

Impact of Salesperson Information Overload on Relationship Selling Behaviours and Sales Performance: A Conceptual Framework

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ABSTRACT

Although salesperson information overload is considered to be one of the most important barrier to salesperson performance and a fruitful and healthy buyer-seller relationship formation; surprisingly, it has received minimum scholarly attention. A better understanding of how salesperson information overload impacts selling behaviour and sales performance could help salespersons as well as business organisations to correctly gather, select and use information to strengthen their selling activities.

This study, therefore, intends to offer an in-depth understanding of this important issue and fills an important gap in the literature. Our conceptual model shows that salesperson information overload negatively affects both customer-oriented selling behaviour and relational selling behaviour which in turn reduces sales performance. In addition, the model shows that information overload can moderate the relationship between adaptive selling behaviour and customer-oriented selling behaviour as well as the association between adaptive selling behaviour and relational selling behaviour. Finally, our model also suggests that salesperson information overload negatively moderates the link between customer-oriented selling behaviour and sales performance and the relationship between relational selling behaviour and sales performance.

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INTRODUCTION

Today's strong business competition means that the selling process is becoming increasingly complex. Such complexities are primarily generated by the high number of available products (Hassan, Nayandoro and Atiquzzaman 2000); the high level of buyer knowledge (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2000); and the high demand of buyers (Singh and Batra 2011). Gremyr (2005) argues that to overcome such complexity, a salesperson is required to understand what the buyer wants and needs. According to Leigh and Marshall (2011), such understanding can be obtained through relationship selling. Relationship selling refers to a strategy whereby salespersons focus on buyers' needs or wants and accordingly adjust or modify their selling behaviour (Hosoi, Wang and Miyauchi, 2013). According to Keillor, Parker and Pettijohn (2000), relationship selling is the product of the integration of adaptive selling behaviour; customer oriented selling behaviour and relational selling behaviour. When salespersons make a genuine attempt to understand buyers' needs and wants, they gain trust, longer satisfaction and the positive view of buyers who see them as attempting to help (Jaramillo, Ladik, Marshall and Mulki 2007). To ensure relationship selling is conducted effectively, Eckert (2006) argues that salespersons need to gather a great deal of buyer information to aid in decision making. However, when the level of information is too large to be processed, there is risk of salesperson information overload which can negatively affect salesperson performance (Hunter 2004). The effect of salesperson information overload in business relationships has been explored in the marketing literature (Hunter 2004; Hunter and Goebel 2008). However, such exploration has been very limited. We did not discover any study exploring the impact of salesperson information overload on relationship selling behaviour and sales performance. Therefore, we intend to fill this important gap and offer more in-depth

understandings of this important issue.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

A salesperson who adopts adaptive selling behaviour develops and uses his/her knowledge towards sales situations (Roman and Iacobucci 2010: 367). That is, a salesperson utilises knowledge to select the most appropriate behaviour and selling tactics to meet the needs of a specific buyer and the selling situation. This includes selecting and filtering information, as well as determining the information process required, in order to ensure that the buyer is provided with the best solution in a specific selling situation and that a healthy and long-lasting relationship with the buyer is maintained. Thus, we propose that:

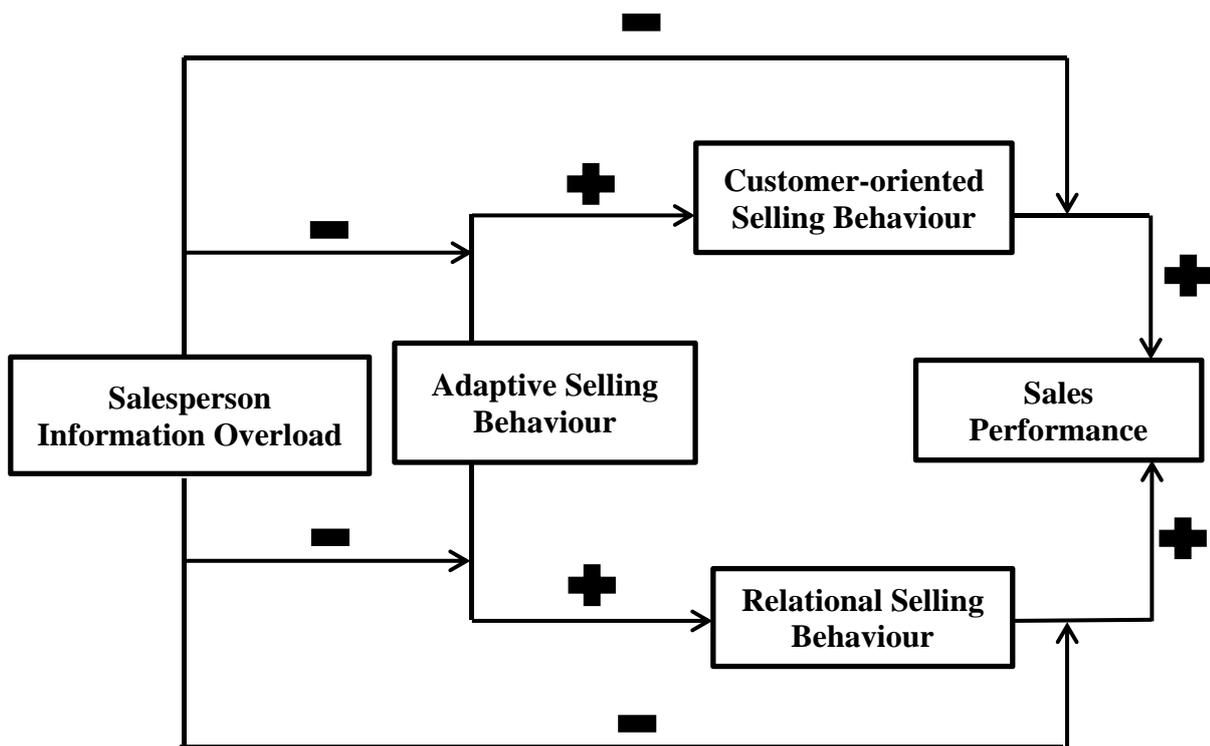


Figure 1: Proposed model of salesperson information overload, relationship selling behaviours and sales performance

P1. A salesperson who exercises adaptive selling behaviour is more likely to show customer-oriented selling behaviour

P2. A salesperson who exercises adaptive selling behaviour is more likely to show relational selling behaviour

As explained above, customer-oriented selling behaviour and relationship selling behaviour are formed through buyer information. By gathering and utilising information about a buyer, a salesperson can gain an understanding of a buyer's needs and wants and offer suitable products or services along with suitable behaviour (Kulp, Lee & Ofek 2004: 444), which further positively affects sales performance. Thus, we propose:

P3. Customer-oriented selling behaviour has a positive influence on salesperson's performance

P4. Relational selling behaviour has a positive influence on salesperson's performance

In line with the rapid development in products and services, buyer expectations from such products and services may change more quickly than salespersons can anticipate (Colletti & Chonko 1997: 1). Although, salespersons may try their best to gather and select information about buyer requirements, these rapid changes may add to the complexity of existing information processing and subsequently create a high level of confusion. As a result, salespersons may wrongly estimate the importance of customers' needs and wants and accordingly fail to offer suitable products or services, ultimately leading to deterioration in the buyer seller relationship. Thus we propose:

P5. A high degree of salesperson information overload negatively moderates the relationship between adaptive selling behaviour and customer-oriented selling behaviour

P6. A high degree of salesperson information overload negatively moderates the relationship

between adaptive sales behaviour and customer relational sales behaviour

In addition, salesperson information overload can cause a false categorisation of a sales situation, unsuitable matching strategies and incorrect behaviours which can jeopardise the effectiveness of the sales procedure and accordingly cause a decrease in salesperson's performance (Hunter & Goebel 2008: 21). Information overload can also weaken the relationship between the salesperson and buyer and once again reduce salesperson's performance. Thus:

- P7. Salesperson's information overload moderates the relationship between customer-oriented selling behaviour and salesperson's performance such that as the level of customer-oriented selling behaviour increases, a salesperson with a lower level of salesperson information overload performs better.
- P8. Salesperson information overload moderates the relationship between relational selling behaviour and salesperson's performance such that as the level of relational selling behaviour increases, a salesperson with a lower level of salesperson information overload performs better.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study proposes the moderating impact of salesperson's information overload on sales performance. The model shows that the role of salesperson's information overload negatively moderates the association between adaptive selling behaviour and customer-oriented selling behaviour and the link between adaptive selling behaviour and relational selling behaviour. In addition, the model also suggests that salesperson information overload negatively moderates the relationship between customer-oriented selling behaviour and sales performance as well

as the link between relational selling behaviour and sales performance. Overall, our model has important implications for practitioners. Our study shows that a salesperson needs to know how to gather buyer information and more importantly how to select the right information and use this information to meet the customer's needs and wants. Accordingly, it is clear that seller firms need to invest in training to improve their salespersons' ability to gather and use this information in order to satisfy buyers and gain their trust and ultimately increase their sales performance. This conceptual work is particularly important for the researchers in the field of sales. Paper provides several testable prepositions and a framework that can provide useful guidance for sales researchers. We expect future researchers to empirically validate our prepositions and framework.

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