

Linking improvisational behavior to customer satisfaction: the relational dynamics

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Abstract

Purpose – Contemporary sales scholarship suggests that salespersons pursuing customer satisfaction should improvise (think and act on their feet) to find solutions to customers' emergent problems. A missing link in this literature, however, is the relational context within which improvisation takes place and becomes effective. This study aims to examine how the tone of the salesperson–customer relationship (whether cordial or coercive) drives and conditions salesperson improvisation and its implications for customer satisfaction.

Design/methodology/approach – The study tests the proposed model using dyadic salesperson–customer data from business-to-business (B2B) markets in Ghana. The relationships are tested using structural equation modeling technique.

Findings – The study finds that salesperson improvisation is associated with customer satisfaction. It also finds the extent of cordiality between salespersons and their customers predicts but does not enhance the value of improvisation for customer satisfaction. The reverse is true for customer exercised coercive power which is not a significant driver of improvisation but can substantially alter its benefits for the worse.

Practical implications – By implication, salespersons should improvise more to be able to satisfy customers. However, such improvisation must be tempered with a consciousness of the relationship shared with customers and the level of power they exercise in the relationship.

Originality/value – Because improvised behavior deviates from routines and may be unsettling for customers, improvising salespersons must first understand whether their customers would be willing to accommodate such deviations. Yet, the literature is silent on this relational context surrounding improvisation. This study, by exploring facilitating and inhibitory relational variables implicated in improvisation, addresses this gap.

Keywords Customer satisfaction, Exercised coercive power, Industrial selling, Relationship cordiality, Salesperson improvisation

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

In the current marketing environment, conditions in firms can change quickly (Gürhan-Canli *et al.*, 2016). Thus, industrial customers' needs and the demands they make on salespersons are often set in a context of surprise and urgency (Hill *et al.*, 2017). Accordingly, recent business-to-business (B2B) scholarship suggests that salespersons' ability to satisfy customers is contingent on the ability to diagnose conditions in sales situations (Kadic-Maglajlic *et al.*, 2016; Román and Martín, 2014; Singh and Koshy, 2010) and respond to them.

While salespersons seldom meet with customers in a strategy vacuum, surprises are frequent making it imperative for salespersons to improvise by thinking and acting on their feet (Moorman and Miner, 1998). Improvisation occurs when salespersons, facing unexpected and urgent situations, employ spontaneous unscripted solutions (Yeboah-Banin *et al.*, 2016) to solve customers' problems.

Yet, for the true value of improvisation to be realizable, salespersons need to feel assured that their improvised solutions would be accommodated, and appreciated by customers. Improvisation being uncertainty-laden (Moorman and Miner, 1998) can be disruptive of routine practices (Ferguson, 2009) to which B2B customers are accustomed. Thus, while customers may benefit from it, they may also find it unsettling (Crosby *et al.*, 1990) thereby becoming unreceptive towards it (Mueller *et al.*, 2011).

This places the customer and its relationship with salespersons at the center of the improvisation-satisfaction argument. Cordial (or frosty) relationships mean customers are more (or less) willing to accommodate and appreciate improvised actions. Thus, salespersons may be tempered in their choice to improvise depending on the nature of the relationship shared with a customer. Marketing and sales scholars and practitioners recognize the importance of the customer relationship to effective selling and customer satisfaction (Cicala *et al.*, 2012). However, its implications for improvisation remain unknown. This is a critical gap that needs to be addressed given the frequency of surprises, the complex

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nature of the salesperson–customer relationship and the growing emphasis on customer satisfaction as the means to lasting exchange relationships.

The objective of this study, therefore, is to examine how the salesperson–customer relationship shapes improvisation and its customer satisfaction outcomes. The study develops and tests a conceptual model of sales improvisation in the face of varying customer relationships: one in which there is cordiality and another in which the customer exercises coercive power. The hypothesized paths address two fundamental questions:

- Q1. Does the perception of a cordial versus coercive relationship with a customer drive salespeople to improvise?
- Q2. To what extent does improvisation drive customer satisfaction in the face of varying salesperson–customer relationships?

Ultimately, the study’s goal is to address a practically relevant issue of which customer salespersons should improvise with to achieve greater customer satisfaction. By this, we make three contributions to the B2B literature. Our attention to improvisation in unexpected and urgent sales situations addresses calls to unpack the dynamics in sales situation types and identify relevant selling behaviors that work within them (Singh and Koshy, 2010). This also provides insights on how salespersons can match their selling behaviors to specific situations.

Second, this study breaks new ground by investigating the relational context within which improvisation occurs. While improvisation is gaining root in contemporary sales scholarship, there appears to be an implicit assumption that it is driven solely by urgency and surprise in sales situations (Yeboah-Banin, 2016; Hill *et al.*, 2017; Parhizgar *et al.*, 2017). We show that there is more to it by way of factors in the salesperson–customer relationship. The approach also responds to Hill *et al.*’s (2017) call for sales improvisation scholars to examine untested variables such as chemistry between the salesperson and customer that shape improvisation and its outcomes.

Finally, we examine the implications of improvisation for customer satisfaction, filling a distinct gap in the sales improvisation literature. Like other selling behavior constructs, the attention to improvisation has focused on salesperson outcomes such as sales performance (Parhizgar *et al.*, 2017) and team performance (Hill *et al.*, 2017). Hardly any research addresses customer outcomes. Yet, at the very core of sales improvisation lies an attempt to resolve customers’ emergencies and restore them to a state of equilibrium and satisfaction. We focus on satisfaction with the salesperson to enable an understanding of the conditions under which customers may be more-or-less receptive to improvisational efforts.

Conceptual background and hypotheses

The salesperson’s boundary role and improvisation

We define salesperson improvisation as salesperson behaviors, in sales situations, that are not pre-scripted but rather conceived and implemented simultaneously (Yeboah-Banin *et al.*, 2016). It occurs when salespersons face surprises such as when customers make unexpected demands that require urgent action (Vera and Crossan, 2005). Under such conditions, the

surprise element means that salespersons lack agreed behavioral blue-prints. In addition, the urgency in the situation means they cannot afford to go to the planning table. Rather, they are forced to think while acting. In improvisation, the time-gap between thinking and action is narrow and hardly separable, even to a point of convergence (Moorman and Miner, 1998). Accordingly, improvisation has been defined as the convergence of behavior composition and execution (Moorman and Miner, 1998), reflecting the conception of action as it unfolds (Cunha *et al.*, 1999).

Sales improvisation differs from adaptive selling behavior (Spiro and Weitz, 1990) given that the latter has planned roots (Sujan *et al.*, 1994, p. 40), whereas the former is a real-time response. In adaptive selling, a time lag can exist between response composition and action whereas improvisation is characterized by a temporal fusion of the two (Cunha *et al.*, 1999; Moorman and Miner, 1998). Yeboah-Banin *et al.* (2016) have discussed, extensively, differences between improvisation and adaptive selling including their temporality and scope. Akin to theatrical improvisation where audience reactions guide performers’ real-time amendments to the composition (Barrett and Peplowski, 1998), in sales improvisation, salespersons think and act, in real-time, in response on customers’ needs or demands.

Thus, improvisation becomes a customer satisfaction effort by which salespersons attempt to meet the demands of their boundary role as relationship and customer satisfaction agents (Rocco and Whalen, 2014). Boundary role theory (Pruden, 1969, p. 57) recognizes salespersons as the “linking pin” holding together the firm and its customer. They spend most of their time in direct contact with customers making them the organization’s ear and eye on the customer side. Where insights gathered require urgent response they are often the best positioned to address them.

Herein lies the double-bind that the boundary role presents to salespersons, which makes the relational dynamics between them and their customers critical for improvisation. On the one hand, salespersons are constrained to ensure customers are kept happy (Agnihotri *et al.*, 2017), an expectation which makes improvising responses to emergent customer problems attractive. On the other, improvisation being disruptive with no predictable outcomes means salespersons risk dissatisfying customers and creating friction at the organizational boundary (Ashok *et al.*, 2017).

Given that salespersons are mindful of how their actions affect customer relationships and outcomes (Crosby *et al.*, 1990), the double-bind that their boundary role generates should make them guarded when improvising. We argue, therefore, that the nature of this salesperson–customer relationship, whether cordial or frosty, can be facilitating or inhibitory of improvisation (Mayer *et al.*, 1995). A cordial salesperson–customer relationship means salespersons are comfortable with the customer and mentally free to improvise in spite of the potential anxiety its non-routine nature might cause them (customers). On the other hand, a frosty relationship can make the salesperson wary (of the likely negative reactions of customers to unforeseen outcomes) to improvise. Both relationship conditions also portend specific implications for the relationship between improvisation and customer satisfaction. Below we explicate these arguments as a basis for our conceptual model which hypothesizes relationship

cordiality and exercised coercive power (frosty) as both drivers and moderators of salesperson improvisation and its link to customer satisfaction.

The relational drivers of salesperson improvisation

Relationship cordiality and improvisation

Relationship cordiality refers to a buyer's assessment that its interaction with a seller is friendly and pleasant. According to Dampérat and Jolibert (2009), a B2B relationship is deemed cordial when an industrial buyer perceives working with a given salesperson to be friendly and easy. Cordiality is critical in B2B relationships because without it, business relationships fail or risk failure. As argued by Andersen and Kumar (2006: 522), a lack of a positive chemistry between B2B partners "is an often-cited reason" for relationship failure. A cordial relationship also opens up the psychological space for dealing with partners on a relational rather than transactional level (Lövsblad *et al.*, 2012).

Previous research recognizes this critical role of cordiality in B2B relationships. However, as seen from the Dampérat and Jolibert (2009) conceptualization, it betrays a bias for the buyer perspective. In this study, we introduce a salesperson perspective given our interest in cordiality as a driver of salesperson improvisation. Our premise is that it is the salespersons' assessment of the relationship (rather than the reverse) that is implicated in their behaviors. Accordingly, this study adapts the construct to the salesperson perspective and defines it as salespersons' assessment that their interaction with a given customer is pleasant.

We view such a perception as a potential driver of improvisation. Cordiality harmonizes the buyer-seller relationship and reduces the risk of conflicts (Dampérat and Jolibert, 2009). That being the case, salespersons improvising should feel less threatened by the possibility of conflict should their response fail in its objective of addressing the customer's needs. A cordial relationship also means there is enough trust and confidence (Mayer *et al.*, 1995) between the parties to warrant the assurance (in the salesperson's mind) that the customer would accommodate their off-strategy behaviors (Goffin *et al.*, 2006). Finally, a salesperson who perceives a cordial relationship with a customer would be at pains to sustain it by going the extra mile (Gu *et al.*, 2016) to improvise responses to their emergent needs. Accordingly, we argue that:

H1. A salesperson's perception of a cordial relationship with a customer is a positive driver of improvisation.

Exercised coercive power and improvisation

In contrast to the first hypothesis, we argue that exercised coercive power reduces the level of improvisation. Leonidou *et al.* (2008) define exercised coercive power as the extent to which a relationship party threatens and exerts punishment if their expectations are not met. For salespeople, a customer's exercise of coercive power may manifest as threats to switch to a competing supplier or breaking prior agreements without recourse to the salesperson. Customers who exercise coercive power generally have more power in the relationship and willingly use it to get what they want irrespective of the consequences for the other side (Sturm and Antonakis, 2015).

A customer's exercised coercive power may make salespersons feel forced to do things which they otherwise

would not do (Frazier and Rody, 1991). Under such conditions salespersons may approach the relationship from a transactional rather than relational perspective (Lövsblad *et al.*, 2012), reducing their willingness to exhibit benevolent (improvisational behavior) in resolving customer problems (Gu *et al.*, 2016). This is in line with Johnson *et al.* (1993) finding that aggressive influence evokes resistance among relationship parties. Importantly, relationships in which customers exercise coercive power could also make salespersons anxious about getting things wrong and being punished for it. Thus, they may choose to submit to the customer's power by conforming (Gölgeci *et al.*, 2017) to routine practices rather than improvising. Accordingly, we propose that:

H2. A salesperson's perception of customer exercised coercive power is negatively related to improvisation.

Salesperson improvisation and customer satisfaction

Extant knowledge suggests a positive link between improvisation and customer outcomes (Leybourne and Sadler-Smith, 2006; Singh *et al.*, 2017). Improvisation as an unscripted behavior involves the use of generalized problem solving skills, in-the-moment assessments of situations (Perkins and Rao, 1990) and spontaneous action (Nemkova *et al.*, 2015) to solve problems when it matters the most to customers (Weick, 1998). When customers determine salespersons are willing to go that extra mile to resolve their urgent problems, the salesperson is deemed to be putting the customer's interest first, a condition that engenders positive feelings towards the latter (Gu *et al.*, 2016). Evidence from the sales performance literature corroborates this assertion by suggesting that improvising salespeople sell more (Hill *et al.*, 2017; Parhizgar *et al.*, 2017). Additionally, improvised responses, being unscripted, may result in differentiated solutions which may please customers (Bowen and Lawler, 1992). These suggestions lead to our third hypothesis that:

H3. Salesperson improvisation is positively related to customer satisfaction.

The relational boundaries of salesperson improvisation

Evidence from the service recovery literature suggests the possibility that the nature of the existing salesperson-customer relationship conditions the improvisation-customer satisfaction link (Komunda and Osarenkhoe, 2012). When improvisation occurs in the context of an already cordial relationship, the positive feelings engendered by such benevolent behavior should add to existing positive affect towards the salesperson (Guenzi and Pelloni, 2004), resulting in increased customer satisfaction. Indeed, Geyskens *et al.* (1996) demonstrate that where relationship parties perceive benevolent partner behaviors there is a tendency to be pleased even to the point of becoming willing to overlook mistakes.

Second, salespersons' perception of cordial relations with a customer should trigger more improvisation to resolve their challenges, increasing the opportunity for customers to be happy with their extra effort to support them. On the flip side, improvising in the face of a poor customer relationship could mean customers are unwilling to forgive mistakes and undesired outcomes. Thus, an argument can be made that a cordial

salesperson–customer relationship acts as an enabling context for realizing the customer satisfaction goals in improvisation.

H4. The positive relationship between salesperson improvisation and customer satisfaction is strengthened when the relationship between the parties is cordial.

In contrast, dealing with coercive customers escalates salespersons' vulnerability to haphazard improvised responses (Bonney and Williams, 2009). This means the resulting solutions may be too riddled with mistakes to make any difference, thereby failing to satisfy customers (Taute and McQuitty, 2004). Moreover, because coercive customers are powerful, they can be unrelenting in their demands making nothing the improvising salesperson does impressive. Even though this may move salespersons to try harder (Gabler *et al.*, 2017) their actions may be too conditioned by the “pressure to perform” to be successful. Finally, because improvisation deviates from norm, coercive customers may be prone to punish such deviations rather than be impressed by them, leading to the hypothesis that:

H5. The positive effect of salesperson improvisation on customer satisfaction is weakened when levels of customer exercised coercive power are high.

Methods

Study sample and setting

The model was tested on data from B2B sales professionals and their customers in Ghana. The study sample consisted of 400 sales professionals in industrial firms in Ghana's major cities drawn from the Ghana Business Directory and the Association of Ghana Industries database (Acquaah, 2012). For each salesperson, the research team personally delivered the questionnaire to be completed at the informant's convenience. Each participating salesperson was given two weeks to complete the questionnaire after which follow up calls and visits were initiated.

To collect the customer data, we asked participating salespersons to share, with us, the contacts of the customer with whom they improvise most. Unfortunately, the salespersons were unwilling to oblige us. As a compromise, we requested that they present the questionnaires on our behalf and collect them. To protect the sanctity of the customer data and also assure them that salespersons would not see their responses, each customer survey was placed in an envelope with a second one enclosed. The second one allowed them to seal and label their surveys themselves before returning them to us. In addition, we included a measure of social desirability to validate the data. A total of 224 salesperson informants returned their questionnaires. For 170 of these, we received corresponding customer responses. As such, the effective sample size used in this study is 170 salespersons–customer dyads representing a 42 per cent effective response rate.

Measures

All constructs included in the model were drawn from extant literature and anchored on seven point Likert-type scales. The dependent variable, customer satisfaction ($\alpha = 0.90$), refers to a customer's rating of the extent to which the salesperson meets

their expectations (Homburg *et al.*, 2009). Salesperson improvisation ($\alpha = 0.71$) refers to the extent to which the salesperson thinks and acts on their feet in unexpected and urgent situations (Yeboah-Banin *et al.*, 2016). The two relational variables, relationship cordiality ($\alpha = 0.91$) and exercised coercive power ($\alpha = 0.87$) were adapted from Dampérat and Jolibert (2009) and Leonidou *et al.* (2008) respectively. Relationship cordiality was measured as the salesperson's perception of the smoothness of his/her relationship with a given customer. Exercised coercive power, on the other hand, refers to the salesperson's perception of the extent of a given customer's exercise of power in the relationship through the imposition of penalties and threats to switch to another supplier. We also included adaptive selling ($\alpha = 0.90$) as a control given its conceptual closeness to the improvisation variable. It was measured as the extent to which salespersons vary their behaviors as they move from one customer to another, taking into consideration customer nuances (Spiro and Weitz, 1990). In addition, we included a measure of social desirability (Crowne and Marlowe, 1960) to assess the possibility that the customer responses were contaminated by method bias. Appendix contains a detailed account of the measures used.

Analysis

Measurement model estimation

To evaluate the quality of the measures we conducted confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using maximum likelihood estimation in LISREL 8.5. Measurement model fit was assessed by chi-square (χ^2) test along with a number of fit heuristics. Results show that the proposed measurement model replicates the data well:

- 1 $\chi^2/\text{degrees of freedom (D.F.)} = 75.95/80$;
- 2 $p < 0.60$; root mean squared error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.01;
- 3 normed Fit Index (NFI) = 0.92;
- 4 non-Normed Fit Index (NNFI) = 0.99;
- 5 comparative Fit Index (CFI) = 0.99; and
- 6 standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) = 0.05.

To establish convergent validity, we checked for and found all item loadings to be significant at 1 per cent level. Loadings ranged between 0.62 and 0.94. Composite reliability (CR) for all constructs exceeded the 0.60 minimum with the lowest being 0.65 and the highest being 0.83. To further assure discriminant validity, construct inter-correlations, average variance extracted (AVE) for each construct, and the highest shared variance (HSV) between construct pairs were assessed. Inter-construct correlations ranged between -0.04 and 0.42 . In addition, all AVEs met the minimum criteria of ≥ 0.50 . Comparisons between HSVs (squared correlations) and construct AVEs show the latter to be larger than the former in all cases (Table I).

To avoid susceptibility of findings to common method bias, Lindell and Whitney (2001) recommend the use of separate data sources for assessing predictor and predicted variables. Accordingly, we collected data on the predictor variables (improvisation, relationship cordiality, exercised coercive power, and adaptive selling) from industrial salespeople, and the dependent variable from customers. Furthermore, given

Table I Inter-construct correlations

| Variables | Mean | SD | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|------------------------------|------|------|----------|---------|----------|----------|---------|
| Salesperson improvisation | 5.29 | 0.74 | 0.71 | 0.003 | 0.041 | 0.045 | 0.070 |
| Adaptive selling | 5.57 | 0.63 | 0.061 | 0.90 | 0.074 | 0.001 | 0.020 |
| Relationship Cordiality | 5.99 | 0.64 | 0.203** | 0.273** | 0.91 | 0.077 | 0.173 |
| Exercised coercive power | 2.75 | 1.37 | -0.212** | -0.043 | -0.278** | 0.87 | 0.004 |
| Customer satisfaction | 5.67 | 0.83 | 0.265** | 0.142 | 0.417** | -0.067 | 0.90 |
| Customer social desirability | 5.85 | 0.91 | 0.211** | 0.135 | 0.312** | -0.369** | 0.265** |

Notes: **Correlations significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed); cronbach alpha values on diagonal; highest shared variance above diagonal

that the conceptual model includes multiple moderating and mediating effect paths, it is unlikely that informants could have formed mental models of the relationships of interest (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). To account for the possibility of common method bias in the customer data (owing to the mode of collection), we tested the extent of their social desirability and correlated it with all other constructs in the model (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2012). The highest correlation recorded was -0.36. Altogether, these findings assure that the constructs in the model display adequate validity and reliability (Fornell and Larcker, 1981) and are not contaminated by common method bias.

Structural model estimation

To test the hypothesized relationships, we followed established precedence (Darrat *et al.*, 2017) to estimate structural equation models using the maximum likelihood estimation method in LISREL 8.5. Structural paths (along with measurement models) were estimated simultaneously in a full information equation model (Jaccard and Wan, 1996). Two nested models (one predicting salesperson improvisation and another predicting customer satisfaction) were estimated. Model 1 estimated the direct effects of relationship cordiality, customer exercised power and adaptive selling on improvisation and customer satisfaction as well as the direct effect of improvisation on customer satisfaction. The two interaction effect paths were constrained in Model 1. Results show that Model 1 fits the data well:

- $\chi^2/D.F.$ = 190.55/104,
- $p < 0.00$;
- RMSEA = 0.07;
- NNFI = 0.92;
- CFI = 0.94; and
- SRMR = 0.05.

In Model 2, we added the interaction effect paths to Model 1. Findings show that Model 2 fit the data better than Model 1:

- $\chi^2/D.F.$ = 171.89/102,
- $p < 0.00$;
- RMSEA = 0.06;
- NNFI = 0.93;
- CFI = 0.95; and
- SRMR = 0.04.

Importantly, we find that chi-square decreases significantly by 18.66 at 2 degrees of freedom, implying that Model 2 is superior to Model 1. Hence, we rely on Model 2 to interpret our findings regarding the hypothesized relationships.

Prior to estimating the interaction effect model, we orthogonized (mean-centered) all variables involved in interactions (i.e. salesperson improvisation, relationship cordiality and exercised coercive power) and generated their multiplicative terms for use in the structural model (Ping, 1995). We controlled for the effects of adaptive selling behavior in both models given extant evidence.

Results

Table II presents the results of the hypothesis tests detailing the coefficients, fit statistics, and variance explained in the criterion variables. We find that relationship cordiality, exercised coercive power and adaptive selling explained 11 per cent of the total variance in salesperson improvisation and 30 per cent in customer satisfaction. The total variance explained by relationship cordiality, exercised coercive power, adaptive selling and the two interactions in customer satisfaction is 36 per cent. This indicates that the two interactions explain additional 6 per cent of the variance in customer satisfaction over and above the direct effect paths. The largest variance inflation factor across the estimated models is 1.26, suggesting that multicollinearity does not undermine stability of the findings.

We specified in H1 that relationship cordiality is positively related to salesperson improvisation. Findings support this assertion ($\beta = 0.22$, $p < 0.05$) leading to the acceptance of the hypothesis. We argue in H2 that perceived customer exercised coercive power is negatively related to salesperson improvisation. Results show that parameter estimate for H2 is negative but not significant at the 5 per cent level ($\beta = -0.19$; $p < 0.10$). Accordingly, H2 is rejected. The study further argued in H3 that salesperson improvisation is positively related to customer satisfaction and is supported in the data ($\beta = 0.25$; $p < 0.01$).

Contrary to our argument in H4, the study finds that the effect of salesperson improvisation on customer satisfaction is rather weakened when relationship cordiality takes on values one standard deviation above the mean (Figure 2). The coefficient of the interaction-term of relationship cordiality and salesperson improvisation is significant but negatively related to customer satisfaction ($\beta = -0.16$; $p < 0.05$). Accordingly, H4 is rejected. Finally, the study posits in H5 that the effect of salesperson improvisation on customer satisfaction is weakened when customer exercised coercive power is high. The study finds support for this argument in that increases in exercised coercive power are associated with a weaker relationship between salesperson improvisation and customer satisfaction

Table II Results of structural model estimation

| Independent variables | Dependent variables | | | | Remarks |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------|-----------|
| | Salesperson improvisation | Customer satisfaction | Salesperson improvisation | Customer satisfaction | |
| Direct effect paths | | | | | |
| Adaptive selling | 0.02 (0.25) | -0.06 (-0.08) | 0.02 (0.26) | 0.01 (0.11) | NA |
| Relationship cordiality | 0.22 (2.13) | 0.45 (5.15) | 0.22 (2.12) | 0.40 (4.68) | Supported |
| Exercised coercive Power | -0.19 (-1.92) | 0.10 (1.24) | -0.19 (-1.93) | 0.06 (0.73) | Rejected |
| Salesperson improvisation (IMP) | - | 0.25 (2.67) | - | 0.25 (2.79) | Supported |
| Interaction effect paths | | | | | |
| IMP x Relationship cordiality | - | - | - | -0.16 (-2.33) | Rejected |
| IMP x Exercised coercive power | - | - | - | -0.22 (3.21) | Supported |
| Fit Indices | | | | | |
| $\chi^2/D.F.$ | 190.55/104 | | 171.89/102 | | |
| P-value | 0.00 | | 0.00 | | |
| RMSEA | 0.07 | | 0.06 | | |
| NNFI | 0.92 | | 0.93 | | |
| CFI | 0.94 | | 0.95 | | |
| SRMR | 0.05 | | 0.04 | | |
| R ² (%) | 11 | 30 | 11 | 36 | |

Notes: Critical values of the t distribution for $\alpha = 0.10$, $\alpha = 0.05$ and $\alpha = 0.01$ (two-tailed test) are † = 1.65; * = 1.96, and ** = 2.58, respectively (t-values are reported in parentheses)

Figure 1 Conceptual framework

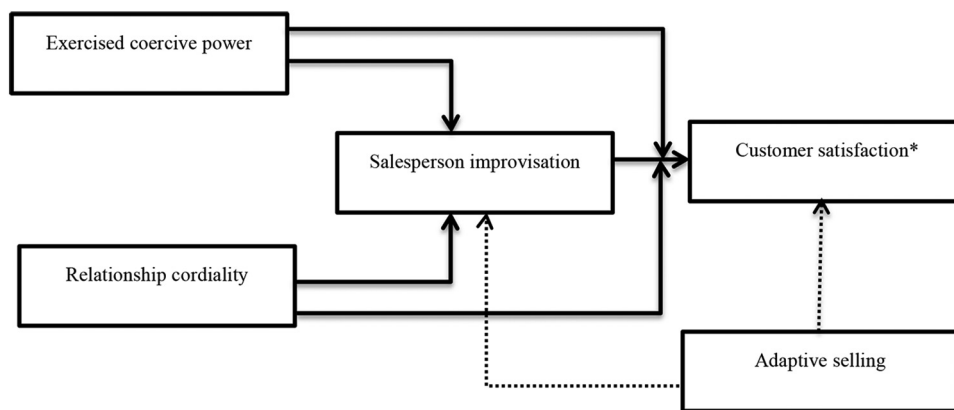
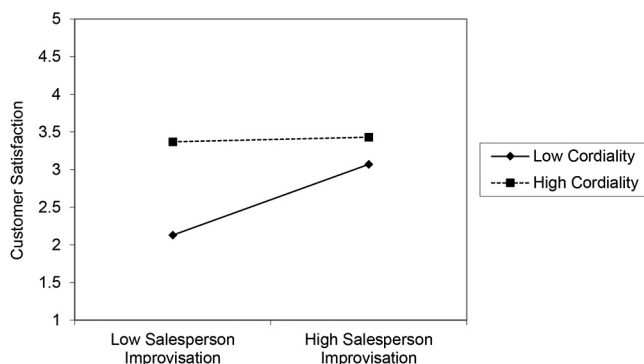


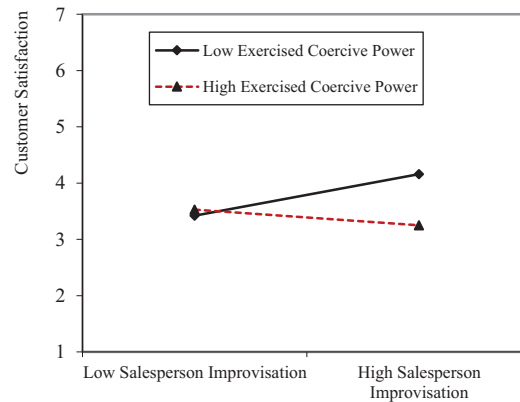
Figure 2 Surface plot of the moderating effect of relationship cordiality



($\beta = -0.22$; $p < 0.01$). As we show in Figure 2, when levels of salesperson improvisation and exercised coercive power are both high, there decrease in customer satisfaction levels.

Discussion

Conditions surrounding sales situations and how these impinge on salespersons' ability to satisfy customer continue to engage scholarly attention. By virtue of their boundary role, salespersons have the responsibility of ensuring customers are kept happy (Gabler et al., 2017). Increasingly, this means being able to resolve their unexpected and urgent challenges. Thus, while it may be useful to plan sales strategies, prevailing market conditions require salespersons to improvise to situational demands as well. According to Tom and Lucey (1997), customer

Figure 3 Surface plot of the moderating effect of customer exercised coercive power

satisfaction is directly linked with the timeliness of salespersons' response to their problems. Accordingly, where customer problems are urgent and unexpected, a reasonable salesperson response is to improvise. However, this cannot occur in a vacuum given the relationship-laden nature of B2B selling (Andersen and Kumar, 2006). We argued, therefore, that the nature of the existing relationship may either propel or inhibit salespersons' improvisational behavior. Additionally, the customer-salesperson relational tone may further determine whether or not customers are impressed by salespersons who improvise.

To explore these issues, the study hypothesized that relationship cordiality and exercised coercive power both drive the level, and condition the effects of salesperson improvisation on customer satisfaction. Results show that improvisation is strongly linked to customer satisfaction. In agreement with extant suggestions (Gu *et al.*, 2016; Singh *et al.*, 2017; Robson, 2015), this finding demonstrates the usefulness of improvisation to salespersons exposed to unexpected and urgent sales situations (Hill *et al.*, 2017; Parhizgar *et al.*, 2017). It appears that customers value improvisation by associating it to salespersons' extra effort to resolve their challenges (Gu *et al.*, 2016; Brown and Peterson, 1994), engendering positive feelings towards the salesperson.

That said, this study suggests that salespersons must be wary of improvising for customers who exercise coercive power over them. On the one hand, where such improvisation fails to save the situation, such customers may choose to punish (rather than appreciate) them for going off-course. Customers with coercive power have the "the discretion and the means to asymmetrically enforce" their will over salespersons (Sturm and Antonakis, 2015 p. 139). Thus where, ordinarily, the improvisational effort should be recognized and appreciated (Gabler *et al.*, 2017) coercive customers, by virtue of their power, may overlook such efforts. They expect it; knowing well that they can exercise their power to enforce their will in its absence. On the other hand, this evidence also corroborates the notion that coercive customers exert pressure on salespersons which makes them prone to mistakes during improvisation (Bonney and Williams, 2009) thereby failing to satisfy (Taute and McQuitty, 2004). For this reason, and as suggested by Boundary Role Theory, salespersons are also likely to improvise less in order to avoid creating frictions at the firm boundary. As Organ (1968 p. 75) argues, impulsive responses

(such as improvisation) "may engender conflict even where it is not inherent in relationships between organizations". It is not surprising, therefore that though the path coefficient of the hypothesized relationship between coercive power and improvisation fails to meet the 5 per cent acceptance criteria, the direction of effects tends towards the negative direction.

In contrast, and as expected, salespersons tend to improvise more with customers with whom they share cordial relations. A key part of the boundary spanning salesperson's role in a B2B relationship is to ensure that relations with customers are kept at a rewarding level of equilibrium (Dampérat and Jolibert, 2009). This is particularly so with customers with whom there is the assurance of future business, by virtue of the positive state of prevailing relationships. It rests with such salespersons, therefore, to ensure that any event with the potential of offsetting that balance is addressed (Agnihotri *et al.*, 2017). Not surprising, salespersons understand this and use improvisation when dealing with cordial customers. As we argue earlier, the fact that salespersons improvise more with such customers may also draw from the none-threatening relationship context within which such improvisation takes place which also engenders benevolent behavior (Mayer *et al.*, 1995).

Contrary to expectation, however, there is little to gain from this effort by way of customer satisfaction. Indeed, while a cordial relationship, itself, is linked to customer satisfaction (Robson, 2015), its value in the specific context of unexpected and urgent sales situations is limited. Rather, its effect may apply to a more planned and scripted selling setting.

This is a surprising finding considering oft-alluded to assertions of links between the quality and cordiality of the salesperson-customer relationship and customer satisfaction (Dampérat and Jolibert, 2009; Mullins *et al.*, 2014). It appears that in a cordial relationship, customers expect salespersons to act in their favor anyway (Crosby *et al.*, 1990), which renders their interpretation of the improvisational effort to redeem emergencies a matter of course rather than something special.

Perhaps also, the possibility of nonlinear effects may account for the non-significant coefficient returned for the test of the moderating effect of cordiality on the improvisation-customer satisfaction link. As suggested by Dampérat and Jolibert (2009), there may be an optimal level at which a free and cordial relationship might present a strong enough influence. Too little cordiality may mean customers are not invested in the

relationship enough to take note of the salesperson's improvisational efforts while too much cordiality might lead them be too familiar with the salesperson to notice their non-routine behaviors to save situations. This thinking finds support in File *et al.* (1995, p. 74) logic that "inappropriate or intrusive interactions could have negative effects on client relationships".

Practical implications

The study's findings portend a number of implications for sales practitioners and managers. First, if as shown, improvisation drives customer satisfaction, salespersons may consider employing it more when facing exigent sales situations. Building on extant evidence of its value to sales performance, this link between improvisation and customer satisfaction is further support to its usefulness in specific situations. Accordingly, industrial salespersons hoping to strengthen their relations with customers through increased satisfaction should employ improvisation under conditions of surprise and urgency. For sales managers, the insight is to train their sales personnel to develop the capacity to think and act on their feet. Managers of salespersons selling in highly competitive and unpredictable markets should also encourage them to improvise more in the interest of customer satisfaction.

However, salespersons must be conscious of the dynamics in their relations with customers. As our evidence shows, there is little to benefit from improvising with customers with whom they share cordial relations, and a lot to lose from those who wield unbalanced power over them. Managers must support their salespersons to identify such customers and either find alternative routes to satisfying their unexpected and urgent demands or determine the amount of improvisation they would be willing to tolerate and appreciate. Sales firms must also pay closer attention to the power dynamics in their relations with customers. Attention should go to identifying less powerful customers and matching them to highly improvisational salespersons.

Limitations and future research directions

A common concern in sales management literature is the challenge of relying on single informants' subjective responses for both predictor and criterion variables. In this study, we address this challenge by obtaining our data from multiple sources. Data for predictor and control variables were collected from industrial salespeople while data on the customer satisfaction variable was obtained from customers. By following this strategy, we were able to account for what is perhaps the most common shortcoming in sales research (Rich *et al.*, 1999).

However, the study suffers a couple of limitations which can be viewed as opportunities for future research. The empirical setting for this study, while introducing unique and exotic evidence to the sales literature, may not replicate in other settings. In particular, Ghana is a middle income emerging African market that adopted the open market philosophy only three decades ago. While this presents a useful and intriguing setting to test the applicability of constructs established in global north markets, the obvious limitations in the reach and global generalizability of the findings are apparent. Might there be ways in which factors characterizing industrial relationships in larger and more established markets may differ from the

evidence presented here? Do certain market characteristics define how business to business relationships form and take shape, and are such factors then implicated in the situations in which salespersons improvise and to what effect? These issues should direct future research.

Importantly too, how should multinational firms operating in both global north and south markets negotiate the issues raised in this study? Moreover, are there cultural factors (e.g. power distance and uncertainty avoidance) that are implicated in how salespersons in multinational firms improvise with respective customers across cultural settings? Future researchers are encouraged to explore these interesting angles and, in particular, look to applying cultural dimensions to cross national improvisation. Such findings would enable conclusions on the standardization and/or adaptation options available to sales managers relative to how their salespersons respond to customer exigencies.

Finally, our study failed to establish any significant links among relationship cordiality, improvisation and customer satisfaction. As we posit, this might be because of possible nonlinear moderating influences rather than the linear one hypothesized here. Future researchers are encouraged to explore this possibility.

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Appendix

| Constructs and measures | Factor Loadings | Average Variance Extracted | Composite Reliability |
|---|-----------------|----------------------------|-----------------------|
| Salesperson improvisation (Yeboah-Banin et al., 2016) | | | |
| <i>When dealing with unexpected and urgent situations...</i> | | | |
| I figure out my responses as I go along | 0.75 | 0.50 | 0.65 |
| I think and act on my feet | | 0.65 | |
| I respond in the moment | | 0.62 | |
| Adaptive selling (Spiro and Weitz, 1990) | | | |
| <i>In my work...</i> | | | |
| I am very flexible in the selling approach I use | 0.83 | 0.61 | 0.82 |
| I can easily use a wide variety of selling approaches | | 0.94 | |
| I am very sensitive to the needs of my customers | | 0.81 | |
| Relationship Quality (Crosby et al., 1990) | | | |
| <i>Salespersons were asked to answer the following about the customer with whom they improvise most</i> | | | |
| I have a good working relationship with this customer | 0.84 | 0.62 | 0.83 |
| My relationship with this customer is outstanding | | 0.89 | |
| I work very smoothly with this customer | | 0.91 | |
| Exercised coercive power (Leonidou et al., 2008) | | | |
| <i>Salespersons were asked to answer the following about the customer with whom they improvise most</i> | | | |
| This client threatens to move to a new supplier, to make me submit to demands | 0.79 | 0.59 | 0.81 |
| Overall, this customer has the upper hand in our business relationship | | 0.92 | |
| This client has what it takes to force our company to submit to their demands | | 0.86 | |
| Customer satisfaction (Homburg et al., 2009) | | | |
| Overall, our firm is satisfied with the way this salesperson handles our needs | 0.87 | 0.58 | 0.80 |
| Our firm is satisfied with the way this salesperson does his/her work | | 0.9 | |
| This salesperson meets our expectations | | 0.77 | |
| Social desirability (Crowne and Marlowe, 1960) | | | |
| I am always courteous even to people who are disagreeable | NA | NA | NA |

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