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Ryan R. Mullins, PhD, Daniel G. Bachrach, PhD, Adam A. Rapp, PhD, Dhruv Grewal, PhD, and Lauren Skinner Beitelspacher, PhD

The old adage tells us that the customer is always right, but does the customer always feel in control? Customers and clients desire to have a level of control over the sales relationship and sales process. However, many times the client’s desired level of control differs from the client’s perceived level of control which can create conflict. Our research was conducted to better understand what salesperson factors may lessen customers’ desire for control and the impact that a customer’s perceived and desired control plays on the sales relationship and process.

The importance of perceived control has been widely recognized, but we considered the relatively neglected consequences of desired control within a sales relationship in a threefold manner, by: (1) investigating how the fit between desired and perceived control can predict both customer satisfaction and sales outcomes; (2) evaluating how a customer’s perceived control can have a substantive impact on the sales relationship and performance; and (3) providing insight into the social capital drivers of desired control. We believe that the interaction between a customer’s perception of and desire for control drives measurable outcomes (including customer satisfaction and sales performance).

Success for both customers and salespeople depends upon how closely the customers’ desire for control coincides with how much control the customer perceives they have in their relationships with salespeople. Therefore, salespeople can more effectively meet the needs and goals of their clients by understanding and managing their clients’ perception of and desire for control throughout the sales process.

Exploring Control-Desire for Control Congruence: Research and Results

Control is the demonstration of competence, superiority, and mastery within the sales relationship (White 1959). For this study a customer’s desire for control is defined as the extent which customers seek and pursue demonstrated competence, superiority, and mastery in their sales relationships.
To better understand how the customer’s desire for control influences a transactional relationship we examined drivers of customer desire for control based on social capital theory. Social capital is the goodwill available to individuals and groups as a consequence of the nature and content of their social relationships (Adler & Kwon, 2002). Incorporating control drivers that build social capital provided several benefits for analyzing control in the sales relationship. First, individuals with stronger social capital tend to have access to more timely, relevant, and accurate information which increases transparency in interpersonal settings and decision making. Second, social capital tends to be associated with greater personal influence due to the scope of networks and experiences that allow people to use social connections and information more effectively. Finally, social capital tends to decrease uncertainty and unpredictability associated with others’ attitudes, behaviors, and intentions by reinforcing social norms and adherence to social standards to increase social compliance, thereby diminishing the need for social monitoring.

For our study, we operationalized specific forms of social capital as control drivers in the sales relationship. The specific control drivers we used were salesperson integration, salesperson expertise, and goal congruence between the salesperson and the customer. Salesperson integration occurs when salespeople spend enough time with their clients that they become engrained into the structure and operation of the client’s business or life. Integration creates a relationship forged when salespeople spend time with their clients, become socially familiar with their clients, and learn the cadence of their clients’ daily operations. Additionally, we assessed the control driver of salesperson expertise, because expertise drives trust and social confidence in interpersonal relationships (McAllister, 1995). We hypothesized that salespeople with greater expertise are likely to generate more social confidence among their customers, due to stronger relational social capital, which in turn results in customers desiring less control over the sales process. Finally, we assessed the impact that goal congruence between the salesperson and customer has on social capital in the relationship and in turn on the customer’s desire for control in the sales transaction. We hypothesized that when the control driver of goal congruence is higher, the sales relationship has a higher level of social capital which then leads to less desire for control of the sales transaction by the customer.

We conducted our study in the context of dyadic supplier-retailer relationships in the athletic merchandise industry. In this study, the suppliers are the salespeople and the retail store managers are the customers in the sales transaction. The retailers buy products from the suppliers and then sell the suppliers’ products in the retail venue which they own and operate. The B2B sales relationship was chosen because of the power that the retailers retained through the ability to discontinue the relationships with suppliers and their salespeople. Any loss of control, or perceived loss of control, by the retailers could be rectified by formal termination of the relationship. The well-defined control parameters allowed us to analyze the impacts of the control drivers (integration, expertise, and goal congruence) on the sales transaction between the salespeople and the customers.
As expected, salesperson expertise did have a measurable effect that was negatively associated with the customers’ desire for control. The greater the salesperson’s expertise in the relationship, the less control that the customer desires over sales transaction.

While goal congruence has an effect on the customer’s desire for control, the effect was opposite of our prediction. The greater the goal congruence between the salesperson and the customer, the greater the customer’s desire for control in the sales transaction. The positive relationship might be caused by a customer having diminished perceptions of dependence on salespeople, which provides customers with the opportunity to control decisions for both parties. Customers may perceive goal congruence between themselves and salespeople as an opportunity to exploit decision autonomy and control the sales transaction. The positive relationship between goal congruence and desire for control might also be caused by the importance and meaningfulness of goal attainment for shared goals. Whatever the cause, our findings reinforce the importance of salespeople working directly with their customers when goals are congruent.

Interestingly, salesperson integration had no direct effect on the customers’ desire for control. In other words, the amount of time that salespeople spend at their customers’ place of operation does not have an impact on the amount of control that the retailers desire for the sales transaction. While sales integration did not display a direct impact on the customer’s desire for control in the sales relationships, increased integration does create greater social transparency. Consequentially, increased social transparency can bring to light any goal incongruence that may exist between the salesperson and the customer which in turn does impact the customers.

Customer expectations and perceptions are very important when it comes to the overall customer satisfaction with the sales relationship. The results of our research confirmed that customer satisfaction decreases as the levels of the customer’s desired and perceived control become more misaligned. The farther apart the customer’s perceived level of control is from the customer’s desired level of control, the less satisfaction the customer will have with the sales relationship.

Through our research we were able to increase our understanding of the antecedents and consequences of customers’ desired and perceived control over sales relationships. Salespeople can become more effective by monitoring and adapting their selling approaches in accordance with their customers’ desired and perceived control over the sales relationship. Failing to recognize when
the customers’ desired level of control is not coinciding with their current perceived level of
control can negatively influence the customers’ satisfaction with the relationship and ultimately
impact sales performance.

**Real Estate Perspective**

While our study was conducted in the B2B sales context of a supplier and retailer, real estate
agents can improve upon client satisfaction and overall sales performance by applying these
lessons to real estate sales transactions. In real estate sales, clients retain a form of explicit power
over the sales relationship because if they are dissatisfied with the services the agent is
providing, clients can end the relationship with the agent. Because of the power dynamic in the
relationship, the congruence between the real estate clients’ perceived and desired control over
the relationship with their real estate agent can impact the client’s satisfaction with the real estate
agent and the overall sales performance.

The interpersonal relationship between a real estate agent and her client is extremely important in
providing a successful experience for the client. Real estate agents should recognize that despite
the fact that the agent and her client share a high level of goal congruence, the client may desire a
greater level of control over the sales relationship.

Clients rely on their real estate agents because the agents are their professional experts. The level
of real estate agent expertise will also impact the client’s desire for control over the real estate
relationship. It is important for real estate agents to become integrated into the decision-making
processes of their clients in order to build social capital. Increased social capital allows the
clients to recognize the agent’s expertise and the agents to recognize any goal incongruence or
divergence between the desired and perceived levels of control their clients may have.

Buying and selling a home is a dynamic process with different events creating different
expectations or perceptions for real estate agents and their clients. This dynamic relationship
results in the clients’ levels of desired and perceived control changing over time. Real estate
agents can more readily understand and manage the patterns and changes in their clients’ desired
and perceived levels of control, and consequentially their clients’ satisfaction with the
client/agent relationship, by building social capital through a quality relationship with the client.

Increased client satisfaction requires the real estate agent to abdicate some control over the
relationship to the client. However, maximizing sales performance requires the real estate agent
to retain a level of control over the relationship. It is therefore essential for real estate agents to
be aware of any patterns in their clients’ perceived and desired levels control over the sales
relationship. Understanding and managing the client’s expectations and desires allows real estate
agents to provide their clients with the greatest level of satisfaction and the best real estate
results.
Recommended Reading


References


About the Authors

Ryan R. Mullins, PhD
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Before coming to Clemson, Ryan worked as an engineer for Boeing as marketing liaison between engineering performance testing and the sales/marketing teams. Ryan pursued his PhD at the University of Houston where he focused his work on sales and sales management research. At Clemson, Dr. Mullins is working on research projects related to sales force management and effectiveness, team selling, customer relationship management, and sales leadership. Ryan’s work has appeared in the *Journal of Marketing, Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, Journal of Applied Psychology*, and the *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management*. Integrating his work into the classroom, Dr. Mullins teaches Introduction to Professional Selling, Advanced Selling, and Sales Management at the undergraduate level, and also teaches Sales Leadership at the MBA level.

Ryan has won several awards for his research work. His dissertation work was awarded the AMA Sales SIG Best Dissertation Proposal (2012) and Best Dissertation (2013). He has also previously won the sales track best paper award at SMA 2012 and SMA 2014, as well as the AMA Services Track best paper award in 2014. More recently, Ryan and his co-authors were awarded the AMA Sales SIG Excellence in Research award (2015) to recognize the sales-focused journal article with the most significant contribution to the sales discipline over the previous year.
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Prior to joining the faculty at Ohio, Adam was the D. Paul Jones and Charlene Jones Endowed Chair in Services Marketing at the University of Alabama. He was an assistant professor at Clemson University and Kent State University. He has been invited to present at Harvard University and Columbia University, among others, to discuss his cutting edge techniques and approach to sales management. Adam is a visiting lecturer at the Vlerick Leuven Gent Management School in Belgium, University of Eastern Finland, and the Athens University of Economics and Business and the ALBA School in Greece. He has a Ph.D. from the University of Connecticut, an M.B.A. from Villanova University, and an undergraduate degree from Penn State. Adam also spent two years as a doctoral fellow at the University of Houston, where he researched and taught in the Sales Excellence Institute.

Adam has won teaching awards at the University of Houston, University of Connecticut, the overall business school teaching award at Kent State and Clemson Universities, and most recently the Board of Trustees Award for Teaching and Research at Clemson University. Adam’s has published three books and over forty peer-reviewed articles, which examine factors influencing the performance of front-line service and sales personnel. He has presented at hundreds of conferences and events around the globe. Adam most recently won the Neil Rackham award for sales knowledge dissemination (2014) and the most impactful journal article in the Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management (2014).
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Dr. Grewal was awarded the 2010 Lifetime Achievement Award in Retailing (AMA Retailing SIG), 2005 Lifetime Achievement in Behavioral Pricing Award (Fordham University, November 2005) and the AMS Cutco/Vector Distinguished Educator Award in May 2010. He is a “Distinguished Fellow” of the Academy of Marketing Science. He has also coauthored Marketing Research (publisher: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1e 2004, 2e 2007), Marketing (publisher McGraw-Hill 1e 2008, 2e 2010-Awarded Revision of the Year, McGraw-Hill Corporate Achievement Award for Marketing, 2e with Connect Marketing in the category of Content and Analytical Excellence, 3e 2012) and M Series: Marketing (publisher McGraw-Hill 1e 2009). He was co-editor of Journal of Retailing (2001-2007). He is currently researching innovative retailers and working on a book.

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Dr. Beitelspacher’s research interests include: buyer-supplier relationships, retail management, and the retail supply chain. Her work has been published in numerous scholarly journals including: Journal of Applied Psychology, Journal of Retailing, Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, Journal of Business Research, and Industrial Marketing Management. She has also presented her work at numerous conferences and won several best paper in track awards at the Society for Marketing Advances and Academy of Marketing Science. Her research concentrates specifically on the relationships with retailers and manufacturers. Whenever possible, her research focuses in the athletic, outdoor, and sporting goods industry. Lauren has contributed to several marketing and retailing textbooks and her teaching interests include: principles of marketing, retail management, business-to-business marketing, and personal selling.