

RESEARCH BRIEFS

DELIBERATION, INTUITION, OR BOTH: WHAT HELPS SALES PROFESSIONALS ADAPT?

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RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Sales professionals face plenty of challenges in managing the buyer-seller relationship, not the least of which involves figuring out how best to close the sale. They often must juggle information about the products or services they sell with clues about the concerns, objections, and priorities of the buyer. In doing so, it may help to be very self-aware, to have emotional intelligence, and be able to regulate one's own emotions when interacting with potential buyers. This may be particularly important when sales professionals need to quickly adapt their approach in response to concerns raised by the buyer or to their own sense of intuition about what that buyer really wants. Their adaptive approach might be a series of deliberate, data-driven rational arguments to persuade the buyer to make a purchase. Or it might be an emotional appeal based on brand attributes or product performance. These scenarios raise an important question: how do cognitive deliberation, emotion, and intuition combine to affect sales professionals' adaptability and, ultimately, their performance?

Answering this fundamental question is complicated by the fact that very little research exists that explains how sales professionals' adaptability is shaped by their emotional regulation and preferences for deliberation and intuition. We do know from the attitude literature that individuals can process information using "dual systems": a quick, intuitive "gut feeling" approach based on implicit knowledge and emotions, and a slower, much more deliberative approach that involves the conscious framing of reasoned arguments and logical judgments. While both of these systems may operate at the same time and interact, what's less clear is which system should dominate in specific situations

to promote adaptive selling (i.e., when sales professionals successfully tailor their behavior based on information they perceive in the selling context). For instance, tailoring behavior based on intuition that is too clouded with emotion can result in missteps because it ignores the needed logical arguments and data assessment. Conversely, being too deliberative in certain situations can cause "paralysis by analysis" and cripple efforts to close sales.

Fortunately, recent research by David Locander (Cal State Fullerton), Jay Mulki (Northeastern University), and Frankie Weinberg (Loyola University of New Orleans) develops and tests a new model of sales professional effectiveness. This new model attempts to take intuition, deliberation, and emotional regulation into account as drivers of adaptive selling and performance. Specifically, Locander and his colleagues propose that the extent to which sales professionals regulate their emotions affects their intuition and deliberation. In turn, this can shape their adaptive selling behavior—which can be critical for their job performance.

Moreover, they suggest that it is vital for sales professionals to be able to recognize and regulate their own emotional states when interacting with buyers. Consequently, Locander and his colleagues predicted that there would be a positive relationship between emotional regulation and both deliberation and adaptive selling. Sales professionals must be prepared and able to respond in the moment to buyer questions and reactions without letting their emotions get in the way. Yet intuition can also play an important role. Plus, some people are more likely to embrace and rely on intuition than others as a way of interpreting and guiding their behavioral responses in certain situations. Indeed,

strong emotional regulation may actually be counterproductive for adaptive selling behavior for people who prefer to rely on their “gut feelings” (i.e., because it suppresses the emotions people need to make the most of their intuition in a situation).

Consequently, Locander and his colleagues predicted that preferences for intuition would moderate the relationship between emotional regulation and adaptive selling, with the relationship being strongest for those who **do not** rely on intuition. But they predicted the reverse would be true when intuition moderates the relationship between deliberation and adaptive selling. In other words, they predicted that a stronger embrace of intuition would actually strengthen the connection between deliberation and adaptive selling. Why? Because intuitive judgments can serve as important “inputs” to deliberative processes that often dominate the decision making that leads to effective adaptive selling.

Finally, Locander and his colleagues also predicted that several factors would directly and positively affect sales performance. Specifically, emotional regulation should directly contribute to sales performance because keeping emotions in check and staying calm are often essential for success. Likewise, deliberation should also be positively linked to performance given that rational, reasoned arguments about product benefits are what sales professionals are typically trained to deliver and are what buyers expect. And adaptive selling—where sales professionals adapt their behavior to fit the specific demands of a particular selling situation—should also positively affect sales performance.

STUDY DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Study data came from a sample of nearly 300 sales professionals in the medical supply and real estate industries who were given questionnaires during corporate training sessions. These two groups are ideal for several reasons. First, both groups must interact with buyers who are making large, important decisions. Second, both groups are typically empowered to operate autonomously in the field—where they have to rely on their own judgment and decision making. In essence, for both groups, intuition tends to be viewed as an important part of the selling toolkit.

All the measures used in the study were well-established scales that had been used in prior research. They relied on 5-point or 7-point Likert items (all ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree,” with the exception of performance items, which ranged from “outstanding” to “needs

improvement”). Self-appraisal of emotions and emotional regulation, for instance, were assessed using items from an established Emotional Intelligence scale. Likewise, items from established scales were used to measure preferences for intuition (e.g., “my feelings play an important role in my decisions”) and deliberation (“before making decisions I first think them through”). Finally, the items for adaptive selling (e.g., “I am very flexible in the approach I take to my job”) and job performance (e.g., “achieving sales targets and other business objectives”) came from well-established scales that have been used frequently in the sales literature.

KEY FINDINGS

Locander and his colleagues first examined whether measurement invariance existed between their two sub-samples. Fortunately, both groups of sales professionals produced similar underlying measurement factors and factor loadings. This provided justification for combining the medical sales and real estate sales groups together for the main analyses. A confirmatory factor analysis also provided support for the measurement model used in the study. Finally, a latent methods factor approach was used that found no significant evidence of common method bias in the study (i.e., since all measures were self-report data gathered at a single point in time).

For the main analyses, a structural equation model was used to test the overall predicted model. Several control variables (e.g., gender, selling experience, age) were included given their potential to affect sales attitudes and behaviors. Generally speaking, the predicted relationships were supported. Consistent with predictions, emotional regulation and deliberation were positively correlated with adaptive selling while emotional self-appraisal, deliberation, and adaptive selling were also positively correlated with job performance. However, emotional regulation was not statistically related to job performance.

A multi-group analysis was used to assess the extent to which intuition played a moderating role in certain relationships. As expected, intuition moderated the relationship between emotional regulation and adaptive selling in the predicted direction. That relationship was much stronger for sales people who did not rely on intuition. In fact, there was no relationship between emotional regulation and adaptive selling for sales professionals who strongly embraced intuition. Likewise, intuition also moderated the relationship between deliberation and adaptive selling, but in the opposite direction. Specifically, the connection between

deliberation and adaptive selling was much stronger for sales professionals who embraced the use of intuition.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study tackled some age-old questions in the field of professional selling about the role and importance of deliberation and intuition in adaptive selling and, ultimately, sales performance. Indeed, Locander and his colleagues have shown us that while intuition does matter, it is largely as input into deliberative processes. In short, intuition can bolster deliberation in ways that contribute to increased adaptive selling and better sales performance. Put simply, when integrated, intuition and deliberation are a powerful combination for sales professionals.

From a management perspective, this also suggests that sales professionals should be empowered to make such integrated decisions when facing selling situations requiring effective adaptation. It also suggests that companies ought to spend more time training their sales professionals on the benefits of using intuition and not just rational, deliberative arguments. Assessing how experience shapes intuition, perhaps guided by company-provided mentors, may be a way to leverage what Locander and his colleagues have found in their study. That said, future research is needed to tease out the impact of sales training, including the use of mentors, on sales professional effectiveness and adaptability.

Moreover, Locander and his colleagues hastened to point out the limitations of their study, including their reliance on cross-sectional, self-report data

that precludes us from drawing firm causal conclusions. Likewise, researchers need to test other alternative models that may provide better and stronger explanations for sales professional adaptability and performance. For instance, intuition may have other effects beyond those examined by Locander and his colleagues (e.g., intuition may be related to sales professional creativity, which has implications for performance).

Research is also needed to deconstruct common aspects of different sales situations to create more sophisticated typologies or clearer scenarios that can help management develop more effective sales training efforts. Finally, future studies should consider the impact of individual differences on deliberation and intuition. Overall, further mapping out of the individual, experiential, and contextual drivers of sales professional adaptability and performance is clearly warranted. And that's something that both sales professionals and their employers will undoubtedly look forward to with enthusiasm and anticipation.

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SOURCE

Locander, D. A., Mulki, J. P., & Weinberg, F. J. (2014). How do salespeople make decisions? The role of emotions and deliberation on adaptive selling, and the moderating role of intuition. *Psychology & Marketing, 31*(6), 387–403.