THE EFFECTS OF COMMUNICATION MODE IN RELATIONSHIP SELLING

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Despite the prominent role salesperson communication plays in relationship selling, our understanding of the extent to which communication mode affects the relationship development process is limited. The purpose of this study is to identify those communication modes most capable of positively influencing desired outcomes in buyer-salesperson relationships. Study results, derived from a sample of purchasing agents, highlight a discrepancy between those communication modes that are most effective in building customer relationships and those that salespeople are most heavily relying upon. Managerial implications are discussed and avenues for future research in the area are provided.

The last two decades have ushered in a new era in selling - one in which the focus has shifted from singular customer transactions to enduring customer relationships. Relationship selling, encompassing those activities directed towards the establishment and maintenance of profitable customer relationships (Johnston and Marshall, 2008), has been adopted as the strategy of choice in many organizations. As spanners of the link between buying and selling organizations, salespeople play a prominent role in enacting this strategy as they assume the responsibility of guiding customers through the relationship development process (Cannon and Perreault, 1999; Weitz and Bradford, 1998). Their personal interactions and ongoing efforts to build and maintain the relationship largely determine the level of value and satisfaction provided the customer (Jap, 2001). We have therefore seen a considerable amount of research dedicated to identifying the means through which salespeople can make these relationships more effective and enduring (e.g., Beverland, 2001; Marshall *et al.*, 2003).

Research has highlighted the particularly important role communication plays in these relationships (Campbell and Davis, 2006; Sengupta *et al.*, 2000; Williams *et al.*, 1990). Technology provides one vehicle through which these communications can be enhanced and the salesperson and customer brought closer together (Bush *et al.*, 2007; Weeks *et al.*, 2004). Technological advancements have provided salespeople a vast array of tools through which they can better communicate with the customer (Widmier *et al.*, 2002). Although some have been slow to adopt these technologies, the newest generation of salespeople - the Millennials - are eagerly embracing them. Millennials have been weaned on the technologies others have been introduced to only at some point in their lives (Howe and Strauss, 2007). They rely heavily upon voice communications, e-mail, text messaging, internet faxing, web browsing, and other wireless information services. Forecasters predict approximately ten million Millennials will join the American work force over the next five years (Cunningham, 2007), many of them in sales.

The convergence of these two related phenomena - the vast array of advanced communication technologies that are now

available and the tendency of the newest generation of salespeople to rely heavily upon them - suggest that a fundamental shift is occurring with respect to the means through which salespeople are communicating with their customers. Is this a good thing? Is there a point at which salesperson reliance upon technology becomes too great? Although technology provides salespeople the ability to communicate more frequently with their customers, it at the same time further inundates customers already awash in a tidal wave of communications. A study conducted in 1998 found the typical manager receives 190 messages per day, including 52 phone calls, 30 e-mails, 22 voice mails, 18 pieces of interoffice correspondence, 18 letters, and 15 faxes (Associated Press 1998). Given the proliferation of e-mail in the past decade, one would assume the situation has only grown worse.

How can salespeople break through this clutter? Which communication tools are most effective in further advancing customer relationships in this environment? Unfortunately, we have very few answers to these type questions, as the choice and resulting impact of communication mode in sales relationships has received little attention in previous research (Cano *et al.*, 2005). Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to empirically examine the effects of salesperson communication mode in relationship selling. We employ an exploratory research design in addressing

three primary research questions from the perspective of the customer:

RQ1:   *Which communication modes are salespeople most heavily utilizing?*

RQ2:   *Which communication modes do customers most prefer?*

RQ3:   *To what extent does customer gender and age moderate these preferences?*

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. In the following section, we introduce the specific variables of interest and discuss the relevant literature. The research methods employed and results attained are then reviewed. We conclude by discussing the implications for management and providing directions for future research in the area.

STUDY BACKGROUND

Figure 1 visually depicts the relationships of interest in the study. We examine the direct effects of salesperson communication mode on buyer trust in and commitment to the salesperson, buyer perceptions of salesperson communication quality, and buyer communication quality. We additionally examine the extent to which these relationships are moderated by buyer gender and age. Our choice of these moderating variables is driven by research which has noted their importance in determining individual communication preferences (Barrett and Davidson, 2006; Gudykunst, 1998; Shakeshaft *et al.*, 1991). The following discussion highlights the specific communication modes of interest while also defining and briefly discussing the relationship outcome variables analyzed.

Communication Mode

Communication mode refers to the method through which the salesperson transfers information (Mohr and Nevin, 1990). Although researchers have operationalized communication mode in a number of different ways (Stohl and Redding, 1987), we utilize the most straightforward of these by examining e-mail, telephone, face-to-face, fax, written, and text messaging communications. Previous research examining interpersonal communications (e.g., Daft and Lengel, 1984) suggest these communication modes can be thought of as resting on a continuum, with those offering a greater ability to convey the richness of a message resting on one end of the continuum (e.g., face-to-face communications), and those providing a more economical means through which the message can be conveyed resting at the other end of the continuum (e.g., e-mail). This operationalization also provides a mix of more traditional and more technological advanced communication tools (e.g., written versus text messages).

Outcome Variables

Trust and commitment play a critical in the development of successful relationships. The presence of both – not just one or the other – distinguishes successful relationships from those that merely endure (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Customers who trust the salesperson believe the salesperson to be reliable and of high integrity (Jap, 2001; Moorman *et al.*, 1993; Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Swan and Nolan, 1985). Trust is developed through repeated interactions in which the customer observes

Figure 1

Salesperson Communication Mode in Relationship Selling
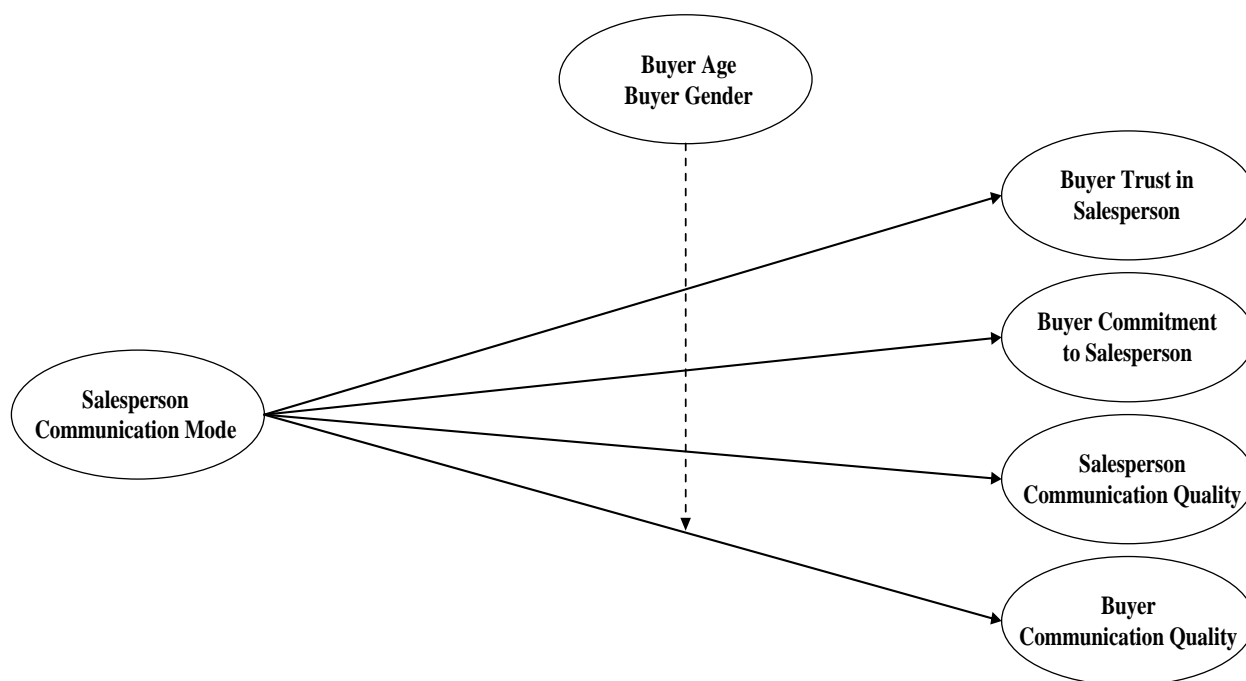
the salesperson to be dependable, reliable, honest, and competent (Swan and Nolan, 1985). Through these interactions the customer comes to believe that the salesperson will not take unexpected actions that may result in negative consequences for the customer (Anderson and Narus, 1990).

Commitment is defined as "an exchange partner believing that an ongoing relationship with another is so important as to warrant maximum efforts at maintaining it; that is, the committed party believes the relationship is worth working on to ensure that it endures indefinitely" (Morgan and Hunt, 1994, p. 23). Moorman, Zaltman, and Deshpandé (1992) suggest that committed parties have an enduring desire to maintain a valued relationship while Anderson and Weitz (1992) note that those committed to a relationship are willing to make sacrifices to ensure this happens. Commitment thus not only denotes a desire to continue a relationship, but also a pledge to work toward this continuance (Wilson, 1995).

Salesperson and buyer communication quality refers to the formal and informal sharing of meaningful and timely information by both parties (Anderson and Narus, 1990). The importance of communication in relational exchanges is supported by the fact that it has been regularly included in relationship marketing models (Dwyer *et al.*, 1987; Morgan and Hunt, 1994) and has been identified as a key determinant of relationship success in both industrial and consumer markets (e.g., Bendapudi and Berry, 1997; Doney and Cannon, 1997). Increased levels of communication facilitate the discovery of

similarities between buyers and sellers (Bennett, 1996), thereby encouraging feelings of trust, special status, and closeness (Doney and Cannon, 1997).

RESEARCH DESIGN

Data for the study were collected through a web-based survey hosted by Vovici.com. A contact list of individuals from the purchasing community was first obtained from the Institute for Supply Management (ISM) and purged such that only those individuals with the primary title "purchasing agent" were included in the sample. Members of the sample were sent an initial e-mail invitation which briefly explained the nature of the study and provided a link to the URL hosting the survey. Once accessing the survey, respondents were again briefly informed as to the nature of the study and provided directions for completion. Each respondent was asked to complete the survey in reference to a salesperson he or she interacts with on a regular basis.

An initial e-mail was sent to 1,500 sample members. From this, 153 usable responses were received for a response rate of 10.2 percent. A second e-mail was sent two weeks later to those who had not yet participated. An additional 53 responses were received from this for a response rate of 3.9 percent. Thus, in total, 206 usable responses were received for an overall response rate of 13.7 percent. Individual and company sample characteristics are provided in Table 1.

We assessed the likelihood of non-response bias by comparing the responses of early and late respondents (Armstrong and Overton 1977). Mean differences between the first and last ten percent of respondents were tested for

Table 1

Sample Characteristics

	Count	*Percentage*
Gender		
Female	47	24.74
Male	143	75.26
Age		
26-35	15	7.69
36-45	45	23.08
46-55	89	45.64
56+	46	23.59
Tenure		
Less than 1 year	4	2.04
1-3 years	31	15.82
4-6 years	41	20.92
7-9 years	22	11.22
10-12 years	16	8.16
13-15 years	8	4.08
15+ years	74	37.76
2006 Revenues		
Less than $5 million	8	4.49
$5 - $49.9 million	24	13.48
$50 - $249.9 million	29	16.29
$250 - $499.9 million	20	11.24
$500 - $999.9 million	12	6.74
$1.0 - $9.9 billion	50	28.09
$10 - $49.9 billion	21	11.80
$50 billion+	14	7.87
Employees		
Less than 100	17	8.72
100-999	49	25.13
1,000-4,999	35	17.95
5,000-9,999	16	8.21
10,000-49,999	47	24.10
49,999-100,000	18	9.23
100,000+	13	6.67
Scope		
Domestic Only	104	52.79
Domestic/International	90	45.69
International Only	3	1.52

Table 1

Continued

	Count	*Percentage*
Industry		
Manufacturing	28	14.29
Services	25	12.76
Government/Public Sector	23	11.73
Petroleum/Petrochemicals	19	9.69
Food and Beverage	14	7.14
Transportation	14	7.14
Information Technology	13	6.63
Education	11	5.61
Metal Products	11	5.61
Construction	10	5.10
Other	10	5.10
Utilities	9	4.59
Retail	6	3.06
Distribution	3	1.53

all constructs. Based on the lack of statistical significance for any variable ($p < 0.05$), non-response bias was not considered a serious concern.

Measurement Model

All measures employed in the study were drawn from previous research and adapted for use in this context. Per Mohr, Fisher, and Nevin (1996), communication mode frequency was assessed by asking respondents to indicate how frequently the salesperson communicates via each of the modes of interest over a typical four-week period (1 = Very Infrequently, 7 = Very Frequently). Salesperson and buyer communication quality were assessed via two sets of four-item measures adapted from Anderson, Lodish, and Weitz (1987). The measures for buyer trust in and commitment to the salesperson were adapted from the work of Morgan and Hunt (1994).

The reliability and validity of all multi-item measures was assessed through confirmatory factor analysis. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 2. Model results indicated an acceptable level of fit between the final measurement model and data: $\chi^2_{(94)} = 215.93$, NNFI = 0.99, CFI = 0.99, IFI = 0.99, RMSEA = 0.080 ($CI_{90\%}$, 0.066 to 0.094) and SRMR = 0.046. All item loadings were statistically significant ($p < 0.01$), indicating convergent validity. Reliability was assessed for each construct by computing composite reliability and average variance extracted (Steenkamp and van Trijp, 1991). For a construct to possess good reliability, composite reliability should be greater than 0.60 and the average variance extracted should exceed 0.50 (Bagozzi and Yi, 1988). All measures met or exceeded these standards. Discriminant validity was assessed by examining whether the average variance extracted by each underlying construct was greater than the highest shared variance with

Table 2

Measurement Model Results

Construct and Scale Items	Standardized Loadings	Composite Reliability	Coefficient Alpha	Average Variance Extracted
Buyer Trust in Salesperson (Given my experience)		0.97	0.97	0.85
…the salesperson is very honest and truthful.	0.94			
…the salesperson has high integrity.	0.95			
…the salesperson can be trusted completely.	0.90			
…the salesperson can be trusted at all times.	0.92			
…the salesperson can be counted on to do what is right.	0.90			
Buyer Commitment to Salesperson (My relationship with the salesperson)		0.95	0.96	0.80
…is one that I am very committed to.	0.92			
…is very important to me.	0.89			
…is of high significance to me.	0.91			
…is one that I really care about.	0.90			
…is worth my effort to maintain.	0.86			
Salesperson Communication Quality		0.88	0.91	0.71
The salesperson keeps me informed of new company developments.	0.82			
The salesperson communicates with me frequently.*				
The quality of communication from the salesperson is consistently high.	0.92			
The salesperson constantly updates me with regard to new services.	0.78			
Buyer Communication Quality		0.86	0.85	0.68
I keep the salesperson informed of new developments within our firm.	0.72			
I communicate with the salesperson frequently.				
The quality of my communications with the salesperson is consistently high.*	0.90			
I feel it is important I communicate with the salesperson on a regular basis.	0.84			

Notes: All items measured 1 = Strongly Disagree - 7 = Strongly Agree, * Items deleted during measurement purification process

Table 3

Communication Mode Descriptive Information

Communication Mode	Mean	SD	F-ratio	*p*-value
E-mail	4.80	1.99		
Telephone	4.36	1.92	6.29	0.01
Face-to-Face	3.10	1.83	48.48	0.00
Fax	2.07	1.67	30.87	0.00
Written	1.45	1.02	22.22	0.00
Text	1.37	1.05	0.45	0.50

Note: F-ratio statistic and *p*-value presented relative to preceding class (e.g., text versus written)

all other latent constructs (Fornell and Larcker 1981). In all cases, this standard was also met or exceeded.

STUDY RESULTS

In addressing our first research question we examined the descriptive statistics associated with each communication mode to gain a better understanding of which are being most often utilized by salespeople. The mean scores for each communication mode are presented in Table 3   (1 = Very Infrequently, 7 = Very Frequently). As noted in the table, e-mail was the most heavily utilized communication tool, followed by phone, face-to-face, fax, written, and text communications. Given the low mean scores associated with fax, written, and text communications, the decision was made to focus only on the effects of e-mail, phone, and face-to-face communications in the remaining analyses. A series of F-tests subsequently revealed that e-mail communications (M = 4.80) were utilized significantly more often than were phone communications (M = 4.36, F(1, 406) = 6.29, p = 0.01), and that phone communications

were in turn utilized significantly more often than were face-to-face communications (M = 3.10, F(1, 405) = 48.48, p = 0.00).

In response to our second research question the direct effects associated with these three communication modes were assessed through a series of linear regressions in SPSS 15.0. Composite indicators were calculated for each of the multi-item constructs and utilized in the regressions. Results from the analyses are presented in Table 4. The table contains R-squared values for each regression as well as the standardized path estimates and corresponding *t*- and *p*-values for each predictor variable.

The various communication modes explained approximately 39 percent of the variance in buyer communication, 35 percent of the variance in salesperson communication, 24 percent of the variance in commitment to the salesperson, and 20 percent of the variance in trust in the salesperson. Each regression produced a similar pattern of results. Phone and face-to-face communications were

Table 4

Multiple Regression Results

	R²	β	*t*-value	*p*-value
Trust in Salesperson	0.20			
E-mail		0.13	1.56	0.12
Telephone		0.25	2.92	0.00
Face-to-Face		0.17	2.40	0.02
Commitment to Salesperson	0.24			
E-mail		0.13	1.69	0.09
Telephone		0.31	3.78	0.00
Face-to-Face		0.14	2.08	0.04
Salesperson Communication Quality	0.35			
E-mail		0.12	1.62	0.11
Telephone		0.34	4.44	0.00
Face-to-Face		0.26	4.10	0.00
Buyer Communication Quality	0.39			
E-mail		0.16	2.30	0.02
Telephone		0.39	5.30	0.00
Face-to-Face		0.20	3.25	0.00

Note: Standardized path estimates provided

significantly and positively related to each of the outcome variables, while e-mail communication was only significantly related to buyer communication ($\beta = 0.16$, *t*-value = 2.30, $p = 0.02$). Phone communication, the strongest predictor of each outcome variable, was most influential in driving buyer communication ($\beta = 0.39$, *t*-value = 5.30, $p = 0.00$), and least influential in driving trust in the salesperson ($\beta = 0.25$, *t*-value = 2.92, $p = 0.00$). Conversely, face-to-face communication was most influential in driving perceptions of salesperson communication ($\beta = 0.26$, *t*-value = 4.10, $p = 0.00$), and least influential in driving commitment to the salesperson ($\beta = 0.14$, *t*-value = 2.08, $p = 0.04$).

We addressed our third research question by examining the moderating effects associated with buyer gender (1 = Female, 2 = Male) and age   (1 = ≤ 45, 2 = > 45). To conduct this analysis, we first performed a series of linear regressions in SPSS utilizing both gender and age as selector variables. We then compared the unstandardized regression coefficients from these analyses to assess the level of difference between them, which was captured through the *z*- and corresponding *p*-values (cf. Brame *et al.*, 1998; Clogg *et al.*, 1995).

Results from these analyses are provided in Table 5. Though the main effects associated with phone, face-to-face, and e-mail communications are quite robust across the two moderating variables, there are some

Table 5

Tests for Moderation: Buyer Gender and Age

Buyer Gender	Overall β	Female β	Male β	*z*-value	*p*-value
Trust in Salesperson					
E-mail	0.13	0.01	0.17	0.70	0.48
Telephone	0.25	0.16	0.31	0.61	0.54
Face-to-Face	0.17	0.47	0.02	3.00	0.00
Commitment to Salesperson					
E-mail	0.13	0.05	0.15	0.43	0.67
Telephone	0.31	0.34	0.33	0.08	0.94
Face-to-Face	0.14	0.29	0.05	1.40	0.16
Salesperson Communication Quality					
E-mail	0.12	0.17	0.10	0.48	0.63
Telephone	0.34	0.26	0.36	0.61	0.54
Face-to-Face	0.26	0.39	0.22	1.02	0.31
Buyer Communication Quality					
E-mail	0.16	0.21	0.15	0.54	0.59
Telephone	0.39	0.28	0.45	1.03	0.30
Face-to-Face	0.20	0.38	0.11	1.91	0.06
Buyer Age	Overall β	Young β	Old β	*z*-value	*p*-value
Trust in Salesperson					
E-mail	0.13	0.28	0.05	1.38	0.17
Telephone	0.25	0.09	0.32	1.31	0.19
Face-to-Face	0.17	0.09	0.20	0.74	0.46
Commitment to Salesperson					
E-mail	0.13	0.21	0.08	0.77	0.44
Telephone	0.31	0.18	0.37	1.07	0.28
Face-to-Face	0.14	0.12	0.14	0.17	0.87
Salesperson Communication Quality					
E-mail	0.12	0.14	0.08	0.40	0.69
Telephone	0.34	0.18	0.41	1.46	0.14
Face-to-Face	0.26	0.26	0.27	0.17	0.87
Buyer Communication Quality					
E-mail	0.16	0.32	0.07	1.55	0.12
Telephone	0.39	0.19	0.49	1.46	0.14
Face-to-Face	0.20	0.20	0.20	0.11	0.91

Note: Standardized path estimates provided

interesting differences worth noting. First, results from the analysis would seem to indicate that female buyers tend to prefer face-to-face communications while male buyers would rather be communicated with via phone. The results would also seem to suggest that younger buyers are more accepting of e-mail communications than are their older counterparts.

DISCUSSION

Our purpose in this study was to examine and quantify the effects of salesperson communication mode in relationship selling. We believe the issue important given the rapid advancement of communication technologies and the emerging presence of the Millennial generational in the workforce. Study results indicate that across the moderating influences examined phone communications are more effective than face-to-face communications, which are in turn are more effective than e-mail communications. Study results also reveal, however, that salespeople are relying most heavily upon e-mail when communicating with buyers. We therefore see a discrepancy between those communication tools that are most effective in developing relationships and those tools that are being most heavily utilized.

Managerial Implications

Our first and most obvious managerial implication results from the finding that phone communications are more effective than e-mail and face-to-face communications from a relationship building perspective. Thus, if the salesperson is in a situation in which an e-mail can be sent or a phone call placed, he or she should use the phone. Further, there may be some instances in which the salesperson can forego face-to-face communications in favor of a phone call. Phone skills would therefore appear to provide salespeople a means through which they can not only be more efficient in managing their accounts, but also more effective in building stronger customer relationships.

Second, our study also brings up some interesting implications with respect to managing the new breed of Millennial salespeople. These salespeople are technologically savvy; they have grown up with many of the more advanced communication technologies and are very adept at using them. Managers are, however, forced to walk a bit of a tightrope when it comes to technology utilization amongst this group. They must ensure that Millennials are leveraging these technologies in order to work more efficiently, yet at the same time not over relying upon them by emphasizing the fact that in some instances the human touch is required. In these instances, the necessary time and energy should be devoted to ensure adequate communications. These instances are also likely to differ by customer; thus, it is important salespeople understand the manner to which individual customers most want to be communicated.

Third, our findings have some interesting implications with respect to communication specialization. It might very well be that certain salespeople are more adept at face-to-face communications, while others are much more proficient communicating via the phone

or computer. Managers should explore their options with respect to this type specialization, particularly in those instances where an inside and outside sales force is utilized in unison. Sales managers should also attempt to leverage the technological skills possessed by Millennial salespeople, specifically focusing on how these skills can best be disseminated to other, less technologically adept salespeople.

Fourth, the study has some interesting implications with respect to call reluctance. E-mail provides a means through which cold calls and confrontation can be avoided and the likelihood of personal rejection lessened (Cano *et al.*, 2005). Even if the customer says no, there is a buffer through which the impact is lessened. It is important managers recognize those salespeople who are using e-mail and other communication technologies in an effort to be more efficient, and those salespeople who are using it due to call reluctance.

Fifth, our perspective in this study highlights the managerial importance of incorporating the voice of the customer into the management and evaluation process. While firms might be focused on salesperson efficiencies and cost reduction through greater use of technology, the customer might well desire something very different. Indeed, in this study we found a discrepancy between those communication tools salespeople are most often utilizing and those tools that are most effective in developing customer relationships. Firms and managers focused solely on internal metrics might very well lose sight of these types of customer preferences.

Study Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study is subject to two of the primary limitations common to cross-sectional research. First, aside from those considered here, there are a myriad of other factors that could potentially influence the outcome variables analyzed in this study (e.g., variables such as salesperson empathy and adaptation). It is also quite possible that the effects of communication mode might differ substantially across a different mix of outcome variables. Second, the survey methodology utilized in the study may have created common method variance. This would be particularly concerning if we felt the survey respondents were providing responses they deemed socially acceptable. However, special care was taken to insure respondents were not aware of the specific issues of interest in the study. The survey was additionally structured such that items for all of the constructs were separated and mixed with items of other constructs so that no one respondent would be able to detect which items were associated with which factors.

These limitations notwithstanding, we foresee several avenues for future research in the area. First, as we have focused on but one side of the customer-salesperson dyad in this study, future research should examine salesperson perceptions with respect to the issue. What communication tools do salespeople believe they are most heavily utilizing? Which of these tools do salespeople perceive to be most effective? Are there generational differences across salespeople with respect to the type communication tools being utilized? Are

salespeople cognizant of the fact that customers might vary in their acceptance of more advanced communication technologies?

Second, as this and other studies examining the issue have primarily been quantitative in nature, future research should employ a qualitative design to develop a deeper, more detailed understanding of the issue. In-depth interviews with salespeople, sales managers, and customers might very well reveal relevant issues not addressed in this study. They might also provide additional information with respect to the perceptions of Millennial salespeople regarding the role technology plays in customer relationships.

Third, future research should take a more dynamic perspective in examining customers' communication preferences over time. In this study, we focused only on established relationships between salespeople and customers. Might this have affected the findings? Might certain communication tools be more effective during the early stages of a relationship, and other tools more effective during the latter stages? Could it be that the human element is necessary when the relationship is initially developing, and technology suffices when the relationship is being maintained? Interestingly, might some communication tools be more desirable when one is trying to disengage from the relationship?

Fourth, from a customer relationship management (CRM) perspective, future research should seek to identify appropriate communication strategies in relation to the return provided by the customer. While all customers may desire phone or face-to-face

communications, not all customers are deserving of the time these type communications require. They do not provide the profit needed to justify the time expenditures face-to-face communications require. For those accounts that provide less, what communication strategies should be employed? How can technology best be leveraged here while still adequately maintaining the relationship? For example, based on the return provided, might some accounts only be communicated with via e-mail? Might others be referred to an Internet site? Addressing these type questions will not only assist salespeople in leveraging technology, but also provide guidance with respect to how technology can be utilized across a portfolio of A-, B-, and C-level customer accounts.

Fifth, future research should be directed towards identifying the means through which firms can enhance the communication skills of salespeople across various technologies. For example, what is the best way to communicate with customers via e-mail? Might there be an optimal way to communicate via text-messaging? Even more specifically, how can the salesperson best communicate with the customer during actual presentations? Many salespeople rely heavily upon PowerPoint - is this optimal? Importantly, how can Millennial salespeople be leveraged during this process? Might there be means through which these individuals can be used as trainers for others who might not be as technologically sophisticated?

Sixth, and finally, as most research is ultimately concerned with salesperson

performance, future research should more fully examine the relationship between salesperson technology use and salesperson performance. Results from this study indicate that the relationship might very well be curvilinear. Is this the case? Is there an optimal point that exists after which performance declines due to an over reliance on technology? If so, where is this point? Can it be moved through customer conversations such that the salesperson is better able to leverage technological efficiencies while still maintaining or even enhancing performance?

Conclusion

Technological advances have created numerous opportunities through which firms can not only be more effective but also more efficient in their dealings with external stakeholders. However, given the prominent role relationships play in firm success, it is important managers be cognizant of the extent to which technology affects the quality of these relationships. Results from this study indicate that, in the customer-salesperson context, more traditional forms of communication still play a crucial role in developing customer relationships. This should give pause to managers who are aggressively promoting technology as a means through which salesperson efficiency can be enhanced. Amidst the prolific technological advances made in recent years, results from this study highlight the fact that the human touch is still an integral part of successful customer relationships.

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