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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 examines 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 modelling 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.

Research 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.

Key words: salesperson improvisation, industrial selling, relationship cordiality, customer satisfaction, exercised coercive power.

Introduction

In the current marketing environment, conditions in firms can change quickly (Gürhan-Canli, Hayran, and Sarial-Abi, 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 & Miner, 1998). Improvisation occurs when salespersons, facing unexpected and urgent situations, employ spontaneous unscripted solutions (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, Evans and Cowles, 1990) thereby becoming unreceptive towards it (Mueller et al., 2011).

This places the customer and its relationship with salespersons at the centre 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, Smith and Bush, 2012).

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However, its implications for improvisation remain unknown. This is a critical gap that needs to be addressed given the frequency of surprises, the complex 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: (i) does the perception of a cordial versus coercive relationship with a customer drive salespeople to improvise?; and (ii) 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.

Secondly, 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 (see 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 (Banin et al., 2016). It occurs when salespersons face surprises such as when customers make unexpected demands that require urgent action (Vera and Crossan, 2004). 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 & Miner, 1998). 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 (BRT) (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, Day and Narula, 2017).

Given that salespersons are mindful of how their actions affect customer relationships and outcomes (Crosby, Evans and Cowles, 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.

Figure 1 about here

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

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up the psychological space for dealing with partners on a relational rather than transactional level (Lövblad, Hyder, and Lönnstedt, 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, Lemke and Szwejczewski, 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, Wang and Wang, 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 (Lövblad, Hyder, and Lönnstedt, 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.'s (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, Murphy and Johnston, 2018) 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 Osarenkho, 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.

Secondly, 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, Agnihotri and Itani, 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% 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 (α=.90), refers to a

customer's rating of the extent to which the salesperson meets their expectations (Homburg et al.,

2009). Salesperson improvisation (α = .71) refers to the extent to which the salesperson thinks and

acts on their feet in unexpected and urgent situations (Banin et al., 2016). The two relational

variables, relationship cordiality (α=.91) and exercised coercive power (α=.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 (α=.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 A 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: (χ^2/degrees of freedom (D.F.) = 75.95/80, p< 0.60; Root Mean Squared Error of Approximation (RMSEA) = 0.01; Normed Fit Index (NFI) = 0.92; Non-Normed Fit Index (NNFI) = 0.99; Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = 0.99; 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% 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 (See Table 1).

Table 1 about here

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 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 (e.g., Darrat, Amyx and Bennet, 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 & 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: χ^2/D.F. = 190.55/104, p< 0.00; RMSEA = 0.07; NNFI = 0.92; CFI = 0.94; 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: χ^2/D.F. = 171.89/102, p< 0.00; RMSEA = 0.06; NNFI = 0.93; CFI = 0.95; 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 2 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% of the total variance in salesperson improvisation and 30% in customer satisfaction. The total variance explained by relationship cordiality, exercised coercive power, adaptive selling and the two interactions in customer satisfaction is 36%. This indicates that the two interactions explain additional 6% of the variance in customer satisfaction over and above the direct effect paths. The largest variance inflation factor (VIF) across the estimated models is 1.26, suggesting that multicollinearity does not undermine stability of the findings.

Table 2 about here

We specified in H1 that relationship cordiality is positively related to salesperson improvisation. Findings support this assertion (β =.22, p <.05) leading to the acceptance of the

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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% level ($\beta = -.19$; $p < .10$). 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 ($\beta = .25$; $p < .01$).

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 (Fig. 2). The coefficient of the interaction-term of relationship cordiality and salesperson improvisation is significant but negatively related to customer satisfaction ($\beta = -.16$; $p < .05$). 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 ($\beta = -.22$; $p < .01$). As we show in Figure 2, when levels of salesperson improvisation and exercised coercive power are both high, there decrease in customer satisfaction levels.

Figures 2 and 3 about here

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

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 & Williams, 2009) thereby failing to satisfy (Taute & 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 five percent 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 favour 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's (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 loose 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 was 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 due to possible nonlinear moderating influences rather than the linear one hypothesized here. Future researchers are encouraged to explore this possibility.

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Figure1: Conceptual framework

Customer-rated variable
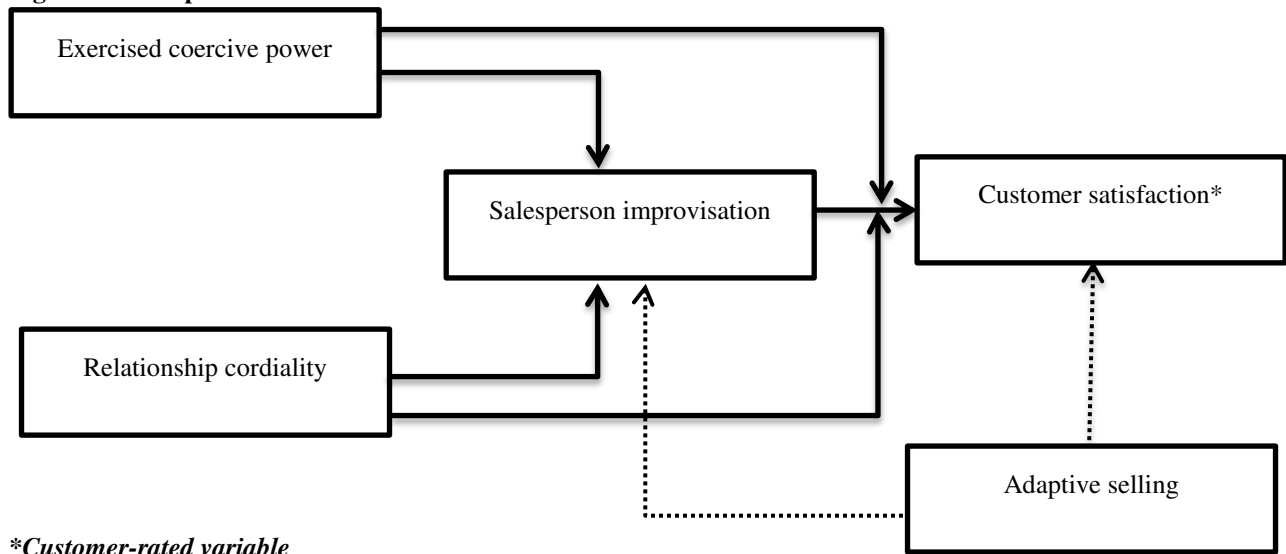
Figure 2: Surface Plot of the Moderating Effect of Relationship Cordiality
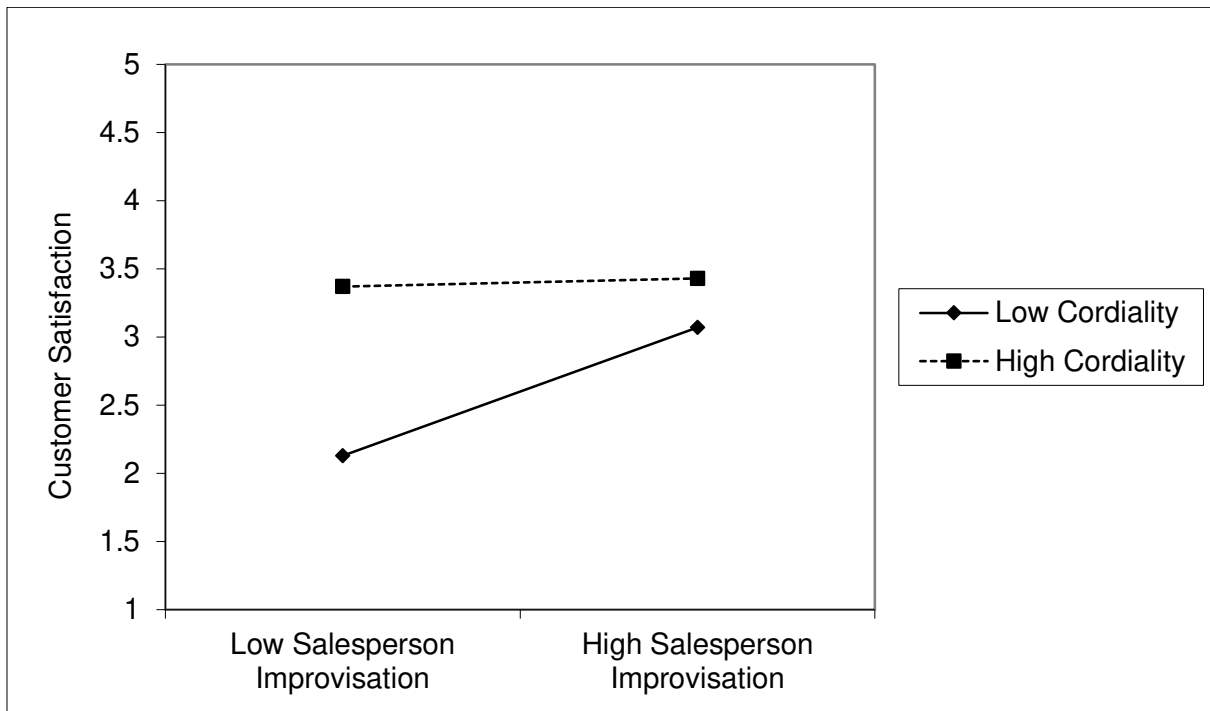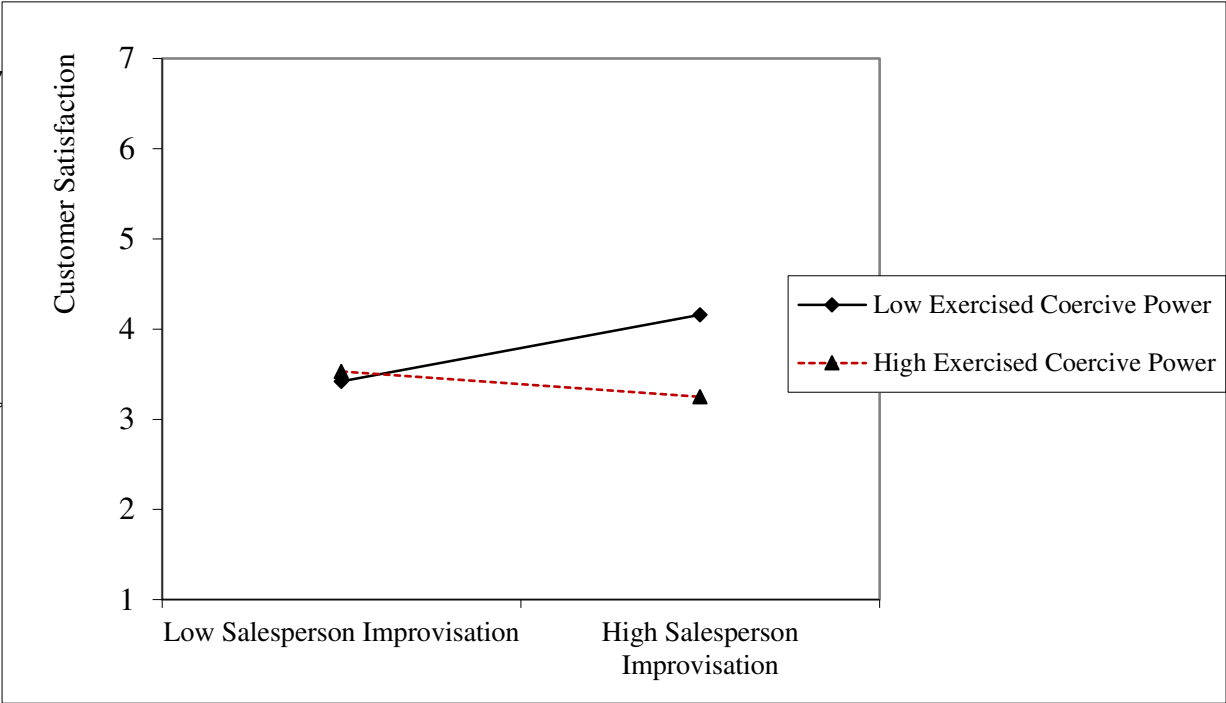
Figure 3: Surface Plot of the Moderating Effect of Customer Exercised Coercive Power

Table 2: Results of Structural Model Estimation

	Dependent Variables				
Independent Variables	**Salesperson Improvisation**	**Customer Satisfaction**	**Salesperson Improvisation**	**Customer Satisfaction**	**Remarks**
Direct effect paths					
Adapative selling	.02 (.25)	-.06 (-.08)	.02 (.26)	.01 (.11)	NA
Relationship Cordiality	.22 (2.13)	.45 (5.15)	.22 (2.12)	.40 (4.68)	Supported
Exercised Coercive Power	-.19 (-1.92)	.10 (1.24)	-.19 (-1.93)	.06 (.73)	Rejected
Salesperson Improvisation (IMP)	-	.25 (2.67)	-	.25 (2.79)	Supported
Interaction effect paths					
IMP x Relationship Cordiality	-	-	-	-.16 (-2.33)	Rejected
IMP x Exercised Coercive Power	-	-	-	-.22 (3.21)	Supported
Fit Indices					
χ^2/D.F.	190.55/104		171.89/102		
P–value	.00		.00		
RMSEA	.07		.06		
NNFI	.92		.93		
CFI	.94		.95		
SRMR	.05		.04		
R^2	11%	30%	11%	36%	

Critical values of the t distribution for $\alpha = .10$, $\alpha = .05$, and $\alpha = .01$ (two-tailed test) are † = 1.65, * = 1.96, and ** = 2.58, respectively (T-values are reported in parentheses).

Appendix A

Constructs and measures	Factor Loadings	Average Variance Extracted	Composite Reliability
Salesperson improvisation (Banin et al., 2016)			
When dealing with unexpected and urgent situations…			
I figure out my responses as I go along	0.75	.50	.65
I think and act on my feet	0.65		
I respond in the moment	0.62		
Adaptive selling (Spiro & Weitz, 1990)			
In my work...			
I am very flexible in the selling approach I use	0.83	.61	.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)			
Salespersons were asked to answer the following about the customer with whom they improvise most			
I have a good working relationship with this customer	0.84	.62	.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)			
Salespersons were asked to answer the following about the customer with whom they improvise most			
This client threatens to move to a new supplier, to make me submit to demands	0.79	.59	.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	.58	.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