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

Discussion

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

Selection of empirical articles: Process, filters, and results

Filter type	Description	ABI Global result	EBSCO result	Total
Substantive	All articles with empath*, "emotional contagion" and "perspective taking" in their title or abstract	1203	1829	3032
Substantive	At least of one three additional keywords must also appear in title or abstract ('sales*', 'sell*', 'buy*')	70	89	159
Methodological	At least one of seven additional key words indicating empirical data or analysis must also appear in title or abstract ('data', 'effect*', 'empirical', 'evidence', 'finding*', 'result*', 'test*')	48	71	119
Substantive and methodological	Remaining abstracts read for both substantive relevance and statistical analysis	29	42	71
Substantive and methodological	Remaining full articles read for both substantive relevance and statistical analysis	21	35	56
Duplicates	Deletion of duplicate articles found in both databases			37

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“)
- Sampe size enough? (n = 42 (37 + 5))
- Target journal: Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management. Other suggestions?

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