

Synergy with Sales: Reexamining the Study of Personal Selling in Business Communication

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Abstract

For over a decade, personal selling has been identified as an important aspect of business communication (Carmichael, 1996). However, selling has received minimal attention from business communication scholars. With increasing demands for the development of sales education programs by industry constituents and students, personal selling is an attractive line of workplace communication for scholars in our field to engage. Observations and propositions for actionable steps toward generating personal selling research are explored for purposes of encouraging business communication scholars to reconsider personal selling as an important and complementary line of research.

Introduction

This year's conference theme emphasizes reflection, introspection, and the exploration of business communication to help students and business partners meet today's challenges. Suchan and Charles (2006) offer a related call to scholars to explore how business communication can add value and elevate its status in the academy. Important outcomes for business communication include ensuring the building of identity, touting value to the academy, attracting students, and getting involvement from outside stakeholders. As a hybrid discipline, business communication should find ways to tackle meaningful problems and issues through the appropriate application of the various research traditions utilized by our members (Shaw, 1993). Thus, business communication stands to benefit from expanding its influence by investigating key business and social movements in today's economy, exploiting key points of differentiation from allied disciplines, and identifying areas of study currently underserved by the academy (Meredith, 2007).

The business environment is ripe for business communication to make disciplinary strides. With the current communicative challenges facing the workforce in the Information Age, business communication must continue expanding its parameters and push forward with rigorous research. Business communication scholars must seize opportunities to increase status within the academy. Scholars can create forward momentum by creating useful work through new streams of scholarship, developing innovative pedagogy, building affiliate organizations, contributing to our universities and communities, and serving our students.

Speaking to the latter point, personal selling is a line of inquiry identified as largely understudied by scholars (e.g. Stewart, 2006) despite the importance of sales activities for many businesses. In fact, formal sales education has been described as essentially non-existent in U.S. business schools (Cohen, 2009) despite the high number of students that invariably become sales professionals. A clear need to

provide sales education exists considering approximately 14 million Americans are employed in sales and related disciplines (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009). Further, research targeting a better understanding of personal selling has implications for theorists, practitioners, and students seeking employment within sales. Given the number of students entering sales and related disciplines, the academy has a responsibility to provide theoretical and pedagogical advancements in personal selling.

Business communication - in particular - holds promise as a disciplinary umbrella to study personal selling and sales management. The interdisciplinary orientation and applied nature of business communication is well-suited to offer needed insights into personal selling. Likewise, personal selling provides a valuable career path and line of study that can be associated with the discipline of business communication. This manuscript advocates business communication as an appropriate forum toward that application and development of theory for the field of personal selling.

Further, this paper seeks to call attention to the potential for disciplinary synergy between personal selling and business communication. Synergy, described as a phenomenon where the combination of the two distinct parts creates a stronger sum than each can attain individually, is similar to the concept of academic mutualism discussed by Meredith (2009a). Here, the potential for gains between the study of business communication and personal selling can be mutually beneficial to both disciplines. Specifically, the application of communication-related theory toward the development of sales literature has the potential for the advancement of research areas. In keeping with the spirit of this year's conference, this paper offers an exploration and discovery of personal selling as an appealing stream of research for business communication scholars to pursue. This paper provides a conceptualization of personal selling, a brief literature review of personal selling research, and advocates personal selling as a viable research stream to be undertaken by business communication scholars.

Conceptualizing Personal Selling

In essence, personal selling involves the building of relationships through communication for the purposes of creating a sales transaction. Personal selling, as defined by Weitz, Castleberry, and Tanner (2004), is an interpersonal process whereby a seller tries to uncover and satisfy a buyer's needs in a mutually, long-term beneficial manner suitable for both parties. Thus, personal selling is interpersonal, two-way communication between a buyer and seller whereby the seller employs persuasive communication regarding goods and/or services.

Communication is the most basic activity for the sales representative during personal selling exchanges (Williams & Spiro, 1985). Personal selling is a social situation involving two persons in a communication dyad (Evans, 1963). Success depends on how well both parties achieve a common understanding enabling mutual goal fulfillment through social interaction (Webster, 1968). Weitz (1978) states the role of a sales representative is to engage and collect information about a prospective customer, develop a sales strategy based on that information, transmit a message that implements organizational strategy, evaluate the impact of those messages, and make adjustments upon this evaluation.

Despite the obvious importance of communication to the conceptualization of personal selling, research utilizing communication-based theory remains limited. Meredith (2009b) argues communication-based theory is promising for understanding sales interactions and effectiveness. Research examining sales interactions is an important topic because salespeople exhibit a wider range of performance outcomes

than almost any other organizational job type and the inability to explain this variance persists (Plouffe and Barclay, 2007).

A Brief Overview of Personal Selling Research

Formalized research in personal selling, while being a vibrant topic in popular literature, has received comparatively little attention from scholars. Sales research is largely underrepresented in university curricula (Stewart, 2006). Despite the long history of the sales career, formally studying selling and sales management remains a relatively young endeavor within the academy. In 1902, the first college courses relating to selling were offered. However, these early courses did not have the widespread impact on the profession because they did not adequately address the needs of business (Powers, Koehler, & Martin, 1988). While Churchill, Ford, Hartley, and Walker (1985) identify sales scholarship from as early as 1918, Fine (2007) states the study of personal selling started in earnest during the 1970s. *The Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management*, the specialized academic journal dedicated to sales and sales management, has been in circulation for less than 30 years (Fine, 2007).

Early scholarly research viewed sales success as a function of the sales representative's job satisfaction, motivation, ability, role clarity, and other attributes particular to the sales representative's biographical or psychological profile (Riordan, Oliver, & Donnelly, 1977). The most frequently studied theme pertaining to personal selling is the examination of the selling processes and techniques of salespeople (Williams & Plouffe, 2007). Selling process and technique research examines individual-level approaches toward improving the effectiveness of customer and prospect interactions and sales outcomes, respectively. As stated, this individual-level of analysis typically examines the customer-seller dyad.

Research attempting to explain the effectiveness of personal selling has found mixed results. Published research in peer-reviewed journals examining personal selling success is broken up into a range of topics. Sales research has investigated variables relating to sales success that include influence strategies, personality traits / behavioral dispositions, and sales representative resources and capabilities. Plouffe, Williams, and Wachner (2008) conducted a content analysis of 1,270 articles published from 1983-2006 in the 16 key journals acting as publication outlets for sales research. The analysis revealed a decline of published sales articles within prestigious marketing journals. The authors suggested one reason for this decline could be due to the overall lack of theoretical sophistication of sales research. Of the articles examined, 48.7% were deemed "atheoretical" by the researchers. In other words, the authors had not been able to find grounded models, hypotheses, or arguments in a clearly identifiable theoretical base for nearly half of the research included in the study.

A sales representative's ability to adapt within a selling situation, first examined during the 1980s, is one of the most frequently studied and theorized topics pertaining to influence techniques used in personal selling (Fine, 2007). Known as adaptive selling, theorists suggest successful salespeople can evaluate and adjust their sales approaches to fit perceptions of customers and such adjustments improve performance. Perhaps the primary draw of adaptive selling is that it logically makes sense. The adaptive selling framework developed by Weitz, Sujan, and Sujan's (1986) and the personality traits Spiro and Weitz (1990) advocate seem to align with an ability to tailor and alter a pitch by salespeople. After all, scholars and practitioners are searching for are the qualities that some individual salespeople possess that make them more persuasive, and thus, more successful in sales interactions with customers.

Adaptive selling research proposes that salespeople have an opportunity to gather information, process that information, and adjust to the customer based on the sales representative's skills and capabilities during a sales interaction. This process requires communicative activities that include probing for information, asking questions, listening, and detecting verbal and nonverbal cues yet empirical relationships between such cues and selling effectiveness is meager (Morgan & Stoltman, 1990). Recently, sales and marketing scholars have started exploring the antecedent skills and capabilities of sales representatives through an analysis of social cognitions.

Cutting-edge research by sales and marketing scholars focuses on relationships and social cognition. This line of research has been identified as among the most promising in the field to date (Porter & Inks, 2000). Morgan and Stoltman (1990) suggest researchers need to examine the skills and abilities that underlie adaptive selling and sales success. Sales research would benefit from using new theoretical perspectives and employing new methods to continue the advancement of the discipline (Marshall & Michaels, 2001; Leigh & Tanner, 2004; Williams & Plouffe, 2007). Goolsby, Lagace, and Boorum (1992) suggest communication effectiveness may mediate the relationship between psychological adaptiveness and performance and call for research into this area. Marshall and Michaels (2001) assert examining cognitive structures as being among the most promising conceptual foundations for the future of selling and sales management research. Considering communication has been referred to as the "essence" of the buyer-seller relationship (Williams, Spiro, & Fine, 1990), research utilizing communication theory seems to hold promise.

Finding Shared Value Between Business Communication, Communication, & Personal Selling

The act of personal selling has received little attention within communication studies. This void is apparent and important to address within business and other types of organizational communication studies – especially as the inter-organizational and external communication streams build momentum within scholarly literature. The roles of the sales representative cannot be ignored as a critical ambassador to the organization, an important mouthpiece and representative toward the formation of organizational identity, and often the primary boundary-spanner linking companies to customers. Thus, examining and understanding personal selling interactions is a vital lynchpin to the understanding of inter-organizational communication, external organizational communication, the co-creation of an organization's identity between organizational stakeholders and the organization itself, as well as overall organizational success.

As noted, communication-based theoretical foundations were not identified among marketing studies examined by Plouffe, Williams, and Wachner (2008). However, allied disciplines with related theoretical foundations including: cognitive psychology (4.3%), social psychology (9%), and sociology (1.4%) comprised a combined 14.7% of the research. As Kuhn (1996) contends, developing working perspectives provide the traction for advancing knowledge within a given discipline. Since philosophies in research are often handed down, scholars in developing disciplines (i.e., personal selling, business communication) must seek ways to adjust and adapt procedures, methods, and theoretical orientations to fit their field of inquiry (Bennett, 1979). Communication theory offers a largely untapped research tradition for examining personal selling interactions.

Despite a continued acknowledgement of the importance of communication skills to salespeople, Sprowl and Senk (1986) noted communication research in personal sales is sparse. A more recent literature review by Meredith (2009b) found there are still meager amounts to research devoted to personal selling utilizing communication theory. Existing research privileging communication is often found outside communication journals. Given the interpersonal nature of sales interactions and the importance selling plays for organizations, one would expect more emphasis on personal selling by scholars studying communication. Much of the existing sales literature within communication journals focuses primarily on the communication style of the sales representative and the potential impact communication has on buyer-seller relationships.

Research utilizing communication theory has contributed to the sales discipline but remains largely untapped in its potential (Capon, Holbrook, & Hulbert, 1977; Williams, Spiro, & Fine, 1990; Meredith, 2009). While few in number, some intriguing studies have come out of the communication discipline related to communication strategies employed during personal selling. Research on selling from within communication studies has focused largely on communication style and strategies employed by sales people. Perhaps one area that can be considered a true stream of research that has been undertaken by communication scholars relating to sales success is the utilization of compliance-gaining strategies and techniques (e.g., Sprowl and Senk, 1986; Sprowl, 1986; Parrish-Sprowl, Carveth, and Senk, 1994; Fennis, Das, and Pruyn, 2006).

Bush and Grant (1994) offer further evidence that research privileging communication in relation to sales scholarship is both necessary and lacking. These scholars conducted a content analysis of the four major journals containing sales-related articles identified as *Journal of Marketing*, *Journal of Marketing Research*, *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management*, and *Industrial Marketing Management* from the dates 1980-1992, to assess trends in sales force research. The authors report a small trend of borrowing from other disciplines such as communications developing in the literature. However, only 15 of the 358 articles examined in the study were identified as having foundations in communication (Bush & Grant, 1994). Williams, Spiro, and Fine (1990) were only able to identify seven studies that examined interpersonal communication between sales representative and customer involving elements other than message content.

While more supportive empirical research is necessary, business communication scholars do not appear to be contributing in any meaningful way. For example, Meredith (2007) found the *Journal of Business Communication* contained only two articles emphasizing sales in articles published within the journal between years 1996-2006. Meredith's finding is an important one considering Carmichael (1996) previously referred to sales as a "distinctive and important aspect" of business communication in an article attempting to conceptualize the discipline of business communication.

A reason why selling may be absent from the literature is that scholars may wrongfully view selling as being tied too directly to marketing and other forms of business literature. This is a poor rationale to neglect a vital function of organizations so intrinsically linked to communicative processes and outcomes. As stated, selling is inherently communication-based yet studying sales from communication theory has seemingly been avoided researchers. However, other business functions, such as public relations, have begun to embrace communication scholarship to the advantage of both disciplines. As marketing communication continues to evolve as a widely accepted field of endeavor, the opportunity to develop inroads into sales communication seems opportune for business communication scholars.

The allied field of organizational communication is another possible field to address issues of selling. However, organizational communication has focused primarily on matters *within* the organization, itself, rather than matters *between* the organization and other organizations and/or the external environment (Cheney, Christensen, Zorn, and Ganesh, 2004). Organizational communication researchers predominately conduct research within the organizational setting, or internal communication, versus looking beyond organizational borders (Kreps, 1983; Cheney & Christensen, 2001).

One exception is the development of network theory that focuses largely on the technological aspects of communication both within and outside corporations and other organizations (e.g., Monge & Contractor, 2001; Monge & Contractor, 2003). As discussed, personal selling involves interpersonal communication in and between organizations, a line of research not typically undertaken by organizational scholars. While exceptions exist, organizational scholars have not taken up the call for examining inter-organizational communication in relation to selling.

Examining external communication efforts by organizations to outside environments is an important, understudied aspect of organizational communication studies and needs to include the interpersonal nature of personnel selling efforts. Cheney (1983) emphasizes that much of the time and effort of organizations is devoted toward attempts to communicate persuasively with parties in the “environment” (frequently other organizations) through marketing, public relations, lobbying, testimony, image making, and issue advocacy. While possibly intended as a part of the marketing function, Cheney’s call does not specifically point to the vital importance of the sales relationship.

Understanding contexts in which interpersonal communication occurs is critical to understanding the nature of the organization, itself (Klauss & Bass, 1982). Since most organizations rely on sales initiatives, the interpersonal sales relationships the sales forces engage in with customers is extremely important and has numerous implications for organizational success. Every sales interaction is important to the organization because of the opportunity costs involved (Spiro & Perreault, 1979). Sales representatives are a valuable conduit for pulling in information about customer needs, intelligence about competition, and monetary resources generated from sales.

Rigorous research is necessary to better allow companies to predict, explain, control, understand, and describe personal selling. Klauss and Bass (1982) state progress toward understanding the nature and impact of communication within organizations is slow because communication is such a pervasive feature of organizations, researchers often find difficulty isolating separate phenomenon for investigation. However, as argued, individuals engaging in personal selling clearly offer one important phenomenon for investigation that holds important implications for the organization. Personal selling, arguably the most important communication activity of many businesses, involves an interesting interplay between organizational needs and individual interpersonal relationship building occurring between a sales representative and customers. As Cheney, Christensen, Zorn, and Ganesh (2004) explain, interpersonal relationships between a sales representative and customers are “moments of truth” that can have a lasting impact on organizational goals.

Capitalizing on the study of external communication provides business communication a key way to differentiate itself from organizational communication. Business communication is traditionally rooted in business writing, business speaking, and management communication (White-Mills & Rogers, 1998)

but the discipline has been evolving to become more robust. Stemming from a content analysis of abstracts between 1988-1994 occurring in the *Journal of Business Communication*, Carmichael (1996) conceptualized business communication as “that which occurs in business, among management, employees and other personnel” (p. 329). The applied use of theory holds potential for informing areas of workplace life. Sales education should be one rich avenue business communication scholars pursue.

Observations of Synergy Between Personal Selling & Business Communication

Business communication scholars are missing the opportunity to contribute to an important line of literature that is being largely underserved by the academy. The hybrid discipline of business communication has the potential of injecting fresh theoretical perspectives, namely communication theory, into the historically practical and applied discipline of personal selling. Likewise, selling provides a valuable applied field for organizational researchers to bring into the fold of business communication. In this way, the potential for synergy can be achieved.

The following seven observations summarize the potential for synergy to occur between personal selling and business communication:

1. Sales and marketing scholarship has often been found to be void of theoretical grounding. Selling is a complex business activity that has received attention from a multitude of research traditions but has been met with a largely inadequate commitment by scholars. Due to the communicative nature of personal selling, communication theory may hold promise. The personal sales interaction invariably involves interpersonal communication and may benefit being studied utilizing communication, rhetorical, and social psychological theory. The hybrid nature of business communication is an obvious location to build a unified commitment to the study and development of personal selling. The fact that business communication is interdisciplinary offers a variety of perspectives to study of the communicative elements of the sales interactions.
2. Sales scholarship is still considered a relatively new line of research. Research to date has primarily focused on seeking clarity in understanding the elements accounting for individual differences in sales success. Seeking to find ways in which top sales representatives differ regarding their communication behaviors and abilities could offer needed insight and is a possible starting place for business communication scholars to examine personal selling.
3. Personal selling is a popular career path for business and communication students, yet personal selling has been identified as an understudied line of research in the academy. While identified as an important aspect of business communication for decades (i.e. Carmichael, 1996), personal selling research is not being produced in our journals (Meredith, 2007). Business communication scholars have an opportunity to contribute valuable research and pedagogy into the field. Given the demand for sales literature and the need for sale training for students entering the sales force, business communication scholars have an opportunity to produce scholarship that will be read by colleagues in other disciplines and by practitioners. This exposure can help create impact in business communication research.
4. Personal selling can be described as the cultivation of a business transaction through a communicative process between a seller and buyer. Personal selling is, in essence, an

- interpersonal persuasive communication act that typically involves a face-to-face interaction. The foundations of business communication, effective oral and written communication, are primary to personal selling.
5. Sales representatives are important gatherers of information flowing between customers and the organization. Personal selling should be a priority line of scholarship for business communication studies to consider due to the number of people employed in sales related careers, the changing roles of the sales position, and the various important communicative aspects of the job that include organizational customer relationship development. These areas are being inadequately examined by core business scholarship.
 6. Communication-related investigations into personal selling are sparse. Communication theory has been underutilized could provide gains in sales literature. Sales and marketing scholarship has found mixed results but new research into areas, such as social cognition and cognitive psychology, seem to hold promise.
 7. Organizational communication scholars have identified their research as primarily focusing on communication within the organization. Examining inter-organizational and external communication through personal selling is one way business communication can make identified contributions to scholarship and simultaneously differentiate itself from organizational communication. The hybrid discipline of business communication can be the bridge between the theoretical nature of communication studies and the applied orientation of personal sales for attaining synergy.

Future Research Directions

As discussed, personal sales interactions invariably involve interpersonal communication. Theory developed, or often used in communication studies, to examine individual communication-related differences and social cognition (e.g., constructivism) should be utilized to study buyer-seller communication (Meredith, 2009b). Utilizing theory based in interpersonal communication and social psychology would bring fresh insight into personal selling.

The following thirteen propositions identify possible personal selling contexts appropriate for business scholars to pursue. Potentially fruitful areas of inquiry include but are not limited to:

1. The examination of the communicative skills necessary for the sales representative to successfully progress through different points in the sales cycle
2. Similarly, the communicative goals of successful sales representatives to trigger behavioral objectives for a customer at each stage of the sales cycle
3. The flow of information from within the sales organization to outside the organization via the sales representative
4. The flow of information (or lack thereof) of information from outside the organization into the sales organization via the sales representative
5. The examination of communication skills taught during sales training
6. Written materials – such as marketing slicks, letters, and emails – utilized by sales representatives for the purpose of persuading customers
7. The utilization (or lack thereof) of Customer Relationship Management (CRM) by sales representatives

8. The examination the communication-related traits of successful versus less successful sales representatives
9. The development of “pitch scripts” for face-to-face and phone calls
10. The management of the emotional rollercoaster associated with being a sales representative
11. Customer-based research into effective communication (messages, behaviors, and etc.) by sales representatives
12. The use of facework when dealing with customers
13. The use of storytelling by sales representatives during sales interactions

Conclusion

Selling and sales management have clearly arrived at a critical juncture toward the advancement and shaping of theory and practice alike (Jones, Brown, Zoltners, and Weitz, 2005). Academics engaging in sales research have a real opportunity to contribute new ideas and the advancement of knowledge for organizations immersed in dynamic, competitive business environments (Dubinsky, 2006). Scholarly research targeting personal selling has been multi-disciplinary and been published in areas such as sales, marketing, economics, psychology, and sociology. While scholars have advanced personal selling as a communicative process, little of the scholarship has utilized communication theory.

Despite the phenomena of personal selling being described as a largely communicative process (Williams & Spiro, 1985), only a relative handful of communication and business communication scholars have attempted to examine personal selling. Studying personal selling is a valuable undertaking for business communication scholars considering sales representatives are identified as being among the most important communicators in business organizations (Nontarantonio & Cohen, 1990).

The interpersonal nature of sales interactions, in particular, should be a top priority for scholars interested in studying communication within organizational contexts. Sales force automation, relationship selling, outsourcing, sales management tasks, e-commerce, and internationalization of the sales force are all hot topics within organizations with real implications for the success or failure of the organization (Dubinsky, 2006). As Sprowl and Senk (1986) contend, examining communication in personal selling is a mutually beneficial line of inquiry for scholars and practitioners within organizational contexts because a) research in this area is sparse; b) personal sales forms the primary source of income for most commercial organizations; c) many organizations invest substantial time and money into training the sales force; d) better understandings of communicative behaviors associated with sales can benefit students going into the workforce; and e) the interpersonal sales dyads in sales interactions afford the researcher an opportunity to examine interpersonal communication in organizational settings outside the traditional superior/subordinate framework. All could be benefits realized by business communication scholars.

Much work needs to be done in the continued development of personal selling scholarship. Due to the high stakes of the sales interaction, the high costs of training and maintaining a sales force, and the intrinsic need for the influx of capital within the organization, garnering an understanding of effective and ineffective sales efforts has been a leading pursuit of scholars studying personal selling (Fine, 2007). In addition, with the increased emphasis on and changing environment of the sales landscape, the sales force's role as critical ambassadors of the organization, important mouthpieces and representatives

toward the formation of organizational identities, and active boundary-spanners linking companies to customers' needs to be examined through scholarship. With the push from industry to develop sales into a profession with more formally recognized standards and qualifications (Rackham, 2009), scholars should take notice.

The need for scholarship examining personal selling has been discussed. A strong argument has been built for utilizing communication-related theory in personal selling contexts. Likewise, business communication, in particular, could stand to benefit perpetuating applied studies in specific business settings utilizing theory from our members in business, marketing, communication, rhetorical studies, and social psychology. Business communication stands to gain by identifying underserved areas of business scholarship that has a communication base, such as personal selling, and rigorously investigating these areas with established theory.

Scholars can provide students with the opportunity to gain perspective into personal selling and practitioners with the ability to develop best practices (Jordan, 2009). While the current call has concentrated primarily on creating synergies between business communication and sales communication, mutual benefits can also be realized in the development of pedagogy. The pursuit of these synergies has tremendous potential for business communication to inject fresh perspective into personal selling scholarship and elevate the status of the discipline.

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