Effectiveness in Sales Interactions: A Contingency Framework

Barton A. Weitz


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A new approach for research on effectiveness in sales interactions is proposed. This approach is based on considering the moderating effect of the salesperson’s resources, the customer’s buying task, and the customer-salesperson relationship. A contingency framework is presented and research directions related to the framework are suggested.

EFFECTIVENESS IN SALES INTERACTIONS: A CONTINGENCY FRAMEWORK

In 1978, the average expenditure for training each industrial salesperson was over $15,000 (Sales and Marketing Management 1979). Even though annual sales training expenses are well over one billion dollars, there is only limited knowledge about which selling behaviors are most effective in customer interactions. A conceptual framework for exploring this issue is presented in this paper.

To demonstrate the focus of this framework, a scheme for classifying variables related to salesperson performance is shown in Figure 1. The initial classification is based on whether the variable relates to the salesperson’s macroenvironment or microenvironment. Macroenvironmental variables include territorial characteristics such as potential and workload and the level of effort expended by the salesperson in covering the territory. However, the objective of the framework presented in this paper is to delineate factors related to the effectiveness of salespeople in influencing customers during interpersonal interactions. Thus, the framework focuses on the effectiveness of sales behaviors in the microenvironment of the sales interaction.

Variables related to effectiveness in the microenvironment are further classified into those related to the sales situation and those related to the salesperson. Variables related to the salesperson’s effort during customer interactions are not treated in the framework. Thus, the framework focuses on the shaded areas in Figure 1.

The fundamental idea behind the framework is that effectiveness in sales interactions can be understood best by examining the interactions between sales behaviors, resources of the salesperson, the nature of the customer’s buying task, and characteristics of the salesperson-customer relationship. This framework provides a mechanism for integrating previous research and a direction for future research.

In the next section, the shortcomings of prior research on effectiveness in sales interactions are discussed. These shortcomings suggest the need for a contingency approach. After presenting the nature and applications of a contingency approach, the approach is expanded into a framework. The basic postulate of the framework is stated, constructs in the framework are defined, and a set of positi-
tions is developed. These propositions are supported by research in leadership, bargaining, social psychology, and personal selling. Further research is needed to complete the framework; however, the portions of the framework presented in this paper suggest a potentially fruitful direction for studying effectiveness in sales interactions. The paper concludes with a discussion of a research program to explore this new direction.

**Research on Effectiveness in Sales Interactions**

Research concerning effectiveness in sales interactions has concentrated on uncovering salesperson behaviors, behavioral predispositions, and capabilities related to performance. Each of these research streams is reviewed below. (See Weitz 1979 for a more detailed review.)

**Sales Behaviors and Behavioral Predispositions**

The study of sales behaviors has been limited to experimental studies examining the effectiveness of different types of messages delivered by salespeople.¹ These studies have found little difference

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¹Several descriptive studies (Olshavsky 1973; Pennington 1968; Taylor and Woodside 1968; Willett and Pennington 1966) have examined sales behavior but have not explicitly considered the effectiveness of sales behaviors.
Table 1

Behavioral Predispositions and Performance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Significantly Related to Performance</th>
<th>Not Significantly Related to Performance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Forcefulness</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>oil company (Harrell 1960)</td>
<td>oil company (Miner 1962)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>life insurance (Merenda &amp; Clarke 1959, Greenberg &amp; Mayer 1964)</td>
<td>life insurance (Zdep &amp; Weaver 1967)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>retail/trade (Howells 1968)</td>
<td>retail (Howells 1968)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>technical rep (Howells 1968)</td>
<td>stockbroker (Ghiselli 1973)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>commodities (Howells 1968)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mutual fund (Greenberg &amp; Mayer 1964)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>automobile (Greenberg &amp; Mayer 1964)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>trade (Dunnette &amp; Kirchner 1960)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>stockbroker (Ghiselli 1973)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>food, appliance wholesaler (Mattheiss et al. 1977)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sociability</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>life insurance (Merenda &amp; Clarke 1959)</td>
<td>oil company (Miner 1962, Harrell 1960)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>technical rep (Howells 1968)</td>
<td>industrial (Pruden &amp; Peterson 1971)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>retail (Howells 1968)</td>
<td>real estate (Scheibelhut &amp; Albaum 1973)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>retail/trade food (Howells 1968)</td>
<td>utility (Scheibelhut &amp; Albaum 1973)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>industrial (Bagozzi 1978)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>food, appliance wholesaler (Mattheiss et al. 1977)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In effectiveness across message types. Levitt (1965) found that a “good presentation” was more effective than a “poor presentation.” Jolson (1975) reported that a “canned” presentation generated more purchase intention than an “extemporaneous” presentation but the universality of this finding has been questioned (Reed 1976). There were no significant differences in the effectiveness of a product oriented-versus a personal-oriented message (Farley & Swinh 1967); “hard sell,” emotional appeals versus “soft sell,” rational appeals (Reizenstein 1971); and six different sales appeals based on Bales Interaction Process Analysis categories (Capon 1975). Thus, experimental studies have failed to uncover influence strategies consistently related to effectiveness in an interaction.

Correlational studies have attempted to uncover relationships between personality traits/behavioral predispositions and performance. The results of these studies are summarized in Table 1. This summary demonstrates that the relationship between these personality traits and performance is equivocal. Characteristics associated with forcefulness were significantly related to performance in ten studies but were not significantly related to performance in four studies. Social orientation was significant in two studies and insignificant in six studies.

**Capability and Resources of Salespeople**

A second stream of research has examined relationships between performance and the salesperson’s resources and capabilities. Several studies have examined the relationship between performance and specific abilities conceptually related to interpersonal persuasion. These studies indicate that effectiveness in sales interactions is related to the salesperson’s ability to develop accurate impressions of customer beliefs about product performance (Weitz 1978); the salesperson’s ability to use these impressions in selecting influence strategies (Weitz 1978), and the salesperson’s ability to detect the impact of influence strategies and make adaptations (Grikscheit and Crissey 1973).

The results of studies that have examined more general measures of capabilities are summarized in Table 2. This summary indicates that the relationship between capabilities and performance, like the relationship between performance and behavioral predispositions, is quite inconsistent, and in some cases, even contradictory. In some cases these inconsistencies may be due to variations in methodology across studies. However, several studies have used the same methodology across different
TABLE 2
Salesperson Capabilities and Performance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Significantly Related to Performance</th>
<th>Not Significantly Related to Performance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>industrial (Kirchner et al. 1960)</td>
<td>household durable (Cotham 1969)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>retail (Mosel 1952, Weaver 1969)</td>
<td>life insurance (Tanofsky et al. 1969; Meranda and Clarke, 1959)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>industrial (Lamont &amp; Lundstrom 1977)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>retail (French 1960)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>life insurance (Merenda &amp; Clarke 1959)</td>
<td>speciality food manufacturer (Baehr &amp; Williams 1968)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>retail (Mosel 1952, Weaver 1969)</td>
<td>insurance (Tanofsky et al. 1969)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>industrial (Lamont &amp; Lundstrom 1977)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>household durable (Cotham 1969)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>retail (French 1960)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sales Related Knowledge, Sales Experience, Product Knowledge, Training</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life insurance (Baier &amp; Dugan 1957)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Intelligence</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>stockbroker (Ghiselli 1973)</td>
<td>oil company (Harrell 1960)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>oil company (Miner 1962, Harrell 1960)</td>
<td>trade (Dunnette &amp; Kirchner 1960)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>industrial (Bagozzi 1978)*</td>
<td>appliance wholesaler (Mattheiss et al. 1977)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Empathy</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>new automobile (Tobolski &amp; Kerr 1952)</td>
<td>used automobile (Tobolski &amp; Kerr 1952)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>automobile (Greenberg &amp; Mayer 1964)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>life insurance (Greenberg &amp; Mayer 1964)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mutual fund (Greenberg &amp; Mayer 1964)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>*significant but negatively related.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

sales forces and reported inconsistent results (Dunnette and Kirchner 1960; Howells 1968; Mattheiss et al. 1977; Scheibelhut and Albaum 1973). Even variables that can be assessed with high accuracy and reliability, such as age, education, and sales experience, are related to performance in some studies and unrelated in others.

Customer Characteristics—The Dyadic Approach

The disappointing results from prior research on sales behaviors, behavioral predispositions, and general salesperson capabilities have led to a growing interest in dyadic research approaches. While there are a wide variety of studies associated with the dyadic approach, the unifying theme of these studies is that characteristics of the customer as well as those of the salesperson are considered. This approach is consistent with a contingency approach because it suggests that effectiveness in sales interactions is moderated by or dependent upon characteristics of both the salesperson and the customer.

Dyadic similarity studies have not demonstrated a meaningful relationship between similarity and effectiveness. Several correlational studies have either not supported the relationship (Doreen, Emery, and Sweitzer 1979) or found similarity explains a low percentage of the variance (Churchill, Collins, and Strang 1975). In addition, the correlation studies (Churchill et al. 1975; Evans 1963; Riordan, Oliver and Donnelly 1977) have not controlled for the plausible rival hypothesis that customers who made purchases perceived that they were more similar to the salespeople than customers who did not make purchases (Davis and Silk 1972). While experimental studies found that similarity is a significant factor in determining sales performance, it has not been as important as expertise.
Research exploring the effectiveness of dyadic similarity has not provided the new approach needed for studying effectiveness in sales interactions. These dyadic studies have focused on a single, static property and have not considered the interaction between sales behaviors and dyadic characteristics. The contingency framework presented in this paper expands upon the dyadic approach by describing the relationship between effectiveness, sales behaviors, and a variety of salesperson and customer characteristics.

Contingency Factors and Personal Selling Effectiveness

Past research efforts have attempted to uncover universal characteristics or behaviors that enable salespeople to perform successfully across a wide range of situations. Interactions between sales behaviors and aspects of the sales situation have not been considered. This research has ignored the unique advantage of personal selling in a company’s marketing communication mix. Salespeople have the opportunity to match their behavior to the specific customer and situation they encounter. They can consider each interaction individually and present themselves and their product so as to be maximally effective in that interaction. In some interactions salespeople might find it more advantageous to present themselves as similar to their customers, while in other interactions salespeople might find it more advantageous to be perceived as an expert.

Prior Considerations of Contingency Factors

The impact and managerial significance of examining the interaction between sales behaviors and sales environment is not a novel idea. Thompson (1973, p. 8) states that “every contact a salesman has . . . involves different human problems or situations. In brief, there is no one sales situation and no one way to sell.” Gwinner (1968) proposed that four traditional approaches to selling have advantages and drawbacks that make each suitable in particular selling environments. In addition, it has been suggested that different approaches and salesperson characteristics are needed to be effective in selling new business versus selling to established customers (Kahn and Shuchman 1961), selling to purchase-oriented versus salesperson-oriented customers (Blake and Mouton 1970), and selling to customers who vary on the dimensions of dominance-submissive and hostile-warm (Buzzota, Lef- ton, and Sherberg 1972).

Although little empirical research has explicitly considered interactions between environmental variables and sales behaviors, several researchers have demonstrated empirically that the relationship between performance and behavioral predispositions varies across sales circumstances. Differences in the relationship between personality traits and effectiveness have been found for industrial/trade salespeople and retail sales clerks (Ghiselli 1969), trade and industrial salespeople (Dunnette and Kirchner 1960; Howells 1968), real estate and private utility salespeople (Scheibehut and Albaum 1973), and new and used car salespeople (Tobolski and Kerr 1952). Chapple and Donald (1947) found that the relationships between communication styles and performance differed across retail selling situations. For example, speech initiation behavior was related to the performance of salespeople operating in an open floor environment but not related to salespeople working behind a counter.

Contingency Factors in Leadership Research

The leadership research illustrates the benefits to be gained by considering interactions between behaviors and moderating variables. The analogy between personal selling and leadership is particularly appropriate due to the similarity in behaviors considered and the similarity in historical development. Personal selling can be defined as the process by which a salesperson attempts to influence a customer to purchase his/her product, while leadership is defined as the “process whereby one person exerts social influence over the members of a group” (Filley, House, and Kerr 1976, p. 211). Thus, the salesperson directs influence behaviors toward customers just as the leader directs influence behaviors toward group members.

Three approaches have been used to study leadership effectiveness (Filley et al. 1976). The first approach looked for personality traits that

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3The expertise conditions explained more variance than the similarity conditions. These differences may be due to the weaker relationship between similarity and effectiveness, but they may also be due to differences in the strengths of the manipulations.
differentiate effective and ineffective leadership. These studies were followed by attempts to identify behavior patterns associated with effective leadership. The inability to find universally effective behaviors has led researchers over the past twenty years to direct their attention toward studying the interaction between leader characteristics, leader behaviors, and characteristics of the work situation (Filley et al. 1976). Theories based on these interactions are referred to as contingency theories since the relationship between performance and leader behavior is contingent upon or moderated by characteristics of the leader, the subordinates, and the work situation.

A contingency approach also provides a promising framework for studying the effectiveness of interpersonal influence behaviors in sales situations. Such a framework is developed in the next section. After stating a basic postulate, each construct is defined and propositions describing the relationship between the constructs are presented.

A Contingency Framework for Sales Effectiveness Across Interactions

A contingency framework for investigating the effectiveness of sales behaviors across interactions is shown in Figure 2. The basic elements of the framework are (a) the behavior of the salesperson in customer interactions, (b) the salesperson’s resources, (c) the customer’s buying task, and (d) the customer-salesperson relationship. The following basic postulate describes the interrelationship of these elements:

Basic Postulate The effectiveness of sales behaviors across customer interactions is contingent upon or

![FIGURE 2](A Contingency Model of Salesperson Effectiveness)

- **Characteristics of the Salesperson-Customer Relationship**
  - level of conflict, bargaining
  - relative power
  - quality of relationship
  - anticipation of future interaction

- **Selling Behaviors**
  - adapting to customers
  - establishing influence bases
  - influence techniques used
  - controlling the sales interaction

- **Resources of the Salesperson**
  - product, customer knowledge
  - analytical, interpersonal skills
  - availability of alternatives

- **Characteristics of the Customer’s Buying Task**
  - needs, beliefs
  - knowledge of alternatives
  - characteristics of the buying task

FIGURE 2
A Contingency Model of Salesperson Effectiveness
This framework for personal selling specifies that effectiveness is related to the first-order interaction between behaviors and characteristics associated with the salesperson, the customer, and the dyad. Potential higher-order interactions are anticipated in the basic postulate. Based on this postulate it is not surprising that previous research on personal selling has failed to find consistent, main effect relationships between performance and individual elements such as behavioral tendencies (forceful or sociable personality traits), behaviors (hard sell versus soft sell or establishing referent versus expertise influence bases), salesperson resources (intelligence, empathy), and characteristics of customer-salesperson relationships (dyadic similarity).

Each of the constructs associated with the framework is discussed in the next section, followed by some propositions derived from past research. The elements and propositions discussed in this paper were selected on the basis of past research in personal selling and leadership. They are not intended to exploit completely the potential set of propositions that can be developed from the framework.

**Constructs in a Contingency Framework**

**Salesperson Effectiveness**

Effectiveness is defined from the perspective of the salesperson rather than the salesperson-customer dyad. This perspective differs from a conceptualization of the salesperson-customer interaction as a problem solving activity in which two parties attempt to reach a mutually beneficial solution (Willett and Pennington 1966). The problem solving perspective is not used because it does not consider the inherent advocacy nature of the salesperson’s activities. While salespeople are somewhat interested in searching for a solution to the customer’s problem that maximizes customer satisfaction, they and their managers strongly prefer solutions that incorporate the purchase of the products or services they are selling.

Consistent with the salesperson and sales management perspective, effectiveness in sales interactions is defined by the degree in which the “preferred solutions” of salespeople are realized across their customer interactions. This definition of effectiveness incorporates the fundamental interest of management in the performance of salespeople and selling behaviors across the entire set of interactions in which salespeople engage. The outcome of a specific interaction is of secondary interest.

Even though this definition of effectiveness does not explicitly consider customer satisfaction, customer satisfaction is considered implicitly because effectiveness is defined across customer interactions. The following illustration demonstrates the implications associated with an effectiveness measure based on performance across interactions rather than during one interaction. Suppose a salesperson made a sale by using a deceptive influence strategy. From the salesperson’s perspective, this influence strategy would have been effective in the interaction. However, the customer might not be satisfied with the product, and realizing the deception, would not buy products from the salesperson in the future. Thus, the use of deceptive influence strategies would not be effective for the salesperson across interactions with the customer, even though it was effective in one specific interaction.

Adopting a salesperson perspective does not mean that the customer’s characteristics and needs are not considered. Customer characteristics and needs are considered in the framework, but only in terms of their moderating influence on the effectiveness of a salesperson’s behavior.

**Salesperson Behaviors**

While marketers have described salesperson orientations (Blake and Mouton 1970) or general sales approaches (Gwinner 1968), most empirical research on salesperson behaviors have considered microbehaviors such as the effectiveness of specific sales messages. Little though has been directed toward identifying underlying dimensions in which a salesperson’s behavior can be assessed. In the

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1 An interaction is defined as beginning when a salesperson first contacts a customer in an attempt to make a sale. The interaction concludes when the salesperson makes the sale or decides to discontinue efforts in this direction. An interaction may be concluded during one face-to-face encounter or may continue over a sequence of encounters.

2 This framework focuses on individual differences in effectiveness across interactions that are due to interpersonal influence behavior. However, traditional measures of performance across interactions such as sales or sales-to-quota incorporate other important sources of variance in effectiveness (see Figure 1). These factors must be controlled when testing propositions developed from this framework.
remaining portion of this section, some of these dimensions are discussed.

Adapting to the Customer. The behavior of salespeople can be characterized by the degree to which they adapt their behavior to the interaction. At one extreme, salespeople are nonadaptive when they deliver the same “canned” presentation (Jolson 1975) to all customers. In contrast to this nonadaptive behavior, salespeople can engage in a unique behavior pattern oriented to each customer.

Dimensions on which sales behavior can be adapted are discussed in following sections. It seems reasonable to assume that the effectiveness of influence bases, influence techniques, specific messages and formats, and the degree of control exerted varies across a salesperson’s customers. Thus a salesperson could increase effectiveness in a specific interaction by altering behavior along the above mentioned dimensions (Weitz 1980).

Measures of adaptivity in sales behavior have not been developed; however, there are some personality measures that indicate a predisposition to engage in adaptive behaviors. For example, one would expect dogmatism and authoritarianism to be negatively related to adaptivity while tolerance for ambiguity would be positively related to adaptivity. A dispositional measure that appears to be closely related to adaptive behavior is self-monitoring. Snyder (1974) has developed a scale to measure the degree to which people monitor their environment and use these environmental cues to alter their behavior. One would expect that high self-monitors would be more adaptive in sales situations.

Establishing a Base of Influence. Another dimension of salesperson behavior is attempting to establish a base of influence. Wilson (1975) suggests that salespeople need to develop source credibility and legitimacy during the initial stages of an interaction. Without such a base of influence, salespeople cannot effectively influence their customers.

In a review of the use of influence bases in organizational setting, McCall (1979) concluded that “the relevance of a given power base, the appropriateness of various tactics, and the likely impacts of power use are intimately linked with each other and with the situation at hand.” (p. 205) Thus, given a set of possible influence bases (French and Raven 1959), salespeople need guidance as to which bases are most effective in specific circumstances. Propositions concerning variables that moderate the effectiveness of these influence bases are presented in the next section.

Influence Techniques Used. Salesperson behaviors can be classified in terms of the influence techniques used. Several studies have been directed toward defining and analyzing a wide variety of influence techniques (Capon and Swasy 1977; Falbo 1977; Spiro and Perreault 1979). These studies suggest that influence techniques can be classified using the following dimensions: (a) open/direct v. closed/indirect and (b) business/product-related v. emotional/person-related. When open/direct influence attempts are used, the purpose of the influence attempt is not hidden. Closed influence techniques involve the use of deception and hidden purposes. (See Yalch 1979 for a discussion of closed sales techniques used in finalizing a sale.)

Product-related influence techniques are defined as business or task oriented messages—information messages directed toward the product and the purchase decision. In contrast, emotional messages are directed toward the customer with the intent of appealing to psychological needs and improving customer-salesperson relations. Emotional messages attempt to reduce risks associated with the social consequences of the purchase decision, while product messages attempt to reduce risks associated with product performance (Newton 1967).

Influence techniques can also be classified by the target and format of the messages delivered. The target can be defined as the specific cognitive element, belief, or value toward which the message is directed. Message formats include comparative v. noncomparative messages and one-sided v. two-sided appeals.

Controlling the Interaction. The final dimension of sales behavior to be considered is the extent to which the salesperson controls the sales interaction. This behavioral dimension is closely related to the dominant-submissive dimension proposed by Buzzotta, Lefton, and Sherberg (1972), the salesperson-oriented dimension proposed by Blake and Mouton (1970), and the traditional salesperson behavior of using high or low pressure. The use of control or pressure is a method of aggressively directing the flow of the interaction toward making a sale. Several researchers have attempted to assess the degree of control exercised by salespeople by analyzing recordings of sales interactions (Willett and Pennington 1966, Olshavsky 1973).

Some insights into control behaviors of salespeople can be gained by examining leader control behaviors. Autocratic and “initiating structure” leader behaviors are associated with a high degree of leader control. In the context of a sales interaction, autocratic behavior is related to the use of high pressure tactics. Initiating structure behavior is related to the salesperson aggressively structuring the customer’s problem so that the solution involves purchasing the salesperson’s product.
Moderating Variables

A wide variety of moderating variables are suggested by personal selling and leadership research. In the contingency framework shown in Figure 2 moderating variables are organized into the following three categories: (a) the customer's buying task, (b) the salesperson's resources, and (c) the customer-salesperson relationship. These categories parallel the following moderating variables used in Fiedler's leadership studies (Fiedler and Chemers 1974): the structure of the group's task, the leader's resources (position power), and the leader-member relations.

Customer's Buying Task. Several researchers have suggested that sales behaviors should vary depending on the buying task confronting the customer. Robinson, Farris, and Wind (1967) defined three types of buying tasks—new buy, modified rebuy, and straight rebuy. The new buy task begins as an ill-structured problem that the customer has not confronted in the past, while the straight rebuy is a highly structured, routinized decision. Since these tasks differ in amount of information needed and the level of uncertainty or risk associated with the purchase decision, one would expect that different sales behaviors would be appropriate for each situation. The different sales behaviors required in these situations have led Kahn and Shuchman (1961) to suggest that salespeople should specialize in either selling new customers (new buy or modified rebuy situations) or existing customers (straight rebuy situations).

Hakansson, Johanson, and Wootz (1977) and Newton (1967) have classified purchase decision in terms of the risk associated with decision outcomes. They have defined specific types of risks and suggested appropriate sales behaviors for each risk type. While the Robinson et al. (1967) classification scheme has received widespread acceptance in the marketing literature, measures of the underlying dimensions have not been developed. In Fiedler's leadership research, task structure is also an important moderating variable. Task structure is operationalized by examining the following task characteristics: (a) goal clarity, (b) goal-path multiplicity, (c) decision verifiability, and (d) decision specificity. These characteristics in a buying task context represent the degree to which the product requirements are known by the customer, the degree to which a variety of products could satisfy the customer's needs, and the degree to which the customer is able to evaluate the performance of the product after the sale.

The Salesperson's Resources. The salesperson enters a customer interaction with a set of skills or abilities, a level of knowledge about the products and the customer, and a range of alternatives that can be offered to the customers. These factors can amplify the effectiveness and/or constrain the range of behaviors in which the salesperson can act effectively. The inclusion of salesperson resources as moderating variables is related to the notion that salespeople should "lead from strength." It is reasonable to assume that salespeople are more effective when they engage in behaviors related to the skills, abilities, and personal characteristics they possess. For example, a highly trained salesperson would be more effective at establishing an expert base on influence and delivering highly informational communications.

In addition to personal resources, the company which the salesperson represents provides resources that can moderate the effectiveness of sales behaviors. Some of these company-provided resources are company reputation, the range of alternatives the salesperson can offer, and the degree to which the salesperson can alter characteristics of the extended product (price, delivery, terms, etc.) to satisfy customer needs. Levitt (1965) demonstrated that the effectiveness of the quality of a sales presentation is moderated by the reputation of the salesperson's company. Saxe (1979) found that the effectiveness of customer-oriented sales behaviors (assessing customer needs, offering products that will satisfy those needs, describing products accurately, avoiding high pressure, etc.) is moderated by the salesperson's ability to help the customer. Ability to help was operationalized as the match between the salesperson's products and the customers' needs, the time available to the salesperson, and the support provided by the salesperson's company.

The Customer-Salesperson Relationship. As mentioned previously, dyadic similarity is the only variable associated with the customer-salesperson relationship that has been considered in sales effectiveness research. This research, reviewed above, indicates that the dyadic similarity is, at best, weakly related to effectiveness.\(^7\)

Two characteristics of the customer-salesperson relationship are similarity and compatibility. Similarity is defined as the degree to which two people are alike in terms of certain characteristics. Compatibility is defined as the degree to which two people are able to work together effectively. Similarity and compatibility are important in personal selling because they influence the effectiveness of the salesperson's communication. Similarity is defined as the degree to which two people are alike in terms of certain characteristics. Compatibility is defined as the degree to which two people are able to work together effectively. Similarity and compatibility are important in personal selling because they influence the effectiveness of the salesperson's communication.

\(^7\)The lack of a meaningful relationship may be due to the definition of similarity used in the studies. In an extensive review on source credibility, Simons et al. (1970) concluded that only relevant similarities between the communicator and the recipient of the communications have significant impact on attitude change. Relevancy is defined in terms of beliefs or experiences pertaining to the object of the attitude. Thus, one would expect that only similarity of beliefs and experiences with respect to the product and the buying decision would influence effectiveness. Dyadic studies in personal selling have operationalized the similarities in terms of physical characteristics, demographics, and irrelevant attitudes.
relationship that have not been considered in sales effectiveness research are the relative power and the level of conflict between the members of the dyad. Both power and conflict have received considerable attention in social psychology (Raven and Rubin 1976), organizational behavior (McCall 1979; Thomas 1976) and channels of distribution (Reve and Stern 1979).

Relative power can be defined in terms of dependency (Emerson 1962). The relative power of a salesperson over a customer is related to the degree to which the salesperson mediates the customer's achievement of a goal and the importance the customer places on achieving the goal. Thus, a salesperson possessing unique information concerning a solution to a customer's problem would have power over the customer. The more important the problem is to the customer, the more power the salesperson possesses. Conversely, if the salesperson's rewards (income) are dependent upon the customer's business, the customer has power over the salesperson. Thus, the relative power in an interaction could be measured in terms of the importance of each party's goals related to the purchase decision and the degree to which each party affects the other party's achievement of those goals.

Conflict, like relative power, has not been considered in personal selling research. Conflict includes a wide variety of phenomena such as:

1. Antecedent conditions (for example, scarcity of resources, policy differences) of conflict behavior,
2. Affective states (e.g., stress, tension, hostility, anxiety) etc.,
3. Cognitive states of individuals (i.e., their perception of awareness of conflict situations), and

In a salesperson-customer relationship, the level of conflict is reflected in the quality of the relationship, the amount of negotiating or bargaining associated with making a sale, the level of competition the salesperson faces, and the degree to which the salesperson's offerings can satisfy the customer's needs.

In addition to relative power and conflict, the nature of the present customer-salesperson relationship and the anticipation of future interactions can moderate the effectiveness of sales behaviors. One important aspect of the salesperson-customer relationship is whether the salesperson represents an "in" or an "out" supplier. An "in" salesperson is presently selling the product to the customer, while an "out" salesperson is attempting to make an initial sale. Both Kahn and Shuchman (1961) and Robinson et al. (1967) have suggested that "in" and "out" salespeople need to perform different functions. Thus, one would expect that different sales behaviors would be appropriate in each situation.

A final characteristic of the customer-salesperson relationship is the anticipation of future interactions. Research has shown that this characteristic influences the bargaining behavior undertaken by two parties (Rubin and Brown 1975) and presumably the effectiveness of sales behaviors. For example, one would expect that effective retail and industrial salespeople typically engage in different behaviors because industrial salespeople typically have continuing relationships with customers, while the retail salespeople do not.

Contingency Propositions

Some propositions incorporating the previously defined constructs are presented in this section. These propositions are stated so that testable hypotheses can be derived to direct future research efforts.

Propositions Concerning Adaptive Behavior

Proposition 1: Engaging in adaptive sales behaviors across interactions is positively related to effectiveness in the following circumstances:

1. Salesperson resources—the salesperson has the resources, both personal abilities and product alternatives, to engage in adaptive sales behaviors.
2. Customer buying tasks—the salesperson's customers typically are engaged in complex buying tasks that could result in large orders.
3. Customer-salesperson relationship—the salesperson has a good relationship with the customer characterized by a low level of conflict and the salesperson anticipates future relationships with the customer.

In general, the salesperson who adapts his/her behavior to the specific interaction situation will be better at presenting a product as a solution to the customer's problem. Thus, one would expect the degree of adaptive behavior to be positively related to effectiveness in a specific interaction.

However, a salesperson's effectiveness across a series of interactions may not be positively related to adaptiveness because there is a cost associated with adaptive sales behavior. The salesperson must spend time during the interaction to collect information from the customer. This information is used
to adapt the sales presentation to the specific customer. The time spent collecting information about the customer is not directly related to the salesperson’s effectiveness across customers. The salesperson’s effectiveness might be higher if more time were spent selling the customer or calling on other customers.

Thus, one would hypothesize that adaptive sales behavior is positively related to sales performance when the benefits outweigh the costs of adapting. Such circumstances are likely to occur when the benefits of adapting are high (large potential orders, opportunity to use information in anticipated future interaction, high probability of securing an order because of a wide range of alternatives that can be offered) or the costs of adapting are low (low expected cost of collecting information due to good relationships with customers.) In contrast, one would hypothesize no relationship between adaptivity and performance when the costs typically equal or outweigh the benefits. This circumstance is likely to occur when the expected benefits are low (small orders with no potential for future orders) or the expected costs are high (a conflicting relationship that makes it difficult to collect information.) Some empirical support for this proposition is provided by Saxe (1979). He found that a salesperson’s resources in terms of capabilities in satisfying customer needs moderated the relationship between effectiveness and the practice of customer-oriented, adaptive behaviors.

Support for these contingency hypotheses concerning adaptive behavior also can be found in the various sales approaches used in industry. Gwinner (1968) indicates that highly qualified and paid salespeople are needed to implement adaptive approaches like problem solution and need satisfaction. These approaches are typically used in industrial sales situations. The least adaptive approach, stimulus response, is limited to “very simple selling situations (low product complexity), to very low-priced products, or to buyer-seller relationships wherein time is an important factor” (Gwinner 1968, p. 39). Thus the stimulus-response approach has been used primarily in door-to-door selling of household products. The mental states approach, a more adaptive approach, is used “in those situations where the product or service is complicated and difficult to understand. In addition, this strategy may be employed when repeat calls on a long-run basis are required. A salesman representing a multiproduct line can effectively use this strategy since the method allows him to vary his sales presentation within the framework of an established plan” (Gwinner 1968, p. 40).

**Propositions Concerning the Establishment of an Influence Base**

Proposition 2: Attempting to establish an expertise base of influence is positively related to effectiveness in the following circumstances:

- **Salesperson resources**—the salesperson has a high level of knowledge about the product and the customer’s applications.
- **Customer buying tasks**—the salesperson’s customers typically are engaged in high risk, complex buying tasks.
- **Customer-salesperson relationship**—the salesperson is typically an “out” supplier.

To establish an expertise base of influence or social power, salespeople need to create the impression that they possess superior skills or knowledge related to the purchase decision. It is reasonable to assume that salespeople who actually possess greater knowledge will be more effective in assuming the role of an expert.

The effectiveness of an expertise base of influence is related to the customer’s need to make a correct decision. Thus, this base of influence will be more appropriate when customers are engaged in complex, high risk purchase decisions (new buy or modified rebuy tasks). In these purchase decisions, customers have a great need for information that will help in making a good decision. Salespeople who are perceived as experts or as possessing unique skills at reducing the risks associated with the customer’s decision will be able to exert substantial influence on the customer’s decision.

Wilson (1975) has suggested that the initial stage of customer encounters should be devoted to establishing “credibility and legitimation. Unless this basic acceptability is developed, further communication is likely to become quite ineffective if not impossible” (p. 394). Thus, establishing credibility by creating the impression of expertise would be most effective when an “out” salesperson makes initial contact with a customer.

Proposition 3: Attempting to establish similarities with a customer as a base of influence is positively related to effectiveness in the following circumstances:

- **Salesperson resources**—the salesperson is actually similar to the customer in terms of characteristics related to the purchase decision.
- **Customer-buying task**—the salesperson’s customers typically are engaged in simple, low risk purchase decisions or in purchase decisions with high psychological or social risks.
Customer-salesperson relationship—the salesperson is typically an “in” supplier.

Wilson and Ghingold (1980) found that salespeople feel establishing rapport with customers is a critical aspect of effectiveness in sales interactions. One method for establishing rapport is for the salesperson to create a link with the customer by identifying similarities—characteristics they have in common. Establishing similarities may increase the trustworthiness of salespeople, facilitate the exchange of information about salespeople and customers, and lead customers to feel their needs and problems are well understood. Salespeople who actually are similar to their customer will be in a better position to establish this base of influence.

When customers are making simple purchase decisions, their information needs are not great. In these situations, an influence base associated with getting the customers to identify with the salesperson will be more effective than an expertise base of influence. Capon and Swasy (1977) provides some support for this proposition. In a role playing situation, students felt that messages directed at establishing a similarity influence base would be more effective when selling to consumers as opposed to purchasing agents. Presumably consumers typically engage in simpler decision processes with higher psychological risks than purchasing agents.

It may be particularly important for the “in” salesperson to maintain good relations with a customer over a long time period by establishing a similarity base of influence. In support of this proposition, Bambic (1978) found that purchasing agents indicate the greatest preference for an attitudinally similar salesperson when the salesperson represents a qualified “in” supplier.

Proposition Concerning the Use of Influence Techniques

Proposition 4: The use of closed as opposed to open influence techniques is more effective under the following circumstances:

Customer-salesperson relationships—

a) The salesperson typically is more powerful than his/her customers.
b) The level of conflict between the customers and the salesperson is high.
c) The salesperson typically does not anticipate future interactions with the customer.

The use of closed influence techniques suggests that salespeople are willing to sacrifice a customer’s long-term satisfaction so that they can make an immediate sale. This type of behavior would be most effective when customers do not have the opportunity to sanction the salesperson if they discover that they have been manipulated or deceived. If the customers will not be encountering the salesperson in the future, they will not have the opportunity to invoke sanctions such as not considering the salesperson’s products in future applications. If the salespeople are more powerful than the customers, the customers will have to forego invoking sanctions because the salespeople control the degree to which the customers can satisfy their needs.

Salespeople might decide to sacrifice future sales to make an immediate sale. This would occur if the immediate sale is very large, larger than potential future sales. In this circumstance, salespeople would risk the long-term consequences associated with closed influence techniques to seek a short-term benefit.

Spiro and Perreault (1979) found that salespeople use closed influence techniques when engaging in difficult sales situations—situations characterized by poor customer-salesperson relationships, low customer interest, and routine purchase decisions involving undifferentiated products. Open influence tactics were used when there was a high level of buyer/seller involvement—situations characterized by good customer-salesperson relationships and purchase decisions that were important to both parties. Assuming that, on average, salespeople engage in appropriate sales behaviors, these findings indicate that closed influence tactics are more effective in sales situations with negotiating obstacles and open influence tactics are more effective in high involvement situations.

Proposition Concerning Control of the Sales Interactions

Proposition 5: Attempting to exert control over the sales interaction is related to effectiveness in the following circumstances:

Customer’s buying task—customers are engaged in ambiguous purchase decisions.

Customer salesperson relationship—

a) future interactions between customers and the salesperson are not anticipated.
b) the salespeople typically are more powerful than the customers.

Salespeople who exert a high level of control in a sales interaction frequently direct the interaction toward an outcome that is more compatible with the needs of the salespeople than the needs of the
customers. This behavior would be most effective when the customers are confronting an ambiguous problem and do not have adequate information to solve the problem. Since the exertion of control might sacrifice customer satisfaction, this behavior would be more effective when the salesperson has a goal of making an immediate sale. When future interactions with a customer are anticipated, the salesperson's long-term effectiveness will be more closely related to satisfying the customer's needs. Under these circumstances, salespeople might be less effective when they control the interaction towards an outcome desired by them. These conclusions are consistent with Bursk's (1947) description of situations in which low pressure selling is more effective than high pressure selling. Bursk suggests that low pressure selling (low control of the sales interaction) is most appropriate when the customer is knowledgeable and when continued goodwill is at stake.

The leadership research also provides support for this proposition. This research indicates that autocratic, "initiating structure" behaviors (high control behaviors) are most appropriate when the group is engaged in an ambiguous, stressful, and nonroutine task. In addition, the more the group members perceive that they possess the abilities to accomplish a task, the less willing they are to accept directive or coaching behavior from their leader (Filley et al. 1976, p. 255). Supportive, participative, consideration leader behaviors (low control behaviors) are most effective when group members possess information about the task and when the task is routine. Based on these research findings, salespeople will be more effective if they attempt to control sales situations when customers are engaged in routine buying decisions (straight rebuys).

Since little personal selling research has considered the effect of moderating variables, the previously stated propositions are quite speculative. Little empirical support can be provided at this time. A research program for developing and testing contingency hypotheses follows.

Developing and Testing Contingency Proposition

In this section, a research program is outlined for developing and testing contingency hypotheses. The three stages of this program are hypothesis generation, hypothesis testing in a laboratory environment, and hypothesis testing in a field setting. These stages parallel the general framework suggested by Ray (1978) for examining communication phenomena. In discussing the hypothesis testing stage, contingency research approaches are contrasted with the traditional research approach used in personal selling.

Generating Contingency Hypotheses

In the preceding section, a number of contingency propositions are presented. These propositions were developed by reviewing the limited amount of research in personal selling that has considered moderating variables and by translating relevant leadership research into a personal selling context. However, these propositions represent only a portion of the contingency "theories" used by salespeople in their customer interactions.

The everyday use of contingency influence strategies is illustrated in a recent study by Falbo and Peplau (1980). When asked to write open-ended essays on the topic "how I get my way," many subjects indicated that their power strategies varied depending on the target. Thus, the existence of contingency influence strategies arises naturally without prompting from researchers.

Methodologies for uncovering rules or "theories" employed by practitioners are reviewed in Zaltman, Lawther, and Heffring (1980). (See Wilson and Ghingold 1980 for an example of a "theories in use" approach used in a personal selling context.) These "theories in use" methodologies involve observing and questioning salespeople. One approach for uncovering "theories in use" is to investigate how salespeople organize their knowledge and experience. A richer taxonomy of moderating variables can be developed by determining what characteristics salespeople use to classify customers and sales situations. (See Cantor and Mischel 1979 for a review of the research on social classification schemes used by people.)

Schank and Abelson (1977) proposed that part of knowledge is organized around hundreds of stereotypical situations and activities. The implications of these scripts (stereotypic-action sequences) have been empirically investigated by Bower, Black, and Turner (1979). Salespeople probably possess contingency selling scripts that guide their behavior in customer interactions. One might access these scripts by asking salespeople to describe their behavior in specific sales situations. The nature of the differences in scripts across sales situations

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*The microtheoretical notions discussed by Ray (1978) are similar to the contingency propositions developed from the framework presented in this paper.*
should be useful in developing contingency propositions.

Theories in use also can be uncovered by using a cognitive response methodology. Salespeople can be asked to describe their thoughts during specific customer encounters. These thoughts can be collected directly after the encounter or during a replay of a recording of the encounter. A more structured format can be used to collect these cognitive responses by asking salespeople to indicate their thoughts when observing a standardized recording of a customer-sales encounter (Grikscheidt 1971).

In contrast to these open-ended methods for collecting information, salespeople can be asked to answer questions concerning the appropriate behavior when confronting a sales scenario (Capon and Swasy 1977) or questions concerning their behavior during a specific past sales encounter (Spiro and Perreault 1979). Vroom and Yetton (1973) have developed a method for soliciting contingency leader responses and describing relevant situational variables.

**Experimental Testing of Contingency Propositions**

Having developed contingency hypotheses, the next step is to test these hypotheses in a laboratory environment using an experimental design. Laboratory experiments are quick and effective ways for testing behavioral propositions. The control achieved in a laboratory allows the researcher to determine causal relationships between variables and eliminate potential alternative explanations.

The experimental approach has been used in several studies previously reviewed; however, these studies have not been designed to examine contingency hypotheses. Only main effect relationships between effectiveness and salesperson characteristics or behavior were considered in these studies. For example, Woodside and Davenport (1974) manipulated two sales behaviors (establishing an expertise base of influence, and establishing a similarity base of influence) and tested whether differences in these behaviors had an effect on purchasing behavior.

In contrast to these past studies, contingency propositions are tested in an experimental setting by examining the interaction between a sales behavior and a moderating variable. Thus, the second part of proposition 2 would be tested by manipulating the level of expertise expressed by the salesperson and the complexity of the buying decision confronting the subject (customer), and testing for a significant interaction between these two factors.

Levitt's (1965) classic study on industrial selling is the only study in which the effectiveness of a behavior-sales circumstance interaction was investigated. In this study, a behavior (quality of presentation) and a resource of the salesperson (company reputation) were manipulated. Unfortunately, there were methodological problems in examining the contingency (interaction) hypotheses (Capon et al 1972).

While laboratory experiments are an excellent method for testing theories and determining causality, there are two problems with laboratory experiments for testing hypotheses concerning personal selling. First, laboratory experiments typically sacrifice external validity to insure high internal validity. To insure homogeneous treatments, the salesperson frequently is removed from the experiment. In some experiments, the salesperson is replaced by a videotape (Busch and Wilson 1976), a film (Levitt 1965), or a paper and pencil description (Bambic 1978). In these experiments, the phenomenon under study is more closely related to impersonal, mass communication than interpersonal influence.

Second, laboratory experiments are most readily adapted to testing the effectiveness of sales behaviors in one-shot, selling situations. It is difficult to create laboratory situations that examine the effects of behaviors across sales interactions. This arises because some behaviors such as adaptation and the use of close influence techniques have "carry over" effects. Both adaptation and the close influence techniques can lead to increased effectiveness in one interaction but decreased effectiveness in subsequent interactions. These "carryover effects" are difficult to manipulate and measure in an experimental design. Due to this problem, some propositions can be tested only in field studies. In addition, field tests offer a method for assessing the impact of behavior across actual selling interactions.

**Field Testing of Contingency Hypotheses**

The steps in testing contingency hypotheses in the field are shown in Figure 3. When contingency hypotheses are tested in the field across interactions, the first step is to develop reliable and valid measures of typical sales behaviors and sales situations (moderator variables) in which salespeople engage.

Few measures of sales behaviors exist; however there are paper and pencil measures to determine influence techniques typically used (Arch 1979), the degree to which a customer-oriented behavior is employed (Saxe 1979), and behavioral predispositions such as self-monitoring. Although studies have postulated moderating variables in the sales situation, no measures of circumstances encountered...
in sales situations have been developed. Thus, research must be directed toward developing measures of sales behaviors and moderating variables before contingency hypotheses can be tested in field settings.

When behavior and situation measures have been developed, contingency hypotheses can be tested by getting measures of typical behavior patterns from salespeople, typical situation measures from independent sources such as sales managers or customers, and then relating these measures to salesperson effectiveness using techniques for examining moderator variable relationships (Allison 1973; Zedeck 1971). While traditional measures of sales performance such as sales or sales to quota can be used as measures of effectiveness, care must be taken to control for sources of variance unrelated to effectiveness in sales interactions (see Figure 1).

The difference between testing contingency hypotheses in the field and traditional correlational studies of salesperson effectiveness is illustrated by the shaded areas in Figure 3. Traditional correlational studies have considered only the shaded steps. In these studies, measures of salesperson behavioral predispositions and performance are collected. No measures are made of the typical sales situations encountered by the salesperson. Hypotheses are tested by correlating performance with behavioral predispositions.

Contingency studies necessitate the inclusion of the unshaded steps—the collection of situational
measures. In addition, the test of contingency hypotheses requires the use of moderator variable regressions so that interactions can be examined.

Conclusion

Most empirical research on salesperson performance has been based on the implicit assumption that a universal set of characteristics or behaviors is associated with successful sales performance across all sales situations. It is reasonable to investigate such parsimonious propositions in the early stages of studying a problem, but more complex propositions are warranted if simple propositions fail to explain the phenomenon of interest. The review of the research of personal selling effectiveness at the beginning of this paper illustrates the lack of support for simple universal propositions. These universal propositions have been of some value, but few have consistently explained a significant proportion of the variance in performance. Thus, it is appropriate, at this time, to investigate the more complex propositions in which circumstances of the sales situation moderate the relationship between the salesperson behavior and effectiveness.

To provide a direction for this research approach, some salesperson behaviors and moderating variables were defined and propositions suggested concerning the effectiveness of these behaviors in different sales interaction circumstances. The group of behaviors and moderating variables considered is intended to be suggestive rather than exhaustive. Little research has been directed toward developing a taxonomy of sales behaviors or characteristics of the salesperson-customer interaction. When descriptive research on classifying sales behaviors and interaction characteristics is more advanced, many additional and richer contingency propositions can be developed and tested.

Even though the propositions presented in this paper are limited, some new and potentially significant variables for understanding personal selling effectiveness have been introduced. Sales behaviors related to adapting to the customer and controlling the sales interaction have not been investigated empirically, even though practitioners view these behaviors as critical to sales effectiveness. Dyadic research has focused on similarity, a dyadic characteristic which appears to have little relationship to effectiveness. Characteristics of the customer-salesperson relationship such as relative power, level of conflict, and the anticipation of future interactions have played an important role in interpersonal influence research in social psychology and organizational behavior, but have been ignored in personal selling research. While this new research direction suggests more complex propositions and research designs, it is anticipated that the effort expended on this new approach will lead to a substantial improvement in our understanding of personal selling effectiveness.

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