Extremeness Aversion Techniques in Personal Selling: An Exploratory Study

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Among the major tasks of sales representatives are taking steps to discover and influence customer preferences. These personnel can benefit from assistance in carrying out these activities. Various studies in the consumer behavior field suggest that consumers may select compromise choices of action, using an extremeness aversion strategy. The investigation set forth in this paper probes into this practice and explores the effects of various attributes, including price, on extremeness aversion choices. Finally, the paper discusses the extremeness aversion technique ethics interface for sales professionals.

INTRODUCTION

In segmenting markets, marketers may offer two varieties – one an expensive and another with a discount appeal – sometimes it is better to introduce a third offering at the mid-price level. This may appeal to consumers who are characterized by "extremeness aversion" – they prefer a middle version of an attribute such as price. Alternatively, the marketer may introduce a new offering at a price higher than that of existing levels producing extremeness where customers to buy what was once the most expensive.

The purpose of this paper is to examine various applications of extremeness aversion (EA) accommodation (ACCOM) techniques for sales representatives and to provide suggestions as to the employment of these applications. The discussion reviews some central EA constructs and relationships to set forth a frame of reference for the utilization of these in personal selling practice.

Past experience indicates that research in consumer behavior can be very useful to sales professionals (e.g. Simonson and Tversky 1992; Huffman and Kahn, 1998; Chang and Liu, 2007). The goal of the discussion presented here is to illustrate some specific consumer choice applications of EA to personal selling which may assist in providing understandings on buyer purchase intention.

Personal selling practice has benefited from various techniques, such as EA, developed in collaboration with the social psychology discipline. Behavior compliance techniques for instance have been helpful in devising personal selling methodology to induce attitude change and purchasing (Ebster and Neumayr, 2008). The most common technique, first introduced by Freedman and Fraser (1966) is termed the door-in-the-face method. The theory underlying is that the targeted person feels an obligation to reciprocate a concession made by someone who marks a request and this paves the way for compliance with a second request (Cialdini el al., 1975). Those in the personal selling industry recognize the implications of reciprocation when another person who receives tangible gifts, time, or other sources of value, responds through purchases or customer loyalty. In the same vein, the extremeness aversion technique might guide sales professionals to center their attention on specific buyer choice perceptions when presenting products. The challenge is discovering which attribute or attributes are most important to the target customer at that point in time.

Some conventional views of how sales representatives attempt to understand consumer behavior have been found to lack validity. Bettman et al (1998) employ the information-processing approach to argue that rational consumer choice theory is incomplete and flawed as an appropriate approach to understanding how consumers make decisions. In this research, individuals often do not have well-defined preferences; instead, they may expediently construct them on the spot when needed, as when they must make a definitive choice (Bettman et al., 1998). For example, arrangements that delay payment until after consumption has commenced leave the consumer to decide whether to pay to avoid losing consumption, as opposed to paying to gain consumption (Kovemsky & Kahueman 2005). The issue is complicated, however, preferences are not always constructed on an as-needed basis, and individuals do have some firm and stable preferences for particular objects or brands (Sinn et al., 2007).

Recent research aims to define the forces that most impact consumer choice. In this, some consumers attempt to minimize their losses through transactions. Chuang et al (2007) have found that aspiration levels influence decision maker tendency to minimize loss. In this regard, the aspiration level is the reference point for what constitutes a satisfactory outcome (Payne et al., 1980).

Choices made on recurring basis affect selection variety (Read and Loewenstein, 1995). Context effects tend to occur when individuals regularly purchase a particular brand. However, they may be unaware of context effects (Simonson and Tversky, 1992). For example, a recent study by Sinn et al (2007) found that superiority effects are robust for recognized brand names. A particular context effects model, (EA ACCOM practices) may be useful for predicting consumer choice and market share.

A major objective of decision and consumer research models is to provide understanding on the strategies that decision makers bring to play when making judgments and choices when confronted with uncertainty (Simonson, 1989). The current study considers the effect of the EA ACCOM procedure in personal selling. EA ACCOM techniques that are well-conceived have the potential for influencing the behavior of sales representative customers and potential customers.

Loss aversion suggests that losses loom larger than gains, that is, when faced with decisions, consumers focus more on avoiding losses (financial or otherwise) than on gaining benefits. Here, valence loss aversion entails greater sensitivity to negative (vs positive) changes and possession loss aversion entails greater sensitivity to items leaving (vs entering) one's possession (Brenner et al, 2007). Past studies on consumer choice have concentrated on value optimization and have not concentrated on the role of personal selling in loss avoidance (Chernev, 2005).

EA is derived from loss aversion. In turn, with loss aversion, outcomes that are below a reference point (losses) are weighed more heavily than outcomes that are above that point (gains) (Simonson and Tversky 1992). Some researchers extend the concept of loss aversion to advantages and disadvantages that are defined in relation to various alternatives, rather than to a neutral reference point. Although certain consumers may not be willing to pay the market price to try a good, they may pay the market price to avoid losing opportunity to possess the good (Kovemsky and Kahneman, 2005). EA can bring consumers to increase their consumption of a soft drink when the smallest drink size is dropped or when a larger drink size is added to a set (Sharpe et al, 2008). This pattern is termed "enhancement" in the literature (Simonson and Trevsky, 1992). Hence, a consumer might be expected to select a product offering that is intermediate to its alternatives. Should a new alternative be added to the decision set, compromise may take place where an already existing alternative is the chosen one.

Research in the topic has extended EA to the dispersion of attributes values within each of the alternatives. A possible situation is that alternatives have unbalanced values. Trade offs can occur when marketers add asymmetrically dominated alternatives and thus increase the probability of the dominant option. The middle value alternative tends to be the compromise or less extreme in the set. However, consumers may perceive that two or more product attributes are important to them. In this case, the distributions of attributes become significant. Some alternatives products in this case have attributes whose value to consumers is very similar or equal. For example, consumers might view a coat produced by one manufacturer as comfortable (with a rating of 80 out of 100 possible) stylish (with a rating of 78), and available (with a rating of 79). This cost would be seen as the middle value alternative when compared to another coat with a rating of 90 for comfort, 80 for style and 72 for durability, because similarity of the attribute ratings for the first product.

The personal selling literature and practice has long acknowledged the importance of listening to customers as a means of uncovering their needs, in order to construct a customer action preference and accompanying competitive advantage status. The usage of EA ACCOM techniques could open up new opportunities for sales representatives in this regard.

The technique directs them to discover what attributes are the most important and to estimate the rating of each attribute. This requires careful listening and reading of the body language of prospects, on the part of the sales representative.

LITERATURE REVIEW – EA ACCOM

This section provides an overview of offerings in the literature that are pertinent to EA ACCOM, on the part of sales representatives. First, two EA ACCOM rationale for choices are in existence. These are the compromise and attraction effects (Simonson, 1989). The compromise effect takes place when the consumer is drawn to the to the middle option choice (EA) in a set of alternatives. Thus, a sales representative might be convinced that a brand alternative will provide a customer with more satisfaction than any other. However, the potentially satisficing alternative may not be viewed by the customer as desirable because it does not meet the requirement of EA. The sales representative in this case may be well advised to present another brand alternative to the customer, an alternative that will make the satisficing alternative dominant not extreme in the mind of the consumer.

Attraction effects, which are types of compromise effects sometimes termed asymmetric dominance, refers to the outcomes of adding a noticeably inferior product to the choice consideration set, thereby increasing dominance on the part of an alternative option (Simonson, 1989). Such an addition can place the potentially satisficing alternative in a middle position of the consideration set. When consumer preferences are influenced by the relative position of the alternatives in a choice set they are likely to prefer alternatives that are in compromise or middle positions (Huber et al., 1982; Simonson, 1989; Simonson and Tversky, 1992).

This selection permits individuals to more readily rationalize decisions to themselves and to others, particularly significant others (Mourali et al., 2007). If one is uncertain about the preferences of others or about the desirability of two products in a consideration set, then a reasonable solution is to select the middle alternative, which is likely to be the safest psychological and social choice with minimal potential error. Further, an EA choice can reduce internal psychological conflict that is associated with sacrificing one attribute in favor of another, and can be justified by arguing that it combines multiple attributes (Simonson, 1989). The compromise effect is also consistent with the notion derived from prospect theory (Kahneman and Tversky, 1979) that if the middle alternative is the decision maker's initial reference point, a switch to an extreme brand may be difficult to justify (Simonson, 1989), in that it imposes possible additional risk.

Researchers have used the EA ACCOM technique in order to derive suggestions as to strategies, which might circumvent customer fears of unacceptable losses. Since most consumers prefer to avoid loss to a higher degree than to experience gain, loss aversion at least partially explains the status quo bias and the endowment effect (Simonson and Tversky, 1992).

The status quo bias, as its name implies, refers to a tendency on the part of consumers to purchase the same brands and products that they did in the past. In fact, EA tends to have less impact in situations in which consumers have well-established preferences than institutions with limited preferences. If a consumer habitually purchases the same brand and category context effects are unlikely to play a major role (Simonson and Tversky, 1992). The motivation factor in this case is fear of the losses which might be associated with a new purchase. When this attitude is in existence, sales representatives may be well advised to engage customers and convince them that the losses associated with the new purchase will not likely or extreme. In order to be in a position to accomplish this persuasion task, sales representatives should develop a strong positive relationship with the customers.

EA also serves to help explain the endowment effect. In turn, this effect reflects divergent views on the part of the sales representative and the customer as to the valuation of an offering. In an early study, Knetsch (1989) discovered that the price, which students specified for a candy bar, was $.90 if they were purchasing it and $1.83 if they were selling it. This suggests that the subjects' acquisition of the product received a smaller valuation that did losing the same item. Essentially, the endowment effect poses the same implications and has the same action prescription for sales representatives, as does the status quo bias.

How much might customer loss aversion be expected to differ from one brand or one situation or another? Studies of choice, under both high subjective risk perceptions provide risk indicators of probable loss aversion (Tversky and Kahneman, 1991).Thus, behavior driven by loss aversion might occur regardless of the level of objective risk which is in existence. As was mentioned earlier, Simonson and Tversky (1992) extend loss aversion to the more extreme alternatives and not only to the neutral reference point. For example, insurance salespeople might increase their productivity by promoting larger consumer monetary gains to their clients from company policies that cost more than others in their inexpensive or middle of the line offering. Further, insurance salespeople might promote important monetary-loss prevention measures, such as price savings or larger cash values which the company enjoys over the competition, rather than less significant factors, such as a free emergency hotline number. Similar strategies might be equally useful for companies in other industries, and for different brands within the same industry.

Consumer choice researchers have dedicated considerable effort toward understanding the behaviors of consumers in the contexts outlined above. A relevant question is: "How can sales reps successfully apply the EA ACCOM methods? A search for answers to this question may create the opportunity for a stream of research in personal selling.

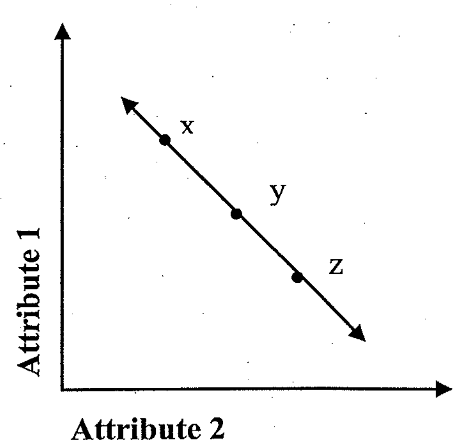
No record of published studies in which the EA ACCOM technique has been applied specifically to personal selling is available, according to a comprehensive literature search by the authors. Conversely, behavioral compliance techniques have been widely researched and recommended for use in this field and there is reason to believe that the EA ACCOM method could be of similar value. The following theoretical propositions may furnish guidelines for pertinent behavioral compliance technique applications.

THEORETICAL PROPOSITIONS

Sales representative understanding of buyer perceptions is essential. A key characteristic of all perceptual models is that they view choice as a constructive process (Bettman et al., 1998) and it is assumed that consumers formulate their preferences on the basis of the local choice set. In turn, the local choice set is the group of competing brands of which buyers are aware. EA serves as a guide to selection from the choice set, for many consumers.

As discussed previously, the EA principle suggests that when consumers choose among options in a choice set, they often avoid selecting the extreme options. Two central forms of EA are commonly presented in the choice literature: (A) compromise and (B) polarization (Chernev, 2004). Polarization occurs when extremeness aversion is asymmetric (Chernev, 2004). For example, a sales representative might promote a higher premium insurance policy against a lower premium policy in which case the buyer might perceive the less expensive offering as more beneficial. In this case, loss aversion could contribute to the image of the lower priced product because when consumers are endowed with a particular good, their perception of the value of that good increase (Kovemsky and Kahneman, 2005). On the other hand, the compromise option is the (y) alternative in a product triplet (see Figure 1). Chernev (2004) has conceptualized that option y is perceived as more attractive when evaluated in a triple complex (x, y, z) than in pairs (y, x) and (y, z). In this case, the EA process can guide salespeople in positioning their products as the middle option against competitors. Thus, for a supermarket chain, a policy of promoting mid-level prices may generate more sales than a strategy of advertising bargains.

Figure 1:
Extremeness Aversion in Choice



In sum, the EA ACCOM process, when used as a compliance gaining tactic may assist sales representatives in influencing buyer purchase attributes and intentions. A compliance gaining tactic refers to gaining a customers acceptance by using a sales technique such as the EA ACCOM method. An awareness of buyer perceptions and behaviors oriented to and avoiding extremes may be of value in producing a competitive edge against the competition.

Proposition 1: EA ACCOM techniques applied by the sales representative as a compliance gaining technique can positively affect buyer intention to purchase opposed to when sales representatives do not sure the technique.

One possible attribute which sales representatives might employ when making use of the EA method is price. Monetary values may be less difficult to justify as the middle option, as compared to other important attributes.

Price Attribute

Buyers often make a brand choice based partially or fully upon monetary value or price. When asked to evaluate the value of a product offering, they sometimes project its worth as a function of price. The EA ACCOM view would likely predict that the desirability of an offering is enhanced when it is positioned as an intermediate option in a choice set and diminished when it is portrayed as an extreme option (Simonson, 1989; Simonson and Tversky, 1992). In many cases price is the immediate and most obvious maker of the position of a product against rival offerings. A Kivetz et al (2004) inquiry on the attractiveness as the middle option revealed that price is frequently the first attribute recognized by shoppers. The salesperson of insurance might be well advised to direct the buyer's attention to specific rival brands found at lower-level and higher-level price points in order to guide the consumer to the middle option as the 'safe' alternative. In this case, many buyers might be expected to visualize price as the least difficult and most convenient means of comparing products.

It would seem that the polarization and compromise effects can have germane implications for positioning strategies (Kivetz et al., 2004). In this regard, pricing a brand provides a significant and easily apparent position within the industry set. In a competitive strategy role, price could be one of the most observable EA ACCOM marketing mix elements. In all probability the middle price option is not difficult for many buyers to justify and, as a corollary, has the potential to help sales representatives position their offerings.

Research has indicated that the EA effect is most likely when consumers use price information as a sacrifice indicator (a measure of loss), rather than as an index of quality (a measure of gain). In the former case, the consumer goal is called prevention, whereas in the latter it is called promotion (Lin et. al., 2007).

Proposition 2: EA ACCOM techniques applied to consumer price choice have the potential to positively affect buyer intention to purchase.

The following section expands on the time variable, as it relates to EA. A number of contributors to the consumer choice literature have noted the need for exploring time (e.g. Bettman et al., 1998). The following section explains possible influences of buyer choice perceptions over time. Sales representative awareness of these variations can assist in adjusting positions against the competition.

Time Attribute

When using EA based strategies supported upon price or other attributes, sales representatives are well advised to be aware of changes over time. Periodically reassessing EA applications may assist in detecting changes in buyer attribute preference. In turn, the ability to recognize modifications in buyer perceptions can assist sales representatives in their efforts to establish or maintain the product as the middle or "safe" option.

Many attributes can impact upon the buyer choice set. Some recent consumer choice research has been dedicated to explaining how changes in specific variables over time affect individual consumers. These variables include levels of aspiration (Chuang et al., 2007), brand effects (Sinn et al., 2007) and context effects (Sharpe et al., 2008). It can be expected that buyer choice sets may change over time, requiring adjustments on the part of individual firms. It is possible, for instance, that shorter durations of product ownership could reduce loss aversion. Or loss aversion could decrease over time, when consumer income grows, to the point that they provide a cushion to possible loss.

Over time as the choice options change so do the buyer perceptions of brands. Many buyers will change assessments of similarity and dissimilarity among newly discovered and already familiar existing brands (Dhar et al., 1999). The attribute balance of an alternative might improve increasing both the likelihood of it being perceived as the compromise option as well as an adequate or preferred choice (Chernev, 2004).

Possible disappointment or regret associated with a choice can influence the buyer's selection. Consumers may seek to maximize the effectiveness of a choice but instead experience disappointment or regret due to a failure to consider how their tastes change over time (Bettman et al., 1998). Sometimes when consumers have too many choices, they are overwhelmed trying to make the perfect choice. EA can be evaluated based not only on a product's relative position in the choice set, but also on the proximity of its own attribute values (Chernev, 2004). A salesperson's awareness of buyer choice options can assist in understanding how to prevent regret from taking over the purchasing choice.

Over time, sales representatives may overlook buyer preference changes and the attributes that rivals bring into the choice set. There is a danger that failure to detect such changes can result in lost accounts. Why should buyers select the compromise option using the EA ACCOM technique? Some individuals could collapse scale-equivalent attributes by matching their end-points, which will automatically position the balanced alternatives as the compromise option (Chernev, 2004). When building customer relationships the sales representative is well-advised to continually be aware of rival product attributes and take steps to reassign company offerings into the middle option if they no longer occupy that position.

Loss aversion research has considered the effects of various attributes on choice behavior and how alterations in the attributes can necessitate modifications in marketing strategy over time. Chernev (2004) reports that when attributes are not directly comparable and relevant alternatives are evaluated relative to one another, the middle option is likely to be selected as the compromise alternative. The loss-aversion parameters may vary by attribute, which is consistent with evidence that the magnitude of loss aversion may differ across attributes (Dhar and Wertenbroch, 2000). Of course, the same offering may appear to be desirable when compared with less attractive alternatives and less desirable on the background of more attractive alternatives (Simonson and Tversky, 1992). Significantly, the effect of the EA method applies not only to single attributes, such as size or attractiveness but also the tradeoff between different attributes (Simonson and Tversky, 1992).

If buyers are changing their choice behaviors, what might salespeople do to accommodate new patterns? In accordance with attribute balance preferences the buyer maybe presented with a compelling rationale for choosing that middle option (Chernev, 2005). Further, requesting consumers to justify their choice might increase the share of either the balanced or the middle alternative as buyers attempt to minimize anticipated regret (Chernev, 2005). As the literature on choice behavior further evolves and provides more robust and clear-cut EA action prescriptions, the importance for the salesperson to recognize these changes and center attention on the attributes most important to the buyer at that point in time increases.

Proposition 3: The EA ACCOM method applied with recognition of changes which take place over time positively influence the effectiveness of the method.

Of course, it is important for sales representatives to be able to use these methods appropriately and knowledge accompanied by supporting mental attitudes can be useful in this regard. The following section clarifies how the employment of the EA technique can assist in engendering sales representative confidence.

Salesperson Confidence

Like other methodologies that assist in discovering buyer preferences, the EA principle has applications regarding sales representative motivation and goal-setting. That is desires to avoid loss may directly influence the behavior of the sales representative, in much the same manner as it influences target customers. Fear about the effect on target customers of future actions, strategies, and tactics can lead to less confident salespeople. In turn, self confidence plus solid understanding on how to apply the EA technique may assist salespeople to be much more productive. The relationship is reciprocal. Increasing sales productivity normally builds confidence and corollary long-term success.

High levels of confidence can impel sales representatives to strive for their goals in an optimistic and energized manner, rather than in an overly-conservative fashion that is designed to prevent losses. Research on the goal orientation has revealed that preference for the status quo is stronger for prevention-focused individuals (Chernev, 2004b). These findings are consistent with the Simonson and Tversky (1992) views on choice and the loss-aversion theory. Confident sales representatives are less likely than those who are not confident to pursue the status quo and less concerned with loss-aversion.

In turn, salesperson confidence levels are likely to influence their sensitivity to gains or losses as well as to impact upon reactions to possible regret. In this regard, research reveals that regret aversion (Chernev, 2004b) motivates salespeople to behave in a manner that assists in resisting the overtures of the competition. Hence, understanding and implementing EA techniques can help in building salesperson confidence by supporting efforts to create customer relationships that stand up against rival approaches.

Proposition 4: EA techniques have the capacity to positively influence salesperson confidence.

For the final proposition it is appropriate to look at the ethical ramifications of applying a behavioral compliance technique. In this case, EA ACCOM, like most personal selling practices, could be used improperly if precautions are not taken.

The ethics domain is particularly relevant to the sales profession because it is recognized that salespeople confront many situations in their line of work that require normative value judgements (e.g. Ingram et al., 2007; Mantel, 2005; McClaren, 2000). Given that sales representatives are charged with the responsibility for convincing customers to purchase products and services, many opportunities arise to misrepresent or distort the benefits of items sold by the employer or otherwise deal with customers in an immoral manner (Valentine, 2009).

In recent periods academic researchers, sales managers, and sales representatives have renewed their efforts to construct a workable framework for personal selling ethical decision-making (Ferrell et al., 2007). These efforts highlight the need for an examination of appropriate normative and socially responsible applications of EA ACCOM. In this regard, manipulating pricing or other attributes to force a product into the compromise option may constitute a less than ethical practice. For instance, a sales representative providing anxiety-reduction programs might attempt to convince prospects that a meditation program offered by the firm "will pay for itself in higher earnings for you" when there is no concrete proof of such a benefit. This practice may be very unethical (Kovemsky and Kahneman, 2005). When such strategies are employed, it can be difficult for salespeople to act in a partnership role with the buyer, dedicated to understanding and fulfilling customer needs. Conversely, by pursuing the needs of customers, EA practice can assist in providing buyers with those benefits that will lead to the fulfillment of their goals.

The EA ACCOM process may help sales representatives formulate competitive advantage and still operate ethically by developing an understanding of buyer perceptions and endeavoring to appreciate the choices they encounter. For example, an insurance sales representative who understands the buyers' needs can evaluate the competition and industry options so as to position their product as the compromise option using the EA principle. For a very conservative prospect that tends to avoid risky decisions, a compromise brand may be most appropriate. Or, a prospect that is very risk averse may resist upgrading a durable good, and the best move for the sales representative may be not to feature a brand that is more upscale than the one currently owned by the prospect. Thus if the salesperson is providing the products that the buyer wants and needs, the EA ACCOM process strategy can be well within ethical bounds.

Proposition 5: The EA ACCOM process can be used in accordance with ethical personal selling practice.

Contributions and Future Research

Given that the EA process is an accepted concept in consumer research, the focus of this study is on the possible useful applications of the technique for personal selling. The authors have centered attention on using the technique in connection with specific attributes. It is apparent that many attributes play a role in buyer choice behavior but this study centers on price and other marketing mix components. These components deserve further attention, on the part of researchers.

In the future, empirical testing of the concepts presented here with relation to time effects could further the understanding of how buyers choice perception form, function, and change over time. The findings could assist sales representatives in predicting changes in choice behavior as the buyer-seller relationship evolves as well as when external influences such as forces in the economy influence this behavior.

Simonson (1989) has recommended that the compromise effect be tested in more natural consumer environments, arguing that increasing the complexity and realism of the decision task would make initial and developing relationships more transparent and decrease choice error. Practical applications of EA ACCOM in personal selling could further this assessment.

Some salespeople who avoid or neglect the implementation of EA ACCOM methods when presenting ideas to buyers may be limiting their understanding of the target customer and unduly restricting their action strategies. An informative study could compare salespeople who were trained on the EA ACCOM technique with salespeople who have not been so exposed. The results could be of value in developing guidelines on how to train salespeople in identifying the appropriate middle option and distribution of attribute ratings for the buyer. In addition, the study could examine differences in confidence levels between the two groups of sales representatives.

An interesting possibility is that future research could indicate that the EA ACCOM technique might not be as effective in situations where there is no direct personal contact between the buyer and seller. In this regard, Ebstner and Neumayr (2008) have utilized the principle of the reciprocal concession as a foundation for the compromise effect in the retail setting. Reciprocal concession refers to the give-and-take method in a compromise with customers. Their research has revealed that members of a consumer sample were most likely to be affected by the compromise option in a face-to-face meeting. Future research could be utilized to conduct a study comparing buyer choice behaviors using the EA method in a face-to-face meeting against a strictly online context. It is possible that understanding appropriate attribute selection and time in uses of the EA ACCOM practice could assist in creating methods specific to both offline and online buyer relationships.

Finally, when sales representatives are trained on the ethical means of utilizing the EA ACCOM technique, stronger relationships between buyer and seller could result. An appropriate study could compare a group of sales representatives trained on the EA ACCOM technique, who focus on buyer needs with another group of salespeople who are only informed about the technique per se. The findings could highlight buyer perceptions of salesperson presentations and relationships, which may produce revelations into effectiveness of the ethical training provided. Such studies could open avenues for research in understanding buyer perceptions of the sales representatives as they are related to ethical techniques guidelines.

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