

AUTHENTICITY IN THE PERSONAL SELLING CONTEXT

By Allen D. Schaefer and Charles E. Pettijohn

Salesperson authenticity (e.g., genuineness) has been generally overlooked by researchers as a potentially relevant personal selling variable. Research in humanistic psychology suggests that authenticity may be highly significant to salesperson performance. This research develops testable propositions designed to evaluate salesperson authenticity and its relationship to personal selling-relevant variables, including: satisfaction, customer-orientation, selling-orientation, job autonomy, role ambiguity, role identity, self-esteem, rejection-sensitivity, and self-efficacy. In the concluding section, the authors discuss the managerial implications of salesperson authenticity and offer suggestions for future research.

INTRODUCTION

According to Buss (1991), human beings have evolved psychological mechanisms that are sensitive to individual differences. These mechanisms are designed to facilitate the answering of key life questions such as, "Can I trust this person?" "Will this person betray my trust?" Such questions are clearly relevant in potentially risky buyer-seller relationships, where buyers are faced with the need to assess salesperson trustworthiness. Indeed, trustworthiness is ranked by organizational buyers as one of the most important characteristics a salesperson can possess (Hayes and Hartley 1989).

The importance of buyer trust suggests that salespeople should behave in a manner that facilitates the development of trusting buyer-seller relationships. Intuitively, we would expect the authenticity (i.e., genuineness) of a salesperson's behavior in the buyer's presence to impact his/her perceived trustworthiness, as such inauthentic behavior would likely give the impression the salesperson has something to hide. Despite this, salespersons sometimes behave in ways that are less than authentic. For example, they sometimes pretend to agree with customers simply to please them (Saxe and Weitz 1982), laugh on cue at customers' bad jokes in order to facilitate the flow of sales calls (Gross and Stone 1964), or falsely display friendliness

and concern in order to close deals (Nerdinger 2001).

While authenticity appears to play a key role in establishing buyer-seller trust and rapport, the topic has received only scant attention from personal selling researchers. In contrast, research in existential-humanistic psychology has reported findings relevant to the construct of psychological authenticity as it occurs among individuals in a broader context. These studies have found authenticity to be positively related to satisfaction, psychological well-being and psychological adjustment (Sheldon et al. 1997), as well as self-esteem (Goldman and Kernis 2002). Moreover, research in industrial psychology involving customer contact workers has shown a substantial negative correlation between authenticity and emotional exhaustion (Brotheridge and Lee 2002).

The present study addresses the nature of the relationship between authenticity and other germane personal selling constructs. The purpose of this paper is to develop testable propositions linking authenticity to several relevant personal selling variables. These variables include: role ambiguity, role identity, job autonomy, customer-orientation, selling-orientation, self-efficacy, rejection sensitivity, and job satisfaction.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Authenticity

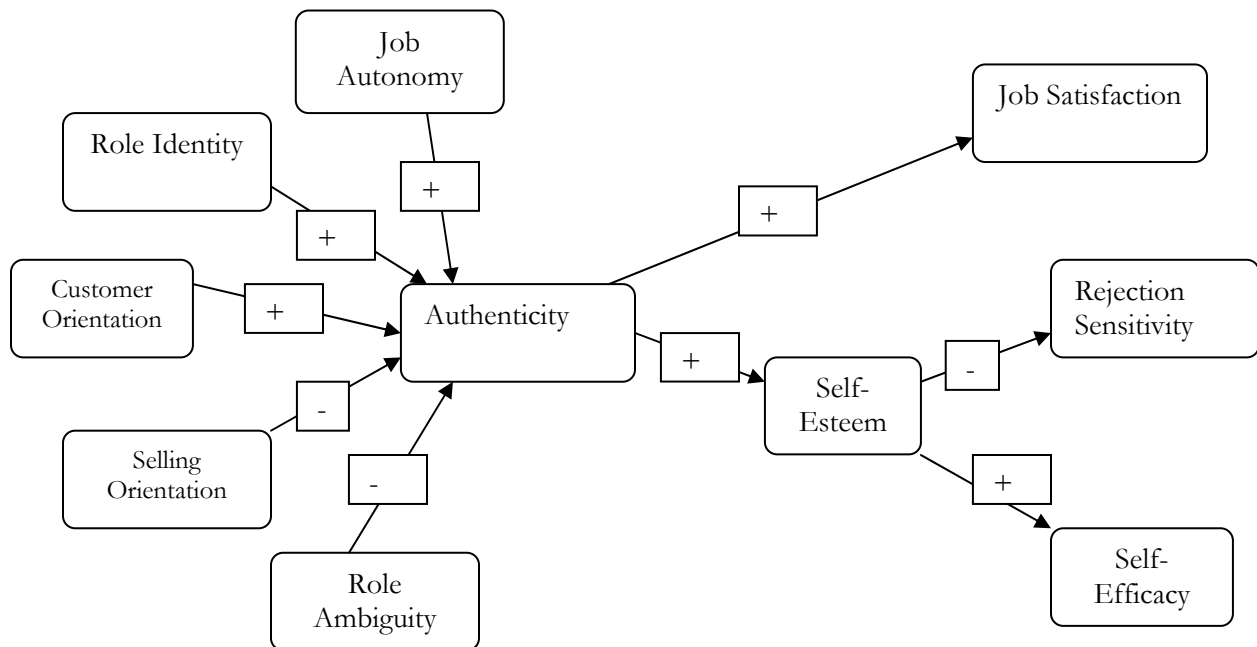
Trait theorists in the field of psychology characterize individuals as sets of personality traits which are highly stable across situations, time, and social roles (e.g. McRae and Costa 1984). This perspective implies that authentic behavior involves acting in congruence with one's own latent traits. This self view is problematic in that it overlooks individual differences in personality stability as well as the manner in which minor environmental changes may contribute to significant personality shifts (Funder and Colvin 1991).

In contrast to trait theorists, existential-humanistic psychology researchers conceptualize authenticity as an autonomous behavioral construct. According to Sheldon et al. (1997), authenticity refers to behavior that is subjectively experienced by the individual as being self-authored, internally caused, and self-determined. According to this perspective, individuals feel most authentic when they act with a sense of choice and full self-expression. This implies that

authentic behavior: (1) is congruent with the individual's internal experience (e.g., values, attitudes, needs, preferences); (2) occurs without pretense, front or façade (Kahn 1992); and (3) is not engaged in merely to please others or to attain rewards or avoid punishments (Kernis 2003).

Individuals are more likely to behave authentically when they are unconstrained by a given role or situation (Sheldon et al. 1997). For example, an individual may behave in a self-expressed manner in the extraverted salesperson role, while being constrained and introverted in the church member role, primarily because the individual feels more authentic in the salesperson role. Sheldon et al. (1997) measured respondents' (undergraduate psychology students) felt authenticity levels across five life roles (e.g., student, employee, romantic partner, son/daughter, and friend). The authenticity construct was measured using the following items: "I experience this aspect of myself as an authentic part of who I am," "This aspect of myself is meaningful and valuable to me," "I have freely chosen this way of being," "I am only

Figure 1: Model of Proposed Relationships



this way because I have to be (R),” “I feel tense and pressured in this part of my life (R).” In all five roles, authenticity was shown to be a significant predictor of satisfaction and self-esteem, and respondents that felt more authentic across the five roles also experienced less anxiety, less depression, less stress and less strain. Considering the apparent relevance of these variables in personal selling, authenticity is potentially a key variable to personal selling.

DEVELOPMENT OF PROPOSITIONS

To facilitate empirical assessments of the relationships which might exist between a sales representative's level of authenticity and relevant variables, nine propositions were developed. The proposed relationship between authenticity and the nine variables is shown in Figure 1. Each of these propositions can then be further developed into testable research hypotheses, which may then be examined empirically.

Role ambiguity

Behrman and Perreault (1984) defined role ambiguity as “the degree to which a salesperson is uncertain about expectations with respect to his/her job, the best way to fulfill known expectations, and the consequences of different role aspect performances.” Role ambiguity may be especially problematic for salespersons due to the boundary spanning nature of their positions, as salespeople are often physically separated from managers, lessening managerial feedback and fostering role ambiguity (Behrman and Perreault 1984). Ambiguity has been positively related to job tension because lack of salient information about role performance apparently results in anxiety and frustration, which in turn leads to job tension (Singh 1993).

As noted above, Sheldon et al. (1997) found authenticity to be negatively correlated with stress, strain and anxiety across five roles. This suggests that when people feel constrained and controlled by a given situation, they likely behave differently (i.e., less authentically and self-expressed) than in situations in which they feel comfortable and genuine. Since role ambiguity likely fosters a controlled and constraining situation:

P1: Role ambiguity negatively influences authenticity.

Role Identity

Identity theorists conceptualize the self as consisting of a collection of identities, each of which is based on occupying a particular role (Stryker and Burke 2000). Identities refer to one's answers to the question “Who am I?” (Stryker and Serpe 1982). Role identities refer to these answers that are linked to the roles one occupies, such as occupation (e.g., salesperson). In turn, these role identities influence behavior as each role has an associated set of meanings and expectations for the self (Burke & Reitzes, 1981).

Workers experiencing high levels of role identity are more likely to feel authentic when they are conforming to those role expectations. Ashforth and Tomiuk (2000) conducted interviews with service agents, who reported that their professional task behavior was generally reflective of their true selves. Ironically, these same individuals also generally reported that their jobs required effective acting (e.g., faking emotions) when dealing with customers. Consequently, emotions required for effective job performance were internalized and displayed as a reflection of self. Ashforth and Tomiuk (2000) referred to this phenomenon as *deep authenticity*.

Consistent with Sheldon et al.'s (1997) finding that individuals' felt authenticity levels vary according to role, self-identity theorists (e.g., Ashforth and Humphrey 1993) have argued that persons experience their highest authenticity levels when conforming to role expectations emanating from their strongly-identified-with roles (e.g., occupations). This argument is based on the premise that individuals whose occupational roles are strongly internalized will feel most authentic. In a selling context, the sales representative who internalizes his/her job role and consequently “becomes the role,” will experience greater levels of authenticity than will sales representatives who have not internalized their roles to a similar degree. This leads to proposition two.

P2: Role identity will positively influence authenticity.**Job Autonomy**

Job autonomy refers to the salesperson's felt ability to determine the nature of a sales task or problem and to arrive at a self-determined course of action (Wang and Netemeyer 2002). Job autonomy should directly affect authenticity. Sales positions associated with low levels of job autonomy would likely result in constrained situations where salespersons perceive little control and choice (Wang and Netemeyer 2002). In situations in which a salesperson's behavioral choices are constrained or controlled, one might anticipate that the level of salesperson's authenticity would be negatively impacted. Thus, because situations that allow little behavioral control or choice tend to inhibit behavior that is felt to be self-expressive and authentic (Sheldon et al. 1997), the following is proposed:

P3: Job autonomy will positively influence authenticity.**Job Satisfaction**

Job satisfaction has been defined as the salesperson's overall affective feeling toward the job (Babakus et al. 1996). According to the social-contextual assumption of Deci and Ryan (1985), some roles afford individuals more autonomous self-expression, and thus more satisfaction than others. As noted above, Sheldon et al. (1997) found that authenticity was substantially correlated with both well-being and satisfaction across a variety of non-selling roles. According to Sheldon et al. (1997), this finding is consistent with Rogers (1963), who associated authenticity with being a fully functioning person. Full functionality involves an openness to experience (as opposed to defensiveness), an acceptance of reality (including one's feelings), and a willingness to live in the here and now.

A fully functioning salesperson would therefore accept full responsibility for his/her efforts and appreciate the experiences that result from those efforts. Further, the fully functioning sales representative would also be accepting of feelings

generated through his/her job activities and accept results "as they are." Such behaviors would probably facilitate the degree to which the salesperson feels content in the sales role. Therefore, the degree to which one can be "fully functioning" in his/her sales job would seem to lead to greater levels of job satisfaction. This perception leads to the development of the fourth proposition. Thus,

P4: Authenticity will positively influence job satisfaction.**Self-efficacy**

Self-efficacy refers to the level of confidence an individual has in his or her ability to perform well in a specific task domain (Bandura 1997). In a selling context, self-efficacy involves a comprehensive summary or judgment of one's perceived capability of performing specific selling tasks. Self-efficacy has been associated with work-related performance (Stajkovic and Luthans 1998).

Self-efficacy has also been related to self-esteem. Self-esteem refers to how an individual characteristically feels about himself/herself (Brown, Dutton and Cook 2001). This conceptualization refers to self-esteem as feelings regarding one's self as a whole, rather than to evaluations of one's characteristics or specific qualities (Kernis 2005). In contrast, *self-efficacy* refers to a person's self-assessment of abilities (e.g., selling) and other attributes. These assessments do not necessarily impact self-esteem. However, if a person possesses high self-efficacy levels on occupation and identity-relevant tasks, a positive correlation between self-esteem and self-efficacy is likely (Bandura 1997).

Research conducted in non-selling contexts suggests that authenticity is positively related to self-esteem (e.g., Herrman, Kernis and Goldman 2004, Goldman and Kernis 2002). Moreover, recent non-selling research by Brown, Dutton and Cook (2001) supports the perspective that self-esteem influences self-evaluations (i.e., self-efficacy). As Brown, Dutton and Cook (2001) note: "People who are fond of themselves in a

general way (i.e., those with high self-esteem), view themselves as having many positive qualities. They like the way they look; they enjoy their sense of humor; they appreciate their talents. The causal process is a top down one, from global feelings of affection to beliefs that one possesses many socially valued attributes.”

In a sales context, self-efficacy occurs when a salesperson feels confident and competent in the selling role. Since authenticity has been shown to be positively related to self-esteem, and self-esteem leads to enhanced self-evaluations (e.g., self efficacy), it logically follows that authenticity would relate indirectly to self-efficacy. In other words, a salesperson that feels authentic performing his/her job will likely feel better about himself/herself in general, and as a result, will tend to view themselves as performing more favorably in the selling role. Hence, proposition five holds:

P5: Self-esteem will positively influence self-efficacy.

Rejection sensitivity

As mentioned above, researchers have shown a positive relationship between authenticity and global self-esteem. Global self-esteem levels have also been shown to correlate negatively with rejection sensitivity (Downey et al. 1998). Rejection sensitivity is essentially an antonym for “resilience.” According to Ingram et al. (2004), resilience is a key salesperson customer service dimension. They define it as the “ability of a salesperson to get knocked down several times a day by a customer’s verbal assault (i.e., complaint) and get right back up with a smile and ask for more.” It seems individuals in sales positions are more likely than those in other occupations to encounter multiple rejections and failures on a daily basis, as well as the accompanying potentially negative feelings and thoughts directed at the self (Verbeke and Bagozzi 2000). Since the fear of rejection is perhaps the most significant reason salespeople avoid prospecting (Ingram et al. 2004), resilience would seem to be desirable as a salesperson quality.

Concerning high self esteem and the ability to tolerate rejection, Kernis (2005) wrote: “If one is truly happy with oneself, being outperformed by others, receiving an unflattering evaluation, or performing poorly should not require excessive self-protection; instead, high self-esteem individuals should roll with the punches so that potentially threatening events would not ‘stick,’ but, instead, roll off like ‘water off a duck’s back.’”

Researchers in psychology have demonstrated that self-esteem is more stable for some people than for others (see Kernis and Waschull 1995, for a review). According to Kernis (2005), self-esteem stability refers to the “magnitude of short-term fluctuations that people experience in their contextually based, immediate feelings of self-worth.” Self-esteem instability has been operationalized as the within-person standard deviation of self-esteem over time (Crocker and Wolfe 2001). While authentic individuals have been shown to have higher levels of self-esteem, they have also been shown to have more stable levels of self-esteem (Herrmann, Kernis and Goldman 2004). People with unstable levels of self-esteem lack a well-anchored self-esteem, and may be especially prone to interpreting everyday events (e.g., salesperson’s closing efforts rejected) as being relevant to their own self-esteem (Kernis 2005). Moreover, people with unstable self-esteem characteristically react very strongly to events perceived as self-esteem relevant (Kernis 2005).

Since authenticity has been shown to positively influence both (global) self-esteem and self-esteem stability, and global self-esteem and self-esteem stability has been shown to negatively influence rejection sensitivity, we would logically expect authenticity to indirectly and negatively influence rejection sensitivity. Thus, a salesperson who feels inauthentic in the sales role should likely be more sensitive when confronting rejection. The authentic salesperson, however, might perceive rejection less personally, as his/her self-esteem is much less contingent upon desired outcomes. Consequently, the sixth proposition holds that:

P6: Authenticity will positively influence self esteem.

P7: Self esteem will negatively influence rejection sensitivity.

Customer-Orientation

According to Brown et al. (2002), customer-orientation refers to an employee's tendency or predisposition to meet customers' long term needs in an on-the-job context. Thus, customer-oriented salespersons keep their customers' best interests in mind. In contrast, a selling-orientation involves practicing the more short-term and company-needs focused selling-concept, which may involve the use of more manipulative tactics and behaviors to close sales (Saxe and Weitz 1982). It would seem that the use of deceptive and manipulative tactics would be examples of inauthentic behaviors.

Saxe and Weitz (1982) suggest that customer-orientation is positively related to concern for others. However, as Ingram et al. (2004) argue, most salespersons lack the commitment and skills necessary to support their clients' interests, and therefore tend to be more "talk the talk" than "walk the walk" when it comes to customer-oriented selling. MacKay (1988) argues that the most effective salespeople are genuinely interested in their customers. Ashforth and Humphrey (1993) argue customers' perceptions of good service hinge on the degree to which service agents convey a sense of genuine interpersonal sensitivity and concern.

Given that customers respond favorably to a genuine customer-orientation (Dunlap et al. 1988), it is likely that salespersons purposefully attempt to give that impression to their buyers. We would expect customer-oriented salespeople to experience themselves as more authentic because it is not necessary for them to *pretend* to have their customer's best interests in mind, because they authentically do have them in mind. In contrast, selling-oriented selling can, at best, only involve a pretense of being customer-needs focused, because in actuality the needs of the salesperson and his/her company are given highest priority. Since authenticity involves a

lack of pretense, salespersons with a selling-orientation would likely experience themselves as less authentic. Thus,

P8: Customer-orientation will positively influence authenticity

P9: Selling-orientation will negatively influence authenticity

CONCLUSIONS

The concepts presented in this study may provide sales managers with insight into the relevance of authenticity to personal selling. This should assist sales managers in the design of authenticity-enhancing sales positions, as well as the hiring of authentic individuals. The testable propositions suggested in this article offer a potential methodology which could be used to evaluate the degree to which a salesperson's level of authenticity might relate to salesperson characteristics. As suggested in Figure 1, role identity; job autonomy; and customer-orientation positively influence authenticity. Selling-orientation and role ambiguity are proposed to negatively influence authenticity. Authenticity, in turn, is proposed to positively influence job satisfaction and self-esteem. Finally, self-esteem is proposed to negatively influence rejection sensitivity and positively influence self-efficacy. These variable are relevant in that some represent desirable salesperson traits (amenable to identification); skills (amenable to development); or desirable sales outcomes.

Managerial Implications

If the propositions established in this research hold true, numerous managerial implications may follow. Perhaps the most obvious implications may involve the impact of the salesperson's authenticity on the selection, retention, and training aspects of sales management. For example, many individuals cling to the belief that they are not well-suited for sales, as they perceive themselves as not being sufficiently extroverted, disingenuous and manipulative to be successful in the selling profession. While most sales managers likely view these perceptions as inconsistent with reality, such perceptions are

nonetheless very real to many prospective salespersons. Consequently, if research supports the notion that authenticity is a desirable trait, the dissemination of such knowledge should facilitate the recruitment of quality individuals into the selling profession, as such individuals will likely be more attracted to a profession they perceive as allowing ample freedom for self-expression. Thus, the availability of a more qualified pool of applicants should result in superior selection decisions reflected in both salesforce performance and career longevity.

Firms might also consider increasing the relevance of authenticity as a salesforce hiring criteria and training hiring managers by assessing the authenticity of sales position applicants in interview settings. Selection methods such as unstructured interviewing, role playing, testing, and reference checking could enhance the likelihood of selecting individuals that are genuinely passionate about and committed to the possibility of entering the selling profession. Such individuals would likely be more authentic in acting out their salesperson roles. Thus, hiring criteria might be modified to focus more on the sales applicant's authenticity and passion for the selling profession (e.g., role identity). Such a change in focus may facilitate the selection of individuals who are better able to maintain their authenticity in sales situations.

If authenticity is indeed a desirable salesperson trait, sales training programs could be modified to enhance the nurturance of the authenticity of newly hired salespersons. Through this process, sales managers might refrain from attempting to "force square pegs into round holes" and instead allow trainees to behave in ways more consistent with their true selves. Correspondingly, if a company's sales training program is designed to create sales cloning, it is likely that salespersons will be required to behave in ways they perceive as inauthentic. The research in this paper suggests that such behavioral attempts may result in lower levels of job satisfaction. Thus, training and retention programs may be modified based on the fact that training may be designed in a fashion that recognizes the individual nature of

the salesperson and no longer advocates "sales cloning." Training might then be developed to focus on sales behaviors, rather than sales personalities, thus allowing salespeople to behave authentically, which would then, in turn, reduce sales force turnover levels and increase long-term performance. Perhaps rather than training individuals to fit the "sales stereotype," managers may be better-advised to develop sales skills that are more customer-orientated than selling-oriented, as selling-oriented behaviors generally involve *pretending* to put the customer's needs first.

Authenticity may be enhanced by reducing salesperson role ambiguity. Reducing ambiguity can be accomplished by clarifying job descriptions, increasing the accuracy and realism of job previews, conducting regular performance appraisals, and generally increasing the quality and quantity of managerial/salesperson communications. This would allow salespersons a greater ability to engage in realistic self-appraisals in order to determine whether a particular sales position fits "who they are," (i.e., whether the position is one in which allows them the freedom to behave in a self-expressed and authentic manner). Thus, reduced role ambiguity, combined with an increased identification of the individual with the sales role, should result in increased levels of authenticity for the salesperson.

Moreover, the present research suggests that firms redesign their sales positions to allow salespersons greater perceived job autonomy. For example, salespersons might be given more leeway in how they establish rapport with customers. This would require that management refrain from expecting their naturally sensitive and supportive salespersons to behave as if they were joke-telling and back-slapping extroverts. Salespersons should be discouraged from attempting to be something other than "who they really are," as "who they really are" is the only thing they can authentically be. Consistent with this, managers should assure newly hired salespersons that sales success can be enjoyed by a variety of personality types, not just the stereotypical extroverted salesperson. Such job

design modifications would likely allow the salesperson more unconstrained freedom for authentic self-expression, potentially contributing to a more satisfied salesforce. This, in turn, would likely impact salesforce turnover in a favorable manner.

In addition, the study might also provide significant managerial implications with regard to salesperson motivation. Many pay-for-performance plans focus on inducing sales performance, much like a theory X type manager. However, salespeople who are behaving authentically might be motivated more intrinsically. The fact that being able to behave authentically leads to heightened levels of self-esteem, which in turn results in greater levels of self-efficacy and lower levels of rejection sensitivity may create circumstances in which extrinsic rewards (commissions, bonuses, etc.) have minimal impacts on sales behaviors and results. Thus, sales managers might discover that authentic salespeople are more likely to be motivated from within, and thus, the opportunities to engage in activities that reflect this authenticity (i.e., job autonomy, customer orientation) meet their desires and result in the higher performance levels desired by management. Such findings would thus suggest that future motivational efforts focus more on factors such as enhancing the salesperson's feelings of growth, self-determination and responsibility for the job and reduce the focus on traditional extrinsic rewards (i.e., contests, commissions, bonuses).

Directions for Future Research

The present study focuses on variables likely to impact salespersons' perceptions of the authenticity of their own behaviors, such as perceived job autonomy, role identity, role ambiguity, customer-orientation, and selling-orientation. It also focuses on the impact of such salesperson-perceived authenticity on salesperson variables such as job satisfaction, self-esteem, rejection sensitivity and self-efficacy. Thus, the present study focuses on the impact of authenticity on the *salesperson*, rather than the *buyer*.

While not explicitly addressed in this research, the likely impact of salesperson authenticity on the firm's relationships with their customers would seem to warrant a future research focus. Moreover, given that a salesperson's authenticity level likely impacts the degree to which he/she is perceived as trustworthy by his/her buyers, and that perceived trustworthiness likely impacts the quality of the buyer-seller relationship and the probability of sales success with that customer, future studies are needed that focus on salesperson authenticity from the buyer's perspective. Such research might investigate the criteria used by buyers in assessing salesperson authenticity. The findings from these studies could enhance sales professionals' awareness of behaviors potentially contributing to buyers' perceptions of their authenticity. Other studies might address the impact of salesperson authenticity on buyer satisfaction. A similar issue warranting research attention relates to the customer's level of trust when dealing with authentic salespeople versus dealing with inauthentic salespeople. If customers are more satisfied and have higher levels of trust as a result of dealing with authentic salespeople, then one might argue that customer maintenance (longevity) and profitability may be enhanced. Thus, salesperson authenticity may result in greater levels of performance, particularly long-term performance.

Regardless of the directions taken by future studies, this study provides what insight to sales managers and sales academicians alike. Broaching the concept that one could actually experience greater levels of success in professional selling by being true, authentic and genuine is an exciting proposition. While many may have felt "intuitively" that authenticity was a critical salesperson trait, this research provides testable propositions and logic supporting the validity of the concept that salesperson authenticity could be a vital component in sales. It is hoped that future research will provide continued enlightenment with regard to this concept.

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