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**Salespeople Contribution to Innovation in the Firm:
Can Generativity Be a Driving Force?**

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Salespeople Contribution to Innovation in the Firm: Can Generativity Be a Driving Force?

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the role of salespeople's concern for the well-being of future generations—a phenomenon known as generativity—in driving otherwise busy salesmen and women to take part in their employer's innovation process through idea generation, promotion, and realization (that is, their innovative performance). In addition, it explores whether or not said innovative performance translates into increased sales performance for salespeople. Six hypotheses are derived from the extant literature and are empirically tested with a sample of 145 professional salespeople. After controlling for other important variables, such as self-efficacy and expertise, our results confirm the positive influence of generativity on two dimensions of innovative performance—idea promotion and idea realization (although only marginally for the latter)—but not on idea generation. 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. These results are discussed in light of the apparent conflict of self-efficacy with our hypothesized generativity—innovative performance—sales performance chain.

INTRODUCTION

Innovation has emerged as the new mantra in all spheres of business over the past decade. As firms tend to understand how to generate a steady flow of innovative new offerings, the role of various actors in spurring and facilitating innovation has been explored by researchers, among which are salespeople (Ausura et al., 2005; Ernst, Hoyer and Rübbsaamen, 2010; Saalsvuori and Immonen, 2008). Intuitively, salespeople should play a key role in innovation and new product development (NPD) since they are probably the ones who best understand consumer needs and wants, or at least those with the most direct access to this information.

Yet not all salespeople take part in NPD efforts—in fact, most of them rarely do so (Gordon et al. 1997). Among those who do, the vast majority get involved because they have to, or have other incentives to participate. But some seem to get involved because they want to, despite the absence of incentives, or organizational imperatives, to do so (McDougal and Smith 1999).

In this article, we look into 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, the well-being of children and next generations can be a strong driving force in orienting behaviors (Urien and Kilbourne 2011). After reviewing the relevant literature relating sales force, innovation, and generativity and developing our conceptual framework, we test our hypotheses through a survey with 145 professional salespeople. Results are then provided, followed by a general discussion on the contribution of this research, its limitations, as well as the avenues it opens for future research.

CONCEPTUAL DEVELOPMENT

Creativity, Innovation, and New Product Development

Some authors have focused on distinguishing innovation from creativity as the difference between both is not always clear (e.g., Amabile 1996; Axtell et al. 2000; Mumford and Gastafson 1988, Hammond et al. 2011). For those authors, creativity is linked to the generation of ideas (that is, creative behavior), while innovation would particularly focus on the implementation of ideas (that is, innovative behavior). In other words, generating and implementing novel ideas can be viewed as stages of the innovation process. To this end, Farr, Sin and Tesluk (2003) proposed a model of the innovation process consisting in two distinct stages: Creativity and Innovation Implementation. In the Creativity stage, the emphasis is on problem identification and generation of alternative ideas and solutions. The Innovation Implementation stage concerns the selection of ideas and the implementation of solutions.

At the individual level, an individual's propensity to behave in an innovation-stimulating way has also been researched. Most notably in the field of business, 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 performance in generating ideas, performance in promoting ideas to hierarchical superiors and colleagues, and performance in realizing ideas within the organization (Janssen 2011; Lu et al. 2011). Applied in the specific context of salespeople, such performance could imply innovation in how a company sells, and likely also in what it sells.

Salespeople Contribution to Innovation Efforts

In most companies, the sales force is the main (or only) function whose role is boundary-spanning, bridging firms with their markets as they 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, some literally referring to boundary spanners as the very source of innovation, no less (Hsu, Wang, and 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 Rübstaamen, (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 the new product market share when it occurs in the early phases of concept and product development—that is to say, the more 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, to a perhaps lesser extent in reality, 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 bonuses (Judson et al. 2006).

Yet, the extent literature offers several instances of salespeople' contribution to new product development despite a lack of organization or explicit compensation (e.g., McDougal and

Smith 1999). That is to say, salespeople motivation in contributing to the R&D efforts are not necessarily economic, and therefore non-economic motivations likely do play a role in that sense. Amabile (1996), for example, shows how intrinsic motivation for a task is one of four major factors affecting creativity, a factor of innovation performance. We next look into some of those non-economic, intrinsic motivations for salespeople to take part in the innovation process.

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 parenting, teaching, mentoring, leadership, and a host of others 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 person is one who "shows awareness of leadership role and has a sense of maximal influence capacity" (1983, p. 809) while McAdams et al. (1998) describe generative individuals as good citizens, contributing members of their communities, leaders, an instigators of change.

In fact, generativity is a good predictor of a host of diverse phenomena, including socially- and environmentally responsible behaviors (Rossi 2001; Urien and Kilbourne 2011), philanthropy (Hodge 2003), work satisfaction in midlife adults (Ackerman, Zuroff and Moscovitz 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 (Giacolone, Paul and Jurkiewics 2005), consumer sensitivity to products and services (Lacroix and Ouellet 2008), as

well as employee performance, leadership, and succession in family businesses (Grante and Wade-Benzoni 2009).

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.

One important consequence of generativity however is creativity and the tendency to act on creative ideas. 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 in order promote the well-being of future generations, which Erikson (1950) defines as *procreativity*. For McAdams and de St. Aubin study (1992), generative adults "generate life products and outcomes that benefit the social system and promote its continuity from one generation to the next." (p.1003). Generative people become, as such, "creative ritualizers" (Browning 1975). In fact, for McAdams (1985), the creation and production of goods and ideas are more than just pro-social or altruistic behavior: it is a powerful self-creation, a legacy of the self. This gives us a first hypothesis:

H1: The higher the level of generativity in a salesperson, the higher 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 1988) who, before actually producing outcomes, first commit themselves and try to make it happen by involving themselves in life projects, and by influencing others in order to promote the well-being of future generation

(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 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 or produce goods, knowledge, and even kids (McAdams and de St. Aubin 1992). Examples of actual outcomes abound in social psychology (e.g., de St. Aubin and McAdams 1995; Hart et al. 2001; Snyder and Clary 2004; Rossi 2001), and in the management and marketing fields (e.g., Grante and Wade-Benzoni 2009; Urien and Kilbourne 2011). This propensity to take action gives us a third hypothesis:

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

Innovative Performance Yields Salesperson Performance

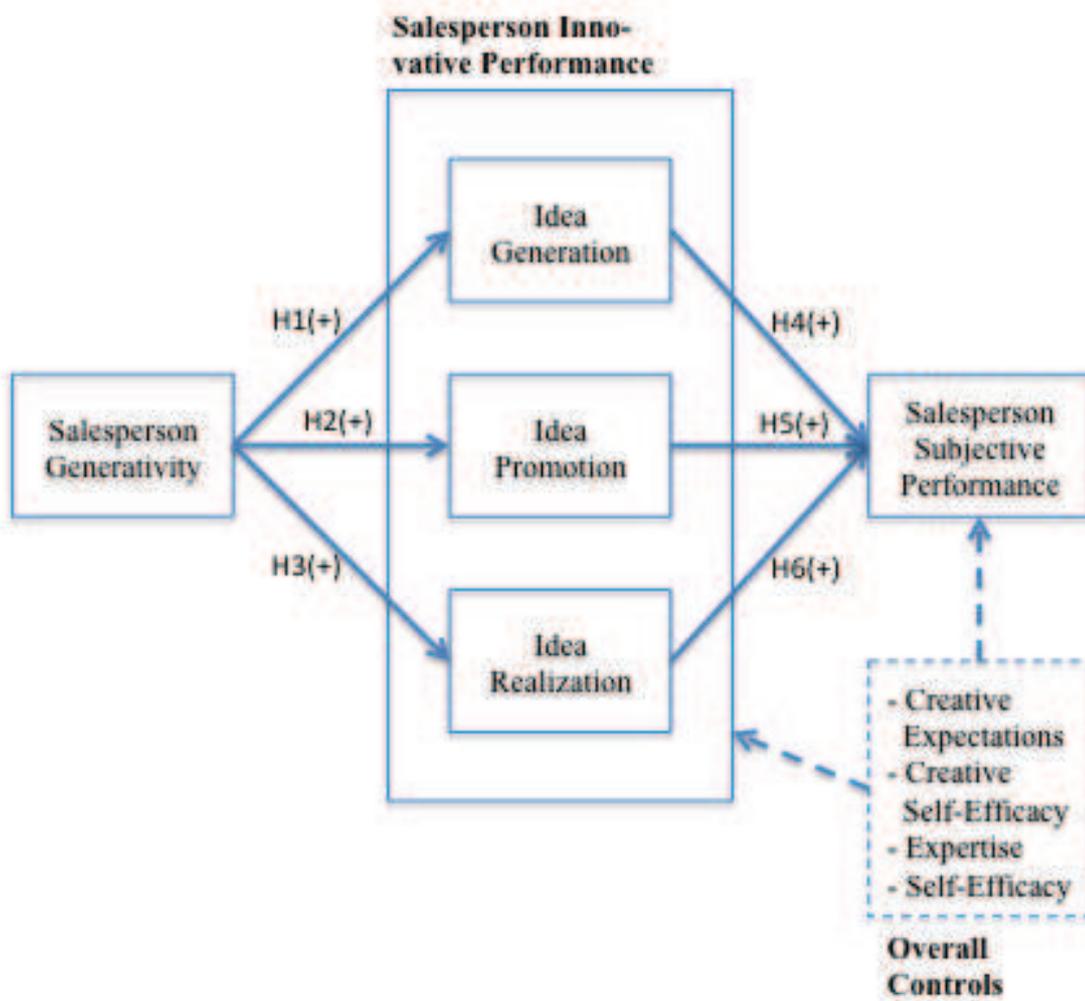
To our knowledge, no empirical research has yet focused on understanding how professional innovative performance may promote sales performance in salespeople, although links with creativity have been made. Empirical research has indeed shown a positive link between salesperson creativity and his/her sales performance, as well as likelihood for promotion to sales management (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 et al. 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 his/her sales performance.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework



METHOD

Sample and Procedure

In order to empirically test our six hypotheses, we conducted a survey with 145 professional salespeople from various organizations. 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 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 sector, 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 during the month of May of 2013. 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.

Measures

Generativity was assessed using 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 behaviour research (e.g., Urien and Kilbourne 2011), despite criticisms about its reliability and applicability in business contexts (Lacroix and Ouellet 2008). It consists in 20 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, one of

the items “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” captures well the idea of being creative and productive. Reflecting Lacroix and Ouellet’s (2008) comments, the scale presented barely acceptable reliability (Cronbach alpha = .605).

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 Sujan, 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 can have an impact on innovative performance and sales performance. This would allow us to evaluate, above and beyond these 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), creative self-efficacy (Tierney and Farmer 2002 – Cronbach alpha = .831), and creative expectations (Unsworth, Wall, and Carter 2005 – Cronbach alpha = .841) in our survey and analyses.

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 R² statistics for each model, can be found in Table 1.

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	.126 ^{ns}		.478 ^{***}	.114	.213 [†]	.111		
Idea Generation							.056 ^{ns}	
Idea Promotion							.159 [†]	.095
Idea Realization							-.109 ^{ns}	
Controls								
Creative Expectations	.357 ^{***}	.055	.216 ^{**}	.075	.400 ^{***}	.073	.052 ^{ns}	
Creative Self-Efficacy	.511 ^{***}	.077	.278 ^{**}	.104	.384 ^{***}	.102	.016 ^{ns}	
Expertise	.088 ^{ns}		.143 ^{ns}		.170 [†]	.089	.117 ^{ns}	
Self-Efficacy	-.185 [*]	.074	-.077 ^{ns}		-.237 [*]	.097	.515 ^{***}	.103
R ²	.676		.486		.549		.375	
N	145		145		145		145	

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

Note: We report standard errors only for significant effects.

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 failed to prove impactful on this dimension. H1 is therefore not empirically supported.

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 ($B = .478$; $p < .001$). This provides 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 ($B = .213$; $p < .10$). Although a larger sample may have allowed for a stronger and more statistically convincing demonstration of the impact of generativity on idea realization, we only find weak support for H3 in this research.

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 ($B = .159$; $p < .10$). This provides weak support for H5 while H4 and H6 are not empirically supported.

DISCUSSION

This research proposed to explore the linkage between salespersons' preoccupation for the well-being of future generations (coined generativity), their contribution to innovation within their firms (that is, innovative performance, which consists in generating ideas, promoting them, and realizing them) and, in turn, the latter's influence on their sales performance. While we found no empirical support that generativity impacts idea generation, we did find strong support that, above and beyond other variables such as self-efficacy, expertise, and creative expectations, generativity exerts a strong influence on idea promotion within the firm. We also found that salesperson generativity seems to positively affect idea realization by salespeople in organizations, although the effects appear weaker and less statistically significant. In turn, contrary to our expectations, we found that innovative performance seems not to be influential on sales performance. In fact, only idea promotion seems to be positively impacting sales performance, but the effects are small and their statistical significance is poor.

When considering the whole chain, however, we realize that self-efficacy—which is a salesperson's perception of their own ability or belief that they possess the skills and resources necessary to succeed in the task of selling, thus focusing their attention and motivation on the tasks necessary for achieving targeted performance levels (Brown, Jones, and Leigh 2005) — appears to play a smothering role on the generativity — innovation — performance linkage. Because salespeople are often evaluated and compensated on the basis of hard metrics like sales volume, they do not spend (or waste) any time on generating ideas and realizing them (both negative relationships significant at the $p < .05$ level in Models 1 and 3). And because the most performant salespeople are strong in self-efficacy ($p < .001$), it is statistically difficult to reach significance when evaluating a linkage between these two dimensions of innovative performance

and sales performance. In contrast, self-efficacy does not influence idea promotion, which is, in turn, a (marginally) significant predictor of performance.

Finally, because generativity—one of the key variables in this study—was assessed using a measurement instrument that exhibited poor reliability, it is possible that our results may be biased and that actual phenomena may not have been captured by our survey. In addition, our sample was biased towards what happens in the Health industry, with over half of our respondents working in this sector. It is possible that the product development realities in the highly technical fields of biotechnology and pharmaceutical products, for instance, may be different than those that prevail in less sophisticated fields, like accommodation and food services, real estate, or even finance and insurance. All in all, this paves the way for future research on the topic of the salesperson generativity, innovation performance, and sales performance.

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