

THE IMPACT OF SELF-EFFICACY ON EXPECTANCY, EFFORT, AND ADAPTIVE SELLING IN A PERSONNEL SELLING CONTEXT

By Robert C. McMurrian and Rajesh Srivastava

The purpose of this study is to examine the usefulness of Bandura's social cognitive theory in explaining a salesperson's level of performance. A central concept in social cognitive theory is that individuals' levels of self-efficacy (beliefs they possess the necessary abilities to successfully perform a task) will have a direct influence on levels of expectancy and levels of effort. This paper posits and tests a model of self-efficacy as an antecedent of a salesperson's levels of expectancy, effort, and practice of adaptive selling. In this study of 400 salespeople in automobile dealerships in a southern state, it was found that a person's level of self-efficacy did have a significant effect on both expectancy and effort. Additionally, self-efficacy was found to have a positive effect on the practice of adaptive selling skills by the responding salespeople.

Introduction

A primary objective of marketing practitioners, especially sales managers in organizations with personal selling functions and sales forces, has been an understanding of the factors related to effective sales performance. The fact that salesperson performance has been a long-time focus to marketing researchers is indicative of the importance of determining and understanding antecedents of success in personal selling jobs. Existing literature on industrial and organizational psychology suggests that an individual's job performance is a function of five factors: (1) personal, organizational, and environmental variables, (2) a person's role perceptions, (3) one's skill level associated with a job, (4) a person's aptitude for the specific tasks associated with a job, and (5) a person's level of motivation to work at specific job tasks (Johlke 2006; Lee, Hui, Tinsley, and Niu 2006; Jaramillo, Mulki, and Solomon 2006; Plank and Reid 1994; Jolson and Comer 1992; Churchill, Ford, Hartley and Walker 1985; Walker, Churchill and Ford 1977). While each of these factors influences ultimate performance of a sales task, the level of personal motivation a salesperson exhibits in specific personal selling tasks can, to some degree, moderate negative environmental influences (both internal and external),

Northern Illinois University

alleviate stressful role perceptions, and overcome some lack of skills and aptitude for a personal selling job. Thus, a salesperson's level of motivation is a key factor in successful outcomes associated with personal selling tasks.

A personal selling job includes several specific tasks that a salesperson must perform well to achieve successful outcomes. These selling tasks include such items as prospecting for new customers, planning sales presentations, securing customer appointments, making effective sales presentations, probing for needs, stimulating desire, building long-term partnerships or relationships with potential customers, demonstrating products, responding to buyers' objections, closing a sale, and providing follow-up service after the sale (Johlke 2006; Marshall, Goegel, and Moncrief 2003; Jolson 1997). A salesperson must effectively perform each of these personal selling tasks to attain successful outcomes. Failure to effectively accomplish any of these personal selling tasks can lead to sales results below sales goals or company and personal expectations.

Much of the sales literature examining the antecedents of successful sales performance has been grounded in Churchill, Ford and Walker's (2000) model of salesperson performance as moderated by

Vroom's expectancy theory (Gray and Wert-Gray 1999). Successful performance of a specific task is a function of the level of effort that a person expends on the task. That is, how hard a salesperson works at specific selling tasks. Off course, there are other variables like aptitude, skill, etc that influence performance but that is beyond the scope of this article. There are three factors that influence a salesperson's level of effort in individual tasks and in the sales job collectively. First, there must be an expectation by a salesperson that some level of effort in the assigned task will result in successful task performance as measured by specific goals (e.g., sales quota) and personal expectations. If there is not such an expectation of successful outcomes, an individual may not work hard enough or frequently enough at a specific sales task leading to failure of the entire process. Second, there must exist a belief that successful levels of performance will result in meaningful rewards. A salesperson, to expend the effort on a sales task required to achieve successful outcomes, must feel that the rewards (e.g., sales commissions) are worth the personal effort. Third, an individual must believe that earned rewards will be paid or given to an individual. A salesperson must know that the company he or she is selling for values effort and performance and demonstrates such through the timely delivery of earned rewards.

The existing research that relies on expectancy theory, however, has explained only a small part of the variance in performance among salespeople (Flaherty and Pappas 2005; Churchill et al. 1985). It has been suggested that "the expectancy theory framework, which assumes rational (or controlled) decision-making processes, cannot adequately describe and explain most motivational situations (Gray and Wert-Gray 1999). This leads one to believe there are variables contributing to performance that

have yet to be researched and explained. The variable we chose to study is effort.

A key question is – "How do salespeople develop high levels of expectations leading to personal effort in a selling task?" A central concept of social cognitive theory (Bandura 1986) is that individuals must first believe they possess the necessary abilities to successfully perform a task in order to have an expectancy that effort in the task will result in desired outcomes. A salesperson's self-efficacy will have a direct influence on levels of effort in the aforementioned personal selling tasks because the salesperson believes such effort will lead to positive results. Krishnan, Netemeyer and Boles (2003) examined the linkage between self-efficacy and effort in their model with self-efficacy, competitiveness and effort as antecedents of salesperson performance. Our model also studies this correlation between self-efficacy and effort. In our study, however, we extend this relationship to include a salesperson's level of expectancy that effort will yield results. This is an important relationship to examine because, as posited in Vroom's (1964) expectancy theory, it is expectancy linking effort and outcomes that results in a salesperson's level of effort in selling tasks. In our proposed model, we examine the effect of a salesperson's level of self-efficacy on both the person's level of expectancy and effort, along with a salesperson's practice of adaptiveness in sales presentations.

A distinctive human characteristic is personal agency (Bandura 1989). In the agency model (Bandura 1986), an individual's behavior is not simply the automatic result of environmental influences. Rather, an individual has the capability to exert some influence over outcomes by the application of forethought. That is, an individual can exert some influence over outcomes by selection of environments and construction of environments. A person high in perceived self-efficacy attempts to