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When, And How Salespersons Spend Time With Customers? An Empirical Study of the Quality of Sales Calls, and it's Impact on Sales Performance

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Abstract

Despite so much research happening in the area of sales call planning and salesperson performance, this stream of literature suffers from adequate understanding on how salespersons in the field use various heuristics for allocating their field time for, in determining the two dimensions of calling plan- call frequency, and call length. This research adds to this area of understanding, using in-depth interviews of 18 salespersons who examine the salesperson-customer interactions in different selling situations. This interview data was then subjected to content analysis. Based on the content analysis of the responses from the interviewees, key themes were identified. Based on the relationships between these themes a series of propositions are posited in the paper. The findings of this study suggests that the variance in sales call lengths for different customers depends on various factors such as, past sales, potential sales, customer type/profile, number of decision makers, level of accounts receivable, level of customer relationships, level of customer satisfaction, level of customer involvement, and level of competition in the market. These factors also bring heterogeneity in sales call frequency to different customers. Based on the findings of this study it is suggested that sales managers should give autonomy to their sales force to choose sales call frequency and call lengths, so that they can adapt their calling patterns to customers based on the salience of the above listed factors. Through this research, I also appeal to all sales managers to realize the importance of sales call length, and use it strategically to determine key sales performance outcomes, in a manner similar to sales call frequency.

When, And How Salespersons Spend Time With Customers?
An Empirical Study of the Quality of Sales Calls, and it's Impact on Sales Performance

A recent study by Cahners Research (Mulcahy, 2002) suggests that salespersons have drastically reduced their contact time with customers, almost to the tune of an average of 1.81 sales representatives making calls to customers each week (industry range: 1.47-2.21), with 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 this context 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, in planning sales effort allocation across customers, firms often face the tradeoff between having fewer salespeople (which may result in opportunity costs or loss of sales) and having too many (which is too costly to maintain). Since sales effort is often measured as a function of time spent by the salespersons with their customers, sales call planning becomes an important activity in sales effort allocation for the firms (Darmon 2005). Planning and managing sales calls with customers in terms of its length (or duration) and its frequency is effective management of selling time by the salesperson, and also considered one of the seven specific sales behaviors of effective salespersons (e.g. Peterson, Wright and Weitz 1984; Behrman and Perreault 1982; Weitz 1981). The sales force does influence customers' perceptions of the seller's reliability and the value of the seller's services that affects relationship continuity (Weitz and Bradford, 1999). Sales researchers

have used this logic to successfully explain sales effectiveness by defining and measuring the sales strategies and its success in terms of customer relationship performance and information sharing (Hunter and Perreault 2007; Ahearne, Jones, Rapp, and Mathieu 2008). These objectives are effort-intensive, and require time to be spent with customer, which does beyond the single-minded goal of efficiency, or that of making a quick sale.

However, since most of the studies on sales call lengths and frequency are based outside India, I conducted an exploratory study to estimate the range of sales calls costs in Indian companies. An exploratory survey was carried out with sales managers (who acted as key informants for their companies) of 43 companies representing sectors such as Manufacturing (49%), Retail and Distribution (12%), Banking and Financial Services (14%), Services (14%), Pharmaceutical (4%), Real Estate (7%). The sales call costs varied as a function of the industry, customer type and the product type. Sales call costs were calculated as total salespersons' compensation plus total reimbursements, divided by the number of sales calls made by them, each month. The sales call costs were found to be in the range: Rs 50 to Rs 2500 per call. The pan-industry mean (median) sales call cost was Rs 475(Rs 324). Another important preliminary finding of this study was that salespersons were found to spend an average of 50% of their sales call time with customers on activities such as discussing their needs and preferences, providing key product related information, making sales presentations, and addressing customer concerns. These activities relate very closely to customer-oriented behaviors of salespersons (Saxe and Weitz, 1982). Only 15% of the call time was consumed in order taking and payment collection. It was also found that mean number of sales calls made by salespersons across all industries was 180 calls per month (median-100 calls). In 58% of cases, sales call reporting was done weekly, while in 23% of companies it was carried out on a monthly basis. Only 10% companies had daily sales calls

reporting system. This calls for further examination of how sales call time allocation by salespersons, in terms of call length and call frequency, impact their effectiveness.

Academic research mentions two main approaches for the sales force effort allocation (sales call length and call frequency): (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 analytic 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.

This research addresses an under-researched area of sales call length (duration) and quality of sales calls to understand how, why and when sales calls are important to achieve sales objectives such as sales volumes, and relationship with customers. Specifically, the following research questions are addressed:

1. How salespersons take decisions about making sales calls to customers?
2. How do these decisions impacts sales performance outcomes such as sales volumes, and relationship with customers?

I use in-depth qualitative interviewing technique to answer the research questions. Based on interviews with 18 salespersons, across industries, and product categories, we posit few propositions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Making a sales call is the most frequent and central activity in any sales job (Moncrief 1986). Managing sales call in terms of its length (or duration) and its frequency is considered to be part of the effective management of selling time by the salesperson, and considered to be one of the seven specific 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 opportunity costs) and having too many (which may be costly to maintain) and thus sales call planning becomes an important activity in sales effort allocation (Darmon 2005).

Prior research (e.g., Beswick and Cravens, 1977) suggests with empirical support, that the sales of consumer products are determined by salesperson's percentage of time spent in the geographic area. Weitz's (1978) ISTEA 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. However, the call length and its objectives 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. However, these studies do establish that sales volume is also a function of time spent with customers.

The change in planned sales call length is not only desirable but also important from the perspective of achieving sales objectives, and has been widely studied in the adaptive selling literature. For example, effective salespeople often 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. 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.

Parsons and Vanden Abeele (1981) not only found a positive relationship between number of sales calls and sales, but they also posit that the sales call elasticity may vary with product life cycle of the product and thus in the short run may not change. They also suggest 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, besides salesperson's personal characteristics such as ability to learn and think analytically and the situational factors affecting them. Other studies on sales call allocation strategies have attempted to suggest a optimal number of sales call 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, these studies have considered the characteristics of salespersons to act independently of sales call made, and has excluded the sales planning activities that go into utilization of a salesperson's time. To resolve this issue, Ryans and Weinberg (1987) 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.

Similarly, models based on sales force allocation to products (e.g.Zoltners and Sinha 1979; Montgomery, Silk, and Zaragoza 1971; 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 typical segment member over the time frame considered, and sales response estimates for the model were converted into indices with base as the normal yearly sales and a normal product mention policy (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 and given the nearly

impossible task of estimating the sales response functions, it is more practical to follow call norms for each type of account rather than opting for optimal call patterns, if there is any.

Studies on effect of sales call frequency on sales outcomes argue that higher frequency of contact facilitates relational selling strategies by working closely with customers to meet their needs, more quickly (Jolson 1997), exchange information, and more easily predict each other's behaviors, due to increased time spent together across situations (Doney and Cannon, 1997). It is also helps close more sales (Roman and Martin 2008). 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, & Cowles, 1990; Frankwick, Porter, & Crosby, 2001). However, the major limitation of these studies has been the assumption that sales call frequency is a function of time spent by the salespeople with their customers, and operationalized as the number of contacts between them.

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).

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 (Gounaris & 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.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology used in a study is determined by the objectives of the research (Silverman, 2000). Decisions about design, measurement, analysis, and reporting flow from the purpose of the research (Patton, 1990). Creswell (1998) explains that qualitative research is appropriate in the following instances: (a) when the research question starts with a "how" or "what" and not with a "why"; (b) the research topic needs to be explored; (c) there is a need to present a detailed view of the topic; and (d) when there is sufficient time and

resources to undertake on the field of study. Thus, considering the objectives set earlier, qualitative research was deemed both appropriate and warranted.

In-depth interviews were conducted to gain a deeper understanding of the specific phenomenon of how to choose the sales call length and antecedents of sales call quality with customers and how and when is it important to achieve the desirable sales outcomes for the companies. The use of in-depth interviews has been known to be an effective way of acquiring "deep" information and knowledge about the subject being studied (Mariampolski 2001; Johnson 2002). Semi-structured interviews were employed. This method follows general guide questions defining areas of interest which allows more flexibility and responsiveness in exploring the answers given by the respondent (Arksey and Knight, 1999). In a semi-structured format, the interviewer wants to know more specific information, and thus introduces the topic and then guides the discussion by asking specific questions (Rubin and Rubin 1995). These interviews follow a general script and cover a list of topics, but will also be open-ended (Bernard 2000). This method is chosen for several reasons. First, "key informants" will be very busy salespersons, and sales managers. Having a semi-structured interview will provide focus and direction to the interviews, allowing the use of time more efficiently. Furthermore, the interview guide in a semi-structured interview helps make interviewing a number of different people more systematic and comprehensive by delimiting in advance the issues to be explored. Second, the semi-structured interview can build on the findings gained in the survey of the literature. Following the advice from Glaser and Strauss (1967) to continue interviewing until a state of theoretical saturation is reached, the researcher continues to interview until a point is reached where nothing new can be learned. Therefore, choice of the sample size was based based on theoretical saturation. A total of 18 interviews with salespersons were carried out in the cities of Kolkata, Mumbai, and

Lucknow. Each interview lasted between 45 minutes and 60 minutes, was audio-recorded, and transcribed for subsequent analysis. The responses from the in-depth interviews was then coded using an iterative process, sorted and combined to determine broad categories, to reflect the dominant themes. Each theme was then be validated with further interviews.

RESULTS & DISCUSSIONS

The qualitative in-depth interviews of 18 salespersons examining the salesperson-customer interactions in different selling situations were subjected to content analysis. Based on the content analysis of the responses from the interviewees key themes were identified. We then use theoretical triangulation of interview data and literature review to posit propositions later in this paper. We now discuss each the key themes obtained from the in-depth interviews.

Sales Call Length & Frequency and Sales Performance

How often to call the customer

When salespersons were asked how they decided on frequency of sales calls, the responses ranged from, “Based on my own decision”, to, “Based on sales of last quarter.” Other responses included, motivating the customer, customer potential, sales, quality of customer interaction, customer’s interest, and willingness to purchase, maintaining a balance between being forgotten by the customers, and getting irritated, competitor actions, as per company norms for sales calls, or as per customers’ wishes. When salespersons were asked whether they would still visit their customer who is buying regularly from them, the responses were largely positive. Many respondents said, they would go to take feedback on their product, or “even to say thanks”, or even take their, “supervisors to make them feel special”. One

respondent said, “for good customers we try to enhance their social image”. Other reasons included, “taking further references from them”, cross-selling, and “to get product feedback”. Based on the above, I posit that:

Proposition 1: Sales call frequency to customers is affected by factors such as past sales, potential sales, level of customer relationships, level of customer involvement, and level of competition in the market.

The above proposition can be broken down in simpler propositions as given below:

Proposition 1a: Sales call frequency to customers is affected by past sales, and potential sales.

Proposition 1b: Sales call frequency to customers is affected by level of customer relationships.

Proposition 1c: Sales call frequency to customers is affected by level of customer involvement.

Proposition 1d: Sales call frequency to customers is affected by the level of competition in the market.

How much time to spend with customers

When salespersons were asked how they decided the quantity of time they would spend their customers and prospects, their responses ranged from, "based on customers' potential offtake", to "depends on the customer", "customer involvement", "customer's sales potential", "customer type/profile", "number of people involved in decision making", "depends on competition" , " to increase customer satisfaction", " or " to recover past dues(receivables)". Overall, almost all interviewees expressed the feeling that their intent was to optimize the time spent with customers based on potential sales they could get. Based on the above, I posit that:

Proposition 2: Sales call length in customer interactions is affected by factors such as past sales, potential sales, customer type/profile, number of decision makers, level of accounts receivable, level of customer relationships, level of customer satisfaction, level of customer involvement, and level of competition in the market.

The above proposition can be broken down in simpler propositions as given below:

Proposition 2a: Sales call length in customer interactions is affected by past sales, and potential sales.

Proposition 2b: Sales call length in customer interactions is affected by customer type/profile.

Proposition 2c: Sales call length in customer interactions is affected by number of decision makers in the customers buying center.

Proposition 2d: Sales call length in customer interactions is affected by level of accounts receivables.

Proposition 2e: Sales call length in customer interactions is affected by level of customer relationships.

Proposition 2f: Sales call length in customer interactions is affected by level of customer satisfaction.

Proposition 2g: Sales call length in customer interactions is affected by level of customer involvement.

Proposition 2h: Sales call length in customer interactions is affected by level of competition in the market.

Sales reporting & monitoring

We also wanted to determine whether the responses received from our respondents on the above themes are due to their reporting structure, or their own volition. We therefore, also asked them to inform us about their organization's reporting systems. Most respondents had some form of reporting structure. Few respondents had submission of market reports about competition, few others also had to report their sales calls (call summary), kinds of products sold, customer satisfaction, the sales pipeline, and some form of call productivity. Those salespersons using the sales technology tools automatically captured this during the sales calls. Interestingly, none of the salespersons interviewed by us reported that his/her

organization wanted reporting on sales call duration. We believe the organizations do give their sales force autonomy at that level. Based on the above, I posit that:

Proposition 3a: Sales reporting systems primarily consist of, sharing information pertaining to:

- **market intelligence,**
- **sales call frequency,**
- **sales call productivity,**
- **product portfolio,**
- **customer satisfaction, and**
- **sales pipeline**

Proposition 3b: Sales reporting systems do not generally contain sharing information on sales call length (or duration).

Calling pattern and sales performance

When salespersons were asked which all activities they spend their time on in the field, their responses were varied, although there were several commonalities. Most common responses included the following:

- Order taking
- Payment collection

- Promoting dealer as well as the brand
- Organizing customer meets
- Find new customers, through references.
- Meeting, and talking to customers to reduce their resistance to purchase.
- Ensure product, promotional merchandise availability, and consumption.
- Tracking competition

Based on the above, I posit that:

Proposition 4: Sales call activities primarily consists of:

- **Order taking**
- **Payment collection**
- **Ensuring product availability, and consumption.**
- **Promoting brand**
- **Meeting customers**
- **Tracking competition, and**
- **Finding new customers**

We also asked the respondents if they think that there is a relationship between spending more time with customers (either by calling more frequently or by increasing sales call length, or both), and their sales performance. We also asked them why and how this relationship might work?

Most respondents thought that there is a positive and direct relationship between spending more time with customers (higher calling frequency, and/or higher call length, or both), and higher sales performance. Some responses were, “If I leave that counter, my competitors will eat that counter”, or, “If we sit at dealer’s point, they will hesitate in selling competitor’s products in your presence”. Other responses suggested collecting market intelligence (“We also get to know about the range of our products available at that are in demand”), “building relationship amidst the clutter (of other sales persons calling the same customer)”, or for the “push factor”. One salesperson noted, “Can’t say that it is always good, sometimes this may annoy the person involved.” However, the summary of responses can be best captured in one respondent who highlighted the importance of maintaining customer relationships amidst the intense competition, “competitor’s merchandisers may take advantage if our relationships are not good”. In summary, the responses suggested that customer relationships were the most important outcome of spending more time with customers that increased the customers’ switching cost; thus leading to higher performance for the salesperson.

When asked how spending their time with customers increased their sales performance, most salespersons had something positive to say. Few said that spending time with customers led to “boosting customers’ morale”, “keeping the competitors away” (or making them weaker), “increases dealer credibility before consumers’ eyes”, “solving their resistance to increase sales”, “build relationships with customers by sharing information about the share market, movies, and jokes”, and, “create awareness about new product launches”.

We finally asked the respondents if their organizations or bosses influenced their calling patterns. Almost all respondents agreed that their organizations decided sales call frequency based on the sales to be achieved from that customer, which in turn was decided based on certain factors such as past sales, and future demand growth. Based on these quotas,

incentives are given, and the salespersons are then free to choose their calling pattern, and even deviate from calling frequency if the need arises. Sales call length is still an unknown entity in the sales reporting and monitoring systems.

Based on the above, I posit that:

Proposition 5a: Higher sales call frequency will increase sales performance primarily by:

- **Building customer relationships**
- **Increasing customer switching costs(to competitors)**
- **Collecting market intelligence, and**
- **Motivating channel customers to sell more to consumers**

Proposition 5b: Higher sales call length will increase sales performance primarily by:

- **Building customer relationships**
- **Increasing customer switching costs(to competitors)**
- **Collecting market intelligence, and**
- **Motivating channel customers to sell more to consumers**

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS & CONCLUSIONS

This study provides new insights on the various heuristics used by salespersons for allocating their field time for, and the factors that determine the two dimensions of calling plan- call

frequency, and call length. The managerial implications of my study are manifold. The primary implications for sales managers is that any efforts to optimize the sales call plan of their salespersons when meeting their customers, based on a clearer understanding of the heuristics used for sales call planning. The primary implications of this study is that it is best to delegate the job of sales call planning in terms of call frequency and call length to the salespersons, rather than driving it from top. Every sales call is different and each encounter between salesperson and customer results in different outcomes. Therefore, it is important to understand when, why, and how sales call lengths and its timing with different customers result in different outcomes.

This study also suggests that the variance in sales call lengths for different customers depends on various factors such as, past sales, potential sales, customer type/profile, number of decision makers, level of accounts receivable, level of customer relationships, level of customer satisfaction, level of customer involvement, and level of competition in the market. These factors also bring heterogeneity in sales call frequency to different customers. Based on the findings of this study it is suggested that sales managers should give autonomy to their sales force to choose sales call frequency and call lengths, so that they can adapt their calling patterns to customers based on the salience of the above listed factors. It is also suggested that salespersons allocate time between customers, choose important customers from unimportant ones, across the length of the relationship with different customers, and therefore any organizational guidelines on sales call frequency or call lengths should only be suggestive, and not controlled for. Through this paper, I also give a call to sales managers to realize the importance of sales call length, and use it strategically to determine key sales performance outcomes, in a manner similar to sales call frequency.

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