I, Me, & My: Little Words that Make a Big Difference in Agent-Customer Interactions
Grant Packard, PhD, Sarah G. Moore, PhD, and Brent McFerran, PhD

Coping with Stress in Real Estate
Jane E. Machin, PhD, Ann M. Mirabito, PhD, Natalie Ross Adkins, PhD, Elizabeth Crosby, PhD, and Justine Rapp Farrell, PhD

Do Opposites Attract?
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Networking: The Difference in Knowing and Doing
Ko Kuwabara, PhD, Claudius A. Hildebrand, PhD, and Xi Zou, PhD

Cooperation in Client Relationships
Bruno Lussier, PhD and Zachary R. Hall, PhD

INSIDER: The Art of Everyday Assertiveness
Zack Snider, MBA Candidate

INSIDER: Show Up: Unlocking the Power of Relational Networking
Maria Arauz, MBA Candidate
Cooperation in Client Relationships
Bruno Lussier, PhD and Zachary R. Hall, PhD

Salespeople (e.g., real estate agents) are responsible for the company’s most important assets, their customers. The salesperson-customer relationship is founded on trust, understanding, and mutual respect to achieve profitable outcomes. A critical success factor that must be present in a salesperson-customer relationship is cooperation. The purpose of this research is to analyze how salespeople’s actual cooperation efforts influence how customers perceive cooperation, and how customer perceived cooperation influences relationship outcomes (e.g., relationship quality and intention to continue the relationship).

Cooperation vs. Perceived Cooperation

It is well established that cooperation between salesperson and customer is essential to achieve positive relationship outcomes. However, prior research shows there is a noticeable disconnect between the cooperative efforts employed by a salesperson and the manner in which cooperation is perceived by the customer. The disconnect between the salesperson’s cooperation and the customer’s perception of the cooperation occurs because these cooperative efforts may not be apparent to the customer’s expectations and perceptions. That is, cooperative cues used by the salesperson may not be perceived by the customer. In addition to cooperative cues between the salesperson and the customer, three important factors have been proposed by previous research to influence effects of salesperson characteristics on perceived cooperation: 1) customer-orientation, 2) relationship duration, and 3) self-efficacy. Lastly, we also evaluate the positive perceived cooperation on relationship outcomes when a customer views the salesperson as being an expert.

Our Study

For our study, we collected data from both salespeople and customers to understand the effects of purposeful salesperson cooperation and customer perceived cooperation on relationship outcomes. Prior research surrounding the salesperson-customer relationship has focused on one side of the relationship or the other, never on both sides of the relationship at the same time. Therefore, we successfully collected dyadic data from 175 salespeople and their respective customers across 17 firms. These firms represented four major industries—financial services, food and beverage, industrial, and pharmaceutical.
Analysis and Results

The research conducted throughout this study aimed to better understand the influences present in a salesperson-customer relationship with respect to cooperation and perceived cooperation and how different factors impact relationship outcomes. Overall, our study concluded that “the extent to which customers perceive salespeople to be cooperative matters more than actual cooperation” (Lussier & Hall 2018, p. 216). In other words, the customer’s interpretation of the salesperson’s cooperative efforts influences the relationship outcomes to a greater extent than the actual application of cooperation by the salesperson. Customers who perceive their salesperson as cooperative will be engaged in increased levels of collaboration that will ultimately be mutually beneficial for the business relationship (e.g., performance improves).

Additionally, the results indicated that customer orientation (how well the salesperson considers the customer’s needs) and relationship duration (relative amount of time the salesperson and customer are engaged in a business relationship) improved customers’ perceptions of salesperson cooperation. However, the third factor noted earlier, salesperson self-efficacy (the salesperson’s belief they can succeed at the task of selling), reduced customers’ perceptions of cooperation. Finally, our study concluded that perceived salesperson expertise by the customer also resulted in a positive influence on the relationship. These findings are important as they can be utilized by salespeople in various industries to improve their customer relationship outcomes and increase profits.

Real Estate Implications

While this research study was focused on the B2B side of selling, these key findings are certainly applicable for real estate agencies and real estate agents seeking to improve client relationships. Just like any salesperson-customer relationship, the real estate agent-client relationship relies on mutual cooperation in order for an agent to provide superior value and the other party to find their forever home. In particular, our findings suggest that real estate agents should focus time on developing emotional intelligence skills that will help them to better capture customer feedback and enhance customer perceptions of cooperation.

This type of training empowers the real estate agent to gain a greater understanding of a client’s emotions, and in turn, lead the client to perceive the cooperative efforts utilized by the agent to foster a successful relationship. Our research shows that a salesperson who has a high level of customer orientation and who has an understanding of the significance of the relationship duration is more likely to be perceived as cooperative regardless of their actual cooperation. Thus, agents can focus on listening skills and speaking the customer’s language to signal higher levels of customer orientation. In doing so, real estate firms and their agents can see the benefits of their relationship investments as clients will reciprocate through value-based activities that will result in profitable outcomes for both agents (e.g., customer referrals, loyalty, and retention) and clients (e.g., customer satisfaction).
Conclusion

This research shows that salespeople, as well as real estate agents and firms, must have a better understanding of the importance of perceived cooperation from their customer and clients. Rather than focusing on persuasive tactics, agents should focus on portraying a customer-oriented selling approach. This can be accomplished through a concerted effort to understand the customer’s demands and needs while providing tailored, beneficial solutions. This is particularly critical early in relationships as customers’ perceived cooperation is lower and more susceptible to change early on in the relationship.

Recommended Reading


About the Authors

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Dr. Bruno Lussier (PhD – Grenoble University) conducts research on sales force effectiveness, relationship marketing, positive organizational behavior, and ethics. His work has been published in various academic publications, such as *Industrial Marketing Management*. Prior to his academic career, Bruno had a 15 year career as a business analyst, consultant, trainer, and sales manager in several B2B firms.

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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.