

# A SALESPERSON-CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIP PERSPECTIVE OF SALESFORCE ETHICAL BEHAVIOUR

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Zoha Fatima\*

Email : [zoha\\_fatima22@yahoo.com](mailto:zoha_fatima22@yahoo.com)

## ABSTRACT

*In this competitive environment, as the companies are producing similar products, the only thing that can differentiate one company from other company is the behaviour of salespeople. Salesforce ethical behaviour has been found to have an immense impact on customer's trust, satisfaction and commitment with the salesperson, influencing salesperson-customer relationship. As the profitability of sales organizations depend on the successful relationship between salespeople and customers, efforts are being made by sales organizations to encourage salespeople to behave ethically and address the concern of customers with due responsibility. This paper makes an attempt to analyse the impact of salesforce ethical behaviour on salesforce-customer relationship and suggests ways to improve it. The paper is based on review of studies.*

**Key Words** : Salesforce ethical behaviour, salesperson-customer relationship, customer's trust, customer's satisfaction

## INTRODUCTION

The environment is becoming competitive. Customers prefer to buy from those salespeople whom they consider to be ethical in selling. If customers perceive salesperson's behaviour to be unethical, they will not purchase and this will result in loss for the company.

Legal environment has also changed. Customers have several rights. Unethical sales behaviour can cause disputes which might result in litigation. Research suggests that a salesperson's ethical behavior can play a critical role in the formation and maintenance of long-term buyer-seller relationships. Unethical behaviour can result in customer dissatisfaction and negatively affect the profitability of the company. Productivity and other measures of efficiency may be low because employees maximize their own welfare rather than giving priority to

company goals (Ferrell and Gresham, 1985). The profitability of the company is dependent on the ethical behaviour of salespeople. In such a scenario, the exploration of the consequences of salesforce ethical behaviour on salesforce – customer relationship holds immense importance.

Money spent on product development and promotion can be an utter waste because of the poor performance of salespeople and their dissatisfying interactions with customers (Goff, Boles, Bellenger and Stojack, 1997). In a similar way, if salespeople are able to make good interactions with consumers, the consumers are likely to overlook shortcomings in the areas of product/service difficulties.

The objective of this paper is to analyse the consequences of salesforce ethical behaviour on their relationship with customers and suggests ways to improve salesforce ethical behaviour.

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\* Research Scholar, Department of Business Administration, Faculty of Management Studies and Research  
Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh (Uttar Pradesh)

## **SALESFORCE ETHICAL BEHAVIOUR**

Ethical sales behaviour is defined as fair and honest actions that enable the salesperson to foster long-term relationships with customers based on customer satisfaction and trust (Roma'n and Munuera, 2005). Unethical sales behavior is defined as a short-run salespersons' conduct that enables them to gain at the expense of the customer (Roma'n and Ruiz (2005). Examples of such activities are Lagace et al., 1991; Robertson and Anderson, 1993):

1. Lying or exaggerating about the benefits of a product
2. Lying about availability
3. Lying about the competition
4. Selling products that people do not need
5. Giving answers when the answer is not really known and
6. Implementing manipulative influence tactics or high-pressure selling techniques.

Bolander, Zahn, Loe and Clark (2015) investigated whether salespeople behave ethically or unethically during repetitive failures using a laboratory experiment involving 134 undergraduate students. The results revealed that when salespeople are unable to influence buyers, then they indulge in unethical behaviour.

## **FRAMEWORK FOR ORGANIZING THE STUDY**

Taking into account the variables of salesforce ethical behaviour, salesforce ethics, salesforce-customer relationship, articles from following management, marketing, and sales journals have been included for the review - Journal of Retailing, Journal of Marketing, Journal of Business Research, Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management, Organization Science, European Journal of Marketing, Industrial Marketing Management and Journal of Marketing Management.

## **CONSEQUENCES OF ETHICAL BEHAVIOUR**

The importance of building relationships in recent years has increased. That is why sales organizations are making efforts to maintain a healthy Salesperson - Customer Relationship.

Practicing ethical behaviour is important for enhancing Salesperson - Customer Relationship. Research studies are discussed below which highlight the impact of ethical behaviour on several components of salesperson - customer relationship like trust, satisfaction and commitment of customers with the salesperson.

## **Salesperson - Customer Relationship**

### **• Customer trust with the salesperson**

The trust a customer has in a salesperson determines the quality of their relationship (Swan, Bowers and Richardson, 1999). Customer's trust in sales contexts can be defined as a confident belief that the salesperson can be relied upon to behave in such a manner that the long-term interest of the customer will be served (Crosby, Evans and Cowles, 1990). Customer trust has been shown to be earned by the honest actions of sales representatives, which is a component of ethical sales behavior (Beatty et al., 1996). According to Swan, Bowers and Richardson (1999), "Customer trust of the salesperson has two components, affect and cognition - Affect is feeling secure or insecure about relying on the salesperson, and cognition is the belief that the salesperson has both the necessary competence and motivation to be relied upon".

It is important for sales organizations to maintain trustworthy relationship with its customers and other organizations. Now as salespeople are the representatives of their organizations, they should develop long-term and mutually beneficial relationships with customers and other organizations. The establishment and maintenance of trust is important in achieving these long-term relationships (Kennedy, Ferrell and LeClair, 2001). Analysing relationship quality in services selling, Crosby, Evans and Cowles (1990) found that selling behaviors such as cooperative intentions, mutual disclosure, and intensive follow up contact help in maintaining a strong bond between consumers and salespeople. This finding highlights the importance of practicing ethical behaviour in maintaining a trustworthy Salesperson - Customer relationship.

Investigating the impact of ethical behavior on relationships between buyers and sellers, Lagace, Dahlstrom and Gassenheimer (1991) found that ethical behavior of salespeople is positively related to trust of doctors with the salespeople. The study on car buyers by Kennedy, Ferrell and LeClair (2001) revealed that buyer-seller trust results from salesperson competence, service quality, low pressure selling tactics and a general tendency to trust others. In their study on 249 consumers, Román and Ruiz (2005) found that perceived ethical sales behavior has a positive effect on trust to the salesperson. Analyzing data of customers of financial services' intermediaries, Wray, Palmer and Bejou (1994) found that salesperson's sales orientation, customer orientation and salesperson's ethics has an impact of customer trust. Sergio Román (2003) analysed the role of ethical sales behaviour in developing and maintaining relationships with customers. The results showed that ethical sales behaviour has a positive impact on trust and loyalty to the company.

Fred Selnes (1998) in their study on 177 customers of the supplier revealed that honest and timely communications with the buyer have a strong effect on trust with the supplier. In turn, trust was found to have a significant impact on the motivation to enhance the scope of the relationship. Swan, Trawick and Silva (1985) investigated how industrial salespeople win the trust of their customers. The analysis of 42 medical salespeople revealed that trust increases when customer feels that the salesperson is dependable, honest, competent, customer oriented, and likeable. Critical behaviors included: offering proof, establishing a common ground with the customer, asserting availability, offering benefits and others.

Emphasizing that successful relationship marketing requires relationship commitment and trust Morgan and Hunt (1994) in their study of 204 independent automobile tire retailers, found that opportunistic behavior has a negative impact on trust. Swan, Trawick, Jr., Rink and Roberts (1988) found that for buyer trust, dependability and responsibility were the more important

dimensions, followed by competence and likability. For cognitive/affective trust, dependability was found out to be the most important single predictor followed by honesty.

- **Customer satisfaction with the salesperson**

Beatty, Mayer, Coleman, Reynolds and Lee (1996) stated that relationship formation between buyers and sellers results from customer service orientation, augmented personal service and team playing by employees and repeat customer-employee interactions based on trust, friendship, and functionality. Weitz (1981) suggested that the use of high pressure selling tactics may sacrifice a customers' long-term satisfaction. Kennedy et al. (2001) developed a model of consumers' trust of salesperson and manufacturer. Their study on car buyers showed that customer satisfaction is positively associated with low-pressure selling tactics.

The study by Oliver and Swan (1989) indicated that customer satisfaction with the salesperson increased when the customer felt the salesperson had been fair in the transaction. Fairness in transaction was associated with ethical sales behavior (Futrell, 2002). The study on 90 doctors by Lagace, Dahlstrom and Gassenheimer (1991) revealed that ethical behavior of salespeople is positively related to satisfaction of doctors with the pharmaceutical salespeople, resulting in enhanced relationship quality.

Analyzing the factors which have an impact on customer satisfaction, Wray, Palmer and Bejou (1994) found that relationship satisfaction was influenced by salesperson's sales orientation and customer orientation and ethics. The analysis of 630 bank customers by Sergio Román (2003) revealed that ethical sales behaviour has a positive impact on customer satisfaction with the core service. Examining the role of satisfaction and trust in maintaining and enhancing the relationship between a supplier and a buyer, Fred Selnes (1998) found that signalling commitment, conflict handling and honest and timely communications with the buyer have a strong effect on satisfaction with the supplier. In turn,

satisfied customers were found to be more motivated to continue the relationship with the focal supplier and enhance the scope of the relationship.

Goff, Boles, Bellenger and Stojack (1997) examined the effect of customer orientation on consumer satisfaction. Analyzing data of 522 purchasers of new vehicles, they found that salesperson's use of a customer oriented sales approach will lead to increased customer satisfaction with the salesperson as well as with the dealer while a salesperson's use of a selling oriented sales approach will lead to decreased customer satisfaction with the salesperson. They also found that customer satisfaction with the dealer will predict satisfaction with the product and the manufacturer. These findings show that salesperson's use of a customer oriented sales approach will directly affect customer satisfaction with the salesperson and indirectly affect customer's satisfaction with the product and manufacturer.

Roma'n and Ruiz (2005) analysed the role of ethical salesperson behavior in developing a better quality relationship between the salesperson and the customer. The findings showed that customer's perceived salesforce ethical behavior played a major role in affecting the quality of the buyer-seller relationship as it had a positive effect on customer satisfaction.

- **Customer commitment to salespeople**

Customer commitment to the salesperson represents an enduring desire to continue the relationship with the salesperson accompanied by this customer's willingness to make efforts at maintaining it (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Characteristics of a commitment are thought to be stability, sacrifice, and loyalty (Gundlach and Murphy, 1993). If salespeople are not ethical in their dealing with the customers, they will not be committed to salespeople and the development of salesperson - customer relationship will be hampered. Gundlach and Murphy (1993) argued that if sellers follow ethical principles, they will be able to maintain long-term relationships with

buyers. Roma'n and Ruiz (2005) found that perceived ethical sales behavior has a positive impact on consumer's commitment to the salesperson.

The components of relationship quality (trust, satisfaction and commitment) are interdependent. The study by Roma'n and Ruiz (2005) showed that satisfaction with and trust in the salesperson has a positive impact on customer commitment to the salesperson. Sergio Román (2003) found customer satisfaction with the company to be related to customer trust, which in turn has a positive effect on customer loyalty. Crosby et al. (1990) found that relationship quality (trust and satisfaction) is positively related to the anticipation of future interaction. Fred Selnes (1998) showed that satisfaction with the supplier has a significant impact on trust with the supplier.

Maintenance of relationship quality between salespeople and customers is extremely important. Therefore ethical behaviour of the salespeople need to be improved.

## **WAYS TO IMPROVE SALESFORCE ETHICAL BEHAVIOUR**

As salesforce ethical behaviour is so important for developing and maintaining buyer-seller relationship as well as their relationship with the organization, following steps can be taken to help salespeople practice more ethical behaviour.

- **Encouragement to build long term relationship**

It has been seen that salespeople who have a short term orientation for selling show less ethical behaviour than salespeople who are guided by long term orientation. Robertson and Anderson (1993) in their study on 446 salespeople found that salespeople who rely heavily on repeat business advise behaving more ethically. If managers expect, encourage, or foster short-term ethical activities, firms can expect their salesforce not to be very customer oriented (Schwepker Jr. and Good, 2004a). Sales organizations should encourage salespeople to develop long term relationship with the customers. Long-term

buying situations will be positively related to ethical behaviour.

- **Ethics seminars/programmes**

A large number of organizations are opting to hold seminars for marketing managers that deal with ethics problems. The purpose of conducting ethics seminars is to make salespeople aware of ethical problems they are likely to encounter in their dealing with the customer. There can be different ways for developing ethics seminars or programs such as corporate conference discussion of ethical cases, in-house conferences responsibilities (Laczniak and Murphy, 1991). Ethical books and articles can also be distributed to salespeople to make them think on ethical related issues. This will help them measure their own performance in ethical terms.

- **Information about Consumer Protection Laws**

Discussing the issues in marketing's legal environment, Boedecker, Morgan and Stoltman (1991) stated that following salesperson activities could lead to legal disputes – (1) Salesperson stopping customers from reading warnings, (2) Salesperson's negative comment about a competitor's product may lead to liability for the tort of disparagement, also referred to as trade libel or injurious falsehood, (3) Salesperson making unsupported claims for their products may create liability for misrepresentation.

Honeycutt, Glassman, Zugelder and Karande (2001) found that ethical perception and legal perception are the most important determinants of ethical behavior. After making salespeople understand the code of conduct, salespeople should also be made aware of consumer protection laws. If salespeople know that their unethical behaviour is going to result in violation of a particular law, they will try to abide indulging in such behaviour.

- **Performance appraisals by taking customer's feedback**

Performance appraisals provide

opportunities for sales managers to consider salesperson behavior in addition to sales outcomes (Boedecker, Morgan and Stoltman, 1991). Performance appraisal should not only include sales manager's feedback of salespeople's performance. It should also include customer's feedback on salesforce performance as this will give a clear picture of salesforce activities and will be helpful in analysing salesforce unethical behaviour. Oliver and Swan (1989) found that buyers' perceptions of fairness are influenced positively by higher levels of seller input. Customers can be asked if they find salesperson's behaviour to be ethical or not. By collecting customers' perceptions of salespeople's performance, sales managers can provide feedback to salespeople which will help salespeople contemplate on their own behaviour and give them the opportunity to self-correct themselves.

- **Ethical climate**

Ethical climate has been defined by Victor and Cullen (1988) as "the prevailing perceptions of typical organizational practices and procedures that have ethical content". Ethical climate is a broad term as it includes employee perceptions of ethical codes of conduct, ethical policies, their enforcement and punishment for unethical behavior (Schwepker and Good, 2007b). The study on 240 sales managers by Schwepker Jr. and Good (2004a) revealed that company's ethical climate has positive influence on salesforce customer orientation.

Examining the relationship among ethical climate, ethical conflict and role conflict, Schwepker, Ferrell, and Ingram (1997) in their study on 152 salespeople in business-to-business companies suggested that if salespeople have a positive perception about ethical climate, they are likely to experience less ethical conflict and vice versa.

Ethical climate not only have effect on salesperson's ethical behaviour but also on sales manager's ethical behaviour. Schwepker and Good (2007b) found that when organization's climate

is ethical, sales managers are more likely to have positive attitudes about ethics. Ethical climate has also been positively linked with salesforce outcomes which can have an influence on ethical behaviour. Schwepker (2001) investigated the impact of salespeople's perception of their organization's ethical climate on their job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Regression analysis on 152 business-to-business salespeople revealed a positive relationship between salespeople's perception of their organization's ethical climate and their job satisfaction and organizational commitment.

Verbeke, Ouwerkerk and Peelen (1996) found that ethical climate has a positive effect on ethical decision making. They also found that control systems have an indirect effect on ethical decision making through their effect on climate. This suggests that companies can employ the right kind of salesforce control system having a positive impact on ethical climate.

Stating that organizations have distinct types of ethical climates, Victor and Cullen (1988) in their study of 872 employees found that sociocultural environment, organizational form, and organization-specific history are important determinants of the ethical climates in organizations. As it is believed that different dimensions of ethical climate are associated with different types of ethical behaviour, the effort should be made by sales organizations to establish such an ethical climate which maximizes ethical behaviour of its sales managers and salespeople.

- **Salesforce control system**

As a salesforce control system is an organization's set of procedures for monitoring, directing, evaluating and compensating its employees (Anderson and Oliver, 1987), it is likely to have an impact on ethical behaviour of salespeople. According to Anderson and Oliver (1987), there are two kinds of salesforce control system: Behaviour based and Outcome based salesforce control system. The study by Robertson and Anderson (1993) exerted the superiority of behaviour based salesforce control system over

outcome based salesforce control in terms of making the salesforce more ethical. Their study on 446 salespeople revealed that salespeople subject to a control system that is very structured, i.e., characterized by intense monitoring and supervision and subjective evaluation, are less likely to recommend a decision that involves violating societal norms than are salespeople operating in a more independent, outcome-driven system.

Hunt and Vasquez-Parraga (1993) indicated that one of the advantages of behaviour-based salesforce control system is "the development and maintenance of an organizational culture that encourages ethical behaviour and discourages unethical behaviour".

Defining anomie as "a situational condition characterized by normlessness and social disequilibrium that sets the stage for deviant behavior" Saini, Krush and Johnson (2008) proposed that a positive relationship exists between the level of output control used in managing the marketing function and the level of anomie within the marketing department. According to Verbeke, Ouwerkerk and Peelen (1996), in a behaviorcontrol oriented organization, the decision making will be more ethical than in an outcome based oriented organization.

These findings reveal that behaviour based salesforce control system is more positively associated with ethical behaviour of salespeople. The reason may be that in behaviour based control system, salesforce is monitored heavily and the emphasis is on building the long term relationship with the customer (Anderson and Oliver, 1987) rather than making immediate sales without thinking about its consequences in order to earn more incentives.

## CONCLUSION

It is clearly evident that ethical behavior of salespeople plays a major role in improving the quality of the relationship with customers, resulting in greater customer satisfaction, trust and commitment with the salesperson. Salesforce

ethical behaviour can be increased by encouraging salespeople to build long term relationship with the customer, conducting ethical programs, giving them information about consumer protection laws, providing them customer's feedback of their performance, improving ethical climate and employing behaviour based salesforce control system.

### IMPLICATIONS

The study analysed the impact of salesforce ethical behaviour on salesperson – customer relationship and suggested ways to improve salesforceethical behaviour. The findings hold implications for sales organizations and salespeople as they can know how important ethical behaviour is for the maintenance of successful relationship with the customer and for the success of the organization. The study also gives them insight on how ethical behaviour can be increased.

### DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study focused on the consequences of salesforce ethical behaviour from the perspective of salesperson – customer relationship. The research in future should take into consideration the impact of salesforce ethical behaviour from the perspective of sales organization – salesperson relationship. Salesforce ethical behaviour can have an effect on salespeoplejob satisfaction, performance, commitment and turnover intentions. Future researches should focus in this direction.

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