

Investigating sales approaches and gender in customer relationships

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Andy Wood, J., Johnson, J., S. Boles, J. and Barksdale, H. (2014), "Investigating sales approaches and gender in customer relationships", *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, Vol. 29 No. 1, pp. 11-23. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JBIM-01-2012-0014>

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Abstract:

Purpose: The purpose of this research is an examination of three different types of sales approaches (product-, solution- and provocation-based) on relational outcomes. The type of sales approach influences buyer's assessments about the trustworthiness of the salesperson and the conflict with the salesperson. These outcomes of the sales approach affect the customer's economic and non-economic satisfaction. **Design/methodology/approach:** Using cross-sectional survey data from a sample of 840 organizational buyers, a structural equation model measures the path coefficients of the proposed model and tests the differences in the magnitude based on gender. **Findings:** The results indicate that sales approaches will differentially influence assessments of trustworthiness and conflict. The magnitude of the influence of the sales approach on outcomes is different between genders. **Originality/value:** To the best of the authors' knowledge, this is the first empirical study to examine the impact of sales approaches on both genders of organizational buyers.

Keywords: gender | relationship marketing | purchasing | accounts management | organizational buying behaviour | sales

Article:

Selling tactics continue to evolve as economic fluctuations increase stress on existing relationships and the environment of the workplace transforms with the dramatic increase of female buyers. For instance, with less money available to spend, purchases are scrutinized more carefully and customer relationships have lost much of their power (Lay *et al.*, 2009). Also, more and more often this scrutiny is being done by women, as they are projected to make up 50 percent of the workforce and 72 percent of these women will be in management, professional, or other related purchase-influencing positions (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009). It has been suggested that salespeople can no longer rely on status quo sales approaches, as traditional sales approaches will be evaluated differently by the emerging women buyers (Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran, 1991). Additionally, the current painful economic realities may increase the saliency of immediate tangible outcomes rather than rewarding efforts emphasizing relationship

building (Lay *et al.*, 2009). Surprisingly, these differential impacts of sales approaches on customer relationships are under-researched in the academic literature (Agnihotri *et al.*, 2009).

Evidence indicates that gender not only influences perceptions but also subsequently the judgments and evaluations of people in buying roles (Meyers-Levy and Sternthal, 1991). Researchers find that these gender differences influence the communication interactions between salespeople and buyers (McQuiston and Morris, 2009). Gender differences also can result in differences in marketing outcomes such as loyalty (Melnyk *et al.*, 2009). Work in other areas of marketing also demonstrates that the gender of an evaluator leads to different assessments and outcomes (Boles *et al.*, 2003).

Addressing differences in buyer gender is important because women have become increasingly present in the workforce and now represent a major force in the global economy. One interesting trend in the business arena is that the number of women in the workforce is about to surpass the number of men, and this trend is expected to continue (Silverstein and Sayre, 2009). While the theoretical background on gender differences in decision-making goes back several decades, we maintain that this more recent expansion of women into decision-making roles makes a pragmatic argument for studying gender-specific assessments that are likely to influence buyer satisfaction in the buyer-seller relationship and ultimately the buyer's expectation of relationship continuity.

Consequently, the purpose of this paper is to examine the role of different sales approaches on buyer-seller relationships. These sales approaches can result in either a positive or a negative evaluation of the salesperson. To understand these differential impressions we focus on two outcomes:

1. assessments of trustworthiness at the positive end of the spectrum; and
2. perceptions of conflict with the salesperson at the negative end.

We suggest that the gender of the buyer will influence perceptions of these sales approaches and potentially lead to alternate outcomes based on differences in processing strategies (Meyers-Levy and Sternthal, 1991).

Theoretical framework

In the broad literature on long-term relationships and relationship quality, there exists a specific interest in selling behaviors and their influence on the relationship (Crosby *et al.*, 1990). While some of this research has examined an individual salesperson's activities, often the consequences measured were at the buying firm level (Doney and Cannon, 1997). Other researchers have expanded the literature to include customer responsiveness to selling firm activities (Garbarino and Johnson, 1999). Salesperson characteristics such as gender and race also have been examined as antecedent to customer decisions (Jones *et al.*, 1998). Finally, research has shown that at the individual buyer level, the customer's perceptions of salesperson interpersonal behaviors influences relationship outcomes such as satisfaction and intentions towards future interactions (Ramsey and Sohi, 1997). This stream of literature suggests that, while relationship outcomes are dependent upon individual buyers' perceptions of their salespeople's influence

activities, the judgments and decisions about those activities are differentially dependent upon the gender of the buyer.

We anchor our proposed model within the above customer relationship literature but with a specific focus on interpersonal actions, judgments, and outcomes. Consequently, we suggest at this interpersonal level the critical marketing stimuli are the salesperson's influence activities. The buyer's perceptions, as well as the buyer's characteristics, will inform the appraisals and judgments about salespeople's influence activities. The outcomes of these judgments and choices are satisfaction, commitment, and ultimately continuance of the relationship.

We propose that three types of approaches (product-based, solution-based, and provocation-based) can be used to broadly categorize most sales influence activities (Johnston and Marshall, 2010). Further, we suggest that a buyer's perceptions of these sales activities directly influence their judgments about the salesperson's trustworthiness and their assessments of conflicts they have with the salesperson. Trustworthiness and conflict will then, in turn, influence the buyer's economic and non-economic satisfaction, which ultimately lead to commitment and continued intention to purchase.

We specifically acknowledge that alternative sequencing of the constructs of interest exists in the overall marketing literature. However, we argue that at the interpersonal level of the buyer-seller dyad, our proposed order most closely mirrors classic stimulus response marketing models, with sales activities serving as the marketing stimulus and buyer judgments about conflict and trustworthiness – as well as their gender – forming the relevant buyer characteristics. Finally, relationship outcomes are the responses. These relationships are shown in Figure 1. In subsequent sections, we examine literature regarding gender-based assessments and develop hypotheses concerning the role gender plays in our proposed model. Finally, a discussion of the research methodology along with results, discussion, and conclusions follow.

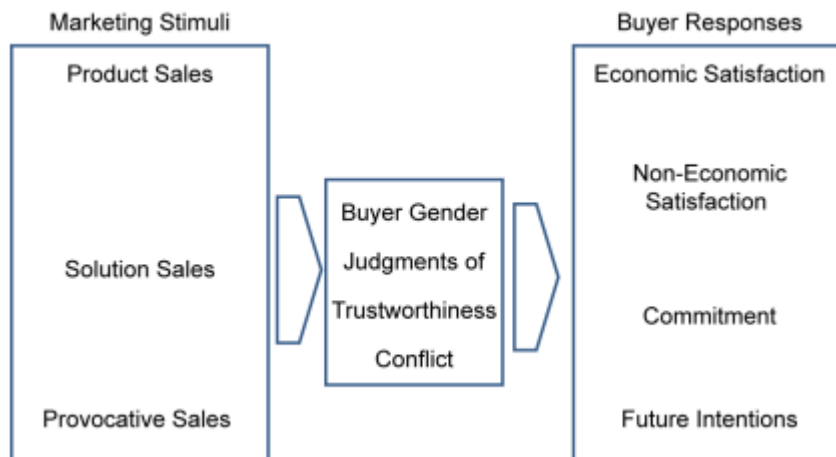


Figure 1. Stimuli response model

Sales approaches

Our model suggests that personal selling influence activities can be viewed as falling into three broad categories:

1. product-based;
2. solution-based; and
3. provocation-based.

Product-based sales approaches involve interpersonal communications and demonstrations of features, functionality, and warranties, usually in a generic manner. A sales representative for an office supply company with an extensive product offering and a large customer base might find themselves required by time constraints to follow this approach. In this type of sale, emphasis is on rapid information sharing in order to expedite face-to-face selling time.

Solution-based sales approaches seek out current concerns in a question-answer dialogue with customers. The goal of this approach is to identify a business problem the salesperson's product/service can solve. Typically, a salesperson asks questions to identify needs, acknowledge pain points and target tactical problems (Lay *et al.*, 2009). A sales representative of customizable internet security software may use this approach. To a buyer, this sale approach conveys a sense of effort on the part of the salesperson as her/his time and expertise are deployed to help solve customer problems.

Provocation-based sales approaches help customers see competitive challenges in a new light and make addressing painful problems urgent. In this approach, salespeople focus on strategic problems and identify problems that the customer may not even be aware of, but once they have been identified, is willing to resolve (Lay *et al.*, 2009). Sales representatives of transformational products or services such as those that first introduced enterprise resource planning software had to raise awareness of the coming shift into integrated systems. The key to provocation-based selling is that salespeople must understand the industry their customers are in and critical issues facing businesses in that industry (Dandridge, 2009). While practitioner-based literature places an overwhelming emphasis on product-based and solution-based sales approaches, provocation-based sales approaches have recently begun emerging in practitioner arenas (Dandridge, 2009). Currently, there appears to be a scarcity of empirical research that simultaneously examines the role of product-based, solution-based, and provocation-based sales approaches on buyer-seller relationships.

There are indications in the sales literature of how categories of sales influence activities link to trustworthiness or conflict. Some of the difficulty is insuring that we clearly define and measure these buyer assessments on the interpersonal level. For example, while there is an extensive literature stream concerning personal selling and trust in relationships (for a review, see Wood *et al.*, 2008), some of the trust-related work is at the organizational level and the concepts of trust and trustworthiness are often confused and used interchangeably. As a departure from the majority of trust-related research, we suggest – as do Wood *et al.* (2008) – that a buyer's first trust-related appraisal is about the salesperson's trustworthiness. Trustworthiness is a judgment by the buyer that the salesperson will intentionally act in a manner that advances the buyer's interests. Thus, buyers observe a salesperson's actions and then draw conclusions about the salesperson's intentions based on the activities they associate with one of the three categories of sales influence behaviors.

The product approach is more transactional in nature and thus is not likely to be conducive to ongoing, long-term relationships (Dwyer *et al.*, 1987). The emphasis in this approach is on limiting time spent with any individual customer and increasing overall territory sales visits. Quick and shallow sales visits, focused on the immediate transaction, can lead to a lack of attention to the overall relationship and the omission of relevant information. This sales approach will influence buyers' perceptions in two ways. The resulting lack of communications depth may lead to perceptions of withholding information. Additionally, the transaction emphasis leads to perceptions that the transaction's value outweighs the relationship's value. Thus, the salesperson does not have the customer's interest in mind. We recognize that buyers' perceptions of this approach may vary with the nature of the message. It seems the absence of a clear value proposition, a complete message, and full transaction details will likely lead to skepticism and suspicion (Eyal and Bazerman, 2010). We suggest that in ongoing relationships a buyer's perceptions that the salesperson is only interested in the sale will not only detract from the salesperson's credibility but will also increase conflict. It is likely that suspicion about salesperson motives will manifest as conflict between the buyer and seller. We test the outcomes of buyer perceptions that result from the salesperson using a product-based approach in the following hypotheses:

H1a. Buyers' perceptions of a product-based sales approach will decrease judgments of trustworthiness.

H1b. Buyers' perceptions of a product-based sales approach will increase judgments of conflict.

The relationship of a solution-based approach, with its reliance on seeking out customer problems and then conveying how the product or service can alleviate the problem, has an extensive history relating it to trustworthiness judgments and buyer-seller conflict constructs. We note, however, that not all researchers conceptualize sales activities as being directly antecedent to these two constructs. We suggest, as do others (Doney and Cannon, 1997; Johnson *et al.*, 2001) that, when looking at the interpersonal level of salesperson buyer interaction, the buyer's perceptions of sales activities directly affect trustworthiness and conflict. Sales efforts conveying benefits are directly indicative of the salesperson considering the customer's interest, which is the prime component of trustworthiness. Conversely, sales activities that do not convey a sense of time commitment, problem solving, and customer benefit likely will lead to buyer-seller conflict. However, when solution selling is perceived as occurring by the buyer, then conflict should decrease. We examine these relationships in the following hypotheses:

H2a. Buyers' perceptions of a solution-based sales approach will increase judgments of trustworthiness.

H2b. Buyers' perceptions of a solution-based sales approach will decrease judgments of conflict.

A provocation-based sales approach is by its very nature high-risk. Salesperson efforts are designed to bring to the forefront difficult problems and conditions. The goal of this category of sales effort is to increase customer discomfort to such high levels that acting on the salesperson's

suggestion is ultimately viewed as less painful than failing to act. Being the lesser of two evils is a challenging sales strategy. Successful use of this strategy entails extensive information sharing aimed at achieving consensus on a shared vision of the strategic issues confronting both parties, as well as the industry in general (Lay *et al.*, 2009). To be successful, the buyer and seller must move beyond the initial conflict that provocative selling is designed to initiate. At its conclusion, this sales strategy needs a buyer to believe that the salesperson's actions and intentions "encapsulate" the buyer's interest. Under these conditions, we suggest the following outcomes will occur:

H3a. Buyers' perceptions of a provocative-based sales approach will decrease judgments of trustworthiness.

H3b. Buyers' perceptions of a provocative-based sales approach will increase judgments of conflict.

Numerous sales-related studies have found that trust-related and conflict-related measures are significantly related to both economic and non-economic satisfaction (Ramsey and Sohi, 1997, Dwyer *et al.*, 1987). Economic satisfaction with the salesperson is the appraisal of the economic performance resulting from the relationship, while non-economic satisfaction is the more global appraisal including social aspects of the relationship (Gassenheimer and Ramsey, 1994). We maintain that trustworthiness and conflict will influence both constructs of satisfaction with higher assessments of trustworthiness leading to more satisfaction and higher levels of conflict leading to less satisfaction:

H4a. Increases in buyers' perceptions of salespersons' trustworthiness will increase economic satisfaction.

H4b. Increases in buyers' perceptions of salespersons' trustworthiness will increase non-economic satisfaction.

H5a. Increases in buyers' perceptions of conflict with the salesperson will decrease economic satisfaction.

H5b. Increases in buyers' perceptions of conflict with the salesperson will decrease non-economic satisfaction.

Developing out of these satisfaction appraisals is the relationship's long-term orientation (Anderson and Wietz, 1989) or relationship investments resulting in short-term sacrifices designed to enhance relationship longevity. Past research and our proposed model indicate that increases in both satisfaction constructs should lead to higher levels of commitment (Geyskens *et al.*, 1999). We test these associations in the following hypotheses:

H6. Increases in buyers' economic satisfaction will increase commitment.

H7. Increases in buyers' non-economic satisfaction will increase commitment.

Additionally, research indicates ongoing relationships need more than buyer commitment. It is also necessary to desire relationship continuity for the commitment to provide benefits (Noordewier *et al.*, 1990). Similar to recent research, we maintain that buyers' commitment to a relationship specifically influences their relationship with the salesperson (Rutherford *et al.*, 2008). We suggest buyers' expectation of continuing the relationship develops through a directed intention to continue to work with the salesperson. Therefore, we add the path of a buyer's commitment increasing desire for future interactions with the salesperson. This path is tested by the following hypothesis:

H8. Buyers' perceptions of commitment to the salesperson will raise anticipated future interactions with the salesperson.

Female versus male perceptions model

As an additional step in our understanding of relationship marketing, this study extends the considerable body of relationship-related research by incorporating a key (but under-researched) aspect of the relationship – the buyer's gender. Given that women will soon outnumber men in the workforce and will be more prominent in decision-making positions (Silverstein and Sayre, 2009), understanding differences between male and female buyers will be important in selecting and using sales approaches. Gender is particularly relevant in the stimulus response model, as existing literature indicates that message characteristics and type of response sought from the buyer will lead to differing elaboration across genders (Meyers-Levy and Sternthal, 1991). The concept that outcomes of judgments and/or assessments differ based on individual characteristics is not new to the literature. However, identifying operationally relevant individual differences is a challenging but important task (Lewin and Johnston, 1996).

The literature seems to indicate that one such individual difference, i.e. gender, is receiving renewed interest. Part of this interest may develop out of the relative certainty to which a person's gender can be identified, but also because of findings about gender's differential effect on decision-making. For example in a marketing context, salespeople's decision-making process about job satisfaction was found to vary based on gender (Boles *et al.*, 2003). As noted above, a particularly relevant finding was that men and women evaluate the antecedents of satisfaction using different judgment processes. These different judgments likely lead to varied buyer assessments of the conduct of salespeople and the interplay of trustworthiness and conflict with both constructs of satisfaction.

Differences in buyers' perceptions based upon gender develop out of differences in work role perceptions. Eagley (1987) and Babin and Boles (1998) suggest that men assume a more agentic work role, while females view their role as more communal. Supporting this framework is the dual adaptation model (Abele, 2000), where both biological differences and social adaptation move men and women into these different work role perspectives. These differences in work role perception may lead the buyer, depending upon their gender, to place more or less weight on the elements that influence judgment about satisfaction (Boles *et al.*, 2003).

In the context of buyer-seller relationships, these differences are not likely to invert the correspondence between an influence conduct and an intermediate outcome, but rather the

magnitude of the relationship. Thus, product-based selling with its emphasis on minimizing face-to-face time may create a goal mismatch. Female buyers may be more interested in investing time in an effort to nurture the relationship, while the salesperson's goal is to minimize time spent in interaction (McQuiston and Morris, 2009). This could result in greater conflict between salespeople using the product approach and female buyers. Boles *et al.* (2003) did find that gender moderated the relationship between role conflict and perceptions of others, suggesting that conflict developing out of activities of salespeople may be perceived differentially depending on the gender of the buyer. Additionally, men are agentic. In their societal role, men are expected to make assessments and judgments on their own. This societal expectation also reinforces an inherent individualistic approach to problem-solving. Reliance by males on individualized judgments suggests that they will not be concerned about the lack of a time investment into the relationship if the information necessary to make the purchase is complete (McQuiston and Morris, 2009). We suggest and test a gender difference between the relationships of product-based sales to conflict in the following hypothesis:

H9. Female buyers' perceptions of product-based sales approaches will lead to more conflict than male buyers' perceptions of product-based sales approaches.

Conversely, the time invested by salespeople in solution-based selling will not manifest a difference between male and female buyers' perceptions of conflict. Goal congruence does not change conflict; it eliminates it. Rather, perceptions of solution-based selling will lead to differences in the magnitude of the trustworthiness assessments. The amount of time and frequency of communications will reinforce females' desire of community. Sales activities that demonstrate an alignment of salesperson's interests with a buyer's interest will increase assessments of trustworthiness. Thus, for females there is the economic alignment of interests as well as the alignment with communal interests:

H10. Female buyers' perceptions of solution-based sales approaches will lead to higher trustworthiness assessments than male buyers' perceptions of solution-based sales approaches.

Finally, the consequences of differences in the magnitude of the relationships between sales approaches and trustworthiness should influence the outcomes of this construct. In other words, there should be differences in the relationships between trustworthiness with both constructs of satisfaction. As women find the salesperson more trustworthy from both the salesperson's solution-based approach and time invested in the relationship, there should be a stronger relationship between trustworthiness and economic and non-economic satisfaction for female buyers. However, while there are likely to be higher levels of conflict between the genders in product-based sales approaches, these are not seen to have a direct influence on performance-based appraisals (economic satisfaction). Rather, we suggest this difference in magnitude will exhibit only between conflict and non-economic satisfaction. We examine these final three relationships in test of the following hypotheses:

H11a. Female buyers' assessments of salesperson trustworthiness will lead to higher levels of economic satisfactions than male buyers' assessments of salesperson trustworthiness.

H11b. Female buyers' assessments of salesperson trustworthiness will lead to higher levels of non-economic satisfactions than male buyers' assessments of salesperson trustworthiness.

H12. Female buyers' assessments of conflict with salesperson will lead to lower levels of non-economic satisfactions than males buyers' assessments of conflict with salesperson.

Methods and results

The sample is based on US-based business customers of a telecommunication company that provides long-distance and data services. Responses came from a self-report mailed survey from a random sample of the customers of the selling firm. Out of the original list of 2,068 customers, 840 usable questionnaires were returned for an overall response rate of 40 percent. Their average annual purchase from the selling firm was approximately \$50,000. A cross-section of industries are represented among the purchasing firms (21 percent manufacturing, 21 percent distribution, 8 percent retail, 36 percent service industry, and 14 percent others). Three hundred and forty-nine buyers were female and 491 were male. Every buyer taking part in the study was responsible for the purchase of the business service being purchased. Respondents agreed that they were primarily responsible for the purchase of the service and felt they were their firm's primary contact with the salesperson.

The respondents then answered seven-point Likert-type items (anchored by “strongly disagree”/“strongly” agree) on their perceptions and judgments about the one sales representative that called on them from the selling firm. Measurement items all came from the existing literature (for sources see Table I) and were investigated for convergent and divergent validity (results shown below). Respondents answered questions about autonomy in decision making, which are used as measures of the marker variable for common method variance analysis.

Table I. Construct measurement summary and CFA

Item description summary	Std loading	t-value
<i>Perception of salesperson use of a product based sales approach</i> (Crosby et al., 1990)		
My salesperson tries to sell me more than I want to buy	0.73	24.09
My salesperson withheld information that affected my purchase decision	0.90	32.88
My salesperson bends the facts when making sales presentations	0.84	29.70
I am suspicious of my salesperson recommendations	0.90	33.12
<i>Perception of salesperson use of a solution-based sales approach</i> (Crosby et al., 1990)		
My salesperson shows me how restructuring our existing service will better meet our needs	0.92	34.19
My salesperson spends time with me to explain why it is a good idea to remain with his/her company	0.78	26.16
My salesperson shows me how changes in our service will benefit my firm	0.90	32.69
My salesperson spends time with me to describe benefits of specific new services	0.77	26.08
<i>Perception of salespersons use of a provocation-based sales approach</i> (Moorman et al., 1992)		
My salespersons shares his/her knowledge about the industry	0.78	26.63
My salesperson helps me to solve my business problems	0.88	32.32
My salesperson has a sound strategic understanding of my business	0.80	27.71
My salesperson is willing to make a long-term investment in helping us	0.78	26.57
My salespersons has expressed a willingness to help me, even when there is nothing in it for him/her	0.72	23.82
My salesperson has expressed an interest in a long-term relationship	0.81	28.08
<i>Perception of conflict with the salesperson</i> (Kumar et al., 1992)		
My relationship with my salesperson can best be described as tense	0.70	22.82

Item description summary	Std loading	t-value
My salesperson and I have significant disagreements in our working relationship	0.75	25.22
My salesperson and I frequently clash	0.79	27.08
<i>Perception of trustworthiness of the salesperson</i> (Wood et al., 2008)		
My salesperson is sincere	0.82	27.34
My salesperson is deals fairly with me	0.82	27.31
My salesperson is trustworthy	0.80	26.30
<i>Perception of economic satisfaction with the salesperson</i> (Dwyer and Oh, 1987)		
The business arrangement I have with my salesperson is a good one	0.68	22.04
Overall, my salesperson is an asset to my company	0.84	29.95
I would rate the performance of my salesperson as excellent	0.89	32.90
<i>Perception of non-economic satisfaction with the salesperson</i> (Crosby et al., 1990)		
My salesperson can be relied upon to take my best interests into account	0.75	25.22
In general, I am very satisfied with my relationship with my salesperson	0.91	34.24
Overall, my salesperson is a good person	0.90	33.39
I am satisfied with my salesperson	0.93	35.68
<i>Commitment to the salesperson</i> (Anderson and Weitz, 1992)		
I have a strong sense of loyalty to my salesperson	0.72	23.67
My relationship with my salesperson is good	0.93	35.38
I have a stable relationship with my salesperson	0.94	35.91
My relationship with my salesperson makes me happy	0.79	27.02
<i>Future interactions with salesperson</i> (Noordewier et al., 1990)		
Expect my relationship with my salesperson to last a long time	0.91	33.29
I expect my relationship with my salesperson to continue	0.91	33.46
My decision to continue my relationship with my salesperson is virtually automatic	0.62	19.40
<i>Autonomy (marker variable)</i>		
The decision to purchase services is mine alone	0.99	18.51
I usually make purchasing decisions without input from others in the company	0.92	17.85

Methodology

Because survey data using cross-sectional analysis in a structural equation model forms the basis of the empirical tests of the hypotheses, the threat of bias from common method variance (CMV) exists (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). While some argue that the extent of CMV in marketing may be minimal and likely does not influence theoretical findings, especially in path analysis (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003; Malhotra *et al.*, 2007), others suggest it is always a threat, especially when the magnitude of the path coefficients is important to the research question (Williams *et al.*, 2010). Since this paper looks at gender differences across the paths of the structural model, the possibility of CMV must be considered.

We began to control for this threat by using appropriate questionnaire design such as reverse-scoring some items and intermixing items between scales, as well as placing “filler” scales between measurements of constructs of interest (Lindell and Whitney, 2001). We also placed demographic and behavioral self-reports at the end of the questionnaire to attempt to minimize response fatigue. Empirical examination of the potential of CMV is via the CFA marker technique of Williams *et al.* (2010), which is a five-step SEM technique that through stages examines the potential of a common method effect on the measures and constructs in the CFA model of interest. A marker variable, which is a construct that is relevant to the domain of interest but theoretically unrelated to any of the constructs in the proposed model, has measures collected as part of the questionnaire. Based on theory, the key in the analysis is for this marker variable to have a zero correlation with the model constructs such that any co-variation would

seem to be the product of common measurement method. Ultimately, the Williams *et al.* (2010) technique generates empirical evidence to help determine whether the marker variable has statistically significant method effects on other constructs in the model.

As the first step of the Williams *et al.* (2010) technique, a CFA model with the marker variable included is fitted with correlations allowed between all constructs including the marker variable. This first model provides the unstandardized factor and error loadings, which are specified as fixed for the marker variable, which is no longer allowed to correlate with the other latent factors. This second step creates the baseline model with factor loadings and error terms of the latent factors estimated free of the marker variable. The third step sets free the marker indicators as factor loadings on the latent variables while setting the baseline factor loadings as equivalent. This model (labeled Model C) allows for the marker variable indicators to become predictors of the unexplained variance. The more variance explained the greater the evidence of a common method bias. The test is a comparison of the χ^2 value of the baseline model to Model C, with a significant χ^2 value indicating measurement bias. The next model (Model U) frees up the constraint of the latent factor loadings as being equivalent. A comparison of the Model U to Model C tests for equal marker influence on the factors; however, in the absence of significant marker effects this test is not relevant. However, Model U is necessary for the final step, which is a comparison to Model R. Model R has the correlations of the latent factors fixed to those calculated in the baseline model, allowing for a test of the influence of the marker on relationships between latent constructs.

Structural modeling techniques using LISREL 8.8 (Joreskog and Sorbom, 2004) are used for the statistical analyses. The CMV method begins with a CFA, which completes the first step of SEM analysis. The overall model with the hypothesized paths is shown in Figure 2. After testing overall model fit, the steps necessary for the comparison of female buyers to male buyers is implemented. In SEM models there are several conditions that can lead to indications of group differences such as varying covariance matrices or factor structures – to mention just two. We explicitly follow the series of steps specified in Joreskog and Sorbom (1996), beginning with testing the equivalence of the covariance matrices of males and females or Model A. Model B then tests for the equivalence of the factor structures. Beginning with Model B, each subsequent Model is tested assuming the previous model found equivalence across gender. The subsequent models test for further equivalence of the overall measurement model by holding additional components of the model invariant and thus more restrictive. Confirmation of overall equivalence allows for comparison of the structural model where we could individually compare the path coefficients in the structural model that were hypothesized to vary across gender.

Comparison of path coefficients across groups extends the measurement model by creating a baseline model (Model 1) with the factor loadings invariant. (For a detailed review of this process, see Song *et al.*, 2005.) The χ^2 difference is then calculated from this model and the hypothesis testing models with factor loadings and the path coefficient of interest held invariant. Significant changes in χ^2 indicate support for the hypothesis.

Results

Analysis of common method variance and CFA

The Williams *et al.* (2010) technique begins with the selection of an appropriate marker variable. We measured buyers' perception of their autonomy in purchasing decisions. We believe this construct is relevant to the purchasing decision but are unaware of any theoretical linkages between this marker variable and the substantive constructs of our proposed model. The following series of CFA models including the marker provide the information presented in Tables II and III, which ultimately leads to a test for measurement method bias.

Table II. χ^2 and goodness of fit of CMV analysis

Model	χ^2	df	CFI
1. CFI	2,189.46	549	0.99
2. Baseline	2,214.30	561	0.99
3. Method C	2,213.99	560	0.99
4. Method U	2,160.83	527	0.99
5. Method R	2,167.49	563	0.99

Table III. Model comparison tests of CMV analysis

Δ models	$\Delta\chi^2$	Δ df	χ^2 critical value 0.05
Baseline versus Method C	0.46	1	3.84
Method C versus Method U	53.16	33	47.37
Method U versus Method R	6.66	36	50.95

The first CFA is also the measurement model, and has thirty-eight items including the two indicators for Autonomy. Measurement testing begins with a confirmatory factor model of the total sample. The results indicate that the measurement model is a good fit to the observed data with both confirmatory and discriminant validity. The χ^2 was 2,189.46 with 549 degrees of freedom. The size of the χ^2 statistic is not unexpected given the large sample size (Cudek and Browne, 1983; Cudek and Henly, 1991). Other measures of fit that are not as sensitive to sample size indicate an acceptable fit for the measurement model (NFI=0.98, NNFI=0.99, CFI=0.99, SRMR=0.04, RMSEA=0.06).

Using the unstandardized factor and error loadings from the CFA model, the baseline model has $\chi^2=2,214.30$ with 561 degrees of freedom. Model C, which allows the marker variable indicators to become the predictors of the variance in the specified CFA model, had good fit, i.e. CFI=0.99, and a χ^2 value of 2,213.99 with 560 degrees of freedom. The test is a comparison of the χ^2 the of the Baseline Model to Model C; the value is 0.46, which is not statistically significant at 1 df, thus suggesting measurement bias is not a problem. The next model (Model U) has $\chi^2=2,160.83$ with 527 df and the comparison of Model U to Model C is statistically significant, indicating that marker variable differentially influences latent factors; however, since we did not find overall measurement bias this does not indicate that a measurement threat exists. Model R has good fit, i.e. CFI=0.99, and $\chi^2=2,167.49$ with 563 df. The comparison between Model R and Model U does not indicate differences, and measurement effect on the correlations of the latent factors does not appear to be an issue.

Returning to the original CFA as presented in Table I, all measurement items had significant loadings on their latent constructs, thus supporting convergent validity. Discriminant validity was assessed using average variance extracted (AVE), internal reliability, and construct

correlations (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Each construct had AVE values greater than 0.55 and internal reliability greater than any related construct's inter-correlation, thus indicating both convergent and discriminant validity.

Structural model

The overall model is depicted in Figure 2 with the hypothesized paths shown. Correlations for the constructs being examined are presented in Table IV. This structural model has good fit to the observed data for the whole sample. As indicated in Table IV, results of the structural model indicate an acceptable fit. The χ^2 value is significant ($\chi^2_{(511)}=2,588.95, p<0.000$), which is not unexpected given the sample size. Using the Hu and Bentler (1999) criteria for models using maximum likelihood, both the SRMR of 0.049 and RMSEA of 0.06 are within range of their respective cut-off values of 0.08 and 0.06. Each of these fit indices when evaluated simultaneously indicates acceptable fit.

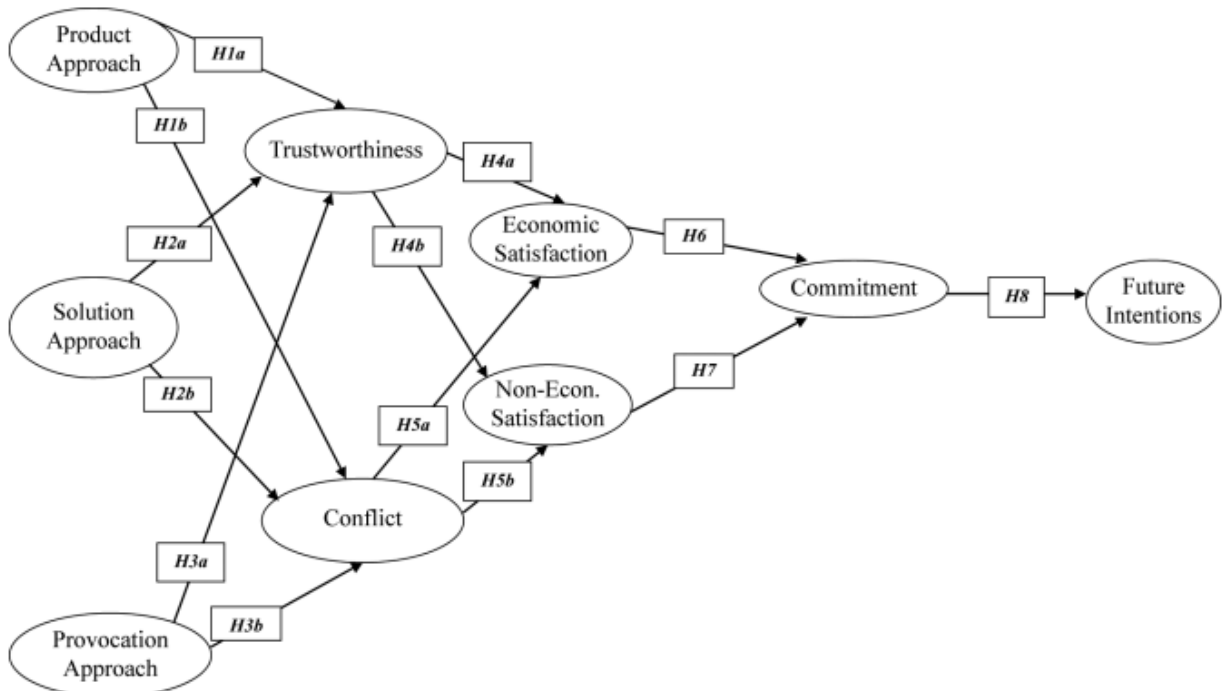


Figure 2. Hypothesized structural model

Table IV. Correlation matrix

	X1	X2	X3	X4	X5	X6	X7	X8	X9
Future intentions	0.81								
Commitment to salesperson	0.78	0.85							
Non-economic satisfaction	0.70	0.90	0.87						
Economic satisfaction	0.72	0.92	0.95	0.81					
Conflict	0.71	0.92	0.96	0.99	0.81				
Trustworthiness	-0.43	-0.55	-0.59	-0.58	-0.65	0.81			
Product-based	0.50	0.65	0.69	0.70	0.73	-0.72	0.84		
Solution-based	0.26	0.34	0.35	0.36	0.36	-0.11	0.21	0.84	
Provocation-based	0.67	0.86	0.91	0.93	0.94	-0.63	0.67	0.36	0.80

Notes: Reliabilities are shown on the diagonal; all correlations are significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed); $n = 840$

Table V. Structural model results and test of hypotheses

Relationship	Para. Estimate	Hypothesized model t-value	Hypothesis supported
Buyers' perceptions of a product-based sales approach will decrease judgments of trustworthiness (H1a)	-0.53	11.91	Y
Buyers' perceptions of a product-based sales approach will increase conflict (H1b)	0.18	7.01	Y
Buyers' perceptions of a solution-based sales approach will increase judgments of trustworthiness (H2a)	0.12	3.97	Y
Buyers' perceptions of a solution-based sales approach will decrease judgments of conflict (H2b)	0.02	1.26	N
Buyers' perceptions of a provocation-based sales approach will increase judgments of trustworthiness (H3a)	-0.33	7.41	N
Buyers' perceptions of a provocation-based sales approach will decrease judgments of conflict (H3b)	0.81	18.25	Y
Increases in buyers' perceptions of salesperson's trustworthiness will increase economic satisfaction (H4a)	0.10	3.63	Y
Increases in buyers' perceptions of salesperson's trustworthiness will increase noneconomic satisfaction (H4b)	0.06	2.33	Y
Increases in buyers' perceptions of conflict with salesperson will decrease economic satisfaction (H5a)	1.00	20.68	N
Increases in buyers' perceptions of conflict with salesperson will decrease noneconomic satisfaction (H5b)	1.05	17.09	N
Increases in buyers' economic satisfaction will increase commitment (H6)	0.78	6.71	Y
Increases in buyers' non-economic satisfaction will increase commitment (H7)	0.20	1.97	N
Buyers' perceptions of commitment to the salesperson will raise anticipated future interactions with the salesperson (H8)	0.78	26.71	Y

Notes: Fit statistics: $\chi^2 = 2,588.95$; $df = 511$; RMSEA = 0.06; NFI = 0.98; NNFI = 0.98; RMR (standardized) = 0.049, CFI = 0.99

Table VI. Test of gender differences in path coefficients

Hypotheses	Male path coefficient	Female path coefficient	$\Delta\chi^2$ between models
<i>H9.</i> Women buyers' perceptions of product-based sales approaches will lead to more conflict than men's perceptions of product-based sales approaches	0.17	0.22	Change in $\chi^2_{(1)} = 637.33$ Hypothesis supported
<i>H10.</i> Women buyers' perceptions of solution-based sales approaches will lead to higher trustworthiness assessments than men's perceptions of solution-based sales approaches	0.09	0.14	Change in $\chi^2_{(1)} = 9.26$ Hypothesis supported
<i>H11a.</i> Women buyers' assessments of salesperson trustworthiness will lead to higher levels of economic satisfactions than men's buyers' assessments of salesperson trustworthiness	0.08	0.14	Change in $\chi^2_{(1)} = 4.45$ Hypothesis supported
<i>H11b.</i> Women buyers' assessments of salesperson trustworthiness will lead to higher levels of non-economic satisfactions than men's buyers' assessments of salesperson trustworthiness	0.05	0.09	Change in $\chi^2_{(1)} = 2.82$ Hypothesis supported
<i>H12.</i> Women buyers' assessments of conflict with salesperson will lead to lower levels of non-economic satisfactions than men's buyers' assessments of conflict with salesperson	0.99	1.01	Change in $\chi^2_{(1)} = 1,040.72$ Hypothesis not supported (path in opposite direction)

Seven of the 13 hypothesized paths are supported with one additional path showing partial support. Results of the tests of *H1* indicate that buyers' perceptions that the salesperson is using a product-based sales approach decrease their evaluation of the salesperson's trustworthiness (*H1a*, $t=11.91$) and increase their perceptions of conflict with the salesperson (*H1b*, $t=7.01$). Solution-based sales approaches are not significantly related to conflict (*H2b*, $t=1.26$) but do increase trustworthiness assessments (*H2a*, $t=3.97$). *H3a*, which indicates that buyers' perceptions of the use of provocative based sales approaches increase trustworthiness, is not supported and is actually statistically significant in the opposite direction (see Table V). This condition is true for *H3b* ($t=18.25$), since the use of provocation-based sales activities causes the opposite of the hypothesized effect and actually increases buyer perceptions of conflict with the salesperson (*H3b*, $t=18.25$).

Increased perceptions of salesperson trustworthiness positively and significantly relate to both satisfaction constructs (*H4a*, $t=3.63$; *H4b*, $t=2.33$). Conflict in the relationship is not negatively related to either type of satisfaction (*H5a* and *H5b*). Increases in economic satisfaction lead to increases in commitment to the salesperson (*H6*, $t=6.71$), while increases in non-economic satisfaction are marginally related to commitment (*H7*, $t=1.97$). Finally, increases in commitment are positively and significantly related to buyers' future intentions to interact with the salesperson.

Female versus male perceptions model

Because this analysis entails two groups based on gender, the measurement model was further tested for measurement equivalence. Joreskog and Sorbom (1996) suggest a sequence of hierarchical steps comparing the groups' measurement models in a series of more restricted specifications. Results of Model A, the comparison of the covariance matrices, indicate the possibility of some difference with a χ^2 of 925.47 with 595 degrees of freedom. In each step, the null hypothesis that the measurement structure of the male and female samples was equivalent was not rejected. With results of the tests of Model B ($\chi^2=1,207.43$, $p=0.21$), Model C ($\chi^2=1,246.96$, $p=0.16$), Model D ($\chi^2=1,296.89$, $p=0.16$), and Model E ($\chi^2=1,339.94$, $p=0.15$), all indicating measurement model equivalence across gender despite the evidence from Model A that at some level the overall covariance matrices may not be equivalent.

In light of these findings regarding equivalence, we proceeded with the analysis of differences in the magnitude of path coefficients between genders. As noted earlier, we constrained the measurement model to be invariant across gender. At this point in the analysis, we hold the structural model with factor loadings invariant to create Model 1 or the baseline model. The fit indices of the model have $\chi^2_{(1,027)}=7,030.20$ ($p<0.000$) with RMSEA=0.06, NFI=0.95, NNFI=0.96, and CFI=0.96. These fit indices seem to indicate adequate fit for comparison purposes.

Results of the path coefficient comparison tests are shown in Table VI. There is evidence that based on buyer gender, perceptions of sales activities differentially impact assessments of the salesperson. Product-based sales approaches increase females' perceptions of conflict. Solution-based sales approaches increase evaluations of salesperson trustworthiness. Thus, *H9* and *H10* are supported. However, at higher levels of analysis of the relationship the only statistically

different path coefficient is the relationship between trustworthiness and economic satisfaction. This support for *H11a* suggests that female perceptions of salesperson trustworthiness will have a greater impact than for males on their view of economic satisfaction. *H11b* and *H12* were not supported as *H11b* did not have statistically significant differences in the path coefficients and the proposed direction of the path difference is not supported in *H12*.

Discussion

For salespeople and marketing managers a clear conclusion is that from the buyer's perception, a provocation-based sales approach is not effective, as it increases conflict and decreases perceptions of trustworthiness. These shortcomings of a provocation-based sales approach held for both men and women. Uncertain economic environments can create uncertainty on both the seller and buyer sides of the dyad. In addition, while additional research is needed, uncertainty alone does not seem a wise rationale for attempting high-risk provocation-based sales activities. Study results indicate caution is necessary when using provocative sales approaches. Highlighting or drawing attention to flaws or issues in the customer's business model or processes entails substantial risk.

On the other hand, the use of solution-based sales approaches increases assessments of salesperson trustworthiness. This effect is stronger for females than males. Moreover, it does not appear that solution-based sales activities increase perceptions of conflict. However, while not statistically significant this style of selling activity does have a positive relationship with conflict – indicating that care should be taken to monitor this potential source of problems. Additionally, this relationship is slightly stronger with male buyers. Overall, the results support the use of solution-based selling with its emphasis on dialogue, listening, and genuine problem-solving. This is not completely surprising given that many trade publications on selling emphasize these skills.

It is clear that the use of product-based sales approaches increase perceptions of conflict with the salesperson. This relationship holds for both genders, but the increase is more pronounced when dealing with female buyers. Further, product-based selling will also decrease perceptions of trustworthiness, and this holds for both male and female buyers. Salespeople should be aware that product or service features and benefits need to be communicated clearly in many, if not most, sales situations. A simple litany of features and benefits without context for the specific customer needs will impede the relationship and fail to move the sale forward.

For salespeople, relationship building is a balance between reinforcing positive assessments such as judgments of trustworthiness and minimizing negative interactions such as conflict. This dual goal is seen in the results of positive assessments of trustworthiness increasing a buyer's economic and non-economic satisfaction. It also appears that for female buyers this effect is more pronounced between trustworthiness and economic satisfaction. On the other side of the picture, perceptions of conflict must be managed, as increases in conflict will lower both economic and non-economic satisfaction. Maintaining high levels of both types of satisfaction is important to the development of customer commitment to the relationship and ultimately the customer's long-term intentions to do business with the salesperson.

The solution seems to be the same for both genders – a salesperson should use solution-based activities to prompt customers to identify the issues they believe are critical. This means that they should first invest the time to listen to the customer's concerns. Then, they should create solutions to these articulated problems. In addition, the salesperson must avoid relying strictly on product-based presentations of features and supposed benefits. It is too easy for salespeople to fall into the trap of believing their perceptions of benefits are the same as the customers when using product-based sales approaches. Finally, the practical implication is that salespeople need to be strategic specialists who understand not only their own products and benefits, but also understand the buyer's value chain so they can identify ways to initiate change in the buying organization.

Limitations and future research

As with any cross-sectional study, this study is limited by not measuring the changes that occur between buyers and salespeople over time. It is clear that the study, while it was a pragmatic necessity of the data collection effort, is limited by the failure to sample a variety of selling firms. In addition, despite the detailed analysis of common method bias, the results indicating that CMV is not a problem in this study is suggestive only and does not mean the validity threat was completely eliminated.

Each of these limitations can be overcome in future research. In addition, future research needs to continue to explore additional salespersons' behaviors that will affect levels of satisfaction, trust, conflict, and commitment. Further work is needed to support and extend the relationships between the perceptions of the salesperson and the perceptions of the buyer.

A number of situational effects should also be considered in future research. Is the length of the relationship with the salesperson important? Is the length of the relationship with the selling firm relevant? Has the buyer had more than one salesperson during the tenure of the buyer's relationship with the selling firm? Have or do buying firms follow salespeople who remain in the same industry? Each of these important questions we leave to future researchers.

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