ADAPTIVE SELLING AND SALES PERFORMANCE: AN EMPIRICAL EXAMINATION

Charles E. Pettijohn, Southwest Missouri State University, Springfield
Linda S. Pettijohn, Southwest Missouri State University, Springfield
A.J. Taylor, Austin Peay State University, Clarksville
Bruce D. Keillor, The University of Akron, Akron

Abstract

One of the major advantages of personal selling compared to alternative promotional methods has been described as selling's ability to adjust its messages to meet the buyer's needs. The belief that the key to effective selling is the salesperson's ability to adapt and adjust is one that has widespread popularity. However, like many so-called truisms, this belief has had limited empirical support in the selling literature. The research reported in this article examines the relationship between salesperson productivity and salesperson adaptability in a field setting. Productivity is measured by examining both salesperson and sales manager reports of a salesperson's performance. Adaptability is assessed by using Spiro and Weitz' (1990) ADAPTS scale and by using Merrill and Reid's (1981) versatility scale. Study participants include retail salespeople, their customers, and their sales managers. The results are consistent with prior research, which indicates that questions regarding the efficacy of adaptive selling continue to exist.

Introduction

The most recent solution to problems encountered in personal selling seems to be the concept of working "smarter" rather than "harder" (Suja 1986). This notion of "working smarter," is gener-

ally considered to be implemented by salespeople as they adjust their messages, communication methods, and basic appeals to coincide with the unique demands of the specific situation. Weitz (1979) contended that the absence of significant findings which reveal the "causes" of effective selling can be attributed to the fact that "aspects of the situation

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have not been considered." This view was supported by Spiro and Perreault (1979) who concluded that the salesperson's selection of appropriate sales strategies is affected by factors in the selling situation. Further, Weitz, Sujan and Sujan (1986) argue that adaptive selling is crucial because it allows salespeople to take advantage of personal selling's "unique communicational elements."

The notion that salespeople should adapt their presentations to different situations seems to have an intuitive appeal. Yet, the issue of linking adaptive selling to actual performance should be addressed. The purpose of this research is to examine the relationship between salesperson adaptiveness and salesperson performance in a field setting.

Review of the Literature

Adaptive selling is difficult to succinctly define because numerous behaviors can be interpreted as being "adaptive." For example, when a salesperson asks a series of diagnostic questions and then selects a product/service based on the customer's responses, it would seem that adaptive selling has occurred. Correspondingly, if the salesperson informs a purchaser of the price and the purchaser's nonverbal response indicates price is a barrier to the sale, it would seem that special attempts by the seller to change the buyer's attitude toward the price could constitute adaptive selling. The existing literature has typically addressed this notion of flexibility in the sales process from two perspectives: empathy and contingency selling/adaptive behaviors.

Empathy

Literature postulating a relationship between empathy and sales is well-established. Weitz (1979) argues that empathy is related to performance and adaptive selling with the following statement: "Empathic salespeople

should be more effective because they would have a greater appreciation of their customers' needs and be in a better position to tailor their presentations to the specific customers with which they are interacting." Alessandra and Cathcart (1985); Amason (1982); Beveridge (1985); Chambless (1985); Feinman (1983); Peterson (1983); Peterson (1988) have all identified empathy as a critical skill for effective personal selling. However, none of these authors supports their contentions with empirical findings.

Research which has explicitly examined the empirical relationship between salesperson empathy and performance has uncovered mixed results. Tobolski and Kerr (1952), Greenberg and Mayer (1964), Sager and Farris (1986) and Pilling and Eroglu (1994) report that empathy is positively related to performance. However, an examination of these studies indicates that the relationship may not be as clear-cut as expected.

In an early study, Tobolski and Kerr (1952) found a significant and positive relationship between empathy and performance for new car salesmen, but uncovered no significant relationship between empathy and performance for used car salesmen. While Greenberg and Mayer (1963) report positive and significant relationships between empathy, ego, and sales performance, Weitz (1979) has questioned the validity of Greenberg and Mayer's findings due to the fact that the research was proprietary and the methodology was not revealed. Thus, although a positive relationship was reported, the reader was left to his/her own discretion in interpreting results because information about the sample and various independent and dependent measures was not reported.

Sager and Farris' (1986) results may be somewhat limited based on the fact that their study concluded that "above average"

salespeople were rated as being more "warm, easy going and cooperative" than were "average" salespeople. They then concluded that being "warm, easy going and cooperative" were traits consistent with the empathy construct. Questions are raised, however, because this definition of empathy conflicts with the psychotherapeutic literature which describes an empathic person as one with the ability to understand the verbal and nonverbal communications and feelings of another; combined with the ability to communicate his/her understanding in a manner sensitive to the customer's current feelings (Barrett-Lennard, 1981; Carkhuff, 1969; Truax and Carkhuff, 1967). Finally, Pilling and Eroglu's (1994) research was conducted by providing retail buyers with scenarios of different "empathic behaviors." Based on the finding that the more "empathic" the scenario the greater the buyer's probability of listening and purchase, the authors conclude that empathy is related to sales performance. Thus, Pilling and Eroglu's research conclusions may be regarded with some reservations, given the laboratory setting for the research and the use of outcome variables such as the buyer's "probability" of listening and purchase.

While the empirical research which has supported the empathy-performance relationship may be somewhat tenuous, other research has failed to support the fundamental theoretical relationship itself. For example, Lamont and Lundstrom (1977) found a significant and negative relationship between empathy and managerial ratings of performance. Dawson, Soper, and Pettijohn (1992) measured salesperson empathy from the buyer's perspective. Their findings revealed no relationship between empathy and various performance measures. Consistent with these results, McBane (1995) discovered that for business-to-business salespeople, empathy's effects on performance and behavior are mixed. Thus, to the degree that empathy and adapta-

bility are related, one cannot positively conclude that high levels of empathy are positively related to sales performance.

Contingency Selling/Adaptive Behavior

A review of the literature suggests existing "adaptability" research can be separated into three basic groups: 1) specific adaptive behavior(s); 2) the ability and/or proficiency of adaptive competencies; and 3) causal research, which examines the adaptability: performance relationship.

One adaptive behavior relates to the salesperson's orientation toward other people. Research has shown that salespeople, as a group rate more highly in their orientation toward others than do "non salespeople" (Sheibelhut and Albaum, 1973). The style of communication also seems to have an impact on performance. Williams and Spiro (1985) uncovered significant differences in the level of sales achieved by different communication styles. According to their findings, the self-oriented style of communication actually reduces the chances of making a sale. The combination of the salesperson's and the customer's both having the interaction-oriented style was most likely to lead to a sale. In addition, the results show that the task-oriented style does not work well with any type of customer. Williams and Spiro concluded that the best salesperson must adapt their communication style.

A separate study found that different behaviors were required for success in selling to different types of customers (Avila and Fern, 1986). The researchers compared the behaviors required in selling large computer systems with the behaviors required to sell small computer systems. While the research revealed that different behaviors were required in selling the different types of computer systems, of the three performance measures ex-

amined, only the percent of quota achieved by the salesperson was affected by those salesperson personality traits which coincided with adaptive behaviors.

Adaptive competencies relate to the salesperson's ability to engage in the practice of adaptive selling. For example, to adapt to different customers, it may be contended that salespeople require broader and more complete knowledge structures, such as methods of categorizing information (Weitz, Sujan and Sujan, 1986). Thus, research in this realm has examined the salesperson's adaptive proficiencies and attempted to relate these to performance.

In examining adaptive competencies, one could argue that the ability to describe customer traits, the ability to identify traits which overlap between customers, and the ability to select the most appropriate sales strategies with which to deal with different customer traits would be indicative of effective adaptive selling. Sujan, Sujan and Bettman (1988) found that salespeople who were able to provide the more descriptive analyses of customer traits, who were more capable of identifying overlapping common traits, and who could select the most appropriate strategies for dealing with customers received significantly higher managerial ratings of their performance.

A similar study (Lambert, Marmorstein and Sharma, 1990) examined the relationship between 1) a salesperson's ability to determine his/her customer's expectations of a product's performance, 2) his/her ability to determine the importance weight assigned to different dimensions of performance by this customer, and 3) the managerial ratings of the salesperson's performance. The results showed that sales representatives who are more capable of identifying the customers' levels of expected performance also received higher

managerial evaluations of their performance (Lambert, Marmorstein and Sharma, 1990). However, the results were mixed, as no significant relationship between performance and the sales representative's ability to accurately predict the customers' importance weights was found.

Szymanski and Churchill (1990) found differences in performance by groups of sales representatives based on their use of various cues, and in the importance or weight assigned to individual cues. Similar findings indicate that experienced salespeople are capable of generating more customer constructs, classification cues and possible adaptive behaviors than are their less experienced counterparts. Based on this finding, the research concludes that adaptability is directly related to sales experience, which suggests a linkage to performance (Gengler, Howard and Zelner, 1995).

Several studies also address the relationship between adaptive selling and performance. Spiro and Perreault (1979) and Harris and Spiro (1981) provide evidence that the selling situation affects the salesperson's choice of the appropriate influence strategy. In these studies, the use of different influence strategies was assessed. The results indicated that when situational selling was practiced, the characteristics of the salesperson and the buyer; the interaction between buyer and seller; and the market interacted to affect the salesperson's selection of alternative influence strategies.

Attributions of the cause of failure and reward preferences have also been shown to affect an individual's orientation toward engaging in adaptive selling (Sujan, 1986). According to Sujan's findings, attributing failure to poor strategies leads to the salesperson's working smarter (engaging in adaptive selling). However, the results also show that in-

intrinsic reward orientations have no impact on working smarter or harder. A recent study of salespeople from Dutch companies provides results which indicates a lack of consistency with the previous findings (Vink and Verbeke, 1993). This research indicates that no significant relationship between performance and adaptive behavior exists. Further, the results indicated that failure attributions and the motivation to work smarter or harder are interrelated.

Notarantonio and Cohen's (1990) research indicates the potential efficacy of adaptive selling. The research, which consisted of students viewing video-tape role plays showed that students preferred low openness and high dominant salespeople over other Dominant: Openness combinations. Thus, these results showed that customers may desire different sales behaviors. A later study indicated that customers have different preferences for types of salesperson socializing behavior. The conclusion offered in this research was that salespeople should be prepared to adapt (Brown, Boya, Humphreys, and Widing, 1993).

The first study which specifically addressed the relationship between sales performance and adaptability by using a scale specifically designed to assess adaptability reported mixed results (Spiro and Weitz, 1990). On the one hand, the results indicated that adaptability was related to the sample's self-ratings of performance. On the other hand, the results indicate that adaptability is not related to managerial ratings of performance.

Other studies examining the performance: adaptability relationship have done so by using other (unique) measures of performance and/or adaptability. One study examined the salesperson's propensity to engage in adaptive selling by assessing responses to cognitive scripts (Anglin, Stolman and Gentry, 1990). The results indicated that managerial ratings of

performance were higher for "adaptive" salespeople. Predmore and Bonnice (1994) measured adaptability by examining the variation of dominant statements in a telemarketer's sales call as measured by coders. Performance was measured by the salesperson's either sending literature or selling a subscription. The results indicated that adaptive salespeople were more capable of closing sales successfully. Blackshear and Plank (1994) found mixed results concerning the performance: adaptive selling relationship. Their research tested the relationships existing between task specific behaviors, adaptive behavior, and performance. The results indicated that task specific behaviors were the strongest predictors of performance. However, it should be noted that adaptive behavior (assessed by using scenario based and an adaptive selling scale) was significantly and positively related to sales performance.

An assessment of the conglomeration of existing research related to adaptive selling in the sales process results in the following conclusions: 1) adaptive selling might be related to performance; 2) adaptive selling has been assessed through a variety of measures; 3) performance has been assessed in numerous ways; and 4) more empirical research should be conducted prior to proclaiming that adaptive selling is empirically related to sales performance.

Purpose of the Research

The purpose of this research is to empirically examine the relationship between performance and adaptive selling. The study is designed to advance existing research in that it is intended to reduce ambiguity by combining measures of adaptive selling which have been validated in previous research and measures of performance which are commonly used by practitioners to form the basis for analysis. The research will also extend our knowledge

of adaptive selling by using both the ADAPTS scale (Spiro and Weitz 1990) and an alternative scale which was developed to assess an individual's versatility (Merrill and Reid 1981). Previous research will also be extended by assessing salesperson behavior by using both salesperson self-ratings of adaptability and customer ratings of their salesperson's adaptive behavior. The use of the customer dimension in evaluating a salesperson's adaptability may provide insight into the relationship between performance and adaptive selling by assessing adaptive behaviors from the viewpoint of the recipient of these behaviors, the customer.

Methodology

Three steps were used to accomplish the research purposes. First, relevant samples were identified and responses solicited. Second, questionnaires were developed to obtain the necessary information. Third, the information gathered was analyzed and the results reported.

Sample Selection

Since one objective of the research was to determine the efficacy of adaptive selling in a field environment, sales practitioners were used in the research. Retail salespeople were selected as research subjects. One reason for selecting retail salespeople was that by identifying the candidate retail firms for inclusion in the study, the researchers could select retail firms in which the salespeople: 1) were required to get orders (not take orders); 2) had the opportunity (time) to engage in adaptive selling; 3) had the potential for repeat business (and repeat business could be important); 4) were compensated by a combination of fixed and variable wages; and 5) were evaluated and rewarded, in part, based on their ability to obtain sales. The use of retail firms meeting

these criteria provided a more homogeneous sample. This type of sample can facilitate the testing of hypotheses, while reducing the chance that the results will be confounded by exogenous variables. Therefore, all salespeople worked in an in-store environment, sold to individuals who used the products for their personal consumption, and worked with customers who engaged in a 'limited decision-making' process. In addition, retail salespeople interact with customers who are easy to contact. Thus, ratings of the salesperson's perceived ability to adapt to the customer could be obtained promptly from these individuals. Finally, since managerial performance evaluations of each salesperson were desired, it seemed that managers could readily evaluate retail sales personnel due to the ease of record keeping and the close proximity in which they work.

The sample was selected by soliciting the participation of retail firms. Eleven retail sales managers employed by stores selling shopping goods were asked to participate in the research. Eight sales managers agreed to participate. Managerial support was necessary because they were asked to provide three critical items of input: 1) the names of their full-time sales representatives; 2) their evaluations of each salesperson's performance; and 3) the opportunity to interview six of each salesperson's "most recent" customers. Sales managers provided the names of seventy-seven full-time salespeople.

Each salesperson was given a questionnaire by his/her manager and requested to complete and return the questionnaire directly to the researchers. Sixty-two salespeople provided complete responses to the researchers (a response rate of 81%). Following the receipt of the completed questionnaires, the researchers visited each salesperson's retail establishment with the purpose of intercepting 372 customers (6 per salesperson) immediately fol-

lowing a purchase. Purchasing customers were selected because the researchers and the participating sales managers felt that these individuals would be more likely to have had an opportunity to interact for a longer period of time than would the nonpurchasing prospects. This longer period of interaction was assumed to provide an opportunity for the customer to provide the salesperson with a more accurate rating. A total of 420 customers were contacted and 370 (88% response rate) provided complete and usable responses (due to problems with timing and an error in computing, only 5 customers were obtained for two sales representatives -- 6 per salesperson for 60 salespeople and 5 per salesperson for two salespeople).

The use of both the salesperson's customers and managers as respondents provided two additional components of information. These two additional information sources might prove to extend prior research which has relied only on the salesperson for measures of both adaptability and performance. This improvement in prior research is attributed to two major factors. First, one could argue that adaptability is a construct that could be perceived by another individual. Yet, most studies of adaptability assess that construct based on self-ratings. The use of customers provides another basis for the assessment of the adaptability construct. Second, performance may be assessed in numerous ways. While self-evaluations of performance may be adequate, additional information may be provided by having the manager provide ratings of the salesperson's performance. Thus, this study expands previous adaptability research by measuring adaptability by using the customer's perceptions and by assessing performance from the sales manager's perspective.

The sample is composed of salespeople who have completed at least some college courses. Approximately 66 percent of the re-

spondents have completed at least some college courses. Also, 73 percent of the respondents had worked in retail sales for at least one year.

Questionnaire Development

Store manager input was solicited in the development of the questionnaire. The participating managers were asked about the use of scales designed to measure the adaptability of their salespeople. Based on the responses of the store managers, a questionnaire was designed that met the managers' requirements for brevity and clarity, but yet met the research requirements regarding the assessment of adaptability and performance. While the managers had a "general" understanding of the research purposes, each manager agreed that the purpose of the research would not be disclosed to the salespeople participating in the study.

One of the scales used to measure adaptability is the Merrill and Reid (1981) versatility scale. Merrill and Reid state versatility is a crucial dimension of behavior. Versatility is described as a dynamic skill -- "it means constantly monitoring your behavior and shifting your actions so that they don't interfere with a relationship." Merrill and Reid discuss four research studies in which versatility is the discriminating factor between the performance of the "best" and the "worst" groups of sales representatives. To facilitate the study's purposes, retail salespeople were provided with Merrill and Reid's short-form versatility questionnaire. To encourage participation and retailer involvement, retail customers were provided with an abbreviated version of the versatility questionnaire.

The second scale used to assess adaptability is the ADAPTS scale (Spiro and Weitz 1990). Since it was imperative to encourage both participation and cooperation by

the participants, the participating managers recommended that the scale be modified to reduce the difficulty of response. The scale was modified from the original seven point version to a more compact five point version. Table 1 shows the sample's responses to the ADAPTS scale. The mean ADAPTS score for each group is approximately 63. When the

mean total score of 63 is adjusted to coincide with Spiro and Weitz' seven point scale and when the total is divided by 16 (the number of questions) the mean responses are 5.54, which is very similar to the score obtained in Spiro and Weitz' study (5.51). The alpha coefficient is .75, which is comparable to Spiro and Weitz' .85.

TABLE 1
Items and Characteristics of Adapts

Questions	Salesperson Sample (n = 62)			Customer Sample (n = 370)		
	Mean	(sd)	Correlation	Mean	(sd)	Correlation
ADAPT	63.3	(8.2)	1.0	44.7	(4.5)	1.0
Unique	4.4	(.6)	.41	3.7	(.9)	.44
Change	4.1	(.7)	.64	3.1	(1.1)	.38
Experiment	3.9	(.8)	.67	N/A	N/A	N/A
Flexible	4.1	(.8)	.60	4.1	(.8)	.37
Deal Same	3.8	(1.2)	.67	N/A	N/A	N/A
Change Approach	4.1	(.9)	.74	N/A	N/A	N/A
Variety	3.8	(.8)	.66	N/A	N/A	N/A
Set Approach	3.6	(1.0)	.68	3.0	(1.1)	.30
Modify	4.0	(.7)	.62	3.5	(1.1)	.56
Same Approach	3.7	(1.2)	.85	2.1	(.9)	.14
Sensitivity	4.4	(.5)	.29	4.0	(.9)	.47
Difficulty Adapting	3.7	(1.1)	.54	3.6	(1.0)	.36
Vary Style	4.1	(.7)	.62	3.5	(.9)	.54
Customers Differ	4.3	(.6)	.43	3.5	(1.0)	.57
Confidence	4.1	(.7)	.55	3.3	(1.1)	.40
Same Treatment	3.4	(1.2)	.45	N/A	N/A	N/A

Table 1 also provides the results of the responses of 370 customers which rated the retail sample of salespeople using a modified version of ADAPTS. The customer version of the ADAPTS scale was reduced by five questions due to the fact that the authors did not feel that these questions were suitable for customer responses. The five questions deleted were "I feel that most buyers can be dealt with in pretty much the same manner," "I do not change my approach from one customer to another," "I treat all of my buyers pretty much the same," "I like to experiment with different sales approaches" and "I can easily use a wide variety of selling approaches." Given these deletions, after adjusting the scale to a seven point format, the mean per question score on the ADAPTS scale is 4.97, which is less than the mean responses provided by salespeople (5.54 and 5.5). This indicates that salespeople may perceive themselves as being more adaptive than their buyers perceive them. Such a result was not surprising, as other research (cf. Michaels and Day 1985) has provided similar results when comparing self-evaluations with the evaluations provided by their customers. The alpha coefficient obtained is .71, which indicates a sufficient level of reliability (Nunally 1978).

Table 2 examines the characteristics of the versatility scale used by Merrill and Reid (1981). Since Merrill and Reid did not provide data documenting their analysis, the data provided are not comparable to other findings. As shown in table 3, the retail sales sample's mean total versatility score is 26.8 and the mean item score is 3.35. The correlations of items in the scale with the scale total are all significant (.01) and the alpha coefficient is .73.

Table 2 also provides the results of an abbreviated version of the versatility scale completed by the retail buyers. The scale was abbreviated due to the requests of the partici-

pating retail managers regarding the buyer's time constraints and due to the desire to maintain high response rates. As indicated in Table 3, customers' ratings of their salesperson's versatility was an average of 4.0. This is surprising because it is higher than the responses provided by sales representatives. The alpha coefficient is .82.

Performance Measures

The measures of performance included: 1) Relative ranking: the salesperson's performance ranking relative to others in his/her store; 2) Sales volume: the percent of the store's or territory's total sales volume generated by the salesperson; 3) Closing ratio: the salesperson's ratio of successfully closed sales to the number of sales contacts. The sales managers also provided ratings of their salespersons' performance on each of the three dimensions.

The primary research hypothesis is designed to examine the relationship between performance and the salesperson's adaptability (as measured by both the ADAPTS and versatility scales). Empirical support for this hypothesis is provided by numerous studies, including Spiro and Weitz (1990) who found that salespeople with higher adaptability scores attained higher self-ratings of performance.

H1: Sales performance will be positively related to subjects' scores on the ADAPTS and versatility scales.

Other research questions examined include the relationships between experience, education and salesperson adaptiveness/ versatility. Lambert, Marmorstein, and Sharma (1990) examined the relationship between these variables and salesperson accuracy in perceiving their customers. The results obtained in Lambert et al.'s study seem counter intuitive, in that these variables were either

unrelated or negatively related to accuracy. However, Gengler, Howard and Zolner (1995) found that the number of constructs generated was greater for more experienced salespeople. In the current study, the following hypotheses were examined:

H2a: More experienced salespeople will be more adaptive and/or versatile.

H2b: More highly educated salespeople will be more adaptive and/or versatile.

Results

Summary Statistics

Overall summary statistics for each of the variables analyzed in the study are provided in Table 3. By regrouping and combining variables, four additional variables were included in the analysis. The variable "global performance" was created by combining the six performance variables (3 self-evaluations and 3 managerial evaluations). The "global

TABLE 2
Items and Characteristics of Versatility

Salesperson Sample	Mean	(sd)	Correlation
Versatility	26.8	(3.1)	1.0
Dress	3.7	(1.2)	.59
First Impression	4.3	(.7)	.58
Individual Dress	2.6	(1.3)	.35
Difficulty Expressing	2.3	(1.0)	.28
Skillful Speaker	3.9	(.7)	.36
Candid	3.8	(.8)	.49
Difficulty Socializing	1.8	(.8)	.32
Directions	4.1	(.7)	.42
Customer Sample			
Versatility	11.9	(2.2)	1.0
First Impressions	3.9	(1.0)	.79
Difficulty Expressing	4.1	(.8)	.81
Candid	3.9	(.9)	.75

adaptability" variable was computed by combining the four measures of adaptability (2 scores on ADAPTS and 2 scores on versatility). The final two variables were created by combining the two separate measures provided by salespeople and customers relating to adaptability (ADAPTS and versatility).

The relationships between the variables are shown in Table 4. As shown in this table, performance ratings pertaining to the salesperson's self-rating and his/her managerial ratings are all significantly correlated. The salesperson's self-ratings and managerial ratings of performance are all significantly and

TABLE 3
Summary Statistics

Variable	Retail Sample n = 62	
	Mean	(sd)
Salesperson Self-Evaluations:		
Adaptability	63.3	(8.2)
Flexibility	26.8	(3.1)
Ranking Compared with Others	3.9	(1.2)
Closing Ratio	3.6	(1.2)
Sales Volume	2.5	(1.1)
Managerial Evaluations:		
Managerial Ranking	3.6	(1.2)
Managerial Closing Ratio	3.6	(1.4)
Managerial Sales Volume	2.1	(1.1)
Customer Evaluations:		
Customer Adaptability	44.7	(4.5)
Other Dimensions:		
Customer Flexibility	11.9	(2.2)
Global Performance	19.3	(4.0)
Global Adaptability	147.6	(10.4)
Customer Global Adaptability	57.6	(3.3)
Salesperson Global Adaptability	90.1	(9.4)

positively correlated with the "global performance" measure.

The salesperson's self-ratings on the ADAPTS scale correlated significantly with the self-ratings on the versatility scale and the global adaptability rating. However, on the

ADAPTS scale, self-ratings do not significantly correlate with the customer's ratings of the salesperson's adaptability or versatility. This may indicate that self-ratings and customer ratings may be evaluating distinct dimensions of adaptability and that versatility may be a dimension that is distinct from that

TABLE 4
Correlation Matrix
(n = 62)

	Self Ratings					Managerial Ratings			Customer Ratings		Overall	
	Adapt	Versa tility	Ranks	Close	Sales Vol- ume	Ranks	Close	Sales Vol.	Cust. Adapt	Cust. flex	Global Perf.	Total Adapt
Adaptability	1.0											
Versatility	.24(c)	1.0										
Ranking	.09	-.13	1.0									
Closing Ratio	.23(c)	.07	.17	1.0								
Sales Volume	-.04	.08	.17	.20	1.0							
Managerial Ranking	-.01	-.15	.44(a)	-.03	-.09	1.0						
Managerial Closing Ratio	.11	.05	-.01	.29 (b)	-.24 (c)	.23(c)	1.0					
Managerial Sales Volume	.09	-.22 (c)	.24(c)	.19	.25 (b)	.29(b)	.38 (a)	1.0				
Customer Adaptability	.08	.12	.07	.23 (c)	.17	.10	.06	-.03	1.0			
Customer Flexibility	.03	.18	-.06	.18	-.22	.11	.32	-.02	.51(a)	1.0		
Global Performance	.16	.10	.58(a)	.56 (a)	.36 (a)	.55(a)	.55 (a)	.71 (a)	.07	.11	1.0	
Global Adaptability	.89(a)	.53 (a)	.04	.28 (b)	-.12	-.01	.16	-.00	.40(a)	.32 (b)	.13	1.0

a: $p < .01$

b: $p < .05$

c: $p < .10$

being measured by the ADAPTS scale. Similarly, the salesperson's self-ratings on the versatility scale correlate significantly with the global adaptability rating

With regard to performance measures, scores on the ADAPTS scale correlate at the $p < .10$ level with the salesperson's self-rated closing ratios. Versatility scores (self-rated) correlate negatively ($p < .10$) with managerial ratings of the salesperson's sales

volume. Customer ratings of salesperson adaptability correlate ($p < .10$ level) with the salesperson's self-rated closing ratios. Customer evaluations of salesperson versatility correlate significantly ($p < .05$) with the managerial evaluations of the salesperson's closing ratios. Finally, global adaptability scores correlate significantly ($p < .05$) with the salesperson's self-rated closing ratios.

Table 5 provides the results of one

TABLE 5
Mean Adaptability Scores and Salesperson Self-Ratings of Performance

<i>Level of Closing:</i>	Self-rating of Adaptability		Customer Adaptability		Self-rating Versatility		Customer Versatility		Global Adapt	
25% and less (13)	60.9	(6.4)	44.6	(2.8)	26.8	(2.5)	11.6	(1.2)	143.9	(7.9)
26 - 50% (20)	61.6	(8.9)	45.1	(2.2)	26.0	(3.1)	12.4	(1.3)	145.1	(10.6)
51 - 75% (13)	65.3	(9.0)	45.7	(2.3)	27.5	(4.3)	12.4	(1.3)	151.0	(12.7)
Over 75% (16)	65.6	(7.8)	45.9	(2.6)	27.2	(2.2)	12.3	(1.3)	151.0	(8.6)
F-Value	1.33		.74		.84		1.33		2.07	
<i>Level of Sales Volume:</i>										
0 - 10% (11)	63.1	(9.3)	45.0	(2.3)	27.6	(3.2)	12.7	(.9)	148.5	(11.3)
11 - 25% (23)	62.8	(6.5)	45.6	(2.1)	26.1	(2.3)	12.1	(1.0)	146.6	(7.3)
26 - 50% (21)	64.7	(9.5)	45.9	(2.7)	27.2	(3.8)	12.2	(1.6)	150.0	(13.0)
Over 50% (7)	61.1	(8.8)	43.5	(2.5)	26.3	(2.6)	11.5	(1.3)	142.4	(7.5)
F - Value	.37		1.96		.81		1.46		1.08	
<i>Relative Ranking:</i>										
0 - 49% (9)	60.6	(8.8)	44.8	(2.5)	27.4	(3.5)	12.7	(1.2)	145.5	(11.1)
50 - 69% (13)	63.3	(7.0)	45.7	(3.1)	27.2	(2.2)	12.1	(1.3)	148.2	(8.8)
70 - 89% (15)	65.1	(9.2)	45.1	(2.4)	26.8	(3.6)	11.8	(1.4)	148.8	(12.5)
90 - 100% (25)	63.2	(8.2)	45.5	(2.2)	26.3	(3.1)	12.3	(1.2)	147.3	(9.9)
F Value	.55		.32		.38		1.08		.20	

No differences significant $p < .10$

way ANOVAs designed to assess the validity of the hypotheses concerning whether adaptability and versatility scores relate positively to the retail sample's self-ratings of performance. As shown in the table, none of the adaptability measures is related significantly to the salesperson's self-ratings of performance. With

regard to closing ratios, the results show that as the retail sample's closing ratios increase, so do their self-ratings, customer ratings and global ratings on adaptability.

Table 6 provides the results of one way ANOVAs designed to examine the rela-

TABLE 6
Retail Sample
Mean Adaptability Scores and Managerial Ratings of Salesperson Performance

Variable	Self-rating of Adaptability		Customer Adaptability		Self-ratings Versatility		Customer Versatility		Global Adaptability	
Category (n)	Mean	(sd)	Mean	(sd)	Mean	(sd)	Mean	(sd)	Mean	(sd)
<i>Level of Closing:</i>										
0 -25% (14)	63.0	(8.2)	44.4	(2.3)	26.8	(2.3)	11.3	(1.3)	145.5	(8.6)
26 - 50% (15)	61.9	(10.5)	46.5	(2.0)	26.7	(3.7)	12.6	(1.0)	147.8	(12.5)
51 - 75% (13)	62.5	(7.2)	45.3	(3.0)	25.8	(2.0)	12.0	(1.6)	145.7	(8.6)
76% and over (20)	65.2	(7.6)	45.0	(2.4)	27.3	(3.5)	12.6	(.9)	150.0	(11.1)
F-Value	.51		2.06		.56		3.93(a)		.69	
<i>Level of Sales Volume:</i>										
0 - 10% (21)	62.5	(9.4)	45.4	(2.2)	27.5	(3.6)	12.2	(1.5)	147.5	(11.6)
11 -25% (22)	63.7	(7.0)	45.3	(2.4)	26.4	(2.4)	12.2	(1.1)	147.6	(8.3)
26 - 50% (14)	63.5	(7.7)	45.0	(2.2)	26.4	(3.1)	12.1	(1.2)	147.0	(10.8)
51% and over (5)	65.2	(12.5)	45.9	(4.7)	25.6	(2.3)	12.5	(1.6)	149.2	(15.2)
F - Value	.17		.14		.86		.13		.05	
<i>Relative Ranking:</i>										
0 - 49% (8)	60.0	(11.4)	44.2	(1.6)	26.1		11.8	(1.1)	142.1	(11.2)
50 - 69% (15)	64.5	(8.6)	46.5	(3.2)	27.2		12.4	(1.6)	150.6	(12.3)
70 - 89% (20)	65.0	(6.1)	44.9	(2.0)	28.0		12.1	(1.2)	150.1	(8.5)
90 - 100% (19)	62.1	(8.7)	45.3	(2.4)	25.2		12.2	(1.2)	144.8	(9.5)
F- Value	.93		1.97		3.6(a)		.47		2.11	

a: $p < .05$

tionship between the salesperson's adaptability scores and managerial ratings of performance. As shown, two factors are significantly related to managerial ratings of performance. First, customer ratings of versatility are significantly related to closing ratios. As shown in the table, the lowest ratings provided by customers of their salesperson's versatility were for the lowest level of closing ratios. Second, self-ratings on the versatility scale were significantly related to the salesperson's relative rank within the store. Self-ratings of versatility were lowest for those salespeople occupying the lowest level of relative rank in the retailer's sales force. The highest versatility ratings were obtained by salespeople in the top 70-89% of the sales force.

The impact of education and experience on salesperson adaptiveness/versatility was also examined. As shown in Table 7, no

significant differences were found in either adaptiveness or versatility scores based on differences in education and experience. An examination of the results does indicate that adaptability scores tend to increase with increases in education and experience. However, these increases were not significant.

Discussion

The results of this study parallel numerous other studies with regard to the impact of adaptiveness on sales performance. Drawing implications from these results is largely dependent upon the reader's interpretation. One interpretation is that salesperson adaptability is an essential ingredient in sales performance. Support for this viewpoint could be garnered from the discovery that many of the performance variables were positively related to salesperson adaptability. This position is

TABLE 7
Mean Adaptability Scores and Salesperson Characteristics

Variable (n)	Adapt	(sd)	Versatility	(sd)
<i>Education:</i>				
High School (21)	62.0	(8.4)	27.0	(3.0)
Some College (29)	63.3	(7.2)	26.7	(3.1)
College Degree (11)	64.3	(8.0)	26.0	(3.0)
F-Value	.31		.43	
<i>Years of Experience:</i>				
0-1 (22)	62.9	(7.8)	27.0	(3.2)
1-5 (23)	63.7	(7.5)	26.7	(2.7)
Over 5 (20)	64.0	(9.7)	26.5	(3.2)
F-Value	.09		.17	

supported by the positive correlations found between the 1) salesperson's self-ratings on the ADAPTS scale and their self-rated closing ratios; 2) customers' ratings of the salesperson on the ADAPTS scale and the salesperson's self-ratings on closing ratios; 3) customers' ratings of the salesperson on the versatility scale and the manager's ratings of the salesperson's closing ratio; and 4) global adaptability scores and the salesperson's self-ratings on closing ratios. In addition, support for the hypothesized relationship between adaptive selling and sales performance may also be found in the results of the analysis of variance conducted. These results showed: 1) customer ratings of salesperson versatility are significantly related to managerial evaluations of a salesperson's closing ratios; and 2) salesperson self-evaluations of versatility are significantly related to managerial rankings of salesperson performance.

A contrary opinion may also be held. Much of the discussion of adaptability operates on the assumption that it is a critical skill. Perhaps other skills operate in the sales environment and adaptability is only one skill that may impact sales performance. For example, this reasoning may lead to the conclusion that one's expertise with regard to the product may compensate for a deficiency in adaptiveness. Perhaps the approach of Jolson (1984) who suggested that increasing one's assertiveness will result in greater performance increases than would the increase in adaptiveness is correct. Jolson's (1989) later suggestion regarding "canned adaptiveness" for personal selling may be more appropriate. By using "canned adaptiveness," the salesperson could optimize his/her results by using a standard approach in the appropriate situation and by practicing adaptive approaches in other situations.

From a manager's perspective, the findings may provide suggestions for managerial activities ranging from the selection proc-

ess to the training and development processes. The findings show that salespeople who rate high on either measure of versatility or adaptability tend to have higher closing ratios. This finding may have implications for firms who discover that they do not have an overabundance of potential customers and believe that each potential customer has potential value. Consequently, firms that cannot afford to lose potential customers may be advised to use adaptability/ versatility as both a selection criteria and a training topic. It appears that either the versatility scale or the ADAPTS scale may have some credibility as an input into the selection process used by firms who place a premium on a salesperson's closing ratio. To the degree that adaptability is a skill that is amenable to training and development, it may also be practical to include this topic as one of the training topics for new and established salespeople.

However, managers may also be advised not to regard adaptability and versatility as a panacea to sales effectiveness. The results fail to support contentions related that adaptability is significantly related to sales volume, which is often an important evaluative criteria. Perhaps the importance of adaptability as a performance construct lies in the type of performance desired from a sales manager. If sales managers are seeking salespeople that make sales quickly and develop a large "volume" of sales, then adaptability may not be a critical dimension that is predictive of sales effectiveness. On the other hand, if managers are working in situations in which salespeople have the time to develop their customers and learn their styles, then adaptive selling may be valuable. Such a value may be particularly notable when salespeople are in situations in which customers are "rare" and "valuable" and where losing a customer constitutes a significant loss of resources. In these situations, closing ratios may provide an important indicator of performance and

adaptability may be more highly valued.

Conclusions

Based on the findings reported in this study, adaptability's relationship to sales performance must still be regarded with some degree of skepticism. Prior to the reader's disregarding the findings as counter intuitive, it should be noted that the results reported are consistent with prior results. In fact, even Spiro and Weitz' (1990) study in which the ADAPTS scale was developed found mixed results supporting the relationship of adaptability to sales performance. Consequently, the results lead to the conclusion that adaptability, as measured in this study may be positively related to sales performance. As the findings show, the global adaptability score is significantly related to the salesperson's self-ratings of his/her closing ratio; salesperson self-ratings in adaptability are significantly related to self-ratings on closing ratios; customer ratings of salesperson adaptability are significantly related to the salesperson's self-rating on closing ratios; customer ratings of salesperson versatility are positively and significantly related to the manager's ratings of a particular salesperson's closing ratio; and the salesperson's self ratings on versatility are significantly related to the manager's rating of the salesperson's relative rank within the sales force. While the other findings relating adaptability to performance are generally in the direction hypothesized, the findings are not statistically significant and therefore the results can be described as being "mixed."

Since a clear relationship between adaptability and performance was not uncovered, it may be concluded that other factors may work to create exceptional sales performance. Perhaps Blackshear and Plank's (1995) findings that task specific behaviors have a greater impact on performance are accurate and adaptability's role in the sales process is

mediated by other behaviors.

Based on the findings of this and other studies, it may be concluded that the adaptive selling:performance relationship requires further study. In the sections below, limitations and suggestions for future research are described.

Limitations

The study is limited by numerous factors. First, the study consisted of salespeople in the retail field. For retail salespeople, adaptability may not be as critical a skill as it might for other types of salespeople. This may be true, even though each retail salesperson was employed by firms that engaged in the sale of shopping goods.

Secondly, the measures of performance may not have been the ideal ones for the present study. Perhaps other performance measures could have been used as criterion variables. For example, the study could have compared the ratings provided by buyers and nonbuyers to determine the degree to which adaptability contributed to the occurrence of a sale. Correspondingly, the study may be limited by the use of buyers as raters of salesperson adaptability and versatility, as those not buying may also have provided valuable information into the perceived adaptiveness of the salesperson. Another possible outcome measure may have been the use of customer attitudes toward the product, the use of such a measure may have provided a more viable outcome measure than would the indirect measures of performance used. Nevertheless, the measures of performance used were widely accepted ones (cf. Churchill, Ford and Walker 1985; Jackson, Keith and Schlacter 1983; Jackson, Ostrum, and Evans, 1982; Jackson, Schlacter, and Wolfe 1995; Morris et al. 1991) and the use of customers who had purchased increased the probability that the

duration of interaction with the salesperson rated would increase and that this increase would provide more accurate ratings of the salesperson's adaptability.

Another potential limitation arises from the "pretest" effect that is the possible result of the subjects' prior knowledge of the research objectives. As stated in the methodology, the acquisition of the participants in the research mandated that the "general" purposes of the research be explained to the sales managers. It was felt that the risk of bias which could result from the general explanations was overcome by the benefits derived from garnering participants. Furthermore, the managers were asked not to disclose the purposes of the research to the salespeople in their stores. Regardless, bias could have resulted from the subjects' prior knowledge of the study's purposes and this may have influenced both the scores obtained on the ADAPTS scale and on the versatility scale used in the study.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future research should be designed to compare adaptability for different groups of salespeople. Perhaps a comparison of salespeople selling high involvement industrial goods and services with salespeople selling lower involvement consumer and industrial goods and services could be conducted. Second, perhaps future research could assess the relationship between adaptive selling and other performance dimensions, such as customer satisfaction, customer retention rates, etc. Third, perhaps other measures of adaptability could be used. However, this suggestion is provided with some level of misgiving, because other measures should be operational in order to be useful in practice. A final suggestion is related to the belief that perhaps the adaptiveness process is being incorrectly assessed. The misperception of adaptiveness may result in research not truly measuring the

effect of adaptive selling on performance. To date, no published research has provided the results of "adaptability training" and its effect on performance using a before-after with control group experimental design. This type of research would help identify whether adaptive selling relates to performance. In addition, no published research has examined changes in adaptability by using trained judges to assess adaptive selling in a laboratory or field setting. This absence of research means that we do not know whether adaptive selling is a behavior which can be learned or whether it has an impact on performance if it is learned.

In summary, regardless of the position one holds, real questions concerning the efficacy of adaptive selling should be raised. First, does adaptive selling relate in a consistent and positive way to sales performance? Second, are current measures of adaptive sales behaviors accurate? Third, are research designs assessing adaptability properly conducted? It seems that answers to these questions are necessary prior to concluding that adaptive selling is an essential ingredient in effective personal selling. ☞

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Notes

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