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EFFECTIVENESS OF VARYING SALES STYLE ON CONSUMER ORIENTATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Using the role-play technique, the effect of four different
sales orientations on customers with four different need patterns
was examined. In a factorial design, product-centred, company-
centred, customer-centred, and self-centred salespersons inter-
acted with strong need, marginal need, no need, and negative need
consumers. Each salesperson-customer pair interacted for a period
of ten minutes during which the salesperson attempted to sell a
radio set to the customer. Neither the salesperson nor the
customer was aware of the other's orientation. The study was
conducted separately on two different samples; three groups of
salesmen and three groups of students with eight persons in each
group. Data obtained from both samples were quite similar.
Results indicated that product-centred salespersons made more
positive impact on consumers followed by customer-centred and the
company-centred. Self-centred salespersons had relatively low
impact. Furthermore, product-centred salespersons made relatively
more impact on low-need customers while company-centred sales-
persons were better off with high-need customers. Customer-centred
salespersons showed more consistency in the impact they made than
the other three types, indicating that they are likely to be
consistently effective irrespective of the need patterns of customers.

EFFECTIVENESS OF VARYING SALES STYLE ON CONSUMER ORIENTATIONS [1]

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Stereotypic views held about salesmen in general are mostly unfavourable, widespread and remarkably resistant to change. The salesman is often pictured as a glib-tongued and deceitful person who must lie in order to succeed. Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman (1957) vividly portrays the hollow values embodied in the old fashioned stereotyped salesman. Despite the negative public image of the salesman, effective salesmen are potentially of enormous value to any company.

What makes one man able to sell and another not? Many sales executives believe that a good salesman must be a certain type. In other words, individual difference variables underlie the success of a salesman. The emphasis here is on what salesmen are. This belief could form the basis for selection, training and management of sales force in an organization between sales effectiveness and measurable character traits, age or education of salesmen. Another approach, which might be profitable, is to examine what salesmen do rather than what they are. This is because salesmen largely function in terms of interactions between themselves and the customers. Mayer and Greenberg (1964) have pointed out that a salesman's success lies in his sensing the reaction of the customer and his ability to adjust to these reactions.

Ackoff (1969) has broadly identified four different types of sales behaviour based upon the patterns of interaction between the salesmen and the buyer. According to Ackoff the sales behaviour is classified as inactive when neither the salesman nor the buyer tries to control the situation. It is reactive when the salesman tries to do what the buyer wants. It is proactive when he tries to get the buyer do what he wants. It is interactive when the salesman tries to influence the buyer as well as gets influenced by him. Emary and Trist (1965) have found that the effectiveness of the given type of sales behaviour varies according to prevailing market conditions. For instance, while reactive sales behaviour might be quite effective in a perfect competition market, the proactive sales behaviour might be effective in a turbulent market. It might also be argued that effectiveness of a given style of interaction between the salesperson and the customer would be influenced by the level of need the customer has for the product. In their original sales grid exercise in the American context Blake and Mouton (1970) viewed the salesperson on two dimensions: concern for the customer and concern for the sale.

The customer is also located on two dimensions: concern for the purchase and concern for the salesperson. They identified the salesperson style through a questionnaire. A similar instrument has recently been developed in India for use with Indian sales managers.(Pareek, 1974).

While concern for the sale and concern for the customer are two orientations that might get reflected in a sales situation, other orientations are possible in our setting. The salesperson may be product-dominant, stressing the attributes of the product or company-dominant, stressing the status of the company he works for. While several other orientations are possible, these two orientations appear to be important in addition to the two used by Blake and Mouton.

The present experiment is aimed at studying the effects of the four different sales-orientations mentioned above on customers with four different levels of need. These are elaborated in the following section of the paper.

Method

A salesperson-customer interaction exercise developed by Rao (1975) was used in this study. This exercise follows the pattern of MITHA^2 exercises.

Sales Style: The sales style was broadly classified into four categories:

1. Product-centred style is characterized by a salesman who believes that it is the inherent qualities of the product which sell the product He believes that if the product is seen as having technical and other advantages over others, consumers go for it. Therefore, in an interacting situation with a customer he speaks as much as possible about the product—how excellent the product is in its technology, how superior it is to similar others, how it has been made, etc. The salesmen is concerned with the excellence of the product he is selling and his interaction is directed to proving it. He talks little or nothing about the company or the needs of the customer.

2. Company-centred style is characterized by a salesman who believes that when consumers buy they like to buy from "standard" or prestigious companies. It is the company which sells the product and not the inherent qualities of the product or any such dimensions which do so. This salesman tries to influence the customer by talking, for the most part, about the company, its name and fame, its profit, its achievement, etc. although now and then he attempts to relate them to the product he is selling.

3. **Consumer-centred style** is characterized by a salesman who believes that no matter what the product or the company is, unless he makes the customer feel that he is interested in him and his needs, he will not buy from him. He tries to influence the customer by pointing out the gains to the customer, the needs of the customer which the product will serve, other benefits the customer gets, and so on. His interaction is dominated by a concern for the customer and the customer's benefits rather than the company or the product.

4. **Self-centred style** is characterized by a salesman who believes that people can be influenced through persuasion and social pressure. He brings such pressures by talking about his achievements with others. He tries to influence the customer by emphasizing how many of a given product he has sold and how well he was received by others, his targets, areas covered, and so on. His interaction is dominated by a concern for himself and his experiences in selling the product.

There are several dimensions on which a salesman's personality and sales orientations could be classified. The present exercise deals with the four dimensions stated above. In reality, a sales-man cannot be classified as distinctly product-centred, self-centred, etc.,he may have a mixed sales style in which some dimensions may be dominant and others less so. It is only for the purpose of this experiment such mutually exclusive styles have been used. Since in reality such distinct styles may be rare, the results of this exercise may be interpreted with caution and within the context of this experiment.

Customer needs: The need patterns of the consumer in the exercise was dealt with under four categories.

1. **Strong need consumer** is one who is very much in need of buying the item proposed by the salesman, is interested in it and has been thinking of buying it (not necessarily of the same company and brand) for quite some time. He does not have any brand preferences so far but he would like to know about it before he purchases the item.

2. **Marginal need consumer** is one who has a need for the item but it is not strong. He can postpone the purchase for some more time. However, he may like to buy the items if some one convinces him.

3. **No need consumer** is one who does not need the item at all. Even if he buys it, he is not going to use it immediately. However, he may like to keep it for use in future whenever the need arises. Or he may like to give it to some one who he knows is in need of it.

4. **Negative need consumer** is one who decided some time back never o buy or use this item, although he is not aware of this new brand.

Even if he buys, it is only under strong pressure. However, if he finds the new brand extremely good he might recommend it to others.

Consumers exhibit different patterns of behaviour. Their choice of items and buying behaviour in general is influenced by several factors besides their immediate needs. Such factors have not been incorporated in this exercise.

Companies often are greatly concerned about attracting customers whose needs have already been aroused. Marketing strategies based on efforts to arouse needs in customers become expensive. Hence for interpretation of the results, the last two categories of customers become new variables. Available marketing experiences are generally based on the first two categories whereas this experiment goes on to use customer categories on which little research evidence is available.

This experiment was designed to examine the relative impact of the four different sales styles on the four categories of customers.

Design

This exercise was tried out in two types of samples. One, post-graduate students of a course on consumer behaviour at the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad, and two, sales personnel who were actually in the field for a pharmaceutical company and were undergoing a 4-day training programme on sales techniques. The experience level of the latter was in the range of 5 to 10 years. The exercise was conducted separately on the two samples at different places. In each sample the salesperson-customer interaction roles were played in three groups. Each group had twelve members; four of them played the four salesperson roles, with different sales orientations. Four of them played the roles of the four categories of customers. The remaining four were observers of the interaction. Each salesperson had to interact with each of the four categories of customers, one after the other, for a duration of 10 minutes each. Thus, there were 16 interaction patterns in each group. The time was monitored by the experimenter.

Experimental session: Salespersons and customers were given role briefing sheets before the experiment began. The role briefing sheets gave the respective role description and orientation for each role player. Each salesperson was to sell a radio to the customer. Fictitious company names were used to neutralize the effect of real company names.

After each interaction, the customer assessed his tendencies to buy from the salesperson on a 4-point scale; his impression of the salesperson on a semantic differential scale with eight bipolar adjectives; and the probability of his buying (out of 100 points) from the salesperson. Upon completion of his/her interaction with all the four salespersons, the customer gave a comparative assessment of the salespersons indicating the salesperson from whom he would like to buy the most and the least.

All through the exercise, customer-role players did not know the orientations of the salespersons with whom they were interacting. Similarly, salespersons were not aware of the customer-orientations or roles. The observers were to comment upon the interactions and throw light on how well the roles were played, etc. Their inputs were used in the class session of the exercise and their observations brought to focus many dynamics of salespersons-customer interaction.

Results and Discussion

Interviews with the observers indicated that the role-players in general exhibited the characteristics of the roles assigned to them. Only a few minor variations were noticed as some of the sales people used many other statements relating to the deal. After each transaction was completed the customers rated their tendencies to buy on a 4-point scale. The four alternative used to evaluate the customer tendencies were:

1. I will not hesitate to buy from this salesperson if I need the product.

2. I will recommend it to my friend if he needs it.

3. I will not buy even if I need it.

4. I will even caution my friend to be very careful before he buys as I am not at all convinced of it.

These four alternatives indicate four different tendencies to purchase, the first alternative indicating the most positive and the last the least. Ordinal weights of 4, 3, 2 and 1 respectively were assigned to the four alternatives. Mean scores for the six groups are presented in Table 1. The table also presents the overall means obtained by each salesperson.

Table 1 about here

Table 1 reveals that company-centred sales style had more positive impact on customers whose needs were aroused followed by the customer-centred sales style. Product-centred and self-centred sales styles were not as effective. However, with the customers having no need arousal, product-centred style made more positive impact followed by the customer-centred style. Company-centred style was not as impactful and the self-centred style was least effective.

In general, product-centred salespersons induced the greatest tendency to purchase in the customers. Consumer-centred and company-centred salespersons had about the same level of effectiveness. Self-centred salespersons made the least impact. The difference between the impact made by the first three styles are rather marginal. The customers assessed the impression each salesperson created on them by using a semantic differential scale with 8 bipolar adjectives. These bipolar adjectives include: active-passive, good-bad, warm-cold, impressive-unimpressive, sharp-dull, efficient-inefficient, friendly-unfriendly, and patient-impatient.

The customers' overall impression of the different salespersons as recorded on this scale is given in Table 2. The table indicates a similar trend as earlier with both the sets of customers. With need-aroused customers both the company-centred and the customer-centred salespersons seem to have created positive impressions. The product-style and self-style have created similar impressions. With customers whose needs are not aroused product-centred style seems to create highly favourable impression. This is followed by the consumer-centred style. Company-centredness was not as effective and the self-centredness was least effective in creating positive impressions. Consistency in effectiveness has been observed in consumer-centred styles although it was only second most effective in total.

Table 2 about here

The probability of buying rated by the consumer on a 100-point scale is presented in Table 3. The results are similar to those above. Consumers preferred to buy from product-centred salespersons

the most, followed by the customer-centred and company-centred salespersons. Self-centred salespersons were the least effective.

Table 3 about here

The ratings in these situations were made by the customers after each transaction without taking into consideration the earlier transaction and thus avoiding comparative judgment. The results indicate a trend in favour of the product-centred sales style as more effective with n and negative need customers and the company-centred style more effective with high and marginal need customers. Customer-centred style was uniformly effective. In view of the small sample size in each cell (N=6) the ANOVA may be too sophisticated a statistic to bring out any significant trends statistically. However, the trend is apparent in consistency.

Comparative evaluation by consumers: After all four transactions were over, each customer indicated the salesperson from whom he would most like to buy and from whom he would least like to buy. Thus each consumer had two choices to make--one positive and one negative. The results are presented in Table 4. Positive preferences are marked by + and negative preferences by -. The product-centred salesperson got 9 + ratings and 3 - ratings. The data in the row corresponding to the product-centred sales-person also reveals that as the need level of the consumers decreases, the effectiveness of the product-centredness increases. Two of the six strong need consumers least liked to buy from the product-centred salesperson, whereas all the six negative need consumers liked to buy from him the most. This indicates that low need customers are likely to be aroused (in their need to buy) if the product descriptions appeal to them. They would care more for the product attributes than for the company (if they had decided earlier not to buy).

A reversed trend could be observed for company-centred sales-persons. Company-centred salespersons appear to be more effective when consumers have a strong need to buy the product than when their need is not so strong. For instance, three of the six strong need customers preferred company-centred salespersons the most, whereas none of the negative need consumers preferred them the most; in fact two of the negative need customers least liked to buy from them.

Table 4 about here

"A significant observation from Table 4 is that the customer-centred salespersons received the least number of least preferences from the customers. However, they did not receive as many first preferences either. It is rather surprising that customers evaluate customer-centred style more positively at an absolute level while on a relative basis they are only in the average range. In other words, these results indicate that, if a customer meets a customer-oriented salesperson, he is generally impressed by him irrespective of his need to buy that item. But, if he happens to meet the company-centred or product-centred salesperson, there is some possibility of his shifting the preference to either of them. Even in case of such a shift he carried positive impressions about the customer-styled person. However, if a product-centred salesperson meets a need-aroused customer, he may not be able to influence him quickly; the customer goes by the company. However, if he is a no-need customer he is likely to have been impressed by the product style salesperson and might not hesitate at all to buy from him. The same is true when a company-centred salesperson meets a need-aroused customer (if his company is prestigious). However, a company-centred salesperson may not be appreciated at all by those whose needs are not aroused. It is rather striking that at least 50 per cent of the customers from each need-orientation group indicates a negative preference for self-centred salespersons. The trends in the results appear to be meaningful, although more experimentation is required to draw definitive conclusions. It may be appropriate to point out here that Blake and Mouton (1970) study a high concern for the sale and a high concern for the customer (9,9 style) was the most effective. This may be a combination of product-centred and customer-centred styles of this study.

Implications

The results suggest that no single strategy of influencing the customer will be uniformly effective. Different types of customers are receptive to different sales styles although customer-centredness is generally harmless. The success of a salesperson lies in his skill in making a correct diagnosis of client-orientations and then using responsive sales styles. A combination of sales styles may be more effective than mutually exclusive styles like those presented in this exercise. The nature of the product to be sold may also influence the effectiveness of a given sales style or combination of styles. Results of experiments of this kind are likely to provide useful clues for marketing, advertising and sales strategies.

Table 1

Mean Scores of Tendencies to Buy from Each Salesperson

| Salesperson | Mean rating score of customer with | | | | Total |
	Strong need	Marginal need	No Need	Negative need	
Product-centred	2.67	2.83	3.33	3.67	12.50
Company-centred	3.17	3.17	3.00	2.33	11.67
Consumer-centred	3.00	2.67	3.33	2.67	11.67
Self-centred	2.67	2.67	1.83	2.33	9.50

Note: When a two-way analysis of variance was computed, the

F   ratio for sales styles was statistically
    significant at .10 level.

F   ratio between customer-orientations and
    for interaction effects were not
    significant at .10 level.

Table 2

Mean ratings by customers of salespersons on a semantic
differential scale for different salespersons

| Salesperson | Mean ratings by customers with | | | | Total |
	Strong need	Marginal need	No Need	Negative need	
Product-centred	4.37	4.50	5.45	6.33	20.65
Company-centred	5.10	4.92	4.78	4.47	19.27
Consumer-centred	5.22	4.63	4.55	5.55	19.95
Self-centred	4.77	4.27	3.82	5.23	18.09

Note: 1. The scores represent the mean rating over the eight
bipolar adjectives.

The F ratio for sales styles was not statistically
significant and for interaction effects it was
significant at .04 level.

Table 3

Mean buying probability (out of 100) scores of customers
from each salesperson

Salesperson	Mean probability scores given by customer with				Total (out of 400)
	Strong need	Marginal need	No Need	Negative need	
Product-centred	47.5	50.3	55.0	73.3	266.1
Company-centred	58.3	59.2	46.7	27.3	191.7
Customer-centred	56.7	50.0	37.5	50.8	195.0
Self-centred	47.5	38.3	25.0	39.2	160.0

The F ratio between sales styles was significant at
.04 level and for interaction effects it was significant
at .20 level.

FOOTNOTES

1   The authors thankfully acknowledge the constructive comments made by Professor Subroto Sen Gupta in the preparation of this paper.

2   MITRA is the acronym for Management Institute for Training and Research in Asia.