An Exploratory Study for Salespersons Extra-Role Customer Service in the Direct Selling Organizations

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ABSTRACT

Employees provide better service than competitors in extra-role service was hypothesized to be significantly and positively associated with the service quality and sales performance. Yet the nature of such extra-role service is still unexplored. This article focuses on the importance of salesperson extra-role service directed at customers (or so-called salesperson extra-role customer service, SERCS) and concentrated on understanding how many different types SERCS exist. Hence, in an effort to better understand SERCS, in-depth interviews with direct selling salespersons were used to establish a classification scheme of SERCS categories. Finally, four types of SERCS were identified: emotional support, information sharing, voluntary social interaction, and practical assistance.

Keywords: Salesperson Extra-role Customer Service, Emotional Support, Information Sharing, Voluntary Social Interaction, and Practical Assistance.

INTRODUCTION

Recently, there is increasing evidence in customer service and sales management research that salespersons’ extra-role behaviors directed toward customers have been regarded as a service strategy to enhance organizational outcomes such as competitive advantage (e.g., Dubinsky & Skinner, 2002) and customer outcomes such as customer satisfaction (e.g., Moliner, Martínez-Tur, Ramos, Peiro, & Cropanzano, 2008). Another conceptually similar construction is extra-role customer service (L. A. Bettencourt & Brown, 1997; Maxham III & Netemeyer, 2003). Extra-role customer service is defined as discretionary behaviors of contact employees in serving customers that extend beyond formal role requirements.

Essentially, marketing researchers have adamantly encouraged salespersons to engage in extra-role customer service while in the selling process (Dubinsky & Skinner, 2002; George, 1998). To date, this literature has focused on demonstrating the consequences of ERCS to service companies (e.g., Bettencourt & Brown, 1997; Dubinsky & Skinner, 2002; Maxham III & Netemeyer, 2003; Ackfeldt & Wong, 2006; Jaramillo & Prakash, 2008; Koc, Paksoy, & Torlak, 2008) and understanding the antecedents for salespersons to engage in extra-role behaviors (e.g., Bettencourt & Brown, 1997; MacKenzie, Podsakoff, & Ahearne, 1998; Ackfeldt & Wong, 2006; Dubinsky & Skinner, 2002; Jaramillo & Prakash, 2008; Koc et al., 2008). Less attention has been paid to identifying different types of ERCS.

Therefore, this study has two purposes. First, we present both a conceptual analysis of salespersons extra-role customer service (SERCS). Second, an exploratory qualitative study (e.g., the in-depth interview methodology) was used to categorize different kinds of SERCS that are performed by salespersons interacting with their customers. In the term, salespersons extra-role customer service has not been used. Hence we postulate that SERCS have been defined as salespersons’ voluntary or discretionary efforts which go beyond the call of duty to serve customers in satisfying their needs and desires, even though these extra-role services may not be seen, recognized or rewarded by a sale manager or organization (Chang and Chen, 2011).
CONCEPTUALIZING SALESPERSON EXTRA-ROLE CUSTOMER SERVICE

Extra-role behaviors are defined as behaviors that are not specified by job descriptions, as well as not included in developing formal reward systems (Van Dyne & LePine, 1998). Recently, a number of researchers have written conceptually about extra-role behaviors within a customer service setting (Maxham III & Netemeyer, 2003). For example, George and Bettenhausen (1990) have emphasized the importance of employees delighting the customer by providing little extras, extra attention, and spontaneous exceptional service during the service encounter for customer satisfaction and positive emotional responses. Bettencourt and Brown’s (1997) research have also advocated that employees who provide better service than competitors in extra-role service will affect customers’ satisfaction, have higher service quality, and receive more favorable word-of-mouth. Yet only a few researchers have attempted to “measure” salespersons’ extra-role behavior in the customer aspect (Molinero, Martinez-Tur, Ramos, Peiro, & Cropanzano, 2008; Payne & Webber, 2006). Hence our research is consistent with George and Bettenhausen (1990) and Bettencourt and Browns (1997) view, specifically understanding salespersons’ extra-role service in the customer aspect, namely salespersons extra-role customer service.

Yet, as was previously discussed, researchers have focused primarily on extra-role behaviors as a global construct and not recognized its multidimensionality (Van Dyne & LePine, 1998). For instance, if salespersons “often” go above and beyond the call of duty when serving customers; then salespersons will be regarded as having “high” extra-role customer behaviors (e.g., Bettencourt & Brown, 1997; Maxham III & Netemeyer, 2003; Ackfeldt & Wong, 2006). However, we postulate that the concept of salespersons extra-role customer service should be considered as a multidimensional construct.

FURTHER EXPLANATION OF SALESPERSON EXTRA-ROLE CUSTOMER SERVICE

Customer Orientation versus SERCS

Customer orientation (e.g., Saxe & Weitz, 1982) has been widely used in sales force research (Franke & Park, 2006). Research on customer orientation (some scholars prefer to call these helpful behaviors directed at customers) has been strongly influenced by the work of Saxe and Weitz (1982). Saxe and Weitz (1982) defined customer-oriented selling as the degree to which salespeople practice the marketing concept by trying to help their customers make purchase decisions that will satisfy customer needs. Based on Saxe and Weitz’s (1982) study, Kelley & Douglas (2006) then talked about the customer-directed prosocial behavior which involves the service provider’s fulfillment of customer needs in the customer’s best interest”.

Salespersons with high levels of customer orientation truly care about customers, and thus engage in actions that customers value, such as listening to customer feedback and solving customer problems. Jaramillo and Grisaffe (2009). However, customer orientation selling emphasizes almost on helping customers solve customers’ problem about products or sales. SERCS of this study focus on the extra-role behaviors that salespeople provide directed at their customer not only on sales-related and products-related areas but also on the daily problem solving. In addition, while customer orientation selling scale might

Service-Oriented Organizational Citizenship Behaviors versus SERCS

We consider that service-oriented organizational citizenship behaviors (OCBs) may share similar extra-role behaviors. Organ’s (1988) organizational citizenship behaviors, undoubtedly have received the most attention in extra-role behavior literature. Organ (1988) defined organizational citizenship behaviors as “individual behavior that is discretionary, not directly or explicitly recognized by the formal reward system, and that in the aggregate promotes the effective functioning of the organization.” Recent research expanding the employee performance criterion domain to include OCBs is particularly meaningful in the service sector. For example, the Lance A. Bettencourt, Gwinner, & Meuter (2001) OCBs conceptualization introduced a new type of citizenship behavior called service-oriented OCBs. Bettencourt, Gwinner, and Meuter (2001) viewed service-oriented OCBs as citizenship behaviors typically performed by customer contact employees and directed at customers. Moreover, there are some attempts to investigate types of OCBs.
A number of researchers have written “conceptually” about OCBs directed at the customer. Yet only a few researchers have attempted to “measure” OCBs directed at the customer in the service sector (Lance A. Bettencourt et al., 2001; Payne & Webber, 2006; Pelled, Cummings, & Kizilos, 2000). Moreover, researchers adopted (Lance A. Bettencourt et al., 2001) view that citizenship behaviors performed by service employees interacting with their customers are still considered role requirements (Payne & Webber, 2006).

Commercial Social Support versus SERCS

The study of commercial friendships gives us some conception of what the SERCS is like. Biggart (1989) revealed that direct selling exemplifies the embeddedness of economic activities in social relations, a thesis has recently become fashionable in economic sociology research (Granovetter, 1985). By integrating social relations into services business, this extensive thesis can help solve services marketing problems. (Adelman & Ahuvia, 1995; Rosenbaum, 2009; Rosenbaum & Massiah, 2007) confirmed the existence of social support’s psychological effect from commercial friendship (or so-called commercial social support). Moreover, (Rosenbaum & Massiah, 2007) also identified three types of commercial social supportive resources: (1) companionship provides people with a partner for activities, (2) emotional support provides people with outlets for discussing their feelings and expressing their concerns and worries, and (3) instrumental support provides people with practical help, assistance with mundane activities, or financial aid. Moreover, researchers also predicted that commercial social support is positively related to customer satisfaction (Adelman & Ahuvia, 1995; Price & Arnould, 1999; Rosenbaum, 2009) perceived service quality (Rosenbaum & Massiah, 2007; Rosenbaum, 2009), and increased willingness to spread positive word-of-mouth communication (Adelman & Ahuvia, 1995; Rosenbaum & Massiah, 2007).

To sum up, according to the commercial social support literature, we posit that direct selling salespersons interact with their customers as friends rather than just business associates; they may often demonstrate commercial friendships to their customers by providing companionship, emotional support, and instrumental support (Price & Arnould, 1999).

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative inductive research approach such as the in-depth interview was first undertaken to investigate the concept of SESBs. Next, the mode of interview content analysis employed in identifying variables by researchers involves the grounded theory approach, as developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Specifically, grounded theory could be particularly appropriate for the investigation of social phenomenon during the early stages of research, and could be further used for the purposes of theory generation under study (Straus & Corbin 1990). Further, (Dohan & Sánchez-Jankowski, 1998) contended that many software packages for the analysis of qualitative data have followed with principles and processes of grounded theory by Glaser and Strauss.

Interviewing

For this study, 30 interviewers used to investigate SERCS were selected from multilevel direct-selling organizations. Multilevel direct-selling business salespersons are well suited for this study. As Rosenbaum (2009) mentioned that the high-customer contact service providers would frequently provide extra services in the form of companionship, emotional support, and instrumental support to their customers.

30 interviews began with a brief explanation of the purpose of the study. Then we asked interviewees some research questions with our interview protocol as follows: Have you ever provided extra-role services for your customers? Have you ever heard about other salespersons’ extra-role services for customers? Why do you provide extra-role helping for your customers? Have customers responded to your extra-role customer service? Does extra-role services for customers relate with the sales performance? After initiating the discussion, interviewees narrated their previous volunteer experience and illustrated examples of service for customers that go beyond the formal role regulation.
Data Recording and Analysis

The majority of respondents were female (77%), full-time (70%), and reported high school graduation (83%). Ages ranged from 24 to 65 years and averaged 41 years. Experience in direct-selling business ranged from 2 to 22 years and averaged 7 years. The average income from selling these products less than NT$ 1 million takes up 53.3%, and average income over NT$ 4 million is 12.6%.

All 30 interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. Then we used grounded theory to analyze the interview data. Based on the suggestions of Strauss and Corbin (1990), four steps in this study were followed. First, according to the initial manuscripts of interview data, we listed several SERSBs examples by open coding. Second, we formed the first level categories or core concepts by partitioning the coding examples into sets that are homogenous with respect to some properties. Third, we discussed and determined the structure and the direction of the first level categories, in order to combine first level categories to yield the higher level categories. At last, classification schemata was reviewed and verified by checking for a fit between the content of interviews and categories.

RESULTS

Identified Salesperson Extra-role Customer Service

As summarized in Table 1, we will illustrate each of these categories in the following paragraphs.

(1) Emotional support

The first dimension of SERCS reported by interviewees is “emotional support”. Gottlieb (1978); Vaux, Riedel and Stewart (1987); Cramer (2004) have suggested emotional support is a salesperson’s help to customers in dealing with emotions or offer encouragement and comfort while their customer is experiencing difficulties. Hence, we define emotional support as salespersons’ service to customers in dealing with the emotions or offer encouragement and comfort while their customer is experiencing difficulties. It includes 7 categories (A1 listened, A2 provide encouragement, A3 provide interpersonal intimacy, A4 created quasi-family bonding, A5 reflected understanding, A6 reflected sustained concern, and A7 distracted from depression). Of all the categories of emotional support, the “listens” category (A1) had been mentioned by 11 interviewees. We speculated that such an action was easier to do than other categories of emotional support behaviors.

(2) Information sharing

The second dimension of SERCS can be described as “information sharing” which includes 4 categories (B1 informed the market information or daily news, B2 provide suggestions, B3 provide referral, and B4 search for information). We define it as salespersons try their best to serve customers by information sharing, which offers customers more choice and suggestions to enhance the service experience, even if it is not salespersons’ duty to do so.

Steward (2008) suggested that salespersons regularly are the first to be aware of changes in the market and often share the wealthiest information within or without the organization. Yet they may be unaware that the information they share might be useful to others. Furthermore, as Grayson (2007) summarized in his review of managerial implications, he discussed that network marketing manuals reframe selling as “sharing” good products and ideas with friends (e.g., Mary Kay consultants assert that they teach skin care and do not sell cosmetics). Salesperson transforms economic transactions into nurturing activities such as “sharing” or “teaching” to solve customer’s problems; even it is not related to the salespersons’ business. As the above research suggested, we could anticipate that salespersons’ sharing or transferring of information is a critical component of SERCS.

(3) Voluntarily social interaction

The third dimension of SERCS reported by interviewees can be described as “voluntary social interaction” which describes when salespersons spend free time with customers outside the work setting voluntarily. These include 3 categories (C1 ordinarily voluntarily visit and call to see how customers were doing, C2 communicated regards for a special day or case, and C3 provided accompaniment). Another conceptually similar construct is Grayson’s (2007) customer voluntary social interaction dimension of friendship with an upline sponsor. It would measure how likely is it
that a customer would spend a free afternoon with their sponsor. Moreover, the social interaction term is often used by social scientists in discussing social support (e.g., Barrera, Sandler, and Ramsay 1981; Vaux, Riedel, and Stewart 1987; Cramer 2004). Take Vaux, Riedel and Stewart (1987) as an example; they investigated if someone would likely others help them by socializing in this way:

“Visited with me, or invited me over”; “Called me just to see how I was doing”; “Had lunch or dinner with me”; “Went to a movie or concert with me”; “Had a good time with me”; “Chatted with me”. (pp. 214-215)

(4) Practical assistance

The final dimension of SERCS reported by interviewees can be described as “practical assistance” which describes how salespersons generally responded to customers’ problem in a special situation and accommodated their needs, even though it is not the salespersons’ duty. These include 4 categories (D1 provided material aids (including financial assistance), D2 provided direct assistance (including emergency assistance), D3 provided customers with extra services, and D4 involved in customers’ situation).

Table 1: A Classification Scheme of Salespersons Extra-role Customer Service

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<th>Category</th>
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| A. Emotional Support | Customers complained to me about their family problem, or someone complained about why was so hard to get along with her husband. Most of the time, I just listened and did not give any suggestions to them. (1:4, 34, Male, Part-time)
| A1 Listen | I can’t give monetary support to customers who are in difficulty, but I can give spiritual support to them. (7:12, 46, Female, Full-time) |
| A2 Provide encouragement | I would regard customers as a friend and they would think of me as his friend too. Then my customers would share personal problems with me, and they trusted me more than family sometimes. (10:12, 46, Female, Full-time) |
| A3 Provide interpersonal intimacy | One customer thinks of me as her granddaughter. She told me about happy or unhappy things in her life. (10:12, 46, Female, Full-time) |
| A4 Create quasi-family bonding | I cared about my customers’ things not only for business but also emotional issues. Once I showed great understanding to a customer about her financial difficulty and bodily tiredness. (28:18, 48, Female, Full-time) |
| A5 Reflect understanding | My customer is a blind person, so I always reflected sustained concern for her about her work or health. (13:7, 46, Female, Full-time) |
| A6 Reflect sustained concern | When he had a pessimistic view of difficulties, I would give him another way of thinking to get his mind off it. (6:12, 46, Female, Part-time) |
| A7 Distract from depression | Sometimes we did not have time to read many books nor have rich experience in many things, but I could get some information from friends; and I would also share market information or daily news with them. (8:7, 42, Male, Full-time) |
| B1 Impart the market information or daily news | I was older than my customers, so I had more experience of life. For example, my customers had no experience of the funeral customs, so I would teach and suggest them how to do it. (9:13, 48, Female, Part-time) |
| B2 Provide suggestions | I would introduce my family doctor to customers who need some information for pregnancy. (2:5, 33, Female, Full-time) |
| B3 Provide referral | If I don’t know the answer to a customer’s problem right away, I would find information from the specialized books, Internet or experts, and then tell them of my findings. (3:2, 40, Female, Part-time) |
| B4 Search for information | I often had lunch or dinner with customers. I would spend free time with customers’ social actions to which they invite me. For example I would go to a movie or concert with customers. (19:10, 37, Male, Full-time) |
| B5 Join customers’ social activities | I always communicated regards on customer’s birthday by mobile phone. (4:2, 43, Male, Part-time) |
| B6 Communicate when customers are in special situations | A customer wished me to accompany her for shopping. (23:1, 32, Female, Part-time) |
| C1 Regularly visit and call to see how customers were doing | I would provide discounts for customers when they were poor financially, even it will cause a conflict of interest for me. (18:12, 37, Female, Full-time) |
| C2 Communicate regards for a special day or case | I could look after a customer’s child when they could not come home immediately. (5:20, 47, Female, Part-time) |
| C3 Provide accompaniment | Sometimes I let a customer pay less than I should, even though that is not my responsibility. (18:12, 37, Female, Full-time) |
| C4 Provide information (including emergency assistance) | I listened and talked about the customers’ family problem, sometimes I played consultant within the customers’ family. For example, I had once written a letter to a customers’ daughter and let her understand her parent’s expectations. (28:18, 48, Female, Full-time) |
| D1 Material aids | (number, working experiences in direct selling industry, age, sex, character of job) |
| D2 Provide direct assistance (including emergency assistance) | (pp. 214-215) |
CONCLUSION

Discussion

Several research questions were addressed in this study, and the principal finding showed that (1) most interviewees endorsed the belief that SERCS played an important role in their customer service experiences, (2) the 18 categories organized into four main dimensions of SERCS and each category has been illustrated with an example, these include emotional support, information sharing, voluntary social interaction, and practical assistance.

Moreover, many of these results echo those reported by Gottlieb’s (1978) study of informal helping behaviors (e.g., emotionally sustaining, problem solving, indirect personal influence, and environment action) which was provided to sole support mothers who experience a broad range of life stresses; however, the purpose in his study was roughly in line with most of the previous research, which was linked to “natural helpers” or “sources and types of helpers”. These helpers included family members, friends, neighbors, or people who work in the institutional social welfare organizations that can provide voluntary help and services to the needy. Yet, our focus topic differs from the previous research in its content and schema; the purpose in our study was to identify those voluntary helping behaviors exhibited by commercial members such as salespersons toward customers.

Limitations and Research Implications

This study had certain limitations. First, although the results of qualitative analysis have shown the overall patterns of salespersons’ beliefs and strategy of providing extra-role service, there was little we could know about the consequences of these SERCS. For example, SERCS may have a significant and direct effect on sales performance including profit performance, customer satisfactions, customer loyalty, and positive word of mouth.

Second, the study examined the various forms of SERCS only by salespersons -initiated feedback. Thus, I cannot claim that these SERCS are expected to be viewed in the same way from the customer’s perspective. Additional research could be conducted on customers’ beliefs about providing SERCS by salespersons and make a comparison between these customers’ beliefs and their salespersons’.

Finally, the generalization of the findings may be limited to populations with similar nature (direct selling industry), but may not be very applicable to other industry groups, such as finance industry or technology industry. Therefore, further studies are needed to corroborate or contradict these findings in other industries. In spite of these minor shortcomings, this research may begin to fill the need for customer service strategies to help personal selling and sales management.

REFERENCES


