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Developing Loyal Customers with a Value-adding Sales Force: Examining Customer Satisfaction and the Perceived Credibility of Consultative Salespeople

Annie H. Liu and Mark P. Leach

The consultative services of business-to-business salespeople are becoming increasingly important to customers when evaluating a supplier's overall value. Thus, a customer evaluation may depend on the salesperson's expertise and trustworthiness; without trust or expertise, customers hesitate to adopt the solutions presented by a salesperson. This study investigates the perceived expertise and trust of a salesperson in a business-to-business context. Findings suggest that both are important to overall customer satisfaction. Furthermore, customer perceptions of a salesperson's power in the supply-firm and perceptions of the quality of interactions with a salesperson were found to be important when developing perceptions of expertise among business customers.

Today, perhaps more rapidly than any other time in recent history, the business-to-business competitive environment is changing. Large firms continue to reduce the number of suppliers they conduct business with, while electronic commerce has increased the number of potential suppliers. Suppliers, fearful of having their existing business relations with key customers terminated, have often seen their expenses rise and margins fall as they covet long-term relations with these customers (Rackham 2000).

In competitive environments, organizational buyers who are interested in establishing long-term relationships are increasingly demanding value-added services from salespeople (Rackham 2000; Graham 1996). As customers place more value on the advice and guidance provided by salespeople, suppliers have quickly recognized the pivotal role their sales force plays in relational exchange. Thus, the effectiveness of consultative selling activities is becoming critically important to suppliers who wish to pursue partnerships with their key customers (Pardo 1997).

The purpose of this article is to empirically examine the relationships among customer perceptions of salespeople, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty behaviors. As such, this paper aims to help marketers understand how the credibility of salespeople engenders loyalty behaviors among business-to-business customers through enhanced levels of satisfaction. Sales literature (e.g., Doney and Cannon 1997; Crosby, Evans and Cowles 1990) is incorporated with research on the credibility of information sources (e.g., Grewal and Gotlieb 1994), customer satisfaction (e.g., Oliver 1980) and repurchase behavior (e.g., Jackson 1985; Jones and Sasser 1995) to

construct a theoretical model (see Figure 1). Furthermore, customer perceptions of salesperson credibility are explored by examining factors that may lead customers to deem a salesperson as having a high level of expertise.

Consultative Selling & Salesperson Credibility

Consultative selling is the process of professionally providing information for helping customers take intelligent actions to achieve their business objectives. It involves proactive communication by salespeople with their customers to facilitate the identification and solution of customer problems (Graham 1996; Tyler 1990; Chevalier 1993; Dunn, Thomas and Lubawski 1981). Thus, consultative selling involves the sales professional as a valued advisor rather than someone merely promoting a particular product (Tyler 1990; Bragg 1986; Hanan 1995). As such, salespeople, and the customized solutions they provide, add value to customers. Meanwhile, the development of trust and increasing levels of dependence by customers provide a barrier to switching and a source of sustainable competitive advantage for the sales firm.

Consultative selling relies on a customer viewing a salesperson as an industry peer and business expert (Smith 1991). Thus, consultative salespeople must possess extensive market knowledge at each level in a supply chain (Riso 1981), and be able to communicate that knowledge in ways that provide value to customers. They must communicate effectively with both internal customers (e.g., support staff, technical departments, etc.) and external customers, and they must be committed to a long-term relationship where their own profits grow as their customers' do (Tyler 1990; Smith 1991). In sum, consultative selling requires customers view their salespeople as having a high degree of expertise, and they must trust that the solutions provided by these salespeople will be in the long-term interests of their companies.

Salesperson expertise has been empirically linked to the level of trust a buyer has with a salesperson (Busch and Wilson 1976; Doney and Cannon 1997), and to buyer-seller relationship quality (Crosby, Evans, and Cowles 1990). Likewise, past business-to-business research provides evidence supporting the importance of trust in maintaining relationships (e.g., Morgan and Hunt 1994; Dwyer, Schurr and Oh

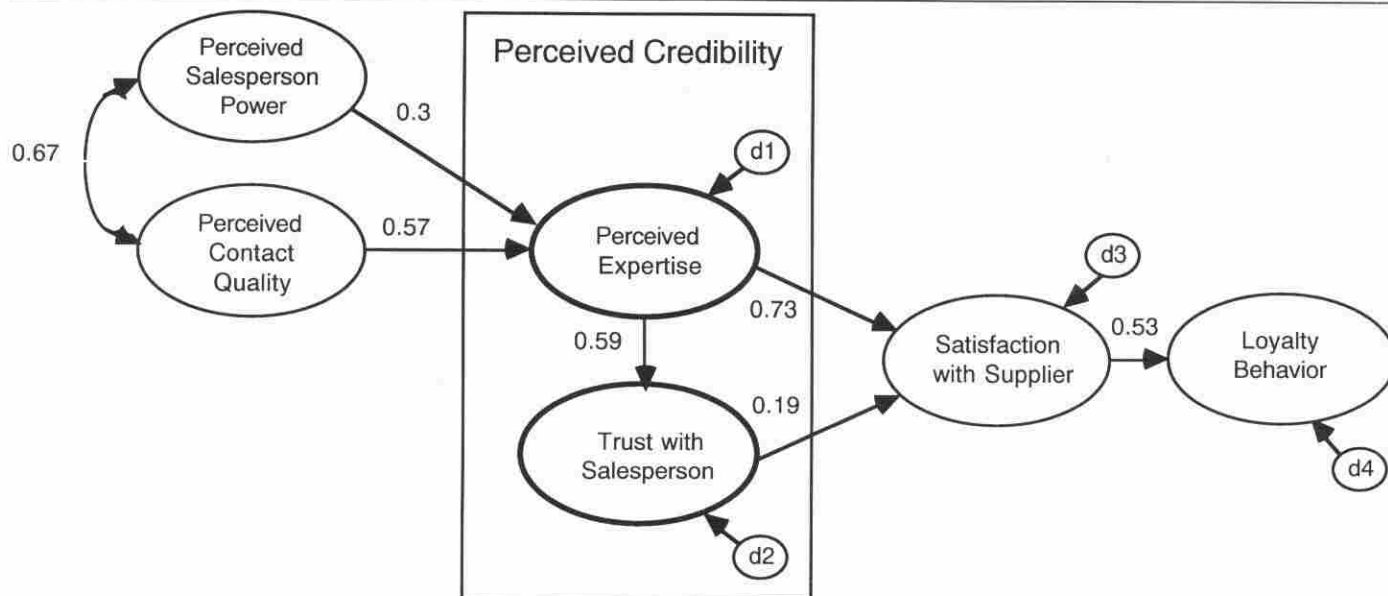
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Figure 1
A Model of Perceived Salesperson Expertise and Trust with the Salesperson



CFI=.96, GFI=.89, AGFI=.86, TLI=.95, RMSEA=.05
Chi Square=168.91, with 112 degrees of freedom

1987; Swan, Bowers, and Richardson 1999). Similarly, consumer research investigating customers' perceptions of market information has identified "source credibility" as being comprised of two underlying dimensions: perceived expertise and trustworthiness (Dholakia and Sternthal 1977).

Studies of source credibility have found that, when a source is considered credible, the information provided is more persuasive (Gotlieb and Sarel 1991) and more likely to lead to purchase intentions and brand choice (Grewal and Gotlieb 1994). As problem solving and developing customized solutions by salespeople becomes an integral aspect of the offering, a customer's perception of a salesperson's credibility becomes increasingly important. Because the credible salesperson is trusted, a customer and salesperson can rely on one another to keep promises and to share sensitive information needed to design appropriate solutions (Anderson and Narus 1990). Because a credible salesperson is seen as an expert, this salesperson becomes a valued information source and possibly a business partner.

Trust with a Salesperson

Trust in a salesperson requires a belief that the salesperson can be relied on to behave in a manner such that the long-term interests of the customer will be served (Crosby, Evans and Cowles 1990). A customer's trust involves confidence that the salesperson will deliver on promises (Crosby et al. 1990) and fulfill long-term needs through coordinative actions (Ganesan 1994; Moorman, Zaltman, and Deshpande 1992; Anderson and Weitz 1989).

Past research has identified several important antecedents to trust with a salesperson. For example, Swan, Trawick, and Silva (1985) found that salespeople believe trust increases when customers see them as dependable, honest, competent, customer-oriented, and likeable (see also Swan and Nolan 1985). Swan, Trawick, Rink and Roberts (1988) investigated

dependability, reliability, honesty, responsibility, and likability as dimensions of buyer trust in business-to-business salespeople. They found that among these dimensions, the dependability of a salesperson is most critical to the development of trust. More recently, Doney and Cannon (1997) found that trust with a salesperson relies on both salesperson characteristics (i.e., likeability, expertise, and similarity) and on the length and frequency of business contact between the buyer and salesperson (see Swan, Bowers, and Richardson [1999] for a recent meta-analysis).

Research investigating buyer-seller relationships (Crosby et al. 1990; Morgan and Hunt 1994) and channel working partnerships (Ganesan 1994; Anderson and Narus 1990; Anderson and Weitz 1989) suggests that the trust between business partners reliably enhances the quality of the relationship and intentions to continue doing business together. Trust is a fundamental aspect to maintaining relational exchange because it allows inevitable short-term inequities to be overlooked and yield long-term mutual benefits (Gundlach and Murphy 1993; Dwyer et al. 1987; Williamson 1985; Schurr and Ozanne 1985). Where there is trust between a buyer and seller, both parties become more willing to share ideas, and to clarify goals and problems. Communication becomes more efficient as shared information becomes increasingly accurate, comprehensive, and timely (Anderson and Narus 1990). Furthermore, with trust, more effort is focused on proactive solutions because there is less need for the continual monitoring of one another's actions (Hawes 1994; Schurr and Ozanne 1985). As such, the benefits of trust are most apparent when parties are subject to high levels of uncertainty and vulnerability (Moorman, Deshpande, and Zaltman 1993).

Because consultative selling often requires an enhanced level of partnering and the sharing of proprietary information, customers may feel that they become increasingly vulnerable to the salesperson. Under these situations, the trust that they establish with the salesperson is what allows con-

sultative selling to take place; without trust, customers do not share the information needed for a salesperson to develop appropriate solutions.

Perceived Salesperson Expertise

Salesperson expertise is the belief that a salesperson possesses special knowledge that is relevant to the business relationship (French and Raven 1959). Expertise is most often demonstrated through the solutions a salesperson provides to a customer. As such, expertise is a primary mechanism by which a salesperson provides added value to a customer; the higher the level of perceived expertise by an industrial customer, the higher the perceived level of value added. Therefore, for a salesperson to be perceived as having a high degree of expertise, he or she must acquire accurate, current, and specialized knowledge. Furthermore, the salesperson must utilize and convey this knowledge to the customer by providing tailor-made solutions.

Past research provides evidence that salesperson expertise builds buyer trust by increasing the buyer's confidence that the salesperson can provide viable and valuable solutions and deliver on promises. Swan, Trawick, and Silva (1985) included competence as an important determinant of a customer's trust in a salesperson. Busch and Wilson (1976) found that organizational buyers perceived salespeople with higher levels of expert power as more trustworthy. Moorman, Deshpandé, and Zaltman (1993) investigated the use of marketing research and found that researcher expertise was strongly associated with trust. Additionally, researcher expertise was a significant predictor of a customer's use of research results. Finally, Doney and Cannon (1997) and Crosby, Evans and Cowles (1990) found that a customer's perception of a salesperson's level of expertise was a significant predictor of trust. Therefore, we hypothesize:

- H1: Organizational buyers' perceptions of a salesperson's level of expertise are positively related to their level of trust with the salesperson.

Antecedents to Perceived Salesperson Expertise

Expertise is the primary mechanism by which a salesperson adds value to the customer; therefore, salesperson factors that enhance a customer's perceived value may subsequently enhance a customer's perception of a salesperson's expertise. In other words, factors that demonstrate or convey a salesperson's capabilities or knowledge will lead to the perceived expertise of the salesperson. Two factors that have received recent attention in the sales literature that seem particularly relevant to expertise perceptions are (1) a customer's perception of the quality of the interactions with a salesperson (i.e., contact quality), and (2) a customer's perception of a salesperson's power in the supplier firm.

Perceived Contact Quality with the Salesperson. Past literature on buyer-seller interactions generally shows that the frequency of contact (Doney and Cannon 1997; Heide and Miner 1992), open communication (Anderson and Narus 1990), and information sharing (Morgan and Hunt 1994; Ganesan 1994) enhance relationship quality and cooperation. However, the benefits of the frequency of contact and communications may lead to the misperception that organizational buyers prefer to be called on and checked up with a lot. In fact, some organizational buyers may not desire excessive contact. Thus, for a salesperson to be viewed as a valued expert and

not a nuisance, he or she must customize his or her communication strategies to meet the desires of each customer. In this way, providing an appropriate level of contact that is well planned and coordinated is one way a salesperson can demonstrate social intelligence, which may enhance a customer's perception of a salesperson's expertise. Therefore, we hypothesize:

- H2: Organizational buyers' perceptions of the quality of interpersonal contact with a salesperson are positively related to their perceptions of a salesperson's level of expertise.

Perceived Power of Salesperson in Supplying Firm. Expertise is typically associated with technical knowledge. However, expert power can also be derived from specialized knowledge of how to get things done (French and Raven 1959; Busch and Wilson 1976). A salesperson's power within the supply firm can be viewed as his or her potential to influence the perceptions, behavior and/or decision making of members in the firm (Frazier 1983; Frazier and Summers 1984). In business-to-business consultative selling, where transactions involve somewhat customized solutions, a salesperson's ability to advocate a customer's position and sell a solution to internal customers is critical to the continued success of the relationship with that customer. A customer's perception of a salesperson's power in the supplying firm is often an essential element of the added value that the customer views receiving from doing business with the salesperson. Doney and Cannon (1997) investigated a customer's perception of salesperson power in the supplying firm and found that perceived power increases trust in the salesperson. Although they did not empirically investigate the relation between power and expertise, they theorize that power affects trust through enhancing a customer's perception of a salesperson's expertise (p. 40). As such, a salesperson's ability to influence internal members (i.e., perceived salesperson power) may be a fundamental antecedent to perceived salesperson expertise. Hence, we hypothesize:

- H3: Organizational buyers' perceptions of a salesperson's level of power in the supplying firm are positively related to their perceptions of a salesperson's level of expertise.

Customer Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction is a post-purchase attitude formed through a mental comparison of the quality that a customer expected to receive from an exchange and the level of quality the customer perceives actually receiving from the exchange (Spreng, MacKenzie, and Olshavsky 1996; Oliver and Swan 1989; Oliver 1980). Customer satisfaction has been useful to marketers for identifying three types of customers (Jones and Sasser 1995). Customers whose expectations are not met are dissatisfied customers. Customers whose expectations are met or exceeded slightly are merely satisfied customers, and customers whose expectations are substantially exceeded are highly satisfied or delighted customers.

Identifying these three types of customers is useful to business-to-business marketers and industrial salespeople because repurchase motivations differ for each. Dissatisfied customers are more likely to actively look for alternative suppliers and leave the exchange relationship. Merely satisfied customers are likely to remain in the relationship but are not committed and will switch to a competitor when an alternative offering appears to provide superior value. Delighted customers are loyal to the relationship; therefore, they are less sensitive to competitors' offers and are most likely to

continue to repurchase (Jones and Sasser 1995; Rust and Zahorik 1993; Rust, Zahorik, and Keiningham 1995). As such, we hypothesize:

- H4: Organizational buyers' satisfaction with a supplier is positively related to their loyalty behaviors toward that supplier.

Lambert, Sharma, and Levy (1997) found that satisfaction with a salesperson is positively related to satisfaction with the selling organization. Humphreys and Williams (1996) investigated organizational buyers' customer satisfaction and found that a buyer's assessment of a salesperson's interpersonal process attributes (i.e., service quality) is more highly related to satisfaction than the technical attributes of the product. Dorsch, Swanson, and Kelly (1998) investigated differences in how customers view their best, typical, and worst vendors and found that better vendors have salespeople that are perceived to be customer-orientated and trustworthy.

Thus, although relationships between customer perceptions of salespeople and overall satisfaction with a supply-firm have received some empirical attention, limited research has investigated the relationship between a customer's trust with a salesperson and overall satisfaction with the supply-firm (Dorsch, Swanson, and Kelly 1998). Furthermore, the relationship between salesperson expertise and customer satisfaction has not previously been investigated.

As with other cognitively based attitudes, customer satisfaction is formed through the evaluation of relevant attributes (i.e., beliefs) and the perceived importance of those attributes (Fishbein and Ajzen 1975). In business-to-business exchange, the importance customers place on receiving added value from consultative services implies that the effectiveness of a salesperson at providing these services will be a prominent attribute in the formation of customer satisfaction (see Grewal and Sharma 1991). In fact, Graham (1996) has argued that the added value of a salesperson is the most important attribute of a sale.

Identifying problems and providing tailor-made solutions for customers requires a high degree of involvement from both consultative salespeople and their customers (Pardo 1997). The willingness of an organizational buyer to develop highly cooperative relations with a salesperson may depend on how capable the buyer believes the salesperson to be, and whether or not the buyer feels that the salesperson can be trusted. As such, credible salespeople are likely to provide added-value to industrial customers (Swan, Bowers, and Richardson 1999) that will enhance customer satisfaction (Liu, Bernhart, and Leach 1999; Grisaffe and Kumar 1998). Thus, integrating literature on source credibility and customer satisfaction, a customer's perception of a salesperson's expertise and trustworthiness are identified as two key concepts influencing a customer's overall satisfaction with the exchange relationship.

- H5: Organizational buyers' level of trust with a salesperson is positively related to their level of satisfaction with the supplier.

- H6: Organizational buyers' perceptions of a salesperson's level of expertise are positively related to their level of satisfaction with the supplier.

Methodology

As illustrated in Figure 1, a model of perceived salesperson credibility with the salesperson has been developed. The proposed model intends to investigate the critical salesperson factors that are related to effective value-adding consultative selling activities.

Sample and Data Acquisition

A mail survey was sent to a sample of 735 organizational buyers. These organizational buyers were identified through a major financial staffing service supplier who provided contact information on their current customers, and prospective customers all within Washington, D.C., Georgia, and Florida. This supplier is one of the six largest national firms in the staffing service industry.

Because this industry is characterized by a large amount of multiple-sourcing of suppliers by organizational customers, respondents were asked to identify one supplier and provide information pertaining only to that supplier. Half were directed to give information pertaining to a primary supplier and the other half were directed to provide information on one of their secondary suppliers.

Questionnaires were sent to the key contact person of each customer. Although Philips (1981) criticizes mono-method approaches, such as the single key informant method, most researchers find the key informant approach efficient (Heide and John 1990), and with little self-report bias (Silk and Kalwani 1982). Empirical evidence supports the key informant techniques and suggests that it can provide reliable and valid data (John and Reve 1982; Silk and Kalwani 1982).

In order to ensure the qualification of the key informants, screening criteria were employed. Responses to competency questions were collected to evaluate key informants' experience with the service supplier and tenure with the company (Kumar, Stern and Anderson 1993). In addition, key informants were asked about their degree of involvement in each of the decision stages (Patterson, Johnson and Spreng 1997). The purpose of this procedure was to reduce a threat to validity from respondent biases.

Seventeen (17) questionnaires were returned by the post office due to wrong addresses or names. Twenty-two were returned indicating their inability to participate. Reminder post-cards were sent to the remaining 696 companies two weeks after the initial mailing. Five weeks after the initial mailing, 172 usable responses (24%) were received. Three key respondents did not meet the screening criteria and their responses were eliminated. Thus, responses from 169 buyers were found useful for hypotheses testing.

Further analysis of demographic information indicated that early and late respondents were very similar. This analysis provides some assurance that the characteristics of respondents were similar to non-respondents (Armstrong and Overton 1977), and provides a certain level of confidence that findings from this study are valid and generalizable to the population from which the sample was drawn.

On average, respondents had been involved in buying decisions for their company for seven years (mean=7.08, s.d.= 6.6). They reported being actively involved in all stages of buying decisions for financial staffing. However, they were more involved during the final supplier selection stage of the process than either the information search stage ($t=5.5$, $p<0.001$) or in preparing a short list of suppliers ($t=6.1$, $p<0.001$). On average, they reported working with three financial staffing suppliers at any one time (mean=3.13, s.d.= 3.5). The evaluated supply-firm was an exchange partner for an average of 3.7 years (range=2 months to 25 years, s.d.=3.2 years). Respondents personally dealt with this supplier for most of this time (mean=3.5 years, range=2 months to 25 years, s.d.=3.3 years).

Measures

Measures were developed following standard psychometric scale development procedures (Anderson and Gerbing 1988).

Multi-item scales were generated from previously established scales when applicable, from a review of relevant literature, and from qualitative interviews conducted with five organizational buyers, four business-to-business salespeople, and two marketing executives in the industry. A total of six constructs were assessed in this study. Table 1 provides a complete list of items and scale reliabilities. The measurement of each construct will be described below.

Trust with a Salesperson. Perceived trust with the salesperson was measured using five seven-point, agree-disagree scaled items (i.e., 1 to 7). These items were adapted from those used by Dorsch, Swanson, and Kelly (1998), Doney and Cannon (1997), and Crosby, Evans, and Cowles (1990) to ascertain respondents' perceptions of trust with the salesperson from the target firm relative to salespeople from competing suppliers. Items from these established scales were selected because they assessed a customer's overall impression of the trustworthiness and honesty of a salesperson.

Having respondents evaluate a salesperson relative to others in the industry provides the respondents with a point of reference and may enable them to provide a more accurate assessment of the salesperson. In this study, respondents have knowledge of several competing salespeople due to the high degree of multiple-sourcing in the industry.

Perceived Salesperson Expertise. The perceived level of expertise of the salesperson was measured using three seven-point, agree-disagree scaled items (i.e., 1 to 7). These items were adapted from scales developed by Doney and Cannon (1997), and through qualitative interviews with organizational buyers and sellers. Respondents were asked to rate the salesperson from the target supplier relative to salespeople from competing suppliers.

Perceived Contact Quality with the Salesperson. Three items were developed for this study to measure an organizational buyer's perception of the quality of the interactions with the salesperson. These seven-point, agree-disagree scaled items were developed from qualitative interviews with industry buyers and sellers to capture the appropriateness of a salesperson's visits, and communications with the customer-firm. They asked respondents to evaluate the overall quality of contact with a salesperson relative to other salespeople in the industry.

Perceived Salesperson Power in the Supply-Firm. The perceived power a salesperson has in the supplying firm was measured using two seven-point, agree-disagree scaled items (i.e., 1 to 7). These items were adapted from scales developed by Doney and Cannon (1997) to ask about a salesperson's perceived power in the supply-firm relative to other salespeople in the industry.

Customer Satisfaction with the Supplier. Extensive research in the area of customer satisfaction provides an array of definitions and scales for customer satisfaction in business-to-business settings (e.g., Patterson et al. 1997; Spreng et al. 1996; Oliver and Swan 1989; Churchill and Surprenant 1982). In order to capture the overall attitude toward the business-to-business service supplier, the current study takes a cumulative perspective of customer satisfaction. Thus, in this study, satisfaction with the supply-firm was measured using four items on a seven-point agree-disagree scale (i.e., 1 to 7) adapted from Oliver and Swan (1989).

Customer Loyalty Behavior. Personal in-depth interviews were used to identify appropriate loyalty behaviors specific to the staffing industry. Three key behaviors were identified that were believed to represent loyalty by both organizational salespeople and buyers. Loyalty was expressed by (1) the

share-of-business given to a supplier (Jackson 1985), (2) calling on a supplier first, and (3) giving a supplier ample time to provide a qualified candidate before calling on a competing supplier. These elements were developed into a three-item scale.

Analytical Procedures and Results

Structural equation methodology was used to validate the measurement of theoretical constructs and to test the hypothesized relationships among constructs. Prior to estimating the structural model, a measurement model (i.e., confirmatory factor analysis) was estimated to evaluate the appropriateness of item indicators (Anderson and Gerbing 1988). The measurement model was specified so items loaded on only the construct they were developed to represent. To specify the scale of each latent construct, one item indicator per construct was set to unity (Jöreskog and Sörbom 1979).

Initial CFA results showed adequate fit ($\chi^2=324.05$, $df=155$, $CFI=0.91$, $TLI=0.89$, $GFI=0.84$, $RMSEA=0.08$), providing support for the appropriateness of the relations between manifest indicators to their intended latent constructs. To ensure a high degree of homogeneity and unidimensionality of items measuring each construct in the measurement model, modification indices as well as the standardized residual matrix were examined. Judicious re-specification of measurement constraints was made in order to achieve an acceptable fit for the measurement model (James, Mulaik and Brett 1982; Anderson and Gerbing 1988). As a result, one item from the set of items indicating the construct "trust with the salesperson," one item from the set indicating "perceived expertise," and one item from the set indicating "satisfaction with the supplier" were removed. The resulting measurement model fit statistics were: $\chi^2=162.51$, $df=104$, $CFI=0.96$, $TLI=0.95$, $GFI=0.90$, $AGFI=0.85$, $RMSEA=0.05$. Table 2 provides descriptive statistics of the measurement scales and the correlation matrix for the six latent constructs.

To further evaluate the unidimensionality of the measured constructs, discriminant validity, convergent validity, and scale reliabilities were evaluated. To assess the discriminant validity among latent constructs, additional models were estimated fixing the correlation between each pair of constructs to unity, one pair at a time. The resulting significant chi-square inflation between these models and the measurement model provide evidence of discriminant validity among latent constructs (e.g., Ping 1994; Burnkrant and Page 1982). Furthermore, for each construct, principle components factor analysis identified a single factor with an Eigen value greater than one, and this sole factor accounted for more than sixty-four percent of the total variance in a construct (range 64% to 84%). Finally, scale reliabilities were all at adequate levels for new scales and ranged from 0.70 to 0.89. The unidimensionality of constructs along with the overall measurement model fit statistics support the appropriateness of measured indicators.

After evaluating the measurement model, a structural model was estimated to test the hypothesized relationships between latent constructs. In order to impose the hypothesized pattern of relationships among the latent constructs, structural parameters were systematically allowed to vary freely or were fixed to zero. This model was found to have good fit ($\chi^2=168.91$, $df=112$, $CFI=0.96$, $TLI=0.95$, $GFI=0.89$, $AGFI=0.86$, $RMSEA=0.05$), and the constraints placed on the structural model did not significantly reduce the level of fit from the measurement model ($\Delta\chi^2=6.40$, $df=8$, ns.). Table 3 provides model fit statistics and path coefficients.

Table 1
Measurement Items and Scale Reliabilities

	PCA Factor		Scale *** Reliability
	Eigen Values >1	% Variance Explained	
<i>Perceived Power and Influence of Salesperson in Supplying Firm</i>	1	75.3	0.70
Compared to the salespeople of other suppliers, ...			
... the salesperson from this supplier has more power in his/her firm to get things done.			
... the salesperson from this supplier has the clout to get his/her way with the supplier.			
<i>Perceived Contact Quality with the Salesperson</i>	1	75.5	0.84
Compared to the salespeople of other suppliers, ...			
... the salesperson from this supplier visits our location(s) as needed.			
... the salesperson from this supplier engages in extra planning assistance for us.			
... the salesperson from this supplier follows through and checks up with us as needed.			
<i>Perceived Expertise of the Salesperson</i>	1	83.8	0.81
Compared to the salespeople of other suppliers, ...			
... the salesperson from this supplier is very knowledgeable.			
... the salesperson from this supplier knows how to provide solutions that fit our needs.			
... the salesperson is not an expert. (r) *			
<i>Trust with the Salesperson</i>	1	74.9	0.89
Compared to the salespeople of other suppliers, ...			
... the salesperson is not trusted by the people at my firm. (r)			
... this salesperson sometimes acts opportunistically at our expense. (r)			
... the salesperson is trustworthy.			
... the salesperson is always honest with us.			
... the salesperson always acts in the spirit of cooperation. *			
<i>Satisfaction with the Supplying Firm</i>	1	76.5	0.87
My company is very satisfied with this supplier.			
My company is very pleased with this supplier.			
My company would highly recommend this supplier to others.			
My company dislikes this supplier. (r) *			
<i>Loyalty Behavior</i>	1	64.4	0.76
My company usually contacts this supplier first when we have financial staffing needs.			
My company usually gives this supplier ample time to find a qualified candidate before seeking service elsewhere.			
Approximately, what percentage of your financial staffing expenditure does your company expect to give to this supplier in the future? **			

Responses were given to each item on seven-point agree/disagree scales

* Items eliminated through re-specification of the confirmatory factor analysis measurement model.

** Responses ranged from 0% to 100%. For reliability analysis, this item was recoded into seven categories to coincide with the scale of other items.

*** Scale reliabilities were computed using procedures described by Raykov (1997) except for "perceived power" and "perceived expertise." Reliability for these two-item scales were computed using Chronbach's alpha.

(r) Reverse coded items.

Table 2
Scale Means, Standard Deviations and Correlations Among Latent Constructs

	Mean	Std.	1	2	4	5	6
1 Perceived Salesperson Power	4.36	0.20					
2 Perceived Quality of Contact	4.64	0.37	.68				
4 Perceived Salesperson Expertise	5.02	0.14	.71	.76			
5 Trust with the Salesperson	5.46	0.28	.31	.44	.61		
6 Satisfaction with the Supplier	5.03	0.17	.58	.67	.83	.62	
7 Customer Loyalty Behavior	4.26	1.44	.40	.41	.33	.11	.23

Table 3
Structural Model Path Coefficients and Model Fit Statistics

			<i>Estimate</i>	<i>Standard Error</i>	<i>Standard Estimate</i>	<i>Z value</i>
<i>Structural Parameters</i>						
Satisfaction with the Supplier	→	Loyalty Behavior	0.765	0.121	0.53	6.31
Trust with the Salesperson	→	Satisfaction with the Supplier	0.196	0.078	0.19	2.52
Perceived Salesperson Expertise	→	Satisfaction with the Supplier	0.697	0.089	0.73	7.83
Perceived Salesperson Expertise	→	Trust with the Salesperson	0.562	0.085	0.59	6.58
Perceived Salesperson Power	→	Perceived Salesperson Expertise	0.332	0.135	0.30	2.46
Perceived Quality of Contact	→	Perceived Salesperson Expertise	0.540	0.112	0.57	4.82
<i>Measurement Parameters</i>						
Loyalty Behavior	→	Loyalty1	1.000		0.94	
Loyalty Behavior	→	Loyalty2	0.856	0.124	0.66	6.929
Loyalty Behavior	→	Loyalty3	0.506	0.083	0.55	6.092
Satisfaction with the Supplier	→	Satisfaction1	1.000		0.88	
Satisfaction with the Supplier	→	Satisfaction2	0.977	0.064	0.90	15.29
Satisfaction with the Supplier	→	Satisfaction3	0.614	0.064	0.66	9.58
Trust with the Salesperson	→	Trust1	1.000		0.79	
Trust with the Salesperson	→	Trust2	0.880	0.086	0.74	10.25
Trust with the Salesperson	→	Trust3	1.063	0.082	0.91	12.93
Trust with the Salesperson	→	Trust4	1.042	0.090	0.82	11.63
Perceived Salesperson Expertise	→	Expertise1	1.000		0.80	
Perceived Salesperson Expertise	→	Expertise2	0.895	0.078	0.85	11.51
Perceived Salesperson Power	→	Power1	1.000		0.88	
Perceived Salesperson Power	→	Power2	0.630	0.108	0.58	5.83
Perceived Quality of Contact	→	Contact1	1.000		0.79	
Perceived Quality of Contact	→	Contact2	0.918	0.088	0.81	10.43
Perceived Quality of Contact	→	Contact3	0.897	0.088	0.79	10.18
<i>Model Fit Statistics</i>						
Saturated Model:	$\chi^2=0.00$, 0 df					
Null Model:	$\chi^2=1655.61$, 136 df ($p<.001$)					
Measurement Model:	$\chi^2=162.51$, 104 df ($p<.001$)					
More Constrained Model:*	$\chi^2=174.90$, 113 df ($p<.001$)					
Less Constrained Model:**	$\chi^2=165.68$, 111 df ($p<.001$)					
Theoretical Model:	$\chi^2=168.91$, 112 df ($p<.001$)					
Fit Indices:			CFI = .96			
			GFI = .89			
			TLI = .95			
			RMSEA = .05			
Explained Variance (SMC):			Perceived Salesperson Expertise = .65			
			Trust with the Salesperson = .35			
			Satisfaction with Supplier = .73			
			Loyalty Behavior = .28			

* Specification constrained the parameter from salesperson trustworthiness to satisfaction with the supplier to be zero.

** Specification allowed the parameter from salesperson power to trust with the salesperson to freely vary.

The hypothesized structural model was further compared to a series of nested models. First, the chi-square of the hypothesized model was compared to four less-constrained models. These models were specified to allow one additional parameter to freely vary. Freeing a parameter reduces the chi-square statistic. The model that showed the largest reduction in chi-square was that which allowed a path from salesperson power to trustworthiness to be estimated. However, the chi-square was not statistically different from the theorized model ($\Delta\chi^2=3.23$, $df=1$, ns.). Next, the hypothesized model was com-

pared to five models that constrained one additional path to zero. Each of these models reduced fit significantly. The model increasing the chi-square statistic the least constrained to zero the parameter from salesperson trustworthiness to customer satisfaction ($\Delta\chi^2=21.01$, $df=1$, $p<0.01$). Thus, adding additional free parameters did not enhance overall fit, while constraining a hypothesized parameter to zero reduced overall fit of the model.

To statistically test the hypotheses that freed parameters were not zero, parameter z-values were evaluated. The re-

sults provided support for all hypothesized paths (see Figure 1). Findings support the hypothesized positive relationship between an organizational buyer's level of satisfaction and changes in a buyer's loyalty behavior ($z=6.31$, $p<0.001$; H4). Similarly, the level of customer satisfaction was found to be positively related to both the perceived expertise of a salesperson ($z=7.83$, $p<0.001$; H6) and the level of trust an organizational buyer feels with that salesperson ($z=2.52$, $p<0.05$; H5).

A buyer's perception of the expertise of a salesperson was found to be an important intervening variable. Not only was it positively related to customer satisfaction, but it was also positively related to a buyer's level of trust with a salesperson ($z=6.58$, $p<0.001$; H1). Both the level of power a buyer perceives a salesperson to have in the supplying firm ($z=2.46$, $p<0.05$; H3) and the quality of the interactions the buyer feels a salesperson provides ($z=4.82$, $p<0.001$; H2) were found to enhance the perceived expertise of a salesperson. Implications will be discussed in the following section.

Discussion

In order for business suppliers to retain customers at current or enhanced levels of business, they must maintain high levels of satisfaction among their customers (Rust and Zahorik 1993; Jolson 1997). This research suggests that one way that firms can help manage the satisfaction of their customers is through their sales force. Findings suggest that salespeople can enhance customers' satisfaction levels by effectively managing their image with their customers. In particular, being perceived as trustworthy and having a high degree of expertise may help a salesperson to establish long-term business relationships.

Other studies have identified salesperson expertise as an important variable that influences the relationship between a buyer and a salesperson (e.g., Busch and Wilson 1976; Moorman, Deshpandé, and Zaltman 1993; Crosby, Evans, and Cowles 1990; Doney and Cannon 1997; Swan et al. 1999). This study extends this stream of research by providing evidence that salesperson expertise is not only related to trust but also to customer satisfaction.

A salesperson's level of expertise was positively related to two key variables. First, salesperson expertise was related to a buyer's perception that a salesperson has the power in his or her own firm to get things done. Often, whether a deal is made or broken relies on the salesperson's ability to effectively advocate his or her external customer's position internally to those who are going to finance, manufacture, alter, transport, or service the sale. Thus, the findings of this study suggest that, not only do industrial salespeople have to effectively deal with their internal customers, but they must also try to communicate this effectiveness to their external customers.

Perceived expertise of a salesperson was also related to a buyer's perception that the interactions with a salesperson are appropriate and valuable. Qualitative research conducted during the scale development stage of this study support the importance of interaction quality. Qualitative interviews with both organizational buyers and sellers indicated that buyers dislike it when sellers attempt to interact too often or without substantial justification. Furthermore, many buyers prefer not to have extensive contact with a salesperson but expect the contact they have to be valuable. As such, salespeople who are able to determine how often customers wish to be called on are more apt to be viewed as having a high level of expertise. In this study, contact quality was conceptualized as providing appropriate levels of communication. However,

in today's rapidly advancing technological environment, customers are adopting various means of communicating (e.g., electronic mail, voice messaging, skytel, etc.). As such, salespeople must also evaluate customers' preferred method of interaction and align their communications to customer preferences. Thus, future studies may want to investigate contact quality as a multidimensional construct.

Finally, findings from this study add to the growing body of research indicating that customer satisfaction is related to a customer's intention for future business contact (e.g., Rust and Zahorik 1993; Reichheld and Sasser 1990). As such, enhancing the level of a customer's trust and perception of expertise with a salesperson may ultimately enhance sales revenue.

In today's business environment, supply firms are critically evaluating the feasibility, costs, and payoff of retaining customers. These evaluations become increasingly critical when current customers are limiting the number of suppliers they are working with. Under these circumstances, supply firms often have to commit to substantially increasing the value of their offering, or decide that the payoff is too minimal or too risky and forgo future business (Rackham 2000). When firms opt to pursue value-adding strategies with key customers, they have two basic approaches (Anderson and Narus 1998; Gale 1994). The first is to enhance value by reducing prices significantly. Often, this requires simplifying and automating the sales function and reducing service to minimal levels. In many commodity and low-tech markets, this action provides the highest perceived value to customers (Berry and Yadav 1996). The second approach is to enhance value through enhancing and adding valued services (e.g., consultative selling services). The effectiveness of this strategy often relies on the quality of the sales force and its ability to convey and deliver value to customers (Rackham 2000). Findings from this study suggest that, when firms opt to pursue key customers through sales and service focused strategies, the consultative selling activities of salespeople can play a key strategic role. However, in order to do this, salespeople must be perceived as credible consultants.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Although the current study does provide insight into the importance of customer perceptions of a salesperson and identifies some key variables to help business-to-business salespeople manage their image with customers, several limitations to the research must be considered. First, the selection of a business-to-business service company is a subjective process, and the use of any one firm's database of current, and prospective customers as a sampling frame may hinder generalizability. Specifically, customers' satisfaction assessments depend on what is relevant and important in that business relationship; determining factors may differ across industries (Herr, Kardes, and Kim 1991; Leach and Liu 1998). In addition, given the number of model parameters, replication with a larger sample size and in other business-to-business settings is a critical area for future research.

Findings from this study illustrate the importance of salesperson power in the internal selling process. Future research may expand the sales and organizational behavior literature by investigating bases of power (French and Raven 1959) and manifest influence strategies (Kohli 1989) among the selling team. Specifically, how salespeople exercise various forms of influence with their internal customers to service their external customers is an area deserving of future research effort.

The potential importance of a customer's perceived switching costs is another area for future investigation (Sengupta, Krapfel, and Pusateri 1997; Jackson 1985). Switching costs include the psychological, physical, and economic costs a customer faces when changing a supplier (Jackson 1985, p. 13). In this study, we found that perceived salesperson expertise and trust impact future business with a customer through enhancing customer satisfaction. By establishing trust and a customer's confidence in consultative capabilities (i.e., expertise), a salesperson can establish exit barriers among customers and, thereby, establish loyalty and safeguard against switching behavior. Thus, trust and expertise may impact future business with customers through both improving satisfaction and establishing relationship-specific investments that enhance customers' perceptions of switching costs.

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