



## EFFECT OF SALESPERSON'S SERVICE BEHAVIOUR ON SALES PERFORMANCE IN THE B2B CONTEXT IN NIGERIA

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### **Abstract:**

In today's competitive business environment, many salespersons appear to struggle in meeting sales targets and build long-term, profitable business relationships with customers. This paper examined the effect of salesperson's service behaviour on sales performance in Henkel-Egil Limited, South-East, Nigeria. Four specific objectives and hypotheses guided this paper. A survey research design was employed and the sample size was 324 salespersons in the organization. The Census method was used in sampling respondents and the major instrument of data collection was a structured questionnaire. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, mean score, Likert scale, and Pearson Product Moment Correlation, which helped test hypotheses. Findings revealed that there is a positive but weak relationship between diligence and sales performance. It also indicated that information communication has a significant effect on sales performance. Results also showed a positive correlation between sportsmanship and sales performance. Again, it was observed that empathy has a significant effect on significantly sales performance. This paper concluded that without diligence, information communication, sportsmanship, and empathy, salespersons might be performing below average until adequate consideration is given to these important service behaviors. It recommended among others, that as firms begin to recognize the importance of salespersons' role in not just closing sales but also providing service to customers, it is important periodic training is given to them as to increase their service orientation and sales performance. Managers should emphasize both service excellence and sales targets during recruitment, training, design of reward systems, and promotion decisions.

**Keywords:** diligence, empathy, information communication, sales performance, salesperson's service behavior, sportsmanship

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## 1. Introduction

In business nowadays, companies inevitably face tremendous challenges, such as high competitive rivalry among existing firms, unpredictable changes in consumption trends and more sophisticated customer demands (Charoensukmongkol & Sasatanun, 2017). Indeed, competitive forces have led organizations to increasingly emphasize service quality while simultaneously pushing frontline employees to generate revenue gains (Ogilvie, Rapp, Bachrach, Mullins & Harvey, 2017). This competitiveness has led organizations to increasingly emphasize service quality (Charoensukmongkol & Sasatanun, 2017). Accordingly, practitioners and researchers acknowledge the need to build and maintain a long-lasting relationship with existing customers (Gonzalez, Hoffman & Ingram 2005). The idea is that it is cheaper in maintaining existing customers than to attract new ones. To achieve this, salespeople in their boundary-spanning role are better positioned to provide superior service to customers and improve sales performance (Agnihotri, Kothandaraman, Kashyap, & Singh, 2012).

Salespersons perform the personal selling role for firms. Personal selling minimizes wasted effort, measures marketing ROI better than most tools, promotes sales, and boosts word-of-mouth marketing. Personal selling aims to improve the interaction between the customer and the sales facility, and/or salesperson. Since the effects of marketing are difficult to measure, personal selling gives insight into customer habits and responses to a particular marketing campaign. Therefore, salespeople play a key role in the formation of long-term buyer-seller relationships (Weitz, Bradford, Weitz, & Bradford, 1999).

As the primary link between the buying and selling firms, they have considerable influence on the buyer's perceptions of the seller's reliability and the value of the seller's services and consequently the buyer's interest in continuing the relationship (Biong & Selnes, 1996). Buyers often have greater loyalty to salespeople than they have to the firms employing the salespeople (Weitz et al., 1999). Thus, salespeople need to perform service behaviors such as information communication, customer service (e.g., responsiveness and reliability), and trust building (e.g., demonstrating empathic concerns and sportsmanship) even after closing the sale (Ahearne et al., 2007; Ahearne et al., 2008). Such service behaviors are categorized as "*ongoing*" and they serve the purpose of "*nurturing and developing the exchange relationship*" (Ahearne et al., 2007, p. 604).

## 2. Problem Statement

In today's competitive business environment, many salespersons appear to struggle in meeting sales target and build long-term, profitable business relationship with customers. To improve their efficiency, firms spend billions annually to recruit and train sales persons and the cost per sales contract continues to increase (Ahearne et al., 2007). In other words, personal selling is expensive. Moreover, sales people may vary in their

willingness to make the desired sales calls each day or make service calls that do not lead directly to sales.

Sales representatives are expected to provide service as part of their extra job role in a timely manner for customers to consider it dependable and accurate (Ahearne et al., 2007). They posit that when customers make service requests that are time sensitive, and if such requests (e.g., sample product deliveries) are fulfilled after two or three days, the customers equate such service with receiving no service at all. Such delay in delivery is common among many salespersons and sometimes makes them to appear unprofessional. They may say foul things about competing reps or forget their manners when dealing with customers. They could also be selling good products but lack the appropriate manner (Ahearne et al., 2007). Furthermore, customers want to deal with salespeople that can feel their pain and show empathy by demonstrating a sincere interest in the customer by helping when necessary. However, due to the focus on closing initial sale, salespersons often lose out of key account.

Despite that salespeople are expected to enhance customer satisfaction, trust, and relationship quality (Crosby, Evans, & Cowles, 1990), little is known about what ongoing behaviors (i.e., service behaviors) salespeople can employ to satisfy and build trust with customers after the initial sale (Ahearne et al., 2007). Previous studies looked at SSB and customer reactions such as satisfaction and share of wallet; none appears to have examined the effect on performance. It is against this backdrop that this paper examines the effect of salesperson's service behaviour on sales performance in Nigeria.

## 2.1 Study Objectives

The broad objective of this paper is to ascertain the effect of salesperson's service behaviour on sales performance. Specifically, the study sought to examine among others the effect of salesperson's diligence, information communication, sportsmanship, and empathy on sales performance.

## 2.2 Hypotheses

The following hypotheses guided this paper;

- 1) H<sub>0</sub>: Salesperson's diligence will have no significant effect on sales performance.  
H<sub>1</sub>: Salesperson's diligence will have a significant effect on sales performance.
- 2) H<sub>0</sub>: Salesperson's information communication will have no significantly effect on sales performance.  
H<sub>1</sub>: Salesperson's information communication will have a significantly effect on sales performance.
- 3) H<sub>0</sub>: Sales person's sportsmanship will have no significant effect on sales performance.  
H<sub>1</sub>: Sales person's sportsmanship will have a significant effect on sales performance.
- 4) H<sub>01</sub>: Sales person's empathy will have no significant effect on sales performance.  
H<sub>01</sub>: Sales person's empathy will have a significant effect on sales performance.

### 3. Literature Review

#### 3.1 Concept of Selling and Personal Selling

Personal selling is a highly distinctive form of promotion. It is basically a two-way communication involving not only individual but also social behaviour. It aims at bringing the right products to the right customers (Singh, 2008). Personal selling is a face-to-face interaction between a company's representative and a customer for the purposes of initiating and managing mutually beneficial exchange relationship. Personal selling is when a company uses salespersons to build a relationship and engage customers to determine their needs and attain a sales order that may not otherwise have been placed. It is employed for the purpose of creating product awareness, stimulating interest, developing brand preference, negotiating price, etc.

#### 3.2 Personal Selling Objectives

The qualitative personal selling objectives are long term and concern the contribution management expects personal selling to make in achieving long-term company objectives. Singh (2008) enumerated these objectives to include: doing the entire selling job (as when there are no other elements in the promotional mix), servicing existing accounts (that is, to maintain contacts with present customers, take orders, and so forth), searching and obtaining new customers, securing and maintain customers' cooperation in stocking and promoting the product line and reporting market information of interest to company management. Others include capturing and retaining a certain market share, obtaining sales volume in ways that contribute to profitability (for example, by selling the "optimum" mix of company products).

#### 3.3 Sales Service Behaviour (SSB)

Sales service behaviour draws from the service quality model, service orientation and relationship selling. Ahearne et al. (2007) posited that the salesperson service behaviors are customer-directed in their orientation, and are designed not to "close initial sales ... {but are instead} behaviors salespeople engage in after the point of the initial sale. "*These behaviors are ongoing and aimed at nurturing and developing the exchange relationship*" (Ahearne et al. 2007, p. 604). There are five sub-dimensions of the Sales Service Behaviors scale: (1) "*diligence*" (being responsive and reliable in catering to customer needs and requests); (2) "*informationcommunication*" (the regular relay of important information to the customer in a clear and timely manner); (3) "*inducements*" (behaviors aimed at personalizing the buyer-seller relationship, such as jointly attending sporting or social events); (4) "*empathy*" (the salesperson's interest in and concern for the welfare of the customer); and (5) "*sportsmanship*" (the salesperson's tolerance of needy or exceptionally demanding customers or customer requests).

Usually, salespeople are expected to provide high-quality customer service to maintain current customer accounts. The term "*service behaviors*" does not refer to behaviors that salespeople employ to close initial sales (see, e.g., Saxe & Weitz, 1982) but

rather to behaviors that salespeople engage in after the point of the initial sale. Such behaviors are ongoing and are aimed at nurturing and developing the exchange relationship (Ahearne et al., 2007). There are five sub-dimensions of the Sales Service Behaviors scale:

### 3.4 Diligence

Diligence as a composite of two types of behavior: responsiveness and reliability. The services literature tags responsiveness and reliability as quality attributes (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1985). A salesperson's reliability corresponds to his or her "*dependability and consistence*," whereas responsiveness is associated with "*willingness or readiness*" to render services efficiently (Parasuraman et al., 1985). A salesperson's customer service behaviors are sometimes labeled "*diligent behaviors*" (Ahearne et al. 2007). Diligence is revealed by the degree of salesperson reliability and responsiveness. In sectors where the salesperson is in direct contact with the customer, responsiveness and reliability appear to be inextricably bound together in one dimension (Agnihotri et al., 2012).

Diligent SSBs that demonstrate both reliability and responsiveness include promptly returning phone calls, following up on commitments, fulfilling customer requests, and remaining available when needed (Ahearne et al., 2007). Dwyer et al. (1987) imply that reliability is an integral ingredient in the relationship development process and Moorman et al. (1993) find that reliability, or what they refer to as "*dependability*," plays a crucial role in the buyer-seller relationship. Keillor, Parker, and Pettijohn (1999) emphasize that it is crucial that salespeople are "*prompt*," or responsive, when fielding service requests, and Ingram (1996) agrees that sales managers should make responsiveness a top priority for their salespeople (Ahearne et al., 2007). They quoted Zeithaml, and Parasuraman (1990, p. 30) to have stated that reliability and responsiveness are important features "*the heart of excellent service*" and can bring about satisfaction to customers.

### 3.5 Information Communication

Salespeople supply vital information to customers and their ability to communicate information is one of the most important facets of a sales encounter. Moreover, personal selling is characterized as an "*interpersonal communication process*" (Reid et al., 2002, p. 206). Despite the importance of the communication process, very few sales researchers consider a communication perspective or investigate its relationship with or its influence on objective (e.g. sales performance) or subjective outcomes (Agnihotri, Rapp, & Trainor, 2009). Effective and efficient information exchange process is a critical antecedent to growing trust in buyer-seller relationships (Agnihotri et al., 2012). In a buyer-seller relationship context, information communication refers to "*the formal as well as informal sharing of meaningful and timely information between firms*" (Anderson & Narus 1990, p. 44). Sales researchers view communication of information as "*regularly relaying product information to the customer in a clear and concise manner*" (Ahearne et al., p. 605).

Information-sharing behaviors include information receiving, information using, and information giving (Agnihotri et al., 2012). This includes prompt responses from the salesperson as well as “*following up on commitments, fulfilling customer requests, and remaining available when needed*” (Ahearne et al. 2007, p. 605).

Information communication is defined as regularly relaying product information to the customer in a clear and concise manner. It includes providing updated information on products (e.g., training on new applications and product usage), customizing presentations to demonstrate particular points and product claims, and continually reiterating a clear case for the product by drawing objective comparisons between it and competitive offering (Ahearne et al., 2007) and its the “*glue that holds together*” business relationships (Mohr & Nevin, 1990, p. 36). The use of company literature and informative brochures can bolster the salesperson’s message and give the customer an added sense of “*assurance*,” which is a concept that Parasuraman et al. (1988) explain is an imperative for effectively servicing and satisfying consumers (Ahearne et al., 2007).

### **3.6 Sportsmanship**

Sportsmanship refers to a salesperson’s willingness to tolerate less-than-ideal circumstances without demonstrating negativism. In the context of the customer relationship, sportsmanship means demonstrating good social judgment and professionalism during client interactions. It includes waiting patiently to meet with the customer, accepting setbacks in a good-natured manner, and not speaking badly about competing firms or sales representatives (Ahearne et al., 2007).

Sportsmanship is more enduring and likely influences customers to view salespeople who are good “*sports*” and who demonstrate good sportsmanship as being more benevolent, which researchers note is an important part of trust (Ahearne et al., 2007). Sportsmanship also had a direct effect on satisfaction, which indicates that the buyer may perceive sportsmanship behaviors as both transient and enduring (Ahearne et al., 2007). Customers trust salespeople who are patient and maintain their composure in the face of adverse circumstances. In turn, this affects the salesperson’s ability to win market share (Ahearne et al., 2007).

### **3.7 Empathy**

Empathy is when a person demonstrates sincere interest and concern for the welfare of the others (Jones, Stevens, & Chonko, 2005). Empathy can be viewed from the cognitive and affective state. From the cognitive view, it is described as “*perspective taking*”. It is the understanding of another person’s situation at a cognitive level (Itani & Inyang, 2015). Perspective taking allows a person to cognitively assess the situation from another person’s viewpoint and anticipate their needs and motivations (Devoldre et al., 2010). The affective view of empathy is described as an emotional response that increases the understanding of another person’s feelings (Itani & Inyang, 2015). The affective view incorporates different aspects such as emotional concern and emotional contagion (Itani & Inyang, 2015). Empathic concern occurs when an individual responds to the emotional

state of another person without experiencing the emotion themselves (Wieseke et al., 2012). Empathic concern is associated with altruistic behaviours, due to feelings of congruency with a person who is in need (Itani & Inyang, 2015). Emotional contagion occurs when a person simultaneously shares the emotion experienced by another person (Duan & Hill, 1996).

In personal selling, empathy it is an invaluable part of providing sales service. Empathy requires demonstrating a willingness to understand the customer's position, (Comer & Drollinger, 1999). Empathy builds an "*emotional bank account*" with the other party, thereby leading to greater trust. Salespeople consistently reiterated that it is important to demonstrate that they care for their customers and "*feel their pain*" (Ahearne et al., 2007). Empathetic behaviors include inquiring about matters that are personally relevant to the customer, offering support and encouragement when others are having difficulties, and offering help when others encounter problems (Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1985). A salesperson that exhibits empathy by taking the perspective of his or her customers can better understand the needs of the customers, since they are able to see things from the customer's point of view. Most scholars agree that empathy results in the exhibition of adaptive and pro-social behaviours (Wieseke et al., 2012). Empathy enhances a person's ability to interact with other people and adopt behaviours that are appropriate for the circumstances.

### **3.8 Sales Performance**

Sales performance is a salespersons ability to generate expected revenue by selling new and existing products and identifying new accounts. Itani and Inyang, (2015) argued that when conducting performance reviews in addition to evaluating salespeople on objective measures of sales performance, such as quota attainment, managers should evaluate salespeople based on non-financial performance measures, such as salesperson service performance. As salesperson service performance has been found to have a positive effect on customer loyalty (Amyx & Bhuian, 2009), customers' perceptions of how well salespeople deliver quality service can give managers a granular view of salesperson performance that may not be captured using only financial measures of performance. Churchill et al. (1985) posits that self-report measures of sales performance do not demonstrate any particular upward bias.

## **4. Materials and Methods**

This paper adopts survey research design. The choice of this design is because it allows the use of questionnaire in collection of data and also avail a researcher the opportunity of being a participant observer. The study population comprises 324 salespersons from a Multinational FMCGs company in Nigeria. Due to the manageable size of the population, it also served as sample size. The Census method was adopted in sampling the respondents and this is considered suitable when a population is small (Kothari, 2004). The major instrument of data collection was a structured questionnaire and copies of it

were administered to the salespersons through their e-mail addresses and social media contacts. Language construct and contents validation were carried out on the questionnaire by two research experts and Cronbach alpha was used to ascertain its level of reliability. Through the aid of SPSS version 20.0 data were analyzed using descriptive statistics such as, frequencies, percentages, mean score, Likert scale and Pearson Product Moment Correlation which helped in testing hypotheses. The Pearson formula was stated thus;

$$r = \frac{n\sum xy - \sum x \sum y}{\sqrt{(n\sum x^2 - (\sum x)^2)(n\sum y^2 - (\sum y)^2)}}$$

r = correlation coefficient;  
x = independent variable;  
y = dependent variable.

#### 4.1 Decision Rule

In interpreting strength of relationship between variables, Osisioma (2009) posits that from 0.0 to  $\pm 0.2$  is slight/no correlation, 0.2 to  $\pm 0.4$  is low correlation, and 0.9 to  $\pm 1.0$  is strong/perfect correlation. Also, the significance level is 5% (i.e.,  $p < 0.05$ ), implying that a null hypothesis would be rejected if  $p$ -value is greater than  $< 0.05$ , otherwise it would be accepted.

### 5. Results and Discussion

#### 5.1 Socio-economic Characteristics of Respondents

Three hundred and twenty-four (324) copies of questionnaire were sent to the respondents, 240 copies were filled and returned, while 84 were not. This gives a 71.1% response rate that was used for analysis. The result of respondents' socio-economic characteristics disclosed that 156(65%) of them were male, while 84(35%) were females. This suggests that there were more male salespersons than female respondents. The least of the respondents were 50(21%) and the highest 112(46%) were above 36 years, while their average age mean was 37 years. This implies that the respondents were adults and are matured enough to take responsibility of their relational approach with customers. It was also observed that 96(40%) and 90(37.5%) of the respondents had OND/HND/NCE and B.Sc./M.Sc, respectively, while the least 54(22.5%) had WAEC/GCE. This suggests that the salespersons are educated and possessed the ability for basic marketing communication with their customers. The result further indicates that majority of the respondents 124(51.7%) were single, while 116(48.8%) were married. Although the margin was not much, but implies that salespersons who are not yet married might be preferable in the company.



## 5.2 Effect of Salesperson's Diligence on Sales Performance

In an effort to ascertain the salespersons accessibility to customers whenever they need something important, the result disclosed that 25% strongly agreed that they were always accessible to customers, 53% agreed, 13% were undecided, 4% disagree, while 5% strongly disagree. The result further showed that 25% of the salespersons strongly agree that they return customers' calls promptly, 42% agreed to that, 17% were undecided, while 8% disagreed and strongly disagree, respectively. Again, it was found that 60% of the respondents were of the view that they keep good records of past interactions with their customers, 25% of them too also affirmed that. However, 4% and 6% disagreed and strongly disagreed, respectively, while 5% were undecided. Similarly, it was also revealed that 24.2% of the respondents strongly agree that they always provide services to customers as at when needed. This opinion was affirmed by 25.2% who agreed to that, and conversely, 17.5% disagreed, while 20% strongly disagree. Others, which represent 12.5% were undecided, suggesting that they were uncertain as to how they respond to customers need. This suggests that a salespersons level of diligence could determine his or her sales performance. In addition, hypothesis one result indicates that there is a positive but weak relationship between diligence and sales performance ( $r = 0.32$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). This implies that diligence is an important service behaviour that can improve sales performance.

## 5.3 Effect of Salesperson's Information Communication on Sales Performance

Findings of objective two shows that majority of the respondents 42% frequently used reprints to support their claims. This was followed by 38% that strongly affirmed that view and 10% of them were indecisive. However, 3% disagreed and 8% of them strongly disagreed too that as well. Again, when probed further the findings revealed that majority of the respondents 85% use company brochures to emphasize points when selling products to their customers. While 5% of the respondents were undecided, 10% of them discredited that avenue of marketing to customers. It was also observed that 82% of the respondents communicate effectively in the course of marketing products to their customers. Conversely, about 10% of the respondents were not communicating effectively, as a result affecting their sales and 8% were indecisive to whether or not they communicate effectively to customers. In addition, result of hypothesis two suggests that information communication has a significant effect on sales performance ( $r = 0.30$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). What this means is that sales performance is likely to improve as information communication increases.

## 5.4 Effect of Salesperson's Sportsmanship on Sales Performance

The result of objective three shows that about 56% of the respondents were of the opinion that that they do not badmouth competing reps or their firms' products. On the other hand, 35% do, suggesting a bad approach to treating customers and 9% were undecided. A further probe indicates that 80% of the respondents did not get upset when sales calls or appointments end prematurely. On the contrary, 12% of the respondents were usually

upset when calls or appointment ended prematurely, 13% were indecisive on whether or not they were. When tried to ascertain how the salespersons usually react to critical thoughts about their products, the findings showed that about 85% of the respondents maintain their composure, while 10% were reactionary or hostile to their customers. This is unhealthy for a business brand and does not show good sportsmanship. Aside this, 3% of the respondents were undecided, suggesting they were indecisive of their actions. Again, it was found that 82% of the respondents always follow their office procedures while at their customer's premises, and 10% of them do not conform to that. The findings also disclosed that about 8% of the respondents were undecided. In addition, result of hypothesis three showed that a positive and significant correlation exist between sportsmanship and sales performance ( $r = 0.26$ ,  $p = 0.00$ ). Sportsman-like behaviour improves salesperson performance.

### **5.5 Effect of Salesperson's Empathy on Sales Performance**

The findings of objective four revealed that majority 49% of the respondents demonstrated sincere interest in their customers. This was followed by 17% of them that did not care about the interest or satisfaction of their customers. Lastly, it was also observed that the least of the respondents 4% were undecided on what to say. Furthermore, the result indicated that majority 80% of the respondents displayed caring attitude toward their customers, while on the contrary, 12% could not. In addition, 13% of them were undecided on their attitude toward their customers. This could suggest that they were uncertain on their behavior. Moreso, effort to uncover the salespersons disposition to customers encounter with non-job-related problems disclosed that majority of them 85% were always ready to help when customers encounter non-job related problems. Again, while 10% of them were not ready to render such assistance, 5% were undecided. This suggests that majority of the respondents were empathic to their customers needs, which in turn could transcend to more patronage by the customers. In addition, result of hypothesis four showed that empathy has a significant effect on sales performance ( $r = 0.26$ ,  $p = 0.00$ ). This suggests that how empathic a salesperson is to his or her customer could trigger more patronage.

## **6. Conclusion and Recommendations**

This paper examined the effect of salesperson's service behaviour on sales performance in Henkel-Egil Ltd, South-East, Nigeria. The paper submits that four dimensions of sales service behaviour such diligence, information communication, sportsmanship and empathy correlate with sales performance. The effect is stronger for empathy whereas sportsmanship has the least effect on sales performance. This paper concludes that without diligence, information communication, sportsmanship and empathy salespersons might be performing below average until adequate consideration is given to these important service behaviors. Based on the findings, this paper recommends that;

- 1) As firms begin to recognize the importance of salespersons' role in not just closing sales but also providing service to customers, it is important periodic training is provided to enable them increase their service orientation and sales performance. Managers should emphasize both service excellence and sales targets during recruitment, training, design of reward systems, and promotion decisions.
- 2) Sales persons should be encouraged and guided to show more empathy in dealing with customers. They should demonstrate a sincere interest, care and be willing to assist customers resolve non-job related issues when need arises.
- 3) Managers should mentor sales personnel to be sportsmanly when dealing with their customers. They should be trained to follow procedures while on the premises of their customers, maintain composure when others are critical of their products or firm and avoid speaking provocative words in trying to defend their firms' products.
- 4) Firms should recruit and deploy people that are diligent as salespersons to attend to customers. They should also reward salespersons that respond to customers promptly and provide solutions to their queries with awards and recognition. This will not only give sense of recognition in them, but could also trigger those that were not doing well to emulate the diligent ones.

### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

The authors declare no conflicts of interest and they do take responsibility for any error or issues that might emanate.

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