Communication Techniques in Adaptive Selling: A Strategic Account Management Approach

By Omar Shehryar and Dan Moshavi

We uncover a range of communication techniques used by salespersons across three levels of accounts classified according to their strategic importance to a selling organization. We further distinguish between communication techniques utilized in positive sales encounters characterized by harmonious interaction between buyer and seller, and those used in challenging situations where salespersons recovered from a breakdown in interpersonal communication. Results from interviews with salespersons from a FORTUNE 150 corporation indicate that salespersons selectively employ facets of broad communication techniques such as rapport building, active listening, information transfer, and social influence in their communication with buyers of varying strategic importance. Moreover, the valence of a sales interaction also necessitates selective use of facets of broader communication techniques. Implications for improving sales communication in strategic account management are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Adaptive selling is acknowledged as an important characteristic that leads to sales success (Chai, Zhou, and Babin 2012; McMurrian and Srivastava 2009). Since adaptive selling techniques vary in accordance with the diversity of buyer types and buying situations, researchers have examined how salespersons adapt their communication techniques with regard to situational elements comprising a sales encounter (Jacobs et al. 2001, stage of relationship; McFarland, Challagalla & Shervani 2006, buyers' communication style; Miles, Arnold & Nash 1990, buyers' communication style and stage of relationship; Reid, Pullins & Plank 2002, complexity of selling situation). However, until recently, little effort has been applied toward studying the strategic importance of a client to the selling organization as a variable that may influence communication strategies in sales relationships. A recent review of research on successful global account management also demonstrates that communication techniques have not been a topic of study when investigating best practices in strategic account management (Grant & Rogers 2010). This omission is noteworthy because as stated by Bradford et al (2012),

Omar Shehryar (Ph.D., University of Missouri), Associate Professor of Marketing, College of Business, Montana State University, Mozeman, MT, omar@montana.edu

Dan Moshavi (Ph.D, University of Oregon), Dean, School of Business and Leadership, Dominican University of California, San Rafael, CA, dan.moshavi@dominican.edu

"strategic accounts are of vital importance to the selling firm as its long-term viability often hinges upon its ability to identify, establish, develop, and maintain relationships with such accounts". Therefore, when examining the context within which adaptive selling is practiced, there is a gap in our understanding of the range and efficacy of communication techniques used across selling situations of varying strategic importance.

A second shortcoming of extant literature is the lack of focus on the valence of a sales encounter within a sales relationship. Whereas responding to objections is an important part of a salesperson's job, research on sales communication and adaptive selling is largely silent on which communication techniques are effective for satisfying buyers' concerns during a challenging situation. As Gonzalez, Hoffman, and Ingram (2005) note, "little, if any, formal training is provided on what is likely to go wrong during the sales process and how to recover from process failures in real time…as a result, how salespersons can enhance customer satisfaction and retention through service failure and analysis of recovery efforts is lacking in the academic literature and sales management practice."

In light of the lack of focus on strategic importance of buyers and the valence of a sales interaction, the objective of the present research is two-fold. First, we uncover a range of communication techniques used by salespersons across three levels of accounts classified according to their strategic importance to a selling

organization. Second, we further distinguish between communication techniques utilized in positive selling situations, characterized by harmonious interaction between buyer and seller, and those used in negative or challenging selling situations where salespersons had to recover from a breakdown in communication. By examining a range of communication techniques used by successful salespersons across selling situations varying in perceived strategic importance as well as valence, we attempt to broaden the current understanding of both salesperson communication techniques and adaptive selling.

BACKGROUND

Past research states that sales performance is positively linked to a salesperson's willingness to adjust to a unique situation by addressing idiosyncratic customer needs with an appropriate sales strategy (Spiro & Weitz 1990; Weitz 1981; Weitz, Sujan & Sujan 1986). Although inconsistent results have been reported in studies of the link between adaptive selling and sales performance (see Anglin, Stolman & Gentry 1990; Comstock & Higgins 1997; Park & Holloway 2004; Pettijohn et al. 1996 & 2000), a synthesis of research states that adaptive selling behaviors lead to improved sales performance (Franke & Park 2006).

Considering that interpersonal communication is the essence of adapting a selling strategy we may expect that the intersection of communication techniques and adaptive selling has received significant attention in personal selling research. To the contrary, a review of research finds that limited attention has been given to this topic.

In perhaps the earliest attempt at integrating communication techniques with situational demands, Dubinsky (1980) interviewed salespersons from 15 industries to seek their opinion on the importance of 84 communication techniques across seven steps of the selling process. Based on the results, 24 of the original 84 techniques were preferred by salespersons during the seven steps of the personal selling process. This research pointed to the need for studying the differential use of communication techniques in personal selling.

In a later study, Miles, Arnold, and Nash (1990) combined Sheth's (1976) communication-style typology (task-, self- and interaction-orientation) with Dwyer, Schurr, and Oh's (1987) taxonomy of phases of an organizational relationship (awareness, exploration, expansion, commitment, and dissolution) to propose that sellers prefer different communication styles across five phases of a relationship. This work moved sales communication literature into the domain of relational selling. Unfortunately, these authors' proposals have not been empirically tested. A different study does provide empirical support to the notion that communication techniques vary in different situations (Reid, Pullins & Plank 2002). These authors found that salespersons used more information-getting communication techniques in complex selling situations whereas more information-giving techniques were employed in moderately complex selling situations. Thus, their results supported the notion of differential use of sales communication techniques to suit the buying situation.

Jacobs et al. (2001) found that disclosure of both social and task-specific information by a salesperson is positively linked to the quality of interaction in an initial personal selling encounter. These authors acknowledged that other stages of the relationship may require different communication techniques. Elsewhere Cano, Boles and Bean (2005) found that transaction partners' preferences for the medium of communication varied depending on the phase of the selling process. For instance, although both buyers and sellers preferred telephone communication in the problem identification phase, their preferences for medium of communication changed in later phases of the selling process depending on the complexity of information and commensurate requirements for richness in a medium. Thus, these results suggest that not only should salespersons adapt the content of communication but that they should also vary the medium of communication to suit buyers' needs.

More recently, Campbell, Davis, and Skinner (2006) forwarded a framework for developing rapport between buyers and sellers during the exploration phase of a potential relationship. However, they acknowledged that "empirical testing is needed to establish the value of our framework for predicting the effectiveness of categories

of rapport management behaviors for handling objections during distinct phases of the relationship life cycle" (p. 368). McFarland, Challagalla, and Shervani (2006) empirically investigated the use of influence tactics developed in marketing channels research (Frazier & Summers 1984), across buyers classified according to Sheth's (1976) typology of task-, self-, and interaction orientation. They found that influence techniques such as information exchange worked better for task- and interaction-oriented buyers, whereas threats and promises were more effective with self-oriented buyers. These results also point to the importance of adapting communication techniques to the specific needs of a buyer. In summary, a few studies focus on the question of which communication techniques are appropriate for specific situations. Further research is warranted to empirically validate some of the earlier theoretical work and to uncover other communication techniques that may be optimal in different buying situations. Indeed, McFarland, Challagalla, and Shervani (2006) lament the paucity of research at the "intersection" of techniques used in persuading buyers and adaptive selling (p. 103).

However, efforts in this direction are limited by two significant gaps. First, no unifying framework is available to classify buyers and buying situations. Whereas some studies use Sheth's (1976) classification, others rely on stages of the buying process. It would be helpful to develop a framework that can be used by salespersons in conjunction with sales managers prior to a sales encounter to avoid a spur-of-the-moment assessment by a salesperson during a sales interaction. We propose that basing such a framework on the strategic importance of an account to the selling organization holds promise. We explain shortly the merits of basing a communication framework on strategic importance of an account. Secondly, there is little effort to investigate what communication techniques salespersons employ to overcome a negative encounter in a relational setting. Some research in the context of recovery from retail service failure is indeed available (Bitner, Booms, and Tetreault 1990; Nyquist, Bitner, and Booms 1985). However, this research primarily studies recovery from the perspective of buyers and customers and how they perceive a seller's recovery efforts (Smith, Bolton, and Wagner 1999). Recovery is hardly discussed in a

relational personal selling context (Gonzalez, Hoffman, and Ingram 2005). As stated by Hartline, Maxham, and McKee (2000), "interacting directly with unhappy customers during failure situations with no training regarding recovery options and implementation places the boundary spanner in an unenviable position." Additionally, the retail setting is often a one-time transaction. In contrast, selling to strategic accounts requires a relational approach. Therefore, it is not known whether the communication techniques considered viable in one-off service recovery efforts overlap or contrast with techniques suitable for recovering from poor buyer-seller rapport in a strategic sales relationship.

The present research builds on past research in two important ways. First, the present research approaches selling situations in terms of their strategic importance to a selling organization. Since not all buyer-seller relationships are equal in importance (Bunn 1993; Plank, Belonax Jr. & Newell 2008; Porter, Wiener & Frankwick 2003) a classification of selling situations in terms of their importance to a seller would obviate the need to identify complex task- self- or interaction-orientation patterns that may be difficult to judge by sellers even over repeated sales interactions with buyers, let alone spontaneously during a sales encounter. The idea of classifying customers in terms of their strategic importance to a selling organization is also consistent with Giacobbe et al.'s (2006) suggestion that if a "relationship is believed to produce considerable future profit opportunities" then there is a higher likelihood that adaptive selling behaviors will provide the "greatest relative advantage" (p. 121).

Secondly, our study design allows for distinguishing between positive or cooperative and negative or challenging sales interactions. Classifying sales interactions in terms of their valence permits us to study whether communication techniques used in positive interactions vary considerably from those utilized in negative interactions.

METHOD

We use a critical incident approach (Edvardsson 1992; Flanagan 1954; Keaveney 1995) to study techniques employed by salespersons when faced with buying situations of varying strategic importance. Critical

incidents have been defined as "any observable human activity that is sufficiently complete in itself to permit inferences and predictions to be made about the person performing the act" (Flanagan 1954, p. 327). This technique is reliable and valid (Keaveney 1995) especially in areas related to sales and service breakdowns (Edvardsson 1992; Nyquist, Bitner & Booms 1985; Bitner, Booms & Tetreault 1990).

We employed a specific form of the critical incident technique called "behavioral event interviewing" (McClelland 1998), that has been used to identify job-specific behaviors. We used this methodology to get salespersons to tell stories about their positive as well as challenging interactions rather than simply describe their skills. These stories provide the background necessary to assess the communications techniques that are most relevant to salesperson success. We worked with the sales force of a leading US sports equipment and apparel company. The organization classifies its buyers in terms of business volume. Each level of classification was considered a proxy for the strategic importance of the buyer to the selling organization. The sales directors concurred with this reasoning. In research on adaptive selling, Plank, Belonax Jr. and Newell (2008) also used sales volume as one of the attributes that constitutes strategic importance. Ten salespersons in each of three levels – national accounts, regional accounts and local accounts – were identified by multiple sales directors as the top performers for their type of account based on annual performance evaluations. We conducted half-hour interviews with the 30 salespersons. The salespersons were asked questions that were designed to elicit two positive and two negative (e.g. challenging) communication efforts with customers (the specific questions asked are available in Appendix 1). Interviewees were asked to describe, in their own words, what they said, thought, felt and did in these four interactions, and for the two challenging interactions, what they did/should have done to recover. This resulted in 120 stories of customer interactions, 60 positive and 60 negative.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The incidents were content-analyzed by two raters. The raters read transcripts of interviews and discussed between themselves possible communications techniques that were reflected in the stories. Four broad communications strategies emerged from the interviews: rapport building, active listening, information transfer, and social influence. All four strategies have received attention in past research and are considered relevant to adaptive selling (Giacobbe et al. 2006; Park & Holloway 2003). Following standard practice in analyzing interview data (McCracken 1988), the emerging thick descriptors categorized as strategies were further refined by raters. Thus, rapport building was bifurcated into enjoyable interactions and building personal connections, and active listening were refined to include advising, probing, and deflecting responses. Three facets of information transfer emerged: frequency, pro-active content sharing, and transparency of feelings/thoughts. Finally, social influence was refined to include reciprocation, persistence, authority, and empathy. The complete list of communication techniques, including the frequency of usage and brief explanations, is available in Table 1.

We further validated the results by providing the developed list of communication techniques and transcripts of the interviews to three additional raters who are experts in business communication. The raters read the stories and assigned a specific technique (or multiple techniques) to each story (excerpts from critical incidents that highlight specific techniques are available in Appendix 2). Inter-rater reliability was .91, above the level of .80 that is used as an acceptable benchmark in critical incident methodology (Keaveney 1995). Any disagreements were resolved by mutual consensus.

A list of key communications techniques utilized by salespersons across accounts of different strategic importance can be found in Table 2. For each level of account, the set of elicited communications techniques used by salespersons was further divided into techniques that were used in positive interactions and techniques used to recover from challenging interactions.

While we provide brief descriptions of each technique emerging from our analysis, to avoid duplication we also label our techniques with names used for similar techniques in past research. For instance, rapport-building techniques similar to creating enjoyable interactions and creating personal connections have received mention in past research on service relationships

Table 1

Description of Communication Techniques

Rapport Building. Rapport indicates customers' feelings about the relationship they have with salespersons, particularly their level of trust and commitment. Salespersons utilized two key rapport building techniques:
  a. creating enjoyable interactions: achieved by communicating in an upbeat and positive manner, using humor, bantering, etc.
  b. creating personal connections: typically achieved by communicating about personal interests, values, family, etc.

Active Listening. These are categories of active listening responses that clarify communication and strengthen interpersonal relationships. Three primary active listening responses were used:
  a. Advising response: provides direction, evaluation, personal opinion or instructions.
  b. Probing response: asks a question about what the customer just said or a question about a topic selected by the salesperson.
  c. Deflecting response: switches the focus from the customer's problem to an issue selected by the salesperson.

Information Transfer. Information transfer deals with the transmission of firm- and customer-specific knowledge from salesperson to customer. Salespersons used three different techniques for transferring information:
  a. frequency: being in touch with clients on a regular and repeated basis.
  b. proactive content-sharing: communicating product- and process-knowledge in a clear and concise manner.
  c. transparency of thoughts/feelings: making statements about what's going on inside the salesperson's mind and sharing feelings.

Social Influence. Social influence is getting people to do things they might not otherwise do. Although social influence is often exercised through actions, it also exercised through communication of actions, especially when those actions are not directly visible to the customer. There are four ways salespersons communicated social influence:
  a. reciprocity: triggering a feeling of indebtedness by communicating that a favor has been done or trying to repay in kind what another person has provided.
  b. persistence: regularly revisiting issues and doing so in a positive and can-do manner; signaling to the customer that a salesperson is expending extra effort.
  c. authority: communicating the exercising of power to make decisions on behalf of the customer.
  d. empathy: communicating sensitivity to others in a manner that suggests that a salesperson understands challenges the customer faces; involves individualized attention.

Table 2

Communications Techniques by Strategic Importance and Valence of Encounter

	Local Account		Regional Account		National Account	
	Positive Interaction	Challenging Interaction	Positive Interaction	Challenging Interaction	Positive Interaction	Challenging Interaction
Rapport Building						
Personal connections	✓(4)				✓(3)	
Enjoyable interactions			✓(3)		✓(3)	
Active Listening						
Advising	✓(7)	✓(8)	✓(6)	✓(10)	✓(7)	
Probing	✓(4)		✓(4)		✓(5)	
Deflecting						✓(5)
Information Transfer						
Frequency	✓(6)		✓(4)		✓(7)	✓(16)
Proactive content sharing	✓(5)		✓(6)		✓(5)	
Transparency of thoughts/feelings			✓(4)		✓(4)	
Social Influence						
Reciprocity	✓(4)		✓(3)		✓(3)	
Persistence			✓(4)	✓(6)	✓(4)	
Authority				✓(5)	✓(3)	
Empathy		✓(12)				

Frequencies are listed within parentheses. Note: a total of 120 interactions – 40 for each type of account – were captured. Note that the range of frequency of specific techniques varies by interaction. In some interactions, only one communication technique was apparent and in others, multiple techniques were apparent.)

(Gremler & Gwimmer 2000). Similarly, Cano, Boles, and Bean (2005) and Jacobs et al. (2001) mention communication techniques involving reciprocity and proactive content sharing in discussing issues related to the quality of sales interactions. Notwithstanding the use of labels used in past research, the value of our findings lies in the more detailed descriptions of the actual behaviors during positive or challenging interactions. Thus, whereas our findings indicate that all four strategies – rapport building, active listening, information transfer, and social influence – played a role in positive interactions and that three of the four strategies – active listening, information transfer and social influence – played a role in challenging interactions for all types of accounts, salespersons at all levels utilized individual facets of each strategy differently, depending on whether an interaction was positive or challenging.

Local account salespersons involved in positive interactions built rapport by developing personal connections, actively listened by advising and probing, transferred information through frequent contact and proactive content sharing, and used reciprocation as the primary social influence tool. In contrast, for more challenging interactions, the primary social influence tool used by local account salespersons was empathy and the primary active listening approach was advising.

Regional account salespersons involved in positive interactions built rapport by creating enjoyable interactions, and actively listened by advising and probing. They transferred information through frequent contact, and proactive content sharing. They were transparent in communicating their thoughts and feelings, and used reciprocation and persistence as the primary social influence tools. For more challenging interactions, the primary social influence tools used by regional account salespersons were authority and persistence, and the primary active listening approach was probing.

Finally, national account salespersons involved in positive interactions built rapport by both developing personal connections and creating enjoyable interactions. They actively listened by advising and probing, and transferred information through frequent contact, proactive content-sharing and being transparent

in communicating their thoughts and feelings. They used authority, reciprocation and persistence as the primary social influence tools. For more challenging interactions, the primary active listening approach used was deflection and the primary mode of information transfer used was frequency.

DISCUSSION & MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

The results suggest that strategic importance of accounts influences the use of communications techniques for both positive and negative sales interactions. Although each broad technique was used by all levels of salespersons, the specific manner in which a technique was employed depended on both the type of account and the valence of the interaction.

First, salespersons at all three account levels used the same active listening responses – advising and probing – in positive interactions. However, there were pronounced differences across strategic levels in terms of active listening responses employed in challenging encounters. Local account salespersons relied on advising responses, regional account salespersons relied on probing responses, and national account salespersons relied on deflecting responses.

These results underscore the importance of being responsive to a buyer's needs by gathering necessary information from the buyer as well as imparting advice that would further the buyer's interest. Whereas past research by Castleberry and Shepherd (1993) relates a two-item self-reported measure of active listening with sales performance, our findings suggest that there is more than one facet of active listening and that certain facets may be more useful than others across selling situations that vary in strategic importance and valence of interaction.

Local and regional account salespersons used more buyer-friendly active-listening approaches (advising or probing) to respond to a challenging interaction while national salespersons used a more confrontational active-listening approach (deflection) to respond to challenging interactions. One possible reason for this difference is that national account salespersons have more interdependent and complex relationships with their buyers than their peers who deal with less

strategically important accounts. Thus, the interactions between a national salesperson and buyer may require deflection in challenging times to build a sustainable long-term relationship.

There were also differences in information transfer among salespersons at different strategic levels – frequency and proactive content sharing were important for all salespersons in positive interactions, but for regional and national salespersons, transparency of feelings also seemed to play an important role. This result is consistent with the idea that disclosure on the part of the salesperson, akin to transparency, has a positive impact on the quality of sales interaction (Jacobs et al. 2001)

Only one of the three strategic levels of account salespersons – national account salespersons – used a form of information transfer when dealing with a challenging interaction. More specifically, national account salespersons relied on frequency as an approach to providing information. It is possible that the time-money relationship for this type of account is more pronounced than for other types of accounts. In other words, challenges such as delays in shipping, the late placement of orders and a lack of agreement on product mix, have a significant financial impact on the selling organization. We discovered that many national account salespersons talked to buyers five to eight times per day. The typical national account salesperson dealt with only one or two buyers while a regional account salesperson often dealt with more than a dozen buyers and a local account salesperson with more than twenty. Therefore, salespersons handling national accounts realize that frequency of contact is more critical in challenging situations.

Of the four broad competencies, rapport-building was the only one used exclusively in positive interactions. Indeed, past research suggests that much of rapport-building usually occurs early in service exchanges prior to the emergence of challenges (Gremler & Gwimmer 2000). However, our findings show that there were differences across salespersons' usage of rapport building. For local account salespersons, creating personal connections was the key to rapport-building

while for regional account salespersons creating enjoyable interactions was the key to rapport-building. For national salespersons, both of these rapport-building competencies were important. Together with the finding that frequency of information exchange was important at all strategic levels, it appears that at the highest level of strategic importance, interactions may contain both personal disclosure and enjoyment value.

Finally, salespersons across the three levels differed in their use of social influence in both positive and challenging interactions. For positive interactions, reciprocity played a key role for local account salespersons, reciprocity and persistence were important for regional account salespersons, and reciprocity, persistence and authority were important for national account salespersons. Apparently, the more strategically important the account, the greater the likelihood that multiple types of social influence techniques were utilized. Due to the high profile of the selling organization in our study, it is possible that buyers with relatively less strategic importance fare unfavorably in terms of their dependence on the seller. Because of the implicit power difference, local and regional salespersons may not need to expressly exercise authority in their communication. Contrarily, when dealing with buyers at the highest level of strategic importance, in addition to reciprocation and persistence, asserting authority insofar as product knowledge is concerned is not only plausible but perhaps also necessary to successfully conduct business.

In addition, there were differences in facets of social influence used by local and regional salespersons to respond to challenging interactions – for local account salespersons, empathy emerged as the key technique while for regional account salespersons, authority and persistence were important. Social influence did not play a role in recovery for national salespersons. These results appear to be consistent with the notion of interdependence raised earlier because unlike a positive interaction, in a negative interaction with a strategically important account, a salesperson would be more cautious in exercising any authority because of mutual interdependence and bilateral deterrence.

LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSION

We identified communication techniques employed by salespersons in positive and negative sales interactions across buyers who are classified according to their strategic importance to a seller. The study involved a FORTUNE 150 organization that is a market leader in many of its product lines. These findings may not generalize to organizations with low brand awareness as sales challenges would be different. However, our methodology dictated a focus on uncovering a range of techniques used by successful salespersons rather than validating a set of behaviors. Thus, our results may be seen as benchmarks that ought to be strived for with consideration to an organization's resources. For instance, when developing training material for relational selling, the techniques mentioned herein may be used to develop scripts for specific situations involving negative or challenging interactions (Peterson & Fischbach 2010). In addition, this study looks exclusively at business-to-business sales and relevant techniques may differ in a business-to-consumer sales environment. Therefore, future research in this area should focus on sellers with a variety of sales challenges as well as those that concentrate on business-to-consumer sales.

We believe that part of the reason that adaptive selling behaviors have not been studied under the rubric of seller's communication techniques may be that conducting an exploratory study that is best suited for uncovering these techniques seems out of place in extant literature that has strong empirical roots. However, we believe that uncovering sellers' communication techniques in relationship-based selling can advance the understanding of adaptive selling.

REFERENCES

Anglin, K. A., Stoltman, J. J., & Gentry, J. W. 1990, 'The Congruence of Manager Perception of Salesperson Performance and Knowledge-Based Measures of Adaptive Selling, *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management*, vol. 10, no. 3, pp.81-90.

Bitner, M.J., Booms, B.H. & Tetreault, M.S. 1990, 'The Service Encounter: Diagnosing Favorable and Unfavorable Incidents', *Journal of Marketing*, vol. 54, no. 1, pp. 71-84.

Bradford, K. D., Challagalla, G.N., Hunter, G.K. & Moncrief III, W.C. 2012, 'Strategic Account Management: Conceptualizing, Integrating, and Extending the Domain From Fluid to Dedicated Accounts', *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management*, vol. 32, no. 1, pp. 41-56.

Bunn, M.D. 1993, 'Taxonomy of Buying Decision Approaches', *Journal of Marketing*, vol. 57, no. 1, pp. 38-56.

Campbell, K.S., Davis, L., & Skinner, L. 2006, 'Rapport Management During the Exploration Phase of the Salesperson-Customer Relationship', *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management*, vol. 26, no. 3, pp. 359-70.

Cano, C.R., Boles, J.S. & Bean, C.J. 2005, 'Communication Media Preferences in Business-to-Business Transactions: An Examination of the Purchase Process,' *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management*, vol. 25, no. 2, pp. 283-94.

Castleberry, S. B. & Shepherd, C.D. 1993, 'Effective Interpersonal Selling and Personal Selling', *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management*, vol. 13, no. 4, pp. 35-49.

Chai, J., Guahngzhi, Z. & Babin, B.J. 2012, 'An Empirical Study on the Impact of Two Types of Goal Orientation and Salesperson Perceived Obsolescence on Adaptive Selling', *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management*, vol. 32, no. 12, pp. 261-273.

Comstock, J. & Higgins, G. 1997, 'Appropriate Relational Messages in Direct Selling Interaction: Should Salespersons Adapt to Buyers' Communicator Style? *Journal of Business Communication*, vol. 34, pp. 401-18.

Dubinsky, A.J. 1980, 'A Factor Analytic Study of the Personal Selling Process', *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management*, vol. 1, no. 3, pp. 26-33.

Dwyer, F. R., Schurr, P.H. & Oh, S. 1987, 'Developing Buyer-Seller Relationships', *Journal of Marketing*, vol. 51, no. 2, pp. 11-27.

Edvardsson, B. 1992, 'Service Breakdowns, A Study of Critical Incidents in an Airline', *International Journal of Service Industry Management*, vol. 3, no. 4, pp. 17-29.

Flanagan, J.C. 1954, 'The Critical Incident Technique', *Psychological Bulletin*, vol. 51, no. 7, pp. 327-58.

Franke, G.R. & Park, J. 2006, 'Salesperson Adaptive Selling Behavior and Customer Orientation: A Meta-Analysis', *Journal of Marketing Research*, vol. 53, no. 4, pp. 693-702.

Frazier, G.L. & Summers, J.O. 1984, 'Inter-firm Influence Strategies and Their Application within Distribution Channels', *Journal of Marketing*, vol. 48, no. 2, pp. 43-55.

Giacobbe, R.W., Jackson, D.W., Crosby, L.A., & Bridges, C.M. 2006, 'A Contingency Approach to Adaptive Selling Behavior and Sales Performance: Selling Situations and Salesperson Characteristics', *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management*, vol. 26, no. 2, pp. 115-42.

Gonzalez, G. R., Hoffman, K.D. & Ingram, T.N. 2005, 'Improving Relationship Selling Through Failure Analysis and Recovery Efforts: A Framework and Call to Action,' *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management*, vol. 25, no. 1, pp. 57-65.

Grant, J. & Rogers, B. 2010, 'Auditing a Strategic Account Management Pilot: A Case Study in the Marine Manufacturing Sector,' *Journal of Selling and Major Account Management*, vol. 10, no. 3, pp. 8-28.

Gremler, D.D. & Gwimmer, K.P. 2000, 'Customer-Employee Rapport in Service Relationships', *Journal of Services Research*, vol. 3, no. 3, pp. 82-104.

Hartline, M.D., Maxham III, J.G. & McKee, D.O. 2000, 'Corridors of Influence in the Dissemination of Customer-oriented Strategy to Customer Contact Service Employees,' *Journal of Marketing*, vol. 64, no. 2, pp. 35-50.

Jacobs, R.S., Evans, K.R., Kleine III, R. & Landry, T.D. 2001, 'Disclosure and Its Reciprocity as Predictors of Key Outcomes of an Initial Sales Encounter', *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management*, vol. 21, no. 4, pp. 51-61.

Keaveney, S.M. 1995, 'Customer Switching Behavior in Service Industries: An Exploratory Study,' *Journal of Marketing*, vol. 59, no. 2, pp. 71-82.

McClelland, D. C. 1998, 'Identifying Competencies with Behavioral-Event Interviews', *Psychological Science*, vol. 9, no. 9, pp. 331-39.

McCracken, G. 1988, *The Long Interview*, Sage University Paper Series on Qualitative Research Methods, vol. 13, Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

McFarland, R. G., Challagalla, G.N., & Shervani, T.A. 2006, 'Influence Tactics for Effective Adaptive Selling', *Journal of Marketing*, vol. 70, no. 3, pp. 103-17.

McMurrian, R.C. & Srivastava, R. 2009, 'The Impact of Self-Efficacy on Expectancy, Effort, and Adaptive Selling in a Personnel Selling Context,' *Journal of Selling and Major Account Management*, vol. 9, no. 1, pp. 42-53.

Miles, M.P., Arnold, D.R. & Nash, H.W. 1990, 'Adaptive Communication: The Adaptation of the Seller's Interpersonal Style to the Stage of a Dyad's Relationship and the Buyer's Communication Style', *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management*, vol. 10, no. 4, pp. 21-27.

Nyquist, J.D., Bitner, M.J. & Booms, B.H. 1985, 'Identifying Communication Difficulties in the Service Encounter: A Critical Incidents Approach', *The Service Encounter*, John Czepiel, Michael Solomon, & Carol Surprenant, eds., Lexington, MA : Lexington Books, pp. 195-212.

Park, J., & Holloway, B.B. 2003, 'Adaptive Selling Behavior Revisited: An Empirical Examination of Learning Orientation, Sales Performance, and Job Satisfaction', *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management*, vol. 23, no. 3, pp. 239-51.

Peterson, R. & Fischbach, S. 2010, 'The Utilization of Scripts in Business-to-Business Selling: An Assessment,' *Journal of Selling and Major Account Management*, vol. 10, no. 3, pp. 29-43.

Pettijohn, C.E., Pettijohn, L.S., Parker, R.S. & Taylor, A.J. 1996, 'Is Adaptive Selling Viable Behavior? A Review of the Literature', *Association of Marketing Theory and Practice*, vol. 5, no. 1, pp. 196-204.

Pettijohn, C.E., Pettijohn, L.S., Taylor, A.J. & Keillor, B.D. 2000, 'Adaptive Selling and Sales Performance: An Empirical Examination', *Journal of Applied Business Research*, vol. 16, no. 4, pp. 91-111.

Plank, R. E., Belonax Jr., J.J, & Newell, S.J, 'Impact of Purchase Importance and Salesperson Behaviors on Relationship Loyalty', *Journal of Selling and Major Account Management*, vol. 8, no. 2, pp. 8-25.

Porter, S.S., Wiener, J.L. & Frankwick, G.L. 2003, 'The Moderating Effect of Selling Situation on the Adaptive Selling Strategy-Selling Effectiveness Relationship', *Journal of Business Research*, vol. 56, no. 2, pp. 275-81.

Reid, D.A., Pullins, E.B. & Plank, R.E. 2002, 'The Impact of Purchase Situation on Salesperson Communication Behaviors in Business Markets', *Industrial Marketing Management*, vol. 31, no. 2, pp. 205-13.

Sheth, J.N. 1976, 'Buyer-Seller Interaction: A Conceptual Framework', *Proceedings of the Association for Consumer Research*. Cincinnati: Association for Consumer Research, 382-86.

Smith, A. K., Bolton, R. N., & Wagner, J. 1999, 'A Model of Customer Satisfaction with Service Encounters Involving Failure and Recovery,' *Journal of Marketing Research*, vol. 36, no. 3, pp. 356-72.

Spiro, R.L. & Weitz, B.A. 1990, 'Adaptive Selling: Conceptualization, Measurement, and Nomological Validity', *Journal of Marketing Research*, vol. 27, no. 1, pp. 61-69.

Weitz, B.A. 1981, 'Effectiveness in Sales Interactions: A Contingency Framework', *Journal of Marketing*, vol. 45, no. 4, pp. 85–103.

Weitz, B.A., Sujan, H. & Sujan, M. 1986, 'Knowledge, Motivation and Adaptive Selling: A Framework for Improving Selling Effectiveness', *Journal of Marketing*, vol. 50, no. 4, pp. 174-91.

APPENDIX 1

Behavioral Event-related Questions Used in Salesperson Interviews

1. Tell me about a time when you felt really positive about a customer interaction? What about it in particular made you feel good? From a communications standpoint, what did you do well?

2. Can you think of a specific interaction when you walked away knowing the customer was really pleased? What was it about your communications efforts that contributed to this?

3. Tell me about a time when you were really frustrated by a customer interaction and felt that your communication efforts were breaking down. What role did you play in this process? What role did the customer play in this process? Did you do anything to try and recover from this?

4. Can you think of a specific interaction where you felt you could have handled your interaction with a customer better? What happened and in hindsight, and what might you have done differently?

APPENDIX 2

Excerpts from Salespersons' Stories that Highlight Specific Communication Techniques

Rapport Building
Creating Enjoyable Interactions. "It was a very positive interaction and different than we typically have with them. In particular, we were able to keep it light, use humor, and finally break through some of their stone faces". "After the formal meeting, I sat with the four of them and just chatted. I got passionate about ideas that could take them to the next level…it was truly a partnership".

Creating Personal Connections. "They had gotten the run around from the previous salesperson…they felt good because I saw them in person, visited them and helped them build trust and was honest about what I could and couldn't do on this matter". "My first week on the job, I went to see my biggest account. It helped to have a positive personal interaction first before launching into servicing the business".

53

Active Listening (Responses)

Advising response. "I tried to convince a client not to buy certain colors." "After landing the account, I offered a quick strike idea that would help them boost their sell-through opportunities." "I put a lot of things on the table, including some ideas for proprietary products."

Probing response. "Once a week I ask, what can I do for you?" "To recover, my response was, what has your experience been? Why do you have such negative feelings?" "I asked a lot of questions, who buys the product, what accessories sell well?"

Deflecting response. "They didn't get it. It's not what we see, they said. Our point wasn't getting across. We were looking at total dollars, not inventory per store and they weren't computing. We had to focus their attention on other products that could help tell our story." "One buying director that we deal with sometimes gets so frustrated that he loses focus and yells, rants and raves…at this time, I'll go off on a tangent to help him refocus."

Information Transfer

Frequency. "I help by keeping everyone up-to-date regularly to minimize surprises." "I do regular once-a-week email communications with him and respond to calls right away." Proactive Content-sharing. "I shared concrete goals and objectives that could be accomplished and required some measure of work but were not insurmountable." "My colleague and I walked them through how our catalog works, and how on-line shipping, delivery and invoices work."

Transparency of Thoughts/Feelings. 'I'm able to gain trust because I let them know I make mistakes but am amenable to fixing them." "I talk daily with the account and am as upfront and honest as I can be – the account needs to know where my mind is."

Social Influence

Reciprocity. "I shared the parameters of a contest we were having and pushed him further than I might have – we each needed each other to do something." "I tried to point out that I couldn't issue a credit memo if they were going to reduce the number of stores for a purchase order that we had previously agreed to."

Persistence. "Many times I'll tell them that I'm working as hard as I can to get this program for you." "I knew he was ticked off at the world and didn't take it personally…I was persistent and kept going in to do business and was true to myself. It worked. I stayed patient. I've learned that it's a marathon, not a sprint."

Authority. "I gave him tough love and made it clear that no means no." "I walked through and explained the importance of ordering on time and told them if they didn't do this, it might affect their ability to get hot products."

Empathy. "All you can do is apologize to them, listen and say you're sorry. They're looking for a place to direct their anger." "I make customers feel like I'm in their backyard, even if I'm not."