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Looking Back: Key Themes in Sales Research
Keith A. Richards, PhD, Wyatt Schrock, PhD, Yanhui Zhao, PhD, and Douglas E. Hughes, PhD

In every field of study, there are moments when looking back helps us better understand where we are now and the path forward. In an effort to uncover key takeaways for salespeople, we reviewed the lessons gleaned from the past 35 years of sales research in the Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management (JPSSM), the premiere journal focused on sales-related issues.

The research themes that surfaced in our study point toward key issues professionals face today and will continue to face in the future. What we learned may confirm many things top agents already know, but some ideas will challenge you to think about your career in new ways. What follows is a journey through three decades of research – join us on the journey and discover the insights that will help you!

What We Studied

In our research, we analyzed over 700 published articles across three decades (1980s, 1990s, and 2000s), uncovering important issues for both academics and practitioners. We began by recognizing that other scholar teams previously reviewed the literature for insights (Bush and Grant 1991; Leigh, Pullins, and Comer 2001; and Williams and Plouffe 2007). To differentiate this study, we used a technique that allows us to evaluate a large number of studies while minimizing subjective judgment. We employed a quantitative method that examines article citations. A bibliometric review of close to 36,000 citations allowed us to uncover important topics (through citation analysis) and identify topics that are related to each other (through co-citation analysis). The recommended reading at the close of this article provides a complete description of the methodology. Suffice to say, the central goal for our work was to identify articles deemed important by many sales scholars and to examine how those articles related to each other.

What We Learned – Motivation and Performance Matter Most!

The bibliometric analyses revealed two central issues across time: salesperson motivation and salesperson performance. Consistent across all three decades was the search to understand salesperson motivation and salesperson performance, suggesting that salesperson performance
has remained scholars’ key outcome of interest. The chief explainer-and-predictor of performance across the decades was salesperson motivation.

The most-cited article in both the 1990s and 2000s was Churchill et al.’s (1985) study of the causes and consequences of salesperson motivation. As any professional will tell you, staying motivated is critical to success. Much of the research uncovered in this study revolved around motivation and the connection is clear in the themes below.

In addition to motivation and performance, our study also revealed four key themes and the developmental history of each theme across the decades: (1) relationship marketing; (2) sales force technology; (3) sales force control systems; and (4) salesperson role stress.

First, the term “relationship marketing” was coined in the 2000s, but theme emerged in the 1980s as buyer-seller interactions, and grew in the 1990s under the study of both adaptive selling and salesperson knowledge. The idea that good agents and salespeople adjust their approach based on the knowledge they have of a given situation underpins relationship marketing. We also see research patterns providing evidence that buyer-seller relationships build over stages and depend on mutual trust and commitment to last.

The first takeaway for real estate professionals is to continue to build relationships to support your business growth. Focus on adjusting your approach to fit each person you work with and build trust to help the relationships last.

Second, sales force technology emerged as a key theme during the 2000s as companies implemented sales force automation systems and customer relationship management software. As companies sought to build stronger relationships with customers, they began to employ software to help in that effort. Early on, a reluctance by salespeople to adopt these technologies spurred work on technology acceptance and technology usage by salespeople. However, as the practice of using software to track customer relationships became more mainstream the focus shifted to how technology enhances performance. Clearly, technology has a growing importance in selling and this trend will evolve even further with increased use of social media and specialized software to connect buyers and sellers.

The second takeaway is to embrace technology. Whether that technology is used to track your customer interactions, network virtually, or list available properties, the best agents will stay on top with the help of technology.

Third, we uncovered a stream of research on sales force control systems in the 2000s linked to studies from the 1980s which examined salesperson performance and salesperson job satisfaction. From the 1980s, and into the 1990s, salesperson performance evaluations moved to the center stage. Specifically, studies of evaluation criteria (how should we measure salespeople’s performance?) and managerial actions (what should managers do?) to improve
both performance and satisfaction were critical to the formation of this theme. Ultimately, we see scholars wrestling with the question of when to use behavior-based control systems (rewarding activity) and when to use outcome-based control systems (rewarding sales).

The third lesson to consider is how pay and job tasks are related to salesperson motivation and ultimately performance. As more agents work remotely and use technology to connect with their clients, these control systems will continue to evolve over the coming decades.

Finally, role stress emerged as a theme in the 1990s and continued into the 2000s. Studies of salesperson turnover and the work environment preceded this work (1980s). By the 1990s, research focused on the nature of the salesperson’s job, revealing the changing nature of the sales job itself. In these studies, we found scholars linking role stress with lower sales performance.

Our final takeaway relates to the job stress we all feel. Anyone who has ever sold for a living can relate to the types of stress generated by commission-based work. Studying this stress helps us better reduce the causes and the impacts of job-related stress in sales. Managing this stress can be the difference in success or failure for both agents and agencies.

Putting It All Together

Taking all of these findings together, we can suggest some actions for agents. First, check your own level of motivation. We all find ourselves feeling less-than-motivated from time to time. Use your motivation level as an early indicator of your future successes and work to stay on track. Second, embrace technology. Be thoughtful in the types of technology that you employ and invest in areas that will have the biggest payoff for you. Third, carefully consider how your day-to-day activities are influenced by your pay structure. It is easy to get distracted and focus on activities that don’t yield results. Stay focused on tasks that lead directly to you meeting your goals and to the rewards you seek. Finally, manage your stress. Missed deadlines, fickle buyers, and unprepared colleagues can all lead to stress. Find ways to manage your stress levels so that you stay calm and collected. It will pay off in both personal and professional ways!
Recommended Reading


This research was awarded the 2016 James M. Comer Award for Best Contribution to Selling and Sales Management Theory in the *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management*.

References


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Dr. Keith Richards (PhD – University of Houston) holds an undergraduate degree from Baylor and an MBA from Indiana University. Prior to joining the faculty at Baylor, Dr. Richards served on the faculty at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. His research, published in the *Journal of Marketing*, the *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management* and *Industrial Marketing Management*, is focused on understanding the relationships between sales organizations and their best customers. Dr. Richards also investigates the impact salespeople have on new product launches, the way salespeople think about success and failure; how they incorporate CRM technology; and what motivates their performance. His research won the 2009 and 2016 James M. Comer Awards for the Best Contribution to Theory in the *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management*. Prior to his academic career, Richards spent eight years as a strategy consultant with two management consulting firms: Kurt Salmon Associates and Accenture. Dr. Richards has helped numerous companies build and enhance their sales function.
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Dr. Wyatt Schrock (PhD – Michigan State University) holds an MBA in Finance from the University of Miami and a BBA in Marketing from the University of Michigan. Dr. Schrock’s research interests include salesperson motivation, persuasion and sales manager leadership. His research has been published in *Marketing Letters* and the *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management*. He has presented his research at several academic conferences in the U.S. and abroad. He currently serves on the Editorial Review Board at the *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management*. Dr. Schrock’s research has received the annual James M. Comer Award for Best Contribution to Selling and Sales Management Theory. Dr. Schrock also has ten years of corporate experience in a variety of sales, marketing and analyst roles. He has worked for companies such as Procter & Gamble and Gannett. At W.V.U., Dr. Schrock teaches Personal Selling (Marketing 320) and Sales Management (Marketing 420).

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Dr. Douglas Hughes’ (PhD – University of Houston) research focuses on sales force management, salesperson performance, customer relationships, and the marketing-sales and sales-service interfaces. Hughes serves as Editor-in-Chief of *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management* and has published articles in the *Journal of Marketing*, *Journal of Marketing Research*, *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, *Marketing Letters*, *Industrial Marketing Management*, *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management*, and *Journal of Service Research*. He was honored for the best doctoral dissertation (2009) and best published articles on a sales topic by the American Marketing Association (2011, 2016) and is also the recipient of the 2013 Withrow Emerging Scholar Award and the 2016 James M. Comer Award for the Best Contribution to Selling and Sales Management Theory. Prior to his academic career, Dr. Hughes served as CEO of a business services firm, as a senior executive in both marketing and sales at Fortune 100/500 consumer products firms, and as a consultant to a variety of companies across multiple industries.