using two confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) models. In the first model, we tested salesperson humor usage, creativity, expertise and adaptability—the antecedents of the full model. In the second measurement model, we included customer trust, word-of-mouth, expectation of continuity, and objective sales performance. In both models, we restricted each scale item to its intended factor and ensured that each factor was correlated with all the other constructs. Both models demonstrate a good fit to data (Model 1: $\chi^2 (113) = 233.25$, $p < 0.0001$; CFI = 0.91; RMSEA = 0.08; SRMR = 0.06; Model 2: $\chi^2 (98) = 194.14$, $p < 0.0001$; CFI = 0.94; RMSEA = 0.08; SRMR = 0.06). Overall, these findings indicate that the measurement models are acceptable and correctly fit the data (McQuitty, 2004).

4.3.2. Common method bias

To limit common method bias, several recommended precautions were taken (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). First, for many of the hypothesized pathways, we drew determinants and consequences from different sources (e.g., the influence of salesperson-reported humor usage on customer-reported trust; the influence of salesperson-reported creativity on objective performance provided by the sales organization), which cancel most of the possibilities for common method bias (Palmatier et al., 2008). Second, in an attempt

Table 1
Descriptive statistics and correlation matrix.

Construct	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Humor	1										
2. Creativity	0.37***	1									
3. Trust	0.25**	0.21**	1								
4. Word-of-mouth	0.25**	0.23**	0.65***	1							
5. Expectation of continuity	0.16*	0.19*	0.64***	0.50***	1						
6. Objective performance	0.19*	0.54***	0.22**	0.19*	0.24**	1					
7. Average company tenure	-0.11	0.05	0.06	0.06	-0.09	0.13	1				
8. Interaction frequency	0.15	0.11	0.13	0.15	-0.01	-0.11	-0.10	1			
9. Relationship duration	0.01	0.11	0.31***	0.25**	0.10	0.17*	0.48***	-0.08	1		
10. Expertise	0.16*	0.21**	0.63***	0.46***	0.54***	0.22**	0.05	0.14	0.25**	1	
11. Adaptability	0.12	0.31***	0.14	0.10	0.14	0.30**	0.03	-0.15	0.14	0.16	1
Mean	3.92	4.37	4.25	3.65	4.53	89.66	7.97	4.28	4.04	4.28	4.76
Standard deviation	0.71	0.51	0.64	0.94	0.62	12.73	7.03	4.71	3.66	0.66	0.39
Number of items	4	5	5	3	4	NA	1	1	1	3	5
Cronbach's alpha	0.79	0.88	0.91	0.87	0.87	NA	NA	NA	NA	0.89	0.91
Composite reliability	0.80	0.93	0.96	0.76	0.88	NA	NA	NA	NA	0.95	0.96
AVE	50.2%	59.2%	68.0%	68.9%	64.7%	NA	NA	NA	NA	62.3%	68.4%

p-Value is based on two tailed-tests.

* $p < 0.05$.
 ** $p < 0.01$.
 *** $p < 0.001$.

Table 2
Results: hypothesized direct effects.

Relationships	B coefficient		
	Partial mediation model	t-Value	Hypothesis
Creativity (R) ²	(0.18)		
Humor usage → creativity	0.42	3.96***	H1
Customer trust (R) ²	(0.64)		
Humor usage → customer trust	0.14	2.04*	H2
Interaction frequency → customer trust	0.03	0.40	
Relationship duration → customer trust	0.19	3.09**	
Expertise → customer trust	0.62	6.85***	
Adaptability → customer trust	−0.05	−0.73	
Objective performance (R) ²	(0.34)		
Humor usage → objective performance	−0.03	−0.78	H3
Creativity → objective performance	0.56	5.82***	H4
Customer trust → objective performance	0.17	2.13*	H5a
Average company tenure → objective performance	0.19	2.58**	
Customer word-of-mouth (R) ²	(0.50)		
Customer trust → customer word-of-mouth	0.71	7.76***	H5b
Customer expectation of continuity (R) ²	(0.49)		
Customer trust → customer expectation of continuity	0.70	6.60***	H5c

p-Value is based on two tailed-tests.

* p < 0.05.

** p < 0.01.

*** p < 0.001.

to reduce the potential residual common method bias, the surveys were administered using two methods: face-to-face, and via Internet using a marketing research firm. Third, predictor and outcome variables were disassociated within the survey, so they appeared unrelated. Fourth, participants were guaranteed anonymity. Finally, we used Likert scales and objective data, which prevent consistency biases and increase validity (Rindfleisch, Malter, Ganesan, & Moorman, 2008).

5. Results

We tested one structural model using AMOS 18.0 SEM with a maximum likelihood criterion. This model provided acceptable structural fit indices: χ^2 (269) = 461.56, $p < 0.0001$; CFI = 0.90; RMSEA = 0.07; and SRMR = 0.08. All together, the results indicate that the structural model acceptably fits the data (Hu & Bentler, 1998). A summary of the coefficients is presented in Fig. 1 and Table 2.

5.1. Direct effects

First, we examined the influence of salesperson humor usage on creativity, trust and objective performance. As expected, salesperson humor usage positively affects salesperson creativity (H1: $\beta = 0.42$, $p < 0.001$) and customer trust (H2: $\beta = 0.14$, $p < 0.01$), in support of H1 and H2. However, salesperson humor is not significantly related to objective performance ($\beta = -0.03$, $p = ns$), so H3 is not supported. It should be noted that H2 is supported even after controlling for four control variables. For them, relationship duration ($\beta = 0.19$, $p < 0.01$) and salesperson expertise ($\beta = 0.62$, $p < 0.001$) were positively related to customer trust, whereas interaction frequency ($\beta = 0.03$, $p = ns$) and adaptability ($\beta = -0.05$, $p = ns$) did not achieve significance.

Next, we examined the impact of salesperson creativity on objective

sales performance. Consistent with H4, salesperson creativity is positively related to objective sales performance ($\beta = 0.56$, $p < 0.001$). The control variable for average company tenure ($\beta = 0.19$, $p < 0.01$) is also positively related to objective performance.³

Last, we evaluated the simultaneous effects of customer trust on several groups of outcomes (i.e., salesperson-focused and customer-focused). In support of H5a, b and c, customer trust positively influenced objective sales performance ($\beta = 0.17$, $p < 0.05$), customer word-of-mouth ($\beta = 0.71$, $p < 0.001$) and customer expectation of continuity ($\beta = 0.70$, $p < 0.001$).

5.2. Mediating effects

For the two mediation hypotheses, we examined the effect of salesperson humor usage on objective sales performance through the mediating mechanisms of customer trust and salesperson creativity. We tested H6 and H7 using the PROCESS bootstrapping method for testing the indirect effects in mediation models (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). The results presented in Table 3 show a significant indirect effect of humor usage on objective sales performance mediated by customer trust ($\beta = 0.043$; lower level confidence interval [LLCI] = 0.009, upper level confidence interval [ULCI] = 0.106), in support of H6. According to the terminology used by Zhao, Lynch, & Chen (2010), this effect is an indirect-only mediation, as salesperson humor usage has no direct effect on objective sales performance.

In support of H7, we found an indirect effect of salesperson humor usage on objective performance mediated by salesperson creativity ($\beta = 0.196$; lower level confidence interval [LLCI] = 0.160, upper level confidence interval [ULCI] = 0.509). Likewise, the effect is an indirect-only mediation. Table 4 provides an overview of our hypotheses and results.

To rule out the possibility of the sequence “salesperson creativity → humor usage → performance”, we tested the significance of the indirect effect using the same PROCESS approach. This indirect effect was not significant; the confidence intervals integrated the zero value (LLCI = −1.08, ULCI = 0.69). This analysis confirms that humor usage is not a relevant mediator to explain the effect of creativity on performance.

5.3. Post hoc analyses: alternative models

In this section, we provide additional evidence to support the quality of our original model. To do so, we compare the model presented in Fig. 1 with two alternative models (see Fig. 2).⁴ If the logic underlying our model is valid, it should fit the data in a superior manner in comparison to the two rival models.

Our first alternative model reverses the sequence between creativity and humor, and it incorporates the “salesperson creativity → customer trust → performance” pathway. Instead of using the linkage “humor usage → salesperson creativity → performance” (as in Fig. 1), this alternative model is based on the path “salesperson creativity → humor usage → performance.” Drawing on the broaden-and-build theory, one could envision that salespeople with higher creativity levels are better at adopting specific actions (e.g., humor usage) that improve their sales and relational outcomes.

The first alternative model presents a lesser fit with the data compared to the original model (see Table 5 for a comparison between models). For the same degree of freedom (df = 269), there is a large

³ A model using a self-reported performance measure was also tested, and the results were almost identical to those currently reported (humor→creativity, $\beta = 0.43^{**}$; humor→trust, $\beta = 0.31^{**}$; creativity→performance $\beta = 0.56^{***}$; trust→performance, $\beta = 0.12^*$); all of the same hypotheses were confirmed.

⁴ For simplicity's sake, none of the three models compared in this section incorporates the control variables. Even with the addition of the control variables, the results remain the same.

Table 3
Results: analysis of direct and indirect effects.

Direct effects of salesperson humor usage on customer trust and objective performance			
	β	SE	t-Value
Direct effect of salesperson humor usage on customer trust	0.22	0.07	3.14**
Direct effect of customer trust on objective performance	0.19	0.08	2.49*
Direct effect of salesperson humor usage on objective performance	0.13	0.07	1.95†
Total effect of salesperson humor usage on objective performance	0.18	0.07	2.61*
R ² (direct effect)	0.04		
N	149		

Indirect effect of salesperson humor usage on objective performance through customer trust (H6)			
β	SE	LLCI (95%)	ULCI (95%)
0.04	0.02	0.009	0.106

Direct effects of salesperson humor usage on salesperson creativity and objective performance			
	β	SE	t-Value
Direct effect of salesperson humor usage on salesperson creativity	0.26	0.06	4.78***
Direct effect of salesperson creativity on objective performance	0.75	0.08	9.32***
Direct effect of salesperson humor usage on objective performance	-0.02	0.06	-0.36
Total effect of salesperson humor usage on objective performance	0.18	0.07	2.61*
R ² (direct effect)	0.04		
N	149		

Indirect effect of salesperson humor usage on objective performance through salesperson creativity (H7)			
β	SE	LLCI (95%)	ULCI (95%)
0.20	0.06	0.160	0.509

Notes: N = 149; number of bootstrap resamples: 1000; LLCI: lower level confidence interval; ULCI: upper level confidence interval.

- *** p < 0.001.
- ** p < 0.01.
- * p < 0.05.
- † p < 0.06.

Table 4
Hypotheses and results.

Hypothesis	β coefficient	Result
H1: Salesperson humor usage has a positive direct effect on creativity.	0.42***	Supported
H2: Salesperson humor usage has a positive direct effect on trust.	0.14**	Supported
H3: Salesperson humor usage has a positive direct effect on objective performance.	-0.03	Not supported
H4: Salesperson creativity has a positive direct effect on objective performance.	0.56***	Supported
H5a: Customer trust has a positive direct effect on objective performance.	0.16*	Supported
H5b: Customer trust has a positive direct effect on word-of-mouth.	0.71***	Supported
H5c: Customer trust has a positive direct effect on expectation of continuity.	0.70***	Supported
H6: Customer trust mediates the relationship between salesperson humor usage and objective performance (indirect effect).	0.04*	Supported
H7: Salesperson creativity mediates the relationship between salesperson humor usage and objective performance (indirect effect).	0.20*	Supported

p-Value is based on two tailed- tests.

- * p < .05
- ** p < .01
- *** p < .001

difference of 40 chi-squares between the models, and all the fit indexes are inferior in the alternative model compared the original model. From these results and the comparison between the models (Fig. 1 versus Fig. 2), we note the following points about the linkage between humor, creativity and performance:

- The original model with the hypothesized sequence (“humor → creativity → performance” in Fig. 1) fits the data better, compared to the alternative model presented in Fig. 2 with the rival sequence (“creativity → humor → performance”).
- The original model also seems preferable because “salesperson creativity” has a stronger effect on performance (see Fig. 1: $\beta = 0.56, p < 0.001$) than “salesperson humor usage” has on this same criterion (see Fig. 2: $\beta = 0.23, p < 0.001$). This result implies that salesperson creativity is a more proximal variable to performance, compared to humor usage.
- The small effect of humor usage on performance even disappears when the effect of salesperson creativity is accounted for in the original model (see Fig. 1: $\beta = -0.03, p = ns$). This result indicates that creativity is more influential at predicting performance in comparison to humor usage; these effects suggest that creativity is a more probable mediator than humor usage is in our model.
- In the Alternative Model 1, salesperson creativity does not have a significant effect on customer trust (see Fig. 2: $\beta = 0.12, p = ns$). This result suggests that “salesperson creativity” is not well positioned as an exogenous variable; we obtain the best fit when “creativity” is modeled as a mediator (see Table 5).

Overall, these results and our prior mediation analysis (see Section 5.2) imply that “humor usage” does not qualify as a mediator but rather as an exogenous variable in this research. In turn, “salesperson creativity” is best modeled as a mediator. In summary, it appears that the sequence “humor usage → salesperson creativity → sales performance” makes the most theoretical and empirical sense.

We tested a second alternative model (see Alternative Model 2 in Fig. 2) in which salesperson creativity could directly influence customer trust. In addition, one could envision that customer expectation of continuity would improve sales performance outcomes; the expectation of continuity could ultimately lead to more sales and the achievement of a salesperson's objective. Therefore, in this second alternative model, we added to the original model a link between “salesperson creativity” and “customer trust” and a link between “customer expectation of continuity” and “sales performance.” Compared to our original model, this alternative model did not produce a better fit (see Table 5). Furthermore, none of the additional paths—that is, “salesperson creativity → customer trust” ($\beta = 0.12, p = ns$) and “customer expectation of continuity → sales performance” ($\beta = 0.08, p = ns$)—achieved significance. Again, these results suggest that our initial

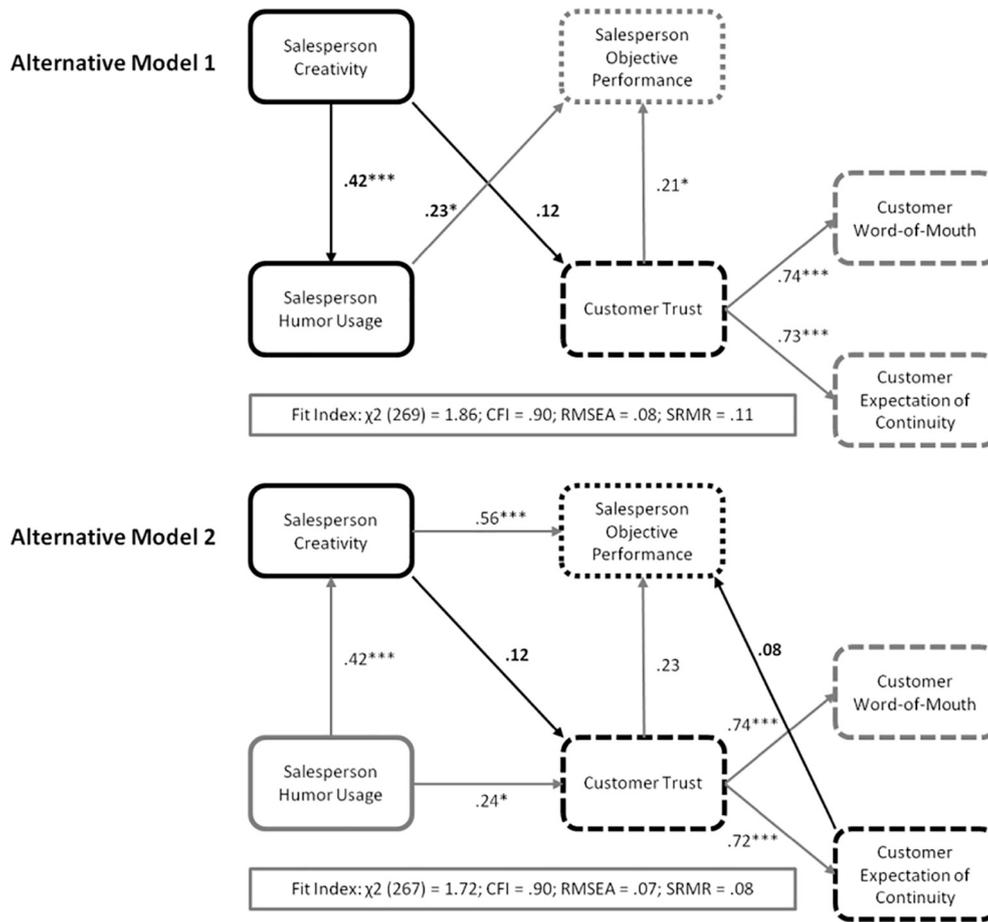


Fig. 2. Alternative models.

Table 5
Alternative models.

Fit	Original model	Alternative model 1	Alternative model 2
χ^2/df	1.72 (461,56/269)	1.86 (500,99/269)	1.87 (459,71/267)
CFI	0.91	0.90	0.91
RMSEA	0.07	0.08	0.07
SRMR	0.08	0.11	0.08
AIC	623.56	662.99	625.71

N = 149.

theoretical model was reasonable, and that these additional paths were not necessary. Specifically, the lack of improvement in fit indicates 1) that “customer trust” and “salesperson creativity” are two independent processes leading to performance, and 2) that expectation of continuity does not immediately lead to an improvement in sales.

6. Discussion

The main objective of this article was to examine the influence of salesperson humor usage on salesperson creativity, customer trust and sales performance within a B2B selling context. The majority of our hypotheses were supported. These findings have several implications for theory and practice.

6.1. Theoretical implications

6.1.1. Effects of salesperson humor usage on creativity and trust

Our study sheds new light on the importance of humor usage in the salesperson-customer dyad in a B2B context. We find in that kind of

context that salesperson humor usage fosters salesperson creativity (H1). Humor is known to help get beyond preconceived ideas (Lang & Lee, 2010), to stimulate “out of the box” thinking (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996) and to lighten the atmosphere so that the communication about ideas is more fluid (Avolio et al., 1999). Salespeople who perceive themselves as humoristic are associated with increased abilities to find new, creative and practical solutions while interacting with customers. As previously explained (Groza et al., 2016; Lask & Shepherd, 2013), it is certainly a competitive advantage for sales organizations to have sales forces with such creative capabilities.

In parallel with this first finding, we also found that salesperson humor usage positively influences customer trust in a B2B sales dyad context (H2). Our findings suggest that salespersons' ability to use humor has a positive influence on customers' perception of salespersons' reliability and their being concerned about customers' welfare. The appropriate use of humor by a salesperson can contribute to fostering a climate characterized by high levels of confidence, competence and knowledge. Humor—used wisely and appropriately—can also diffuse tensions in relationships (Martin et al., 2003) and develop social relationships (Cooper, 2005; Lehmann-Willenbrock & Allen, 2014), which helps to convey that a salesperson is willing to display benevolence toward his or her customers. Also, as they use humor, salespeople show more confidence and control in stressful situations (Avolio et al., 1999), which may reassure customers. Importantly, the relation between humor and trust is robust even after controlling for influential control variables such as relationship duration, interaction frequency, adaptability, and salesperson expertise. Although relationship duration and expertise explain a larger portion of variance than humor usage does—as the B2B literature suggests (Wagle, 1985)—we can still conclude with confidence that humor usage explains a unique

and significant portion of the variance in trust.

To sum up, our results confirm that salesperson humor usage positively influences salespersons' creativity and customer trust. In addition, these two effects appear independent of each other—creativity and trust were found to be unrelated in our post hoc analyses. Overall, humor usage appears to be an important antecedent of both trust and creativity, and these mechanisms are independent of each other in a B2B context. Interestingly, humor usage does not have a direct effect on objective performance (i.e., H3 was not supported), and these results naturally lead us to examine the mediation influence of trust and creativity (see next section).

6.1.2. Mediating influence of salespersons' creativity and customer trust between salespersons' humor usage and objective performance

Expanding on the results found for H1 and H2, we show the mediating effect of salesperson creativity and customer trust in the pathways between salespersons' humor usage and objective performance. Hence, we add to the body of research on the broaden-and-build theory the importance of “general positivity” in broadening and building lasting behaviors and outcomes in a B2B sales setting. According to our findings, salespeople must first increase their creative levels and/or increase their customers' perception of trust if they want to increase their performance by using their humoristic ability. Indeed, both salesperson creativity (H4) and customer trust (H5) are related to objective performance in our B2B sales context. A sharp increase in performance may be caused by providing added value to customers by presenting new and original solutions for their needs and problems (H4). In our data, creativity was one of the strongest predictors of objective performance. Moreover, the sales force could also benefit from developing long-term relationships based on trust (H5); this relational antecedent was linked as well to performance (although to a lesser extent than to creativity).

Our finding suggests that the positive influence of salesperson humor usage on objective performance is *only* present when customer trust is strong (H6) and/or when the salesperson provides creative solutions (H7). The indirect paths “humor → creativity → performance” and “humor → trust → performance” are both significant in this research. These conclusions are consistent with prior results indicating that humor usage is not directly linked to objective performance (i.e., the actual sales revenue achieved as a percentage of the objectives set by the sales organizations). In our analyses, we find only the presence of indirect effects of humor usage through the two mediators; humor usage does not have a significant direct effect on performance in any instances in this research. In simple terms, humor usage is not sufficient to increase performance—a humoristic ability needs to stimulate creativity and/or generate trust to lead to successful outcomes.

A unique contribution of this research is the finding that the “humor → creativity → performance” sequence is stronger than the “humor → trust → performance” sequence. In other words, the ability of a B2B salesperson to provide innovative solutions appears to be a more influential antecedent of performance than simply establishing general “trusting” relationships (although both are significant). Thus, sales organizations may want to invest “first” in salespersons' creative performance (as distinguished from customer trust) in order to increase sales performance.

We believe the indirect path going through creativity is more important than that going through trust for two key reasons. First, from our results, we find that humor has a stronger effect on salesperson creativity compared to customer trust. It appears that humor is an all but essential ingredient for the development of a positive climate in which creativity would be naturally enhanced. In turn, we notice that humor usage is a relatively weak predictor of trust—especially compared with other well established antecedents such as salesperson expertise and relationship duration. Second, because the problems can be very complex in a B2B context, our results clearly highlight

the importance of being creative for salespersons; so these individuals could understand and propose a novel solution that fits well the needs of their business customers. In a nutshell, the ability of B2B salespersons to provide innovative solutions appears to be a more influential antecedent of performance than simply establishing general “trusting” relationships. In a B2B context in which the performance imperative is crucial, it is more important for salespersons to provide innovative solutions to their partners than simply to become their “friends.”

Of note, we also tested and ruled out the possibility of a “creativity → humor → performance” sequence. This indirect effect is not significant, and this result again highlights the fact that humor does not have a direct effect on performance.

The effects of humor usage on creativity and trust imply that sales organizations should incorporate humoristic business solutions to diffuse tensions or stressful situations (Avolio et al., 1999) in their sales strategies and tactics. At least partially attributable to salesperson humor usage, both creativity and customer trust positively influence individual sales performance, customer word-of-mouth and expectation of continuity. Therefore, neglecting salesperson humor usage in a B2B context could result, to some extent, in decreased creativity and trust, which could lead to lower performance.

6.1.3. Influence of customer trust on word-of-mouth and expectation of continuity

In their meta-analysis, Palmatier et al. (2006) argue for the use of salesperson-focused and customer-focused outcomes to better understand the formation of relationships. In addition to its positive effect on sales performance, customer trust has a positive influence on positive word-of-mouth and expectation of continuity. Specifically, our results show that salespeople in a B2B context benefit a great deal from an increase in trust—their customers become more likely to recommend them and have a greater intention to pursue the relationship in the future. These findings emphasize the important role played by customer trust on the development of key relational outcomes.

6.2. Managerial implications

Sales managers have to be aware of the positive influence of humor usage on salesperson creativity, sales performance and customer trust (which results in several relational outcomes). Our findings highlight the importance of key hiring and training criteria for sales managers—such as humor usage and creativity—to gain a competitive edge and develop stronger relationships (based on trust).

6.2.1. Humor usage and creativity as drivers of customer trust and performance

Our results shed new light on how salesperson humor usage exerts positive effects on salesperson creativity and customer trust, which in turn drive sales performance. Specifically, our study shows that salesperson humor usage has a positive effect on salesperson creativity and customer trust. Moreover, as prior sales research has shown (Groza et al., 2016; Lassk & Shepherd, 2013), salesperson creativity has a positive influence on sales performance. In line with previous management research (Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012; Romero & Cruthirds, 2006), we show that hiring humoristic salespeople may increase performance and improve relationships. In addition, field members who can provide creative and useful solutions to customers are essential to an organization's success. Not only do field members who use humor and who are creative increase their performance, but they are also better at building relationships (based on trust) over time. Hence, managers should invest in enhancing salesperson humor usage and creativity; and fortunately, there are interesting ways to do so. First and obviously, managers could try to hire humoristic candidates. Second, managers could provide their sales force with practical “thinking outside the box” workshops and opportunities to share humoristic sales-related stories with their customers. This type of training could

increase salespeople's skill sets and confidence levels in their ability to use humor and develop creative business solutions.

6.2.2. The sales manager as a model and an initiator of discussions on best practices

In agreement with previous research, we believe that a sales encounter represents a critical interaction between a salesperson and a customer where both parties invest in building the relationship (Turnbull, Ford, & Cunningham, 1996). In accord with this premise, our findings reveal the importance of investing in salesperson humor usage for the development of a relationship based on trust. However, we are aware that incorporating humor usage in training programs may be challenging to implement in actuality; this kind of new training would considerably differ from the conventional formation in selling skills in sales organizations. We instead suggest that sales managers should try to enhance salespersons' humor usage through personal coaching or separate workshops. Moreover, sales managers could initiate discussions about humor usage during selling encounters with their salespeople, setting its boundaries and identifying the effective types of humor according to the selling context. Team-building activities could also be a part of strategies to foster trust in the salesperson-manager dyad. As a result, salespeople could be more tempted to use humor during selling encounters with the support of their managers. Hence, the salesperson-customer dyad could fully benefit from humor's positive outcomes.

6.3. Limits and opportunities for future research

As with all research, this study has some limitations and opportunities for further research. First, the sample size of 149 salesperson-customer dyads is rather limited. Although collecting matched surveys of salesperson-customer dyads is a difficult task, we recommend

replicating this study. Second, the context of our three studied industries enables us to generalize our model by controlling for many salesperson factors (e.g., sales experience); however, as a result of the small sample size in some industries (e.g., 10 salesperson-customer dyads in the financial industry), it was not possible to compare industries. Hence, additional insights may be derived from replicating our research across different industries in a B2B context (e.g., the manufacturing or sports industry). Third, in this research, we test the “affiliative and self-enhancing” humor style of salespeople. However, we do not look into other styles, such as self-defeating humor (i.e., where individuals often use humor at their own expense) or aggressive humor (i.e., where individuals use sarcasm, tease and say funny things to victimize or diminish others). It would be interesting to evaluate different types of humor style to determine where to draw the line with customers, and even with colleagues. Fourth, our research studied how individual salesperson characteristics or competencies (e.g., salesperson humor usage) affect attitudes and behaviors of customers (e.g., customer trust). However, this study does not compare “the same constructs” perceived by the salesperson and customer. It would be advisable to evaluate how salespeople and customers both perceive humor usage, or how customers perceive salespersons' creative performance, for example. A comparison of salespersons' and customers' perceptions of humor usage would enrich results for sales organizations. Fifth, although we tested the influence of humor usage on both dimensions of trust—salespeople's credibility (i.e., how reliable is a salesperson) and benevolence (i.e., how concerned is a salesperson about customers' welfare)—we did not have sufficient information in the literature to predict which of them would be the most influential. Last, our research was conducted using a cross-sectional design, which limits our ability to show causality. In further research, it would be advisable (and interesting) to examine salesperson-customer dyads over time with a longitudinal design.

Appendix A. Scale items and factor loading

Constructs, items, and source	Factor loading
Salesperson humor usage (adapted from Avolio et al., 1999; Bergeron & Vachon, 2008; Martin et al., 2003)	
I am a humoristic individual.	0.51
I told a few jokes and made my client laugh.	0.62
I use funny stories to diffuse conflicts.	0.85
I use humor to take the edge off during stressful situations.	0.80
Salesperson creativity (adapted from Lask & Shepherd, 2013; Zhou & George, 2001)	
I suggest new ways to achieve goals or objectives.	0.79
I come up with new and practical ideas to improve performance.	0.82
I exhibit creativity on the job when given the opportunity to.	0.78
I have new and innovative ideas.	0.69
I come up with creative solutions to problems.	0.76
Customer trust (adapted from Garbarino & Johnson, 1999)	
This salesperson performs with integrity.	0.77
This salesperson company is reliable.	0.79
This salesperson has my best interests in mind.	0.86
The salesperson has my business' best interests in mind.	0.85
This salesperson is genuinely concerned that our business succeeds.	0.85
Customer expectation of continuity (adapted from Román & Iacobucci, 2010)	
It is probable that I will see this salesperson again.	0.83
I am willing to discuss business with this salesperson again.	0.89
I plan to continue doing business with this salesperson.	0.91
I will buy the product(s) from this sales person again.	0.78
Customer word-of-mouth (adapted from Hennig-Thurau et al., 2002)	
I often say positive things about this salesperson to other colleagues.	0.83
I often recommend this salesperson's product(s) to colleagues.	0.84
I often encourage colleagues to prescribe this salesperson's product(s).	0.82

Expertise (adapted from Doney & Cannon, 1997)	
This salesperson is very knowledgeable about his/her products.	0.69
This salesperson is very experienced in his/her job.	0.87
This salesperson is very competent.	0.77
Adaptive selling (adapted from Spiro & Weitz, 1990)	
I can easily use a wide variety of selling approaches.	0.80
I vary my sales styles from situation to situation.	0.78
Basically, I use different approaches with most customers.	0.83
I am very flexible in the sales approach I use.	0.91
I try to understand how one customer differs from another.	0.79
Relationship duration (years)	
How long has this salesperson called on you?	n/a
Interaction frequency (times per 3 months)	
How many times did you interact with this salesperson in the past 3 months?	n/a
Sales performance	
Objective sales performance data as a % of sales targets set by the firm	n/a

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