

Salesperson's listening ability as an antecedent to relationship selling

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Abstract

Purpose – In this study, active empathetic listening is proposed as being an antecedent to a salesperson's communication skill, ability to maintain quality relationships and build trust. The study proposes that communication skill, relationship quality and trust all moderate the relationship between AEL and sales performance.

Design/methodology/approach – Survey research using salespersons was conducted; structural equation modeling was used to test the hypotheses of the model.

Findings – The findings confirmed that AEL was positively related to salespersons' communication skills, relationship quality and trust. The proposed moderators of communication and trust received support when predicting sales performance.

Research limitations/implications – This was the first empirical study to examine the role of AEL in a relationship selling model. AEL was found to directly affect levels of trust, relationship quality and overall communication skills of salespeople. More research on the role of AEL in the relationship selling process should be investigated.

Practical implications – Managers that focus on long-term relationships in a dyadic buyer-seller relationship may benefit most from this study. A scale that can be used to measure existing levels of AEL in the sales force is included. AEL may better enable salespeople to develop long-term relationships with their customers.

Originality/value – This study examines a form of listening (AEL) that is proposed to be superior to other forms of listening within the personal selling context. Presently little research on the importance of listening and its impact on relationship building exists. This is the first study to test AEL as an antecedent to relationship skills of salespeople.

Keywords Listening, Salespeople, Communication, Relationships, Trust, Performance, Employee behavior, Buyer-seller relationships

Paper type Research paper

An executive summary for managers and executive readers can be found at the end of the article.

A key component to building mutually beneficial relationships in business to business sales is the ability of salespeople to communicate well with their customers (Spiro and Weitz, 1990; Williams *et al.*, 1990). There is growing evidence that effective listening in particular plays a vital role in successful communication and ultimately the development of healthy working relationships (Aggarwal *et al.*, 2005; Comer and Drollinger, 1999; Ramsey and Sohi, 1997). When building relationships, listening skills of salespeople have been found to be positively related to trust in salespeople (Drollinger *et al.*, 2005; Ramsey and Sohi, 1997; Swan and Oliver, 1991), satisfaction in buyer/seller relationships (Aggarwal *et al.*, 2005; Drollinger and Comer, 2007; Ramsey and Sohi, 1997), and higher levels of intention for future business (Ramsey and Sohi, 1997). In an era marked

by relationship selling, listening skills of salespeople are becoming increasingly important.

Effective listening has also been shown to play a critical role in the satisfactory evaluation of salespeople by their customers and management (Aggarwal *et al.*, 2005; Comer and Drollinger, 1999; Ramsey and Sohi, 1997). Studies using purchasing professionals as respondents reported: effective listening as the most important skill a salesperson can possess (Moore *et al.*, 1986), whereas poor listening by salespersons has been significantly correlated with poor working relationships (Drollinger and Comer, 2007). Ingram *et al.* (1992) surveyed 126 sales executives in order to determine the reasons that salespeople were unsuccessful in their performance and found that poor listening skills were among the six most common reasons for failure. Thus far the literature supports the notion that effective listening skills are requisite when building relationships and performing well.

The majority of research in sales literature has examined the role of active listening behaviors of salespeople. The present study examines the role of active listening with an empathetic

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overlay. Active empathetic listening (AEL) has been defined as “listening practiced by salespeople in whom active listening behaviors are combined with empathy to achieve a higher form of listening” (Comer and Drollinger, 1999). The notion that good interpersonal communication in sales should be accompanied by empathy has received support in practitioner (e.g. Covey, 1989; Tracy, 1993) and academic literature (Bagozzi, 2006; Comer and Drollinger, 1999; Malshe and Pryor, 2004). It has also been argued that AEL is superior to “active listening” in the effective performance of the personal selling process because of the salesperson's ability to better understand the internal frame of the customer, and relay the message that the salesperson is indeed concerned for the well being of the customer and understands them beyond words (Comer and Drollinger, 1999).

Presently there is only modest support for the notion that empathy as a component of listening may bring greater gains to the salesperson/customer relationship. In a recent study by Drollinger and Comer (2009), AEL was considered alongside an Active Listening measure to determine which of the two listening measures were better able to predict key relationship building skills of salespeople. Dominance analysis was performed in order to determine which of the two measures had the greatest predictive ability and AEL was found to be generally dominant (greater predictive power) over the active listening measure on all relationship building skills. Dominance analysis is commonly used when examining the relative importance of correlated predictors in a multiple regression and in the case of examining two listening measure this type of test was appropriate (Johnson and LeBreton, 2004).

In order to better determine linkages between AEL and relationship building the theoretical framework proposed by Comer and Drollinger (1999) regarding the role of AEL in the personal selling process and Palmatier *et al.*'s (2006) model of relationship marketing were taken under consideration. In Comer and Drollinger's (1999) conceptual paper on active empathetic listening, it was purposed that AEL could be utilized to build better relationships with customers in every phase of the personal selling process. The authors did not propose that AEL would have a direct effect on sales performance but that AEL would enhance the buyer/seller relationship through greater amounts of explicit and implicit information and thus enhance performance. Further, Palmatier *et al.*'s (2006) model on relationship marketing indicates that in dyadic buyer/seller interactions that communication is an antecedent to trust and relationship quality which acted as mediators to the outcome of sales performance. Relationship satisfaction and trust have also been found to be correlated in several studies as mediators of performance and future business (Palmatier *et al.*, 2006; Aggarwal *et al.*, 2005). In the present model active empathetic listening is proposed as an antecedent to both trust and relationship quality. Trust is also hypothesized to be positively related to relationship quality. Lastly, relationship quality and trust are treated as mediators to the outcome variable of sales performance (see Figure 1).

Active empathetic listening as antecedent to relationship building behaviors

Active listening requires that the listener attend to the sender's message with regards to both verbal and nonverbal elements

(Brownell, 1990). This implies that listening is not a passive activity in which the listener simply acts as a vortex which information flows into, but the listener assures the speaker they hear them via head nods and eye contact. The listener also seeks to understand the speaker by asking questions or repeating what was said for the sake of clarity. Active listening is an information gathering process in which the listener is fully engaged in the conversation.

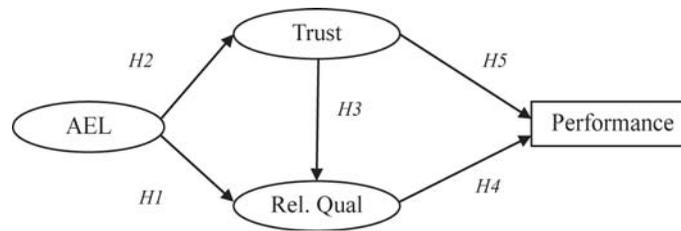
Active empathetic listening includes all elements of active listening but also incorporates an empathetic overlay. Empathy is defined as the ability “to perceive the internal frame of reference of another with accuracy, and with the emotional components and meanings [...] as if one were the other person, but without ever losing the ‘as if’ condition” (Rogers, 1959, p. 210). It is important that the salesperson fully understand the buyer however they must also maintain a professional distance in which they recognize not only the needs of the buyer but those of their own company as well. In the present definition empathy is regarded as a form of perspective taking which allows the salesperson to understand the buyer's subjective point-of-view. This kind of empathy should better enable the salesperson to not only consider their goals and concerns but those of the buyer as well. When utilizing the empathetic component in the task of listening it also requires the salesperson to understand the subtle emotions and feelings of the buyer and not limit their understanding to just the literal or explicit message.

An example of a salesperson listening on an active level would be one who listens intently to important information and sends verbal and non-verbal signals that they are indeed listening but does not necessarily pick up cues with regards to feelings. In popular literature on active listening it is suggested that imitation of a customer's body position is an effective technique in developing rapport. For example: if the customer stands then the salesperson should and if the customer's legs are crossed so should the salespersons. Many times active listening that mirrors actions or words of the speaker may seem to be contrived. Further, imitation may demonstrate that the salesperson is aware of the customer's body position but it does not indicate that they are in tune the emotional context of the interaction. Another consideration is that imitating a customer may actually annoy them.

Salespeople who accompany active listening behaviors with empathy are able to pick up emotional messages (excitement, urgency, anxiety, anger etc.) and respond in a verbal and non-verbal manner that expresses understanding rather than imitation. Empathic understanding provides the salesperson with insightful information regarding the nature of the interaction and also helps guide the salesperson to be more self aware of their own actions and words. Empathy is important in developing emotional intelligence as a salesperson (Goleman, 1994). When we understand our own emotions and those of others we are better equipped to respond to them and can develop healthier relationships (Goleman, 1994). When emotional messages are not attended it could be disastrous in the development of the relationship and ultimately the performance of the salesperson. Salespeople using AEL are proposed to be more capable of responding to emotions because they are better able to understand their customer's point-of-view.

The capacity to employ empathy has been regarded positively in buyer/seller settings as it facilitates communication, liking, trust, satisfaction and attachment

Figure 1 Hypothesized model



(Bagozzi, 2006; Aggarwal *et al.*, 2005). In order for others to appreciate and recognize empathy it needs to be expressed and listening is one way in which empathy can be expressed effectively. It does little good if a salesperson is empathetic toward their customer's position but the expression of it is lacking. Empathy has also been reported to impact an individual's motivation to listen (Steil *et al.*, 1983) and has also been theoretically regarded as an antecedent to effective listening (Brownell, 1985, 1990; Castleberry and Shepherd, 1993). It has been argued that when salespeople listen beyond words and are empathetic they are likely to pick up valuable information regarding the buyer's situation or needs that they may not have been able to gain if they were not using empathy (Comer and Drollinger, 1999).

When examining the process of listening it is generally agreed to have three dimensions (e.g. Castleberry and Shepherd, 1993; Ramsey and Sohi, 1997). The dimensions of AEL are "sensing," "processing," and "responding" (Comer and Drollinger, 1999). "Sensing" involves hearing the words of the speaker and also includes receiving implied messages via non-verbal signals such as body language and facial expression. Furthermore, salespeople who use AEL to detect the tone of the conversation are more aware of the mood or general feeling of the speaker.

The second dimension of AEL is "processing" (sometimes referred to as "evaluating") which generally refers to cognitive aspects of the listener. The speaker's message is organized and transformed into a meaningful form in this stage (Brownell, 1985). When attempting to understand and interpret meaning of a customer's message the AEL salesperson processes information with regards to feelings generated by the speaker through non-verbal and verbal messages along with the literal message. Evaluation is more complete when employing AEL as the listener has not only processed the literal message but has also considered the attending emotional cues that provide valuable information.

The third dimension "responding" refers to the signals listeners send back to the speaker that show that they have heard the message and would like the speaker to continue. When considering the role of each dimension responding is perhaps the most critical as it indicates to the customer that the salesperson has been listening and on a much deeper level than someone only listening on a marginal level. A response can take on a verbal form such as an acknowledgement, a probing question or it can be a non-verbal response such as making eye contact, nodding the head or a smile. All of these responses encourage the speaker to continue in delivering their message because they are assured of a receptive audience. When a salesperson employs AEL they are more likely to respond in such a way that they are able to communicate not only in words but via their body language that the speaker is being heard and responded to in like

manner. The responding dimension is perhaps one in which the speaker is best assured of the salesperson's effort to listen actively and empathetically (Drollinger *et al.*, 2005).

Hypotheses

The process of gathering both literal and emotional information through AEL is a unique contribution to research in personal selling. It is proposed that using AEL will enhance the salesperson's ability to build trust and relationships with their customers. More specifically, when salespeople use AEL they should be better able to meet their customers' needs because of greater levels of understanding and therefore develop better relationships.

Research on empathy as an indicator of accurate sales interactions has shown that salespeople who correctly assess emotional information during interpersonal communications can more accurately respond to the emotions of others (Salovey and Mayer, 1990). In a similar study, Kidwell *et al.* (2007) examined salespersons' ability to detect emotion in facial expression and its influence on the effective use of adaptive selling and customer-oriented selling. The authors' concluded that salespeople can gain important insights into the customer's psychological state and thus adopt the appropriate emotional and mental perspective when they are able to read emotional information. In summary, the salesperson's ability to read emotional information from the buyer has been shown to be an effective tool in salesperson/buyer communications and when developing relationships using adaptive and customer oriented sales techniques.

Relationship quality and effective listening have been theorized to be positively associated (Brownell, 1985; Castleberry and Shepherd, 1993; Comer and Drollinger, 1999) and have also received empirical support for this connection. In a study by Ramsey and Sohi (1997) the authors' found that customers who rated the listening skills of salespeople highly were more likely to anticipate future interactions with them than those salespeople who were poor listeners. In another study, professional purchasing agents were more likely to relate poor working relationships with poor listening skills and good working relationships with good listening skills (Drollinger and Comer, 2007). In Crosby *et al.* (1990) paper the authors characterized high levels of relationship quality between a salesperson and a buyer as being one in which the customer can rely on the salesperson and has confidence in future performance. Although no one definitive descriptor or scale exists in which the quality of a buyer/seller relationship can be measured, in the present study Crosby *et al.*'s (1990) general description is adopted. When empathy is combined with effective listening it is proposed that relationships between buyers and sellers will be enhanced:

H1. AEL skills of salespeople will be positively related to the relationship quality between salespeople and their customers.

Developing trust between buyers and sellers facilitates the exchange relationship whereas mistrust hinders it (Swan and Nolan, 1985). Trust between both parties is something that progresses over time as commitments are fulfilled (Doney and Cannon, 1997) and information exchanged is deemed reliable (Hawes *et al.*, 1989). When fulfilling the expectations of their customers' salespeople need to have a clear understanding of what the buyer wants. By using AEL salespeople will be much more likely to understand the expectations of their customers on a literal and emotional level and respond in a way that confirms to the customer that a meaningful dialogue is taking place. Further, a buyer's willingness to trust a salesperson is affected by their perception of the intentions of the seller (Doney and Cannon, 1997). Active empathetic listening is proposed to be a means in which buyers can be assured that salespeople are indeed interested in their needs by making efforts to understand their perspective. It is proposed that AEL will be a way in which salespeople can develop more trusting relationships with their customers as they demonstrate understanding through empathy and effective listening:

H2. AEL skills of salespeople will be positively related to higher levels of trust.

Mediators of sales performance

Trust in the salesperson has been correlated with satisfaction in buyer seller relationships (Aggarwal *et al.*, 2005) and has been proposed to be a mediator along with relationship quality when the outcome variable is sales performance (Palmatier *et al.*, 2006). When hypothesizing a relationship between trust and relationship quality Aggarwal *et al.* (2005) found that higher levels of trust were related to higher levels of satisfaction in the buyer/seller relationship. It is proposed in the present model that trust will be positively related to relationship quality:

H3. Trust will be positively related to higher levels of relationship quality.

Salespeople who focus on strengthening relationships with their present customers are considered to be practicing a good strategy due to the high costs of attracting new customers relative to retaining old customers. Developing and maintaining good quality relationships with customers has been empirically connected to the outcome of higher levels of performance (Crosby *et al.*, 1990; Palmatier *et al.*, 2006). As salespeople take on the role of a relationship manager and begin to foster long term relationships rather than just serve as spokesperson's for a company they will likely see greater success in the performance of their job. Furthermore, they will also be more apt to view a customer as a potential partner rather than treat them in a transactional manner. Overall it is assumed that performance will be greater for those salespersons that foster healthy buyer seller relationships:

H4. Relationship quality will be positively related to higher levels of salesperson performance.

Trust in the salesperson is multifaceted as it includes a belief that one is dependable, reliable, benevolent, competent and

honest (Swan *et al.*, 1988). However, trust is a feeling that these things are correct because some uncertainty and risk must exist for one to engage in trusting another (Frost *et al.*, 1978). Trust is usually developed over time as the salesperson demonstrates the previously mentioned qualities. In the meta-analytic relationship marketing model proposed by Palmatier *et al.* (2006) the authors found that trust between the buyer and seller plays an important mediating role to seller performance.

Previous research has shown that organizational buyers who trust a salesperson are more likely to cooperate with the selling firm (Schurr and Ozanne, 1985), it helps build buyer commitment to the salesperson (Prus, 1987), and trust in salespeople has been positively related to intention for future purchases (Palmatier *et al.*, 2006; Ramsey and Sohi, 1997). In the present study trustworthiness of the salesperson is expected to be positively linked with sales performance:

H5. Trust will be positively related to higher levels of salesperson performance.

Methodology

Sample

Salespeople were chosen as the target sample for the present survey because many of the hypothesized relationships focus on personal values, attitudes and beliefs. Further, when measuring sales performance Behrman and Perreault (1982) indicate that self report instruments are appropriate when the responses are confidential, part of the sales effort is not directly observable by the manager and some aspects of performance are not reflected via quantitative data.

A mail survey was sent to 2,500 salespeople who were randomly selected from a commercial mailing list of people in business-to-business sales. A total of 370 questionnaires were returned as undeliverable. A total of 175 completed and useable questionnaires were received, with a resulting response rate of 8.2 percent. While the response rate was low, commercial mailing lists typically contain names of people who are no longer salespeople or their addresses are not current and as a result such individuals are unlikely to return questionnaires. Thus, the figure may underestimate the proportion of qualified respondents who returned questionnaires. A comparison of responses between early and late responders showed no significant differences in demographic characteristics.

The salespeople had a median age of 45 years (ranging from 20 to 68). A total of 81 percent of the respondents were male, and 63 percent had at least a college degree. Approximately 65.7 percent were involved in business-to-business sales, 24 percent sold to resellers, and the remainder were involved primarily in retail sales. Respondents had been in sales a median of 20 years and with their present companies a median of 12 years. Respondents reported that 60 percent of their time was spent in account management activities and 30 percent in developmental activities. The majority (74.9 percent) of the salespersons in the sample were involved primarily in long-term relationships with the remainder reporting both long-term and short-term relationships.

Measures

The survey consisted of several previously published multi-item instruments that have been commonly used in selling

research. All the scales in the survey were measured using Likert-type seven point scales. Following Anderson and Gerbings' (1988) two step procedure in testing structural equation models all instruments were examined with regards to internal consistency of the scales using an item-to-total correlation as well as factor analysis. In order to purify the measures and confirm acceptable levels of internal consistency those scale items that had low item-to-total correlations were dropped. This was followed by a confirmatory factor analysis in order to affirm the original factor structure of the scale (Gerbing and Anderson, 1988). The final scales and the corresponding items that were included in the measurement model are listed in Table I.

The active empathetic listening (AEL) scale developed by Drollinger *et al.* (2005) was used in order to measure the salespersons ability to demonstrate AEL in the customer/salesperson interaction. The final scale consisted of four items and internal consistency was at an acceptable level ($\alpha = 0.785$). Fit statistics further confirmed its factor structure in the full measurement model (see Table I).

Relationship quality was measured using a scale developed by Williams and Attaway (1996). This scale was designed to measure the degree of relationship commitment between buyers and sellers at a point in time (see Table I). Items in this scale measured confidence in the salesperson in the working relationship. This scale was developed for use among salespersons and their customers and consisted of three items. Internal consistency was good ($\alpha = 0.861$).

Trust was measured using Ganesan's (1994) instrument. More specifically the belief that the salesperson is trustworthy and faithful was examined in the study. The scale originally included 6 items however results from item to total correlations produced a weak alpha and two items were dropped which produced an acceptable alpha ($\alpha = 0.849$). The scale was subject to confirmatory factor analyses in order to confirm the original factor structure and fit statistics confirmed a good fit. The outcome indicator of selling performance was measured by a single item with regards to the salespersons beliefs on their performance. The question "I

generate a high level of dollar sales" was used to measure the salespersons sales performance.

CFA and hypothesis results

Before estimating the structural equation model presented in Figure 1, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) that included all of the final scales was conducted according to Gerbing and Anderson's (1988) recommendations. The results were reported in Table I. It is recommend that when presenting results from structural models that several fit criteria are presented in order to better evaluate the overall fit of the model (Bollen and Long, 1993; Hu and Bentler, 1999). Results from the CFA indicated that the chi-square statistic ($\chi^2 = 68.635$, $df = 51$, $p > 0.05$) and therefore the model and data were considered to be a good fit. The goodness of fit (GFI = 0.939), comparative fit index (CFI = 0.982) and normed fit index (NFI = 0.935) values were all above the recommended level of acceptance of 0.90 (Hu and Bentler, 1999). Due to the large number of degrees of freedom in the model the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA = 0.045) was also consulted and was found to be at an acceptable level which indicated a good fit. Lastly the adjusted goodness of fit (AGFI = 0.907) was above the 0.80 minimum recommended overall the fit indices would indicate the model and data in the CFA were a good fit.

The estimated values of the standardized coefficients are also reported in Table I. All of the standardized coefficients were significant at a significance level of 0.001. Further the composite reliabilities for each of the scales were above the 0.70 value level recommended by Churchill (1979) for non-exploratory studies.

The hypothesized model was tested using AMOS software. The advantages of using a structural equation modeling approach versus other ordinary least squares methodology were that:

- it is capable of testing more than one dependent variable at a time;

Table I CFA for scale items: AEL, relationship quality and trust

Var. name	Item	Standardized loading	t-value	Composite reliability
AEL	Active empathetic listening			$\alpha = 0.785$
A1	I listen for more than just the spoken words	0.581	7.063	
A2	I assure my customers that I am receptive to their ideas	0.760	7.094	
A3	I ask questions that show my understanding of my customers' position	0.737	7.296	
A4	I show my customers that I am listening by my body language (e.g. head nods)	0.600	7.079	
A5	I sense why my customers feel the way they do	0.601	7.305	
RQ	Relationship quality			$\alpha = 0.861$
R1	My customers would recommend me to a friend	0.830	12.786	
R2	My customers intend to continue doing business with me	0.864	13.012	
R3	My customers would not hesitate to have me work with other members of their firm	0.781	11.460	
TR	Trust			$\alpha = 0.849$
T1	My customers feel that I care for them	0.849	11.073	
T2	My customers believe that I would go out on a limb for them	0.732	9.504	
T3	My customers feel like I am a friend	0.782	10.192	
T4	My customers feel like I am on their side	0.753	9.875	

Notes: $\chi^2 = 68.635$; $df = 51$; $p = 0.050$; GFI = 0.939; CFI = 0.982; NFI = 0.935; RMSEA0.045; AGFI=0.907

- it provides information regarding how well the model fits the data as a whole;
- it can test relationships between latent constructs that are measured by multiple scale items and lastly; and
- it is capable of taking error variance into account (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988).

The data were analyzed using the maximum likelihood estimation method.

Overall, model fit indices report the relationships represented in the hypothesized model were a good fit (see Figure 1). Hu and Bentler's (1999) recommendations regarding fit statistics when using the maximum likelihood method of estimation were adhered to. According to the results the fit statistics were acceptable. The chi-square statistic for the full measurement model was not significant ($\chi^2 = 80.592$, $df = 61$, $p > 0.047$) and therefore the model and data were considered to be a good fit. The goodness of fit (GFI = 0.934), comparative fit index (CFI = 0.981) and normed fit index (NFI = 0.926) values were all above the recommended level of acceptance of 0.90 (Hu and Bentler, 1999). The root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA = 0.043) and adjusted goodness of fit (AGFI = 0.901) also indicated a good fit. Although the goodness of fit indicators was encouraging the path between the indicator of trust and performance was not significant (standardized coefficient = 0.180, $p > 0.286$) whereas all other paths in the model were. In order to generate a more parsimonious model a second structural model that removed the path between trust and performance was conducted.

Once again Hu and Bentler's (1999) recommendations regarding fit statistics when using the maximum likelihood method of estimation were adhered to in testing the second model. According to the results the fit statistics for the revised model were acceptable and very similar to the initial model. The chi-square statistic for the full measurement model was not significant ($\chi^2 = 81.894$, $df = 62$, $p > 0.046$) and therefore the model and data were considered to be a good fit. The goodness of fit (GFI = 0.934), comparative fit index (CFI = 0.981) and normed fit index (NFI = 0.927) values were all above the recommended level of acceptance of 0.90 (Hu and Bentler, 1999). Due to the large number of degrees of freedom in the model the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA = 0.043) was also consulted and was found to be at an acceptable level which indicated a good fit. Lastly the adjusted goodness of fit (AGFI = 0.902) was above the 0.80 minimum recommended (see Figure 2). Considering the acceptable levels of model fit it is appropriate to examine the hypothesized relationships and the path coefficients.

Given the more optimal levels of the fit indicators in the second model it was adopted as being a more parsimonious model. The test of *H1*, *H2*, *H3* and *H4* are shown in Figure 2. *H1* proposed a positive relationship between AEL and relationship quality. This hypothesis was supported since the standardized coefficient was 0.32 and statistically significant ($t = 3.346$, $p > 0.001$). *H2* proposed a positive relationship between AEL and trust. This hypothesis was supported with a standardized coefficient of 0.652 and was statistically significant ($t = 5.696$, $p > 0.001$). *H3* proposed a positive relationship between trust and relationship quality. This hypothesis was supported with a standardized coefficient of 0.615 and was statistically significant ($t = 6.339$, $p > 0.001$). *H4* proposed a positive relationship between relationship

quality and sales performance. This hypothesis was supported with a standardized coefficient of 0.516 and was statistically significant ($t = 6.978$, $p > 0.001$).

According to Baron and Kenny (1986) in order to test the mediation of the proposed hypothesis the model should meet three conditions. First the predictor variables should be significantly related to the mediators. In the case of the present study the coefficient values from AEL to the mediating variables of trust and relationship quality were both significant (see Figure 2). Secondly, the mediators should be related to the dependant or outcome variables and in the present model we see that relationship quality is significantly related although trust is not. In this case trust was tested as mediating the relationship between AEL and relationship quality and met the first two criteria. Lastly, according to Barron and Kenny (1986) there should be a substantial reduction in the relationship between the predictor and dependent or outcome variable when the mediator is included. In the present case AEL was not significantly related to the dependant or outcome variable. The mediation was supported according to Baron and Kenny's (1986) recommendations.

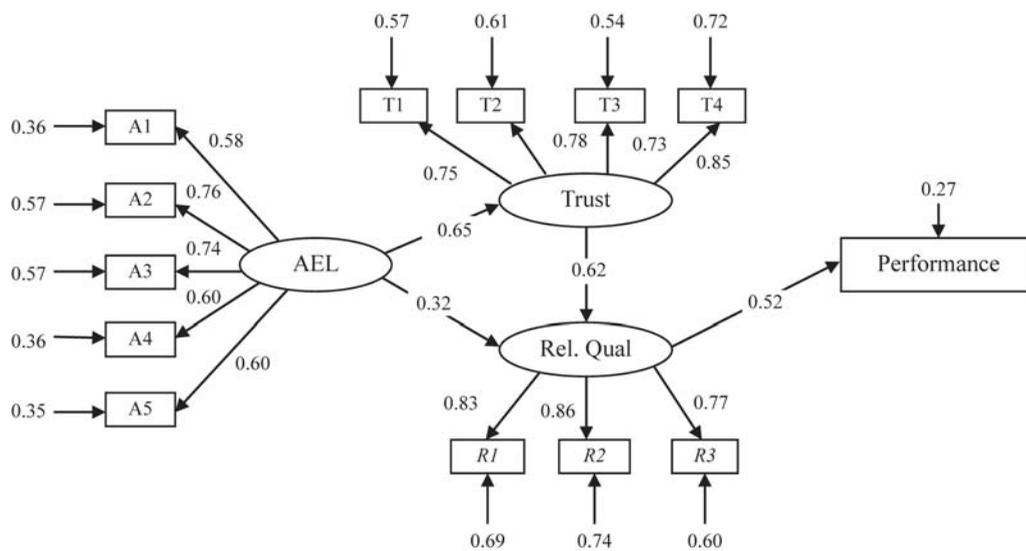
Discussion

When examining the hypothesized relationships it is apparent that they are generally supported directionally and via their significance (with the exception of *H5*). The support of the hypotheses in the present study may also be seen as lending credibility to the relationship marketing model developed by Palmatier *et al.* (2006) and Comer and Drollinger's (1999) theoretical model on the personal selling process. Overall the findings sustain the notion that salespeople with higher levels of AEL will have higher quality relationships, and be regarded as more trustworthy. Further, when levels of trustworthiness are high the level of relationship quality is higher which results in higher sales performance. Examination of the standardized coefficient (0.62) indicates that the path between trust and relationship quality is strong. This finding indicates that as trust in the salesperson increases by 1 standard deviation the perceived level of relationship quality increases by 0.62 standard deviations. Trustworthiness of the salesperson should result in a better relationship between the buyer and seller. Active empathetic listening also had a strong relationship to trust (standardized coefficient 0.65). Salespeople with greater levels of AEL should be able to instill higher levels of trust in the relationship.

In the field of psychology, trust and empathy are generally found to be positively related to healthy interpersonal relationships whereas the lack of trust and empathy often results in dysfunctional relationships (Goleman, 1994). When salespeople utilize AEL they enable themselves to better understand the needs and priorities of their customers through consideration of their literal and emotional messages and in the process instill a sense of sincerity and genuine interest in the salesperson/buyer relationship.

Perhaps the most interesting finding in the present study is the insignificant finding of trust as an indicator of performance. Past research has established a link between trust and performance whereas the present study would indicate that it is only a mediator to performance rather than a direct indicator (Palmatier *et al.*, 2006). This result may be due to the multidimensional nature of relationship quality.

Figure 2 Hypothesized model estimation results



Notes: $\chi^2 = 81.894$, $df = 62$; $p > 0.046$; GFI = 0.934; CFI = 0.981; NFI = 0.927; RMSEA = 0.043; AGFI = 0.902

Relationship quality may be a result of greater levels of trust as well as confidence in future interactions and current perceptions of salespersons' reliability. The results from the present model suggest that trust acts as a mediator to relationship quality which then directly affects performance. Both trust and AEL in the present model appear to be antecedents of relationship quality rather than direct indicators of a salespersons financial performance.

In this study sales performance was measured with regards to meeting financial sales goals rather than as a measure of technical knowledge or presentation performance (Behrman and Perreault, 1982). It may be of interest in future studies to examine the relationship between trustworthiness and AEL of the salesperson and their presentation performance. Furthermore, no one single definition or predominant scale exists that describes the multidimensional nature of relationship quality. Research that better defines the complex nature of relationship quality would be of value when investigating this construct.

Managerial implications

Sales managers whose sales force is engaged in dyadic communications with buyers and are interested in developing long term relationships with them may benefit most from this study. The findings indicate that AEL is positively related to greater levels of relationship quality and superior levels of trust. AEL may be seen as a means in which salespeople can enhance these relationship building skills. In order for salespeople to take advantage of this higher form of listening they will need to be trained in active listening behaviors as well as the ability to see the sales interaction from the buyers' point-of-view (empathy). Salespeople can be trained to be more empathetic when interacting with their customers by recognizing emotional signals in facial expressions, tone of voice and other non-verbal behaviors. Being more aware of the customers feelings will provide the salesperson with additional information that will likely help them to build a

better relationship through responses that demonstrate greater levels of understanding on both a literal and emotional level.

Research has indicated that when managers coach salespersons in relationship selling skills the ability to listen effectively is paramount (Good, 1993). Role plays may be an excellent way to train salespeople in AEL. The full AEL scale may also be useful in assessing the present level of AEL among an existing sales force or could be used as a selection tool when hiring relationship oriented salespeople (Drollinger *et al.*, 2005).

Limitations and future research

In the present study a cross sectional sample of salespersons was used in order to examine AEL and its link to relationship quality, trust and ultimately performance. In order to have a more depth understanding of the effect that AEL has on interpersonal skills and ultimately performance a longitudinal study would be ideal. A longitudinal study would be better able to determine what the long-term effects of AEL are in the buyer/seller dyad. Further, in the present study we examined all of the variables from the salespersons' perspective. Self-report measures used in the present study limit the interpretation of the findings. It would be of value to use customer/salesperson dyads in future research in order to determine if there are gaps in perceptions of communication skills, relationship quality and trust. A potential threat to the present study is that of common method bias. Because the data were collected through self-reported measures it poses a threat to the findings in the study. Another important limitation is that of a single indicator to predict sales performance. Single indicators are less desirable when specifying a structural model but can be used to estimate a construct (Hu and Bentler, 1999).

A limitation when investigating relationship selling is defining the nature of the constructs. Multiple definitions of relationship quality, trust and performance exist. Many times

these constructs overlap in meaning. For example trust is considered to be a contributing variable when defining relationship quality in Crosby *et al.*'s (1990) study and in Palmatier *et al.*'s (2006) paper the authors consider trust to be a mediating construct in the overall process of cooperation between buyers and sellers. It would be of value to have a more concrete definition of the dimensions of relationship quality and related constructs. Presently overlap and lack of clarity in the definition of constructs undermines research in the area of relationship selling.

This study has implications for the nature of the buyer seller relationship as it demonstrates that by actively and empathetically listening to the customer the salesperson can build better relationships and higher levels of trust. The present model supposes that the salesperson is not an adversary but a proponent of the customer and willing to better understand the needs of the customer. Ultimately the salesperson should experience higher levels of sales as they build the relationship.

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Further reading

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Executive summary and implications for managers and executives

This summary has been provided to allow managers and executives a rapid appreciation of the content of the article. Those with a particular interest in the topic covered may then read the article in toto to take advantage of the more comprehensive description of the research undertaken and its results to get the full benefit of the material present.

Novelist Ernest Hemingway was pretty good with words, but he also liked to hear what other people had on their minds, saying: "I like to listen. I have learned a great deal from listening carefully. Most people never listen." How true. How many people do you know who love to talk but cannot bear to listen? How many friends and colleagues cannot stop themselves, no matter how they try, from interrupting what someone else is saying just so they can talk? How many people do you see not really listening to what someone else is saying, but eager to jump in with their own views? If someone boasts that they have got good communications skills, chances are they are merely confident speakers and do not even realize that good listening is an essential part of communication.

In an era marked by relationship selling, listening skills of salespeople are becoming increasingly important. Effective listening also plays a critical role in the satisfactory evaluation of salespeople by their customers and management. Studies have reported effective listening as the most important skill a salesperson can possess. When sales executives took part in a survey to find out why salespeople's performance was not that

great, poor listening skills were among the six most common reasons given for failure.

A key component to building mutually beneficial relationships in business-to-business sales is the ability of salespeople to communicate well with their customers. Surely it is common sense that good listening is one of the essential qualities needed, another being empathy.

In "Salesperson's listening ability as an antecedent to relationship selling" Tanya Drollinger and Lucette B. Comer examine the role of active listening with an empathetic overlay. Active empathetic listening (AEL) has been defined as "listening practiced by salespeople in whom active listening behaviors are combined with empathy to achieve a higher form of listening."

Active listening requires that the listener attend to the sender's message with regard to both verbal and non-verbal elements. This implies that listening is not a passive activity in which the listener simply acts as a vortex into which information flows, but the listener assures the speaker they hear them via head nods and eye contact. The listener also seeks to understand the speaker by asking questions or repeating what was said for the sake of clarity. Active listening is an information-gathering process in which the listener is fully engaged in the conversation.

Active empathetic listening includes all elements of active listening but also incorporates an empathetic overlay. It is important that the salesperson fully understands the buyer. However, they must also maintain a professional distance in which they recognize not only the needs of the buyer but those of their own company.

In the present definition empathy is regarded as a form of perspective taking which allows the salesperson to understand the buyer's subjective point-of-view. This kind of empathy should better enable the salesperson to not only consider their goals and concerns but those of the buyer. The empathetic component in the task of listening also requires the salesperson to understand the subtle emotions and feelings

of the buyer and not limit their understanding to just the literal or explicit message.

An example of a salesperson listening on an active level would be one who listens intently to important information and sends verbal and non-verbal signals that they are indeed listening but does not necessarily pick up cues with regard to feelings. Salespeople who accompany active listening behaviors with empathy are able to pick up emotional messages (excitement, urgency, anxiety, anger etc.) and respond in a verbal and non-verbal manner that expresses understanding rather than imitation. Empathetic understanding provides the salesperson with insightful information regarding the nature of the interaction and also helps them to be more aware of their own actions and words.

Sales managers whose sales force is engaged in dyadic communications with buyers and are interested in developing long-term relationships with them may benefit most from this study. The study finds that AEL is positively related to greater levels of relationship quality and superior levels of trust. It may be seen as a means in which salespeople can enhance these relationship-building skills. In order for salespeople to take advantage of this higher form of listening they will need to be trained in active listening behaviors as well as the ability to see the sales interaction from the buyers' point-of-view (empathy).

Salespeople can be trained to be more empathetic when interacting with their customers by recognizing emotional signals in facial expressions, tone of voice and other non-verbal behaviors. Being more aware of the customers' feelings will provide additional information that is likely to help them to build a better relationship through responses that demonstrate greater levels of understanding on both a literal and emotional level. Role play may be an excellent way to train salespeople in AEL.

(A précis of the article "Salesperson's listening ability as an antecedent to relationship selling". Supplied by Marketing Consultants for Emerald.)