Any Questions? Questioning Skill as a Selling Tactic for Sales Students

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Purpose of the Study: It is important for sales educators to provide sales students with skills that lead to immediate performance benefits for the early stage of their career. This paper investigates the performance benefits of questioning skills, customer orientation (CO) and adaptive selling (AD) for sales students.

Method/Design and Sample: Dyadic survey data was collected from 62 sales encounters between sales students selling to real business-to-business customers. Hypotheses were tested using OLS regression.

Results: Sales students and customers rate questioning skills similarity but have very little agreement about CO and AD. Using sales student ratings, CO interacts with questioning skills to improve customer purchase intention and AD does not improve performance. Using customer ratings, only questioning improves purchase intention but not CO or AD.

Value to Marketing Educators: Educators should include questioning skills and CO in their curriculum to provide immediate performance benefits to sales students. AD is important but does not have immediate performance value. When using 360-degree evaluations, educators should be aware that student and customer ratings of CO and AD will likely disagree and have a different impact on performance.

Keywords: Sales education, Sales training, Questioning, Customer orientation, Adaptive selling

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A key goal of sales education is to improve the performance of sales students. Customer orientation (CO) and adaptive selling (AD) have both been linked to greater sales performance; hence, they are valuable strategies for new salespeople to learn (Franke & Park, 2006; Homburg et al., 2011a; Jaramillo & Grisaffe, 2009). However, these strategies may not yield immediate performance benefits for sales students entering the work force. The benefits of CO take time to manifest (Jaramillo & Grisaffe, 2009) and salespeople must learn how to optimize CO (Homburg et al., 2011a). Similarly, the knowledge structures required to effectively implement AD are cultivated through experience and practical hands-on development (Franke & Park, 2006; Leigh, 1987; Morgan & Stoltman, 1990). "Given the notion that sales expertise requires a long-term developmental process, an interesting avenue for research would be to investigate the motivators that will enable a salesperson to stay on the job in order to learn over the extended period of time necessary to become successful" (Leigh et al. 2014, p. 137). Thus, it is important to determine whether CO and AD lead to immediate performance improvements for rookie salespeople and, if they do not, identify alternative strategies for improving short-term performance.

Another sales skill commonly taught in sales classes is effective questioning. Sales instructors use methodologies such as the SPIN® model by Rackham (1988) to help students learn how to effectively ask questions. Salesperson questioning skill is the act of asking customers "probing and insightful questions that uncover their buying situation and needs" (Shoemaker & Johlke, 2002, p. 118). Questioning skill is a key component of active listening in the response stage (Drollinger et al., 2006). An active listener "aggressively acts to draw information out of the environment" (Castleberry et al. 1993, p. 36). Research has shown that active listening improves sales performance (Aggarwal et al., 2005; Drollinger & Comer, 2013; Ramsey & Sohi, 1997); hence, as a component of active listening, questioning skill is also likely to lead to sales performance. Because questioning is a short-term tactic, it may offer immediate performance benefits to sales students. Furthermore, questioning is a requisite skill for the successful implementation of CO (Pettijohn et al., 2007) and AD (Pelham & Kravitz, 2008). As such, exemplary questioning skill may

enhance the impact of CO and AD on performance. This should be particularly true for sales students who lack sufficient knowledge structures to implement CO and AD without strong questioning skills.

The purpose of this research is to investigate the performance benefits of CO, AD, and questioning skill for sales students. The next section reviews the relevant background for CO, AD and salesperson questioning skills, and explains how these concepts relate to customer outcomes. To test the effects of CO, AD, and questioning skills among sales students, dyadic survey data were collected from sales students and customers after they engaged in a live sales interaction. Purchase intention was measured from the perspective of the customer and CO, AD, and questioning skills were measured by both the customer and sales student. In the next section, the hypotheses are developed. Afterward, the methodology and results are presented. Finally, the theoretical and managerial implications of the findings are discussed, and the limitations of the research are presented.

BACKGROUND

Adaptive selling and customer orientation are strategies that salespeople can adopt to guide their selling behaviors (Porter, Weiner, & Frankwick, 2003). Customer orientation refers to attempting to help customers make purchase decisions that will satisfy customers' needs (Saxe & Weitz, 1982). Adaptive selling refers to using different sales styles, techniques, or tactics during or across customer interactions based on the selling situation (Weitz, Sujan, & Sujan, 1986). A considerable body of research has examined the consequences of adaptive selling and customer orientation. In their meta-analysis of the influence of AD and CO on performance, Franke and Park (2006) found that adaptive selling was directly linked to objective and subjective sales performance, while customer orientation was only linked to subjective sales performance. Nevertheless, adaptive selling and customer orientation have a somewhat more complex relationship with objective performance than simple direct effects would at first indicate. Customer orientation improves sales performance when practiced at a moderate amount but then declines at higher amounts (Homburg, Müller, & Klarmann, 2011a). Furthermore, it has long term benefits for ongoing relationships (Jaramillo & Grisaffe, 2009). The theoretical explanation is that the cost to implement customer orientation eventually outweighs the benefits of the strategy, except in some long term relationships. Hence, new salespeople must learn how much customer orientation is optimal.

For adaptive selling behaviors, researchers have consistently shown that salesperson experience improves the influence of adaptive selling on performance (Franke & Park, 2006; Levy & Sharma, 1994). Salesperson capability to practice AD depends largely on sales knowledge structures (Weitz, Sujan & Sujan, 1986). There are two types of knowledge structures, *declarative knowledge* which are used to make expert stereotypical judgments about customer needs (Szymanski, 1988) and *procedural knowledge* which is used to guide sales behavior during the sales interaction (Sujan, Sujan, & Bettman, 1991). Declarative knowledge is useful for adaptation that differentiates between customers and procedural knowledge is useful for adaptive behavior during a specific customer interaction.

Research about declarative knowledge has shown that successful salespeople assign different weights and values to customer cues than unsuccessful salespeople (Szymanski & Churchill, 1988). Research on procedural knowledge has shown that highly effective salespeople have a clearer understanding of how to handle specific customer problems and situations than less effective salespeople (Leong, Busch, & John, 1989). Top performing salespeople treat customer interactions like hierarchical set of "if-then" choices while other salespeople treat customer interactions as a linear dialogue (Leigh et al., 2014). Experience is important for developing the necessary knowledge structures required to effectively implement adaptive behaviors (Spiro & Weitz, 1990). Hence, sales students will find it difficult to adaptive effectively until they gain more experience. As a consequence, even when sales students are adaptive their performance may not improve.

Before sales students can successfully implement CO and AD, they must develop sufficient questioning skills. Pettijohn and colleagues (2007) demonstrated that sales skills such as asking questions were related to CO. In the "need identification" stage of a sales encounter, customer oriented salespeople engage in behaviors for "identifying the customer's interests, goals, and other product-related needs" (Homburg et al., 2011a, 56). The most direct way to identify customer needs is to ask. Similarly, the most basic way to adapt to different customer styles and needs is to ask questions. Indeed, questioning has been conceptualized as an antecedent of AD (Boorom et al., 1998; Pelham & Kravitz, 2008). Hence, honing questioning skills may be a developmental step to the effective implementation of CO and AD.

Furthermore, effective questioning skills should yield immediate performance benefits. Active listening, which includes questioning skills, has been linked to a variety of performance benefits, such as customer intention to engage in future interactions with salespeople (Aggarwal et al., 2005; Ramsey & Sohi, 1997), satisfaction with the salesperson (Aggarwal et al., 2005), trust in the salesperson (Aggarwal et al., 2005; Ramsey & Sohi, 1997), and relationship quality (Drollinger & Comer, 2013). By asking customers questions, salespeople will learn customer needs and demonstrate empathy towards the customer. Hence, questioning does not require an elaborate knowledge structure to implement successfully.

HYPOTHESES

The extent to which CO, AD, and questioning lead to improved performance likely depends on whether they

are measured by the sales student or the customer. When comparing customer and salesperson perceptions of the salesperson's AD behavior, Pettijohn et al. (2000, p. 99) reported that "salespeople may perceive themselves as being more adaptive than their buyers may perceive them." Sales encounters that seem linear to customers (i.e., rapport-building, information dissemination, closing), may actually consist of a branching series of "if-then" choices made by expert salespeople (Leigh et al., 2014). Hence, customers may not recognize when salespeople have been adaptive. In a similar way, Michaels and Day (1985) found that business customers rate salespeople substantially lower on the Selling Orientation/CO scale than salespeople rated themselves. Prior to meeting with important customers, salespeople are encouraged to do research about them in the preapproach step of the sales process (Moncrief & Marshall, 2005), yet customers would be unaware of that preliminary work.

At the same time, sales students may struggle to assess their own CO and AD behaviors because they lack the necessary knowledge structures. Consequently, there should be significant variability between customer and sales student assessments of CO and AD. Conversely, asking questions is a tangible behavior directed towards customers. Thus, customers are ideally positioned to comment on sales student questioning skills and may be able to provide valuable feedback for sales students to help them improve their skills. Sales students can also provide an accurate account of their questioning behaviors because they are tangible actions. As a result, questioning skills may be easier to improve in the short-term than CO and AD because it is easier to obtain accurate feedback.

H1: Customers and sales students will have a stronger agreement about sales questioning skill than (i) CO and (ii) AD.

When measured by the sales student, there is likely to be an interaction of questioning with CO and questioning with AD on sales performance. AD and CO consist of a wide range of behaviors and skills that require questioning skills (e.g., Eckert, 2006; Saxe & Weitz, 1982; Weitz et al., 1986). The core principle of CO is identifying and understanding customer needs (Homburg et al., 2011a), and the underlying principle of AD is matching selling styles and tactics to best fit individualized customer situations (Román & Iacobucci, 2010); hence, strong questioning skills are clearly related to these concepts (e.g., Shepherd et al. 1997; Shoemaker & Johlke, 2002). CO and AD provide strategic goals for students; that is, meeting customer needs and adapting to customer context, respectively. Questions can help to guide sales students towards the attainment of those goals. Indeed, there may be a synergy between asking effective questions and CO and AD. For example, when sales students practice CO and ask effective questions, they should be able to learn customer needs more effectively which improves the link between CO and performance. Similarly, effective questions can help sales students determine whether their sales approach is working and can help them to adapt accordingly. Given that sales students have not built sufficient knowledge structures to rely on, asking questions may be the best, or even only, way to implement CO and AD effectively. As such, questioning skill should interact with CO and AD on performance.

H2: When rated by sales students, sales questioning will interact with (i) CO and (ii) AD to improve customer purchase intention.

Customers have no way of knowing salesperson declarative and procedural knowledge structures or strategic intentions. Thus, customers cannot adequately assess sales student CO and AD and instead must rely on observable behaviors, which may or may not be indicative of actual CO and AD. Although questioning is a prerequisite of successfully implementing CO (Pettijohn et al., 2007) and AD (Pelham & Kravitz, 2008), from the customer's perspective, questioning skill will appear to dominate CO and AD. As such, when CO, AD, and questioning skills are rated by customers, questioning skills will mediate the impact of CO and AD on customer purchase intention.

H3: When rated by customers, sales questioning skill will mediate the impact of (i) CO and (ii) AD on customer outcomes.

METHODOLOGY

The hypotheses were tested using sales encounters between a salesperson-in-training and a real customer at a face-to-face sales call. The sales students were participants in a professional selling class who were selling actual business-to-business advertising to local community business professionals from a variety of industries. The products that the students sold were cups and small trinkets with customizable print, such as a business logo or event name.

The sample consisted of 62 dyads, including 19 different sales students and 62 different customers. This sample size is consistent with other published studies using dyadic data. For example, Jaramillo et al. (2015) used a sample size of 145, Winczewski et al. (2016) used a sample size of 91, Abu and McCann (2016) used a sample size of 59 groups, and Tanskanen and Aminoff (2015) used a sample size of 43 interviews of 6 buyer-seller dyads. Of the salespeople in the sample, 79% were aged 18–25 and 21% were aged 26–34, 68% were male, and 63% were white/Caucasian. For the customers, 14% were aged 25–18, 18% were 26–34, 54% were 35–54, 11% were 55–64, 2% were over 65, and 2% did not answer. There were 48% male and 49% female customers, and 3% did not respond. Finally, 81% were white/Caucasian.

CO was measured using six items from the scale by Stock and Hoyer (2005). AD was measured using four items from the scale by Robinson et al. (2002). Questioning skill was measured using the six item scale by Shoemaker and Johlke (2002). Finally, customer

purchase intention was measured using four items from the scale by Ramsey and Sohi (1997). Note that we used customer purchase intention because the goal of the sales call was to generate interest and awareness in the offering rather than make an immediate sale. Nevertheless, one customer did make a purchase of $1500 demonstrating that the sales situation was real. Purchase intention was measured using the customer's evaluation while salesperson CO, AD, and questioning skills were rated by both customers and sales students.

Construct validity was evaluated using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). The sample size was not large enough to run a full CFA on all of the scales simultaneously so, consistent with Helfert et al. (2002), separate single-factor models were assessed for each construct. The Cronbach's Alphas and Composite Reliabilities for each scale exceeded the commonly accepted threshold of .7 (Nunnally, 1978). Furthermore, the Average Variance Explained for each construct exceeded the squared correlations between constructs suggesting discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Hence, construct validity is supported for the scales. The items loadings and construct measures are shown in Table 1. A composite measure was created for each construct to be used for hypothesis testing. The interaction variables were created by mean centering and multiplying the focal constructs.

Table 1

Measurement Scales

	Items	Std. Load.		CR	AVE	CA	
	Customer orientation	*T*	*C*				
1	This salesperson tried to discuss my needs with me.	0.901	0.83	0.925	0.680	0.899	*T*
2	This salesperson answered my questions about products and/or services as correctly as he/she could.	0.863	0.854	0.880	0.614	0.888	*C*
3	This salesperson tried to influence me by information rather than by pressure.	0.842	0.863				
4	This salesperson tried to give me an accurate expectation of what the product will do for me.	0.902	0.774				
5	This salesperson was willing to disagree with me in order to help me make a better decision.	0.522	0.616				
6	This salesperson tried to help me to achieve my goals.	0.852	0.736				
	Adaptive selling						
1	When the salesperson's sales approach does not work, the salesperson easily changes to another approach.	0.840	0.855	0.870	0.630	0.860	*T*
2	The salesperson likes to experiment with different sales approaches.	0.852	0.940	0.874	0.640	0.875	*C*
3	The salesperson is very flexible in the sales approach used.	0.852	0.771				
4	The salesperson can easily use a wide variety of selling approaches.	0.602	0.593				
	Salesperson Questioning Behavior						
1	His/her ability to discover important customer needs.	0.903	0.874	0.938	0.717	0.940	*T*
2	His/her ability to ask questions that reveal my buying motives was:	0.923	0.906	0.936	0.711	0.935	*C*
3	His/her ability to get me to thoroughly explain my product needs was:	0.914	0.904				
4	His/her ability to use appropriate open-ended questions was:	0.752	0.750				
5	His/her overall ability to probe and uncover my needs was:	0.742	0.700				
6	His/her ability to use active listening with me was	0.825	0.902				
	Purchase intention						
1	It is probable that I will contact this salesperson again.		0.943	0.931	0.771	0.929	*C*
2	I am willing to discuss business with this salesperson again.		0.828				
3	I plan to continue doing business with this salesperson.		0.911				
4	I will purchase from this salesperson again.		0.824				

T = student measure, C = Customer measure.
CR = construct reliability, AVE = average variance explained, CA = Cronbach's Alpha

RESULTS

Table 2

Correlations and Descriptive Statistics

			Questioning				*AD*				*CO*			
		Mean	SP		C		SP		C		SP		C	
Questioning	Salesperson	5.87												
	Customer	6.29	***0.354***	**										
AD	Salesperson	5.71	0.601	***	0.264	*								
	Customer	5.43	0.177		0.386	**	***0.030***							
CO	Salesperson	5.97	0.777	***	0.366	**	0.620	***	0.171					
	Customer	5.92	-0.030		0.366	**	-0.178		0.676	***	***-0.016***			
PI	Customer	5.27	0.370	***	0.566	***	0.264	*	0.231	^	0.395	**	0.223	^

Bold font represents correlation between customer and salesperson on focal construct
SP = salesperson, C = customer
AD = adaptive selling, CO = customer orientation, and PI = purchase intention.
^ $p < .1$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Hypothesis 1 was tested using procedures for assessing interrater reliability. Specifically, sales student and customer agreement were calculated for each construct using correlation and the intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC). The correlation between student and customer assessment of questioning was positive and significant (R = .37, p < .01) and the ICC was 0.515 (F = 2.06, p < .01), indicating modest agreement. The correlation between student and customer assessment of AD was not significant (R = -.02, ns) and the ICC was -.032 (F = .970, ns). Hence, there was no significant agreement between sales students and customers about salesperson CO. The correlation between student and customer assessment of AD was not significant (R = .04, ns) and the ICC was .072 (F = 1.077, ns). This indicates that there was no significant agreement between sales students and customers about salesperson AD. Given that there was significant agreement between sales students and customers for questioning but not CO and AD, H1i and H1ii were supported.

Table 3

Regression analysis

	Purchase Intention					
	Student measured IVs			*Customer measured IVs*		
	Step A	*Step B*	*Step C*	*Step A*	*Step B*	*Step C*
	Std. Beta	*Std. Beta*	*Std. Beta*	*Std. Beta*	*Std. Beta*	*Std. Beta*
CO	0.32*	0.24	0.18	0.08	0.00	-0.01
AD	0.11	0.08	0.05	0.20	0.03	-0.01
Question		0.13	0.29		0.57***	0.60***
COxQuest			0.31*			-0.10
ADxQuest			-0.14			0.17
F-value	5.765*	3.961*	3.306*	2.158	9.779***	5.925***
R^2	0.163	0.17	0.228	0.068	0.336	0.346
R^2-adj	0.135	0.127	0.159	0.037	0.302	0.288

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.
Quest = questioning skills, AD = adaptive selling, CO = customer orientation

Hypotheses 2 and 3 were tested using OLS regression. H2 predicts an interaction of questioning with CO and questioning with AD on purchase intention when using the sales student ratings. H3 predicts questioning will mediate CO and AD on purchase intention when using the customer ratings. To rule out alternative models, the moderation and mediation models were assessed for both the sales student and customer ratings. The results are shown in Table 3. Mediation was evaluated using the Baron and Kenny (1986) method, shown in Table 3 as Step A (CO and AD only) and Step B (CO and AD plus questioning). The interaction terms were added in Step C.

For the sales student measures, the overall model in Step A is significant ($F(61,2) = 5.765$, $R^2 = .163$, R^2-adj = .135, $p < .05$). CO has a significant and positive relationship with purchase intention (std. beta coefficient = .32, $p < .05$) but AD does not (std. beta coefficient = .11, ns). In Step B, the model is still significant ($F(61,3) = 3.961$, $R^2 = .170$, R^2-adj = .127, $p < .05$); however, none of the independent variables were significant. This indicates that the questioning, CO, and AD have overlapping effects that mask the significance of any one variable. Finally, the model in Step C is significant ($F(61,5) = 3.306$, $R^2 = .228$, R^2-adj = .159, $p < .05$). The interaction between questioning and CO is significant (std. beta coefficient = .311, $p < .05$) but not the interaction between questioning and AD (std. beta coefficient = -.135, ns). This indicates that H2i is supported but not H2ii.

For the customers measures, the overall model in Step A is not significant ($F(61,2) = 2.158$, $R^2 = .068$, R^2-adj = .037, ns). In Step B, the model becomes significant ($F(61,3) = 9.779$, $R^2 = .336$, R^2-adj = .302, $p < .001$). Questioning has a significant positive effect on purchase intention (std. beta coefficient = .569, $p < .001$) but CO (std. beta coefficient = -.001, ns) and AD (std. beta coefficient = .026, ns) do not. Thus, the evidence supports H3i and H3ii. To be thorough, the interaction variables were also assessed. The model was still significant in Stage C ($F(61,5) = 5.925$, $R^2 = .346$, R^2-adj = .288, $p < .001$) but neither the interaction between questioning and CO (std. beta coefficient = -.104, ns) nor between questioning and AD (std. beta coefficient = .171, ns) were significant. Table 4 summarizes the hypotheses support.

Table 4

Summary of Hypotheses Support

Hypotheses		*Support*
H1 Customers and sales students will have a stronger agreement about sales questioning skill than ___.	(i) CO	Supported
	(ii) AD	Supported
H2 When rated by salespeople, sales questioning will interact with ___ to improve customer purchase intention.	(i) CO	Supported
	(ii) AD	NS
H3 When rated by customers, sales questioning skill will mediate the impact of ___ on customer outcomes.	(i) CO	Supported
	(ii) AD	Supported

CO = customer orientation, AD = adaptive selling, NS = Not supported

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this research have a number of theoretical implications for sales education research. First, the results show that sales students and customers have little or no agreement about sales student CO and AD but have moderate agreement about sales student questioning skill. There is enough agreement between sales students and customers that either rater will provide an adequate measure of questioning skill. The lack of agreement about CO and AD indicates that sales students and customers are using different rating criteria. It is likely that sales students rate themselves on their strategic intentions but lack the knowledge structures to assess their actual behaviors. Customers cannot rate strategic intentions and rely only on observable behaviors for ratings.

The findings also demonstrate that choice of rater impacts hypothesis support. When using customer ratings, only questioning appears related to purchase intention, probably because customers are unaware of the mental process underlying CO. However, the student rating suggest that both CO and questioning impact purchase intention. The sales student ratings indicate that CO impacts purchase intention directly (see Table 3, Step A) and there is a positive interaction between CO and questioning that improves purchase intention (see Table 3, Step C). As sales student rating of CO and questioning increase, customers have a greater purchase intention. It is likely that CO provides the strategic motivation for asking questions (i.e., needs assessment) and questioning skill provides the ability to obtain information. AD does not appear to contribute to sales student performance in the short-term, even when combined with questioning skill. This is not surprising given that AD requires refined knowledge structures to effectively implement.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SALES EDUCATORS

Many researchers have suggested that it is important for sales students to develop sophisticated knowledge structures (e.g., Morgan & Stoltman, 1990; Sharma et al., 2000; Sharma et al., 2007; Weitz et al., 1986). Rippé, Martinson, and Dubinsky (2017) suggest training students in DISC to help them develop knowledge structures. Szymanski (1988) suggests four major learning activities to develop knowledge structures including modeling effective selling/problem-solving, role-playing, social reinforcement, and encouragement for on-the-job use of training. Yet, the tacit knowledge and expertise of highly successful salespeople requires considerable practice and hands-on experience to develop (Leigh et al., 2014). Until knowledge structures are built, it is important to also provide skills that provide immediate benefits. To that end, this research investigated the short-term benefits of CO, AD, and questioning as taught to a class of students. The findings indicated that the combined influence of CO and questioning leads to improved performance.

Furthermore, we opine that asking questions will help to develop more elaborate knowledge structures because questioning gives sales students an opportunity to learn from customer encounters. Consequently, it is likely that sales student AD will improve as a result of asking questions, though more research is necessarily to confirm that relationship.

The specific questioning development program used in this research study was based on the SPIN model by Rackham (1988) and other common listening skills such as probing during objections, reducing distractions, asking clarifying questions, etc. The SPIN model asks a series of need assessment questions that lead customers to explicitly stating their needs. SPIN stands for the four types of questions: (1) *situation questions*, which ask facts about current customer conditions, (2) *problem questions*, which ask customers about concerns that they might have with their existing situation, (3) *implication questions*, which probe customers more deeply about the business impact of their concerns, (4) *need-payoff questions*, which probe about the value, importance or usefulness of a solution to their problem.

The findings of this study suggest that the questioning techniques, such as the SPIN model, should be taught in conjunction with CO to successfully improve customer intention to purchase. For example, using the SPIN model without an explicit focus on the customer's needs (i.e., a low CO) may come across as deceptive. For example, were a needs-payoff question focused on the salesperson's solution (e.g., "So how might the new machine my company is offering increase your productivity?") instead of the customer's needs (e.g., "Would there be benefits to having a newer machine?") the salesperson might sound sneaky instead of professional. Consequently, we suggest that CO be taught prior to, or currently with, questioning techniques to maximize effectiveness.

To evaluate student learning, many sales training programs (including college programs) elicit feedback from salespeople, managers, and customers (Lassk et al., 2012). The findings of this study indicate that there will be significant agreement between sales students and customer about questioning skill but typically little or no agreement about student CO and AD. This is important because educators often use inconsistencies between sales student and customer evaluations to identify gaps (Lassk et al., 2012). The assumption is that external raters have a less biased perspective that can be used to identify weaknesses that sales students do not see in themselves. However, our results demonstrate that customer and student ratings had a different impact on performance. Student evaluations of CO were important because they interacted with questioning skill to improve customer purchase intention. When only the customer ratings were used, CO did not interact or have any impact on purchase intention beyond questioning skill. Hence, sales student ratings may be useful above and beyond identifying gaps. Furthermore, students will likely find customer ratings of CO and AD to be unexpected and may have trouble accepting customer feedback. If educators feel it is necessary to have CO and AD rated by customers, we recommend explaining to students that customers evaluate CO and AD using different criteria so sales students are better prepared to receive the customer feedback.

LIMITATIONS

This research has a number of limitations that should be explored in future research. First, the number of sample-matched dyads used in this research were relatively small (n = 62); hence, there is only enough statistical power to detect medium or large effects. Furthermore, while the model developed in this paper should be widely generalizable for inexperienced sales students, it is unlikely to apply for training experienced salespeople. Previous literature has repeatedly demonstrated that the efficacy of AD depends on salesperson knowledge structures (Leigh et al. 2014); since our focus was sales students, the nonexistent link between AD and performance was not surprising. However, it does limit the findings of this study to inexperienced salespeople only. Levy and Sharma (1994) suggest that salespeople in the exploration career stage are less effective at AD than those in the establishment and maintenance stages. Consistent with those findings, it is likely that our model holds during the exploration career stage, but we have only tested the model with students in a professional selling class. Further research should investigate whether our model holds throughout the exploration stage.

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