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Sharing Market Intelligence Among Salespeople
Zachary R. Hall, PhD, Ryan R. Mullins, PhD, Niladri Syam, PhD, and Jeffrey P. Boichuk, PhD

Regardless of industry, understanding the changing dynamics of customers and competitors in your markets is a cornerstone for maintained success. This valuable information, known as market intelligence, helps improve organizational, group, and individual decision-making, especially in fast-changing markets such as real estate. But where does market intelligence come from? Is there a cost to collecting and sharing marketing intelligence?

And how do we utilize it in an agency context to bolster sales?

Generating market intelligence (MI) is a foundational tenet of market-oriented firms to deliver customer value and create a competitive advantage (Kohli & Jaworski 1990; Narver & Slater 1990). Research has consistently shown that MI offers many benefits to the sales organization, directly improving the performance of salespeople (Hughes, Le Bon, and Rapp 2013), sales managers (Mariadoss et al. 2014), and sales teams (Menguc, Auh, & Uslu 2013). Because the sales force is the primary vehicle through which firms interact with their customers (Palmatier et al. 2006), sales teams that gather information from and about customers, distributors, and competitors (Menguc, Auh, & Uslu 2013) and share information within the team (Bachrach, Mullins, & Rapp 2017; Bachrach & Mullins 2019) improve customer relationship outcomes and performance. Research also demonstrates that generating and sharing MI helps sales teams’ ability to perform adaptive selling (Rapp, Agnihotri, & Baker 2015), manage customer relationships (Menguc, Auh, & Uslu 2013), and diffuse market orientation throughout the team (Lam, Kraus, & Ahearne 2010).

Our Study

Our research complements this stream of sales and marketing literature that views marketing intelligence (MI) as a benefit to everyone within the organization. Here we look at sharing marketing intelligence among members of the sales team, focusing on two important members: the sales manager and an expert salesperson within the team. We conducted our research with the entire sales force (40 sales teams representing 287 salespeople) from a multinational, Fortune 1000 business-to-business (B2B) firm that has operations in 10 industries.
Findings & Implications

Previous research on MI sheds light on how organizations should form their teams as well as how to improve the knowledge management of those teams at different stages of team formation to obtain the benefits of MI. Our findings build on these studies by showing that the sales manager’s MI-sharing efforts also provides benefits. However, this sharing comes at a cost. As managers share more and more MI, the effort of MI-generation among other team members decreases rather than increases. It seems that managers create a “free-riding” problem where the members of the team take advantage of the manager’s knowledge sharing. In contrast, when the manager lowers MI-sharing efforts, the expert salesperson, usually the top performing salesperson, must increase MI-sharing efforts. In other words, experts “pick up the slack in sharing MI” with other team members when managers do not share as much, and sales team members reduce their effort by taking advantage of the expert’s sharing. This is troubling as the expert salesperson is often the top performer and must spend more time on non-selling tasks.

Our research finds that, in general, individuals within a sales team are critical in the knowledge-sharing processes of organizational groups. Essentially, sales managers and expert salespeople fuel the knowledge sharing within sales teams. When both the sales manager and expert distribute market intelligence to the team, team members tend to accept this free knowledge while shirking their own MI generation efforts. We designate this shirking problem as “sharing tax”—the cost that sales managers and expert peers must pay when increasing their MI sharing efforts.

Application

To stay ahead in today’s real estate marketplace, agencies should develop mechanisms (e.g., market intelligence meetings, virtual sharing platforms, classifying team members’ expertise in various fields) for obtaining and distributing market intelligence across their teams. Efficiently generating and managing market intelligence allows agencies to develop unique insights which are unknown to competing agencies and also create opportunities for growth.

At the same time, the costs of sharing and acquiring market intelligence must be considered when allocating knowledge across employee networks. To avoid the sharing tax, firms can establish MI activity responsibilities, such as behavioral control systems, to monitor MI-generating efforts by the entire team. Organizations could also establish informal knowledge repositories where each team member is responsible for a certain domain of knowledge. Developing these formal or information knowledge sharing systems helps ensure that MI generation and sharing responsibilities are performed across the team. For real estate firms, the distribution of labor allows each agent/broker the ability to remain knowledgeable about the market without placing severe time constraints on specific individuals or taxing those who share valuable insights.
In addition, firms should consider formal mechanisms for sharing MI. This would help connect all team members, making it easier for all members to share MI and eliminating possible MI-sharing and generating redundancies. The goal of this process is to consolidate information acquired throughout the agency, providing increased awareness and accessibility for each agent. Investigation into how knowledge flows within/across functional boundaries provides valuable insight into structuring the optimal MI distribution network for marketing and sales teams.

**Conclusion**

Understanding MI as a public good helped us develop an economic model to capture the pattern of generating and sharing MI throughout the social network (e.g., linkages) of a sales team. Guided by the premise that each agent within the sales team acts to maximize his or her utility, we formed propositions to explain each agent’s efforts in generating and sharing MI within the social network. When testing these economic propositions against social network data from a multinational sales organization, we discovered a sharing tax of market intelligence across hierarchical levels of employees. Inefficiencies in the acquisition and distribution of market intelligence produced time constraints and incohesive sharing efforts. Brokers can promote efficiency by reevaluating the distribution of market intelligence in their agencies and developing new policies that more appropriately disburse responsibility and foster collaboration.

**Recommended Reading**


**References**


About the Authors

Zachary R. Hall, PhD  
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Dr. Zach Hall’s (PhD – University of Houston) research examines factors that affect the performance of salespeople, sales teams, and sales organizations. His research focuses on investigating these performance issues from a dyadic perspective in both salesperson-customer exchanges and manager-employee relationships. His research has been published in the Journal of Marketing, Journal of Marketing Research, Industrial Marketing Management, and Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management. Before entering academia, Zach accumulated almost 10 years of experience in sales, financial analysis, pricing analysis, consulting, and marketing.

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Dr. Ryan Mullins (PhD – University of Houston) is working on research projects related to sales effectiveness, branding, 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, Industrial Marketing Management, Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management, and the Journal of Business Research. Dr. Mullins also serves the field through his associations with marketing journals across domains. Ryan actively serves on the editorial review boards at the Journal of Service Research and the Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management. In addition, he serves as an ad-hoc reviewer at several marketing journals and is a guest co-editor for a special issue on selling teams at Industrial Marketing Management.

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Dr. Niladri Syam’s (PhD – University of Texas at Dallas) research methodology includes building analytical models and also empirical analyses of field data and experimental data from the laboratory. His research on sales force management covers optimal sales compensation schemes, including setting sales quotas and designing sales contests, analytics for sales pipeline management, issues in team selling, issues in ‘inside vs outside’ sales etc. His work on innovation and product design focuses on firm-level strategies and consumer behaviors in product customization and product co-creation. His research has appeared in major journals such as Marketing Science, Journal of Marketing Research, Journal of Marketing, International Journal of Research in Marketing, Quantitative Marketing and Economics, and others. He is on the Editorial Board of the Journal of Retailing and has served on the Editorial Board of Marketing Science.
Dr. Syam does extensive executive teaching and company workshops on enhancing sales manager effectiveness and competitive marketing strategy. He has received the Outstanding Teacher Award for Executive MBA teaching at the University of Missouri. Consistent with his Operations Research and Management Science background, Syam’s teaching and training strongly emphasizes an optimization-based analytics approach, using data, to address issues in salesforce management. Over the last several years he has worked with many companies that are partners of the Center for Sales and Customer Development (CSCD) at the University of Missouri, and of the Sales Excellence Institute (SEI) at the University of Houston. Prior to joining academia, Professor Syam worked in India for an international company.

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Dr. Jeffrey Boichuk's (PhD – University of Houston) research interests include the areas of business-to-business marketing, marketing analytics, and sales force effectiveness. Published in *Journal of Marketing, Journal of Accounting Research*, and *Journal of Retailing*, his current research portfolio addresses such questions as “Why do salespeople use hard sell tactics?”, “What factors cause salespeople to misread customers’ interest levels?”, and "What do companies ask of the sales function when earnings are short?" After graduating from the University of Houston doctoral program, Dr. Boichuk received the inaugural American Marketing Association Emerging Scholar Award. He was also named the 2015 AMA Sales SIG Dissertation Award winner and an ISBM Business Marketing Doctoral Fellow for his dissertation work. Outside of academia, Jeffrey has professional experience with ZS Associates.