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SALCUSTOR:**A multi-dimensional scale for salesperson's customer orientation
and implications for customer-oriented selling**

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Abstract

Recent studies suggest that the selling vs. customer orientation (SOCO) scale for measuring salesperson's customer orientation does not completely assess behaviors essential for ensuring customer satisfaction. Therefore, few researchers call for new research on identifying the underlying dimensions of customer-oriented selling, and for developing a new scale. This study provides a new and expanded conceptualization, and develops and validates a multi-dimensional scale for salesperson's customer orientation, SALCUSTOR. SALCUSTOR assesses the degree to which a salesperson: (1) provides relevant and correct information to his/her customers, (2) understands and learns the underlying needs of the customers, and (3) maintains relationships with customers, and thinks about their long-term benefits. We also establish the reliability, convergent, discriminant, and nomological validity of SALCUSTOR. The new scale would be useful for managers to identify specific gaps in the three dimensions of customer-oriented selling behaviors of the salespersons, and address these gaps using appropriate intervention strategies.

Keywords: Salesperson, customer orientation, construct, scale development, validity, reliability.

Salesperson's customer orientation or customer-oriented selling is becoming increasingly important in today's demand-driven markets. A study by Cahners Research (Mulcahy, 2002) on 23,341 worldwide businesses highlights that only 39% of customers, who meet salespersons in face-to-face sales calls, think that salespersons actually understood their needs. Anderson and Trinkle (2005) also points out that only 42% of customers felt the salespersons were successful in addressing their concerns.

Saxe and Weitz's (1982) propose a mechanism for measuring the salespersons' customer orientation through the selling vs. customer orientation (SOCO), which has been widely researched in the personal selling literature (Brady and Cronin, 2001; Brown, Widing, and Coulter, 1991; Kennedy, Lassk, and Goolsby, 2002; Brown, Mowen, Donovan, and Licata, 2002). Schwepker (2003, p. 166) also raises the

we develop and validate a new multi-dimensional scale for salesperson's customer orientation. First, we broaden the domain of the construct to capture the phenomenon in its entirety, looking beyond the SOCO perspective. A clear explication of the domain of the salesperson's customer orientation construct, and its underlying dimensions are currently absent in the literature. In order to expand the domain of the construct, we synthesize different streams of literature, and then theoretically triangulate the results with qualitative studies grounded in customers' and salespersons' data. Our definition of salesperson's customer orientation also has clearly delineated construct boundaries.

Second, this study contributes by conceptually, and empirically unraveling the underlying dimensions of salesperson's customer orientation, a concern that was left unaddressed in literature. Through this study we also address important concerns about the conceptualization and operationalization of the salesperson's customer orientation construct. As an important outcome of this study, we now understand that salesperson's customer orientation is a second order construct with three first order constructs.

This study develops and validates a multi-dimensional scale, SALCUSTOR for measuring salesperson's customer orientation. The new scale assesses

(1) A focus on customers, and potential customers of the salespersons, and the forces that drive

research on salesperson's declarative knowledge, and procedural knowledge in the adaptive selling literature (e.g. Szymanski, 1988; Friedman and Churchill, 1987; Weitz, Sujan and Sujan, 1986). Gathering, processing, and providing information to customers enable salespeople to structure incoming data on customers to understand their product and selling requirements better (Szymanski, 1988). Since customers demand more adaptations from salespersons (Brennan and Turnbull, 1999), salespeople need to engage in higher exchange of information with their customers. Therefore, gathering and disseminating, and providing information to customers is an important dimension of salesperson's customer orientation.

Understanding and fulfilling customer needs

An integral aspect of a salesperson's function is to enable customers to make purchase decisions that satisfy their preferences (Saxe and Weitz, 1982; Spiro and Weitz, 1990).

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relationships of the salespersons with their customers would reduce such demand uncertainties and lead to better estimation of customers' demands. Therefore, sustaining relationships with customers is an important dimension of salesperson's customer orientation.

New definition of salesperson's customer orientation

Based on the above synthesis of literature, we define salesperson's customer orientation as, customer-centric behaviors that consist of providing information to customers, understanding and fulfilling customer needs, and sustaining long-term customer relationships. Salesperson's customer orientation has the following three dimensions: providing information to customers; understanding and fulfilling customer needs; sustaining long-term customer relationships.

Item Development

To develop items for the new scale, Churchill (1979) recommends that exploratory study for the item-generation stage should include literature searches, experience surveys, insight stimulating examples (Selltiz et al., 1976), and focus group discussions. Therefore, we conduct qualitative studies that consist of in-depth interviews of salespersons and sales managers, and focus group discussions with customers. The exploratory studies also help to triangulate the findings from the literature review.

Qualitative Interviews

The study includes carrying out open-ended semi-structured interviews with 17 sales managers and salespersons describing salesperson's customer orientation (or customer-centricity), and their attitudes and behaviors that distinguish high and low customer-oriented (or customer-centric) salespersons. Selecting respondents on the basis of theoretical saturation, the interviewees represent diverse sales experience, different levels of hierarchy in their organizations, and a diverse range of product categories. Each interview took between 35 and 45 minutes. A content analysis of the interviews yield 116 unique key words and phrases (behaviors that represented first order concepts), out of which 26 key words pertain to salesperson's traits in a customer-oriented salesperson, and therefore we do not consider for further sorting. Following well-known procedures (e.g., Huntley, 2006), the responses from in-depth interviews yielding 90 key words (that represented behaviors) after sorting and combining yield four broad categories or dimensions. The three dimensions, understanding and fulfilling customer needs, providing information to customers, and sustaining customer relationships, overlap with the same three dimensions.

Customer focus group discussion

We also conduct a moderated focus group discussion (FGD) with 10 customers who describe a situation involving interaction with a salesperson with intent of purchase. The entire FGD of 60 minutes duration, after transcription, and content analysis yield responses which we examine for emergent themes, and integrate with the multiple, theoretical perspectives from the literature survey. The same three dimensions emerge from the FGD too.

Developing initial pool of items

Directionality of the scale items may also pose a potential threat during scale

discriminating task using two groups (one each of customer service, and salespersons), following Clark and Watson's (1995) guidelines. As a result of reducing redundancies, only 43 items across three dimensions remain for the discriminating task, which the respondents rate on a scale of 1 (least important) to 5 (most important) that reflects the relevance of the item to the given context, i.e. selling context or customer service context. Basing the decision on the qualitative differences between the items in both the contexts, and after dropping the non-distinguishing items from the item list, 37 scale items remain.

The 37 scale items are pretested with salespersons for item-level substantive validity, which measures the extent to which an item is theoretically linked to the focal construct of interest (Holden and Jackson, 1979; Loevinger, 1957; Anderson and Gerbing, 1991). The items are then refined iteratively with qualitative feedback of salespersons to reduce the redundant items and delete those deemed to be irrelevant. After deletion of seven items and modification of one item, 30 items remain (given in appendix 1) for measure purification using exploratory factor analysis.

Data Collection and Measure Purification

The study carries out data collection from 380 insurance salespersons in the city of Ahmedabad, India. A sample size of 150 for exploratory factor analysis (item/response ratio of 1:5), and 230 for confirmatory factor analysis (parameter/response ratio of more than 1:5) is adequate for each analysis given the guidelines in several studies (e.g., MacCallum, Browne, and Sugawara, 1996; Clark and Watson, 1995; Comfrey, 1988; Worthington and Whittaker, 2006).

Exploratory Factor Analysis

The study uses exploratory factor analysis (EFA) to validate theoretically generated number of factors with data, as this technique helps to recover the correct factor model satisfactorily (Gerbing and Hamilton, 1996). The sample of 150 salespersons representing 18 insurance companies consists of 93.33 % male respondents; 90% of the respondents are below the age of 30 years. The sample represents the actual population of insurance salespersons in the Indian context, where most insurance salespersons are young men. The mean of the responses range between 2.8 - 4.7, while standard deviations range between 0.49 - 1.4. Using principal axis factoring for factor extraction as it is independent of the data distributional assumptions (Fabrigar, Wegener, MacCallum, and Strahan, 1999), we extract factors with a minimum of 5 percent shared variance. Using promax with Kaiser normalization for rotation results in collectively extracting six factors with 58.25% shared variance. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy (value of 0.76), and Bartlett's test of sphericity (a significant chi-square value at $p=0.00$) suggest that the covariance structure is suitable for conducting EFA. By observing the pattern matrix, we find that 15 items meet the threshold factor loading of 0.40, with cross loadings less than ± 0.3 . Table 1 shows the items for each factor, the variance extracted, and the Cronbach alpha reliabilities of the six factors. The inter-correlations among the six factors range between -0.03 between factors 3 & 5, to 0.64 between factors 1 & 4.

Table 1 about here

with MLE for estimation of parameters. Since the model's degrees of freedom are found to be positive, the model is an over-identified model (Hair et al., 1998).

Testing the factorial validity of the new scale using CFA, we find the eight items to load meaningfully on its respective three factors. The model fit is excellent as the model fit indices suggests (insignificant chi-square value of 19.3 with $df=15$ and $p=0.19$; CFI= 0.99; NFI=0.96; TLI, $\rho^2=0.98$; RMSEA=0.03 with 90% C.I. of

discriminates against other two dimensions. Therefore, ‘providing information to customers’ dimension is distinctly different dimension, while the ‘understanding customer needs’ and ‘sustaining customer relationships’ have low discriminant validity. Figure 1 shows the CFA model used for analysis.

Figure 1 here

Further validating the factorial validity of the new scale by testing two null hypotheses H1 (for unidimensional factor structure), and H2 (bi-dimensional factor structure), we reject H1 since the model fit with all eight items loading into a single factor is poor (chi square significant; CFI= 0.82; NFI=0.8; TLI, rho2=0.75; RMSEA=0.14 with Pclose value of 0.00). We hypothesize H2 as a model with a one factor by combining ‘understanding customer needs’ and ‘sustaining customer relationships’ dimensions (since discriminant validity is low between these two factors), and the second dimension as ‘providing information to customers’. However, we also reject H2 since model fit is worse than the default model with three dimensions (chi-square insignificant; CFI= 0.98; NFI=0.95; RMSEA=0.04 with Pclose value of 0.52). These results clearly suggest that salesperson’s customer orientation has a three-dimensional factor structure.

Nomological validity

From existing literature, we select key antecedents and consequences of salesperson’s customer orientation for assessing the nomological validity of the salesperson’s customer orientation construct using the new scale (given in the appendix). The antecedent variables are

job satisfaction (e.g., Bateman and Organ, 1983; Hoffman and Ingram, 1991), and selling experience (e.g. Scheibelhut and Albaum, 1973; Siguaw et al., 1995; O'Hara et al., 1991). The consequent variables are salesperson's performance (Brown et al., 1997), adaptive selling (Boles et al., 2001; Dadzie et al., 1999; O' Hara et al., 1991), and organizational commitment (Kelley 1992; Pettijohn et al., 2002; Siguaw and Honeycutt, 1995).

The Cronbach alpha reliability values of all measures are above 0.85. The assessment of the nomological validity is carried out using bivariate and partial correlations with the key selected antecedent, consequent variables, and correlates. Results suggest that all three dimensions of the new scale have significant bivariate correlations with all antecedents, consequences, and correlates, except comparative sales performance. However, results from partial correlations suggest that 'understanding customer needs' dimension is significantly correlated at $p < 0.05$ with all antecedents, consequences, and correlates, except comparative sales performance. These results are congruent with recent meta-analytic studies (e.g., Jaramillo et al., 2007; Franke and Parke, 2006) that self-rated measures of sales performance have no association with salesperson's customer orientation. 'Providing information to customers' dimension is significantly correlated only with adaptive selling at $p < 0.05$, and 'sustaining customer relationship' dimension is significantly correlated with selling experience at $p < 0.1$, and with adaptive selling, and SOCO at $p < 0.05$. Therefore,

Although, the study establishes sound nomological validity for the new scale, further work on scale validation might consider using unobtrusive, and objective measures of salesperson's performance to assess the soundness of the measure. Similarly, the soundness of the construct's nomological validity must be tested using other constructs in the nomological space. We also suggest that since SALCUSTOR is further validated in other industries, and other product and service categories. From a cultural and macro-economic perspective, the scale is developed using samples of salespersons in India, an emerging market. Future work must also look at the salience of the dimensions in different cultures, and markets. Different dimensions may emerge as salient when validating the scale in different cultural contexts, and/or in the matured markets.

Testing for common method variance

In general all self-report scales face some threat from self report biases including that from common method variance (in case of single respondent). We take sufficient steps to ensure that social desirability effects do not threaten the reliability and validity of the new scale. Our measures of reliability using Cronbach alpha and construct reliability, and those for validity show robust results to validate this point. Assessment of the common methods variance [CMV] using Harman's one-factor test shows that the first factor accounted for only 19.5% of the overall variance (58.2%), thus reducing the likelihood of the threat of common methods bias (Podsakoff and Organ, 1986). We also use the "marker variable approach" for assessing CMV as suggested by Malhotra, Kim, and Patil (2006, p. 1868), in which we use job satisfaction and relationship dimension of SALCUSTOR as proxy for marker variable. Results for the 'adjusted correlations' between the various antecedents and consequences of SALCUSTOR suggests that results are not

significantly different from the correlation table given in Table 3. Both these tests suggest that common method variance or bias is not a serious threat in the study.

Managerial implications

This study has several meaningful managerial implications. First, the new scale is a useful diagnostic tool for manage

from customers shows that salesperson/s lack customer orientation, a diagnostic analysis using

Research implications and concluding remarks

Global measures of customer-oriented selling including SOCO under-identify the dimensions of salesperson's customer orientation, and may become unimportant in the presence of the new scale. As an example, if the reason for a salesperson's low customer orientation is his/her inability to sustain customer relationships, then it may not be useful to measure his/her customer orientation using a global measure such as SOCO. If we need global measures of salesperson's customer orientation, researchers can develop a composite measure from SALCUSTOR by calculating a weighted-average score, giving more weight to dimensions that are more important in the given context. This approach is better than using global measures where the determining the weights for the construct's dimensions is difficult. Based on these advantages, we encourage researchers to use the new scale for studies related to salesperson's customer orientation.

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Appendix 1: List of 30 scale items used for exploratory factor analysis

Codes	Items
SAL1	I try to provide complete information to my customers about my company's products/services.
SAL2	I try to provide correct information to my customers about my company's products/services.
SAL3	I try to provide information to my customers about my company's products/services that is relevant to them.
SAL4	I try to provide my customers with any information which helps them to buy the products/services.
SAL5	I try to clarify my customers' doubts about my company's products/services.
SAL6	I am interested to learn about my customers' products/services related requirements.
SAL7	I make efforts to understand the products/services related needs of my customers.
SAL8	I try to help my customers to make their buying decision.
SAL9	I try to listen to my customers' products/services related requirements.
SAL10	I try to ask questions from my customers frequently to ensure that I have understood their needs.
SAL11	I try to put myself in my customers' buying situation when I sell to them.
SAL12	I get impatient when my customers need more time to decide what to buy.
SAL13	I try to speak to my customers according to their requirements.
SAL14	I try not to force my company's products/services to my customers.
SAL15	I try to provide my customers with complete solutions to their problems.
SAL16	I try to offer different solutions to my customers, to suit their needs.
SAL17	I try to convince my customers about the advantages of buying my company's products/services.
SAL18	I compare my company's products/services with competitors' products/services, to show the benefits to my customers.
SAL19	I try to understand my customers' actual use of the products/services when I sell to them.
SAL20	I think of my company's profits, when I sell to my customers.
SAL21	For my customers, I am the person that they can depend upon.
SAL22	I think about my customers' long-term benefits in buying my company's products/services.
SAL23	I think the time spent with my customers is a long term investment.
SAL24	I enjoy the time I spend with my customers in discussing about my company's products/services.
SAL25	I am interested to maintain a long-term relationship with my customers.
SAL26	I try to solve my customers' complaints in time.

products/services.

Appendix 2: Measures used for assessing nomological validity of the new scale

Organizational commitment (adapted from Allen and Meyer, 1990)

1. I would be very happy to spend the rest of my career with this company.
2. I feel “emotionally attached” to this company.
3. I feel a strong sense of belonging to my company.

Job satisfaction (adapted from Wright and Cropanzano, 1998)

1. All in all, I am satisfied with my job.
2. All in all, I am satisfied with my income.
3. All in all, I am satisfied with my supervisor.
4. All in all, I am satisfied with the promotional opportunity in this job.
5. All in all, I am satisfied with my co-workers.

Adaptive selling (adapted from Spiro and Weitz, 1990)

1. I experiment with different sales approaches
2. I am flexible with the sales approaches used.
3. I adapt selling approaches from one customer to another.
4. I vary sales style from situation to situation.

SOCO

We used the 12 items of the customer orientation sub-scale of the SOCO scale.

Experience (2-item scale adapted from the 16 item ADAPTS scale of Spiro and Weitz, 1990)

1.

**Table 1: Exploratory Factor Analysis results showing item loadings,
and reliabilities of the extracted factors.**

Factor (Factor Number)	Understanding Needs (F1)	Providing Information (F2)	Sustaining Relationships (F3)	(F4)	(F5)	(F6)
Variance Explained	19.5%	9.8%	8.9%	8%	6.5%	5.5%
Cronbach Alpha	= 0.62	= 0.80	= 0.78	= -	= 0.33	= -
Item Nos	Item Loadings					
	(Loadings in bold suggests item that were strongly loaded to respective factors)					
SAL24	.69	-.11	.18	-.21	-.13	-.10
SAL6	.60				-.19	
SAL5	.50			-.15		
SAL15	.49		-.15	.11		
SAL29	.47		-.12	.20		.11
SAL30	.46				.12	
SAL9	.46		.10	-.18		.14
SAL4	.43	.19				.27
SAL19	.43			.18	.10	
SAL1		.64	.13			
SAL2		.59		.11		.12
SAL27	.19	.43	-.11			
SAL28	.23	.42				.19

SAL23	.20	-.23	.75	.12		
SAL25			.66			.12
SAL22		.25	.58		-.11	.18
SAL21	-.15		.52		.25	
SAL11	-.17		.13	.97		-.22
SAL12		-.10			.51	

Table 2: The SALCUSTOR scale: Its three dimensions with respective scale items, standardized item loadings, AVE, and construct reliability values.

Factors	Items	Item Loadings(Std)	AVE	CR
Needs	SAL 6: I am interested to learn about my customers' products/services related requirements.	0.61	0.58	0.81
	SAL 9: I try to listen to my customers' products/services related requirements.	0.57		
	SAL 19: I try to understand my customers' actual use of the products/services when I sell to them.	0.61		

Table 3: Assessment of nomological validity of salesperson's customer orientation scale

(Bivariate correlation coefficient in first row and partial correlation coefficient in second row)

		Dimensions of salesperson's customer orientation		
		Needs	Information	Relationships
Antecedent variables	Job satisfaction ($r = 0.89$)	0.47* $r = 0.38; p = 0.00$	0.27* $r = 0.11; p = 0.08$	0.26* $r = -0.06; p = 0.36$
	Selling experience	$r = 0.15; p = 0.02$ $r = 0.13; p = 0.04$	$r = -0.08; p = 0.20$ $r = -0.03; p = 0.60$	$r = -0.06; p = 0.34$ $r = -0.04; p = 0.05$
Consequent variables	Organizational commitment ($r = 0.89$)	0.46* $r = 0.31; p = 0.00$	0.27* $r = 0.08; p = 0.19$	0.35* $r = 0.08; p = 0.23$
	Adaptive selling ($r = 0.87$)	0.54* $r = 0.25; p = 0.00$	0.44* $r = 0.22; p = 0.00$	0.58* $r = -0.33; p = 0.00$
	Comparative sales performance	$r = -0.02; p = 0.67$ $r = -0.00; p = 0.90$	$r = 0.00; p = 0.99$ $r = 0.02; p = 0.75$	$r = -0.04; p = 0.53$ $r = -0.03; p = 0.60$
	Salesperson's sales quota performance	$r = 0.33; p = 0.00$ $r = -0.21; p = 0.00$	$r = 0.17; p = .00$ $r = -0.03; p = 0.57$	$r = 0.25; p = 0.00$ $r = 0.05; p = 0.44$
Correlates	SOCO ($r = 0.89$)	0.63* $r = 0.34; p = 0.00$	0.39* $r = 0.09; p = 0.15$	0.69* $r = -0.47; p = 0.00$
	Selling experience	$r = 0.15; p = 0.02$ $r = 0.13; p = 0.04$	$r = -0.08; p = 0.20$ $r = -0.03; p = 0.60$	$r = -0.06; p = 0.34$ $r = -0.04; p = 0.05$

*: Bivariate correlation significant at $p = 0.00$.

Figure 1: Confirmatory factor analysis mode