Attention Vulnerable Shoppers: Measuring Consumer Attitudes Toward Salespeople

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Despite the prevalence of consumer interaction with salespeople, little is known about the attitudes and responses of consumers toward salespeople. Drawing upon a review of the salesperson literature the authors argue that a multi-dimensional scale to measure the Salesperson Orientation of Consumers (i.e., SOC scale) is critical to the understanding of consumer heterogeneity in attitudes toward salespeople as marketing agents. In total, four studies were run to develop and validate the four dimensions (Information Seeking, Self Presentation, Avoidance, Convinceability) of the SOC scale, each lending new insights into consumer attitudes and behaviors in sales-aided marketplaces.

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MEASURING SALESPERSON ORIENTATION OF CONSUMERS

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Research on customer-salesperson relationships and sales performance has been plentiful (Churchill et al. 1985; Franke and Park 2006). This research can be divided into two major categories: 1) research that focuses on the properties of specific customer-salesperson relationships and the effects of those properties, and 2) research on enduring salesperson characteristics and their consequences.

More recently, researchers have begun to focus on the role of the consumer in the salesperson-customer interaction (Kirmani and Campbell 2004). Much of this study has grown from the acknowledgement of the Persuasion Knowledge Model of consumer behavior (Friestad and Wright 1994). This recent consumer-focused literature parallels the first category of the salesperson-focused stream of literature—an assessment of situation-specific consumer behavior in the sales process. We develop the Salesperson Orientation of Consumers (SOC) Scale to aid researchers and practitioners alike in understanding the many enduring consumer characteristics that affect the consumer-salesperson interaction.

We define the Salesperson Orientation of Consumers (SOC) as the enduring disposition of a consumer to engage in particular salesperson-related thoughts and behaviors across a variety of marketplace encounters with salespeople. Previous research on consumer behavior regarding salespeople has focused on how this behavior changes as a result of the properties of a particular interaction. By developing the SOC scale, we hope to identify and measure the salesperson-related behaviors that are determined more by consumer traits than the interaction.

To develop the Salesperson Orientation of Consumers (SOC) scale, we followed the procedures for creating and validating scales developed by Churchill (1979). First, an initial set of items were drafted. The original list of potential scale items came from several sources. A literature review on consumer-salesperson interaction turned up a 13-item scale from Goff, Bellenger and Stojack (1994) which measured consumers’ orientation toward automobile salespeople. We adapted their scale items to address general salesperson orientation, rather than car-salesperson-specific orientation.

A second source of preliminary scale items came from a two-stage brainstorming process. In the first stage, we hypothesized various factors that consumers could use to describe their feelings and orientations toward salespeople, including factors from the literature and some of our own hypothesis. After brainstorming these factors with ourselves and by informal consultation with various colleagues, we generated several items to measure each of these factors. We then removed redundant measures, which resulted in a pool of 35 items.

Scale Purification: Study 1

The 35-item scale was administered to three different samples. The data from all three studies were subjected to separate exploratory factor analyses with a varimax rotation. In all three studies, the results suggested a four-factor structure with similar loadings across the 35 items. Individual scale items that either 1) did not load strongly on any of the four dimensions or 2) did not load consistently across all three studies were dropped. This left the 18 items below. Items 1-5, 6-10, 11-15, and 16-18 loaded on factors 1, 2, 3, and 4, respectively.

1. When a salesperson is helping me, I usually take his/her advice.
2. I value the opinion of salespeople.
3. I feel more comfortable buying something when a salesperson has recommended it to me.
4. I want salespeople to help me make decisions.
5. I trust the information I get from salespeople.
6. I feel some obligation to please salespeople.
7. I sometimes wonder if a salesperson thinks better of me as a result of my buying something.
8. I sometimes wonder if a salesperson thinks ill of me when I don’t purchase anything.
9. I am sometimes afraid that a salesperson will think I’m cheap if I don’t buy something.
10. When I decline to buy something, I feel bad for the salesperson.
11. I avoid stores with a lot of salespeople.
12. When shopping, I would rather make the decision on my own before talking to any salespeople.
13. I wish salesclerks only answered questions instead of trying to convince you to buy something.
14. I feel more comfortable entering a store where I know salespeople will not approach me.
15. I wish I could forever avoid having to talk to a salesperson.
16. I am a person who is easily convinced by salespeople.
17. I could be talked into a purchase by a persuasive salesperson.
18. For reasons I don’t fully understand, pushy salespeople are often successful in getting a sale from me.

Factor Structure: Study 2

To test the new 18-item scale, 532 undergraduates completed the scale in exchange for extra credit in a marketing course. The data were then submitted to the same factor analysis with varimax rotation as previously performed to check that the factor loadings concurred with the data collected from the 35-item scale. The resulting factor structure aligned precisely with the one predicted.

Interpretation of Factors

Information Seeking. Previous research has made much of the function of salespeople as experts aiding consumers to make better decisions (Wernerfelt 1994). Of course, consumers are likely to differ in their beliefs about salesperson motivations. The first factor in the SOC scale captures the consumer tendency to seek and value the information provided by salespeople.

Self Presentation. Personal interaction with a salesperson is one type of social interaction. In social interactions with salespeople, consumers are likely to vary in their concern for the impression they give to the salesperson (Lennox and Wolfe 1984). The second factor of the SOC scale measures this concern.

Avoidance. Previous research has shown that consumer heterogeneity in tolerance for salesperson interaction can lead to a differentiated retail equilibrium (Chu, Gerstner and Hess 1995).
The existence of this third SOC subscale provides some empirical evidence in support of their model specification. Consumers vary in the extent to which they seek to avoid salesperson interaction.

**Convincibility.** Despite universal contempt for high pressure selling tactics, salespeople continue to use them. Asch’s conformity experiments and Milgram’s fake-shock experiments illustrate the powerful effect of social pressure (Asch 1952; Milgram 1974). It should come as no surprise then that salespeople can often use social pressure to extract sales from not-entirely-willing consumers. Of course, consumers vary in the extent to which such sales tactics work on them. This fourth and final SOC subscale measures the extent to which consumers are influenced by salespeople.

**Predictive Validity: Study 4**

In study 4, participants responded to a number of vignettes about marketplace behavior relating to salespeople. Due to space limitations, we cannot present the results here, but the full working paper is available from the authors.

**REFERENCES**


