The authors propose that adaptive selling is influenced by salespeople’s knowledge of customer types and sales strategies as well as their motivation to alter the direction of their behavior. Pertinent research in psychology and personal selling is reviewed and specific propositions relating to knowledge, motivation, and adaptive behavior are advanced. On the basis of these propositions, suggestions are made for selecting, training, managing, and compensating salespeople.

Theories of job performance suggest that three factors affect performance, (1) role perceptions, (2) motivation, and (3) ability. Role perceptions influence the salesperson’s understanding of what activities should be undertaken and how these activities should be performed. Motivation affects the amount of effort expended performing the activities, and ability affects the quality of the effort expended. The Walker, Churchill, and Ford (1977) model of salesperson performance pertains almost exclusively to the first two factors—role perceptions and motivation. The third component, ability, is discussed in a few paragraphs and no propositions are developed.

The objective of our article is to provide a framework for research directed toward increasing our understanding of the ability component. The framework centers on a specific ability, the ability to adapt sales behaviors effectively to the demands of the sales situation. Though ability related to adaptive selling is only one element of the ability component, we believe it is a crucial aspect because it indicates the degree to which salespeople are able to take advantage of the unique communication elements associated with personal selling. Personal selling is the only communication vehicle in which the marketing message can be adapted to the specific customer’s needs and beliefs. Salespeople have the opportunity to do “market research” on each customer and implement a sales presentation that is maximally effective for that customer. In addition, they can observe the reactions of their customers to sales messages and make rapid adjustments (Weitz and Wright 1978).

The article is divided into five sections. In the first section, we define adaptive selling and present a framework for examining it. Prior research on adaptive selling is reviewed in the second section. In the third section we consider the crucial capabilities needed...
to be effective in adaptive selling—knowledge of sales situations and behaviors and information acquisition skills. In the fourth section we describe the variables that motivate salespeople to practice adaptive selling and learn from their experiences. We conclude with a discussion of managerial actions that can improve the adaptive selling ability of salespeople.

**Adaptive Selling Framework**

A model relating the motivation to practice adaptive selling, adaptive selling capabilities, the practice of adaptive selling, and selling effectiveness is shown in Figure 1. The model identifies some key constructs associated with adaptive selling and suggests how these constructs are interrelated. It is not intended to describe the process by which salespeople adapt their sales presentation, develop adaptive selling skills, or are motivated to practice adaptive selling.

**Contingent Relationship Between Adaptive Selling and Effectiveness**

The practice of adaptive selling is defined as the altering of sales behaviors during a customer interaction or across customer interactions based on perceived information about the nature of the selling situation. An extreme example of non-adaptive selling is delivering the same "canned" presentation (Jolson 1975) to all customers. In contrast, salespeople are extremely adaptive when they use unique sales presentations for each customer and also alter their behavior during an interaction.

Selling effectiveness, the performance of salespeople across sales interactions, is not included in the definition of adaptive selling we use here. Altering sales behaviors (adaptive selling) can be effective or ineffective. The upper right part of the model suggests that the relationship between the practice of adaptive selling and selling effectiveness is moderated by the
nature of the selling environment and the capabilities of the salespeople. Adaptive selling is effective only when these variables result in the benefits outweighing the costs of practicing adaptive selling.

**Characteristics of selling environment.** Though in general one would expect the practice of adaptive selling to improve selling effectiveness, there are costs associated with practicing adaptive selling. To practice it salespeople must spend time doing "market research" on the customer—time that might be spent more profitably in calling on other customers. Some characteristics of the selling environment that influence the cost/benefit tradeoff associated with adaptive selling are (1) the variety of customer needs and types encountered by the salesperson, (2) importance of the typical buying situation encountered, and (3) the resources provided by the company to the salesperson.

When salespeople have similar customers with similar needs, they can effectively use the same, best suited sales approach in all customer encounters. The costs of collecting information will not justify the marginal benefits realized by altering their sales approach. However, the benefits of adaptive selling may be substantial when customers are making significant purchase decisions. In these situations, customers can reward salespeople by placing larger orders if the salespeople tailor their presentations to each customer's needs.

Further, salespeople can realize the potential benefits of adaptive selling when they have the resources to make appropriate alterations in their behavior. The benefit/cost ratio improves when salespeople are selling a broad product line or products with many features and options. A variety of offerings assists salespeople in tailoring their presentations to meet the needs of their customers. Empirical support for this notion is provided by Saxe and Weitz (1982), who found that the resources available to salespeople moderated the relationship between customer-oriented (adaptive) selling and effectiveness.

**Capabilities of salespeople.** In addition to the resources provided by the company, salespeople's abilities and skills moderate the effectiveness of practicing adaptive selling. The lower left part of Figure 1 indicates the specific ability (knowledge) and skill (information collection) that we examine here. We suggest that, to practice adaptive selling effectively, salespeople need an elaborate knowledge structure of sales situations, sales behaviors, and contingencies that link specific behaviors to situations. To utilize this knowledge, salespeople need to be skillful in collecting information about customers so that they can relate knowledge acquired in previous sales situations to the interaction in which they are currently engaged.

**Proposition 1:** The effectiveness of practicing adaptive selling is moderated by the characteristics of the selling environment (variety of customers, importance of buying situation, and availability of company resources) and the abilities (knowledge) and skills (information collection) of the salesperson.

**Motivation to Practice Adaptive Selling**

The upper left part of Figure 1 indicates that three salesperson characteristics motivating the practice of adaptive selling are (1) the degree to which salespeople have an intrinsic reward orientation, (2) the tendency of salespeople to make strategy attributions when they analyze the causes of successful as well as unsuccessful sales encounters, and (3) the degree to which salespeople have the capabilities for effectively practicing adaptive selling. In a subsequent section, these factors are described in more detail.

**Sales Management and Adaptive Selling**

The left edge of the adaptive selling model suggests how sales management practices are related to constructs in the model. The intrinsic reward orientation of salespeople is affected by the level of self-management, the culture of their organization, the nature of the reward system in which they function, and the feedback provided by sales managers. Environmental cues including the actions of sales managers are related to the tendency of salespeople to make strategy attributions. Selection and training affect the knowledge and information acquisition skills of salespeople. Finally, the model in Figure 1 indicates that knowledge is influenced by the practice of adaptive selling.

After a brief review of personal selling literature related to this framework, we discuss in more detail the capabilities needed to practice adaptive selling effectively, the factors motivating adaptive selling, and the impact of sales management practices on capabilities and motivation.

**Personal Selling Research and the Adaptive Selling Framework**

**Theoretical Models**

Conceptual models of the sales process recognize the importance of the unique adaptive capability of salespeople. These models incorporate adaptive behavior in the form of feedback loops and interactions between customer characteristics and sales approaches (see Alessandra 1979; Green and Tonning 1979; Hakansson, Johanson, and Wootz 1977; Robertson and Chase 1968; Spiro, Perreault, and Reynolds 1976;
Weitz 1978). However, most empirical research on personal selling has largely ignored the adaptive nature of personal selling.

Rather than considering the role of adaptation, empirical research has sought to uncover sales behaviors or behavioral predispositions (personality traits) that are effective over a range of selling situations. The equivocal and even contradictory nature of the findings suggests that there are no universally effective selling behaviors (see Weitz 1979 for a review). “Every contact a salesman has . . . involves a different human problem or situation. In brief there is no one sales situation and no one way to sell” (Thompson 1973, p. 8). Thus, effective salespeople need to use a contingency approach in which they select their sales approach to match the specific situations they encounter (Weitz 1981).

**Empirical Research**

Though empirical research in personal selling has not directly investigated adaptive behaviors, there is some evidence that salespeople do adapt their sales approaches to fit perceptions of customers and that such adjustments improve performance. A field experiment demonstrated that automobile salespeople varied the price quoted and treatment offered on the basis of customers’ sex and race (Wise 1974). Spiro and Perreault (1979) found relationships between influence tactics used by salespeople during a sales interaction and characteristics of the interaction. The consistency of these findings suggests that salespeople use different approaches in different situations. However, descriptive studies of retail appliance salespeople suggest that the degree of adjustment may be limited. In the retail setting, more variation in attributes discussed (Olshavsky 1973) and types of comments made (Willet and Pennington 1966) occurred across salespeople than across customers for a salesperson.

The only empirical research examining relationships in the proposed adaptive selling framework (Figure 1) concerns the impact of information acquisition skills on selling effectiveness. This research is reviewed in the next section.

**Knowledge and Information Acquisition: The Salesperson Resources Needed to Practice Adaptive Selling Effectively**

**Knowledge and Performance**

Knowledge about a domain has been shown to have a substantial impact on performance in that domain (Anderson 1982; Bettman and Park 1980; Larkin et al. 1980). These findings have led the developers of expert systems to place their primary emphasis on uncovering and modeling the knowledge structure of experts (Hayes-Roth, Waterman, and Lenat 1983, p. 4).

Though expert systems have been developed in the personal selling domain (Collins 1984), little empirical research has examined salesperson knowledge. Thus, support for the propositions in this section is drawn largely from cognitive psychology research on the abilities needed to solve complex problems and play complex games such as chess and bridge. These domains may seem to be unrelated to personal selling, but certain parallels justify using this research to study personal selling. First, many marketers (e.g., Gwinner 1968) advocate a problem-solution selling approach. Second, game playing involves anticipating and responding to an opponent’s move, just as selling involves adapting to customers’ needs and behaviors. Though the needs and behaviors of customers may be less structured than physics problems and game situations, the basic principles associated with solving such problems are likely to be applicable to sales. Consequently, differences in knowledge structures should be an important determinant of effective adaptive selling just as they are an important factor in problem solving and game playing. Weitz (1978), though not directly examining knowledge structures, found the performance of salespeople to be related to their knowledge of customer values and beliefs.

**Categorical Model of Memory**

We use the categorical model of memory developed by Rosch and her colleagues (Rosch 1975; Rosch et al. 1976; Mervis and Rosch 1981) as a foundation for studying salesperson knowledge. Categories are cognitive structures representing organized and interre-
lated knowledge about a domain (Medin and Smith 1984; Smith and Medin 1981). Two types of knowledge are associated with categories—declarative and procedural knowledge (Chi 1978; Larkin 1979). Declarative knowledge is the set of facts associated with the category, such as the attributes describing a type of sales situation. Procedural knowledge consists of heuristics or action sequences associated with the category (Leigh and Rethans 1984), such as the sales approach that enables the salesperson to cope with the type of sales situation. Thus, declarative knowledge provides the data base for understanding and interpreting the selling domain, whereas procedural knowledge indicates what should be done.

Categorization is fundamental to human nature (Rosch 1975; Rosch and Mervis 1975). People naturally divide the world into categories so that objects, people, or events within a category can be treated similarly and differentiated from objects, people, or events in other categories. Categorization enables salespeople to cope with their complex selling environment. Knowledgeable salespeople, when confronting a sales situation, can simply categorize the situation on the basis of similarity to a sales situation category in memory and then retrieve from memory the sales approaches for dealing with customers in that category. This efficiency has been demonstrated in other domains, for example, with bridge experts (Charness 1979; Engle and Bukstel 1978), physics experts (Chi, Feltovich, and Glaser 1981; Larkin et al., 1980), and political experts (Fiske 1982). Salespeople, like other experts in problem-solving situations, operate in an extremely complex domain. Rather than reacting to each new situation uniquely, salespeople accumulate a base of experience and probably organize this experience into categories of selling situations so that it can be readily applied when they confront new customers and new selling situations.

A widely used sales training program (Ingraschi 1981) based on the Merrill and Reid (1981) communication style matrix illustrates an approach for improving performance through the development of a salesperson’s categorical knowledge structure. In this training program, salespeople are instructed to classify customers into four basic categories (driver, amiable, expressive, or analytical). Each category has four subcategories, affording a more detailed knowledge structure. Declarative knowledge is provided describing the behaviors and motives of the typical customer in each category. For example, drivers typically have a technical background, dress conservatively, prefer group activities, tell rather than ask, and do not display emotions. This declarative knowledge can be used to classify customers as well as understand their behavior. Procedural knowledge (sales approach rules) is provided to aid salespeople in developing effective sales strategies. For example, if a driver salesperson is interacting with an expressive customer, the salesperson should increase responsiveness by verbalizing feeling, expressing enthusiasm, and spending more time on relationships rather than business.

The following proposition is forwarded to describe the relationship between the knowledge structures of salespeople and their capability to practice adaptive selling effectively.

Proposition 2: Categorized knowledge of selling situations is critical for effective adaptive selling. When confronting a sales situation, effective adaptive salespeople tend to categorize the selling situation on the basis of its similarity to sales situation categories stored in memory, and apply declarative and procedural knowledge associated with the category to the sales situation.

Knowledge Structures and Adaptive Selling

The propositions developed in this section indicate how knowledge structures of effective and ineffective adaptive salespeople may differ. These propositions pertain to the structure of knowledge rather than its specific content. The content of knowledge will be very idiosyncratic and will be contingent upon situation-specific factors including the company for which the salesperson works, the competitive environment, and the specific customers of the salesperson. However, generalizations can be made about the structural properties of knowledge, that is, the amount and type of knowledge and its organization. These generalizations are outlined hereafter.

Number of categories. The availability of a large number of sales situation categories allows more precise classification of sales situations and sales approaches and thus results in the retrieval of a more appropriate sales strategy for the given situation. Research in both object and person perception supports the proposition that effective performers use more categories and subcategories to describe their domain than

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3 Throughout the article we distinguish between the practice of adaptive selling and effective adaptive selling. Because of the proposed contingent relationship between effectiveness and the practice of adaptive selling, effective adaptive selling implies that adaptive selling is practiced under the appropriate sales conditions and that the salesperson has the appropriate capabilities.
novices (Brewer, Dull, and Lui 1981; Chase and Simon 1973; Crocker, Fiske, and Taylor 1984; Mervis and Rosch 1981; Simon 1979; Taylor 1981). For example, Simon and Gilmartin (1973) estimated that chess masters have a vocabulary of 50,000 chessboard configurations in long-term memory. In contrast, a good club player has a vocabulary of 1000 configurations and a novice has very few categories for classifying chess patterns.

Proposition 3: The effectiveness of adaptive selling increases with the number of sales situation categories available in the salesperson’s long-term memory.

Category organization. Effective and ineffective adaptive salespeople are likely to differ not only in the number of categories available to them, but also in how these categories are organized or structured in memory. Effective performers may have hierarchically organized knowledge structures with superordinate categories defined in terms of abstract or general principles and subordinate categories based on more detailed specific information (Rosch et al. 1976).

With a hierarchical structure, information can be categorized at more fine-tuned or specific levels. Consider the following example. A salesperson receives information on a small customer that is inconsistent with his or her “small customer type” category (e.g., the prototypic small customer is ill-informed about market options, whereas this customer is very knowledgeable). The expert salesperson with a hierarchical structure is able to classify the customer at a more specific level (e.g., the MBA small-scale entrepreneur type). Thus, the salesperson could augment knowledge at a global level with more specific, subcategory-level information (Crocker and Weber 1983; M. Sujan 1985; Weber and Crocker 1983) to generate appropriate sales strategies.

A hierarchical structure also enables salespeople to cope effectively with a wider variety of problems. For example, salespeople might want to categorize customers at a global level, such as large versus small customers, to generate strategies for an aggregate-level problem such as the allocation of time across accounts. Thus, the ability to categorize at various levels in a hierarchy affords greater flexibility in the utilization of knowledge for solving different problems.

Salespeople who are less effective at adaptive selling, in contrast, would have relatively nonhierarchically, flat knowledge structures. Their memory structures for the domain would contain few superordinate categories representing abstract concepts and no subordinate categories providing detailed information at more specific levels (Chi 1978).

Proposition 4: The effectiveness of adaptive selling increases with the degree to which salespeople have hierarchically organized knowledge structure.

Classifying cues. Because categorization is fundamental to human nature (Mervis and Rosch 1981; Rosch 1975), both effective and ineffective salespeople are likely to classify incoming information as belonging to some sales situation category in memory. However, they would use different types of cues to classify the information. Effective adaptive salespeople are likely to categorize sales situations on attributes that suggest appropriate selling strategies. Conversely, inefficient salespeople who are ineffective at adaptive selling are likely to categorize customers on attributes that suggest surface similarities between customers, such as title, position in organization, style of dress, etc. Some support for this proposition comes from research in other domains. For example, Chi, Feltovich, and Glaser (1981) showed that novices categorized physics problems on the basis of the objects referred to in the problems, whereas experts categorized the problems on the basis of the physics principles required to solve the problems. M. Sujan (1985) found that novices categorized cameras on the basis of their labels (35 mm SLR vs. 110), whereas experts attended to specific camera features.

Proposition 5: The effectiveness of adaptive selling increases with the degree to which salespeople classify sales situations in terms of underlying

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3There is a parallel between the segmentation of markets by marketing managers and the categorization of customers by salespeople. Conceptually, segmentation variables should divide markets into groups with homogeneous within-group responses and heterogeneous between-group responses to marketing variables. Similarly, the basis effective salespeople use for categorization should result in classifying customers according to the uniformity of their responsiveness to selling approaches. Further, as is compatible with our claim, research on segmentation has shown that categorizing customers on the basis of “surface” characteristics (e.g., demographic) is less effective than categorizing them on the basis of benefits underlying their purchase decision.
characteristics, such as the effect of sales approaches, rather than surface characteristics.

**Procedural knowledge.** Effective adaptive salespeople may have a well-established repertoire of selling strategies closely linked to their sales situation categories. This repertoire of sales procedures is likely to be unavailable to the less effective salesperson. Several researchers (e.g., Anderson 1982, 1983; Brucks and Mitchell 1981; Chi 1978) hypothesize that procedural knowledge arises during the final stages of knowledge development about a domain. Anderson (1982) defines three stages of knowledge development. In the first stage, knowledge is represented propositionally or as facts. This stage is referred to as the declarative stage. The second stage, referred to as knowledge compilation, is a gradual process by which knowledge is converted from declarative to procedural form so that it can be applied directly to generate behavior. In the final, procedural, stage knowledge is fine tuned so that it will apply more appropriately and efficiently. Thus procedural knowledge appears to be the key feature distinguishing expert knowledge structures.

**Proposition 6:** The effectiveness of adaptive selling increases with the level of procedural knowledge possessed by salespeople.

**Information Acquisition Skills and Adaptive Selling**

To use effectively the knowledge associated with sales situation categories, salespeople need to be able to collect information about the sales situation and relate it to information stored in memory. The importance of probing for information, asking questions, and listening is well recognized in selling textbooks (e.g., Pederson, Wright, and Weitz 1984) and trade books (e.g., Grikscheit, Cash, and Crissy 1981). In fact, we consider research on information acquisition skills to be the only empirical research that relates directly to our adaptive selling framework.

Weitz (1978) found that sales performance is related to the salespeople’s ability to form accurate impressions of customer beliefs and values and the degree to which they develop effective sales strategies based on these impressions. Within the context of categorical knowledge structures, Weitz’s impression formation skill indicates an ability to classify customers accurately on the basis of their needs and values whereas the strategy formulation skill indicates an ability to retrieve procedural knowledge associated with the category. Grikscheit (1971) found that effective salespeople detected more cues, particularly nonverbal cues, when viewing a recorded sales interaction. Similarly, the relationships reported between empathy and selling effectiveness (Greenberg and Mayer 1964) suggest that information acquisition skills improve selling effectiveness.6

It is difficult to distinguish between information acquisition skills and knowledge structures, because knowledge structure facilitates information acquisition. However, knowledge structures are domain specific whereas acquisition skills may be developed and used in a broad range of social interactions. Thus, inexperienced salespeople may be effective at adaptive selling because of the more general information acquisition skills, even though they have not acquired domain-specific knowledge.

**Proposition 7:** The salesperson’s skills in acquiring information about customers and sales situations and relating this information to knowledge in memory increase the effectiveness of adaptive selling.

**Motivation to Practice Adaptive Selling**

Motivated behavior has three aspects, (1) intensity, (2) persistence, and (3) choice (Atkinson 1964; Campbell and Pritchard 1976; Weiner 1980). Intensity refers to the level of mental and physical effort expended. Persistence indicates the duration over which the effort is expended, particularly when adverse outcomes are encountered. Both the intensity and persistence aspects of motivation are nondirectional because they relate to the amount of effort expended. Choice is the directional aspect of motivation because it refers to the task selected as well as the particular approach used in the task.

Previous research on salesperson motivation (cf. Walker, Churchill, and Ford 1977) and employee motivation in general (Staw 1984) has centered primarily on the nondirectional aspects of motivation. However, both conceptual (Naylor, Pritchard, and Ilgen 1980) and empirical research (Katerberg and Blau 1983; Terborg and Miller 1978) suggests that when employees have a significant latitude in work proce-

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6However, the evidence on the relationship between empathy and selling effectiveness is mixed. Lamont and Landstrom (1977) actually reported a significant negative relationship. Perhaps these equivocal results are due to the definition and operationalization of empathy. In the broadest sense, the term “empathy” refers to the reactions of an individual upon observing the experience of another individual. Though there is a wide variety of potential reactions, empathy research has concentrated on two broad classes of response, (1) a cognitive reaction, an ability to understand the other person’s perspective, and (2) an emotional reaction, a tendency to feel concern and sympathy for another person (c.f. Davis 1983). Within our framework, the cognitive aspect of empathy is related to skills in correctly categorizing customers and sales situations.
dures—as do salespeople—the direction of effort is a major determinant of performance. The specific customers to whom salespeople direct their efforts, as well as the selling approaches they choose to employ with these customers, are likely to have a significant impact on performance. When salespeople are motivated to make these choices, they will be motivated to practice adaptive selling and their behavior will vary across and within sales situations. Three factors motivating salespeople to sell adaptively are intrinsic reward orientation, a tendency to make strategy attributions to explain poor performance, and the capabilities to practice adaptive selling.

**Intrinsic Reward Orientations**

Rewards, according to most motivational psychologists, have a central role in guiding behavior (Weiner 1980). Rewards related to a work environment often are conceptualized as being of two types, intrinsic and extrinsic (Lawler 1973). On the basis of a survey of industrial and organizational psychologists, Dyer and Parker (1975) concluded that a generally accepted definition of intrinsic rewards is “rewards derived directly from or inherent in the task or job itself—associated with the content of the task or job” whereas extrinsic rewards are “rewards derived from the environment surrounding the task or work—associated with the context of the task or job.” By this definition, the level of intrinsic orientation in salespeople is related to the extent to which they find their work, the task of selling, inherently interesting and rewarding; the level of extrinsic orientation is related to the extent to which they treat their work as a means for obtaining external rewards, such as money, recognition, and promotion.\(^7\) Note that intrinsic and extrinsic reward orientations are conceptualized as two dimensions along which rewards can be assessed rather than polar extremes on one dimension. Salespeople can be oriented toward both reward dimensions or neither (see Switzky and Haywood 1974).

We suggest that the degree of intrinsic reward orientation among salespeople is related to their motivation to practice adaptive selling. People who are intrinsically oriented are interested in the work itself and try to achieve mastery in their area of interest (Pittman, Emery, and Boggiano 1983). They refrain from using routinized methods to perform their job (Condry 1977). Instead they attempt to be creative by looking for different and more appropriate ways for achieving success (Amabile 1983).

Further, intrinsically oriented people have little trouble accepting failures because they view failures as natural occurrences en route to solutions (Condry and Chambers 1978). They simply gather information from their failures that enables them to approach the problem in a somewhat different way (Amabile 1983). Thus, intrinsically oriented salespeople are likely to be motivated to learn more about selling by varying their behavior from customer to customer in an attempt to adapt effectively to customer needs.

Adaptive sales behavior is unlikely to be related to the level of extrinsic orientation among salespeople. An extrinsic orientation focuses the attention of salespeople on the outcomes of their work. Thus, they concentrate on achieving success by using a few simple, “tried and tested” methods of selling (Pittman, Emery, and Boggiano 1983). They are not interested in experimenting because their concern is with working toward success in what they consider to be the most certain way possible (Condry and Chambers 1978).

**Proposition 8:** The degree to which salespeople are oriented toward intrinsic rewards determines their motivation to practice adaptive selling.

**Strategy Attributions**

In addition to differences in reward orientation, the reasons salespeople assign for their successes and failures may affect their motivation to practice adaptive selling. According to the attribution theory of motivation, people search for causes of their successes and failures in order to attain “a cognitive mastery of their environment” (Kelley 1967). A wide range of specific attributions have been identified, such as luck, mood, ability, effort, strategy, and difficulty of the task (Anderson and Jennings 1980; Weiner 1980). These attributions are classified by three dimensions—locus, stability, and controllability (Weiner 1980).

In terms of adaptive selling, the internal, unstable, and controllable attributions are of most interest because they relate to potential changes in behavior. These attributions are termed “behavioral attributions” because they pertain to the salesperson’s actions (Anderson, Horowitz, and French 1983) in contrast to “characterological attributions” such as aptitude, which relate to dispositional characteristics of the salesperson.

Within the behavioral attributions, a distinction is made between strategy and effort. H. Sujan (1986) has shown that strategy and effort attributions motivate different behaviors in salespeople. When poor strategies are considered a cause of failure, salespeople are likely to be motivated to change the direction in which they work. This change in direction might

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\(^7\)In much of salesperson motivation research, intrinsic rewards have been defined as satisfying higher order needs and extrinsic rewards as satisfying lower order needs (Oliver 1974; Tyagi 1982; Walker, Churchill, and Ford 1977). The alternative definitions are a result of disagreement about the conceptualization of intrinsic and extrinsic rewards (see Guzzo 1979 for a review).
involve using a different sales approach or spending more time asking questions rather than making a presentation. Salespeople alter their behavior because they consider their failure to have been caused by the selection of an inappropriate sales strategy. When failure is attributed to a lack of effort, salespeople are probably motivated to increase their effort, channeling this increase in the same direction as followed previously. Similarly, strategy attributions for success may reinforce particular directions of work, and effort attributions may reinforce the need for a high amount of effort. Thus, strategy attributions for successes and failures may motivate salespeople to sell adaptively—to vary behavior in accordance with the situation.

Proposition 9: When salespeople make strategy as opposed to effort attributions, they will be more motivated to practice adaptive selling.

The Link Between Motivation, the Practice of Adaptive Selling, and Knowledge

Social cognition research (Fiske, Kinder, and Larter 1983; Fiske and Taylor 1984; Taylor and Winkler 1980) draws a parallel between knowledge development and changes in motivated behavior. As individuals progress from the novice or declarative phase of knowledge development to being relatively expert in the domain, they increasingly focus attention on information in the environment that is inconsistent or discrepant from knowledge structures. This motivated behavior then leads to further fine-tuning of the knowledge base.

Thus, salespeople who engage in adaptive behavior, because of their intrinsic reward orientation and their tendency to make strategy attributions, will probably, through experimental learning, acquire an elaborate knowledge structure. By observing the outcomes associated with different sales approaches, salespeople may develop customer categories related to the effectiveness of sales approaches. Unsuccessful sales approaches will be discarded and successful approaches will be related to current sales situation types or used as the basis for developing new situation categories. Thus, through motivation, the practice of adaptive selling improves the salesperson’s knowledge structure which in turn enables the salesperson to make appropriate adaptation.

Proposition 10: The practice of adaptive selling results in the development of a more elaborate knowledge structure for salespeople.

Salespeople probably go through some cost/benefit analysis when they select sales behaviors. Because of management information systems analysis, they will be motivated to select behaviors that are consistent with their capabilities.

Proposition 11: The motivation of salespeople to practice adaptive selling increases as the capabilities they need for effective adaptive selling improve.

Sales Management and Adaptive Selling

Fostering an Intrinsic Reward Orientation

The adaptive selling framework (Figure 1) suggests that four factors foster an intrinsic reward orientation in salespeople: (1) the compensation system, (2) feedback, (3) self-management, and (4) organizational culture.

Compensation. The compensation program has an important role in the motivation and control of salespeople. In the development of a compensation plan, a critical issue is the emphasis placed on salary versus incentive compensation (commissions and bonuses). Earlier research on rewards (e.g., Deci 1975; Kruglanski 1978) suggested that an emphasis on incentive compensation would enhance an extrinsic reward orientation and dampen an intrinsic reward orientation because the incentives would highlight the contingency between money and performance. This research suggests that the use of incentive compensation may reduce the motivation to practice adaptive selling and thus impede the development of elaborate knowledge structures.

More recent research (Ryan, Mims, and Koestner 1983) indicates that though contingent rewards do enhance extrinsic interest, their influence on intrinsic interest depends on how the monetary rewards are perceived. When incentive compensation is perceived by salespeople as a means of controlling their behavior—that there is a threat of losing income if one does not perform adequately—the incentives probably will re-
duce intrinsic reward orientation. However, when the incentives are perceived as information on one’s competence—for example, additional rewards are seen as indicators of superior performance—these rewards may actually enhance intrinsic interest (Fiske and Taylor 1984; Ryan, Mims, and Koestner 1983).

Proposition 12: The use of incentive compensation reduces an intrinsic reward orientation, particularly when the controlling rather than informational aspects of the incentives are emphasized. The negative impact of incentive compensation on intrinsic reward orientation is particularly strong during the initial stages of a salesperson’s development.

Feedback. A key function of field sales managers is providing feedback to their salespeople. A distinction is made between outcome feedback and cognitive feedback (Hammond, McClelland, and Mumpower 1980; Jacoby et al. 1984). Outcome feedback is information on whether or not a desired outcome, such as quota, is met. This type of feedback enables salespeople to assess their performance. In contrast, cognitive feedback provides information on how and why the desired outcome is achieved or is not achieved. Because outcome feedback, unlike cognitive feedback, does not help in diagnosis, researchers such as Einhorn and Hogarth (1978) have suggested that outcome feedback is likely to be dysfunctional in complex, dynamic environments.

Cognitive feedback to salespeople is likely to increase their intrinsic interest by focusing attention on the content of the selling job. This form of feedback is likely to be particularly helpful in gaining procedural knowledge because it helps identify the contingencies between the salesperson’s behavior and effective performance in a given situation. Thus, in keeping with the claim that “feedback is central to the learning of expertise” (Hogarth 1981, p. 202), cognitive feedback can be particularly helpful to salespeople.

Proposition 13: Cognitive feedback in contrast to outcome feedback increases intrinsic reward orientation.

Self-management. Recent research on leadership examines the notion of self-management (Manz and Sims 1980). In contrast to directing salespeople toward achieving goals (Evans 1970, 1974; House 1971), managers can help salespeople direct themselves. Salespeople can direct themselves by setting their own goals, deciding how they will achieve these goals, evaluating their own performance, and even rewarding themselves (Manz and Sims 1980; Mischel 1973). Self-management is particularly advantageous when (1) the problem to be solved is not highly structured, (2) subordinates have more information than their managers for solving the problem, and (3) the solutions to the problem must be accepted by the subordinates to ensure implementation (Maier 1970; Manz and Sims 1980; Vroom and Yetton 1973). For all except the most routine selling jobs, these conditions appear to prevail.

Self-management increases the intrinsic reward orientation of salespeople. Because salespeople are deciding for themselves how goals are to be met, they are likely to give more attention to the content of their work.

Proposition 14: Self-management increases intrinsic reward orientation.

Organization culture. The culture of an organization significantly affects the performance of the organization and the productivity of workers within the organization (Deal and Kennedy 1982; Ouchi 1981; Peters and Waterman 1982). However, the conceptualization of organizational culture is in a state of flux (see the September 1983 Special Issues of Administrative Science Quarterly; Jelinek, Smircich, and Hirsch 1983). Though there is no well-developed theory relating organizational culture to employee motivation, it appears that an organizational culture developed through management practices can foster an intrinsic reward orientation in salespeople and thus result in effective adaptive selling.

Originally, the Theory Z, clan-type organizational culture was ascribed to entire organizations. However, now it is believed that such cultures are difficult to maintain in a large, complex organization and may be more meaningful in small units within an organization such as an R&D department, a sales division, or even a district sales office (Wilkins and Ouchi 1983).

Ouchi’s Theory Z prescribes relationships between management practices, the resulting organizational culture, employee behavior, and organizational efficiency (Ouchi 1980, 1981; Ouchi and Jaeger 1978; Ouchi and Price 1978). According to Theory Z, the following conditions facilitate employee involvement in developing close cooperative working relationships within the firm.

1. Lifetime employment so that employees have more time to develop complex social understandings.
2. Slow promotion to dampen competition among employees.
3. Non-specialized career paths so that employees interact with each other and gain an under-
standing of the demands and perspectives of employees occupying different roles.

4. Implicit control mechanisms embodied in an organizational philosophy rather than explicit control through rules and close supervision.

5. Collective decision making and responsibility to build cooperation and involvement.

These conditions encourage the development of shared social knowledge within an organization which constitutes a framework for decision making and a congruence of organizational and individual goals (Wilkins and Ouchi 1983). The decision-making framework consists of heuristics and examples of desirable and undesirable problem solutions. With this knowledge, employees can function in the organization with little direct supervision. In addition, they are able to derive courses of action when confronted by novel situations.

Goal congruency is based on (1) the recognition of joint interests among employees and (2) the belief by employees in long-run, equitable treatment by superiors. By recognizing joint interests, employees realize that their individual self-interest can be achieved only if the interests of the organization and other employees are achieved. A belief in long-run, equitable treatment means that employees are willing to accept short-term dislocation because they are confident that the organization will reward them appropriately over the long term.

The two aspects of goal congruency provide a climate of trust and involvement—a climate that Ouchi refers to as a “clan.” A clan work environment fosters an intrinsic reward orientation because the clan focuses employee attention on the work itself rather than on efforts to achieve extrinsic rewards associated with the work. Employees believe in the long-term equity of the reward system. They can experiment with novel approaches for doing their work because they are assured they will be evaluated fairly on the quality of their work and effort, not on short-term outcomes they can neither control nor foresee. An intrinsic reward orientation also arises in a clan because direct supervision and explicit rules for behavior are limited. Thus, the instrumentalities for extrinsic reward are implicit, less salient, and consequently do not divert attention from the task.

Empirical support for the relationship between Type Z organizational cultures and intrinsic reward orientations has been found for salespeople (H. Sujan 1986; Tyagi 1982) and other employees (James et al. 1977).

Proposition 15: A Theory Z organization culture (characterized by stable employment, dual career paths, implicit control mechanisms, and collective decision making and responsibility) results in intrinsic reward orientation among the salespeople.

**Encouraging Strategy Attributions**

Research in psychology (e.g., Fiske and Taylor 1984; Nisbett and Ross 1980; Taylor and Fiske 1979) suggests that salient cues in the environment are likely to have a significant impact on how salespeople interpret their environment and develop attributions. In a dramatic experiment, Wilson and Linville (1982) manipulated environmental cues to alter attributional patterns. College freshmen who were concerned about their academic performance were led to make unstable attributions through videotaped reports from upperclassmen who explained that their GPAs had increased since their freshman year. The unstable attributions led to (1) improved performance on sample GRE items, (2) a lower dropout rate, and (3) improvement in GPAs one year later.

These findings suggest salespeople can be influenced to make strategy attributions by successful salespeople or sales managers who claim that their failures result from poor strategies and their successes from good strategies. Another form of attributional training through the provision of salient cues is the use of THINK signs to remind salespeople that strategy is an important ingredient for success. First-line sales supervisors, through a process of directed questions, may be able to encourage salespeople to engage in causal reasoning (Hastie 1984) and prompt them to make strategy attributions.

Self-management also encourages strategy attributions. Salespeople who are practicing self-management are likely to try to correct strategic errors and identify strategic successes. They may do so by “gradually limiting the discriminative stimuli that precede mal-adaptive behavior while simultaneously increasing exposure to stimuli evoking more desirable behavior” (Manz and Sims 1980).

Finally, cognitive feedback prompts the salesperson to make more strategy attributions when the supervisor is providing feedback on good and bad strategies.

**Proposition 16:** Salient cues, self-management, and cognitive feedback prompt salespeople to make strategy attributions.

**Developing Elaborate Knowledge Structures**

Sales training generally is directed toward teaching inexperienced salespeople, in a relatively short time, the skills of the more experienced, effective members of the salesforce. Within the context of this article, train-
ing can be used to develop knowledge structures. The objectives of the training would be to develop a set of hierarchically organized sales situation categories and appropriate declarative and procedural knowledge associated with those categories. The following training procedures are likely to result in such knowledge structures.

**Content.** Training programs typically transmit information on the company’s products (product knowledge), sales presentation techniques (selling techniques), current and potential markets and customers (market orientation), and company policies on price, delivery, and so on (company orientation) (Hopkins 1978). Though this information is important, the categorical approach to knowledge suggests that this information must be “unitized” into sales situation categories if it is to be used effectively by salespeople. Unitization enables salespeople to recognize standard sales situations and associate those situations with typical customer types, product requirements, effective presentation styles, and so on. Thus, training programs, to be effective, must emphasize the associations or links between the various components of knowledge.

The knowledge research discussed before suggests that the conceptual scheme of the communication style matrix (Ingrasci 1981) and the Sales Edge Program (Collins 1984) are likely to be effective in providing salespeople with the relevant knowledge base.

**Proposition 17:** Training programs that emphasize the links between information about products, selling techniques, markets, and customers are more effective in providing salespeople with categorical knowledge of selling situations than training programs that merely expose salespeople to the information.

**Who should train.** For categorical knowledge to be maximally effective for adaptive selling, a company must develop and teach a knowledge structure that is idiosyncratic to its selling environment. Though training programs like the ones discussed before (e.g., the communication style matrix) may be effective starting points, training is likely to be most effective when company personnel become actively involved in developing its content—the knowledge of experts is captured and incorporated in the program.

**Proposition 18:** Training programs that incorporate the knowledge of expert company salespeople are more effective in providing salespeople with appropriate declarative and procedural knowledge than training programs that employ only general knowledge developed by outside experts.

**Techniques.** Also relevant to training is the issue of what methods or techniques should be adopted to provide salespeople with the necessary knowledge. Most companies adopt a mix of “on-the-job” and classroom training (Hopkins 1978).

Knowledge research suggests that one important factor differentiating expert and novice performers is the extent of procedural knowledge. This knowledge is likely to be acquired “doing the job” (Anderson 1982; Anzai and Simon 1979; Simon and Reed 1976). Thus, participative methods of training are likely to be most effective in developing this procedural knowledge base. Knowledge research also suggests that the appropriate order of training should be formal classroom training to provide a declarative knowledge base followed by participative training to help proceduralize this knowledge.

**Proposition 19:** On-the-job training programs are more effective in providing salespeople with procedural knowledge associated with selling situations than classroom training programs. In classroom training programs, role-playing exercises are more effective in providing proceduralized knowledge than lectures. Further, more elaborate knowledge structures arise when formal classroom training precedes on-the-job training.

**Objectives of training.** The focus of sales training programs is likely to be actual “selling,” that is, helping salespeople identify methods that will effectively result in making sales. The most useful kind of knowledge base is detailed knowledge of sales situations, customers, and selling procedures. However, knowledge research suggests that effective salespeople have a hierarchically organized knowledge structure with detailed knowledge at the bottom and more abstract, or global, knowledge at the top. This hierarchical knowledge structure helps effective salespeople solve a range of problems, from broad planning issues (e.g., how much time to allocate across accounts) to actual selling. Training programs can help salespeople develop this hierarchical knowledge structure by emphasizing the different tasks a salesperson is required to perform as well as the different knowledge bases needed to perform these tasks.

**Proposition 20:** Training programs that emphasize the range of problems a salesper-
son solves are more effective in providing salespeople with flexible (i.e., hierarchically organized) knowledge structures than training programs that emphasize only the selling function.

Assessing the Tendency to Practice Adaptive Selling Effectively

Information acquisition skills such as effective listening and probing can be developed in salespeople through training. However, these skills are of a more general nature than the idiosyncratic knowledge needed for a particular sales job. Thus, information acquisition skills can be assessed and used as part of the selection process for sales job candidates.

Self-monitoring is the degree to which people tend to regulate their self-presentations in accordance with the situational cues present in their environment (Snyder 1974, 1979). The Self-Monitoring Scale (Lennox and Wolfe 1984; Snyder 1974) has been designed to measure this individual-difference construct and comprises five components: (1) concern for the appropriateness of social behavior, (2) attention to social comparison information, (3) the ability to control and modify one’s self-presentation, (4) the use of this ability in specific situations, and (5) the extent to which a person’s self-presentation varies across situations. The scale items for the fifth component could be used to assess the tendency of a sales job candidate to practice adaptive selling. The items for the first component could be used to assess the degree to which the candidate will be motivated to practice adaptive selling. The second, third, and fourth components could be used to assess perceived skills in practicing adaptive selling. Other psychological tests conceptually related to adaptability in social situations are sex role androgyny (Bern 1974; Markus et al. 1982), empathy (Gough 1965; Laing, Phillipson, and Lee 1966), and public self-consciousness (Carver and Scheier 1981).

Interviews. The personal interview is the most widely used selection mechanism because candidates can be observed in an interpersonal environment similar to the one they will encounter on their jobs. In the context of our proposed framework, a critical objective of the interview should be to assess the degree to which candidates adapt their behavior when confronted with different situations. Candidates should be confronted with different situations during an interview and across multiple interviews.

Proposition 21: The degree to which sales job candidates have information acquisition skills and will practice adaptive selling can be assessed by (1) using psychological tests of adaptive behavior in social situations, (2) observing the level of adaptation they show when confronted with different social situations during selection interviews, and (3) assessing the degree to which they have an intrinsic reward orientation to selling.

Directions for Future Research

Measures

The first step in testing our propositions is the development of measures for the key constructs. Measures for some of the constructs such as attributional styles (Peterson et al. 1982; Russell 1982), tendency toward social adaptation (Lennox and Wolfe 1984; Snyder 1974), and individual differences in knowledge structure (Rosch et al. 1976) have been developed in other research domains. These measures must be adapted and validated in the personal selling domain.

Adaptive selling. An obvious way to measure the practice of adaptive selling is by assessing the degree to which salespeople vary their behavior across sales situations. However, there are practical difficulties in making this assessment because the variance in the selling situations encountered by the salesperson must also be considered. To measure the intentions, or motivation, of salespeople to sell adaptively, the salesperson’s attention to information in the sales environment, concern for the appropriateness of selling strategies, and emphasis on controlling and modifying the sales presentation should be considered.

Knowledge structures. Methods for measuring knowledge structure, the key construct in our framework, have not been applied to domains as complex as personal selling. The free sort method, a measurement technique used in categorization research (e.g., Brewer, Duff, and Lui 1981; Cantor and Mischel 1979; Chi 1978) appears to be appropriate for the selling domain. This method provides measures for the number and organization of categories, the extent of declarative and procedural knowledge associated with categories, and the classifying cues used to categorize information.

In the free sort method, respondents are provided with a set of cards, each describing a single stimulus object in the domain in which knowledge is to be measured. They are asked to sort the stimulus cards into piles without being given criteria for sorting. The sort is analyzed to determine the number of “basic” groups perceived by the respondent (Rosch 1975; Rosch et al. 1976). The respondent can be instructed to group
the initial sort into broader categories and also to subdivide the sorts into finer categories. Iterations of this sort/re-sort procedure provide an indication of the hierarchical organization of knowledge.

The free sort procedure often is used in conjunction with free elicitation methods in which respondents are asked to report the criteria they use for sorting (e.g., Kanwar, Olson, and Sims 1981; Olson and Muderrisoglu 1979). The criteria can be coded to determine the classifying cues used by expert and novice groups. Respondents also can be asked to give information on what attributes they believe are “characteristic of and related to” objects in each sort (Rosch et al. 1976). This information would provide a measure of declarative knowledge associated with each category of objects. Finally, as a measure of procedural knowledge, respondents can be asked to indicate what strategies can be applied to members grouped together in each sort. Declarative and procedural knowledge then can be characterized in terms of “richness,” the number of attributes/strategies associated with the category, and “distinctiveness,” the degree of overlap of declarative and procedural knowledge across categories (Cantor and Mischel 1979). A large number of rich, distinct categories, hierarchically organized and based on underlying similarities rather than surface characteristics, are likely to typify the knowledge structures of effective adaptive salespeople.

In the application of this method to salespeople, the stimulus cards could consist of a random selection of the salesperson’s customers or brief descriptions of different sales situations. Measures then could be obtained for how salespeople hierarchically organize their selling knowledge, the cues they use to structure this knowledge, and the extent of declarative and procedural knowledge associated with different selling situations.

**Expert Systems**

Research directed toward the development of expert systems examines the content of knowledge rather than individual differences in knowledge. Though some work has been done on expert systems in personal selling (Collins 1984), these efforts have pertained primarily to generalized systems. In the context of our discussion, the greatest benefits from expert systems will be derived from systems that are idiosyncratic to the specific class of sales situation encountered by the salesperson. We need to explore methods for developing expert systems for a specific salesforce. Such research would involve investigating procedures for accessing and codifying the knowledge of expert salespeople and transmitting this knowledge to less effective salespeople.

**Conclusion**

**Dynamic Nature of Personal Selling**

Personal selling is inherently a dynamic influence process. Effective salespeople need to alter their sales approaches both within and across sales interactions. However, the conceptual underpinning of most prior research is a static “source-message-receiver” model that does not include this aspect of personal selling (see Capon, Holbrook, and Hulbert 1977).

Recent research has followed a dyadic approach. Inherent in this dyadic approach is the notion that salespeople must adjust to the specific customer with whom they are interacting. However, empirical research based on the dyadic concept has concentrated on static properties of the customer-salesperson dyad such as similarity and relative expertise (e.g., Busch and Wilson 1976; Riordan, Oliver, and Donnelly 1977; Woodside and Davenport 1974).

The contingency approach suggested by Weitz (1981) builds on the dyadic theme, emphasizing the importance of tailoring sales approaches to specific sales situations. This approach clearly identifies the basic unit of knowledge—the situational category and associated procedural knowledge—needed for effective adaptation. However, the contingency approach, like other dyadic research, does not explore how this knowledge is developed and effectively utilized.

We suggest that knowledge is the critical characteristic enabling salespeople to cope effectively with their dynamic, complex environment. The nature of the knowledge structures needed for effective adaptation is described and methods for assessing the degree to which salespeople have these knowledge structures are presented. Finally, our proposed framework suggests methods for developing knowledge structures and motivating salespeople to use this knowledge in sales situations. Thus, our adaptive selling framework comprises the factors that enable salespeople to exploit the unique opportunity associated with interpersonal influence—the opportunity to alter influence attempts according to the characteristics of each influence situation.

**Motivation to Work Smarter versus Harder**

The proposed framework also suggests a new direction for research on salesperson motivation. Sales motivation research has centered on motivating salespeople to work harder—to devote more hours to the job, make more calls, and be more persistent in getting an order from a customer. It has ignored factors that motivate salespeople to analyze customers and select appropriate sales strategies, to try new approaches when the approaches used prove not to be effective, and to learn from the successes and failures of past sales en-
counters. These directional aspects of motivation, referred to as “working smarter,” warrant more research attention because they are related to the development and utilization of skills needed to operate effectively in a dynamic selling environment.

Assessing the Impact of Sales Management Practices

We suggest several constructs related to effective adaptive selling. These constructs—intrinsic reward orientation, strategy attribution style, elaboration of knowledge structure, and the practice of adaptive selling—can be used to evaluate sales management programs. Rather than output measures such as increases in sales generated, the more readily measured intervening constructs can be used to assess the impact of field sales management practices and motivation programs. For example, changes in the knowledge structure of participants can be used to measure the effect of training programs, and compensation programs can be evaluated in terms of their impact on intrinsic reward orientations as well as the degree to which salespeople spend more time selling.

In fact, the intervening constructs we suggest can be used to uncover some potential adverse long-term effects that might be masked by positive short-term effects. For example, sales contests may increase product sales in the short run but also may result in a decline in intrinsic reward orientation and thus inhibit the development of an elaborate knowledge structure about sales situations involving the product.

Test Propositions

Finally, we outline several testable propositions. Though some evidence for these propositions is provided, it is drawn largely from domains other than personal selling. Thus, caution should be exercised in interpreting the propositions until they are examined in the personal selling domain. Many of the propositions can be tested with survey methods whereas others are amenable to experimental designs.

The propositions represent a new direction in personal selling research. Rather than proposing which sales approach will be effective, they suggest the capabilities a person needs to be effective in selling, how these capabilities can be developed, and how salespeople can be motivated to develop and use these capabilities.

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