

SOCO's impact on individual sales performance: The integration of selling skills as a missing link

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Abstract

Conventional wisdom suggests that a customer orientation is a vital cornerstone upon which the success of salespeople is predicated in terms of serving their customers and prospects. However, at a pragmatic level, not all salespeople practice a customer-oriented philosophy in their day-to-day selling. In fact, decades of sales research provide largely inconclusive results with respect to individual salespersons' customer orientation and performance outcomes. We argue that for customer orientation to be a predictor of sales performance, specific selling skills must be present. Furthermore, we empirically demonstrate that without these requisite selling skills, salespeople are better off utilizing a sales orientation approach, as opposed to a customer orientation approach. More provocatively, this research shows that a "missing link" in the long standing body of research on the SOCO (sales orientation/customer orientation) perspective is that specific selling skills can impact sales performance directly as well as moderate the impact that both a "sales orientation" and a "customer orientation" ultimately have on sales performance.

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Long-term, mutually beneficial relationships with customers have long been a goal for most firms. The benefits of these relationships to the firm are increased loyalty (DelVecchio, 1998; Dwyer, Schurr, & Oh, 1987) and satisfaction (Boles, Babin, Brashear, & Brooks, 2001; Brown, Widing, & Coulter, 1991; Goff, Boles, Bellenger, & Stojack, 1997) amongst customers. In turn, customer loyalty and high levels of satisfaction can lead to increased sales and profits (Anderson & Sullivan, 1993; Reinartz & Kumar, 2000). Few would argue against the benefits of firms seeking these long-term relationships.

At a more granular level, the link between the practice of relationship selling and the practice of a customer orientation by

boundary spanning salespeople is well-documented (e.g., Beverland, 2001; Boles, Brashear, Bellenger, & Barksdale, 2000; Frankwick, Porter, & Crosby, 2001), with boundary spanning being the activity, behavior and navigation the employee engages in with various parties inside and beyond his/her own organization (e.g., Singh, 1998; Tushman & Scanlan, 1981). A common mechanism for measuring the propensity of boundary spanners to engage in relationship selling is through the sales orientation they practice (i.e., the 'SOCO' perspective. See Saxe and Weitz, 1982). Salespeople practicing a so-called customer-oriented strategy are far more likely to foster long-term relationships with their customers (Schultz & Good, 2000; Williams, 1998). A customer-oriented selling approach focuses on helping customers make satisfactory purchase decisions and may include actions that sacrifice immediate sales and commissions in favor of the customer's best interest. Conversely, salespeople using a sales-oriented selling strategy may show less concern for the customer's interest if a quick, relatively effort-free sale can be achieved. In addition, it is important to note that most salespeople perceive a

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temporal dimension to having a sales versus customer orientation. As per this perspective, the salesperson will probably sell more in the long term by better satisfying their customers, or by adopting a customer orientation.

Interestingly, customer orientation has been treated both as an antecedent to performance (Boles et al., 2001; Brown, John, Donavan, & Jane, 2002; Keillor, Parker, & Pettijohn, 2000) as well as being a measure of performance (Brown et al., 1991; Flaherty, Dahlstrom, & Skinner, 1999). From the firm's perspective, this makes sense, since a customer orientation can lead to both direct (short-term) and indirect (long-term) benefits. However, the link between individual salesperson performance and customer-oriented behavior is murky at best, and has been rarely been studied apart from firm performance (Cravens, Ingram, LaForge, & Young, 1993; Ahearne et al., 2007; Ford, Walker, & Churchill, 1985; Spiro & Weitz, 1990). When the salesperson is evaluated on outcome-based measurements (e.g., financial performance), Schwepker (2003) suggests that salespeople are much more likely to utilize a sales orientation in an effort to meet the demands and goals that have been placed on them. This could be due in part to monetary rewards and financial incentives, which are the most highly sought after and valued by salespeople (Ford et al., 1985; Ingram & Bellenger, 1983). We therefore contend that, in isolation, a customer-oriented selling philosophy does not always produce the intended spike in individual salesperson performance that many managers — and the marketing literature — have assumed.

The premise of this research is that while most firms see the value of a customer orientation for their long-term success and for profitable relationships with their customers, salespeople may fail to see the value of a customer orientation precisely because it may not directly impact their individual performance. In this research, we take a very traditional view that performance in the sales role surrounds very tangible achievements, such as attaining the objectives sales management has set for the salesperson, maximizing the potential inherent in the sales territory, etc. (cf., Behrman & Perreault, 1982; Chonko, Loe, Roberts, & Tanner, 2000). Just as Stewart (2006) asserts in his opening editorial to the recent special double issue of *Harvard Business Review* on sales and managing the salesforce, we argue that what the marketing literature needs is a richer and more up-to-date delineation of which specific factors shape and influence individual-level sales outcomes, most notably performance. Such delineation would allow salespeople, their managers, and firms at large to better understand the intricate relationship between performance and the practice of a customer orientated selling philosophy in the field. In this light, Schwepker (2003, p. 166), in his exhaustive review of the two-plus decades worth of research on the SOCO perspective, notes that:

Salespeople may take numerous actions (e.g., following through on promises, following up after the sale, being available when needed to fix a problem, communicating customer concerns to the seller's company, resolving complaints, creating value, etc.)

beyond merely presenting a solution that may help customers achieve their goals and thus satisfy customers. Yet such actions are not assessed with (SOCO)..SOCO fails to fully assess the behaviors necessary to achieve goals to bring about customer satisfaction. As such, research is needed to fully uncover the dimensions underlying customer-oriented selling.”

What this view highlights is that even though much research as has been undertaken surrounding SOCO, we still have a largely incomplete understanding of the specific salesperson behaviors, skills, and traits that may impact the efficacy of SOCO in explaining variance in individual-level salesperson performance. In this paper, we build upon this general logic, and incorporate and test a relatively new perspective into the SOCO → Sales Performance nomological chain. Specifically, we explore Rentz et al.'s (2002) three-fold conceptualization of selling skills within the context of the traditional SOCO → Sales Performance relationship.

The paper is organized as follows. After first reviewing the literature surrounding SOCO and the selling skills perspective, the research model and hypotheses are articulated. Next, methodological and measurement-related details are offered, as are descriptions and characteristics of the studied samples. The findings of the research are highlighted next, with a broader discussion of the study's implications following. Lastly, the contributions and limitations of the study are articulated, along with directions for future research.

1. Literature review

1.1. Sales orientation–customer orientation

As a cornerstone of the modern marketing discipline, the marketing concept emphasizes the importance of integrating a firm's strategies and tactics in pursuit of long-term customer satisfaction (Kotler, 1972). One of the earliest attempts to formally assess in-field sales behavior came as a result of researchers questioning whether salespeople were indeed practicing the tenets of the marketing concept in their individual interactions with customers (Schwepker, 2003). Leading this effort to evaluate the marketing concept's adoption among individual salespeople, Saxe and Weitz (1982) introduced a conceptualization of customer orientated selling. In their view, customer-oriented salespeople exhibited a sincere desire to help customers and prospects make satisfactory purchase decisions by assisting in the assessment of their needs and by only offering products that satisfy those needs. Oftentimes, such customer-oriented behaviors result in the sacrifice of immediate sales gains in favor of the establishment and/or maintenance of longer-term relationships. Saxe and Weitz operationalized this conceptualization into the 24-item SOCO scale, which distinguishes between salespeople practicing a traditional “sales orientation” that attempts to maximize short-term sales gains by stimulating demand for products versus the “customer-oriented” approach that favors selling products only in response to bona-fide customer needs or wants (e.g., improve innovation; solve latent “pain” etc.).

To date, the majority of the literature has focused on customer orientation from the perspective of the firm in contrast to individual performance. When performance and SOCO have been assessed at the firm level, the results have generally been inconclusive or weak [we invite the reader to consult Schwepker (2003) for a detailed treatment of this issue]. One area which has seen heavy attention is that of organizational level factors as they come to impact SOCO, including culture (Herche, Swenson, & Verbeke, 1996; Williams & Attaway, 1996), climate (Mulki, Jaramillo, & Locander, 2006), and ethics (Howe, Hoffman, & Hardigree, 1994; Verbeke, Ouwerkerk, & Peelen, 1996). Several studies have also evaluated customer orientation's impact on the salesperson's role conflict and role ambiguity (Flaherty et al., 1999; Johnston, Parasuraman, & Futrell, 1989; Siguaw & Honeycutt, 1995). From an outcomes perspective, a popular topic has been customer orientation's impact on loyalty (DelVecchio, 1998), and even more popular is satisfaction (Flaherty et al., 1999; Johnston et al., 1989; Siguaw & Honeycutt, 1995).

In contrast to the areas of inquiry outlined above, the impact of SOCO on individual-level performance has received relatively scant attention in the literature. Recently, a few studies have evaluated the correlation between customer orientation and individual outcome performance (Boles et al., 2001; Brown et al., 1991; Keillor et al., 2000). However, the last 20 years has produced surprisingly little empirical evidence to support the supposition that a positive and significant relationship exists between customer orientation and individual-level performance. Instead, as astutely pointed out by Schwepker in his review, it has generally been the case that researchers and managers alike have slowly evolved to a point of tacitly assuming that this relationship exists, and that it has been validated in the literature.

Importantly, Franke and Park (2006) recently published a meta-analysis that supports our assertion and take on the literature that, for the most part, there is very little empirical evidence supporting the notion that the tenets of SOCO (i.e., a sales orientation or a customer orientation) empirically drive individual-level performance outcomes, regardless of how these are measured or operationalized. This does not mean that researchers have not tried to show that this relationship exists modeling SOCO as an antecedent and/or moderator of performance, typically within the context of some other broader nomological chain. However, the fact remains that despite its intuitive appeal and obvious overlap with the broader marketing concept, much remains to be learned about the SOCO → Sales Performance relationship. This context sets the foundation for the current study.

1.2. Selling skills

Selling skills have been identified as one of the five determinants of selling effectiveness (Walker, Churchill, & Ford, 1977). Based on the meta-analysis by Churchill et al. (1985), selling skills, loosely defined, were found to be the most highly associated determinant of performance. Yet there has been very little empirical attention since Churchill et al.'s

seminal meta-analysis to support — or further expound upon — this claim. Hence, the notion that “selling skills” are vital to success in the sales role has retained an enduring conceptual appeal among sales scholars and managers. However, the examination of the impact of specific types of selling skills on performance has largely remained an important — yet dormant and largely unexplored — thematic area in the literature.

In an effort to address this gap in the literature, Rentz et al. (2002) theoretically derived and empirically validated a perspective that marries three distinct components of overall selling skill: (i) interpersonal skills (i.e., verbal and nonverbal communication proficiency); (ii) salesmanship skills (e.g., sales presentation abilities); and (iii) technical skills (e.g., the salesperson's product knowledge). These three components comprise a higher-order construct of selling skills which are germane to the salesperson and, these authors argue, exemplary sales performance and longer-term success in the sales role. Curiously, the exhaustive review of the literature we conducted revealed that no known study has yet applied this tripartite measure of selling skills in an empirical field setting to further evaluate its efficacy, or to determine how it might mesh from a theoretical perspective with other existing frameworks of sales effectiveness (e.g., SOCO).³ With this overview and context in mind, we now turn our attention to developing a testable research model and related hypotheses.

2. Research model and hypotheses

2.1. Main effects

Fig. 1 outlines the research model. The model begins from the basic logic espoused by Saxe and Weitz (1982) and others who have contributed to the rich stream of research surrounding SOCO (e.g., Brown et al., 1991; Michaels & Day, 1985); that is, that both of this perspective's two constituent components — a sales orientation and a customer orientation — should each impact sales performance. In this research, sales performance is defined over a long time horizon, using a high level of abstraction (Behrman & Perreault, 1982). Specifically, this construct encompasses the achievement of general and long-term objectives, such as exceeding sales targets and objectives, identifying major accounts in one's territory, and producing a high market share for one's territory. More specifically, a customer orientation should positively impact sales performance, as the customer's needs and best interests have been heeded by the salesperson. Conversely, a sales orientation should negatively impact sales performance as the salesperson has set aside the customer's primary needs and drivers in exchange for the satisfaction of their own interests (e.g., generating the quick sale, a commission, etc.). This set of long-

³ Correspondence we initiated with several of the authors of the Rentz et al. (2002) perspective confirmed that to their knowledge, their selling skills model had yet to be tested within or beyond the marketing literature.

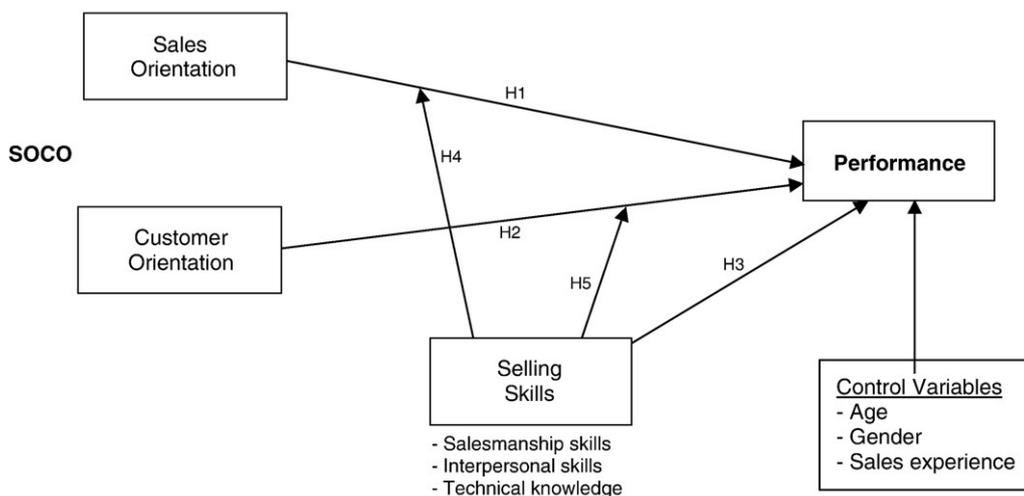


Fig. 1. Research model.

established relationships is captured in Hypotheses 1 and 2, which are:

H1. A sales orientation will have a negative direct effect on sales performance.

H2. A customer orientation will have a positive direct effect on sales performance.

With selling skills, we expect that this perspective — if treated as a single higher-order construct reflected in interpersonal, salesmanship and technical skills — will have a positive and significant direct effect on sales performance, as per the initial development and conjecture espoused by [Rentz et al. \(2002\)](#). Thus:

H3. Selling skills will have a positive direct effect on sales performance.

2.2. Interaction of selling skills on customer and sales orientation

A key supposition of this work, which is supported by [Schwepker's \(2003\)](#) recent analysis of SOCO research as well as other research (e.g., [Periatt, LeMay, & Chakrabarty, 2004](#)) is that a customer orientation is not just a marketing or sales role specific philosophy. Rather, customer orientation also requires certain basic skills be present to ultimately be effective in terms of shaping resultant sales performance. The ability to ask good questions, to discover needs, to match product and service offerings to those needs, and to communicate benefits and value to the customer, all require selling skills. A sales orientation, alternatively, really only requires the ability to influence, manipulate, and continually push toward closure of the sale ([Brooksbank, 1995](#); [Spiro & Perreault, 1979](#)), regardless of how well the solution being offered by the salesperson fits the customer's or prospect's needs. If the salesperson lacks baseline competency in selling skills, we argue that he or she will obtain higher levels of outcome performance success by simply relying

on a self-serving, perhaps short-term focused and otherwise manipulative approach — in other words, the classic notion of the sales-oriented individual.

However, as the skill level of the salesperson rises, the usefulness of employing a sales orientation is eventually supplanted by the increased effectiveness of a customer orientated approach. We suggest that a salesperson's competency vis-à-vis a customer orientation should be considered in a broader theoretical context rather than as a simple philosophy of business conduct and/or the desire to “do right” by the customer. In other words, the salesperson may have a desire to satisfy the customer's needs (the core of a customer-oriented philosophy), but without the requisite selling skills to discover and satisfy those needs as well as carry out other critical aspects of the modern sales job, the salesperson cannot ultimately be successful using a customer orientation. Alternatively, with low or otherwise modest levels of basic selling skills, the salesperson will probably perform better by simply sticking with a classic short-term focused sales orientation.

The previously detailed [Fig. 1](#) highlights two testable moderating relationships that build from the logic articulated above (i.e., Hypotheses 4–5), while [Figs. 2 and 3](#) translate the preceding into anticipated interaction effects for which we would expect to find empirical support. To summarize, when selling skills are high, a customer orientation will have a significantly greater impact on individual performance ([Fig. 2](#)). Conversely, salespeople with relatively low selling skills will perform better by employing a classic sales orientation, rather than a customer orientation, with this effect diminishing as selling skills increase above and beyond some requisite threshold ([Fig. 3](#)). Therefore:

H4. The lower the salesperson's selling skills, the greater the impact of a sales orientation on their performance.

H5. The greater the salesperson's selling skills, the greater the impact of a customer orientation on their performance.

3. Methodology

3.1. Sample aggregation and resultant response rates

A heterogeneous dataset was collected from three sources: two separate online questionnaires administered to two different samples, as well as a paper and pencil questionnaire administered to a third sample. We pursued this triangulated approach in order to aggregate a rich and multi-faceted sample; emerging research indicates that a persistent issue that has hindered sales research, both historically and in recent years, is that of single firm samples due to the lack of generalizability that constrains the interpretation of findings associated with research executed in this manner (for a comprehensive treatment of this issue, see: Williams & Plouffe, 2007).

The scales and questions on all surveys were identical as they pertain to the constructs and relationships being examined. All scales and items (after purification) are presented in Appendix A. The design and execution of our surveys followed Dillman’s (2000) tailored design method (TDM). Guidance also came from work on online data capture and e-mail administered surveys (e.g., Couper, 2000) as pertinent to the first two samples. A secure, third-party web survey hosting service was used to administer the online surveys.

The first sample consisted of a firm-sponsored survey of an entire salesforce of 69 salespeople selling industrial cleaning supplies and related products to a wide variety of customers in B2B markets. Using multiple contacts to increase completion rates, 43 surveys were completed for a response rate of 62.3%.

The second online survey sample consisted of a large division of a residential real estate firm (i.e., real estate agents). This firm had 320 representatives, and a response rate of 36.5% was achieved (117 usable cases). While the appropriateness of a consumer/residential real estate firm may seem questionable in terms of its ability to shed light on the industrial/B2B marketing arena, we would highlight that existing research and anecdotal accounts converge to point out that today’s residential real estate professional is actually a boundary-spanner who assists the end user consumer by helping them make satisfactory purchasing decisions and so forth (McIntyre, Wheatley, & Uhr, 1996). Real estate professionals must also interact with and sell in partnership with account



Fig. 3. Expected interaction of sales orientation and selling skills on performance.

managers at property title companies (Gardiner, Heisler, Kallberg, & Liu, 2007), mortgage firms and financing companies (Barr, 2006) etc. These critical dimensions of the real estate professional’s job today underscore the point that they make an excellent example of an industrial salesperson to examine in this research.

The third sample consisted of an in-person paper and pencil questionnaire administered by MBA students from a large U.S. university. Over a two week period, MBA students frequented several convention centers (located at a major convention destination) that were hosting several national sales conventions across a host of industries (both B2C and B2B). At breaks, before, and after sessions, the MBA students approached salespeople to complete the survey. Students received class credit for their participation. Salespeople attending the convention would then either complete the survey on site, or in a few cases, mail the survey back at a later time. Due to the nature of data collection with this third sample, the specific response rate is not meaningful (Cravens et al., 1993). A total of 238 responses were collected with this third group, bringing the overall total number of responses in the three-fold pooled dataset to 398 (i.e., 43+117+238).

In our overall sample, 53% of the respondents were male, 58.7% were between 19 and 39 years of age, and the average sales experience was 10.2 years. Overall, 80% of the respondents had some college experience, with 45% completing their degree. As expected, our overall sample is rich in diversity, and we noted differences between respondents’ profiles in the three samples. Specifically, our first sample (industrial cleaning supplies) incorporates a larger proportion of males with 93%, compared to 37.2% and 53.4% for samples 2 (real estate) and 3 (sales conventions), respectively ($\chi^2=39.04, df=2, p=.000$). In addition, the respondents in sample 2 were older than those in samples 1 and 3; only 16.8% of sample 2 were aged between 19 and 39 years old, where this proportion was respectively 46.5% and 80.7% in samples 1 and 3 ($\chi^2=209.36, df=12, p=.000$). Correspondingly, the participants in sample 2 had more years of experience with 16.54 years compared to the participants of samples 1 and 3 with respectively 11.31 and 7.07 years ($F [2, 388]=43.89; p=.000$).

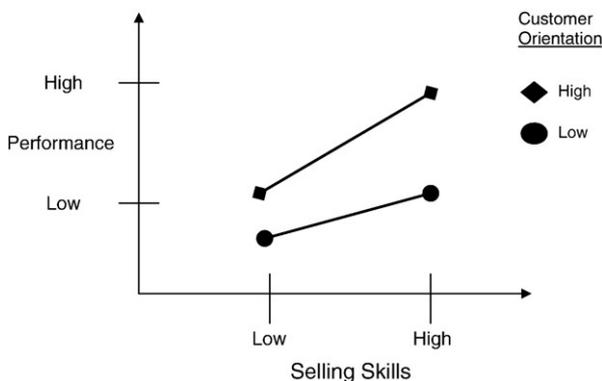


Fig. 2. Expected interaction of customer orientation and selling skills on performance.

Table 1
Descriptive statistics correlation matrix

| | Mean | Standard deviation | PF 1 | CO 2 | SO 3 | SS 4 | Gender 5 | Age 6 | Exp 7 |
|---------------------------|------|--------------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|----------|-------|-------|
| Performance | 8.17 | 1.83 | .91 | | | | | | |
| Customer orientation (CO) | 7.92 | 1.19 | .22 ** | .90 | | | | | |
| Sales orientation (SO) | 3.34 | 2.30 | .14 | -.45 ** | .92 | | | | |
| Selling skills (SS) | 5.67 | .78 | .51 ** | .47** | -.10* | .88 | | | |
| Gender (GDR) | – | – | -.07 | -.04 | -.19** | -.02 | | | |
| Age | – | – | -.06 | .36** | -.48** | .15** | -.07 | | |
| Sales experience (Exp) | 10.2 | 9.73 | .17 ** | .28** | -.37** | .21** | -.04 | .70** | – |

Note 1: * $p < .05$; and ** $p < .01$ (two-tailed distribution).

Note 2: Figures on the diagonal represent the square root of the average variance extracted.

Consistent with recent recommendations formulated in the sales management field (Williams & Plouffe, 2007), we view the heterogeneous nature of our data as an opportunity to develop and test a general theory that may apply across industries and salespeople. In order to validate this theoretical claim, we performed post-hoc analyses (see the Analysis and results section below) to examine the possibility that our different samples (or their characteristics) may have an impact on the hypothesized relationships. Before performing these analyses, our basic hypotheses and model were first validated.

3.2. Measures

3.2.1. Selling skills

Selling skills were measured using Rentz et al.'s three-fold scale. The scales of the three dimensions include five items each (for a total of 15 items), and 7-point Likert-type scales anchored by self-rated abilities of: 1=Highly Unskilled to 7=Highly Skilled. The first scale rates the interpersonal skills of the salesperson with items such as “ability to express yourself non-verbally” and “awareness and understanding of the nonverbal communication of others.” The second scale rates salesmanship skills using items such as “ability to prospect for customers” and “ability to qualify prospects.” The final scale measures technical knowledge and consists of items such as “knowledge of customer's markets and products” and “knowledge of your own company's procedures.”

3.2.2. SOCO

The sales orientation/customer orientation scale developed by Saxe and Weitz (1982) has been used extensively in the literature. The original scale consists of 24 questions with a 9-point Likert-type scale that measures problem solving efforts and customer interactions that salespeople utilize with their customers. One concern about the SOCO scale is the length and cognitive load it places on the respondent. Response fatigue and acquiescence bias has been stated as a concern with the original scale (O'Hara, Boles, & Johnston, 1991; Tadepalli, 1995). Therefore, a modified, shortened, and empirically validated version of the SOCO scale developed by Thomas, Soutar and Ryan (2001) was employed in this study. Based on this new scale, customer orientation was measured with a five item scale that includes item such as “I try to figure out what the customer's needs are,” whereas sales

orientation is reflected in a five item scale that incorporates “I try to sell as much as I can rather than to satisfy a customer.”

3.2.3. Performance

In keeping with the view of performance in the sales role that we offered in this manuscript's introduction, we measured sales performance based on the scale developed by Behrman and Perreault (1982). Using an 11-point Likert-type scale, six items were used to measure self-reported performance relative to other individuals on the salesforce. Items such as “my ability to sell products with higher profit margins” and “my ability to exceed sales targets” were included in the scale.

3.2.4. Control variables

We controlled for a variety of causes that could explain the variance of sales performance. Previous research indicates that gender (Levy & Sharma, 1994; Sigauw & Honeycutt, 1995), age (Levy & Sharma, 1994), and sales experience (Churchill et al., 1985; Churchill, Ford, & Walker, 1997; Levy & Sharma, 1994) are important variables that could have an impact on sales behaviors and performance. These control variables have been consistently used in research on customer/sales orientation (O'Hara et al., 1991), selling skills (Churchill et al., 1985; Rentz et al., 2002), and performance (Churchill et al., 1985).

4. Analysis and results

4.1. Measure validation

We assessed the validity and dimensionality of our reflective constructs by performing a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) with maximum likelihood estimation. Our CFA model contains the second-order constructs selling skills, which was reflected in technical skills (five items), salesmanship skills (five items), and interpersonal skills (five items), as well as the following first-order constructs: sales orientation (five items), customer orientation (five items), and sales performance (six items). We deleted two items (one item each for interpersonal and salesmanship skills) because of high cross-loadings and in order to improve model's fit (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). After deletion of these items, the model fits the data acceptably with a χ^2 of 736.34 ($df=368$, $p=.000$), a comparative fit index (CFI) of .96, and a root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) of .05, with a 90% interval of .045 to .055.

In our model, all loadings of the first- and second-order constructs are substantive and significant (all p 's < .001). Indeed, all loadings are greater than the .6 value, and most of them equal or exceed the .7 value. In addition, the covariances were significantly less than one, and the average variances extracted exceeded .5 for all constructs. Finally, Cronbach's alpha was calculated for each construct, and all scales exhibited scores exceeding the .7 norms set by Nunnally (1978) (see Appendix A for details). Overall, the CFA model indicates that our constructs possess satisfactory psychometric properties. As a result, the items of the constructs were summated, and construct scores were used in the regression analyses. Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics of the final constructs and a correlation matrix.

We performed additional tests of discriminant validity. First, we compared the square root or the average variance extracted for each construct with its correlations with the other constructs (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Table 1 presents the correlation matrix where the square roots of the average variance extracted values are calculated for each of the constructs along the diagonal (in bold characters). As shown, all values representing the square root of average variance extracted are substantially greater than all other correlations. Second, an examination of the cross-loadings (through a principal component analysis) showed that no item loaded more highly on another construct than it did on the construct it is intended to measure. Overall, cross-loadings were found to be minimal (less than .3).

4.2. Hypothesis testing

Our hypotheses were tested by performing a moderated regression with sales performance as our dependent variable. Following the procedure suggested by Aiken and West (1991), the control variables were first entered, followed by the main effects, and then the two-way interaction terms. All the interacting predictors were centered, and the interaction terms were created by multiplying the centered predictors (Cohen,

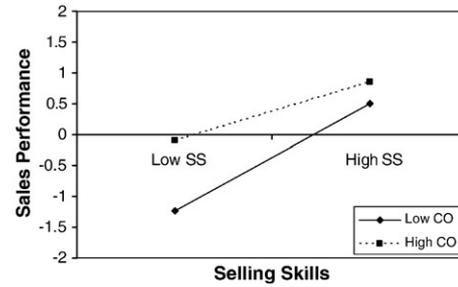


Fig. 4. Interaction of sales orientation (SO) and selling skills (SS).

Cohen, Aiken, & West, 2003). This procedure is recommended because it eliminates nonessential multicollinearity between the predictors. The final results of our regression analyses are displayed in Table 2. For parsimony's sake, only the standardized coefficients are presented. Because both hypothesized interaction effects are significant, we focus on the description of model 2.

The achieved R^2 value in model 2 (39%) is very encouraging considering that, historically, sales researchers have typically explained only about 10–20% of the variance in sales performance, regardless of how the performance is measured or operationalized (see Churchill et al., 1985; Rich, Bommer, MacKenzie, Podsakoff, & Johnson, 1999). It should be noted that Rentz et al.'s (2002) relatively new concept of selling skills seems to occupy an important place in better understanding sales performance. In the second model, the main effect of the higher-order construct selling skills explained by itself 23% of the variance in sales performance. This result highlights the importance of incorporating the construct of selling skills in future research.

The experience control had a positive effect on performance, as both the literature and intuition indicate should be expected (Ingram & Bellenger, 1983; Pfeffer, 1985). Interestingly, the age control had a negative effect on performance, a result which is explainable in one of two ways. First, it could be that some portion of our sample(s) might have experienced a so-called "plateau" — or a negative effect on performance because of a lack of job interest, desire, or motivation that might come with age (Keenan, 1989). Second, it could also be that the older salespeople in our sample(s) may have attained the so-called "disengagement" stage of their selling careers, with this of course having a well-documented and negative impact on selling performance (Cron, 1984; Cron & Slocum, 1986). A reconsideration of the age distribution of our sample (i.e., 58.7% were between 19 and 39 years old, with average sales experience of 10.2 years) leads us to lend more credence to the explanation above for the negative relationship between the age control and performance than the latter.

The regression analyses provide mixed results about the effects of SOCO and its respective customer orientation and sales orientation components. Consistent with H1, customer orientation is positively related to sales performance ($b = .23$, $p < .001$). However, and in contrast with our initial expectation ($b = .26$, $p < .001$), sales orientation was positively related to

Table 2
The effects of customer orientation, sales orientation, and selling skills on sales performance

| | Model 1: main effects | | Model 2: interaction effects | |
|----------------------------|--------------------------|---------|---------------------------------|---------|
| | Beta | T-value | Beta | T-value |
| Control variables | | | | |
| Gender | -.05 | -1.14 | -.06 | -1.40 |
| Age | -.29 | -4.70** | -.27 | -4.15** |
| Sales experience | .31 | 5.22** | .29 | 5.05** |
| Main effects | | | | |
| Customer orientation (CO) | .12 | 2.21* | .23 | 3.95** |
| Sales orientation (SO) | .19 | 3.74** | .26 | 5.08** |
| Selling skills (SS) | .45 | 9.54** | .48 | 10.28** |
| Interaction effects | | | | |
| CO × SS | | | .16 | 3.33** |
| SO × SS | | | -.13 | -2.98** |
| | R^2 34% | | R^2 34% | |

Note: * $p < .05$; and ** $p < .01$ (one-tailed distribution; $df = 397$).

sales performance. Supportive of our logic and H3, the higher-order construct of selling skills was found to be positively and strongly related to sales performance ($b = .48, p < .001$).

Importantly, the previously described main effects are qualified by two significant interaction effects. Supportive of H4 and H5 respectively, we found significant “sales orientation by selling skills” ($b = -.13, p < .01$) and “customer orientation by selling skills” ($b = .16, p < .01$) interaction effects. In order to interpret the meaning of these interaction effects, we followed the procedure recommended by Cohen et al. (2003). Standardized values of “-1” and “1” were inputted in the regression models for all interacting predictors, and the predicted values of sales performance (for each combination of predictors) were plotted. Figs. 4 and 5 represent a summary of this procedure.

As hypothesized, selling skills have a different impact on the relationship between the two components of SOCO and sales performance. Consistent with H4, a sales orientation only increases sales performance when salespeople possess a low level of selling skills (see Fig. 4). Although salespeople with low selling skills report lesser sales performance on average, their performance is substantively increased when they display a sales orientation philosophy. On the other hand, a sales orientation philosophy seems to have limited impact on the performance of salespeople with high selling skills.

Consistent with H5, a high level of customer orientation only leads to greater sales performance when it is accompanied with a high level of selling skill (see Fig. 5). It is encouraging to see that the combination of “high selling skills and high customer orientation” is associated with the highest level of performance observed in this study. Based on Fig. 5, salespeople with low selling skills do not seem to benefit from adopting a customer-oriented approach.

4.3. Post-hoc analysis 1: decomposition of the effects of selling skills

Given the large effect of selling skills on sales performance, we performed a post-hoc analysis in which we assessed the individual effect of each of the three sub-dimensions of selling skills on sales performance. Interestingly, Rentz et al. (2002) provide little guidance on their preferred or suggested epistemic presentation of the selling skills construct for future researchers: Should it be modeled as a single higher-order construct? Or

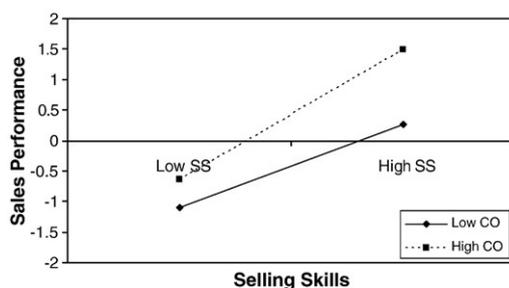


Fig. 5. Interaction of customer orientation (CO) and selling skills (SS).

Table 3
The effects of customer orientation, sales orientation, salesmanship skills, technical skills, and interpersonal skills on sales performance

| | Model 1: main effects | | Model 2: interaction effects | |
|---------------------------|--------------------------|---------|------------------------------|---------|
| | Beta | T-value | Beta | T-value |
| Control variables | | | | |
| Gender | -.03 | 2.23* | -.04 | -.94 |
| Age | -.29 | -4.34** | -.27 | -4.52** |
| Sales experience | .29 | 6.00** | .27 | 4.87** |
| Main effects | | | | |
| Customer orientation (CO) | .10 | 2.02* | .24 | 4.15** |
| Sales orientation (SO) | .17 | 3.38** | .25 | 4.91** |
| Interpersonal skills (IS) | -.02 | -.34 | .02 | .33 |
| Salesmanship skills (SaS) | .43 | 7.33** | .41 | 7.21** |
| Technical skills (TS) | .12 | 2.14* | .12 | 2.18* |
| Interaction effects | | | | |
| CO × IS | | | -.03 | -.38 |
| CO × SaS | | | .25 | 2.94** |
| CO × TS | | | -.04 | -.47 |
| SO × IS | | | .00 | .05 |
| SO × SaS | | | -.01 | -.14 |
| SO × TS | | | -.11 | -1.87* |
| | R ² 38% | | R ² 41% | |

Note: * $p < .05$; and ** $p < .01$ (one-tailed distribution; $df = 397$).

should it be modeled with each of the three sub-dimensions acting on their own? We chose to replicate the same procedure by separating the effects of the three sub-dimensions. Our results are presented in Table 3.

Although these analyses mimic most of our previous results, they improve our understanding of sales performance in three ways. First, the salesmanship dimension was found to be the principal set of skills that leads to greater performance; this construct explains an important portion of the variance in sales performance (17%). It should be noted that the dimension of technical skills has limited effect on performance (only 1.4% of the variance explained), and interpersonal skills showed no significant effect at all. Second, the “customer orientation → performance” path is principally moderated by the salesmanship skills dimension. This result indicates that a customer orientation improves performance to a greater extent when salespeople display a high level of salesmanship skills. Finally, the “sales orientation → performance” path appears to be moderated by the technical skills dimension. Here, a sales orientation is thought to increase performance when salespeople have a lesser level of technical skills.

4.4. Post-hoc analysis 2: robustness of the findings across samples

To test the robustness of our results across samples, we performed a post-hoc analysis in which we examined the extent to which the different samples could have moderated the hypothesized paths. If our results are caused by a particular sample and its characteristics, we should find significant effects of moderation. Given the categorical nature of the variable of interest (i.e., sample), we created two dummy variables for

samples 1 and 3 (sample 2 represented the reference category), and examined their multiplicative effects on the hypothesized main effects and two-way interactions (Cohen et al., 2003). Overall, the results of this analysis revealed that our findings were comparable across samples. None of the dummy variables were found to significantly interact with any of the hypothesized main effects (all p 's > .15) or two-way interactions (all p 's > .18). Complementing this approach, we replicated our key findings in two separate samples.⁴ Overall, our key findings were robust: the effects of selling skills, the selling skills by sales orientation interaction, and the selling skills by customer orientation remained significant (all p 's ≤ .05) and in the expected direction across samples.

Overall, these additional post-hoc analyses suggest that our findings are not contingent upon our samples or their corresponding profiles (i.e., socio-demographic or industry). Importantly, our results were found to be robust across our B2B samples (samples 1 and 2) and the mixed sample 3 (B2B and B2C). Overall, these analyses provide confidence in the generalizability of our model and logic, and its applicability to a B2B context.

5. Discussion and managerial implications

5.1. Discussion

As highlighted in this paper's introduction, while much research has been executed with respect to the SOCO perspective, very much still remains tenuous and unknown. In this spirit, Schwepker (2003, p. 163), in his exhaustive review, notes that, "From the existing research, it is not yet clear whether customer-oriented selling is a selling style, an aspect of performance, or if it even affects sales effectiveness."

This study has attempted to further enhance the utility of the SOCO perspective in understanding its effects on individual-level salesperson performance. In so doing, however, the approach taken was markedly different from those traditionally pursued with respect to SOCO. Until now, it has been commonplace to study SOCO from a firm level and high level perspective, and to examine its organizational antecedents. With the extant research consistently pursuing these areas, we posit that attention has been misdirected from the core of what SOCO actually is: a perspective that speaks directly to what the salesperson *does* — how he or she strategizes and plots an approach to managing relationships with both customers and prospects.

Precisely because of this, the primary aim of this research was to push the conventional wisdom associated with SOCO further by incorporating a new and promising perspective: Rentz et al.'s (2002) selling skills. Our results suggest that this approach was fruitful. We found that the previously untested selling skills perspective explained on its own an encouraging amount of variance in sales performance. Indeed, 23% of sales

performance was explained by the higher-order construct selling skills (see model 2 in Table 2). Overall, selling skills is the most important factor predicting sales performance, and its effect is substantive compared to that of customer orientation and sales orientation, which explained 5.3% and 6.8%, respectively, of the variance in sales performance (see model 2). Interestingly, our post-hoc analysis revealed that these three skills do not have the same impact. When all skills are separately considered, salesmanship was found to be the stronger predictor by far; its predictive ability was very important with an explanation of 17% of the variance in sales performance.

5.2. Managerial implications

The results of this study highlight that the importance of assessing customer and sales orientations does not necessarily reside at the level of the firm, but rather at the level of individual performance. We show that a philosophy or desire to be customer-oriented is not enough to achieve exemplary sales performance. In order to pay dividends in terms of achieved performance, we show that the salesperson must have *both* a customer orientation and the requisite selling skills. Consistent with this view, Brooksbank (1995) discussed the ease of closing a sale when the customer's needs have been properly identified and matched with a product that satisfies those needs. We posited, and the data showed, that selling skills play a critical role in translating the long-revered benefits of a customer orientation into demonstrable performance outcomes. In summary, we have made a theoretical contribution in that we pointed out, empirically tested, and therefore corroborated an initial linkage and interplay between SOCO and selling skills.

Salespeople who are skilled and customer-oriented have significantly better results than their counterparts who are not skilled, but nevertheless attempt to be customer-oriented. This may seem intuitive. However, the truly interesting findings pertain to those of sales-oriented individuals. If a salesperson has low selling skills (e.g., identifying needs, matching products to needs, translating features to benefits, etc.), they perform better by applying a pure sales orientation rather than a customer orientation. From an incentive perspective, the salesperson will gravitate towards whatever model that helps them to succeed. If they are low in selling skills, it is markedly to their benefit to simply pursue a classic "me-focused" sales orientation. If they are high in selling skills, however, a customer orientation would seem to maximize their longer-term performance. Moreover, it would also have the value-added bonus of enabling the marketing concept (Kotler, 1972) at the most basic level: the individual salesperson–customer dyad.

The implications for sales managers and marketing executives are noteworthy. First, consider a firm budgeting for and developing their sales training curriculum. If they have entry-level or salespeople otherwise low in selling skills, they may be better off training these salespeople in basic salesmanship skills (at least over the short term) rather than attempting to teach them how to be customer-oriented (though in theory, the customer-oriented salesperson should succeed to a greater extent over the longer term). This strategy would be effective because

⁴ We added samples 1 and 2 because of their B2B nature, and to obtain a sufficient sample size to perform our regression model.

salesmanship skills would at least allow the salesperson to better cater to the customer or prospect over a short time horizon (i.e., a quarter, a single quota/fiscal year etc.), and thus maximize their own short-term sales and, presumably, their compensation (Anderson & Oliver, 1987).

On the other hand, as salespeople grow in their experience and/or if the firm already possesses a disproportionate number of “experienced and skilled” salespeople, it would behoove the firm from a sales revenue optimization point-of-view to develop sales training routines and mechanisms to ensure that customer-oriented practices are being enacted (cf., Rackham & DeVincentis, 1999).

An additional set of management implications emerging from this work pertains to the vital importance of the first-level field sales manager (e.g., Kohli, 1989; Sager & Johnston, 1989). Under a traditional model of first-level sales management (e.g., Churchill et al., 1997), salespeople would be deployed — typically by geography, industry vertical, etc. — without much thought being given to: (i) differences that may exist in their competency at executing certain selling approaches (e.g., SOCO); as well as (ii) their current skill level in key behavioral areas germane to the sales role (e.g., selling skills). This traditional approach to salesforce deployment therefore does not optimize achieved sales in the field because what it assumes — incorrectly — is that *every* salesperson has the requisite competencies in terms of enacting important selling styles (such as a customer orientation), as well as sufficient tactical selling skills to get the job done in a competent, exemplary manner. Poorly skilled salespeople, or those for whom the engagement of a customer orientation is a stretch, may end up calling on customers and prospects who actually require salespeople who are perhaps higher in *both* selling skills and mastery of key sales strategies (such as a customer orientation). This finding suggests a new and critical dimension to the sales manager’s coaching, mentoring, and support roles. Managers must determine which salespeople are best positioned in terms of selling skills and competencies, and then make field-level deployment and account coverage adjustments based on this evaluation.

What the preceding discussion implies from a management perspective, therefore, is that the salesforce itself could be better segmented at most firms — with lower skilled, lower customer-oriented and non-strategic salespeople handling transactional sales of low risk, short sales cycle, high volume, and non-strategic nature (as per Rackham & DeVincentis, 1999). However, salespeople who have higher skills and a propensity to successfully enact a customer-oriented sales approach would be better utilized catering to customers and prospects who are more strategic, have more unique and demanding needs, and whose accounts have longer sales cycles and higher business volume. This is precisely the approach taken recently by the Hilrom Corporation in the medical supplies industry (see Waaser, Dahneke, Pekkarinen, & Weissel, 2004). They segmented their salesforce into what they labeled “prime” customers (i.e., transactional, or perfectly suited for a lower skills/sales-oriented salesperson) and “key” customers (i.e., consultative, or ideal for a higher skills/customer-oriented

salesperson). In other words, they matched the skills and competencies of their existing salespeople to the demands and needs of each of these unique customer segments. As a result of this re-organization, the firm’s overall sales revenue and market-share figures have significantly improved.

6. Limitations and directions for future research

The research reported here provides some intriguing and unique insights into the drivers of the multi-faceted sales role. The work, however, is not without limitations. One potential limitation concerns the dependent variable of interest — sales performance — and how the data was captured and assessed. Both the marketing literature (more narrowly, see Chonko et al., 2000; Rich et al., 1999) as well as the social sciences literature (more broadly, see Vinchur, Schippmann, Switzer, & Roth, 1998) are replete with evidence that although self-reported measures of job performance, such as sales performance, should correlate highly with objective/archival measures of performance, they generally either do not, or do so poorly (Franke & Park, 2006). This runs counter to the long-accepted conventional wisdom in marketing (cf., Churchill et al., 1985), and this limitation is very important to acknowledge. Therefore, as Jaramillo and his colleagues have shown (Jaramillo, Carrillat, & Locander, 2003, 2005), it is never entirely possible to rule out socially-desirable responding (Zerbe & Paulhus, 1987) when one is commenting upon their own job performance. In addition, it is difficult to insure that individuals truly understand how they are performing, can intelligently comment on it, and are willing to do so (Chonko et al., 2000; Rich et al., 1999; Singh, 1998).

Hence, one limitation of this work is that upward biases in the dependent variable cannot be ruled out because we have just one measure of performance — a measure which, while well-accepted in the marketing literature, nevertheless remains far from ideal in terms of its “objectivity” (i.e., Behrman & Perreault, 1982). However, the results are still quite encouraging. From a theory testing and construction perspective (Bagozzi, 1984; Hunt, 1983), it could be said that the testing of our research model, hypotheses, and moderation effects may be viewed as a logical and important first step that sets the stage for future work. Such work, for example, could attempt to utilize multiple measures of sales performance to validate the robustness of our findings.

An additional limitation is that we solely considered the SOCO perspective in testing the efficacy of the new selling skills perspective of Rentz et al. (2002). While SOCO is both long-studied and revered in marketing (Franke & Park, 2006; Schwepker, 2003), there are other alternatives to consider. One logical direction for future research, therefore, would be to further widen our nomological network and research model. Blending SOCO and selling skills with other long standing individual-level perspectives of salesperson job functioning — such as adaptive selling (Spiro & Weitz, 1990) or emerging perspectives of selling, such as Ahearne, Jelinek, and Jones’ new conceptualization of salesperson service behavior — would be interesting research avenues for future work.

Appendix A. Construct measurement items

| | Scales |
|---|--|
| Selling skills | Rentz et al. (2002) |
| Interpersonal skills $\alpha = .81$ | Ability to express yourself nonverbally Ability in general speaking skills Awareness and understanding of the nonverbal communication of others Ability to control and regulate nonverbal displays of emotion |
| Salesmanship skills $\alpha = .86$ | Ability to prospect for customers Ability to qualify prospects Ability to close the sale Ability to present the sales message |
| Technical skills $\alpha = .84$ | Knowledge of the customers' markets and products Knowledge of your company's procedures Knowledge of competitors' products, services, and sales policies Knowledge of product line, including product features and benefits Knowledge of customers' operations (e.g. store and shelf layout, employee training, etc.) |
| Sales performance | Behrman and Perreault (1982) |
| Sales objective performance $\alpha = .93$ | My ability to sell products with higher profit margins. My ability to generate a high dollar amount of sales in my territory. My ability to quickly generate sales of new company products. My ability to produce a high market share for my company in my territory. My ability to exceed the sales targets and objectives that are assigned to me. My ability to identify and sell to major accounts in my territory. |
| SOCO | Saxe and Weitz (1982), Thomas et al. (2001) |
| Customer orientation $\alpha = .91$ | I try to figure out what the customer needs are. A good employee has to have the customer's best interest in mind I try to bring a customer with a problem together with a product/service that helps solve that problem I offer the product/service that is best suited for the customer's problem I try to find out what kind of products/services will be most helpful to a customer |
| Sales orientation $\alpha = .94$ | I try to sell as much as I can rather than to satisfy a customer It is necessary to stretch the truth in describing a product to a customer I try to sell a customer all I can convince them to buy, even if I think it is more than a wise customer would buy I paint too rosy a picture of my product/service to make them sound as good as possible I decide what product/service to offer on the basis of what I can convince customers to accept, not on the basis of what will satisfy them in the long run. |

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