

Concern with the Well-Being of Future Generations Makes Salespeople More Innovative – But Does It Make Them More Performant?

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This paper explores how salespeople's concern for the well-being of future generations — a phenomenon known as generativity — could drive otherwise busy salesmen and women to take part in their employer's innovation process through idea generation, promotion, and realization. After controlling for other important variables, such as creative self-efficacy, creative expectations, and expertise, our results confirm the positive influence of generativity on all three dimensions of innovative performance. In turn, the influence of salespeople' innovative performance on their individual sales performance is mitigated: Only idea promotion turns out to be a marginally significant predictor of sales performance.

INTRODUCTION

Innovation has emerged as the new mantra in all spheres of business over the past decades. As firms tried to understand how to generate a steady flow of innovative new offerings, the role of various economic actors—e.g., salespeople—in spurring and/or facilitating innovation has been explored by academics (Ausura et al., 2005; Ernst, Hoyer and Rübсаamen, 2010). Intuitively, salespeople should play a key role in innovation and new product development (NPD). Because they spend their workdays interacting with customers and clients, they are very likely the ones who best understand whatever it is that the market prefers, needs, and wants.

Yet not all salespeople take part in NPD efforts—in fact, most of them rarely do so (Gordon et al. 1997). And those who do get involved typically do so because they have to, or because they are offered incentives to participate. But some seem also get involved because they want to, despite the absence of incentives, or organizational imperatives (McDougal and Smith 1999). Recognition, gaining power or advancement and a few other motivations are raised, but the literature is scarce on empirical studies looking at what non-economical reasons might prompt sales representatives to take part in their employer's innovation process.

In this article, we specifically explore how one's desire to leave a better world for the next generations—that is, generativity—can act as a motivating force for salespeople to get involved in their employer's innovation efforts. As every parent knows, wishing to preserve or promote the well-being of

next generations can be a strong driving force in orienting behaviors (e.g., Lacroix and Ouellet 2008; Urien and Kilbourne 2011). While generativity has been extensively studied in the field of psychology, it is under-researched in the field of business, and especially in the field of innovation management.

We also explore how any partaking of salespeople into the innovation process translates into increased (or decreased) sales performance for these professionals. This article therefore addresses three important issues: (1) What makes salespeople want to take part in new product development and innovation processes?—and more precisely, does generativity play a role in that sense; and (2) How does this all affect a sales professional's personal sales performance?—that is, it links individual innovation to individual sales performance. A better understanding of both issues by researchers and managers could help bridge the gap between firms' R&D and sales efforts.

After reviewing the relevant literature, we develop a conceptual framework and test its hypotheses through a survey with 151 professional salespeople. Results are then provided, followed by a general discussion on the contribution of this research as well as the avenues it opens for future research.

CONCEPTUAL DEVELOPMENT

Creativity, Innovation, and New Product Development

Distinguishing innovation from creativity is tricky as the difference between both is not always clear (e.g., Amabile 1996; Axtell et al. 2000; Mumford and Gustafson 1988, Hammond et al. 2011). On the one hand, creativity is linked to the generation of ideas (that is, creative behavior) while, on the other hand, innovation is more intimately linked to the implementation of said ideas (that is, innovative behavior). In other words, being creative by first generating novel ideas, and later working at actually doing something about those ideas can be viewed as two stages of a general innovation process. To this end, Farr, Sin and Tesluk (2003) proposed a model of the innovation process consisting in two distinct stages: (1) Creativity; and (2) Innovation Implementation. In the Creativity stage, the emphasis is put on problem identification and generation of alternative ideas and solutions. The Innovation Implementation stage concerns the selection of the most promising ideas and the actual implementation of solutions—that is, in our context, the actual development of new products.

At the individual level, an individual's propensity to behave in an innovation-stimulating way has also been researched. Most notably, Scott and Bruce (1994) drew from Kanter's (1988) work on the stages of innovation and defined innovative performance in the workplace as a three-dimensional construct consisting of: (1) performance in generating ideas; (2) performance in promoting ideas to hierarchical superiors and colleagues; and (3) performance in realizing ideas within the organization (Janssen 2001; Lu et al. 2012). For example, at the salespeople' level and in the context of new product development, this should mean that innovative sales professionals would generate, promote, and help realize ideas about what, how, and/or to whom a company may be orienting its sales efforts.

Salespeople Contribution to Innovation Efforts

In most companies, the sales force is the main (if not only) function whose role is boundary-spanning, bridging firms with firms' markets as representatives are in daily contact with customers, focusing on how best to serve the latter's wants and needs (Pelham and Lieb, 2004). As such, salespeople intuitively sound like a powerful source of ideas and insights to tap into whenever a firm looks at developing new products (Hsu, Wang & Tzeng 2007).

In fact, recent research has highlighted the role of salespeople in product lifecycle management, notably in the development phase. For instance, Ernst, Hoyer and Rübсаamen, (2010) show that cross-functional cooperation between sales and R&D positively affects the overall performance of new product development (NPD) projects as well as new product market share when it occurs in the early phases of concept and product development—that is to say, the more closely R&D and sales functions work together, the better the outcome for any firm.

However, while it is the main role of R&D and marketing people to develop new products, or to at least contribute to development efforts, it is rarely the sales function's job to do so—that is, businesses are

not organized to encourage R&D-Sales cooperation in new product development (Anderson et al. 1997; Gordon et al. 1997). And because salespeople typically have a shorter-term time orientation than marketers (Homburg and Jensen 2007), they are probably not likely to get out of their way and make extra efforts to contribute to the NPD process, unless they are rewarded for it, for instance through monetary incentives (Judson et al. 2006).

Yet, the extant literature offers several instances of salespeople' contribution to new product development despite a lack of organization to support this contribution or explicit compensation to do so (e.g., McDougal and Smith 1999). That is to say, salespeople' motivations to contribute to the R&D efforts do not have to be economic in nature; some sales professionals might just contribute to innovation efforts because they want to (Amabile 1996).

Generativity as a Motivation for Salespeople to Take Part in the Innovation Process

One factor that has recently emerged in the marketing literature as a potentially powerful motivator for people to engage in certain activities is generativity. This concept, which appeared in the social psychology literature in the early 1950's, is defined as "an adult's concern for and commitment to the next generation, as expressed through [...] a host of activities that aim to leave a positive legacy of the self for the future" (de St. Aubin, McAdams and Kim 2004, p. 4). For Ryff and Heink (1983), a generative individual is one who "shows awareness of his/her leadership role and has a sense of maximal influence capacity" (1983, p. 809). McAdams et al. (1998) describe generative individuals as good citizens, contributing members of their communities, leaders, and instigators of change.

In fact, generativity is a good predictor of a myriad of phenomena, including socially- and environmentally responsible behaviors (Rossi 2001; Urien and Kilbourne 2011), philanthropy (Hodge 2003), work satisfaction in midlife adults (Ackerman, Zuroff and Moskowitz 2000), successful aging (Watburton, McLaughlin and Pinsker 2006), and overall life satisfaction (Hofer et al. 2008; Ackerman et al. 2000; de St. Aubin and McAdams 1995). It is also associated with consumer sensitivity to corporate social performance (Giacalone, Paul and Jurkiewics 2005), consumer responses to products and services positioned as (un)favorable to the well-being of future generations (Lacroix and Ouellet 2008), as well as employee performance, leadership, and succession in family businesses (e.g., Zacher, Schmitt and Gielnik 2012).

In other words, not only is generativity a personal phenomenon with consequences on one's general well-being, its effects reach beyond one's personal life and into the professional sphere. As a consequence, in the context where a generative individual would happen to be a salesperson, it would appear likely, on the basis of extant literature, that he/she would be inclined to contributing to generating ideas, promoting them, and realizing them within the context of his/her work, provided said ideas have the potential to make a difference and improve the well-being of future generations.

Moreover, one important consequence of generativity is in fact creativity and the tendency to act on creative ideas (McAdams and de St. Aubin study 1992; Browning 1975; McAdams 1985). According to Erikson (1950), generativity pushes people to action in three main ways, one of which is through the production of novel goods and ideas that promote the well-being of future generations. This gives us a first hypothesis:

H1: The higher the level of generativity in a salesperson, the higher is his/her innovative performance in generating ideas within an organization.

Generative people are also viewed as leaders who exert influence on others (Ryff and Heink 1983). They are seen as instigators of change (McAdams et al. 1998) who, before actually producing outcomes, first commit themselves to trying to *make it happen* by involving themselves in projects and influencing others (McAdams and de St. Aubin 1992). This gives us another hypothesis regarding the second dimension of innovative performance:

H2: The higher the level of generativity in a salesperson, the higher is his/her innovative performance in promoting ideas within an organization.

Finally, generative people go beyond promotion; they are people of action who make things happen and effectively create and/or produce goods and knowledge, among others (McAdams and de St. Aubin 1992). Examples of actual outcomes are legion in social psychology (e.g., de St. Aubin and McAdams 1995; Hart et al. 2001; Snyder and Clary 2004; Rossi 2001) as well as in the management and marketing fields (e.g., Grante and Wade-Benzoni 2009; Urien and Kilbourne 2011). This theoretical propensity to actually make things happen provides us with a third hypothesis:

H3: The higher the level of generativity in a salesperson, the higher is his/her innovative performance in realizing ideas within an organization.

Innovative Performance Yields Salesperson Performance

To our knowledge, no empirical research has yet focused on understanding how professional innovative performance may promote sales performance in salespeople, although links with creativity have been made. Empirical research has indeed shown a positive link between salesperson creativity and sales performance, as well as likelihood for promotion to sales management positions (Dubinsky and Ingram 1983; Wang and Netemeyer 2004). Extant literature suggests that creative salespeople are more equipped to engage in problem-solving activities (Wang and Netemeyer 2004), to perform and respond better to non-routine tasks that call for creativity (Lassk and Shepherd 2013), and a number of other relative advantages in comparison with less creative individuals (Devanna and Tichy 1990; Oldham and Cummings 1996; Shalley 1995).

Moreover, human resources professionals have known for ages that involving employees in decision-making increases motivation, engagement, job satisfaction and scores of other factors that, in turn, increase service quality, firm performance, productivity and other positive manifestations of a healthy company (e.g., Appelbaum, Bailey, Berg, & Kalleberg 2000; Huselid 1995). Put more simply, at the individual level, people tend to like (and probably sell) better what they contributed to creating; we therefore believe that a salesperson's innovative performance should be positively associated with his/her selling performance, which gives us three additional hypotheses. Figure 1 summarizes our hypotheses and conceptual framework.

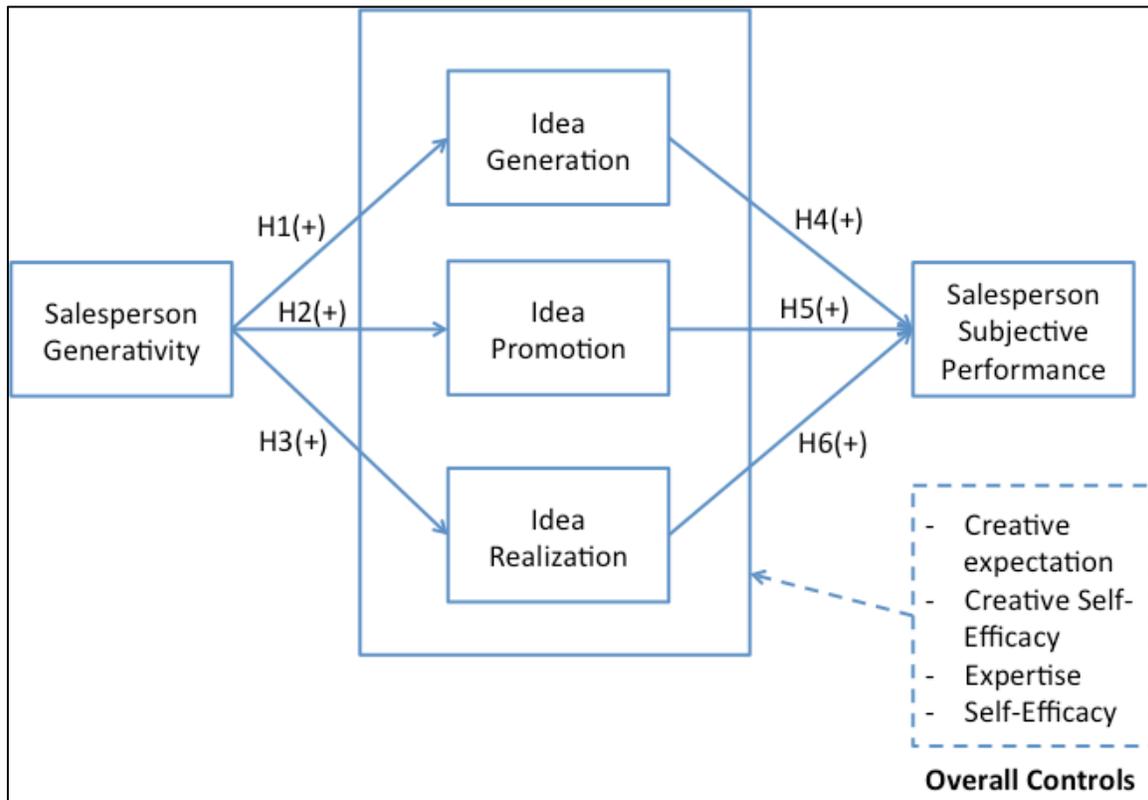
The higher a salesperson's professional innovative performance with regards to (H4) Idea Generation, (H5) Idea Promotion, and (H6) Idea Realization, the higher is his/her sales performance.

METHOD

In order to empirically test our six hypotheses, we conducted a survey with 151 professional salespeople from various organizations and industries. The average respondent was 38.6 years old and had been a sales professional for 11.5 years, out of which some 4.6 at the company where they were currently employed. Our sample was 56.8% male with 55.5% having a Bachelor's degree, and 26.7% a Master's degree. Slightly over half of our respondents (51.4%) were in the Health industry, while most others were in the Arts & Entertainment (7.6%), Retail Trade (6.9%), Manufacturing (6.3%), and Finance & Insurance (5.6%) industries.

The survey was administered online and by invitation only. After having been explained the purpose of the survey, respondents would answer—in a randomized order—all item questions of our survey (46 questions) and concluded with socio-demographic information about their age, gender, experience, and industry. We also provided respondents with a chance to win an iPad Mini as an incentive to take some 15 minutes of their time to fill out our survey.

FIGURE 1
CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: SALESPERSON INNOVATIVE PERFORMANCE



Measures

Generativity was assessed using a 14-item subset of McAdams and de St. Aubin's (1992) *Loyola Generativity Scale*. This scale is certainly the most widely used measurement instrument for generativity, even in consumer behavior research (e.g., Urien and Kilbourne 2011), despite criticisms about its reliability and applicability in business contexts (Lacroix and Ouellet 2008). It consists in a set of items reflecting all topics related to generativity, such as the desire to teach, to pass on knowledge, to contribute to the community, to be creative and productive. In this matter, some items, such as "I have made and created things which have had an impact on other people" and "I have important skills that I try to teach others," capture the idea of being creative and productive (Cronbach alpha = .814).

Innovative performance was assessed using nine items based on Scott and Bruce's (1994) scale for individual innovative behavior in the workplace, which draws on Kanter's (1988) work on the stages of innovation. Three items referred to idea generation ("creating new ideas for improvements," "searching out new working methods, techniques, or instruments," and "generating original solutions to problems" – Cronbach alpha = .883); three items referred to idea promotion ("mobilizing support for innovative ideas," "acquiring approval for innovative ideas," and "making important organizational members enthusiastic for innovative ideas" – Cronbach alpha = .842); and another three items referred to idea realization ("transforming innovative ideas into useful applications," "introducing innovative ideas into the work environment in a systemic way," and "evaluating the utility of innovate ideas" – Cronbach alpha = .843). Respondents rated how often they exhibited the scale's nine innovative work behaviors in the workplace, from "never" (1) to "always" (7).

Finally, individual sales performance was measured subjectively by asking salespeople to evaluate themselves, relative to other salespeople working for their company, on achieving quantity and quality

sales objectives. We used five items from Sujon, Weitz and Kumar (1994), which included “I maintain a high level of current customer retention” and “I find and develop new customer relationships” (Cronbach alpha = .800).

We also included a number of additional factors that extent research has suggested to have an impact on innovative performance and sales performance. This would allow us to evaluate, over and above these well-established factors, what the impact of salesperson generativity should truly be. We therefore included self-efficacy (Brown et al. 1997 – Cronbach alpha = .924), expertise (Palmatier et al. 2006 – Cronbach alpha = .839), and creative self-efficacy (Tierney and Farmer 2002 – Cronbach alpha = .831) in our survey and analyses. And to determine the impact of generativity over and above what is expected in terms of innovation by salespeople in their firms, we also measured creative expectations (Unsworth, Wall, and Carter 2005 – Cronbach alpha = .841).

RESULTS

To statistically analyze the hypothesized relationships summarized in Figure 1, we ran 4 regressions with varying dependents—that is, Idea Generation, Idea Promotion, Idea Realization, and Subjective Performance—and their hypothesized predictors. The results, as well as the R^2 statistics for each model, can be found in Table 1.

Our first hypothesis stated that generativity should positively influence the first dimension of innovative performance, which is Idea Generation. In Model 1, after controlling for 4 factors that are creative expectations, creative self-efficacy, expertise, and self-efficacy, generativity proved to be a significant and positive predictor of Idea Generation ($B = .187$; $p < .05$). This provides empirical support for H1.

Our second hypothesis stated that generativity should positively influence the second dimension of innovative performance, which is Idea Promotion. After taking into account our 4 control variables, generativity is found to be a significant and positive predictor of this dimension ($B = .481$; $p < .001$). This provides strong support for H2.

Our third hypothesis stated that generativity should positively influence the third dimension of innovative performance, which is Idea Realization. After once again controlling for our 4 control variables, generativity is found to be a marginally significant and positive predictor of this dimension ($B = .298$; $p < .01$). This also provides empirical support for H3.

Hypotheses 4 through 6 predicted a positive impact of idea generation, promotion, and realization on sales performance. Our fourth model examined these relations after statistical control of the same 4 control variables that are creative expectations, creative self-efficacy, expertise, and self-efficacy. Only idea promotion turned out to be a positive and marginally significant predictor of sales performance ($B = .160$; $p < .10$). This provides weak support for H5 while H4 and H6 are not empirically supported.

**TABLE 1
RESULTS**

Model / Dependent	Model 1: Idea Generation		Model 2: Idea Promotion		Model 3: Idea Realization		Model 4: Subjective Performance	
	Estimate	S.E.	Estimate	S.E.	Estimate	S.E.	Estimate	S.E.
Main Effects								
Generativity	.187 *	.075	.481***	.100	.298 **	.098		
Idea Generation							.025 ^{ns}	
Idea Promotion							.160 [†]	.093
Idea Realization							-.127 ^{ns}	
Controls								
Creative Expectations	.312***	.053	.182 *	.071	.348***	.070	.102 ^{ns}	
Creative Self-Efficacy	.526***	.073	.316 **	.098	.420***	.096	-.008 ^{ns}	
Expertise	.069 ^{ns}		.116 ^{ns}		.134 ^{ns}		.145 ^{ns}	
Self-Efficacy	-.156 *	.071	-.043 ^{ns}		-.216 *	.094	.495***	.099
R ²	.682		.509		.566		.384	
N	151		151		151		151	

*** p < .001 ; ** p < .01 ; * p < .05 ; † p < .10 ; ^{ns} p ≥ .10.

Note: We report standard errors only for significant effects.

DISCUSSION

This research proposed to explore the linkage between salespersons' concern for the well-being of future generations (that is, generativity), their contribution to innovation within their firms (that is, their innovative performance, which consists in generating, promoting, and realizing ideas) and, in turn, the latter's influence on their sales performance. We did find empirical support that generativity does impact all aspects of innovation. Over and above other variables such as self-efficacy, expertise, and creative expectations, salespeople' generativity positively influences idea generation, promotion, and realization by salespeople in organizations. In other words, although it may not be the main aspect of their job description, and despite the fact that there may or may not be expectations or incentives for them to innovate, salespeople who show concern for the well-being of future generations do contribute significantly more to the innovation process within their firms than do non-generative salespeople.

However, contrary to our expectations, we found that a salesperson's innovative performance does not influence their sales performance. In fact, only idea promotion seems to be positively impacting sales performance, but the effects are small and only marginally significant. That is to say that, at best, taking part in the innovation process of their firms might make salespeople slightly more performant but, in the worst of cases, it does not make them less performant. For managers, this means essentially one thing: If you wish for your salespeople to get involved in new product development and innovation within your firm, but still want these salespeople to do a good job selling your products, then consider hiring generative individuals to fill sales positions.

This research raises some questions for future research, however, the main one having to do with reconciling our hypothesized links between salespeople' innovative performance and sales performance. It could be that there are two types of superior salespeople: those who simply do nothing but sell, and therefore will not take part in any form of innovation process, and those who are better at selling what they have indeed contributed to developing. If this was the case, it should come as no surprise that we find no statistical linkage between innovative and sales performances as both salespeople' types would counterbalance one another. This remains to be explored in future research.

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