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Sales call length, call frequency, and its impact on salesperson's performance and customer relationship quality: Few research propositions

by

Ramendra Singh

Assistant Professor, Indian Institute of Management Calcutta, Joka, Kolkata 700104

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Author

Ramendra Singh

Assistant Professor (marketing), IIM Calcutta.

Email: ramendra@iimcal.ac.in

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Abstract

Purpose

This paper introduces the construct of *sales call length* and extends the extant theoretical understanding of sales effort allocation to shed light on how (1) sales call length and sales call frequency impact salespersons' performance, and, (2) call frequency, and sales call length impact relationship quality.

Design/methodology/approach

The paper provides an exhaustive review and synthesis of the relevant literature on sales effort allocation, and sales call planning. It then introduces the construct of sales call length to extend the extant theoretical knowledge in this area, using a series of research propositions.

Findings

This paper posits several research propositions on how sales call length, and call frequency impacts salesperson's performance, and relationship quality with their customers.

Research limitations/implications

Since this is a conceptual article, future research should focus on empirical validation of the suggested research propositions in the article.

Practical implications

Sales managers can use *sales call length* along with sales call frequency to monitor and control the effectiveness of salesperson's call time allocation with customers to increase their sales performance, and customer relationship quality.

Originality/value

This paper introduces the construct of *sales call length* and extends the extant theoretical understanding of sales effort allocation with customers.

Conceptual paper

Key Words: Salesperson performance, sales call length, sales call frequency, relationship quality, customers.

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1. Introduction

A recent study by Cahners Research (Mulcahy, 2002) based on 23,341 businesses worldwide, suggest that salespersons have drastically reduced their contact time with customers. The survey suggests that only an average of 1.81 numbers of sales representatives manage to meet the customers every week (industry range: 1.47-2.21). Similarly, an average of 4.61 number of salespersons manage to speak to customers on telephone every week (industry range: 3.15-5.18), and took an average of 5.12 sales calls (industry range: 3.34-6.50) to close the sale. Cahners' research also shows that only 39% of customers who meet salespersons in face-to-face sales calls, think that salespersons actually understood their needs. Thus in the backdrop of reducing sales call length and call frequency, it becomes imperative to understand how salespersons spend their time in the field meeting customers to increase their effectiveness in selling. Focusing on the effective use of salespersons' time in the field is becoming more important in the light of increasing costs of sales calls, which according to one study has reached an average of \$ 169.94 per sales call in the US (Marchetti, 2000).

However, despite the focus to allocate sales effort in terms of number of calls to each category of account in salesperson's portfolio, little attempt has been made by researchers in looking at factors that are likely to impact the effectiveness of a sales call that leads to increased salespersons' effectiveness, relationship quality with customers, and increase in sales performance in the long run. Moreover, sales call allocation strategies focus on sales call productivity of salespeople without simultaneously taking into consideration, the quality of calls made, which would also impact the relationship with customers.

One of the most important area on salespersons' time allocation is their choice of sales call length. Literature is silent on how sales call length impacts salesperson's performance, and relationship quality with their customers. Similarly, although a few studies have attempted to relate sales call frequency with relationship quality and salesperson's performance, these studies have ignored to incorporate the simultaneous choice of sales call length and frequency in determining the relationship quality with customers and its impact on salesperson's effectiveness. This paper intends to extend the extant theoretical understanding and tries to shed light on (1) how sales call length and sales call frequency impact salespersons' performance? and, (2) how call frequency, and sales call length impact relationship quality?

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. First a exhaustive review of literature is carried out in a synthesized form. The construct of sales call length is introduced, and using a series of research propositions, the impact of sales call length and sales call frequency on salesperson's performance and customer relationship quality is posited. Meaningful theoretical and managerial implications are given in the end.

2. Literature Review

Sales effort allocation has a direct impact on sales call length as well as the number of sales calls per account or per year (or call frequency) for each salesperson. However, in light of the difficulties in estimating the incremental increase in sales revenue by increasing sales effort or vice-versa, managers often rely on gut feeling and guesswork rather than taking an analytical approach (Fogg and Rokus, 1973). In the extant literature, there have been two main approaches to sales force effort allocation, (1) the workload approach and (2) the sales response function approach. The workload (or breakdown) approach (Talley, 1961; Johnston and Marshall 2003; Zoltners, Sinha, and Zoltners, 2001) assumes the number of sales calls needed for each type of account, the number of calls per year and typical length of a sales call, to arrive at the total workload needed to serve a particular territory. The sales response function approach on the other hand, uses an analytical approach to determine the market sales response functions to selling time (Parsons and Vanden Abeele 1981; Ryans and Weinberg 1987), and estimates the sales response functions at the territory level. However both these approaches ignore the client's response to call time allocation, and assume a direct albeit non-linear relationship between salespersons' efforts and sales.

Previous studies using management-oriented models of salesforce have attempted to determine the impact of personal selling as one among the several other marketing variables that may impact sales. These models have looked at allocating selling efforts to customers, territories, or products for salesforce sizing, territory design and other salesforce management decisions (Beswick and Cravens, 1977; Parsuraman and Day, 1977). The use of sales response functions to selling efforts have been looked at from various measures of selling efforts. These include number of salespersons (Lambert, 1968), number of sales calls (Waid, Clark, and Ackoff, 1956), product of number of calls and number of people met (Turner 1971), and salesperson's percentage of time spent in the geographic area, besides other territory related and salesperson's related variables (Beswick and Cravens, 1977). In a seminal study (Parsons and Vanden Abeele, 1981) it was found that there is a positive relationship between number of sales calls and sales, and that the sales call elasticity may vary with product life cycle and thus may remain unaffected in the short run. The study also suggests that sales call elasticity should also include quality of sales approaches, presentations, ability to close sales, service orientation, knowledge about company, product, competitors and its products, and customers, salesperson's personal characteristics such as ability to learn and think analytically, and the situational factors.

Other studies on sales call allocation strategies have attempted to suggest a optimal number of sales calls to each category of account, with a view to maximize the sales call productivity in terms of sales dollars per call (e.g. LaForge and Cravens, 1982a; LaForge and Cravens, 1982b ; Laforge et al., 1983; Lodish, 1971; Parasuraman, 1982). Most of these studies have found a relationship between selling effort of the salespersons and their sales performance. However, most studies have not considered the sales planning activities that go into utilization of a salesperson's time. To resolve this issue, Ryans and Weinberg (1979) conjecture that a two stage model of salesperson's performance may be the way out; the first stage would look at the factors affecting salesperson's efforts and the second stage would then try and explain the sales efforts-sales relationship. Yet another shortcoming

of such models of sales effort allocation has been the total ignorance of the behavioral aspects of both salespersons and customers, and the nature of the relationship.

Similarly, models based on sales force allocation to products (e.g. Zoltners and Sinha, 1979; Lodish, 1980) look at optimal allocation of sales efforts for particular product type. However the choice of which particular customers to call on was left to the salesperson, subject to management controls. Here again, the sales of the product to a particular segment were assumed to be responsive to the average levels of mentions made to a customer within the considered time frame (Lodish, 1980). Darmon (2005) suggests that distinguishing between making more short calls than fewer long calls, given the same time for allocation, is important for measuring salespersons' effectiveness; since estimating sales response functions accurately is not fully possible, it is more practical to follow call norms for each type of account than opting for optimal call patterns.

Adding to the existing shortcomings of allocating selling efforts using sales response functions, are the complex 'carryover effects' from previous sales calls, which suggests that even a no-call policy for a given segment account may lead to a threshold sales (Sinha and Zoltners, 2001). As the number of sales calls increase, the response reaches maximum, for a threshold number of sales calls, beyond which the response starts decreasing (Cloonan, 1966). Similar to the response of call frequency, the response of call length also shows a decreasing return with increase in call length. Darmon (2005) suggests that for a given call length, the response of sales to sales call frequency would be an increasing function with decreasing marginal returns, till a point beyond which sales call would be perceived by the customer to be a nuisance. Similarly, Darmon also suggests that for a given sale call frequency, the response of sales call length to sales would be an increasing function with decreasing marginal returns, bounded between a minimum threshold call length and a maximum call length beyond which the customer gets irritated.

Literature on the impact of sales quota on sales call selection also suggests that in presence of a single target, salesperson's risk taking behavior impacts their sales call option that helps them in achieving the unachieved portion of quota (e.g. Ross, 1991). Since salespeople are quota maximisers when quota is the single target (Ross 1991) and also bonus maximisers, in presence of quota and bonus as dual targets (McFarland et al., 2002), it is posited that salespeople choose risky customers when quota achievement is at risk, and less risky customers when quota achievement is near fulfillment. It is argued that both these behaviors are not desirable from the firm's perspective. Moreover, since salespeople feel pressured to achieve quota (and bonus), it is very likely that they choose, 'easy' customers where they are more likely to close the deal than tougher accounts that require more development, and time. Hence from a firm's perspective, it becomes imperative to measure and evaluate salespeople for their effectiveness, so that no potentially attractive account is neglected, especially in the light of the rising costs of sales calls.

3. Research propositions

3.1 Sales call length and salesperson performance

Beswick and Cravens (1977) suggests that the sales of consumer products are determined by salesperson's percentage of time spent in the geographic area. Moreover, Weitz's (1978) ISTEAs sales process model also suggests that for new customers i.e. initial sales calls are expected to have higher call length than latter ones, since these are characterized by rapport building and information gathering, as well as impression formation and strategy formulation. This shows that sales call length is a function of salespersons' call objectives and different objectives may require appropriate duration for its completion. Leigh and McGraw (1989) suggest that fundamentally the sales call objectives of the salespersons for initial, follow-up and regular sales calls are as follows:

- ***Initial Sales Call Objectives***
 - Develop personal rapport with the customer
 - Gather information about customer needs and objectives
 - Create favorable impression of me as a salesperson
 - Communicate positive impression of my company
 - Determine who are the key decision makers
 - Assess sales potential
 - Assess the buyer's attitude towards my company
 - Lay groundwork for follow-up contact

- ***Follow-up Sales Call Objectives***
 - Offer a specific product or service
 - Make sure all questions have been answered
 - Obtain go-ahead for product or service
 - Get to know key decision makers
 - Learn staff needs and product usage
 - Reinforce my company's ability to serve their needs

- ***Regular Sales Call Objectives***
 - Identify opportunities for new business
 - Renew relationship and rapport with the customer
 - Follow-up on previous meeting's unfinished business
 - Introduce new product ideas
 - Demonstrate excellent service by providing solutions to client problems
 - Get an order or evaluation of new business

The call length may be determined either by the salesperson prior to the call in accordance with his/her call planning objectives or may change during the call to suit the needs of the customer. Literature on adaptive selling suggests that most often effective salespeople need to consider the desires and wants at each stage of the selling process and adapt their behaviors accordingly (e.g. Szymanski, 1988; Friedman and Churchill, 1987; Weitz, 1981). For example, a customer with little discretionary time to meet the salesperson may prefer a short sales presentation; but if the salesperson makes a lengthy presentation, then he/she is likely to be evaluated negatively by the customer (Szymanski, 1988), which impacts his/her selling effectiveness. From the above stated sales call objectives for three types of sales calls, we posit the following propositions:

P1: Since initial sales calls intend to build a rapport and create initial impression with customers/prospects, shorter sales call length would be more effective with customers.

P2: Since follow-up sales calls intend to exchange information, learn about customer needs and establish customer relationships, longer sales call length would be more effective with customers.

P3: Since regular sales calls intend to review, get order, and look for future opportunities with customers, shorter sales call length would be more effective with customers.

Since salespeople have some discretion to choose which customer to call first which to call later (prime prospect vs. suspect), hence they choose to call prospects of lesser quality, only if time permits (Futrell, 1984). Thus it follows that call length is likely to be more for higher quality prospects than lower quality prospects, other factors remaining constant. Darmon (2005) suggests that for a given sale call frequency, the response of sales call length to sales (volume) would be an increasing function with decreasing marginal returns, and it would be bounded between a minimum threshold level of call length and a maximum permissible call length, beyond which the customer may get irritated. Thus it is posited that:

P4: Longer sales call length is more effective with high quality prospects, and shorter call length is more effective with lower quality prospects.

Also, since higher sales quotas, and their under-achievement leads salespersons to call more risky customers, it is posited that:

P5: Longer sales call length is more effective with more risky customers/prospects, and shorter call length is more effective with less risky customers/prospects.

Also, since longer sales calls will be effective only up to a threshold after which customers may get irritated, therefore it is posited that:

P6: Sales call length is associated with salespersons' effectiveness, such that at low/high call lengths the salespersons' effectiveness is low but at moderate call lengths it is high (inverted U shape relationship).

3.2 Sales call frequency and salesperson performance

Several studies have reported that increased sales call frequency of a salesperson leads to higher sales volume in b2b context (e.g. Roman and Martin 2007), as well as in b2c context (e.g. Barnes, 1997; Crosby, Evans, and Cowles, 1990; Frankwick, Porter, and Crosby, 2001). In a longitudinal study, Roman and Martin (2007) show that sales call frequency is positively related to not only sales volume, but also customer satisfaction, perceived value for money and perceived service quality in the b2b context.

The underlying argument linking sales call frequency and higher sales related performance of the salesperson is that increased time devoted to customers goes towards not only making sales presentations, demonstrations, but also negotiating customer objections and closing the sales (Roman and Martin, 2007). At the same time, higher call frequency also reflects the resources being committed to the relationship by both the parties (Roman and Martin, 2007), and thus can be considered as transaction-specific asset that increases buyer's relational orientation and thus the likelihood of more sales to customers (Pillai and Sharma, 2003). Thus higher investment in the relationship by the salesperson in terms of personal contact is likely to lead to higher sales (Wilson 1995). In line with the above research, an empirical study by Beswick and Cravens (1977) suggests that sales of consumer products were determined by salesperson's percentage of time spent in the geographic area. Another supporting evidence suggest that frequency of contact also enhances the communication between parties (Mohr, Fisher, and Nevin 1996), that leads to better and faster problem solving and thus an improved service to customers (Roman and Martin 2007).

Contact frequency also enhances customer's assessment of what is being exchanged in relation to cost (Zeithaml, 1988). Recent empirical study by Ulaga (2003) suggests that availability of supplier and speed of information were important ways of adding value to the relationship by the supplier. In the literature, higher call frequency has also been shown to be a key determinant of customer satisfaction (e.g., Barnes, 1997; Boles et al., 2000; Crosby et al., 1990). However over the relationship life cycle, the effect of call frequency may not be uniform. Initial sales calls with customers are expected to have higher call frequency since several calls may be required before the buyer gives a salesperson serious consideration (Leigh and McGraw, 1989). Several studies in the service literature indicate that in the mature stage of the relationship, the influence of person-related aspects like contact intensity with the salesperson reduces over time and the relationship is maintained on more rational basis e.g. offer-related characteristics (Coulter and Coulter, 2002; Gounaris and Venetis, 2002). In the strength-of-ties literature too, it has been emphasized that frequent interaction between two parties (e.g. buyer-seller) decreases the display of opportunism and facilitates transfer of information (Hansen, 1999), which is likely to enhance effectiveness of salespeople. Thus it is posited that:

P7: Call frequency is positively associated with salespersons' effectiveness, such that at low/high call frequency the salespersons' effectiveness is low but at moderate call frequency it is high (inverted U shape relationship).

P8: Call frequency would be higher in initial stages of relationship with customers, and would be lower in matured stage of relationships for effective selling performance.

P9: Call frequency would be higher in initial sales calls and lower in regular sales calls for effective selling performance.

3.3 Sales call length, call frequency and relationship quality

Relationship quality has been conceptualized as a higher order construct consisting of various distinct constructs. Most researchers have adopted trust and satisfaction as key dimensions of relationship quality (Dorsch et al., 1998; Palmer and Bejou, 1994; Kumar et al., 1995). It has been found that in relational selling approach, the customer's perception of the salesperson, and not of the selling firm, actually influences his or her behavior (Palmatier et al., 2006). Thus the salesperson plays a central role in the creation and maintenance of the trust necessary for a high quality of the relationship between him/herself and the customer (Swan, Bowers, and Richardson, 1999). In a salesperson-customer context, relationship quality is achieved as an outcome of the salesperson's ability to reduce perceived uncertainty in the buying situation for the customer (Roloff and Miller, 1987; Zeithaml, 1981). High relationship quality means that the customer is able to rely on the salesperson's integrity and has confidence in the future performance of the salesperson, based on the level and consistency of past performance.

Sales call frequency has been found to be a key determinant of developing and maintaining buyer-seller relationships in the literature. Since contact intensity is a key determinant of developing and maintaining buyer-seller relationships, higher frequency of contact facilitates relational selling strategies (Jolson, 1997), easier predictability of the other partners' behaviors, due to increased time spent together across situations (Doney and Cannon, 1997). Several studies validate have the finding that higher call frequency leads to increased customer satisfaction and improved relationship outcomes (e.g. Boles et al., 2000; Cannon and Homburg, 2001; Doney and Cannon, 1997; Heide and Miner, 1992; Nicholson, Compeau, and Sethi, 2001; Schultz and Evans, 2002; Barnes, 1997; Crosby, Evans, and Cowles, 1990). Thus it is posited that:

P10a: Higher sales call frequency is associated with higher relationship quality with customers.

P10b: Higher sales call frequency is associated with higher salesperson's performance.

Since contact intensity originates not only from call frequency but also from call length, the impact of increased time spent with customers through longer calls should also exhibit similar consequences. Thus *ceteris paribus*, higher call lengths should also lead to higher relationship quality with customers. Thus it is posited that:

P11: Higher sales call length is associated with higher relationship quality with customers.

4. Theoretical Implications

Making a sales call is the most frequent and central activity in a sales job (Moncrief, 1986), and involves decisions pertaining to allocation of field time by salespersons. Thompson (1973) notes that “every contact a salesperson has...involves different human problems or situations...and there is no one sales situation and no one way to sell” (pg 8). Managing time effectively has been long considered as one of the seven sales behaviors of effective salespersons (e.g. Peterson, Wright and Weitz, 1984; Behrman and Perreault, 1982; Weitz, 1981). However, in planning sales call time allocation across customers, firms often face the tradeoff between having fewer salespeople (which may result in potential loss of sales) and having too many (which may be costly), which makes sales call planning an important activity in sales effort allocation (Darmon, 2005).

This paper contributes to the existing body of knowledge on sales call planning and effort allocation by shedding light on the implications of allocating time with customers in terms of sales call length and call frequency for higher salesperson’s performance and higher relationship quality with customers. This paper also contributes by highlighting the under-researched construct of sales call length in determining salesperson’s performance. The paper shows that sales call length and sales call frequency are together important in determining sales performance. Both call length and call frequency are function of time and time spent well with customer will increase performance and customer relationship quality.

5. Managerial Implications & conclusion

The paper has several meaningful managerial implications. First, the paper sheds light on the need for bringing sales call length into managerial action table. Hitherto, sales call length was planned assuming customers with equal sales potential to be same or similar. However, this assumption often led to ineffective allocation of sales time, wasted calls, inappropriate call planning and poor relationship quality with customers. This paper therefore provides new information to managers on how sales call duration or contact time with customers can impact relational and performance outcomes of the salesforce, and therefore, how to manage the field time using appropriate autonomy to salespersons to allocate their own time in the field.

Secondly, this conceptual paper also demonstrates how call frequency is also important along with sales call length. Therefore, sales managers and salespersons need to manage both call frequency and call length, individually and in combination, so as to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of sales calls. Sales effort allocation needs closer management of field force time management and is also important from monitoring and control purposes.

Thirdly, this study also shows that customers do expect salespersons to spend quality time with them and maintain the contact. Quality of time spent by salespersons with customers is often difficult to measure and manage; however, call length and call frequency which may lead to higher customer satisfaction is a good proxy measure of quality of time spent with customers and the required frequency of meeting with customers.

Finally, the study also shows that time is a good proxy measure of sales efforts. Although call reports are often used for monitoring and control of salespersons, however, these are more often manipulated. Instead, appropriate strategies for determining sales call lengths and call frequencies with each individual customers in the salesperson's territory would lead to more effective salesperson's performance. Sales managers no longer need to rely on sales call lengths determined from workload approach which has often unrealistic assumptions about the realities in the sales territories.

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