What Skills Make a Salesperson Effective? An Exploratory Comparative Study among Car Sales Professionals

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Abstract

This study explores important skills of an effective salesperson as well as their impacts in terms of performance from both sales managers and sales representatives perspectives. An exploratory research was conducted on a total of 58 car sales professionals that comprise 30 sales managers and 28 salespersons. A thematic analysis of interviews content indicates existence of both similarities and differences in skills perceptions among the two groups of sales professionals. Salespeople reveal that to be effective they should have communication and listening skills, knowledge possession, sales presentation skills, flexibility and adaptability, empathy, cooperative skills, honest and ethical behavior, and time management skills. Sales managers, on the other hand, highlighted the importance of two additional skills, namely the follow-up and technology skills. From the skills gap, the study suggests implications for academicians and practitioners.

Keywords: selling skills, sales performance, car sales professionals, effective salesperson, exploratory research

1. Introduction

Researching the skills of effective salespeople is crucial because they have great impact on hiring process, enhancing sales, developing, and expanding customer relationships. Salespersons' selling skills are identified as a determinant of salesperson performance (Churchill et al.1985; Churchill et al., 2000; Rentz et al., 2002). To face up an unstable business environment, sales departments should hire highly skilled salesperson as to ensure successful sales (Ingram et al., 2004 (a,b)). In such context, where extensive options and choices are offered to customers, sales force is a vital marketing tool. Skilled sales representatives efforts improve the company competitiveness by maximizing revenues from existing customers and through identifying new prospects (Futrell, 2006). Selling skills are categorized into four dimensions namely interpersonal skills, salesmanship skills, technical skills and marketing skills (Ahearne and Schillewaert, 2000; Rentz et al., 2002).

An expanded number of past research has developed and tested frameworks of salesperson performance and effectiveness (e.g. Walker et al., 1977; Weitz et al., 1986; Verbeke et al., 2011; Yang and Wu, 2014; Johlke, 2006; Shepherd et al. 1997; Galber et al., 2019). A recent qualitative study has provided a theoretical conceptualization of sales communication competence in B2B solution selling based on salespeople and sales communication educators opinions (Koponen et al., 2019). Another research has done a contemporary, systematic review of the academic literature on the characteristics of effective salespersons, the authors found that personal, organizational, co-worker, buyer and situational dimensions are responsible for increasing salespersons' performance (Herjanto et Franklin, 2019). However, noticeably a lack in the extant literature is found about a deep qualitative exploration of the skills of an effective sales representatives. In particular, there is no real attempts to explore skills' perception gaps within sales professionals. A dissimilarities understanding between managers and their sales subordinates on characteristics of effective salespersons will offer a guide for an efficient salesforce training content and smarter management strategy.

The purpose of this research is to reinforce understanding of salesperson effectiveness by exploring the skills of effective sales representatives and their effects from two perspectives. The present exploratory study examines the following questions: What do sales managers and salespeople consider the most important skills of an effective salesperson? What are the similarities or differences among the skills provided by the both sales professionals groups? And why these skills are important?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Sales Skills and Salesperson Performance Relation

Sales performance is defined as "behavior evaluated in terms of its contribution to the goals of the organization" (Johnston and Marshall, 2006, p. 412). Performance includes two categories that conceptualize two areas of sales performance constructs, namely relationship performance and outcome-based performance. The first area focuses on behaviors that reinforce the relationship between buyers and sellers (Hunter and Perreault, 2006). The second one, represents measures of salesperson performance, especially quota achievement, growth in average billing size, increases in sales productivity, and overall revenue gain (Anderson and Oliver 1987; Cravens et al. 1993). The relational sales behaviors with customers are a "key aspect of externally oriented sales performance" (Hunter and Perreault 2006, p. 19). Consequently, a high-quality relationship sales performance brings a high outcome-based sales performance.

Sales Performance was largely discussed in the literature and strongly associated to the overall corporate performance. This concept is associated to the salespersons themselves rather than to factors not controllable by them, like market potential, intensity of competition or brand image (Churchill et al., 2000; Babakus et al., 1996). High-performing sales representatives add value for customers, influence future business intentions, discover and create business opportunities (Luthy, 2000; Gordon et al., 1997; Boles et al., 2000).

Numerous researches have examined the determinants of salesperson performance (e.g. Brown and Peterson, 1994; Churchill et al., 1985; Porter et al., 2003; Baldauf and Cravens, 1999; Piercy et al., 1997; McBane, 1995; Cravens et al., 1993; Ahearne and Schillewaert, 2000; Johlke, 2006). By Applying the classification scheme of sales performance antecedents developed by Walker et al. (1977), Churchill et al. (1985) extracted, through a meta-analysis, six predictive categories of salesperson's performance. Results indicate that when the average size of their association with salesperson performance is considered, the determinants were ordered as follows: role variables, sales skills (or skill levels), motivation, personal factors, aptitude, and organizational factors. Nevertheless when arranged according to real variation (i.e., not attributable to sampling error), the determinants were ranked: personal factors, sales skills, role variables, aptitude, motivation, and the organizational/environmental factors. The two classification showed that the sales skills were still the second most important determinant (Churchill et al., 1985). Substantively, the largest single determinant of salesperson performance found by the Churchill et al. (1985) are the selling skills. Nevertheless, few empirical studies has been done to either substantiate or refute this claim, and neither to operationalize the selling skills concept, until Rentz et al. (2002) proposed and tested a scale incorporating three sales skill-based dimensions: interpersonal, salesmanship, and technical skills. Ahearne and Schillewaert (2000) distinguished between the knowledge related to technical aspect of products and the knowledge associated to marketing (e.g. consumer knowledge). Therefore, sales skills focus on individual's sales learned proficiency required to perform the necessary sales tasks. They integrate two primary areas, namely micro-skill stream including interpersonal skills, salesmanship skills, and technical skills (Rentz et al., 2002), as well as macro-skill stream referring to marketing skills (Ahearne and Schillewaert,2000).

This paper aims to explore the individual salesperson skills perceived as determinant of sales performance from sales professionals perspectives.

2.2 Selling Skills Dimensions

The micro-skill stream category discerns three types of skills discussed below.

The interpersonal skills refer to mental as well as communication algorithms used during social communications and interactions to attain definite effects and result. They are mandatory to cope with and resolve conflicts. The interpersonal skills' sub-dimensions are listening, empathy, optimism, and perceived observation skills (Churchill et al., 2000; Rentz et al., 2002; Ford et al., 1983). Past studies showed a significant and positive relationship between these four sub-dimensions and performance (Comer and Drollinger; 1999; Castleberry and Shepherd, 1993; Ramsey and Sohi, 1997, Shepherd et al., 1997; McBane, 1995; Philling and Eroglu,1994; Rich and Smith, 2000; Rapisarda, 2002).

The salesmanship skills represent skills in selling or skills in persuading people to buy, hence they are crucial in making sales presentation and close sale (Manning and Reece, 2004). The sub-dimensions of salesmanship skills are adaptability, negotiation and questioning, salesperson cues and communication style skills, and consultative selling (Rentz et al., 2002). Previous results demonstrated a positive association amongst these five salesmanship skills and sales force performance (Babakus et al., 1996; Goolsby et al., 1992; Schuster and Danes, 1986; Morgan and Stoltman, 1990; Stafford, 1996; Whittler, 1994; Williams and Spiro, 1985; Futrell,

2006; Leigh and Summers, 2002).

The technical skills indicate the salespeople proficiency in providing information about design, specification, applications, and functions of the products or services (Churchill et al., 2000; Futrell, 2006). They are also manifested in behavior to keep abreast with the technological development of products and services (Behrman and Perreault, 1982). Researchers have identified that the use of technical knowledge induce a higher salesperson performance (Babakus et al., 1996; Cravens et al., 1993; Baldauf and Cravens, 2002).

Salespersons collect knowledge about the industry trends, the economic structure, customers' needs and competitive information(Baldauf and Cravens, 2002; Futrell, 2006). This behavior constitutes the sales representatives' marketing skills named macro-skill stream. The marketing skills indicate the level of understanding a salesperson has about the business in which they operate (Ahearne and Schillewaert, 2000; Manning and Reece, 2004; Futrell, 2006) and they are critical to performing well selling tasks (Churchill et al., 2000; Shoemaker and Johlke, 2002; Ingram et al., 2004 (a,b)).

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Sample and Data Collection

To explore the attributes of effective salespeople and to understand why those characteristics are important, the data were collected from a total of 58 car sales professionals through a focused in-depth interview process. The empirical investigation was conducted, within the period from March to May 2019. The interview were addressed to the 30 sales managers and 28 sales representatives. The investigation was done nearby 15 auto car dealers' Showrooms in Riyadh city, Saudi Arabia, where sales professionals represented 32 of brands car (Table1). Once the data gathering began, the interviews were transcribed and analyzed. Data saturation is the point when the information collected in interviews becomes redundant (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006). Saturation was attained after thirty interviews for sales managers and twenty eight ones for salespersons. Ninety percent of sales representatives were male. More than half of these respondents (54 percent) were aged between 20 and 30 with 39 percent between the ages of 31 and 40, and 7 percent between 41 and 50. The largest number salespeople interviewees (64 percent) have an experience between 1 and 5 years with 25 percent between 6 and 10, 7 percent between 11 and 15, and 4 percent more than 16 years' experience. Only one sales manager was female. The greatest number of them (57 percent) were between the ages of 31 and 40 with 27 percent aged between 41 and 50, 10 percent between 20 and 30, and 6 percent between 51 and 60. Sales managers interviewees that have an experience between 1 and 5 years represent 23 percent, those are with 6 to 10 years account for 37 percent, and 40 percent possess more than 11 years' experience.

Table 1. Car dealership' names

Auto car dealers	Car brands
AL Jazirah Vehicles; Abdullatif **Alissa Automotive**; Juffali Automotive;Wallan Hyundai; AljomaihCar Company; Peugeot; KIA Motors; Porshe Centre; United Motors; Audi (Samaco automotive); Abdul Latif Jameel Motor; BMW (Mohamed YousufNaghi Motors);Seven car lounge; Nice car; Lexus.	Jeep; Dodge; Ram; Fiat; Alfa Romeo; Hyundai; Toyota; Bmw; Cadillac; Gmc; Chevrelet; GCA Motor; Bentley; Mercedes-Benz; Lamborghini; Pagni; Porsche; Ferrari; Aston Martin; Bugatti; McLaren; Lexus; Rolls Royce; Nissan; Peugeot; Kia; Ford; Audi; Chrysler; Land-Rover; Jaguar; Volkswagen.

3.2 Procedure and Data Analysis

All interviews were conducted in Saudi dialect, in order to let the participants freely express their ideas. They were gathered in written or audio form according to the interviewee approval. Each individual interview lasted for an average of 25 minutes and enclosed three main questions: What are the skills (attributes/characteristics) of an effective salesperson? How would you rank these skills if you were to order them from "highest" to "lowest importance"? And why these skills are important (consequences on individual or firm performance) ?

Interviewer followed a specific structure of first asking respondents to identify five to eight characteristics of effective salesperson. Once those attributes were identified, interviewees were asked to rank the skills evoked in order of importance. The interviewer then interrogated each interlocutor about the importance of each attribute. Such procedure allows researcher to extract most important characteristics of an effective salesperson and to investigate the consequences resulting from possessing them.

A Thematic Analysis (TA) was used to examine interviews' data collected. This qualitative descriptive approach is described as "a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun and Clarke, 2006). TA involves the search for and identification of common threads that extend across an entire interview or set of interviews (Bowen,2006). A theme refers to a logical and consistent integration of scattered pieces of data that constitute the findings (Sandelowski and Leeman, 2012). It captures something important about data, a group of repeating ideas, in relation to the research question, and represents some level of response pattern or meaning within the data set (Ryan and Bernard, 2003; Braun and Clarke, (2006, 2013)).

The transcribed interviews were content analyzed. The attributes (skills) identified were first termed using the expressions of the participants, then merged into major themes and labeled on the basis of the existing literature. The effective salesperson's skills were aggregated and then associated to consequences resulting from their possession. The frequency that respondents mentioned the attributes among interviews and their ranking, in term of importance by respondents, were considered to extract a list of salesperson's top skills.

4. Discussion of Research Results

Interpretation of the data generated interesting findings that identified the skills of an effective salesperson, as well as explored differences and similarities in perceptions between sales managers and salespeople. Significant skills extracted from data analysis and an example of their verbatim were summarized in the table2.

Table 2. Skills of an Effective Salesperson according Salespersons and Sales managers Perspectives

Skills	Example verbatim	
	Salespersons	**Managers**
Communication and listening skills	"I should be active listener, which means paying close attention to the clients when he/she speaks." "listen carefully to what the customers' saying is mandatory" "Communication is important to understand customer needs" "Without good communication skills I wouldn't know what the customer is looking for" "If I don't listen customer before sales presentation, they will not trust on me and I will probably not close the sale."	"Sign language and body language are important to communicate with customers" "Communication skills are important to persuade customers" "Active listening increases sales, when you listen well you will understand the customer better" "Salesperson's listening skills lead to understand customer need" "Through communication skills you will able to make clients engaged and .... It helps build trust with the clients."
Knowledge Possession	"Knowledge is important to build self-confidence and important to the selling process." "Product knowledge is important to deal objection, communicate product's benefits, and gain customer's trust." "Knowledge about customers' needs allow successful communication with customers" "If we have knowledge about our competitors it will be easier to beat them"	"salesperson should have strong product knowledge to persuade customers about it benefits" "Salesperson should collect information about customers and their needs to communicate easily with them" "salesperson should have market knowledge to adapt the sales presentation"
Sales presentation skills	"It is important for salesperson to deal with objection." "Persuasion and influencing skills, convincing ability are mandatory for salespersons" "it is important to have problem solving skills" "The main task of the sales representative is to sell goods, so the ability to close the sale is a must." "Salesperson should have the ability to ask the right question""	"Salesperson should use persuasion techniques to convince customers" "With negotiation skills, salesperson can go smoothly to reach an agreement and close the sale" "The real challenge for salesperson is to close sale with a mutual benefit for the organization and the client" "Salesperson should know when and how to ask questions as well as how to overcome objections"

Flexibility and adaptability	"salesperson should be able to adapt sales style from situation to other" " sales representative must have the willingness to adopt new selling technique when needed to adapt the sales presentation" "Salesperson should be flexible" "salesperson must have openness of mind, be open to new ideas and experiences in order to adapt communication with customers"	"Salesperson should be able to personalize their interaction with customers" "Salesperson should be flexible and able to cope with different customers personalities" "Salesperson should have the ability to adapt the sales presentation to the situations." "Salesperson should be willing to learn, develop and adopt new selling techniques"
Empathy	"Empathy and sensitivity to others are prerequisites to great customer service." "Putting itself in other's shoes and avoid prejudgment, helps salesperson better understanding customers' needs, enhance interaction and transmission of product's advantages." "When we express empathy toward customers, we try to facilitate communication process and to inspire trust in order to close sales."	"Salesperson should be friendly in order that customers feel comfortable and confident." "Empathy helps the salesperson make a great first impression, essential to close the sale" "When the salesperson is charming a great first impression comes and the customer will be seduced, which affect positively customer relationships as well as sales."
Cooperative skills	"Salesperson's social skills are important to attain a good work performance" "Salesperson should have proficiency in interacting with people at all levels within an organization, ...This skill lead to establish good relation others, good work environment, less conflict and a great team work."	"To be efficient Salesperson should have teamwork skills " " The most effective salespeople should have social skills to deal with sales force team"
Honest and Ethical behavior	"salesperson should have respectful attitude towards all customers" "salesperson should have good behavior" "salesperson should be honest. Not lying to our the clients is important to establish trust."	"salesperson should have good behaviour with customers to build trust" "Ethics in sales behaviours is crucial to avoid negative reputation" "If salesperson exaggerate about product features, this will reflect negative image of our brand." "To close the sale, the salesperson must be honest and build trust with clients"
Time management ...	"For salesperson, time management is a priority that leads to high performance in sales" "Effective time management is an essential part of success in sales." "The time allowed to each customer depends on the number of customers in my responsibility, salesperson should avoid keeping their clients waiting."	"Successful salesperson should be able to plan their schedule and manage their time" "Good time management enable salesperson to work smarter" "In managing their time in a good way, salespersons ensure high performance in sales"
Follow- up skills		"Salesperson's follow-up skills are crucial, it is important to keep touch with customers via phone call, email." "Salesperson's follow-up skills increase customer retention" "Salesperson's ability to ensure after sales services retain our relationship with the clients. If salesperson didn't have this ability no consumers relationships can be maintained"

Technology skills		"Salesperson should use social media to follow customers and gain knowledge about new trends." "The most successful salespeople are Tech-Savvy... They invest time to achieve sales performance with lasted technology tools." "Salespersons should be socially active with target buyers.... It's essential to use technology in prospecting , gaining knowledge and maintaining business relations"

4.1 Differences and Similarities in Skills

The sales professionals interviewed expressed a strong agreement about eight skills that an effective salesperson need to have. However, opinions divergences between sales representatives and sales managers exist about skills' degree of importance as well as to their total number (Table3). On the one hand, salespersons and managers gave equivalent importance, in first position to communication and listening skills, in second one to knowledge possession, in third one to negotiation skills, questioning skills, deal with objection as well as closing skills, and in seventh one to honest and ethical behavior. On the other hand, they assign different importance levels to adaptability, empathy, human relation skills, and time management skills. Sales managers mentioned two skills ignored by salespersons, namely follow-up skills and technology skills, which increases the number of skills perceived as important for them to eleven. All the important skills of an effective salesperson extracted from the interviews were perceived as possessing consequences on the performance, both at the individual and organizational level (Table4).

Table 3. Ranking Skills of an Effective Salesperson according Salespersons and Sales Managers Perspectives

	Ranking*	
Skills	**Salespersons**	**Managers**
Communication and listening skills	1	1
Knowledge Possession	2	2
Sales presentation skills	3	3
Flexibility and adaptability	4	5
Empathy	5	8
Cooperative skills	6	4
Honest and Ethical behavior	7	7
Time management skills	8	6
Follow up skill	n.l.	7
Technology skills	n.l.	8

*Notes.*Skills with the same ranking reflect a tie in the number of times it was listed as important by respondent; n.l. = not listed as a skill*

Table 4. Skills' Consequences on Salesperson's Performance

Skills	**Consequences**
Communication and listening skills	Enhance customer knowledge, trust, persuasion power and hence closing sale.
Knowledge Possession	Customer, product, competitors, and market knowledge enhance self-confidence as well as facilitate selling process.
Sales presentation skills	Enhance sales
Flexibilityand adaptability	Effective sales presentation
Empathy	Facilitate communication
Cooperative skills	Improve teamwork and sales performance
Honest and Ethical behavior	Build trust and good brand image
Time management skills	Enhancing individual job performance
Follow up skill	Increase customer retention
Technology skills	Enhance knowledge possession and strengthen customer relationship

4.1.1 Interpersonal Skills

Communication and Listening Skills

Communication skills refer to the ability to show appropriate and effective verbal and nonverbal communication behavior in a certain context (Rubin, 1990). Listening in the sales context is defined as "the cognitive process of actively sensing, interpreting, evaluating and responding to verbal and nonverbal messages of present or potential customers" (Castleberry and Shepherd, 1993). Both managers and representatives considered communication and listening skills as the primary important skills of an effective salesperson. They attested that these skills lead to better understand customers, build trust relationship, enhance persuasion power, and increase closing the sale. This finding converge with past ones, where an effective listening was found as a valuable communication skill for a successful salespeople (Manna and Smith, 2004; Comer and Drollinger, 1999; Castleberry and Shepherd, 1993; Ramsey and Sohi , 1997; Shepherd et. al., 1997. A Good listening skills on behalf of the seller improve trust, relationship quality and the overall communication skills of salespersons (Ramsey and Sohi, 1997; Drollinger and Lucette, 2013). Equipped with an effective interpersonal listening ability, the sales representative acquires perceptions required for an adaptive selling behaviors, which is favorable for sales performance (Spiro and Weitz, 1990; Weitz et al., 1986). In fact, with a suitable communication competencies an effective interaction occurs, the salesperson can stimulate consumers' interest and persuade them to buy products and services (Omar, 2014; Omar and Mustaffa, 2012).

Empathy

Salesperson's empathy is considered as a personality trait (Wispe, 1987) and it is defined as " the perception on the part of a buyer that a significant other demonstrates that they both feel and think about that buyer's situation."(Spaulding and Plank, 2007; Plank et al., 1996). Sales representative empathy contributes toward the establishment of a trust level that affect the customer relationship, and consequently the sales performance (Grönroos 1990; Surprenant and Solomon, 1987; Comer and Drollinger, 1999; McBane, 1995; Pilling and Eroglu, 1994; Plank et. al., 1996; Deeter-Schmelz and Sojka (2003); Sojka and Deeter-Schmelz, (2002); Rapisarda, 2002; Spaulding and Plank, 2007; Limbu et al., 2016).As the previous studies have suggested, the respondents mentioned that empathy drives trust, thereby strengthen salesperson performance in selling process. Sales professionals in the research sample used the terms "charm", "friendly" and "sensitivity" to describe empathy. They affirmed that empathy on the part of the salesperson facilitates a two-way transmission of information, thus increases the salespersons understanding of needs and the consumers' understanding of product benefits. By improving understanding comes confidence, which in turn may lead to a feeling of trust in the representative's person and the product. Although an agreement that empathy is a crucial competence exist, the salespeople interviewed positioned it at a more high level of importance than sales managers. The disagreement on the given importance to empathy can be explained by the level of product experience. In fact, as customers acquire product experience an empathetic attitude become less important. Empathy has a significant effect on trust when customers are in the early stages of buying process (Coulter and Coulter, 2002).

Honest and Ethical Behavior

Sales professionals interviewed agreed on the importance of the honesty and ethical attitude as related to interactions between sales representatives and their customers. They highlighted the existence of a positive impact of salespeople's ethical behavior on brand image and on trust establishment. This result is consistent with antecedent researches, which confirmed that salesperson's honesty is regarded as a key determinant of buyers' assessment of the sellers' ethics (Babin et al., 2004)and that the perception of an ethical treatment by customer strengthen trust (Kwon and Suh 2004; Roman and Munuera, 2005).In addition, the product brand image and the corporate image perceived by customers are shaped by interactions experienced with the company salespersons (Andreassen and Lanseng, 1997). Hence, the sales force ethical behavior is considered as an antecedent of the brand image as well as of the corporate reputation (Fatima, 2018).

Cooperative Skills

Throughout the interviews analysis, sales managers and salespeople stressed on the importance of sales representative social skills that promote social interaction within the organization. Despite that managers conferred a greater importance to cooperative behavior than sales representatives, they completely agreed with them that team work skills are mandatory to create a more congenial work environment, reduce conflicts, and therefore reach a better salesperson performance. Accordingly, the salesperson cooperation was perceived as important for a good sales performance. This finding is supported by the sales literature. Cooperativeness was identified as salesperson personality trait linked to the interpersonal skills (Borg and Johnston, 2013). Cooperative behaviors of salespersons toward other salespeople working in the same organization were

identified as crucial antecedent of the sales performance (Yilmaz and Hunt, 2001). Cooperation refers to the "willful contribution of individuals, groups, and so on, to the successful completion of common tasks and/or to the achievement of mutual objectives" (Anderson and Narus 1990; Deutsch 1949; Wagner, 1995). Within a cooperation, the sales force productivity increase since the sales representatives which are cooperative tend to share information, rely on division of labor, accept divergence in points of view, and express willing to assist and help each other (Tjosvold and Tsao, 1989; Laughlin, 1978).

4.1.2 Salesmanship Skills

Sales Presentation Skills

The sales presentation skills include skills that ensure an effective personal selling process and contribute to salesperson job performance (Marshall et al., 2003; Chonko et al., 1993; Peterson and Smith, 1995). The sales presentation represents a series of inter-related steps commonly used to interact with and persuade customers (Abdolvand and Farzaneh, 2013). Despite that the earlier researches have observed the use of sales presentation skills is broadly relevant and uniform across industries, products and sales situations (Moncrief, 1986), in the present study salespeople and sales managers conferred specific attention to some selling process' steps namely the negotiation, the questioning, the dealing with objections, and the closing. Focusing only on these five steps seems to come from a perception of their worth in cars sale. Moreover, sales professionals reported that these sales presentation skills are mandatory for sales success and they have conjointly positioned them third as important skills of an effective salesperson.

Flexibility and Adaptability

From the sales representatives opinion, the adaptability and flexibility hold the fourth place of important skills of an effective salesperson, while according sales managers perspective these skills occupy the fifth position. During the interviews, the sales professionals specified that the salespersons' ability to personalize selling techniques and communication style improve their flexibility in sales situations and with various consumers personalities. Hence, sales professionals established a clear linkage among adaptive sales behaviors and sales presentation effectiveness. This link was previously discussed in the literature and the favorable adaptive behavior effect on sales was supported. The sales representative ability to decrypt perceived information during customer encounter constitute a basis for adaptive selling behavior (Barton et al., 1986; Spiro and Weitz, 1990; Weitz et al., 1986). The adaptive selling indicates the customization level a salesperson is employing (Baldauf and Carvens, 2002). It is defined as "the salesperson's ability to alter her/is sales behavior when interacting with customers" (Weitz et al., 1986, p.175). An adaptive selling behavior has a positive impact on sales outcome performance and in turn on sales organization effectiveness (Barton et al., 1986; Babakus et al. 1996; Piercy et al.1999; Sujan et al. 1994; Boorom et al. 1998; Baldauf and Carvens, 2002).

Follow-up Skill

During the interviews, only the sales managers raised out the follow-up after sale as an important skill of an effective salesperson and they gave it the same importance as the honest and ethical behavior. In fact, as discussed above, honesty as well as ethic attitude create trust on salesperson-consumer relationship, so this relation must be maintained by a strong follow-up. Jobber and Lancaster (2009) affirmed that the follow-up is used essentially to provide reassurance that the purchase was the right one, hence it supports a long-term consumer relationship and the re-purchase intention. The phone calls and e-mails were the two techniques mentioned by the sales managers as efficient to keep lines of communication with clients, ensure after sale service and so enhance consumers retention. With advances in technology, websites and social media apps represent an interesting alternative to preserve an open dialogue with buyers. Accordingly, it is not surprising that sales managers claimed during their interviews that the salesperson should possess technology skills to perform efficiently they job tasks.

4.1.3 Technical Skills

Technology Skills

Even if sales managers ranked technology skills at the last position of importance, they affirmed that salespersons should be Tech-savvy to gain knowledge, follow customers, and prospecting. In addition, the sales managers linked the technology skills possession to sales performance and they described how technology fits into salespeople-customers interactions, especially through social media apps. Technology's influence on salespeople was largely discussed in the past studies and findings converge with the interviewees opinions. Sales technology literature focuses on sales–customer relationship management (CRM) (Ahearne, et al., 2004; Pass, et al., 2004; Plouffe, et al., 2004; Shoemaker, 2001; Zablah, et al., 2004) and sales automation technologies

(Joneset al. 2002; Parthasarathy and Sohi, 1997; Pullig, et al. 2002; Schillewaert et al., 2005; Speier and Venkatesh, 2002). The information technology integration improve salespersons effectiveness and sales performance by enhancing customer service, building strong customer relationships, increasing the salespersons' adaptability, as well as their knowledge capital (Igbaria and Tan 1997,Duncan and Moriarty 1998, Jones et al., 2002). The sales technology orientation refers to the salesperson's tendency and analytical skills for using information technologies tools. A sales representative adopting this orientation will perform effective selling (Spiro and Weitz, 1990; Jones et al.,2002). Hence, the role of sales managers is to assess the overall fit between the sales process tasks and the sales technology tools used by salespersons for insuring that the sales force realizes performance returns from its investments in sales technology (Jones et al., 2002; Schillewaert et al., 2005). This sales managers' responsibility may explain why exclusively they emphasized that technology skills are important for effective salesperson.

Knowledge Possession

In the second place of importance, the sales managers and sales representative classified knowledge possession as an important skill of effective salespersons. Respondents defined knowledge possession in terms of product knowledge, customer knowledge, market knowledge, and competitors knowledge. They declared that salespeople knowledge develops a self-confidence facilitating the communication process and building trust with customers. Therefore, it is clear that sales professionals believe that salesperson knowledge possession should not be only restricted to technical information, but should also comprise a thorough understanding of micro and macro environment essential for sales effectiveness.

These findings correspond to the categorization of knowledge in the literature, where researchers distinguished the technical skills from those marketing(Churchill et al., 2000; Futrell, 2006; Behrman and Perreault, 1982; Ahearne and Schillewaert, 2000; Manning and Reece, 2004).The technical skills possession provides salespersons with an information expertise on products and services, as well as on technological advance in their field (Churchill et al., 2000; Futrell, 2006; Behrman and Perreault, 1982). Empirically, a positive correlation was found between technical knowledge and both salespeople outcome performance and sales organization effectiveness (Baldauf and Cravens, 2002; Babakus et al. 1996; Carvens et al. 1993; Piercy et al. 1999).The market knowledge competence refers to "the processes that generate and integrate market knowledge" and market knowledge is "the organized and structured information about the market" including knowledge about both actual and potential customers, as well as competitors (Li and Calantone, 1998). The market knowledge process entails a number of behavioral activities that generate information about customers needs as well as competitors' products and strategies (Li and Calantone, 1998). The market information acquisition, interpretation, and then integration on the organization system require an implementation of an operational CRM and a competitor information system (CIS), which are part of the marketing intelligence of an organization (Fletcher and Donaghy, 1993; Li and Calantone, 1998; Ahearne et al., 2004 ;Lies, 2019).Therefore, to build and possess market knowledge, the salespersons should acquire technology skills to easily adopt sales force automation (SFA) technology. SFA is a conduit of an organization's existing pool of intellectual capital to salespeople (Mariadoss, 2014) and hence a basis of their marketing skills. A strong consensus emerged from the literature concerning the positive impact of SFA use on salesperson effectiveness and efficiency (Huber, 1990; Tanner and Shannon, 2005; Ahearne et al., 2008).The knowledge possession either technical or marketingcontributes favorably to the salesperson performance. While, the technical knowledge expresses expertise level in product and service, the marketing one need technology skills. The link among marketing knowledge and technological competence was highlighted by sales mangers interviewed. This linkage was clearly cited by one sales manager in the following quotation: "It is essential to use technology in prospecting, gaining knowledge and maintaining business relations."

4.1.4 Time Management Skills

Although an agreement was found regarding the time management skills, considered as essential to an effective salesperson, there appears to be less entente as to the level of it importance. Salespersons positioned time management skills in the eighth position, while sales managers placed them in the sixth one. From the interviewed sales professionals' quotations, it raised that an effective time management is a prerequisite to success in sales because it allows them to work smarter. According the sales representatives and sales managers perspectives, the time management skills include competences in the management of the customer wait time and those related to the sales' activities that lead to high sales performance. This result is in coherence with literature where engaging time management behaviors is beneficial to the job performance of sales personnel (Berkowitz and Ginter, 1978; Feiertag, 1991; Friedman, 1993; Macan, 1994; Barling et al., 1996; Babakus et al. 1996 and Piercy et al. 1999). In the sales planning, the salesperson activities integrate the calls plan, the strategies selection

plan, and the territory coverage plan (Baldauf and Carvens, 2002).

4.2 Summary

Throughout the content qualitative analysis, the sales professionals expressed a clear agreement about the existence of eight skills of an effective salesperson as well as on their consequences on sales performance. However, the skills' importance level was perceived differently by the two interviewees groups. From the most to least important, salespeople arranged skills as follows: communication and listening skills, knowledge possession, sales presentation skills, flexibility and adaptability, empathy, cooperative skills, honest and ethical behavior ,and time management skills. Whereas sales managers ranked them as follows: communication and listening skills, knowledge possession, sales presentation skills, cooperative skills, flexibility and adaptability, time management skills, honest and ethical behavior, and empathy. Accordingly, the unanimity concerns three major skills that are communication and listening skills, knowledge possession and presentation skills. This is an interesting result since each of these skills represents a sub-dimension in the three selling skills' dimensions advanced by Rentz et al. (2002).

The communication and listening skills represent an interpersonal skills' sub-dimension. During the interviews, the sales professionals attested that the others interpersonal skills' sub-dimensions namely the empathy, the honest and ethical behavior, as well as the cooperative skills improve the communication and listening skills efficiency.

The knowledge possession is a technical skills' sub-dimension. Sales representatives and sales managers declared that this sub-dimension refers to the products technical information and the environment knowledge. Only the sales mangers indicated that technology skills represent a second sub-dimension of technical skills and they constitutes basis of knowledge possession.

The sales presentation skills constitute a salesmanship skills' sub-dimension. Findings showed that respondents affirmed that the flexibility and adaptability are also a sub-dimension of salesmanship skills that enhance salesperson efficiency during the sales presentation's steps. Solely sales managers added the follow-up as a third sub-dimension of salesmanship skills. They highlighted its importance in maintaining strong customer relationship, especially after achieving the sales presentation steps.

The time management skills does not appear in the selling skills' categorization advanced by Rentz et al. (2002). Nevertheless, the salespeople and the sales managers interviewed emphasized their importance for an effective sales representative.

5. Research Implications and Limitations

As highlighted throughout outcomes discussion, similarities exist on perception of eight important skills of an effective salesperson. Nevertheless, differences also are present. Contrary to the salespersons, the sales managers mentioned two additional skills during the interviews. They perceived the follow-up skill and the technology skills as crucial for sales presentation and knowledge possession, respectively. According to both perspectives of sales managers and sales representatives, the skills of an effective salesperson, the main connections between them, and their impact on sales performance are schematically presented in Figure1.
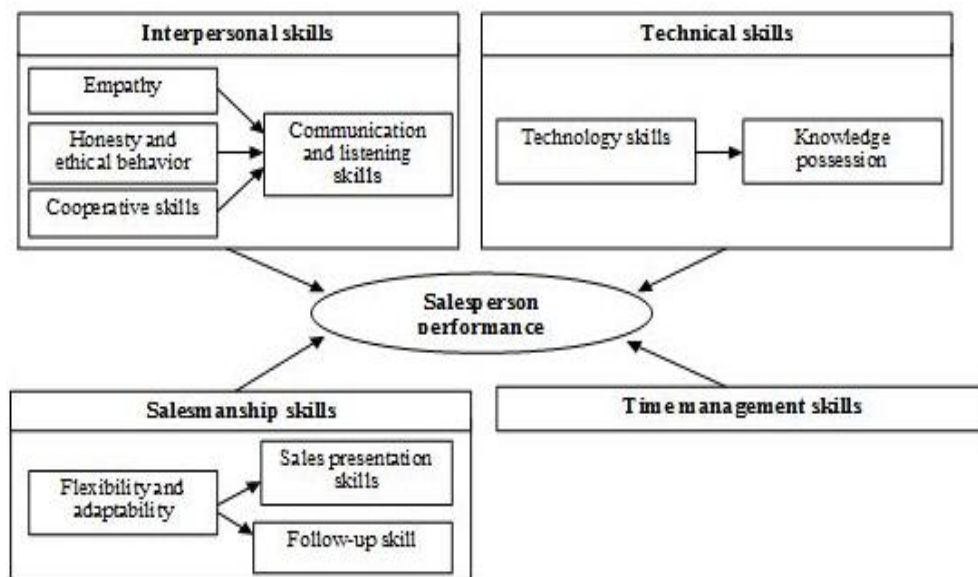
Figure 1. The impact of an effective salesperson's skills on the sales performance

The key contribution of this study is the identification of a set of salesperson skills that are important for research and practice given that they originated from the perceptions of sales professionals themselves. Both sales representative and sales manager points of view are important to consider, especially in their differences. No one's of the two perspectives is more accurate or correct than the other, contrariwise, they are complementary and bring contributions for academics as well as practitioners.

5.1 Implications for Research

The exploratory aspect of the investigation offers possible pathways for future research. First of all, the opportunity to examine the developed framework validity by a confirmatory analysis so as to provide evidence of the nature of the relationships among the skills identified and their direct or indirect consequences on sales performance. Future research would thus need to operationalize the skills extracted and examine the possible interactions that might exist between them.

In light of findings' differences between sales managers and sales representatives, both in term of number of skills as well as their level of importance, coming researches should explore more fully why these dissimilarities exist.

Given the consumer is as a part of the selling process, it would also be interesting to explore customers' points of view about the skills required for an effective salesperson. This will allow building a more comprehensive model, integrating both the sales professionals and consumers perspectives.

In addition, this research extend the selling skills concept operationalization. The time management skills emerged as a fourth selling skills dimension in addition to the three Rentz' et al (2002) dimensions namely, interpersonal skills, salesmanship skills, and technical skills.

The cooperative skills were identified by interviewers as an interpersonal skills sub-dimension, hence the five-item scale of Rentz et al. (2002), conceived for measuring interpersonal skills, should be revisited. The dimensions related to the salesperson's sociability and extroversion, namely collaborative, cooperative, emotional, supportive, warm, as well as emotional were identified as highly important sub-dimensions of interpersonal skills (Ambady et al., 2006). Consequently, a review of the selling skills concept dimensionality constitute an imminent research area.

Finally, future studies are called to investigate the importance of others determinants of salespeople's performance, that are motivation, role variables, personal factors, aptitude, and organizational/ environmental factors. Furthermore, the effects of possible moderators variables should be considered. As example, previous studies showed that the customer type and the product type affect the relation between determinants of

salespeople's performance and sales performance (Churchill et al., 1985).

5.2 Implications for Practice

The study findings contribute to establishing a more best future management practices. This paper provides sales organizations, particularly in car industry, with a sales force training program guidelines. Results suggest that globally the sales managers and salespeople agree on eight skills affecting salesperson effectiveness. However, differences in points of view exist. The importance level of some skills and the significance of the follow-up after sale as well as of the technology skills are subjects of disagreement that should be emphasized in sales representatives training programs and management strategies conception.

In the digital era, the technology increases the speed and breadth of knowledge turnover, enhance trust, facilitate buyer-seller relationships and thus affect positively the sales process (Bruce and al., 1997). So it is surprising that salespeople did not mention technology skills as important for their work effectiveness. Unfortunately, some sales organizations are not aware of opportunities that technological innovation can offer and others encounter issues in technology implementation. One of the organizational barriers to technology adoption is salespersons' attitudes toward the use of computer technology applications in their job (Bruce and al., 1997). As consequence, an establishment of a sales automation-tools training program and a continual sales managers support will help salespeople to adopt technology(Jones et al., 2002; Pullig et al., 2002; Ahearne et al., 2005).

Andzulis et al. (2012) affirmed that despite their prominence impact in the sales process efficiency, the sales follow-up and customer service are frequently overlooked. A finding confirmed by the present research, where salespersons not mentioned the follow-up in their interviews. On the contrary, the sales managers considered the follow-up as important. Accordingly, they should build an efficient follow-up strategy and assist salespeople in it implementation. E-mails, calls, web site online forms, customer-facing social networking forums or groups and social media can be used to maintain a proactive on customers relationship management.

5.3 Limitations

This study, however, has some limitations which must be acknowledged. Foremost, the exploratory aspect of the investigation and the convenience sample of sales managers and sales representatives means the results are not generalizable. Future research may test the framework identified according a quantitative method. Subsequent studies might also investigate effect of the industry type, product type, and consumer type effects on the skills' perception of an effective salesperson.

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