

A Push or a Nudge: Understanding Consumer Perceptions of Sales Pressure

Diana L. Haytko

Florida Gulf Coast University

Ronald A. Clark

Missouri State University

James J. Zboja

University of Tulsa

Abstract

The authors share recent research related to consumer perceptions of high pressure sales tactics. A model was developed depicting two types of sales pressure: aggressive and directive, both of which impact consumers' trust in, and satisfaction with, the salesperson and the company. Aggressive pressure has a negative impact while directive pressure may be positive, as the consumer views the salesperson as helpful in addressing their needs. Directive sales pressure is much less damaging to desirable marketing outcomes. The authors developed a scale to measure perceptions of sales pressure. This scale can be added to any customer satisfaction survey. The results can be used in sales training.

"In sales, it's not what you say; it's how they perceive what you say"

Author Jeffrey Gitomer.¹

Nearly everyone has an example of a time when they encountered a salesperson who was extremely pushy, making the buying experience uncomfortable, maybe to the point of walking away from something they really wanted. Marketing practitioners understand the salesperson's power to influence the consumer's decision making process. Today's focus on consultative selling suggests that the salesperson should pursue a strategy that is a win-win for both parties. However, using high pressure tactics

Understanding Consumer Perceptions of Sales Pressure

changes the sales message from persuasive to coercive.² Persuasive messages are viewed as positive, showing the consumer how the product can meet their needs, while coercive messages are more negative, using aggressive and manipulative strategies to force the consumer to purchase.

While the short-term benefits of high pressure tactics can lead to quick sales for the firm, the long-term effects are bad for the consumer, salesperson and retailer.³ High pressure tactics have been criticized for causing consumer discomfort. The consumer frequently perceives these tactics as unfair, manipulative and/or unethical.⁴ This perception can even cause the consumer to do the opposite of what the salesperson desired because of the consumer's perceived threat to his or her freedom of choice.⁵ Ultimately, the benefits of employing these tactics may be outweighed by their cost. In fact, research shows that coercive tactics only result in a slight increase in short-term sales.⁶ Consequently, it is important that sales managers and salespeople understand what increases the consumers' perception that they are being pressured as well as the outcomes of this perceived pressure. Moreover, it is valuable to improve our understanding of consumer perceptions of sales pressure to determine if there are any positive outcomes, if there is an optimal level of pressure, or if there exists a clear line where the effects of perceived pressure go from being positive to negative.

Aggressive versus Directive Sales Strategies

The current research is based on both qualitative and quantitative work. Given this effort, we define consumer perceptions of sales pressure as follows: A consumers' perception of being pressured by a sales agent to purchase a product within an artificially urgent time frame and/or being directed by a sales agent towards the purchase of different or additional product alternatives.⁷

As such, there are two types of sales pressure: aggressive and directive. The aggressive tactics include: rushing the consumer, an inability to browse, and early close attempts. Directive sales tactics include: asking the consumer what benefits/features they seek, understanding the needs being met by the purchase, suggesting products that can meet those needs, and providing advice as to which product may be best. In most sales experiences, both tactics are used to a certain extent. What we seek to examine is the consumer's perception, as it is the consumer's perception that matters, not the salesperson's intent.

The authors developed and tested a scale to measure consumer perceptions of sales pressure. The final scale includes 7 items and is presented below in Table 1.

Table 1. Sales Pressure Measurement

Aggressive Sales Pressure

1. The salesperson used high pressure sales tactics.
2. The salesperson forced me to make a decision before I was ready.
3. The salesperson attempted to close the sale before all of my concerns were addressed.
4. I felt like I had been “played” by the salesperson.

Directive Sales Pressure

1. The salesperson kept pushing me toward one product when I was interested in another.
2. I felt pressure to buy what the salesperson insisted on, as opposed to what I originally wanted.
3. The salesperson was more interested in selling me his or her recommendation than the product I wanted.

This scale was used to test whether consumer perceptions of the use of these tactics influenced their trust in, and satisfaction with, the salesperson. The results of the study showed that aggressive tactics had negative influences on both trust and satisfaction, while directive tactics did not. It may be that directive sales pressure is perceived as a salesperson's attempt to help the consumer find a product that will better meet their needs. While not necessarily positive, directive pressure is much less damaging to the salesperson and the firm.

Implications for Practice

The results of this work can be applied to nearly any organization, including business-to-business selling. There are two key efforts that can be made.

Sales Training

The two types of sales pressure: aggressive and directive, should be discussed in organizational sales training procedures. It is important that all sales representatives understand the tactics employed in each type of pressure and what the outcomes of using each type might be for everyone involved. Given that some level of pressure may actually be good, it would be beneficial to everyone to share experiences and individual customer characteristics that seem to determine which types promote positive outcomes and which types promote negative results. The fact that directive pressure tactics did not cause negative feelings of trust in, and satisfaction

Understanding Consumer Perceptions of Sales Pressure

with, the salesperson suggests that some customers may need a little pressure to help them make decisions in buying situations. The importance of a thorough and specific training program is underscored by the assumption that the salesperson is operating in the best interests of the customer when making purchase recommendations.

Customer Satisfaction Surveys and Focus Groups

The perceptions of sales pressure scale can be used to assess the level of pressure felt on the part of customers and can be easily added to any customer satisfaction survey. Just asking the questions may help minimize the consumer's negative attitudes caused by felt pressure.

In addition, focus groups can be held periodically to delve deeper into consumers' perceptions of their sales experience. This effort can be used in tandem with a quality improvement initiative aimed at communicating to the customer the importance of their interaction with the sales team. At the same time, this effort will serve to keep the sales team informed of the customer's perceptions of their sales tactics and styles. Further, the findings from customer satisfaction surveys could be used for training and assessment purposes to compare selling styles and performance across members of the sales team.

In conclusion, there exist two types of sales pressure: aggressive and directive. What matters most is not the salesperson's intent, but the consumer's perception. Not all sales pressure is bad. Indeed, there may be an optimal amount of pressure that is beneficial to everyone involved. The key is to question customers about their perceptions of sales pressure (easily added to current customer satisfaction surveys) and use this knowledge in the organization's sales training programs to determine what the sales team can change to promote more positive outcomes.

Authors

Diana L. Haytko is the Marguerite and Guy Howard Professor of Marketing in the Lutgert College of Business at Florida Gulf Coast University in Estero, Florida. Dr. Haytko's research spans from millennial shopping behavior, to logistics strategy, and international advertising. Her work has been published in the Journal of Consumer Research, Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, Journal of Retailing, Journal of Business Research, and many others. She is Editor of the Journal of Business Cases and Applications.
email: dhaytko@fgcu.edu

Ronald A. Clark is the Daisy Portenier Loucks Research Professor and Associate Professor of Marketing in the Department of Marketing of the College of Business

at Missouri State University in Springfield Missouri. Dr. Clark's research interests are primarily in consumer behavior, personal selling and sales management with an emphasis on consumer responses to social influence, persuasion, individual consumer traits and psychometrics. His research has been presented in more than twenty conferences (with several best paper awards) and he is published in quality academic journals such as the *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, *Psychology & Marketing*, *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, *Cornell Hospitality Quarterly*, *Journal of Marketing Theory & Practice*, *Journal of Social Psychology*, *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management*, *Psychological Reports*, and the *International Journal of Logistics Management*.
email: RonClark@MissouriState.edu

James (Jim) Zboja is an Associate Professor of Marketing at The University of Tulsa. His research focuses on perceptions of sales pressure and interpersonal influence in personal selling, services, and organizations. His work has been published or is accepted to be published in *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, *Journal of Business Ethics*, *Journal of Services Marketing*, *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, *Career Development International*, and *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, among others.
email: jim-zboja@utulsa.edu

Endnotes

1. Jeffrey Gitomer Quote. (n.d.). Retrieved March 03, 2017, from <http://www.azquotes.com/quote/1231896>.
2. Barron, J.M., & Staten, M.E. (1995). Coercion in the selling of credit life insurance. *Psychology and Marketing*, 12(8), 765–787.
3. Chu, W., Gerstner, E., & Hess, J.D. (1995). Costs and benefits of hardsell. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 32(1), 97–102.
4. Brown, S.P. (1990). Use of closed influence tactics by salespeople: incidence and buyer attributions. *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management*, 10(4), 17–29.
5. Clee, M.A., & Wicklund, R.A. (1980). Consumer behavior and psychological reactance. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 6(4), 389–405.
6. Barron, J.M., & Staten, M.E. (1995). Coercion in the selling of credit life insurance. *Psychology and Marketing*, 12(8), 765–787.
7. Zboja, J.J., Clark, R.A., & Haytko, D.L. (2016). An offer you can't refuse: consumer perceptions of sales pressure. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 44(6), 806–821.