

# How to Overcome Emotional Exhaustion in Sales Settings

OUTSTANDING PAPER – Professional Sales/Sales Management

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## Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to investigate how sales organizations can reduce emotional exhaustion in their sales employees. Specifically, this paper examines how organizational support, sales creativity, grit and emotional engagement impact emotional exhaustion. Three hundred sixty-one business-to-business sales employees across a variety of organizations and industries were sampled. Results found that perceived organizational support and emotional engagement negatively impacted emotional exhaustion. In addition, although grit and sales creativity did not directly impact emotional exhaustion, they did positively impact emotional engagement. These findings have important applications for sales organizations. Employers need to hire employees that exhibit high levels of grit and sales creativity. Furthermore, sales organizations need to provide a supportive and creative environment to their sales employees in order to minimize the impact of emotional exhaustion.

## Introduction

Of particular interest in marketing and organizational behavior (Wright & Cropanzano 1998), understanding emotional exhaustion is important due to the negative implications it causes to employees and organizations (Cordes & Dougherty 1993). Emotional exhaustion is defined as “the feeling of being emotionally overextended by ones’ work” (Maslach & Jackson 1981, p. 101), and often occurs when an employee feels physically fatigued and/or psychologically and emotionally drained (Rutherford, Hamwi, Friend, & Hartmann 2011; Wright & Cropanzano 1998).

Because of the negative ramifications that occur when a sales employee becomes emotionally exhausted, it is important to investigate how an organization might reduce the level of emotional exhaustion in their workforce. Due to the nature of the sales role, when key salespeople become exhausted, they are more likely to leave the organization (Babakus, Cravens, Johnston, & Moncrief III 1999), and revenue can be impacted (Lewin & Sager 2007). Therefore, organizations are motivated financially to minimize the impact of emotional exhaustion. Because of this, the focus of this study is to investigate how organizational support, and emotional engagement negatively impact emotional exhaustion. In addition, how individual characteristics such as grit and sales creativity might also reduce levels of emotional exhaustion in a sales employee.

## Methodology

In order to examine the relationships in the hypothesized model, data was gathered from business-to-business sales employees from a variety of industries. Because of the difficulty of obtaining business-to-business sales samples and to ensure generalizability, an online U.S. panel was utilized to collect the data. A total of 361 respondents completed the survey. All of the scales proposed in this study were taken from prior literature. All scales were unidimensional. Each scale was measured on a 7-point scale. Partial least squares structural equations modeling (PLS-SEM) using SmartPLS 3.2.7 is used to analyze the data (Ringle, Wende, & Becker 2015).

## Results and Discussion

The authors evaluated the reflective model to examine its reliability and validity (Henseler, Ringle, & Sinkovics 2009). All indices met the minimum criteria (Hair et al. 2016; Henseler, Ringle, & Sarstedt 2015). The structural model was tested using bootstrapping (5000 resamples). The results supported six of the eight hypotheses.

It was hypothesized that each of these constructs (perceived organizational support, grit, sales creativity, and emotional engagement) would negatively impact a salesperson's emotional exhaustion. In addition, it was hypothesized that perceived organizational support and grit would positively impact sales creativity and that perceived organizational support, grit, and sales creativity would positively impact emotional engagement. Although this study did not find that grit or sales creativity negatively impacted emotional exhaustion, all other hypothesized relationships were supported.

There are several important implications for organizations as a result of this study. First, when hiring salespeople, it is important that organizations consider both sales creativity and grit since these are individual characteristics that can not necessarily be taught by an organization. Second, and of utmost importance, organizations need to provide a supportive environment to their salespeople. This is shown both through the direct and positive impact of support on emotional engagement as well as the direct, negative impact on emotional exhaustion.

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**Keywords:** Emotional Exhaustion, Sales, Grit, Sales Creativity, Emotional Engagement, Organizational Support

#### Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and Practitioners:

This study examines how sales creativity, grit, perceived organizational support and emotional engagement impact emotional exhaustion. It is important for sales organizations to provide a supportive and creative environment in order to reduce their sales employees' emotional exhaustion. Sales organizations also need to examine their hiring practices in order hire sales employees that have high grit and sales creativity levels.

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