

## THE ROLE OF CUSTOMER NETWORKING CAPABILITY EFFECTIVENESS IN ENHANCING THE SALESPEOPLE'S PERFORMANCE IN SMALL AND MEDIUM ENTERPRISES

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### ABSTRACT

**Research Aims:** This research examines the research gap between adaptive selling and the salespeople's performance. There is an inconsistency of research results among marketing researchers. This study extends the previous marketing literature to customer network-based marketing.

**Design/Methodology/approach:** The research data were collected from 300 salesperson in the field of small and medium enterprises. The data analysis used a structural equation model and Sobel tests.

**The findings of the research:** Research findings show that the effectiveness of customer networking capability functions as an intervention between adaptive selling and salespeople's performance. Adaptive selling, interaction quality, and perceived interpersonal skills have a significant positive effect on the effectiveness of customer networking capability and salespeople's performance.

**Theoretical Contribution/Originality:** The current study develops networking theory and tries to contribute to the literature, which serves as a step towards broadening the concept of customer networking.

**Practitioner/Policy Implication:** Managers can also build a network of customers who can communicate well. This communication supports long-term relationships and mutual benefits between customers and the company. To sustain long-term relationships, a company monitors customers through the network of effective communication.

**Research limitation/Implication:** As this research was undertaken in Indonesia, the collected data merely represents the country's sales and marketing situations. The findings may not apply in all countries. Conducting the same type of research in other Asian countries can test the accuracy of the model empirically.

**Keywords:** Adaptive selling, Effectiveness of customer networking capability, Interaction quality, Perceived interpersonal skill, Salespeople's performance.

This research carried out for help and cooperation with the Directorate of Research and Community Service of Directorate General of Research and Development of Ministry of Research, Technology, and higher education.

## INTRODUCTION

The role of salespeople determines the successful performance of a business (Ferdinand and Wahyuningsih, 2019; Strukan et al. , 2017). The growth of a business rests on the essential role played by the salespeople. Thus, salespeople pay serious attention to the company's owner in managing the quality of products so that, in the end, they influence the customers directly, especially the products that have high complexions. If a salesperson cannot run his or her power properly, all the previous activities will be useless. The salesperson determines the success of a well-empowered business. This form of empowerment results from a variety of strategies that may satisfy the customers. The success of salespeople impacts business through the increasing sales and business performances.

The measurement of organizational performance and business success closely connects to the salespeople's performance (Agnihotria et al. , 2016). In this sense, a company's sales and marketing personnel seek to improve organizational performance. The company's task is to find and place people who have a business talent in the field of sales and marketing to support the quality products and services. Some researchers state that there is a significant positive influence between adaptive selling and salespeople's performance (Chena and Jaramillo, 2014; Wang et al. , 2016). On the other hand, other researchers emphasize the adaptive selling that has no significant effect on the salespeople's performance (Chakrabarty et al. , 2013; Goad and Jaramillo, 2014; Locander et al. , 2018; Tanya and Comer, 2013).

The authors propose new variables to solve the contradiction of research results. The new variable is called the effectiveness of the communication networking capability, which is the development of networking theories. The proposed new variables are expected to bridge the gap between the research results nowadays. Good communication with customers results in information about the company's products that accurately reach out to the marketing segments. Using complete information, customers can make informed decisions quickly and appropriately. Accurate decisions can be beneficial to both the customers and the company owners.

This research was conducted in small and me-

dium enterprises in Indonesia as they have not built networks with customers. They increasingly grow and determine economic growth nationally. The increase in the number of businesses is relevant to quality improvement, improvement of services, and the development of quality networking customers. Thus, this small and medium business needs to be empowered systematically and structurally so that its customer network influences the high-quality customer network boost to improve sales and marketing personnel's performance. Research objectives is to help resolve contradicted findings related to adaptive selling and salesperson performance using the effectiveness of customer networking capability as an intervention variable, and to identify and analyze factors that affect salesperson performance in the Small and medium enterprises.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Adaptive Selling Capability.*

Spiro and Weits (1990) initially discussed sales theories. There are three important aspects that a salesperson can make to perform his or her sales tasks properly. The first aspect is the internal motivation. Internal motivation arises from the salesperson himself or herself. This internal motivation determines the success of salespeople's duties. The higher the internal motivation in salespeople, the higher the level of success in carrying out sales tasks. The second aspect is the ability of salespeople to practice sales theories. A salesperson not only masters the theories of sales but also can practice such theories. The third aspect is the ability to interact with customers. As customers have unique characteristics, it takes the salespeople's ability to understand the customers' needs and desires.

### *Communication Networking Capability*

Three dimensions of communication can affect the quality of service (Ou et al. , 2013). The first dimension is the frequency of communication. The message can be well-received by the consumer when it is repeated. Regularly targeted messages are easy for customers to remember. The second dimension is communication quality. Quality communication can be viewed from the benefits of the customer's information (Zieliński, 2013). Customers who get information relevant to the product are required so that the customers feel satisfied. Based on the use-

ful information, customers can make decisions more quickly and accurately on the purchase of a product. The third dimension is the union that has a two-way system. Indicators that can be used to assess the effectiveness of two-way information are always the customer's information conveyed by the company to give the customers feedback on the information it receives.

### ***Interaction Quality***

Quality interactions can be created through the company honesty to its customers (Derek, 2014). Honesty is realized in the form of a promise the company has made. Honesty is very important to maintain good relations between companies and customers (Udayana, Prayekti, et al. , 2019). The guarantee is one way the company can do to realize honesty. Thus, it can create good relations in a relatively long time, give rise, and trust both sides. The parties trust one another, and it is not easy to turn to a competitor's product. The quality of good relations can be measured through the network of conflicts and rare members of the relationships.

### ***Perceived Interpersonal Skills***

Skills can be profitable from exercises. The more experience a salesperson has, the more skills he or she enhances (Agnihotria et al. , 2016). Sales skills can be divided into four categories namely interpersonal skills, salesperson skills, technical skills, and marketing skills. Salespeople are required to improve their skills considerably based on the four dimensions. If they want to succeed in sales, both the dynamic wishes and needs of customers are the main concerns to prioritize.

The salespeople's skills can be improved through sales abilities such as being good listeners for customer complaints, and negotiators in handling sales activities (Mendesa and Machadob, 2015). Salespeople can also adapt to the customers, provide some solutions to problems the customers are facing, negotiate with the customers, and predict what potentials the customers have.

### ***Salesperson Performance***

The success of salespeople can be measured from the ability to increase the sales volume (Liang et al. , 2018). For a successful sale,

for example, a salesperson acquires a variety of skills and knowledge. He or she must possess a reliability to advocate a training or short course of sales strategies. Knowledge can be pursued through sharing the experience of fellow salespeople (Masa'deh et al. , 2019). Both pleasant and miserable experiences are key factors in enhancing sales activities. A pleasant experience determines the struggles for the next challenges and sales competitions by setting more strategies to share sales experiences in discussion fora. It is also important to stay passionate about working with stressed salespeople (Udayana, Farida, et al. , 2019). In this circumstance, an unpleasant experience needs to be shared with fellow salespeople.

### ***Research models and hypotheses development***

#### ***Adaptive selling, communication networking capability, and salespeople's performance.***

The ability of salespeople to adapt to interactions with customers greatly determines the success of sales performance (Christian Schmitz et al. , 2014; Gathungu et al. , 2014; Wang et al. , 2016). Salespeople can work to the best of their ability when they are keen on improving their competence. The shape of a competency can be done through trainings, learn from colleagues who have succeeded, share the experience with them, or share the experience with the customers. An accomplished salesperson should get a decent award from the company owner. The salespeople who work underperform need to join motivation-building sessions so that they will be motivated to achieve success. Thus, good communication with the salespeople is necessarily required to step up to the top performance.

Communication between salespeople and customers can run well if it is fully supported by a wide network of customers (Gibson et al. , 2014). The customer's network seeks to build the capacity of sales-related activities and the sustainable development of the communication. The customer's network is highly defined as an external link block involving the dimensions of the environment such as external turbulence, hostility, and dynamism (Milovanovic et al. , 2016). The network strategy includes similarities between the partners. A similarity, for example, can be viewed from the reputation, mutual trust, mutual keeping of the agreed promise, and a series of cooperation,

transparency, and communication, as drawn in the following hypothesis.

- H1 The ability of salespeople to adapt to the interactions with customers is increasing at the level of communication networking capability.

- H2 The ability of salespeople to adapt to the interactions is mainly concerned with increased salespeople's performance.

***Interaction quality, communication networking capability, and salespeople's performance.***

Quality interactions can be measured from the cost efficiencies incurred by the company (Bahaa Abdul-Hafez and Al-Nady, 2016). Besides, the effectiveness of interaction quality can be measured from the intertwining relationships of long-term mutual benefits between the consumers. More importantly, long-term relationships with customers can maintain the customer's trust, satisfaction, and effective communication. Feedback from customers is important to create a quality relationship, and a training program to support the communication. The training is expected to create effective communication between the company represented by the salespeople and customers.

Communication can run well if it is fully supported by a wide-ranging network of customers. Information and knowledge sharing and emotional bonding are a means of effective communication to nurture and enhance the network of customers (Udayana, Prayekti, et al., 2019). Salespeople often share information with customers, either pleasant or unpleasant information. Unpleasant information is an integral part of weaknesses about products that might not provide solutions to the sales and marketing problems. Customers get products that fit what they need. If they get suitable products, they will feel satisfied. This satisfaction results in a re-purchase and other positive things to recur about product sales and marketing, which can improve the performance of salespeople, as described in the hypothesis below.

- H3 The ability of salespeople to build relationships increasingly improves the communication networking capability.

- H4 The ability of salespeople to build relations increases the salespeople's performance.

Perceived interpersonal skills, communication networking capability, and salespeople's performance.

The skills of a salesman greatly affect success in creating and developing communication networks. Such skills can be embodied through skills in performing sales tasks, conducting sales, technical sales, and marketing activities (Dulger et al., 2016). The skills of salespeople to expand the customer network greatly determine the success of the sales force performance. A skill to handle the customers' complaints is one of the important factors that a salesperson should have. For that reason, a salesperson must have extensive knowledge including common knowledge indirectly related to the sales, communication, and discussions. Thus, the mentality of a salesperson should be prepared in all circumstances.

The interpersonal mental skills of salespeople can be realized through the ability to interact with the authorities in the management of a company, the ability to detect non-verbal signs, having an attractive eye view, and the ability to build relationships with customers (Agnihotria et al., 2016). In a broad sense, a salesperson is required to build communication with the customers, discuss and share pleasant and unpleasant experiences with colleagues. Customers who get good personal services will feel satisfied. The customers' satisfaction impacts on the performance of salespeople, as proposed in the following hypothesis:

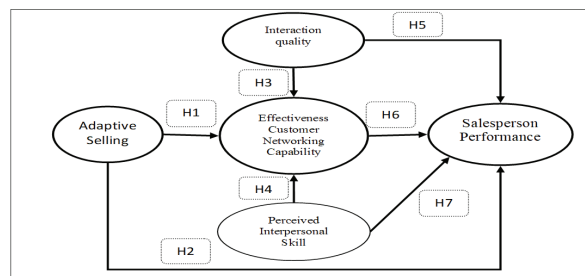
- H5 Perceived interpersonal skills affect the effectiveness of customer networking capability.
- H6 Perceived influential interpersonal skills affect the salespeople's performance.

Communication networking capability and salesperson performance

Customers' commitment and confidence in the company are important factors to improve the performance of salespeople. With the idea of how important it is to safeguard and nurture



customer trust at all times, a high integrity factor can help customers' satisfaction (Racela and Thoumrungroje, 2014). Besides, the company's willingness to maintain good relationships with customers is crucial to understand the products, wishes, and the customers' needs.



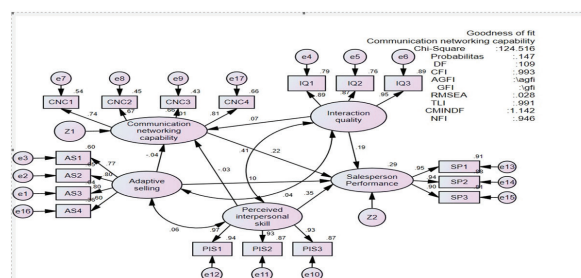
Sharing experiences in business sharing units about the customers' satisfaction is very helpful for the company to provide the best service to the customers.

H7 Increasing the ability of salespeople to develop the communication network enhances the performance of salespeople.

Based on the review and development of the hypothesis, the conceptual model illustrates

the pathway of the hypothesis relationship and research construct, as shown in the following figure 1.

Figure 1. Initial Research model



## RESEARCH METHOD

### Data Collection

The research data used questionnaires that the owners of micro and small enterprises filled out. Before being circulated, the questionnaires were tested to elicit the validity and reliability involving 40 respondents. To obtain accurate measurements, the structural model (Hair Jr et al. , 2010) was estimated to conduct a construct validity

Table 1. The scale and measurement estimate, construct reliability and convergent validity

Variable & Indicator	Sources	Std Loading	Construct Reliability	Convergent Validity
<b>Adaptive Selling</b>	Adapted from (Wang et al. , 2016)		.923	.755
Different approaches		.789		
Easy to change approach		.814		
Likes to experiment		.966		
Presentation material is up-to-dated		.903		
<b>The effectiveness of customer networking capability</b>	Adapted from (Bahaa Abdul-Hafez and Al-Nady, 2016; Bahaa Abdul-Hafez and Al-Nady, 2016 )		.912	.644
Pleasant communication		.889		
Information sharing		.724		
Answer all questions		.866		
Clarity of information		.953		
<b>Salespeople's performance</b>	Adapted from (Jae-Won and Seung-Bae, 2019; Liang et al. , 2018)		.812	.766
Sales volume growth		.789		
Profit growth		.822		
Market share growth		.788		
<b>Interaction quality</b>	Adapted from (Erikssona et al. , 2014; Zhu Dong Hong, 2015)		.822	.655
Caring for customer issues		.887		
Solutions to customers' problems		.874		
Harmony of communication with customers		.875		
<b>Perceived interpersonal skill</b>	Adapted from (Agnihotria et al. , 2016)		.968	.744
Verbal Expressions		.877		
Speech skills		.988		
Non-verbal communication		.877		

Source: Authors' data processing

test by using 4 SIZE of CFA and the loading coefficient  $factor \geq 0.7$ ; convergent validity  $\geq 0.7$ ; average variance extracted  $\geq 0.5$ ; construct reliability  $\geq 0.7$ , and linear validity  $\geq 0.7$ . The questionnaire was circulated to 300 Respondents. Using Amos v. 24, the data were analyzed to measure the performance of the main tasks of the sellers in small and medium enterprises. After screening the data, a further analysis of the 255 questionnaires was conducted.

### Measurement

The unit of analysis in this research is a salesperson who performs the main task of selling the products of small and medium enterprises in Yogyakarta. Once the collected data were correct, they were eligible for further analysis. Besides, a non-response bias test was taken to get respondents' answers based on the properly filled out questionnaires. Amos version 24 was used for analyzing the data. To get good research results, a test model was worth declaring after fulfilling the cut-off point in the SEM analysis, sobel tes used to test the role of the intervening variable.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Test validity and reliability

The measurement estimate, construct reliability, and convergent validity are presented in the following table.

### Evaluation of a good model

A new model can be analyzed further if it has fulfilled the provisions of the cut-off points in the structural equation model (SEM) analysis. From the targeted analysis results, the val-

ues included Prob = .147, CFI = .993, Agfi = .999, GFI = .999, Rmsea = .028; TLI = .991, CMINDF = 1.142, NFI = .946 and so forth.

### Structural Model and Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis testing was conducted because the provisions in an SEM analysis were fulfilled, as appeared in the figure below.

Figure 2: The result of research on the effectiveness of communication networking capability and salespeople's performance

Figure 2 shows the interaction quality, effectiveness of communication networking capability, adaptive selling, and perceived interpersonal skills that have significant positive effects on the salespeople's performance. Adaptive Selling, perceived interpersonal skill and interaction quality have no significant effects on the communication networking capability.

### Hypothesis Testing

Table 2 proves four accepted hypotheses, namely the hypothesis 2, hypothesis 5, hypothesis 6, and hypothesis 7. The three rejected hypotheses are the hypothesis 1, hypothesis 3, and hypothesis 4.

### Testing a Mediating Role: effectiveness customer networking capability

A mediation test used the Sobel test (Baron and Kenny, 1986), aiming to identify the role of the intervening variable in the communication networking capability as a new concept that serves to bridge a gap between the adaptive selling and salesperson performance.

Table 2. Standardized Regression Weights (Group number 1 – Default mode)

	Pathways		$\beta$	Sig	Comment
H1	Effectiveness customer networking capability	← Adaptive Selling	.039	.662	rejected
H2	Salespeople's Performance	← Adaptive Selling	.107	.014	accepted
H3	Effectiveness customer networking capability	← Interaction Quality	.068	.470	rejected
H4	Effectiveness customer networking capability	← Perceived Interpersonal skill	.029	.756	rejected
H5	Salespeople Performance	← Interaction Quality	.188	.014	accepted
H6	Salespeople Performance	← Effectiveness customer networking capability	.231	.002	accepted
H7	Salesperson Performance	← Perceived Interpersonal skill	.354	***	accepted

N = 250; \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

The mediation test results show the value of the Sobel statistic test worth 5.8395 and the value of two-tailed probability worth .000. It implies that a full mediation occurs. The communication networking capability of the Veran variable can overcome the previously emerged research gap.

### **Discussion**

The most influential variable in the effectiveness of communication networking capability is the interaction quality. The ability of salespeople to understand the problems faced by customers paves the way for the solutions to determine the success of salespeople (Jifeng Mu, 2011; Kenny and Fahy, 2011). The customers highly expect the clarity and timely responses of salespeople towards the emerging problems. This response provides significant comfort to the customers (Locander et al., 2018). Besides, customers expect a communication style that appeals to customers' problems by considering the limited time (Bahaa Abdul-Hafez and Al-Nady, 2016). The time effectiveness in communication determines the customers' satisfaction. Salespeople who can manage their time well can increase the customers' satisfaction whereas the customers are averagely busy so that time is valuable.

Perceived interpersonal skills are the most influential variables of the salespeople's performance. Small and medium enterprises can develop their skills in verbal speeches. This verbal communication determines the success of a salesperson (Jae-Won and Seung-Bae, 2019). Nonverbal skills can also be improved to achieve maximum results. Speaking skills determine the success of a salesperson. A salesperson with a high level of speaking skills seizes a huge opportunity to improve the sales performance. The speaking ability can attract the customers' attention (Liang et al., 2018; Vasić et al., 2019). Customers can purchase products that they mostly need. The increasing number of customers further improves the salespeople's performance.

Effectiveness of customer networking capability has a significant positive effect on salesperson performance. This finding is consistent with research conducted by (Chow, 2015). Thus it is very important for salespeople to always improve their communication skills with customers for the sake of building customer networks. Clarity of information about the

products being sold is very useful for customers in order to get products that suit customer needs (Ponduri and Bala, 2014). always share information with customers about the advantages and disadvantages of a product, can reduce the risk of complaints from customers.

### **Managerial Implication**

A company puts more emphasis on three important things that can improve the effectiveness of customers networking capability. First, increase the competency of salespeople to adapt to interactions with customers. Adaptability can be surmounted if the salespeople have good interpersonal skills. Second, both salespeople and customers can improve the quality of interactions through sales and marketing activities to figure out the customers' problems, and uphold harmonious communication. Third, improve interpersonal skills. Managers historically pay attention to such things to develop the customer network communication.

Managers can also build a network of customers who can communicate well. This communication supports long-term relationships and mutual benefits between customers and the company. To sustain long-term relationships, a company monitors customers through the network of effective communication. The company's manager focuses on complaints and provides solutions to the problems the customers are facing. If the manager can handle complaints well, the customers will be satisfied, and effective communication a key to sustaining the long-term relationship.

### **CONCLUSION**

The research results provide data concerning adaptive selling behavior, interaction quality, and perceived interpersonal skills that have a significant positive effect on the capability of communication networking. In line with Saskia and Melville (2012), this research outlines the importance of mutually beneficial long-term relationships to maintain the customers' trust. Both salespeople and customers are influential factors in developing the communication networking capability. Besides, perceived interpersonal skills have also been found in previous studies on this topic (Agnihotria et al., 2016), and the conclusion connects to the influences of subjective happiness on interpersonal mental skills that ultimately

balance the communication networking and sales performance.

Interaction quality, communication networking capability, and perceived interpersonal skills have a significant positive impact on the salespeople's performance. The findings surprisingly have positive linkages to the evidence in that a company should strive to improve the quality of interactions and interpersonal skills to enhance the salespeople's performance as highlighted in the previous research conducted by Mago and Trivedi (2014). Developing a communication network through social media can be a promotional momentum for a company to improve the quality of salespeople's interactions with customers.

### ***Limitation and Future Research***

As this research was undertaken in Indonesia, the collected data merely represents the country's sales and marketing situations. The findings may not apply in all countries. Conducting the same type of research in other Asian

countries can test the accuracy of the model empirically. This research has not incorporated cultural perspectives yet. The likelihood of cultural factors can affect the salespeople's performance.

Both communication networking capability and perceived interpersonal skills in countries with diverse cultures need further studies that can modify the model by identifying other significant forces to improve the salespeople's performance. The studies provide significant space for researchers to consider the individual characteristics of responsiveness such as age, gender, and shopping experience, sera factor -the main driving factor that affects the decision to shop around. Finally, cross-sectional data *per se* does not allow the researchers to determine the cause and effect relationship in such a way that provides a more comprehensive causal interpretation of variable correlations. Therefore, it is necessary to conduct longitudinal research whereas the exogenous factors are obtained first before collecting the endogenous data.

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