

**If they talk the talk, should you walk the walk?
Influences on the quality of sales force-generated market information**

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ABSTRACT

Owing to its cost-effectiveness, proximity to the market, and inherent job task, the sales force appears to be an ideal internal information provider, which is frequently utilized in practice. Although studies have revealed mixed results concerning the validity of the information provided by the sales force, no research has yet comprehensively addressed the resulting uncertainty regarding the quality of the information and the associated fear of fatal errors when basing decisions thereon. Against this background, the aim of the present paper is to introduce an integrative model that applies the Theory of Planned Behavior to explain influences on high quality information reporting by the sales force. More concretely, after (1) providing an overview of problems and causes of low information quality in market research by salespeople, we (2) theoretically derive and discuss antecedents of information quality and (3) introduce possible moderating effects. Our study thereby offers researchers and practitioners a starting point to determine under which conditions the sales force is a reasonable alternative to external sources of market information and which factors should be controlled to improve the quality of the information reported.

Keywords: market research, sales force, B2B

INTRODUCTION

Although, overall, enterprises competing in business-to-business (B2B) markets create several times as much revenue as consumer goods industries, they account for only a fraction of the 29 billion USD annually spent on market research services worldwide (ESOMAR 2010, pp. 6, 16). This imbalance is largely due to information in B2B markets about the market environment, competitors, and customers being sought from internal sources far more often than being bought from external providers (Cox & Dominguez 1979, p. 81). This phenomenon can partly be explained by specific characteristics of industrial marketing research that make it either unnecessary or far more difficult for external providers to obtain data (Deshpande & Zaltman 1985, 1987, p. 114): While market and geographical concentration may facilitate information gathering in B2B markets, other factors increase the complexity of gathering marketing information in B2B settings. These factors are, for example, the identification and dispersion of relevant buying center members throughout the company (Bradburn, 1992; Knoke, Marsden, & Kalleberg, 2002, p. 796), the unwillingness of industrial clients to participate in surveys due to time constraints (Tomaskovic-Devey, Leiter & Thompson 1994), and the fear of giving the interviewer too much detailed knowledge of the company's situation (Knoke, Marsden & Kalleberg 2002 p. 797; Tomaskovic-Devey, Leiter & Thompson 1995).

Given this, it is not surprising that existing research suggests interviewing the salespersons who service the industrial customers instead of the industrial customers themselves (Webster 1965). In the context of our study, we define the sales force as employees who “typically perform all of the activities in the selling process including prospecting, preparation, presentation, handling objections, closing, and followup” (Moncrief 1988, p. 164) and whose specific tasks also include information gathering and management (Moncrief 1986, p. 263; Marshall, Moncrief & Lassk 1999, p. 97). Surveying the sales force addresses several of the above mentioned difficulties of B2B market research, such as access to and obtaining information from buying center members (Block & Block 1995, p. 40), by having to interview one sales representative instead of several buying center members (Brinkmann & Voeth 2007). Besides, collecting market information and providing it to the company is traditionally part of a salesperson's duties (Grace & Pointon 1980; Moon & Mentzer 1999) as they need such information in order to successfully make sales (Dwyer & Tanner 2002, p. 395). Consequently, market research through the sales force is highly efficient as it can be realized without involving considerable additional time or cost (Webster 1965, p. 78).

Therefore, in general terms, Webster (1965, p. 78) suggests using the sales force as an information source for product planning, forecasting, competitive strategy, and pricing. More specifically, in the area of new product development (Souder 1987; Szakonyi 1988; Von Hippel 1989), the sales force's input ranges from gathering customers' perceptions of competitors' products (Gordon et al. 1997) to including salespeople in new product development processes (McKeown 1990), adoption estimation (Klompaker 1980), and to testing customers' reactions to new product usage (Rochford & Wotruba 1993). Owing to their proximity to the market, salespeople can also provide a valuable information basis for sales forecasts and market potential estimations (Lackman, Saban, & Lanasa 2000, p. 7; Moss 1979, p. 95). Moreover, obtained by means of friendly exchange or negotiation, the sales staff often possesses insights into competitors' strategies, resources, products, and specific actions (Agnihorti 2009; Evans & Schlacter 1985, p. 56; Lorge & Brewer 1998, p. 76) that are not available to marketing managers in such detail. Additionally, sales representatives, who need

to justify prices to customers, assess pricing information, such as customers' willingness to pay, industry price levels or price thresholds on a daily basis and can thus provide this intelligence to pricing managers within their own company as well (Evans & Schlacter 1985, p. 55). Finally, in international settings, especially in the market entry phase, salespeople's input is considered during forecasting, competitive monitoring, and strategic decision making (Chonko, Tranner & Smith 1991; Leonidou & Theodosiou 2003).

Despite its obvious advantages and numerous application areas, recent empirical studies reveal mixed results on the practical utilization of the sales force for market research purposes. While, according to Cross et al. (2001, p. 202), 46% of the firms rate sales force feedback as "extremely important," compared to 29% in primary market research, other studies have shown that information obtained from the sales force is mainly used to extend an existing product line and is passed on only to the sales management (Wright & Calof 2006; Saegert & Hoover 1980, p. 37).

One reason why salespeople remain an infrequently and ineffectively used information source (Pass, Evans & Schlacter 2004, p. 231) is uncertainty about the quality of the information they provide. Basing decisions on information that is not reliable or credible, however, is extremely risky and prone to error (Sharma & Lambert 1994, p. 358). While more recent studies have shown the advantages in the validity of buying center decision projections by the sales force over directly surveying buying center members (Brinkmann & Voeth 2007, p. 999), older experiments have revealed inadequate validity of the information provided (Fouss & Solomon 1980; Sharma & Lambert 1994) and a lack of the sales force's willingness to report critical information (Albaum 1964, p. 28, Robertson 1974, p. 71). Considering this information in decision making processes therefore is only partially advisable, as sales representatives are not always capable of providing objective and impartial information. In an experiment in the airline industry, information gathered by professional market researchers was significantly and systematically better than data obtained from the sales force (Fouss & Solomon 1980, p. 39). Furthermore, as a consequence of their motivation to maximize sales, the sales staff tends to overestimate their customers' price sensitivity (Stephenson, Cron & Frazier 1979, p. 26). While salespeople quite accurately assess the importance of various product and service attributes to their customers, a customer's perception of products' and service components' performance is significantly misgauged and its relative importance overrated by the sales force (Lambert, Marmorstein, & Sharma 1990a, p. 144). More specifically, validity seems to be higher for attributes that are important to customers or on which a firm performs well (Sharma & Lambert 1991, p. 30). In general, information quality seems to be better in the service industry than in chemical or technology-driven businesses (Sharma & Lambert 1994).

These findings have led us to conclude that the contradictory empirical results of salespeople's general aptitude for market research purposes, on the one hand, and the serious information quality issues in some settings, on the other hand, are due to the quality of sales force-generated market information being dependent on specific influential factors. Despite the critical importance of information quality for sound decision making, these factors have not yet been adequately addressed by marketing researchers. More specifically, to the best of our knowledge, no research has yet analyzed the motivational drivers, attitudes, and intentions of a salesperson to provide high quality market information. While, admittedly, the extant literature has identified scattered antecedents of salesperson reporting and information quality (e.g., Liu & Comer 2007), overall, the current body of literature fails to attain important issues; heretofore conducted studies either depict non-generalizable case studies of a single company (e.g., Le Meunier-FitzHugh & Piercy 2006) for which industry or

enterprise-specific influences cannot be ruled out, or analyze only isolated aspects, neglecting tradeoffs and the intensity of the effects (Wotruba & Mangone 1979). Moreover, the current literature assesses information quality solely by comparing the correctness of specific items (Lambert, Marmorstein & Sharma 1990 a,b; Sharma & Lambert 1991, 1994), but neither offers a detailed view on what defines information quality nor includes multi-layer quality criteria. It furthermore disregards factors such as the quality of the customer relationship (Heide & Miner 1992), hierarchy levels and company size (Saayman et al. 2008), the maturity of the product or the market (Read et al. 2009), strategic vs. operative information (Rapp et al. 2011), personality traits (Lin 2007, p. 146), and salespeople's experience (Rapp et al. 2006) as potential moderators of their information acquiring and processing skills.

Against this background, our goal is to develop a model that allows for an integrative analysis of influences on the quality of the sales force's market information reporting. More specifically, our goals are (1) to identify a suitable theoretical background as the foundation of our model of high quality sales force information reporting, (2) to theoretically derive antecedents of information quality and structure them into the proposed model, as well as (3) to account for market, business, product, and salesperson diversity in practice by including them as potential moderating effects. Thereby, the model will not only contribute to closing the above-mentioned gaps in existing research, but will also be of value to practitioners as it can help them ascertain which factors influence information quality to what extent and should therefore be controlled by managers interested in using the information concerned.

In order to achieve our goals, we first introduce Ajzen's (1991) Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) as a suitable framework to explain behavior through motivational drivers, attitude intention, and behavioral control. By adapting TPB to the sales force market research context, we develop our model, deriving in detail our proposed hypothesis and discussing potential moderating effects. Then, we elucidate implications and the practical relevance of our work. Finally, we introduce issues concerning the derivation of suitable indicators of information quality in a market research context and suggest an empirical study to test our model using structural equation modeling techniques as propositions for future research.

ANTECEDENTS OF INFORMATION QUALITY FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE THEORY OF PLANNED BEHAVIOR

"Salespeople are the eyes and ears of the firms they serve. They possess market knowledge that is critical for a wide range of decisions" (Chen, 2005, p. 60), but that is not directly accessible for marketing deciders (Rapp et al. 2011, p. 141). Thus, as already explained, from a marketing perspective, they are a favored source of market information. For the salesperson, however, conveying this information requires time and effort, which could otherwise be put directly into sales-related tasks. Furthermore, conveying this information entails a loss of power, and is consequently a rather unattractive task for sales professionals. The decider, on the other hand, does not have an opportunity to control the information acquisition activities of the salesperson and therefore has little chance to assess the quality of the information itself. Therefore, to maximize personal gain, in some cases, it might be sensible for a salesperson to provide information that is biased due to uncontrollable external factors or painted in his or her favor (Jaworski 1988, p. 34; Phillips 1982).

From these issues, one can conclude that the quality of the market information provided by the sales force is largely influenced by the actions of the salespeople themselves, and, more specifically, by their willingness and ability to access and provide relevant

customer, market, and competitor information. Therefore, it seems reasonable to focus our analysis of influences on the quality of the sales force's market information reporting on the behavior of the respective salespeople as well as their underlying intentions and motives. An appropriate theory to analyze individual beliefs and attitudes to explain human behaviors is Ajzen's (1991) Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), which has been found useful in predicting a wide range of behaviors (Armitage & Conner 2001). Similarly, Fishbein and Ajzen's (1975) earlier and simpler Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) has been useful to predict knowledge sharing in particular (Bock et al. 2005).

Following the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen 1991), behavioral intention, and ultimately behavior, is not only determined by attitude, but by subjective norms and perceived behavioral control as well. According to the TPB, if people evaluate the suggested behavior as positive, and if they think their peers want them to behave in the suggested way (subjective norm), this results in a higher intention and they are more likely to actually do so. However, as an individual's behavioral intention is not the exclusive determinant of behavior in situations where an individual's control over the behavior is incomplete, TPB extends TRA (Ajzen & Fishbein 1980; Fishbein & Ajzen 1975) by also including perceived behavioral control. This construct is determined by an individual's beliefs about the presence of factors that may facilitate or impede the behavior (Ajzen 1991, p.183).

In the context of our study, TPB suggests that whether or not salespeople will provide high quality market information (behavior) is influenced by two main drivers: (1) a salesperson's willingness (intention) and (2) his or her ability (perceived behavioral control) to do so. Willingness to engage in market research activities is determined by (1a) a positive attitude towards market research and (1b) the belief that peers and subordinates in the company actually want salespeople to report high quality information (subjective norm). Ability (2), on the other hand, summarizes salespeople's expectations regarding the ease or difficulty of high quality market research activities and influences behavior directly and indirectly via intention. This extension of the TRA to TPB is especially helpful in the sales context since the ability of the sales staff to provide information after all depends on the cooperation and openness of their respective customers and thus is not entirely under their control. Therefore, the willingness to report information (intention) needs to be complemented by the ability to do so (perceived behavioral control) in order to accurately explain the quality of the reporting behavior. In the context of this paper, the attitude towards providing high quality market information is defined as the degree to which one has positive feelings about sharing one's knowledge of the market, customers, and competitors. In turn, in a knowledge sharing context, these feelings are influenced by various motivational drivers, such as anticipated extrinsic rewards, benefits from ongoing relationships with others, and a sense of being of personal value to the organization by performing market research activities (Bock et al. (2005, p. 91). Finally, characteristics of an organizational climate, such as high mutual trust between colleagues and in the organization (Hinds & Pfeffer 2003), open and free-flowing information exchange (Dixon 2000; Gibbert & Krause 2002), and pro-social norms (Constant, Kiesler & Sproull 1994; Wasko & Faraj 2000), have proven to have a positive influence on subjective norms and the willingness to share knowledge (Bock et al. (2005, p. 99). Based on this framework, we will next develop our research hypotheses and present our model.

RESEARCH HYPOTHESES, MODEL, AND MODERATING EFFECTS

RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

As explained above, following the Theory of Reasoned Action, a salesperson's willingness (intention) to provide high quality market information (behavior) determines whether he or she will actually share such information. More generally, intentions indicate how willing people are to try to act a certain way and positively influence the people's actual actions (Ajzen 1991, p. 181). As the correlation between behavioral intention and behavior has been confirmed by several other studies (Armitage & Conner 2001, p. 475), we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1: The higher the willingness to provide high quality market information, the more effective the information provision behavior.

Focusing only on the aspects that are controlled by the rational actor, as mentioned above, the intention to engage in a behavior is determined by an individual's attitude toward that behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein 1980; Fishbein & Ajzen 1975). The attitudes' influence on the willingness to share information as well as on the consistency of knowledge sharing behaviors, which are related to our research focus, have been analyzed and confirmed by several researchers (e.g., Jones, Cline & Ryan 2006; Lee & Choi 2003; Moffett, McAdam & Parkinson 2003). Similar to other studies on knowledge sharing, we use the TRA or TPB to show a positive correlation between knowledge sharing intentions and attitudes towards knowledge sharing behavior (Bock & Kim 2002; Lin 2007, p. 143; Lin & Lee 2004). We therefore hypothesize:

Hypothesis 2: The more positive the attitude towards providing high quality market information, the higher the willingness to do so.

However, behavioral intention cannot be the exclusive determinant of behavior in cases where "the performance [...] depends at least to some degree on non-motivational factors as availability of requisite opportunities and resources (e.g., time, money, skills, [and the] cooperation of others)" (Ajzen 1991, p. 182). These circumstances are especially relevant in B2B-settings: Industrial clients often do not wish to disclose any information as they fear it will give the business partner too much detailed knowledge of the company's situation (Hall 1975, p. 27; Knoke, Marsden & Kalleberg 2002, p. 797). It is also possible that they respond strategically rather than honestly, which would lead to biased data. Consequently, salespeople cannot provide correct information, even if they want to. They will therefore perceive to have little control over their behavior. In such situations, including perceived behavioral control in the model significantly increases predictive validity (Madden, Ellen & Ajzen 1992, p. 9). If more resources and opportunities are available to a person, he or she will be more likely to achieve a planned goal (Ajzen 1991, p. 183). Or, in our context, the more information available to the sales force, for example due to a good relationship with customers and frequent exchanges with them, the higher the quality of the information that will be reported back to the organization. Summing up these thoughts, we suggest:

Hypothesis 3: The higher the perceived behavioral control, the higher the quality of the information provided.

Perceived behavioral control is conceptually related to the notion of self-efficacy (Bandura 1977, 1982; Bandura, Adams & Beyer 1977; Bandura et al. 1980), which describes the influence of an individual's trust in his or her ability to behave in a certain way and its effect on the choice of action, level of preparation, effort, and thoughts while carrying out the action. Perceived behavioral control therefore also has motivational consequences: When

people believe they have little control over the outcome of their actions, they may have little intention to act a certain way, even if they generally have positive attitudes or subjective norms (Madden, Ellen & Ajzen 1992, p. 4). In the sales force market research context, this means that even if salespeople regard providing market information as positive, they could be less willing to actually do so because they only deal with hard-ball negotiating, disclosure-averse clients who make it impossible to obtain valuable information in the first place. Acknowledging and controlling for the use of perceived behavioral control as a substitute for actual control, which is impossible to measure and therefore not recommended in situations where a person possesses little information about the respective action or where requirements or available resources have changed (Ajzen 1991), we propose:

Hypothesis 4: The higher the perceived behavioral control, the greater the willingness to provide high quality market information.

The subjective norm, which is defined as an individual's perception of social normative pressures or peers' belief that the individual should or should not exhibit such behavior (Ajzen 1991, p. 188), has received considerable empirical support as an important antecedent of behavioral intention (Mathieson 1991; Taylor and Todd 1995; Thompson, Higgins & Howell 1991). This has led to the study's next hypothesis:

Hypothesis 5: The higher an individual's subjective norm, the higher his or her willingness to provide high quality market information.

Two aspects of an organizational climate are particularly relevant to promote knowledge sharing activities, such as information reporting: fairness and affiliation. Fairness, which reflects the perception that organizational practices are equitable and not random (Brock et al. 2005, p. 94), builds trust between members and helps overcome the social and public good dilemma associated with information sharing (Cabrera & Cabrera 2002, p. 692). From a social exchange perspective, managers can create an environment in which salespeople voluntarily share information by increasing perceived fairness and justice, thereby reducing information asymmetry (Ramaswami, Srinivasan & Gorton 1997) and unfavorable behavior (Jelinek & Ahearne 2006). Thus, fairness can be expected to lead employees to voluntarily share their knowledge and become more knowledgeable about their work in the process (Kim & Mauborgne 1997). On the other hand, innovativeness, which reflects the perception that exchange and creativity are actively encouraged and rewarded, emphasizes learning, open information flows, and reasoned risk-taking. Consequently, individuals in innovative work contexts are more likely to share new and creative ideas with each other than individuals in non-innovative work contexts (Kim & Lee 1995). Bringing together these ideas, we posit that the organizational climate directly influences individuals' intentions to share knowledge:

Hypothesis 6: The more positive the organizational climate, the higher a salesperson's willingness to provide high quality market information.

Similarly, the organizational climate has an effect on the subjective norm: Adequate training and clear objectives, technical support, and a sincerely communicated emphasis on the importance of market information increase an individual's perception of social normative pressures and beliefs that he or she should report high quality market information (Evans & Schlacter 1985; Festervand, Grove & Reidenbach . 1988; Grove et al. 1992; LeBon & Merunka 1999; Liu & Comer 2007; Ryans & Weinberg 1981; Wotruba & Mangone 1979). We thus hypothesize:

Hypothesis 7: The more positive the organizational climate, the higher a salesperson's subjective norm to provide high quality market information.

Given the difficulty of controlling and enforcing marketing information generation and reporting by the sales force, organizations must find ways to encourage employees to share knowledge with their colleagues. Although several studies have argued that motivation factors are crucial determinants of knowledge sharing behaviors, there is no significant body of empirical research that assesses the effect of the difference between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation factors on employees' knowledge sharing behavior (Lin 2007, p. 136). We contribute to closing this gap by including three different attitude drivers in our model: extrinsic motivation, reciprocal benefits, and a sense of self-worth.

Organizational rewards' positive effect on fostering a knowledge sharing culture (Ba, Stallaert & Whinston 2001; Beer & Nohria 2000; Kankanhalli, Tan & Wei 2005) as well as how they motivate and improve salespersons' information reporting (Chen 2005; Gonik 1978; Wotruba & Mangone 1979) are well understood and have been extensively researched. Since, from a socioeconomic perspective, from a set of stable and given options, an individual will always choose the one that maximizes his or her utility (Smelser & Swedberg 1994), and knowledge sharing is only likely if the personal gain is higher than the associated cost (Hyoung & Moon 2002), incentive systems need to be designed to include and improve willingness to report information (Jung & Riegler 1999). This has led to our next hypothesis:

Hypothesis 8: The higher the expected extrinsic rewards, the more positive the attitude towards providing high quality information.

As knowledge sharing occurs mainly during informal interactions and owing to the intricacy of measuring knowledge sharing behaviors, it is difficult to make organizational rewards contingent on knowledge sharing behaviors (Masterson et al. 2000). In addition, extrinsic rewards only succeed in securing temporary compliance (Kelman 1958). Not surprisingly, Lin (2007, p. 144f.) showed that expected organizational rewards do not significantly influence employees' attitudes and intentions towards knowledge sharing. This could be the case if salespeople are motivated by other objectives, such as the belief that encouraging employees to share knowledge with colleagues is an obligation (Lin & Lee 2004; Macneil 2001).

One important alternative driver is expected reciprocal benefits. In situations in which two individuals – in this case a salesperson and a marketing decider – exchange unspecified cooperative outputs, such as market information, depending on their social and organizational contexts, the social exchange relationship is a major determinant of their attitudes (Constant, Kiesler & Sproull 1994). In contrast to economic exchange, social exchange creates friendship bonds and/or superordination over others, and induces vague, unspecified obligations (Organ & Konovsky 1989). The focus lies primarily on the relationship itself, and not necessarily on any extrinsic benefit that might follow directly (Blau 1967). Thus, salespersons who believe their mutual relationships with other departments or their superiors can improve through their provision of market information, and who operate on the basis of their desire for fairness and reciprocity (Huber 2001) are likely to have positive attitudes towards knowledge sharing (Lin 2007; Scott 2000). Therefore, we posit:

Hypothesis 9: The higher the expected reciprocal benefits, the more positive the attitude towards providing high quality information.

In an ongoing interaction setting, such as a sales force market information reporting setting, appropriate feedback is critical. The process of reflected appraisal contributes to the formation of self-worth (Gecas 1971), which is strongly affected by a sense of competence (Covington & Beery 1976) and closely tied to effective performance (Bandura 1977). Therefore, an understanding of how reported information is used in decision making (Liu &

Comer 2007; Webster 1965) or directly integrating salespeople into decision making (Bonfrer, Peters & Mazany 1993, LeBon & Merunka 1998) would allow them to increase their sense of self-worth accordingly (Grove et al. 1992; Wotruba & Mangone 1979). That, in turn, would render these employees more likely to develop favorable attitudes towards market research. Moreover, salespeople who enjoy sharing knowledge and thus helping others tend to be more motivated to share knowledge with their colleagues (Lin 2007). Additionally, sales representatives who are confident about their ability to share organizationally useful market information tend to have a stronger motivation to provide such information to others (Bock et al. 2005, p. 93). Defining these kinds of cognition in terms of an individual's sense of self-worth affecting his or her information providing behavior, we propose:

Hypothesis 10: The higher a sales person's sense of self-worth, the more positive his or her attitude towards providing high quality information.

Figure 1 summarizes our proposed research model based on the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen 1991) and behavioral intention formation in knowledge sharing (Bock et al. 2005). Following Bock et al.'s (2005) approach, the model deviates from the standard TPB formulation (in grey): the organizational climate is posited to directly and indirectly (through subjective norm) influence individuals' intention to report high quality market information.

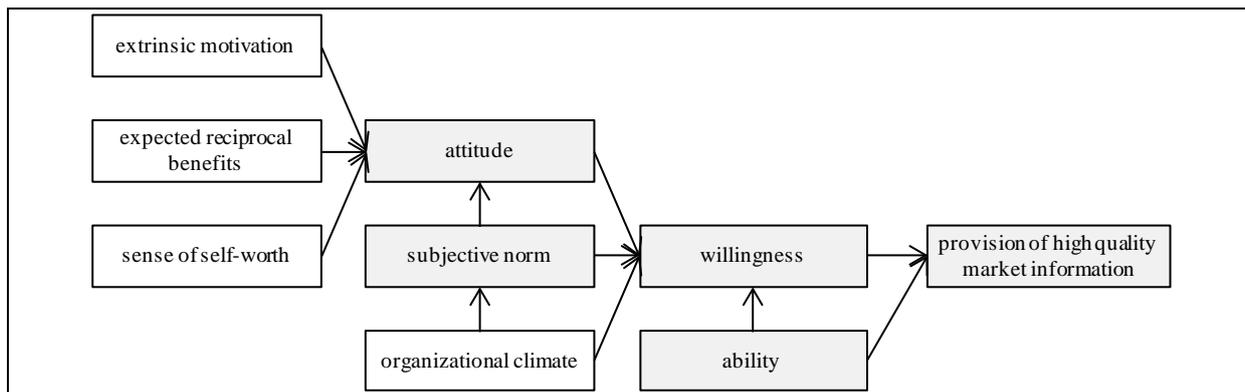


Figure 1: Research Model

MODERATING EFFECTS

While TPB manages to project cognitive-driven behavior quite well, there are still various internal and external factors, such as insufficient personal ability, that might prevent a person from performing a highly intended behavior or magnify or alleviate the effects of its antecedents. First, Read et al. (2009, p. 9) found that expert entrepreneurs were significantly more likely to not believe market research data than managers in more established industry environments. This might be due to the identification of relevant information about customers, competitors, and product usage being rather straightforward in mature markets. A salesperson in a developing market, on the contrary, has to deal with far more complex, new issues. While he or she might be convinced that the information gathered is correct and of value and therefore report it to the organization (high perceived control, high intention), this information could still be flawed (low quality behavior) merely due to the fast changing and still developing environment. We therefore suggest that the maturity of the product or the market influences the effect of perceived behavioral control over the willingness to report information as well as over the quality of the provided information itself.

Second, while operative information is generally used directly by the sales force or the superior to make tactical decisions, strategic information has to be passed on in the organization to deciders with other functions or on other hierarchical levels (Fleisher 2000; Rapp et al. 2011, p. 146). However, these deciders might have different expectations of what kind of information is needed (Lackman, Saban & Lanasa 2000) and what defines high quality information. We thus plan to investigate the effect of strategic compared to operative information about the influence of intention on high quality reporting.

Third, existing research has suggested but not yet sufficiently addressed that personal traits (such as age, level of education, and working experience) and organizational characteristics (such as firm size and industry type) may moderate the relationship between motivation factors and employees' knowledge sharing attitudes and intentions (Lin 2007, p. 146). For example, older studies note that salespersons' performance, experience, and education are directly related to the accuracy of their predictions of customers' expectations (Weitz 1978), but do not fully explain why, for instance, more experienced salespeople have significantly less accurate impressions of their customers (Lambert, Marmorstein & Sharma, 1990b, p. 6).

Moreover, well-resourced, large organizations are more likely to implement formal competitive intelligence practices (Bergeron 2000, p. 153), and employee involvement in market research differs between small and large firms (Saayman et al. 2008, p. 402). Therefore, we intend to extend previous research in this respect (Calof & Dishman 2002) by investigating the moderating effects of company size on organizational climate and the attitude towards market information provision (Lin 2007, p. 146). Likewise, the industry itself could influence the ability to provide information, as an experiment showed similar accuracy in the chemical and high-technology industries, but considerably higher information quality in a transportation service setting (Sharma & Lambert 1994, p. 364).

Finally, as briefly discussed above, perceived behavioral control will vary depending on the customers' intention to share information. Their knowledge sharing, in return, is influenced by characteristics of the buyer-seller relationship, such as the level of trust. For example, buying firms that believe their suppliers cannot be trusted are more likely to behave in an untrustworthy manner themselves (John 1984). We therefore suggest that information quality should be higher when there is a favorable relationship atmosphere between the company and its customers.

IMPLICATIONS

Our study helps close the earlier identified gaps in existing sales force market research as, to the best of our knowledge, it is the first work to integrate antecedents of the quality of sales force-generated market information into one model. Therefore, this research could set the stage for a large-scale quantitative empirical study that tests the suggested hypotheses and assesses the relative importance of each influencing factor. As we also suggest potential moderators of information quality, this will help elucidate the above-mentioned mixed results of studies on the validity of sales force-generated market information and provide a better understanding of why and in which settings the sales force is a qualified source of marketing information.

Moreover, our study is of high practical relevance as it offers marketing deciders a starting point to determine which factors should be controlled for in order to improve the quality of the information reported. More specifically, if the model is analyzed empirically, it

will be interesting to see which of the factors – attitude, subjective norm, and organizational climate – have a stronger influence on the intention to provide high quality information as they can (or cannot), in turn, be influenced by managers in substantially different ways. For example, costly extrinsic rewards will be squandered away, if an organizational climate of clear objectives and feedback on information usage are much stronger motivational drivers. Furthermore, an empirical test of the proposed moderating effects, for example, will show under which conditions the sales force is a reasonable alternative to external sources of market information. Concretely, on the one hand, it can provide valuable insights into personal traits and capabilities that enable salespeople to be better information providers, which can be used both in employee selection and personal development. On the other hand, the results might show that – despite their best efforts – due to the changing environment or too many hierarchical levels involved, the sales force is not able to provide high quality market information in entrepreneurial environments or for strategic decisions, which would make it necessary to use other sources, such as external market research institutes. In sum, on a more abstract level, this work ultimately contributes to improving the effectiveness and efficiency of business market research.

PERSPECTIVES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Since the TPB is intended to be applied to a broad range of behaviors, the operationalization of specific measures remains unspecified. In a mature field of study, prior literature is usually sufficient for identifying the relevant drivers and respective measures. However, in our case, there is not yet a common understanding of the factors that shape a salesperson's intentions to provide high quality information. Moreover, defining items to measure our endogenous variable, high quality information reporting is a rather difficult task. Conventionally, information quality is reduced to information accuracy (Huang, Lee & Wang 1999, p. 33). However, recent literature has discussed information quality in multiple dimensions (Eppler 2006, pp. 71, 83), covering relevance and soundness as well as procedural or infrastructural aspects. To identify the "right" criteria, Huang, Lee, and Wang (1999, p. 17) recommend to approach this from the user perspective. Consequently, our next step is to interview industry experts to validate and supplement, if necessary, antecedents, information quality measures, and corresponding scales identified in the existing literature (Bock et al. 2005, p. 90).

After receiving feedback and integrating the suggestions into our model, we plan to conduct a large-scale empirical survey in B2B settings to test our research hypotheses using structural equation modeling (SEM), as it is, so far, the only statistical method of analysis that allows analyzing complex dependence structures while simultaneously considering constructs that cannot be measured directly (Homburg 1992, p. 500). While high quality information reporting, as the endogenous construct, will be ascertained by interviewing marketing deciders and sales managers as the information users, data on our exogenous constructs will be gathered from their respective salespeople. Per definition, this will help us avoid common method bias (Chang, van Witteloostuijn & Eden 2010; Podsakoff et al. 2003, p. 900). In order to analyze the effect of the moderators, a multigroup analysis should be applied.

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