

BUYERS' PERCEPTIONS OF PERSONAL SELLING QUALITY IN SERVICES SELLING

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Abstract

This study addresses the need for better understanding of personal selling quality, and focuses on buyers' quality perceptions regarding salespeople's behavior in services selling. Earlier research has explored salespeople's behavior concerning its quantitative outcomes, usually in industrial, business-to-business selling from a managerial perspective. This qualitative, narrative study concentrates instead on services sold in business-to-consumer, travel agency context. The data consisted of 48 narratives written by 46 mystery shoppers who observed salespeople's behavior in sales encounters. Thematic analysis of narratives was performed, and four themes regarding personal selling quality emerged: 1) delivering product information (sharing objective, factual and subjective, experiential information), 2) satisfying socio-emotional needs (creating a sense of comfort and a sense of closeness), 3) satisfying product-related needs (treating buyers as individuals, engaging in co-operative conversation), and 4) helping in the decision-making (making effort and showing initiative). The results show the importance of salespeople as knowledge brokers who are specialized in sharing versatile, subjective, and experiential information. Furthermore, the results indicate that salespeople also have social value as commercial sources of information. Another implication of this study is that the growth of online sales has confused salespeople's understanding of their work-related activities and tasks in sales encounters.

Keywords: personal selling, quality, services selling, sales encounter, sales behavior

Introduction

Personal selling is an interaction between buyers and salespeople. What happens in these interactions is crucial, because the behavior of salespeople will impact buyers' perceptions of quality. Thus, buyers' quality evaluations are based almost entirely on the behavior of salespeople. In order to manage quality in sales encounters, it is important to understand how the behavior of salespeople is perceived from a buyers' perspective. In this study, personal selling quality is defined by focusing on buyers' subjective perceptions of salespeople's behavior in sales encounters.

This study is significant because it is often forgotten that selling is a human-centered activity; there remains a lack of understanding about buyers' quality perceptions related to salespeople's behavior. Academic literature on personal selling quality remains scarce because the evaluation of salespeople has been based on the amount of activities they perform, and on sales results. Salespeople are then left to succeed on their own, and are not provided with adequate feedback (Oliver & Anderson, 1994; Boles, Donthu, & Lothia, 1995). However, it is vital to understand how these results are generated, and not only concentrate on the outcomes of feedback by itself. It is impossible to provide guidance for salespeople without knowing the formula for success.

This study thus attempts to provide insights into personal selling quality by understanding buyers' subjective quality perceptions. Previous research, conducted on salespeople's behavior in sales encounters, has emphasized the perspectives of sales managers and salespeople. Personal selling and salespeople's behavior have not been commonly approached from a buyer's viewpoint. Instead of focusing on sales managers' or salespeople's perspectives, buyers' opinions should be understood and underlined, because they are the best—if neglected—source of

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information on sales behavior (Lambert, Sharma, & Levy, 1997; Dion & Banting, 2000).

This study also extends previous understanding by concentrating on sales encounters of business-to-consumer (B2C) services. Because the majority of personal selling research has explored industrial goods and business-to-business (B2B) selling, services in business-to-consumer contexts have not been commonly represented. Williams and Plouffe (2007) noticed that in personal selling research studies that exclusively sample service firms were considerably less frequent, and focused on the insurance industry, with very little work addressing other important service contexts. Jackson, Schlacter, Bridges, and Gallan (2010) also noted that evaluating salespeople's behavior in the service context is more important today than ever before due to the substantial changes in selling services. Therefore, for these reasons this study will concentrate on salespeople who sell services, in this case package tours to individual buyers in Finnish travel agencies.

Concerns about the role of face-to-face agents have been growing for many years due to the growth of the Internet as an alternative source of travel bookings. In fact, Finnish tourists are heavy users of the Internet, and 61 per cent of their package tours were booked online in the year 2011 (The Association of Finnish Travel Agents, 2012). However, The Association of Finnish Travel Agents (2011) has also stated that the growth of online sales was already moderated in the year 2010. Thus, it is predicted that in the future agents are likely to reinvent their role as bespoke travel advisors, and as a trusted source of information (Oxford Economics & Amadeus, 2010). Based on these assumptions research should not forget to explore issues concerning personal selling quality. This sector especially has to develop personal selling practices in face-to-face setting to guarantee future business success, and to gain a competitive advantage.

Despite this fact, research has not provided relevant information in order to develop personal selling practices in travel agencies. There remains a lack of understanding of what personal selling quality is, in the travel agency context. Studies concerning travel agencies have juxtaposed personal selling with online sales, and focused on the impact of the Internet on the role of travel agents (Vasudavan & Standing, 1999; Law, Law, & Wai, 2002; Law, Leung, & Wong, 2004; Bennett & Lai, 2005; Cheyne, Downes, & Legg, 2006). Sales encounters in travel agencies have usually been approached as service encounters, and personal selling quality as service quality (Ryan & Cliff, 1997; Lam & Zhang, 1999; Bigne, Martinez, Miquel, & Andreu, 2003; Johns, Avci, & Karatepe, 2004; Ruiqi & Adrian, 2009; Filiz, 2010; Marinkovic, Senic, Kocic, & Sapic, 2011). Salespeople's main tasks have not been selling services, but delivering a high-quality service. Therefore, research needs to concentrate more on issues concerning personal selling quality in travel agencies, instead of online sales and service quality.

Against this background this study suggests that it is insightful to extend the current understanding of salespeople's behavior by focusing on its quality from the buyers' subjective perspective in services selling, in this case in travel agency context. The study answers the following research question: What is personal selling quality in sales encounters as perceived by buyers when selling services?

Previous research on quality in personal selling

Personal selling research has not focused on salespeople's behavior, and quality, before. The main theoretical framework is based on sales performance research, because behavior has been previously conceptualized from a sales management perspective, as salespeople's behavior performance. According to Plank and Reid (1994) behavior involves the execution of

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selling-related activities by salespeople in the performance of their jobs. Sales managers or salespeople have evaluated this performance using measures related to the salespeople's activities (Boles et al., 1995; Pettijohn, Parker, Pettijohn, & Kent, 2001). These measures have included salespeople's product knowledge, sales presentation, communication and listening skills, teamwork, attitude, appearance and manners, initiative, and aggressiveness (Jackson, Schlacter, & Wolfe, 1995; Taylor, Pettijohn, & Pettijohn, 1999; Pettijohn et al., 2001; Zallocco, Bolman Pullins, & Mallin, 2009; Jackson et al., 2010). A few studies (Pascoe, 1995; Lambert, Sharma, & Levy, 1997; Peterson & Lucas, 2001) have asked buyers for their preferences, or what they want salespeople to do, in the industrial B2B context. Buyers emphasized salespeople's product, industry and market knowledge, their ability to provide advice and information, thoroughness, trustworthiness, responsiveness, and commitment. Buyers also highlighted the salespeople's ability to understand, know, and provide for their needs.

The theoretical framework of this research is also based on service marketing and service quality research, because of the service context and buyers' perspectives in this study. Previous studies regarding service quality have identified interaction as a critical dimension of quality (Grönroos, 1984; Lehtinen & Lehtinen, 1991; Brady & Cronin, 2001). Interaction service quality is produced in the interaction between customers and employees (Lehtinen & Lehtinen, 1991). Brady and Cronin (2001) suggested that customers' perceptions of the interpersonal interactions are a dimension of perceived service quality. Grönroos (1984) conceptualized this as functional quality, meaning the manner in which the service is delivered in terms of the interactions during service encounters. Unlike personal selling literature, service marketing literature has approached quality from the customer's perspective, and addressed their quality perceptions regarding employee behavior.

It is interesting to note that most of the studies related to selling in service context have generally conceptualized sales encounters between buyers and salespeople as service encounters (Evans & Grant, 1992; Evans, Arnold, & Grant, 1999; Shepherd, 1999; Ahearne, Jelinek, & Jones, 2007; Amyx & Bhuian, 2009). Accordingly, the behavior of salespeople has been understood as service behavior, or salespeople have had a dual role in service-sales, instead of selling services. These studies (Evans et al., 1999; Amyx & Bhuian, 2009) have also measured quality by applying the scales used in service quality research (SERVQUAL: Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988; SERVPERF: Cronin & Taylor, 1992). In these scales service quality is explained through five quality dimensions: reliability, responsiveness, assurance, tangibles, and empathy. Because the scales used have been adopted directly from the service quality research, the previous studies are inadequate in measuring personal selling quality.

In the case of travel agencies, sales encounters have been approached as service encounters, and quality as service quality. Therefore it is commonly understood that a travel agent's function is to serve customers, not to help buyers to make purchase decisions and commit to buy. Service quality in travel agencies has frequently been examined using the SERVQUAL scale (Ryan & Cliff, 1997; Lam & Zhang, 1999; Bigne et al. 2003; Johns et. al, 2004; Ruiqi & Adrian, 2009; Filiz, 2010; Marinkovic et al., 2011). Thus, travel agency service quality usually consists of reliability, responsiveness, assurance, tangibles, and empathy.

In sum, the prior research concerning personal selling has not addressed buyers' quality perceptions in services selling. In the case of selling services buyers are usually seen as customers, and salespeople are considered as employees who serve them in service encounters. Thus, salespeople's behavior does not include

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selling-related activities, which aim towards buyers making purchase decisions. In the travel agency context, salespeople's behavior has been examined as service behavior, and service quality has been measured frequently using the SERVQUAL scale. It has been stated that personal selling, especially in the context of fast-growing online sales, has to deliver extra value in order for the agencies to survive in the future. Therefore, personal selling quality has to be explored, instead of focusing only on sales outcomes, management perspectives, salespeople's self-assessment, or service quality. This study extends the current knowledge of personal selling quality by addressing these issues from within the travel agency context.

Research Methods

The data collection and analyzing techniques in this qualitative, narrative study, embraced an interpretivist research position. Interpretive research aims to understand the fundamental nature of the social world at the level of subjective experience (Burrell & Morgan, 1979, 28). There is certainly a need for this approach in personal selling research, where functionalist, quantitative paradigms have provided the dominant framework. This issue was also confronted by Plouffe, Williams, and Wachner (2008), who discovered that qualitative methods were only used in seven percent of published sales research between the years 1983–2006.

The data consisted of narratives (n=48) that were written by mystery shoppers (n=46), who observed salespeople's behavior in travel agency sales encounters. Mystery shopping is a form of participant observation where the researcher interacts with the subject being observed (Wilson, 2001). I recruited 46 mystery shoppers who were each asked to visit a salesperson to observe their behavior, and to write a detailed, evaluative narrative (n=48) of the perceptions in a chronological order after the visit. However, two

of the shoppers visited two agencies each, and thus wrote two narratives.

Reporting was based on subjective information. I did not want to use the traditional checklist used in mystery shopping, or for the buyers to observe any specific behavior. I wanted to understand the buyers' points of view, and therefore the observation was unstructured. I chose mystery shopping as the data collection tool because according to Wilson (2001), and Van der Wiele, Hesseling, and Van Iwaarden (2005) it is a useful instrument to create an in-depth insight into perceptions of buyers, and helps to develop a richer knowledge of the experiential nature of services.

In this study buyers were potential, individual leisure tourists who had not yet made a purchase decision when entering an agency. Buyers were both male and female, ranging in age from 20 to 65. Their buying task was to buy a package tour (a pre-packaged or a tailored vacation) that held special significance for them, and included at least flights and hotel accommodation. They were also asked to familiarize themselves with the packages the agent sold before the visit, and choose a certain destination or a tour type.

The critical incident technique was also employed, and buyers were asked to pay special attention into the critical incidents they perceived during the encounter. The critical incident technique (CIT) (Flanagan, 1954) is the most used qualitative approach when measuring service quality. It consists of a set of procedures for collecting observations of human behavior, and classifying them in such a way as to make them useful in addressing practical problems (Flanagan, 1954). A critical incident in this study is a specific salesperson's behavior that is especially satisfying or dissatisfying according to the buyer.

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The critical incident technique was employed in an interpretative fashion. The approach was interpretative because the subjective incidents were analyzed with interpretation from the respondent. Gremler (2004) noted that most critical incident studies treat narratives as reports of facts, with minimal contextualization and respondent explanation. Gremler (2004) recommended that researchers should gain insight from interpreting the respondent's perceptions, instead of reporting facts. Therefore, in addition to concentrating on the whole narratives I chose longer sections of text, describing positive and negative incidents they included, as a unit of analysis.

Thematic analysis of narratives was used. According to Riessman (2004) a thematic approach is useful for finding common thematic elements across research participants and the events they report. In the analysis the focus was on the meaning and content of the narratives. When focusing on the meaning and content of the narrative, the research aims to answer the question of 'what is told' (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, 219). According to Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008, 219) empirical data is then analyzed for themes, and a storyline is developed. Hence, I analyzed the narratives whilst also paying attention to the critical incidents they included for themes, and constructed a positive and a negative storyline describing each theme.

The approach was inductive, and the themes were formed as they emerged from the data. First, the narratives were closely examined and coded. Longer sections of text describing critical incidents relating to similar topics were organized into categories representing salespeople's behavior. All together four themes were identified that were perceived as significant by the buyers, and described personal selling quality from different, emerging perspectives. These similar incidents were then re-organized into meaningful wholes that described the buyers'

perceptions of personal selling quality, chronologically, from a certain perspective. Eight storylines were constructed and interpreted, which represented each of the four themes from positive and negative perspectives. The storylines were developed because a story has progressive, sequential structure as a sales encounter, and it allowed me to gain insight into the buyers' own perceptions, explanations and context.

I also had two group discussions and many individual conversations with the buyers after their visits, so the themes already began to emerge in this phase. After writing the preliminary storylines I also carried out a member-check, and let the buyers comment on the themes and the storylines.

Results

Four themes (figure 1) describing personal selling quality were identified: 1) delivering product information, 2) satisfying socio-emotional needs, 3) satisfying product-related needs, and 4) helping in the decision making. Each theme is defined and described below. Storylines representing these themes are illustrated in the results.

Delivering product information

The first theme was defined as satisfying buyers' information needs by delivering versatile and new product information. The buyers expressed that they had both *factual and experiential information needs*. Factual information needs concerned the objective facts related to the destination, schedules, hotel amenities and tour programs. However, the buyers wanted to learn experiential information that cannot be found from the brochures or official websites, and were not satisfied with hearing only objective facts.

The results show that subjective, experiential information was the buyers' motive to visit salespeople. The buyers stressed that salespeople

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should share travel experiences they have gained from various information sources. The buyers were searching for the salesperson's—or their colleagues' and other buyers'—own recommendations regarding destination choices. They also wanted to get new and innovative ideas in relation to destinations, and to learn about activities, in various destinations, which create hedonic experiences. Delivering product information is illustrated in the following synthesis:

The salesperson presented me with a certain island in Asia. First he told me about its versatility and described the island very accurately. I noticed that he actually seemed to have personal experience about the destination. He said that he had been there for ten days two years ago. Thus, this salesperson had excellent information, because he told me about his feelings and own experiences related to the destination. The salesperson also told me that many of his clients have also visited the destination before. They have highly recommended this destination and it has become a very popular honeymoon destination. Then the salesperson gave me a lot of tips about unique activities which allow me to experience new things. I was convinced that this vacation would be a great experience. After the visit I felt that I could have not found the same information the salesperson provided me with from the Internet. I wanted to get information, which is not available on their websites.

Satisfying socio-emotional needs

The results revealed that the buyers experienced personal selling quality holistically, meaning that they had both product-related and socio-emotional needs towards salespeople's behavior. Because sales encounters are social events, buyers expressed that salespeople should be socio-emotionally competent, and able to fulfill

their socio-emotional needs. The buyers stressed that salespeople should *create a sense of comfort* by dispelling tension, and establishing a relaxed and friendly atmosphere. According to the buyers, salespeople should also *create closeness* that decreases the social distance between the buyer and the salesperson. By doing this, the buyers felt that it was also easier to fulfill the product-related needs together. The following synthesis illustrates how this theme is perceived by buyers:

When I entered the office, the salesperson made me feel comfortable and seemed genuinely interested in me. I was a little bit surprised, because I feared that he would ignore me and urges me to search for alternatives on the Internet. His enthusiasm made me feel also very relieved and relaxed. I also thought he was very easy to talk to. I felt like I was talking to one of my friends, who had visited a lot of places and is telling me about them. He also told me about his own holiday plans, because he is planning to visit this destination in the near future.

Satisfying product-related needs

The results indicate that the buyers perceived salespeople to be task competent if they *treated buyers as important individuals* and understood that the buyer's unique and complex product-related needs were at the focal point in sales encounters. When discussing buyers' unique needs, and choosing products, the buyers also expressed willingness to take an active role. Hence, the buyers considered salespeople to be task competent if they also let buyers be actively engaged, and play an equal role, when fulfilling the product-related needs.

However, the buyers expressed that salespeople's behavior was often product-oriented, and that their unique needs were not taken into consideration. According to the buyers, salespeople refused to tailor complex packages,

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and offered the same—and the cheapest—product to every buyer. The buyers felt that salespeople sold the product that was the easiest to sell, and that they concentrated on special offers instead of products that satisfied buyers' needs.

The results show that the buyers interpreted sales encounters as *co-operative conversations, where they were both engaged*. The buyers described sales encounters as conversations between two friends, where they exchanged ideas, negotiated about the best product and examined the alternatives together. As a result of this conversation together they reached a consensus about the product that best fulfilled the buyer's product-related needs. This theme is illustrated in the next synthesis:

It was nice that we first thought about what I really wanted and after that we took a closer look at the availability. By asking me questions the salesperson learned that I'm not interested in going to a crowded holiday destination. This was nice, because he also saved my time and did not recommend me any unsuitable alternatives. I could say that during the whole encounter I was the focus of his attention. When the conversation went on, the salesperson gave me constantly new options based on my opinions. I liked the conversation, because he wanted to hear first my thoughts and after that gave me more information if I wanted to. After considering all the alternatives together we re-examined one of the destinations. We concluded that this could be the best choice for me. We also agreed upon the hotel, because we came to the decision that this particular hotel is what I want from my vacation.

Helping in decision making

According to the buyers, salespeople should be willing to help them in with decision making. Thus, salespeople were expected to make an effort

and to show initiative in sales encounters. Making an effort means energy and time is consumed in order to help buyers in their decision making. The buyers perceived that salespeople should show enthusiasm and energy regarding their buying task. They also wanted salespeople to make extra effort, and to find out about every detail concerning the product. The buyers also wanted to have a long and an unhurried conversation with the salespeople. Showing initiative refers to the salespeople's ability to proceed spontaneously and proactively in helping buyers to make decisions.

However, the buyers often experienced that salespeople refused to help, and instead directed them to the Internet. Salespeople assumed that the buyers had visited the agency's website before coming to the agency, or asked the buyers to search for more information and to book the product online after the encounter. Thus, the buyers perceived that the existence of the Internet resulted in salespeople not assisting buyers, and not making any effort.

The buyers also perceived that the salespeople's role was not to consult and to help them in their decision-making, but to process a pre-existing order. It could be stated that this role of an order taker, and passive booking-agent practices, still existed. This means that sales encounters were buyer monologues, where they were supposed to ask questions and to inform salespeople about their decisions. Salespeople did not show interest, take initiative, ask questions, or present alternatives. This was the reason why the buyers felt that salespeople had no advisory or specialist role in sales encounters. This is revealed in the next synthesis:

The salesperson didn't try to sell me anything. I was waiting for him to tell me something about the packages, but he didn't present me with any alternatives or ask me questions. Instead he announced right away that I could find all their packages also on the Internet. I

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felt like he was wondering why I was visiting him personally, because I could check all the details also online. He gave me a couple of homepage addresses I could browse at home. The whole encounter lasted only less than 10 minutes. All I got from this meeting was two homepage addresses. Afterwards I felt discouraged because the salesperson acted so passively. I could not book the vacation even if I had been so excited about the possibility of going somewhere on my holiday.

Discussion and Conclusions

The purpose of the study was to extend the current understanding of a salesperson's behavior by focusing on its quality from a buyer's subjective perspective in services selling. Four themes describing personal selling quality from a buyer's perspective were identified: 1) delivering product information, 2) satisfying socio-emotional needs, 3) satisfying product-related needs and 4) helping in decision making.

The lesson to be learned from this study concerns the fact that sales encounters are social and conversational interactions. Buyers see their role as more active, equal, and co-operative conversational partners than previous personal selling research assumes. Before, it has been considered as the salespeople's responsibility to define a passive buyer's needs, and then to select and present the product that matched those needs. Personal selling has therefore been a task-oriented, hierarchical function, and salespeople's task competence has referred to their listening, sales presentation and communication skills. Instead, the equal partnership calls for dialogical competence as well as emotional intelligence.

Comparing personal selling quality with service quality, the results show that they have some similarities and differences. In light of the results, the similarities concern *the right attitude towards helping buyers and the ability to provide*

them with individualized attention. As the results show, an important aspect of personal selling quality is salespeople's willingness to help buyers in their decision-making by making an effort, and showing initiative. Similarly, in service quality literature, responsiveness that concerns the willingness and readiness to provide service when needed is considered to be an important dimension of service quality (Parasuraman et al., 1988; Evans et al., 1999; Lam & Chang, 1999; Amyx & Bhuian, 2009). However, in the service context, helping involves quick response, but in personal selling consuming long-lasting energy and time when helping buyers is needed. Another important aspect of personal selling quality is salespeople's ability to treat buyers as individuals by focusing on their unique and complex needs. Also, in the service quality literature, understanding buyers' needs and providing individualized attention has been referred as an important dimension of quality (Parasuraman et al., 1988).

The results suggest that reliability is not such an important aspect of personal selling quality, as it is of service quality. Salespeople's error-free and prompt behavior, or the completion of promised tasks, are not stressed in the results. The results also imply that personal selling quality emphasizes salespeople's ability to deliver versatile product information more than in service quality literature. Delivering versatile product information is also a critical aspect of personal selling quality because it is considered to be a buyer's motive to visit salespeople.

The results support the notion of salespeople as knowledge brokers (Verbeke, Dietz, & Verwaal, 2011), whose job is to transfer knowledge about products to buyers. It was found that buyers did not visit salespeople only to share objective, factual product information that the previous personal selling studies have highlighted. It was found that buyers expected salespeople to share especially subjective and experiential

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product information. This supports the results of previous studies (Vogt & Fesenmaier, 1998; Cho & Jang, 2008) of vacationers' information needs and values. Vogt and Fesenmaier (1998) stated that tourists have multiple information needs (innovative, hedonic, aesthetic and social needs) when purchasing a vacation. The results are in line with Cho and Jang's (2008) suggestion that information that satisfied vacationers' needs from a value perspective in the pre-trip stage has hedonic, sensation seeking and social value.

It could be argued that the role of, and the line between, commercial and social information sources has been blurred. The results show that even if salespeople were commercial sources of information, they had a social value for buyers. Cho and Jang (2008) suggested that social value relates to discussions about vacation experiences and exchange of opinions with friends and family, not to commercial communication channels. However, buyers expected salespeople to share the same kind of information that they share with friends and family. The reason behind this may be the fact that within countries of high Internet penetration, buyers are used to sharing information on the Internet and expect salespeople to also do the same in face-to-face sales encounters.

In order to assure personal selling quality, managers are encouraged to increase salespeople's knowledge base. Because of new technologies, buyers want to acquire the same kind of information visiting salespeople in person as they would get by communicating with other buyers, and searching for information on the Internet. Therefore these new technologies, and especially the important role of social media, have an impact on salespeople's skill requirements. Salespeople should visit destinations and get educational, personal experiences. Salespeople should also work as a team, and share their experiences as well as

become acquainted with the experiential information content the Internet provides.

Another implication of this study is that the growth of online sales has confused salespeople's understanding of their work-related activities and tasks in face-to-face sales encounters. Therefore, it could be concluded that salespeople do not understand the use and the roles of personal selling and online sales in the multichannel selling context. Due to this fact it is vital to determine these roles more clearly, and to communicate this information to salespeople. Because the confusion between personal selling and online sales is evident, better practices and guidelines are needed regarding these sales channels.

The results also point out that product orientation and passive order-taker routines and practices still exist, and are rooted in the travel agency sales culture. A change in both thought and behavior is required. It could be argued that the travel agency sector develops new and unique products, but that salespeople are not able to sell these products to buyers' individual needs. Therefore salespeople need more guidance and feedback about their behavior in sales encounters.

The results can be generalized when selling services to individual consumers, but due to the high Internet penetration and the disintermediation of the travel agency sector in Finland, there are some limitations. The theory related to personal selling quality should be developed further. Studies that focus on salespeople, or sales managers' perspectives could also shed some light, regarding the results of this study. Follow up studies regarding the use and roles of personal selling and online sales in the service selling are also recommended, as well as studies on experiential information sharing in face-to-face sales encounters.

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