Salespersons’ Empathy

A Systematic Literature Review and Research Agenda

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Outline

1. Salespersons’ empathy: Relevance and definition
2. Prior research on salespersons’ empathy
3. Research gap and research questions
4. Method: Systematic literature review
5. Results
6. Conclusion and research agenda
1. Salespersons’ empathy: Relevance and definition

Relevance

- Salespersons’ empathy: Its importance has been recognized in the marketing, retail, sales and service literature.
- Prerequisite of successful selling.
- Vital part of the process of identifying and satisfying customer needs.

Definition

- Empathy: An ability or trait which is either cognitive or affective and either unidimensional or multidimensional.
- Cognitive empathy: Perspective taking.
- Affective empathy: Emotional contagion, empathic concern.
- Salespersons’ empathy: The ability to sense and react to buyers’ thoughts, feelings, and experiences in personal selling.
2. Prior research on salespersons’ empathy

- Marketing and sales research: Salespersons’ empathy as a trait or an ability personality construct that is linked to sales performance or relationship outcomes, namely customer satisfaction and customer loyalty.

- Service marketing literature: Frontline employees’ empathy used in developing the service quality (SERVQUAL) test instrument and in testing its effect on relationship outcomes.

- Networking literature: Empathy as an independent variable in explaining franchisor-franchisee working relationships.
3. Research gap and research questions

Research gap

- Rich conceptual background in the literature (marketing, sales etc.).
- Numerous empirical examinations of the impact of salespersons’ empathy on sales performance and relationship outcomes.
- Not quite obvious which aspects have to be considered when empathizing with buyers in personal selling.
- No systematic literature review on hand yet.

Research questions

- Which aspects have to be considered when empathizing with buyers in personal selling? (focus on ability, not behavior)
- Which are the antecedents, moderators and effects of the cognitive and affective dimensions of salespersons’ empathy (perspective taking, emotional contagion, empathic concern) in personal selling?
4. Method: Systematic literature review

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5. Results

Emotional contagion and empathic concern

- Research regarding their antecedents and moderators does not yet exist.
- However, some research on their effects is on hand.
  Emotional contagion: **Sales performance (positive (+) or negative (-) impact).**
  Empathic concern: **Sales performance (no effect (0)),** negative customer emotions (0), customer orientation (+), positive customer emotions (+) etc.

Perspective taking

- Antecedents: **Seller-buyer relationship duration (+),** salespersons’ neuroticism (-), …
- Effects: **Sales performance (0),** positive word-of-mouth (+), client referrals (+), likelihood of placing an order (+), customer loyalty (+) etc.
  Moderators: Professionalism (+) on the likelihood of placing on order, perspective-taking training (0) on customer need knowledge etc.
### 6. Conclusion and research agenda

#### Conclusion

- When empathizing with buyers in personal selling, both the cognitive and affective dimensions seem to be important and should therefore be considered.

#### Research agenda

- Emotional contagion, empathic concern: Research on antecedents and moderators (for example, *customer empathy*).
- High seller-buyer relationship duration as enabler for salespersons’ empathy?
- Still mixed findings on salespersons’ empathy’s effect on sales performance – perhaps because of different conceptualizations. Does empathy increase performance at all? Which are the consequences of being not empathic?
- Role of the personal selling process: When salespersons’ empathy is of particular importance in order to perform effectively?
Discussion

- Research questions too restricted? (clear focus on „empathy“, „personal selling“)
- Sample size enough? (n = 42 (37 + 5))
- Target journal: Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management. Other suggestions?


List of references (continued)


List of references (continued)
