

Keller Center Research Report

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Is Internal Support Key to Building Customer Relationships?

Kevin Duane Bradford, PhD, Yongmei Liu, PhD, Yuying Shi, PhD, Barton Weitz, PhD, and Jun Xu, PhD

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 → Customer Relationship Quality

H_{1b}: Customer Relationship Quality → Sales Performance

H₂: Internal Networking → Effectiveness in Obtaining Internal Support

H₃: Helping → Effectiveness in Obtaining Internal Support

H₄: Helping → More Positive Internal Networking and Support

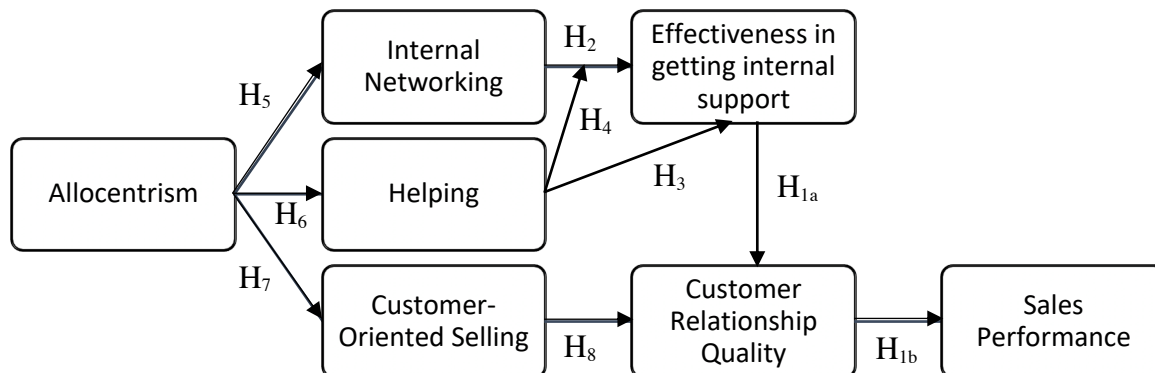
H₅: Allocentrism → Internal Networking

H₆: Allocentrism → Helping

H₇: Allocentrism → Customer-Oriented Selling

H₈: Customer-Oriented Selling → 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

Bradford, Kevin Duane, Yongmei Liu, Yuying Shi, Barton Weitz, and Jun Xu (2019), "Harnessing Internal Support to Enhance Customer Relationships: The Role of Networking, Helping, and Allocentrism," *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice*, 27(2), 140-158.

About the Authors

Kevin Duane Bradford, PhD

Professor of Marketing, University of California

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."

Yongmei Liu, PhD

Associate Professor, Illinois State University

Dr. Yongmei Liu (PhD – Florida State University) has taught courses in Organizational Behavior, Leading Organizational Change, Human Resource Management, Recruitment and Selection, and International Management. Yongmei's current research interests include emotion in organizations, and interpersonal dynamics at work, and her research has appeared in journals such as *Academy of Management Learning and Education*, *Human Performance*, *Human Resource Management Review*, *Journal of Management*, *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, *Personality and Individual Differences*, and *Personnel Psychology*. She reviews for numerous academic journals, and serves on the editorial boards of *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, and *Group and Organization Management*.

Yuying Shi, PhD

Assistant Professor of Marketing and Business Analytics, Texas A&M University Commerce

Dr. Yuying Shi's (PhD – University of Florida) research area focuses on marketing analytics and digital marketing. Her research has been published in outlets such as *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, *Review of Marketing Science*, *British Journal of Mathematical and Statistical Psychology*.

Barton Weitz, PhD

J.C. Penney Eminent Scholar, University of Florida

Dr. Barton A. Weitz's (PhD – Stanford University) research interests focus on long-term relationships between firms in a distribution channel, salespeople and their customers, and firms and their employees. He is also interested in the use of organizational culture, supervision, and incentive compensation to motivate and control salespeople and service providers. Weitz has made important theoretical and empirical contributions to the marketing discipline. Three of his articles have been selected to be among the 10 most influential papers on personal selling and

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.

Jun Xu, PhD

Associate Professor of Marketing, DePaul University

Dr. Jun Xu’s (PhD – University of Florida) main research interests include selling effectiveness, channels of distribution and inter-organizational relationships and innovation. His research has been published in the *Journal of Marketing*, the *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, the *Journal of Business Research*, the *Academy of Management Learning and Education* and the *Journal of Vocational Behavior*. He also serves as a professional reviewer for the American Marketing Association, Academy of Marketing Science, Society for Marketing Advances, Academy of Management, Southern Management Association and other academic journals.



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Baylor University | Keller Center for Research | Hankamer School of Business
One Bear Place #98007 | Waco, TX 76798

www.baylor.edu/kellercenter | Keller_Center@baylor.edu

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