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Applying Adaptive Selling Techniques: Exploring How

Dr. Sascha Alavi, Dr. Johannes Habel, and Dr. Kim Linsenmayer

Consider Alex, a real estate agent who recently entered a conversation with a potential client, Sarah. Sarah is a 32-year-old physician who is shy, goal-orientated, and has a calm communication style. Taking this client's behavior into consideration, to what extent should Alex adapt his sales behavior to these characteristics when interacting with Sarah, and how would Alex's adaptations influence the likelihood of a home sale?



Defining Adaptive Selling

Formally defined as the “alteration of sales behaviors during a customer interaction or across interactions based on perceived information about the nature of the selling situation,” adaptive selling conceptualizes the adaptations Alex makes in response to Sarah's characteristics.¹ Previous research indicates that adaptive selling is a critical success factor in personal selling. Specifically, adaptive selling is associated with increased job satisfaction on behalf of the salesperson,² customer satisfaction with the product and salesperson's approach,³ and salespeople's selling performance.² As such, it is clear that adaptive selling is essential to the success of salespeople. However, the existing body of literature is largely limited in practical application. It fails to capture which specific behaviors a salesperson changes in accordance with specific characteristics of the selling situation. Otherwise said, current research merely suggests that Alex would benefit from adjusting his behavior in response to Sarah's attributes, yet fails to explain what adjustments should be made. Our research sought to capitalize on this shortcoming and instigate a discussion that explores this question of *how*.

Study One: Exploring the Facets of Adaptive Selling

In our first study, our team sought to explore the facets of adaptive selling. Specifically, we conducted interviews with ten experienced salespeople in various industries and asked the interviewees to evaluate their adaptive selling behavior using the established, widely utilized, and generic scales established by Spiro and Weitz.⁴ Then, we coded the responses to address how salespeople practically implement adaptive selling into their sales endeavors. Analysis revealed two main categories of adaptive selling: salespeople's perceptions of customer attributes on which they base their behavior (bases of adaptation) and their behavioral changes based on these perceptions (adapted behaviors).

Ultimately, analysis of our qualitative research revealed ten specific bases of adaptation and adapted behaviors. The bases of adaptation that emerged include customers' needs, personality, social status, communication style, body language, and relationship length. The adapted sales behaviors that emerged include salesperson's product recommendation, argumentation, communication style, and body language. Moving forward, these ten specific facets of adaptive selling were used as the basis for our team's second, quantitative study.

Study Two: Linking the Facets of Adaptive Selling

In our second study, our team sought to link these facets of adaptive selling to established survey scales. Specifically, we aimed to examine the extent to which the ten bases of adaptation and adapted behaviors explain the variance of salespeople's scores on traditional adaptive selling survey scales. This information is vital to practically understand salespeople's interpretation of adaptive selling when responding to the adaptive selling measurement items on the standardized survey scales established by Spiro and Weitz.⁴ To execute this quantitative research, our team surveyed a sample of 289 salespeople working in various professional selling industries.

Our team measured adaptive selling by utilizing items from generic survey scales that are frequently employed in academic studies.⁴⁻⁶ Further, we also utilized specific scales that captured salespeople's use of the bases of adaptation and adapted behaviors and measured these items by adapting generic items. For example, in addition to asking "I vary my sales style from customer to customer," we asked, "I vary my sales style from customer to customer based on his/her needs" (evaluating customers' needs, a specific basis of adaptation). This procedure was repeated for each of the ten specific facets of adaptive selling. This methodology added novel specificity and applicability to our research, beginning to answer the question of *how*, with hopes of producing practical managerial insight that can be used to help organizations attain an enduring, competitive advantage.

Overall, our analysis yielded two distinct categories of significant results: direct effects and total effects. First, our direct effects indicate that four bases of adaptation (customers' needs, personality, communication style, and body language) have positive effects on two adapted behaviors (salesperson's argumentation and communication style). Second, placed in the context of our initial hypothesis, we tested which bases of adaptation ultimately manifest in generic adaptive selling scores. Our results indicate that three bases of adaptation (customers' needs, personality, and body language) impact total effects on the generic adaptive selling scale. Ultimately, our analysis suggests that when evaluating generic adaptive selling, salespeople factor in their adaptation of their argumentation and communication style in response to customers' needs, personality, and body language. However, they do not factor in their adaptation of their product recommendation or body language in response to the customers' social status, communication style, or relationship length.

Real Estate Implications

Prior research has shown that adaptive selling is essential to salespeople, including real estate agents. To quantify these adaptations, this existing body of research has largely utilized generic survey scales to capture the extent of these selling adaptations. However, the generic nature of these scales makes it difficult for salespeople and managers to practically translate findings into actionable sales advice. Otherwise stated, while research suggests adaptive selling is a core ingredient of sales success, the question of *how* salespeople should alter their behavior, in response to varying customer attributes, has remained unclear. One probable and significant implication of this shortcoming is that salespeople may become convinced of the effectiveness of fruitless adaptive selling approaches,⁷ meaning, a salesperson may make repeated behavioral adaptations that appear to be successful in one customer interaction; and over time, the salesperson will likely develop the misconception that this fruitless adaptation drives selling success. In reality, however, the success may be due to other adaptations made simultaneously yet overlooked on behalf of the salesperson. Exposing such misconceptions may significantly advance managerial practice, and it is vital for real estate professionals to recognize and actively combat this fallacy.

Our research strongly indicates that salespeople use the adaptive behaviors of argumentation and communication style in response to the bases of adaptation including customers' needs,



personality, and body language when responding to generic adaptive selling scores. As such, seller training that capitalizes on advancing skills in recognizing these three bases of adaptation and developing appropriate responses regarding these two adaptive behaviors will likely contribute to enhanced sales success. Additionally, managers should consider investing in emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills training to increase the likelihood

that an organization's salespeople can successfully identify and respond to these facets of adaptive selling. These recommendations offer specific managerial insight that capitalizes on the genuine benefits of adaptive selling, likely contributing to greater sales success, organization-wide, and leading to the development of enduring, competitive advantage.

Recommended Reading

Alavi, Sascha, Johannes Habel, and Kim Linsenmayer (2019), “What Does Adaptive Selling Mean to Salespeople? An Exploratory Analysis of Practitioners’ Responses to Generic Adaptive Selling Scales,” *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management*, 39(3), 254-263.

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About the Authors

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Dr. Sascha Alavi’s (Dr. rer. oec. – Ruhr-Universität Bochum) research focuses include business and management research in the area of marketing and sales, and more specifically, leadership, sustainability, and digitalization. His research has appeared in leading academic journals including the *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management*, *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, *Journal of Service Research*, *Journal of Marketing*, and *Journal of Retailing*, among others. Dr. Alavi has received the *Dissertation Award for Excellent Research in the Retail Sector*, the *IMU Research for Practice Award*, and several *Best Paper Awards*, among others. Dr. Alavi previously worked for the Sales Management Department at The University of Bochum (Ruhr-Universität Bochum).

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Dr. Johannes Habel's (Dr. rer. oec. – University of Bochum, Germany) research interests include the psychology of personal selling and sales management, as well as the digital transformation of sales. His research has appeared in leading academic journals including the *Journal of Marketing*, *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management*, and *Journal of Service Research*, among others. Dr. Habel serves on the Editorial Review Board of the *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management* and *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*. He received the *2020 Marvin Jolson Award for Best Contribution to Selling and Sales Management Practice* and five teaching awards from 2016 to 2020. Prior to his time at the University of Houston, Dr. Habel taught at the Warwick Business School (United Kingdom) and at ESMT (Berlin, Germany). Prior to his academic career, he worked as a management consultant with Booz & Company and as a radio news anchor.

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Dr. Kim Linsenmayer's (Dr. rer. oec. – Ruhr-Universität Bochum) research interests are centered around the theoretical and empirical investigation of success factors in sales management and personal sales. Her research has appeared in leading academic journals including the *Journal of Marketing* and *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management*. Dr. Linsenmayer has received significant accolades and awards, including the *2020 Marvin Jolson Award for Best Contribution to Selling and Sales Management Practice*. Prior to her academic career, Dr. Linsenmayer served as a Trainer and Coach for Leadership Accelerators and a Communicator Change Processes and Digital Transformation specialist for The Berner Group.



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