

Sales Performance of Politically Skilled Salesperson: An Intervening Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Despite the theoretical relevance of salespeople's political skill and job-related outcomes, scholars have recently devoted their attention to empirically examine the outcomes of political skill. Thus, grounding upon COR theory, the study aims to explore the direct and indirect effects of political skill on job-related outcomes. To test the hypothesized relationships, data were collected from 306 sales representatives of the pharmaceutical industry. Findings indicate that political skill fosters adaptive selling, which in turn enhances sales performance. Furthermore, our results also confirmed the indirect association between political skill and sale performance via adaptive selling. In sum, findings pronounce that political skill plays a crucial role in implementing marketing strategies and maintaining a foothold in the marketplace. Along with valuable insights for effective managerial interventions, our study provides avenues for further research.

Keywords: Adaptive selling, Political skill, sales performance, pharmaceutical industry

Introduction

Sales and marketing scholarships have long pronounced that salesperson skills play a pivotal role in sales performance (Herjanto & Franklin, 2019; Rangarajan References et al., 2021). In the modern era of hyper-competition and outburst of

online brands, sales organizations demand their sales employees deal with abrupt and tacit needs of customers to efficiently close transactions in the organization's favor (Oh & Oh, 2020); making the role of frontline sales employees even more critical than the recent past (Ahearne et al., 2010; Franklin & Marshall, 2019). Given the critical role of sales employees, to date, organizations are spending a huge amount to develop and cultivate skills among salespeople that can eventually foster sales performance. For instance, in 2013 U.S. organizations have invested 20 billion dollars to develop the selling abilities of their sales employees (Association for talent development, 2013). Despite the significant spending "many sales organizations get low ROIs from their sales training initiatives" (Katsikeas et al., 2018). In a similar vein, according to a recent industry poll, almost half of all salespeople fail to fulfill their annual sales targets (Ahearne et al., 2013) and the variance in sales performance is less than ideal (Bolander et al., 2015; Plouffe, 2018). Moreover, scholars have devoted their attention to identifying several individual-level and contextual antecedents of sales performance (Chawla et al., 2020; Kalra et al., 2017). Amongst others, the skill-related factors are considered more influential determinants of sales performance (Evans et al., 2012; Verbeke et al., 2011).

Despite the burgeoning efforts of scholars to unearth different skills and abilities of the salesperson that can impact sales performance, we still don't know How do different individual traits and skills impact sales performance? (Herjanto & Franklin, 2019) such as political skill. Political skill is the individual's "ability to effectively understand others at work and to use such knowledge to influence others to act in ways that enhance one's personal and/or organizational objectives"(Ferris et al., 2005, p.27). Political skill encompasses social astuteness, interpersonal influence, networking ability, and apparent sincerity (G. R. Ferris et al., 2009). Indeed, in a dynamic environment, such as sales, political skill is one of the critical skills for survival (Liu et al., 2007). Scholars aver that, despite its negative connotation, political skill help employees to effectively manage the relational fabric of their organizations (Frieder & Basik, 2017; Harris et al., 2007) and access to embedded resources (Bolander et al., 2015), that will auspiciously impact their performance

(García-Chas et al., 2019; Munyon et al., 2021). In sales, where salespeople are firmly immersed in an "intricate web of relationships" with both inter-and intra-organizational members, political expertise is vitally important (Treadway et al., 2010). Kalra et al., (2017) established that politically skilled salespeople can easily identify the tacit needs of customers and offer them creative solutions, ultimately gaining customer satisfaction. Kimura et al., (2019) claim that political skill amplifies the impact of adaptive selling on auspicious outcomes, as a politically skilled salesperson can build rapport with customers and influence them by modifying their sales offering. Scholars consider adaptive selling (i.e., tailoring sales presentation during and across customers interaction) as one of the most promising selling techniques of the modern era (Alnakhli et al., 2020; Luu, 2020; Simintiras et al., 2013).

Our review of past literature highlights several critical impedes that demand scholarly attention. First, as mentioned above that despite organizations' significant investments in developing sales person abilities to enhance their sales performance, surprisingly the results are less than ideal, and at best, equivocal (Bolander & Richards, 2018; Katsikeas et al., 2018; Plouffe, 2018). Thus, to reconcile the empirical inconsistencies of prior literature, our study introduces political skill as an important antecedent of sales performance.

Secondly, our review highlights that despite theoretical relevance and practical significance of political skill (Kalra et al., 2017), surprisingly, political skill has failed to gain the attention of marketing and sales scholarship, for an exception see (Bolander et al., 2015; Munyon et al., 2021). Therefore, the study introduces and empirically examines the association between salesperson' political and sales performance.

Third, recent literature has pronounced the positive association between adaptive selling and sales performance (Alavi et al., 2019; Giacobbe et al., 2006; Munyon et al., 2021). Scholars have agreed that adaptive selling behavior is a critical factor in salesperson success with customers (Franke & Park, 2006), as effective tailor-

ing of sales presentation enables sales employees to close the transaction in the organizations' favor (Yoo & Arnold, 2019). However, the linkage between salesperson political skill and adaptive selling behavior is unknown.

Forth, scholars have agreed upon the positive association between political skill and outcomes, such as creativity, affective commitment, and performance (Frieder & Basik, 2017; Yang et al., 2018). Despite being insightful, how and why political skill generate positive outcomes is still unknown (Kim et al., 2019; Munyon et al., 2015). Therefore, intruding adaptive selling as an intervening variable is timely and relevant.

Fifth, prior insights about political skills and their outcomes are based on more developed nations and western contexts rather than non-western settings (Kalra et al., 2017; Kimura et al., 2019), which may limit the understanding and application of theories and concepts in non-western settings (Raja et al., 2018).

The present study aims to address the above-mentioned research impedes in sales literature. Grounding upon the conservation of resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 2011; Hobfoll et al., 2018), the study offers three main contributions to general management and sales literature. First, by introducing the political skill, it contributes on the timely, on the present debate on how salesperson skills and abilities foster sales performance (Gabler et al., 2019; Plouffe et al., 2014). In so doing study not only respond to the recent calls to explore individual-level antecedents of sales performance but offer effective managerial intervention to explain additional variance in sales performance. Secondly, by proposing political skill as an antecedent of sales performance study extends the nomological network of outcomes of political skill. Third, by considering adaptive selling, the current investigation contributes to the scant literature on the underlying mechanism between political skill and sales performance and concurs the recant call to explore the intervening mechanism between political skill and outcomes (García-Chas et al., 2019; Munyon et al., 2015).

Lastly, our study confirms the pivotal role of political skill and adaptive selling in a non-western setting.

The study is structured as follows. First, the study presented the study's background as well as its rationale. The following section of the study presents the relevant literature, followed by the hypothesis. The third chapter discusses the methods, and the fourth chapter discusses the study's findings. The final section discusses research and practical implications, as well as some obvious caveats.

Theory and Hypotheses

Political skill and Adaptive Selling

Customer-oriented salespeople are the cornerstone of marketing philosophy (Groza & Groza, 2018) that require salespeople to understand the tacit and abrupt needs of customers (Zmich et al., 2018), and act accordingly (Charoensukmongkol, 2019). One such selling orientation is known as adaptive selling (Spiro & Weitz, 1990). Adaptive selling refers to a salesperson's ability to intercept, understand and adapt sales presentation according to customer needs and across customer needs (Weitz et al., 1986; Weitz & Bradford, 1999). To effectively close transactions in organizations' favor, adaptive selling requires salespeople to make sense of the selling situation (Locander et al., 2020). Political skill, a widely acknowledged construct in management literature, enables sales employees to effectively sense the selling situation and alter their presentation during and across sales encounters (Grewler & Gwinner, 2008; Kalra et al., 2017; Munyon et al., 2021). Politically skilled employees can easily interact and communicate with others in a nonthreatening manner (Hochwarter et al., 2010), which enables them to entice others to share tacit information. Having access to sensitive information, foster domain-specific knowledge of sales employees and enable them to offer creative solutions (Miao & Wang, 2016) by altering their sales offering (Simintiras et al., 2013). Similarly, political skill helps salespeople to read and understand the prevailing situation, including emotions and feeling of customers, that further

facilitates to offer tailored solutions (Franke & Park, 2006). Finally, COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989) argues that people define themselves by resources they own. Resources include individual and contextual factors (Hobfoll et al., 2018) that enable individuals to gain further resources by investing in existing resources (Halbesleben et al., 2014), such as political skill enhance adaptive selling. Taken together with the above commentary which suggests that politically skilled salespeople can assess information, opinion, and perspective of customers that will enable them to offer customized and tailored solutions during and across sales encounters. Thus, it is hypothesized that:

H1: Political skill will have a positive impact on adaptive selling.

Adaptive selling and Sales Performance

Sales performance can be attained by “carrying out several discrete and specific activities which may vary greatly across different types of selling jobs, and situations” ((Walker et al., 1979, p. 22). In adaptive selling, salesperson tailors their sales presentations in accordance to selling encounters, which entails adjusting sales offering according to customer needs and preferences, leading to the more customer-centred focus of sales employees (Singh & Das, 2013). Adaptive selling can develop the empathetic relationship between salesperson and their customers (Siguaw, 1991). Thus, showing empathy with the customer can enable salespeople to access the information and develop a long-term relationship, ultimately leading to higher performance outcomes. The logic behinds this is that through adaptive selling, sales employees can invest their time, efforts, and energies to understand customers’ needs and act accordingly, which will enhance their performance outcomes (Agnihotri et al., 2017; Wong et al., 2015). Therefore, grounding upon the resources investment principle of COR theory which argues that individuals by investing their resources (Hobfoll, 2011), such as time and energies while altering sales presentation during customer encounters, can gain future outcomes (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Hobfoll et al., 2018), such as higher customer satisfaction and sales performance. Past studies have also established the positive association between adaptive selling and sales performance (Giacobbe et al., 2006; Park

& Holloway, 2003; Wong et al., 2015). Thus, grounding upon logic, the study articulate that:

H2: Adaptive selling will have a positive impact on sales performance.

Mediating role of Adaptive Selling

Weitz (1980) aver that considering the growing complexities of sales encounters, there is no one best method to approach the customer; rather salespersons need to adjust their sales offering instead of going traditional canned approach (Román & Iacobucci, 2010). Politically skilled salespeople can easily build trust with customers and gain insights into customers' needs to offer novel solutions (Kalra et al., 2017; Munyon et al., 2015, 2021). Politically skilled salespersons can confidently handle sales encounters to close transactions in organizations' favor, as based on the perceived information they can reshape the style and content of their offering (McFarland et al., 2006). Moreover, the adaptive selling approach of a salesperson can generate favorable outcomes, specifically higher sales performance (Román & Iacobucci, 2010; Simintiras et al., 2013). Additionally, building upon COR theory, in hypotheses 1 and 2, we speculate that political skill will enhance adaptive selling and adaptive selling will foster sales performance, respectively. Thus, we speculate that political skill enhances adaptive selling, which in turn fosters sales performance. Saying differently, we aver that adaptive selling mediates the positive association between political skill and sales performance. As COR theory claims the positive spiral of resources (Hobfoll, 2011),

Methodology

Sample and Procedures

To test the hypothesized nexus of the model, data was collected from the sales representatives of pharmaceutical companies operating in the twin cities of Pakistan, because being the capital of Pakistan, a good number of private and public sector hospitals are located here. Therefore, almost every pharma firm has its head or sub-office in these cities. Thus, collecting data from these two cities deemed

appropriate Cross-sectional study design was used to collect data from the respondents. Respondents were approached by the personal and professional links of the first author. Data was collected via the paper and pencil method. The questionnaire pack encompasses the cover letter, items of the study, and return envelope. Cover latter explains the academic intent of the study and ensures the anonymity and confidentiality of the data. Initially, 430 questionnaires were distributed to the interested respondents via convenience sampling techniques, but after 2 reminders 352 respondents returned the filled questionnaire. Out of 352, filtering out the missing and extreme responses, only 306 (71.1 percent) questionnaires were deemed appropriate for further analysis. 81 percent of respondents were male, and the average age of subjects was 28.4 years having an average sales experience of 5.6 years. All respondents have earned their intermediate degrees.

Measures

The study used the established measures to collect data from the targets. The measures were slightly modified to fit in the context of the study (i.e., the pharmaceutical industry). Data were collected on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Political Skill

Political skill was measured by the 12 item scale adopted from Kalra et al., (2017), originally developed by Ferris et al., (2005). “I am particularly good at sensing the motivations and hidden agendas of others” and “I am good at using my connections and networking to make things happen at work”, were sample items.

Adaptive Selling

The shortened version of the adaptive selling scale was developed by Robinson Jr et al., (2002). “When I feel that my customer approach is not working, I can easily change to another approach”, was a sample item.

Sales Performance

Behrman and Perreault's (1982) four-item scale was used to measure sales performance. In recent years other scholars have also employed the same scale to meas-

ure the self-rated performance of sales employees (see., Locander et al., 2020). Sample item includes “I am very effective in contributing to my firm’s market share”. For obvious reasons, we relied on self-report measures. For example, objective measures may be skewed by the reason for their creation (e.g., Gatignon and Xuereb 1997). Second, past research has discovered a link between subjective and objective performance markers (e.g., Ren et al. 2009). Third, because firms often do not give performance statistics of their initiatives (Spyropoulou et al., 2018), subjective measures are more relevant (Agnihotri et al., 2016).

Control Variables

To examine the association between variables of interest and avoid any potential demographic impact, based on the results of one-way ANOVA and suggestions from prior literature, age, gender, and experience were controlled in this study (Goad & Jaramillo, 2014; Verbeke et al., 2011).

Results

Correlations, Means, Reliabilities and Standard Deviations

Table 1 indicates values of correlations, means, and standard deviations. All values of correlations among the variables of interest were in anticipated directions. Furthermore, Table 1, also presents (in diagonal) the values of reliability. The reliabilities of all constructs were above the benchmark value of 0.7 (Cronbach & Shavelson, 2004; Peterson, 1994).

Direct and Mediation Results

The PROCESS macro in SPSS was used to test the hypothesized relationships between the constructs. Table 2 shows a positive relationship between political skill and adaptive selling (β .21**, p.001), which supports hypothesis 1. Similarly, hypothesis 2 was supported because adaptive selling improves sales performance (β .19**, p.001). Furthermore, the results in Table 2 revealed that the indirect relationship between political skill and sales performance (β .14**, p.001) was also significant, indicating that adaptive selling mediates the positive relationship

between political skill and sales performance. As a result, hypothesis 3 was supported.

Discussion

Using COR theory in the backdrop, the study empirically examined the direct associations between political skill and adaptive selling, and adaptive selling and sales performance. Moreover, the study also examined the indirect association between political skill and sales performance via adaptive selling. A cross-sectional study design was used to collect data from 306 sales representatives via the convenience sampling technique. Data were analyzed by process Macro for SPSS, which confirmed the hypothesized association among variables. Our findings are consistent with previous literature (Kalra et al., 2017; Munyon et al., 2015, 2021)

Theoretical Contributions

By filling the obvious impedes of the literature, the study offers several contributions to different streams of literature. First, the study extends the scope of COR theory by employing it as an over-arching theory to explain the nexus between political skill and sales performance. Secondly, despite the theoretical relevance of political skill in sales and marketing literature, particularly for the pharmaceutical industry, so far only two studies (Bolander et al., 2015; Munyon et al., 2021) have empirically examined the association between political skill and sales performance and maintained the call for further exploration. Therefore, by examining the association between political skill and adaptive selling, the study enhances the nomological network of outcomes of political skill. In so doing, the study also indulges the scholarly debate on salesperson skills and abilities that brings favorable outcomes, such as performance. Third, although past studies have overwhelmingly pronounced the positive association between political skill and positive outcomes, still, how political skill leads to favourable outcomes is not clear. Therefore, by studying adaptive selling as an underpinning mechanism study contributes to the scarce literature of mechanisms through which political skill leads to favorable outcomes. In so doing study also enhances the nomological network of antecedents and outcomes of adaptive selling.

Practical Implication

Besides theoretical contribution, our study offers valuable insights for effective managerial interventions. First, grounding upon the findings of the study, we advise sales managers to cultivate political skill by offering continuous training and providing the opportunity for socialization. As, (Ferris et al., 2005) in their seminal work argue that political skill is an innate and learnable skill, therefore, we believe that political skill can be cultivated among employees by training and providing them with the opportunity to interact with others and learn from them. Secondly, we also recommend managers encourage their sales employees to confidently alter their sales offering during and across sales encounters. To develop such behaviors managers should provide on-the-job training and also regard this behavior in their annual appraisals, so that others can also participate in such behaviors. Finally, we also recommend managers critically evaluate the political skill and customer orientation while hiring new sales incumbents.

Caveats and Future Direction

Despite theoretical and practical contributions, a few caveats need to be addressed in future endures. First, as we used a cross-sectional study design, which may prone to some basis. Therefore, we recommend using a time-lag study design in future studies. Secondly, our respondents were only from the pharmaceutical industry which limits the generalizability of the study, therefore upcoming scholars should collect data from a diverse sample. Lastly, considering the newness of political skill in sales literature we recommend scholars explore different mediating and moderating variables to have more rational insights on how and why political skill leads to sales performance.

Conclusion

Grounding upon COR theory, the study explored the direct and indirect (via adaptive selling) effects of political skill on job-related outcomes. To test the hypothesized relationships, data were collected from 306 sales representatives of the pharmaceutical industry. Findings indicate that political skill fosters adaptive selling, which in turn enhances sales performance. Furthermore, our results also confirmed the indirect association between political skill and sale performance via adaptive selling. Along with research implications, the study offer insights for effective managerial interventions.

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Table 1. Means, standard deviation, correlations, and reliabilities

Construct	Means	SD	1	2	3
1. Political Skill	2.81	.86		(0.81)	
2. Adaptive selling	2.71	.89	.21**		(0.76)
3. Sales performance	2.01	.76	.18**	.27**	(0.87)

Notes. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. Sample size (N) = 306.

Table 2. Direct and mediation effects

Direct paths	β	P
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Political skill → Adaptive selling	.21**	.00
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Adaptive selling → Sales performance	.19**	.00
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Indirect path		
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Political skill → Adaptive selling → Sales performance	.14**	.00
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Notes: *Empirical 95% confidence interval does not overlap with zero, N = 306 (bootstrapping by specifying a sample of size 5000). $p^* < .05$, $p < .01$