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Is Internal Support Key to Building Customer Relationships?

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Our research investigates how the relationship between the buyer and seller is affected by the effectiveness of the salesperson’s coordination of internal resources. Ultimately, this study explores the impact of customer relationship quality on sales performance. The foundation of this research revolves around the concept of Social Problem Theory (SPT)—which explains how a person earns the focus and support of a population or community. SPT provides guidance to understand how problems emerge and behaviors that individuals engage in to solve those problems.

A customer’s problem is the opportunity for the salesperson to create value for customers. Salespeople commonly need internal assistance when customer needs exceed the amount of resources salespeople have at hand. We introduce allocentrism, a trait-like predisposition to value relationships with others. The following research will outline how allocentrism leads to internal networking and helping behaviors that, in turn, meet the unmet needs of customers. Furthermore, salespeople who harness internal support, enhance customer relationship quality, and ultimately increase sales performance. Throughout, it is important to note that the term “salesperson” can be used interchangeably with agents or salespeople within the real estate industry.

Framework from Allocentrism to Sales Performance

This research uses SPT to examine how salespeople obtain the internal support to address the needs of customers. Salespeople can enhance their internal support by engaging in internal networking and helping behaviors. In terms of real estate, this could be a customer who needs a loan or home architecture connections. Though this is outside of the typical real estate agent’s job description, salespeople who have the internal network to connect their customers to other resources are the agents who have the greatest customer relationships. In turn, the greater customer relationship quality, the greater sales performance.
Salespeople’s allocentrism is related to salespeople’s tendency to engage in internal networking and helping behaviors as well as external customer-oriented selling behaviors. Internal networking is an effective way to harness the internal support that salespeople need. Helping occurs when individuals make efforts to voluntarily help others on work-related problems or prevent the occurrence of problems. The effectiveness in obtaining internal support by salespeople is the extent to which salespeople successfully integrate internal resources to assist in customer opportunities beyond the capacity of the salesperson. Furthermore, satisfying the needs of customers builds credibility, satisfaction and thus, the quality of the relationship. This led us to the following hypotheses: (the arrow can stand for “leads to”)

H$_{1a}$: Effectiveness in Obtaining Internal Support $\rightarrow$ Customer Relationship Quality

H$_{1b}$: Customer Relationship Quality $\rightarrow$ Sales Performance

H$_{2}$: Internal Networking $\rightarrow$ Effectiveness in Obtaining Internal Support

H$_{3}$: Helping $\rightarrow$ Effectiveness in Obtaining Internal Support

H$_{4}$: Helping $\rightarrow$ More Positive Internal Networking and Support

H$_{5}$: Allocentrism $\rightarrow$ Internal Networking

H$_{6}$: Allocentrism $\rightarrow$ Helping

H$_{7}$: Allocentrism $\rightarrow$ Customer-Oriented Selling

H$_{8}$: Customer-Oriented Selling $\rightarrow$ Customer Relationship Quality

The following diagram outlines the conceptual framework and hypotheses researched in this study.
Our Findings

Our study tested the framework above and showed that all the proposed hypotheses are supported and statistically significant. The empirical results of our study indicate that salespeople who effectively coordinate internal support through networking help leverage this support to develop higher quality customer relationships. Through such internal support, salespeople are better equipped to deliver the fundamental promise of selling: the development of offerings tailored to the customer’s needs. Allocentrism in this research proves important because it indicates a predisposition to build both internal and external relationships, an important trait for salespeople in their contemporary role.

Application

While sales managers tend to put emphasis on salesperson-customer interaction, many have yet to embrace the importance of the strategic role of salespeople effectively coordinating internal resources to support customer opportunities. Furthermore, this supports evidence urging sales managers to direct salespeople to give effort and attention to identifying and developing connections with internal resources that can assist with their customer opportunities. The research also reveals that time spent engaging in allocentric behaviors enables salespeople to enrich their customer relationships. This tells us that sales managers could create events to provide introductions, to facilitate conversations, and to create informal lines of ongoing dialogue.

It should be noted that placing too much emphasis on salespeople individually for obtaining internal support resources without support of some formal allocation of internal resources is not advisable and can be costly. These costs can include restricted time away from customers and potentially ineffective and inefficient allocation of internal resources. Both, a well-structured formal internal support system and providing salespeople an understanding of the importance of informal coordination of internal resources is necessary. Finally, the measure of allocentrism can be used to assist in the selection process for sales positions that entail relationship management responsibilities. At the same time, the measure can be used to assist managers in identifying those salespeople that need support with internal coordination behaviors such as internal networking and help.

Recommended Reading

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Dr. Kevin D. Bradford’s (PhD – University of Florida) teaching areas of interest are consumer behavior, marketing research, marketing strategy, and sports marketing. He conducts research on developing understanding of significant issues within the marketing system and its relationship to society. Kevin received an "Excellence in Sales Scholarship Award" from the American Marketing Association’s special interest group supporting research in the selling and sales management. He also received the honorable mention award for the "Best Paper Contributing to Theory and Practice to Retail Marketing."

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sales management. Consumers and financial analysts are only now beginning to see the wisdom of predictions he made in a 1997 article titled “Interactive Home Shopping: Consumer, Retailer, and Manufacturers’ Incentives to Participate in Electronic Markets” about the challenges pure electronic retailers would face competing against traditional store-based retailers.

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