The Contribution of Adaptive Selling to Positive Word-Of-Mouth In Malaysian Computer Retail Business

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Abstract: - The application of salesperson adaptive selling skills and sales presentation skills by a salesperson during their interaction with customers in the sales situation can have a significant effect on customer intention to promote through word-of-mouth in the Malaysian Computer retail business. The purpose of this paper is to examine the relations between salesperson adaptive selling skills, positive word-of-mouth and the relative roles played by cognitive satisfaction in the development of customer satisfaction which will lead to customer's intention to promote through word-of-mouth in a computer retail setting in Malaysia. This will then lead to increased benefits for the organization in the form of customer loyalty. The cognitive evaluation of customer satisfaction was found to explain customer loyalty in a retail setting significantly. This finding holds importance to those retailers who have been able to generate high expectations in the eyes of their customers.

Key-Words: - Adaptive Selling, Cognitive Satisfaction, Word-of-Mouth, Customer Loyalty, Malaysian Computer Retail Business.

1 Introduction

Recognizing the function of salespeople is important, both from an academic and practitioners' viewpoint. To a large extent, this curiosity develops because individual outcomes are a contribution to organizational performance (1). Salespeople play a significant role in organizational success or failure. Previous researches have agreed that there is no single factor that could explain selling effectively (2; 1). For example, voice characteristics (3), environmental competitiveness (4), personality traits (5), and psychological adaptation (6). These are a few examples that signify just a few of the qualities that have been connected with individual sales productivity (1).

As competition deepens, products and services become more indistinguishable, and markets become established, it is becoming increasingly tougher for companies in retailing industries to distinguish themselves from other stores. Simply offering customers with technical solutions to problems does not be sufficient anymore to be competitive and obtain and retain market share. Various value-added services, which commence before the actual operation begins, had gone far beyond it, so as to stay competitive and develop customer loyalty. Research and business customs have shown that upholding customers through value-added services costs less than obtaining new ones (7; 8).

A prevailing belief holds that an essential key to performance rests with the ability to sustain customer relationships (7; 9). Correspondingly, as relational value continues beyond price, customer bond are particularly effective when involved in long-term relationships (10).

2 Problem Formulation

As competition deepens, products and services become more indistinguishable, and markets become established, it is becoming increasingly tougher for companies in retailing industries to distinguish themselves from other stores. Simply offering customers with technical solutions to problems does not be sufficient anymore to be competitive and obtain and retain market share. Various value-added services, which commence before the actual operation begins, had gone far beyond it, so as to stay competitive and develop customer loyalty. Research and business customs have shown that upholding customers through value-added services costs less than obtaining new ones (1; 8).

This study will consider how cognitive satisfaction mediates the relationship between adaptive selling and customer intention to word-of-mouth. These situational factors have not been considered in prior research and provide new avenues for examining salesperson adaptive selling and its consequences.

3 Literature Review

3.1 Salesperson Behavior Performance

Sales organizations account for a considerable amount of marketing expenditures and revenues in many organizations. Operating at the edge between the organization and its environment, salespeople execute important boundary-spanning roles. The skills and efforts of salespeople have bearing on their individual outcomes as well as the effectiveness of their organizations. Since the sales force is decisively responsible for implementing business and marketing strategies, an essential objective of effective salespeople is giving superior value to customers and enhancing the organization's performance (11). Salespeople incorporate to sales volume, profits, and customer satisfaction. Because of this significant organizational role it is necessary for sales management to distinguish and analyze the factors that influence sales force outcomes and sales organization effectiveness.

3.2 Adaptive Selling

Adaptive selling refers to the ability of the salesperson to adapt his or her selling behaviour to accommodate particular interactions with the customer (12). This concept recognizes that no single sales approach is applicable to all situations. Instead, the effective salesperson will use a contingency approach which tailors the sales presentation to the particular selling situation (12; 13). Adaptive selling has been shown to enhance customer satisfaction (14) and to improve salesperson performance (15). Thus, the salesperson's ability to engage in adaptive selling is important in understanding the buyer-seller relationship.

3.3 Cognitive Satisfaction

Measuring customer satisfaction through cognitive satisfaction has become increasingly popular in the last two decades and today represents an important source of revenue for market research firms (16). The satisfaction construct has gained an important role in the marketing literature. It is widely accepted among researchers as a strong predictor for behavioral variables such as repurchase intentions, word-of-mouth, or loyalty (16).

Cognitive satisfaction is regarded as one of the primary determining factor of repeat shopping and positive WOM. The greater the degree to which a consumer experiences satisfaction with a retailer, for instance, the greater the probability the consumer will revisit the retailer and recommend (17; 18).

3.4 Formation of Word-of-Mouth through Cognitive Satisfaction

It is by and large believed that cognitive satisfaction leads to positive word-of-mouth recommendation, which is one of the indicators for customer intention to word-of-mouth (WOM). Marketing literature and a number of studies have confirmed a significant positive relationship between cognitive satisfaction and WOM (19; 20; 21). If consumers are satisfied with the product or service, they are more likely to carry on purchasing, and are more willing to spread positive WOM.

3.5 Relationship between Salesperson adaptive selling and Intention to WOM

Although a customer's personality and the employee's customer orientation were considered an important antecedent to relationship strength, salesperson adaptive selling skills rather than his/her personality

would perform a greater part in determining relationship strength (22). Salespersons are social actors who learn behaviors that are appropriate to the positions they take up (23; 24). In other words, salesperson can be motivated to adapt their behavior to situational requirements in spite of personal preferences (23; 25; 26; 27; 28).

Moreover, customer-oriented behavior by a salesperson has been established to intensify customer satisfaction (29; 30). The greater the customer's satisfaction with their past interactions on the salesperson, the higher will be the customer's trust in him/her (31). Conclusively, a salesperson's adaptations in attitude, values and/or goals signify a commitment to the maintenance of the customer relationship (23) which promotes commitment reciprocity (23; 32) by the customer. The popularity of customer–oriented behavior which includes adaptive selling skills stems, in part, from the assumption that building customer relationships will point in the right direction to increased benefits for the organization. The benefits are in the form of; customer satisfaction, loyalty, word-of-mouth, and intensify purchases (33; 34).

Inevitably, the customer-contact employee relationship has been the focus of a wide variety of service and retailing research (35; 36). For example, issues such as the customer-sales associate relationship (37), the influence of retail sales training (38), and the personalization of services (39) have been focused on in previous research. This stream of research supports the idea that the customer-contact employee interaction influences overall service quality (39), customer satisfaction (36), customer loyalty (37), and purchase intentions (35; 34).

Regardless of the growing worthiness and emphasis on relationship marketing, the operationalization of this concept is still vague. According to some authors, studies on relationship marketing in consumer markets are still deficient (40; 41). In occasions where research has been conducted in consumer markets, they focused mainly on generic issues, and there has been few concentration on areas that are influenced by the nature of the industry

or transaction concerned (42). As well, to date, there is a lack of studies investigating the numerous aspects of service that are imperative to customer retention (43)? Furthermore, the different outcomes (i.e. attitudinal and behavioral) of relationship strength are left predominantly unexplored in the relationship marketing literature. In addition, there is a lack of studies that explore the impact of factors such as salesperson adaptive selling on customer loyalty. Conclusively, there is little empirical work investigating customer relationship economies, which is the link between attitudinal measures (i.e. salesperson adaptive selling, customer satisfaction) and behavioral measures (i.e. customer loyalty, word-of-mouth behavior, and long-term customer relationship profitability), (44; 34). Therefore, in line with the above reasoning's and findings, it is conjectured that:

H1: There is a direct positive relationship between salesperson's adaptive selling and intention to word-of-mouth (WOM).

3.6 Relationship between Customer satisfaction and customer's intention to Word-Of-Mouth

Previous literatures have demonstrated that customer satisfaction has come to represent an important cornerstone for customer-oriented organizations (45). The concept highlighted on delivering satisfaction to consumers as well as obtaining profits in return (46). Customer satisfaction is important to marketers because it is usually assumed to be a significant determinant of recurring sales, positive word-of-mouth, intention to repurchase, and customer loyalty. It is worthy to consumers because it reflects a positive outcome following the outlay of limited resources and/or the positive accomplishment of prior needs. As a consequence, maximizing satisfaction is seen as a significant objective, collectively for both the firm and the consumer (47; 46).

Likewise, theory suggests that satisfaction feeds back into the system to influence ensuing intentions and behaviors (48). Customer's satisfaction with the shopping experience should reflect well on the retailer. An increase in satisfaction has been shown to result in

increased customer loyalty (49). From the above arguments it is hypothesized that:

H2: *There is a direct positive relationship between cognitive satisfaction and intention to word-of-mouth..*

4 Methodology

4.1 Sampling Design

To have a representative finding, the sampling technique used must be objective. This is an important effort adopted by most researchers in order to furnish a finding pertinent to the general. To choose the sample for this study, probability random sampling was used. A probability sample is necessary if the sample is to be representative of the population (50). Therefore, a two-stage systematic sampling technique is employed in this study.

4.2 Population and Sample Size

The unit of analysis for this study is individual customers who patronize the computer store. Studying primary consumer groups permits a more valid and reliable clarification to the model research in this study. A total number of 483 usable samples were collected from 5 different locations in the states of Penang, Kedah, and Perlis. In determining the sample size for this study, sample size selected was based on the criteria set according to (51). According to (51), it is estimated that a proportion of 13% of the explained variance to effect size values is a medium effect size for regression analysis.

4.3 Questionnaire Design

The survey questionnaire is divided into 7 sections: Section "A" covers the qualifying questions. To capture the salesperson's personal characteristics, 4 items were adopted from past literature and are listed under Section B. Three items (salesperson is younger or older, gender of the salesperson, and ethnicity of the salesperson) from this section will be controlled so as to see if it does have an effect on the relationship between salesperson adaptive selling and customer's intention to word-of-mouth. Following this, Section C and D measures the dimensions of the independent variables (salesperson's adaptive selling) which are hypothesized as having an effect on the dependent variable.

Section E consists of the dimension for the mediating variable, which is customer's cognitive satisfaction with a total of 4 questions. Questions from this section were phrased in positive and negative statements to encourage critical evaluation before responses were given. Section F requires the respondent to give objective opinions on their intention to be loyal to the store through behavioural intention statement and attitudinal responses. Lastly, an additional 5 questions in Section G serves as an instrument to capture the demographic characteristics of respondent.

5 Problem Solution

Multiple regression tests were conducted in order to test the relationship between the dimension of the predictor variable and the criterion variable. The predictor variable was salesperson adaptive selling skills, while the criterion variable relates to intention to word-of-mouth. Respondents' demographic variables such as salesperson are younger or older than the customers, gender, and ethnicity were statistically controlled (52). Hence, these variables were entered into the regression equation in the first step. The predictor variables were entered in the second step.

5.1 Profile of the respondents

Results from the analysis of the demographic profile of respondents indicate that there is a greater representation of customers in Kedah (41.4%), Penang (34.4%) and in Perlis (24.2%) respectively. This is viewed as being reflective of the accessibility to respondents. With the sample size of 700 customers and research assistant was able to gain respond from 483 respondents exiting the computer retail store, giving a 69% response rate. An analysis of response and non-response bias was not deemed to be necessary as all respondents answers questions right away and collection of questionnaires were also done as soon as respondents finishes answering the questionnaire (53). Moreover, the data for this study managed to be collected within the set time frame.

Majority of the sample are male (65%) as compared to female (35%). Respondents spanned the range of age categories from 15 to 64, with the majority (43.3%) of the respondents included in the survey sample being between the ages of 15-25, followed by the 26-35 age groups at 30.4%. The next largest age group was the 36-45 at 18.2%.

Respondents were also asked to provide information regarding their ethnicity. The analysis revealed that more than half of the total sample, or 53.2% of the 257 respondents included were of Chinese ethnic while 30.4% were Malays. By comparison, the state ethnic distribution from the 3 states sampled in this study is 62.1% Malay, 29.4% Chinese and 8.5% Indians (54). However, in this

study, it is the Chinese (53.2%) who frequent to the computer shops most as compared to Malays (30.4%), Indians (10.8%), and other races (5.6%).

Statistics on respondents Level of Education showed that a large proportion of the respondents (45.1%) were customers who possessed a Diploma or a College level education while 24.8% had attained a Bachelors Degree. Subsequently, Secondary School education customers made up a total of 17.0% of the sample population. Masters Degree, Doctoral Degree and primary school education respondents constituted 11.6%, 0.8%, and 0.4% of the sample respectively. The high proportion of respondents having a high education level was due to the urban nature of the sample.

The income frequency count showed that 40.0% of the respondents had a monthly income of less than RM 1000. 36.2% reported figures between RM 1001 – RM 3000 while 19.9% indicated income between RM 3001 – RM 5000. Subsequently, 3.3% of the respondents revealed income between RM 5001 – RM 7000. The remaining 0.6% of the respondents reported income up to RM 7001 and above. Majority of the respondents who visited the computer store are earning an income of less than RM 1000 as majority of them are students from a local University, colleges, and Schools. The money they earn is from scholarships and contributions from their parents. The general scenario among consumers of a computer shop is that, working consumers who earns a fixed income are generally provided with computer facilities by their employers. Thus they do not make to the majority of the population who frequent to a computer shop as compared to students.

In summary, the sample included in this study appeared to be largely comprised of Chinese, Male, students, and includes more middle-income earners. Reasons being that, during the survey process, consumers who are presently working notified that they don't frequent to a computer shops as much as student groups because computer facilities are provided by their employer at their working place. Thus, it explained the reason for having more students at the computer shop as most students are deprived of such facilities. Furthermore, the nature of a student work required them to keep in pace with the latest technology. This gives them more reason to be of interest in computers and its peripherals.

Table 1
Profile of Respondents

	Description	Frequency	%
Gender	Male	314	65
	Female	169	35
Age	15 – 25	209	43.3
	26 – 35	147	30.4
	36 – 45	88	18.2
	46 – 55	34	7.0
	56 -64	5	1.0
Ethnicity	Malay	147	30.4
	Chinese	257	53.2
	Indian	52	10.8
	Others	27	5.6
Level of Education	Primary school	2	.4
	Secondary school	82	17.0
	Diploma or college level	218	45.1
	Bachelor's degree	120	24.8
	Master's degree	56	11.6
	Doctoral degree	4	.8
	Others	1	.2
Monthly income	Less than RM 1000	193	40.0
	RM 1001 – RM 3000	175	36.2
	RM 3001 – RM 5000	96	19.9
	RM 5001 – RM 7000	16	3.3
	RM 7001 and above	3	.6

5.2 Data Analysis
5.2.1 Validity

One criterion for evaluating the accuracy of a research instrument is validity, the degree to which an empirical measure sufficiently reflects the real meaning of the concept under considerations. An assessment of validity would indicate how well a particular measure captures what it is intended to measure. It is important to point out that reliability and validity are very much related but they are not completely independent of one another.

Validation of an instrument always demands empirical investigations, with the nature of the proof required depending on the type of validity (55). Two types of validity are of applicable to this study: (1) content validity, the degree of correspondence between the items selected to constitute a summated

scale and its conceptual definition and (2) construct validity, the ability of a measure to confirm a network of related hypotheses generated from a theory based on constructs.

5.2.2 Reliability Analysis

To examine the internal consistency of the factors obtained, Cronbach's alpha was calculated where a coefficient at 0.6 or higher was considered acceptable (56; 57). For each resulting factor, an internal reliability of the summated scales was tested by using Cronbach's coefficient alpha. This reliability analysis procedure provided information about the relationships among individuals' items and their internal consistency as well as examined the properties of a measurement scale and the questions that make it. Subsequently, the Standard Deviation will show whether there is variation in the data of the study. Readings from the data below shows that the standard deviation is less than 1, indicating a small variation in the data sampled. With reasonably large samples as in this study, skewness and standard deviation will not 'make a substantive difference in the analysis' (58; 59). Responses to all items to the study variables were made on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). For clarity of explanation, the following criteria based on the mean scores were used to determine the levels of agreement of the variables. A mean score of M=1.67 and less were considered as 'low' agreement; mean scores within the range of M=1.68 to M=3.32 were categorized as 'moderate' agreement; and mean scores of M=3.33 and higher were termed as 'high' agreement.

Table 2:
Reliability Coefficients for the Variables in the Study

Construct/ Variables	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha	Mean	Std. Dev
Adaptive Selling	4	.84	3.91	0.60
Customer satisfaction Cognitive Satisfaction	4	.76	3.85	0.58
Customer loyalty Word-of-mouth (WOM)	2	.69	3.93	0.59

Note: All items used a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree)

The result of the reliability analysis sum up in Table 2 confirmed that all the scales shown, reveal a high internal consistency and reliability with Cronbach's alpha values higher than the minimum perimeter, (Cronbach's alpha > 0.60).

5.2.3 Hypotheses Testing

Multiple regression tests were conducted in order to test the relationship between the two dimensions of the predictor variable and the criterion variable. The predictor variable were salesperson adaptive selling, while the criterion variable relates to intention to word-of-mouth. Respondents' demographic variables such as salesperson are younger or older than the customers, gender, and ethnicity were statistically controlled (52; 60). Hence, these variables were entered into the regression equation in the first step. The predictor variable was entered in the second step. The following Table's below summarizes the result of the analyses.

5.2.4 Regression Analysis between Adaptive Selling and WOM

Table 3
Results of hierarchical regression analysis of adaptive selling skills on intention to word-of-mouth

Predictors	Model 1	Model 2
	Std. β	Std. β
Step 1: Control Variables		
Younger or older	-.05	.01
Gender	-.01	-.01
Ethnicity	.09	-.02
Step 2: Adaptive selling		.21**
R^2	.01	.43
Adj. R^2	.01	.42
R^2 Change	.01	.42
F-Change	1.09	68.19**

Note. Significant levels: *$p<0.05$, **$p<0.01$

From Table 3 above, adaptive selling have positive and significant association with intention to word-of-mouth; adaptive selling (β = .21, $p < .01$), thus, the results provide evidence that hypotheses H1 is fully supported.

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5.2.5 Hierarchical Regression Analysis between Cognitive Satisfaction and Intention to WOM

To test for hypothesis 2, another set of regression analysis was performed. The purpose of this analysis is to test for the effect of cognitive satisfaction on intention to word-of-mouth. The predictor variable was cognitive satisfaction. The criterion variables relates to intention to word-of-mouth. Salesperson's demographic variables such as younger or older than the customers, gender, and ethnicity were statistically controlled. Hence, these variables were entered into the regression equation in the first step. Cognitive satisfaction was entered in the second step. Table 4 summarizes the results of the hierarchical regression analysis. These results provide evidence that hypothesis H2 is accepted.

Table 4
Results of hierarchical regression analysis of cognitive satisfaction on Intention to word-of-mouth

Predictors	Model 1	Model 2
	Std. β	Std. β
Step 1: Control Variables	-.05	-.04
Younger or older	-.01	-.02
Gender	.06	.02
Ethnicity		
Step 2: Cognitive satisfaction		.64**
R²	.01	.41
Adj. R²	-.00	.40
R² Change	.01	.40
F-Change	.70	303.91**

Note. Significant levels: *p<0.05, **p<0.01.

5.2.6 The Mediating Effect of Cognitive Satisfaction on Adaptive Selling and Word-Of-Mouth

The Hypothesis posits that cognitive satisfaction mediates the relationship between salesperson adaptive selling and intention to word-of-mouth. Results in Table 5 shows that none of the control variables had significant influence on intention to word-of-mouth in step 1, subsequently, adaptive selling (β= .21, p<.01) were found to have a significant influence on word-of-mouth in the second regression equation.

Additionally, the third regression equation resulted in adaptive selling to be significant. This indicates that cognitive satisfaction only partially mediates the relationship between adaptive selling

on word-of-mouth. The comparison can be seen in Table 5.

Table 5:
Mediating Effect of Cognitive Satisfaction

Predictors	Criterion Variables			
	Significant Levels and Beta before Mediating		Significant Levels and Beta after Mediating	
	Step 1	Step 2	Step 1	Step 2
Control				
Gender	.00	.00	-.01	-.01
ethnicity	.10	-.01	.06	.01
IV				
Adaptive selling		.21**		.20**
Mediating				
Cognitive satisfaction				.31**
R²	.01	.43	.01	.49
Adj. R²	.00	.42	-.00	.48
R² Change	.01	.42	.01	.49
F change	1.09	68.19**	.70	70.39**

Note. Significant levels: *p<0.05, **p<0.01

6 Significance of the Study

The findings of this study are significant to marketers on an applied level, whereby the results provide information to retailers to help them to be more effective in providing appropriate customer service levels in the area of salesperson behaviour performance.

The nature of the product used in this research may help to explain the reported importance of the sales presentation skills/knowledge delivered to customers. Computer goods are often complex or technical, have numerous features, and change frequently due to the inclusion of new features or combinations of features. For their part, customers shopping for computer products may find it easy to be overwhelmed with numerous details and become confused. They may well be seeking a straightforward presentation of only that information that will help them make a choice. Salespeople in this product category are typically much more knowledgeable than the customer, and may be eager to explain technical features of the product.

7 Limitations and Future Research

Future research may benefit if some limitations of this study are noticed. Although we have examined a number of important issues in this study, there are several limitations inherent in the study. Firstly, only computer retailers in the northern states of Malaysia were examined. As a consequence, and regardless of the fact that the customers of the firm represent a wide range of industries, the generalization of the findings to other retail organizations is limited. However, as noted by (22), the generalization of studies undertaken in a single firm must be viewed with some scepticism; the results are likely to have increased internal validity. Clearly future research which provides more information on the external validity of our study would be most welcome.

Subsequently, as with much of the research in consumer behaviour realm, findings from the present research are no doubt being influenced by the context of the study. In particular, the specific variables sought by purchasers of computer product in their interactions with salespeople may not be the same as those sought by customers for other types of high involvement products. The salesperson behaviour performance attributes important in the purchase of appliances, automobiles, or homes, for example, may vary.

Future research should address the following issues. The external validity of the findings should be examined through replications in other industrial settings. The advantage by using data from only one industry and customers of the same retail store (only computer retail stores were used in this study), as in the present study, is that the potential confounding effect of the industrial context is reduced. However, a stronger test of the model would be to test the hypothesized model across several industries and types of relationships.

8 Conclusion

Results of this study found that there was a partial mediation effect of cognitive satisfaction on the relationship between salesperson adaptive selling and customer's intention to word-of-mouth. This implied that adaptive selling have an indirect impact on customer's intention to word-of-mouth via cognitive satisfaction. This result suggests that salesperson who posses an adaptive selling skill, plus an ability to applied these skills during their interaction with the customers is vital in enhancing customers intention to word-of-mouth.

The result of this study is consistent with the findings of previous study by (61) which suggest that satisfaction is a more central construct which mediates the effect of service quality perceptions on behavioural intentions and other outcomes. Thus the results of this study suggest that efforts to increase customer's loyalty should focus on enhancing customer's cognitive satisfaction during the salesperson/customers interaction. Special attention should be given to the enhancement of adaptive selling skills, which were found to have significant effects on customer's intention to word-of-mouth.

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