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How to Win the Sale: Adaptive Sales Techniques

Bryan Hochstein, PhD, Willy Bolander, PhD, Ronald Goldsmith, PhD, and Christopher R. Plouffe, PhD

As technology has developed and grown, so too has our collective and individual knowledge about the goods and services we buy. The world’s wares are at our fingertips, so consumers now come to the table better informed and aware than at any point in the past. As a result, interpersonal selling faces questions surrounding its continued necessity, effectiveness, and future. We can now buy cars at the push of a button. Consider the purchase procedure for Tesla. There are no stores, lots, or salespeople; yet the company continues to receive interest and orders. Consider the many real-estate apps like Zillow that provide detailed information and connect home buyers with sellers. What can salespeople do to maximize their efficacy in the modern sales environment? Disruptive technologies are changing the way the sales process occurs; therefore understanding the best methods of interacting with customers is paramount to success.

In our research, we identify and determine a link between “consumer informedness” of the product being purchased and the effectiveness of various sales techniques. Further, we aim to specify different methods and forms of adaptive sales techniques on which salespeople could capitalize. Past work is extensive on the need for adaptation by salespeople and on specific behavioral tactics to reach sales success, but little-to-no evidence exists on specific adaptive techniques. Our research provides initial clues in this area by offering insights on adaptive sales techniques based on consumers’ perceived informedness given high-involvement purchase decisions (e.g., automobiles; real estate; investments, etc.).

The research examines three broad types of seller influence tactics (SITs)—internalization, compliance, and identification—and their interaction with consumers’ perceptions of their own informedness, regardless of their true or “real” understanding of the details associated with these purchases and sales transactions. Internalization tactics are successful when the consumer determines the actions of the seller to be in his or her interest and accepts those contributions. Compliance tactics tend to involve superficial evaluation and reactionary decision-making, rather than deep reflection and evaluation. Identification tactics revolve around emotional connection.
and engagement between the seller and consumer that influence purchase decisions. Each of these techniques and SITs are explored in greater detail below.

**Internalization Seller Influence Tactics**

Internalization involves two specific SITs: information exchange and recommendation. *Information exchange* involves a back and forth questioning and answering between the salesperson and the consumer to determine what knowledge the consumer already has about the product. Through questioning and observation, salespeople can assess the level of informedness consumers exhibit and adapt their sales approach accordingly. Once the consumer’s informedness is determined, the *recommendation* element of internalization SITs offers the opportunity to recommend specific and targeted solutions to satisfy customer needs. Together, successful applications of internalization SITs acknowledge and affirm the consumer’s informedness and improves likelihood of purchase.

Our expectation is that information exchange and recommendation become more effective as informedness increases, and that high informedness produces a high willingness to purchase. The results of our research in fact confirm this. Overall, higher informedness by consumers creates positive dispositions to buy when internalization SITs were used, with the most informed consumers responding in the greatest positive degree. As informedness decreases, internalization SITs are still effective, albeit to a lesser extent than with consumers who have maximum informedness.

One key point is that internalization SITs do not prompt positive consumer reactions from those with the lowest informedness. Lacking much of the information needed going into the sales interaction, consumers in this situation likely feel overwhelmed by the volume of information provided to them by salespeople. So determining the requisite level of consumer informedness should be a priority in the opening stages of the sales process, with salespeople shifting away from internalization and considering alternative SITs as informedness lessens.

**Compliance SITs**

Compliance SITs are composed of threats and promises. Threats, or “consequences” when used in reference to consumer sales, imply some degree of negative effect to the consumer as a result of noncompliance. Whether highlighting a missed opportunity (“If you don’t act now it will be gone”) or instilling a sense of urgency (“Things are moving quickly, so you need to act today”), threats allow a salesperson to increase the stakes for the consumer in an attempt to secure the sale. Promises, or “incentives” for consumer selling, on the other hand, involve consumers receiving some reward in exchange for agreement and acceptance of sales terms, demands, or the suggestions of the salesperson. These involve some external value given to consumers, such as a reduction in closing costs for a house or including upgrades in a vehicle for no additional charge if the seller’s demands are met.
In a reversal from the internalization SITs, our thinking is that when consumer informedness is high, we will see a reduction in compliance efficacy, with little-to-no sales success using compliance SITs. The results of our research support these hypotheses, supplementing prior research on sales pressure to include an additional dimension of consumer informedness. For the most highly informed customers, compliance SITs meet strong opposition and significantly reduce the likelihood of successfully completing the sales process. Consumers entering the sales environment with little-to-no informedness, however, respond quite favorably to compliance SITs, which increase the likelihood of the salesperson ultimately making the sale.

These results point to a likely explanation for the link between high informedness and the failure of threats and promises as seller influence tactics. Whereas internalization tactics are successful when the customer’s knowledge and information are validated, the inherently emotional appeal of compliance SITs leave little room for recognizing and capitalizing on that informedness. Compliance SITs capitalize on rapid decision-making based on external factors which typically reside beyond one’s perception of informedness. In fact, misapplication of compliance SITs on the highly-informed consumer may be met with skepticism and mistrust, whereas the same tactic may find success with a less-informed consumer or those susceptible to greater emotional reactions. As before, the conclusion is that it is crucial for salespeople to identify their customers’ level of informedness to best adapt their sales approach to one that will provide the highest odds of success.

**Identification SITs**

Identification SITs include ingratiation and inspirational appeal. Ingratiation appeals are centered on the formation of a relational bond between seller and consumer. Often manifested in the form of flattery or compliments, these appeals serve to solidify the consumer relationship with the salesperson by affirming some status point or other area of individual interest—but not necessarily their informedness—in order to build rapport and legitimacy. Inspirational appeals target and highlight shared values and communal similarities between buyer and seller, with a goal of producing favorable emotional reactions and connections that lay the foundation for a completed sale. From appeals at a macro level (such as national pride) with the “Buy American” movement, to more micro-level appeals such as fund-raising for a local school (e.g., a chocolate bar drive), inspirational appeals give the buyer reasons to buy based on
inclusion and belonging to some shared group, geography, entity (e.g., a company, university etc.) which is important to them.

Similar to compliance SITs, ingratiation and inspirational appeal are far more shallow in their reach than internalization SITs. Understanding this, we proposed in our research that increasing informedness levels by consumers will correspondingly decrease the efficacy of identification SITs to generate sales. In other words, those consumers with the highest levels of individual informedness will exhibit significantly lower willingness to buy; and their less-informed counterparts should respond much more favorably to identification approaches. Our results show all of this to be the case. The effect of identification tactics on consumer purchase at the highest level of informedness is insignificant, greatly increasing in significance as informedness drops. Consumers with the lowest level of informedness again respond heavily to identification tactics in driving sales to completion.

So rather than centering on the affirmation of consumer informedness and knowledge, salespeople need to understand that emotionally charged attempts can appear forced and illegitimate by the most informed consumers. As such, identification tactics may prompt resistance to the sales process by these individuals. On the other hand, consumers lacking information (low informedness) do provide an opportunity for salespeople to step in and use emotional influences to push consumers towards a positive sales outcome.

**Conclusion**

The addition of the lens of “consumer informedness” when analyzing the sales process can yield great benefit for the salesperson. Determining the requisite level of consumer informedness early in the sales process will provide key clues as to the best course of action for salespeople in adapting sales techniques to the situation at hand. That evaluation makes possible the application of the present research’s findings—namely that salespeople interacting with consumers who exhibit high levels of informedness should employ internalization SITs (information exchange and recommendation). As salespeople identify lesser informed consumers, however, successful adaptation requires a shift away from internalization approaches towards greater compliance (threats and promises) and identification (ingratiation and inspirational appeal) approaches.

As the efficacy of the three types of SITs evaluated in this research vary among consumers, sales managers should therefore ensure that each time their team enters a sales interaction, an individualized and unique design is used. Important here is the identification of which sales techniques individual salespeople are able to apply to all consumers, and which must be tailored based on observations of informedness. While some tactics are generally useful across all consumers (e.g., identification), specific application of internalization and compliance tactics requires careful attention. In order to avoid use of inappropriate tactics, train your salespeople to look for measures and clues to “actual” consumer informedness, and apply these lessons above to maximize the probability of the sale closing in their favor.
Recommended Reading


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Dr. Bryan Hochstein’s (PhD – Florida State University) research has been published in the *Journal of Marketing, Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, Industrial Marketing Management, Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management, Journal of Business Research, Marketing Letters,* and the *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice.* His industry experience includes a twenty-year career in the service/sales industry. Bryan’s *research experience* is within the broad topic of sales. Bryan is a thought leader of research and education on Customer Success Management (CSM), and his research and teaching on CSM are among the first on the subject. Recent research topics include the CSM and the sales-service interface, CSM ambidexterity & role, and the customer’s view of CSM.

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Dr. Willy Bolander’s (PhD – University of Houston) research focuses on influence, persuasion, and leadership in selling and sales management and has been published in various academic outlets, including the *Journal of Marketing, Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management,* and *Journal of Business Ethics.* Willy's insights have also been featured in a variety of non-academic business publications, including *Forbes.com* and *Training and Development (TD) Magazine.* Dr. Bolander teaches courses in selling and sales management to undergraduate, graduate, and corporate students. These students have gone on to build successful careers in the world's top sales organizations.

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