The role of the salesforce in gathering customer intelligence: A view from the general insurance sector

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Introduction

The role of the salesforce in gathering market intelligence, particularly customer intelligence, is well known (see for example Wright *et al.* 2002). Because of their boundary position, salespeople can offer their company direct access to important customer information (Lorge, 2006; Le Meunier-FitzHugh and Piercy, 2006). Indeed, according to Festervand *et al.* (1988) and Webster (1965) there are compelling reasons for using the salesforce to collect customer intelligence. For example, the salesperson has a well-established relationship with the customer and is familiar with their needs and wants. The salesperson is often perceived as a problem solver and thereby the customer is more willing to open up and provide information to them. In addition, this data collection method is low cost as data can be collected as part of the salesforces' everyday activities in terms of customer visits and reporting back (Festervand *et al.* 1988; Webster, 1965).

Despite the benefits of using the salesforce to collect customer intelligence, their use to-date has not always been frequent, effective or reliable (Cross et al., 2001; Tanner and Shipp, 2005). Previous research suggests that this may be due to few salespeople allocating the time to collect and report information to their company (Robertson, 1974; Albaum, 1964; Thietart and Vivas 1981) and/or because the information obtained is unreliable as the key interest of salespeople is to make sales and they may not therefore be objective or report reliable information (Moss, 1979).

The role of the salesperson is to call on customers and prospects, build and manage trusting relationships and create satisfaction and value for individual customers (Cron and Decarlo, 2010; Jap, 2001). The collection and use of intelligence, although not explicitly mentioned, is a necessary part of this role. For example, in order to create satisfaction and build value, the needs and wants of the customer have to be known. Requests from the company to undertake intelligence gathering or other research activities may, or may not, fall within the salesperson's own perceived role.

This paper draws on role theory to provide an insight into this area. The aim is to identify how the salesperson role is perceived by a company and its salesforce and whether data collection is an integral part of that role. The study is of managerial importance as companies consider the information they receive from their salesforce to be more important than primary research (Cross *et al.* 2001). Insights into how this process can be improved will enable companies to increase the quality of their customer intelligence which in turn can be used to improve and maintain their competitive position in the marketplace (Anica and Cucui, 2009; Le Meunier-FitzHugh and Piercy 2006; Kahaner, 1998).

Data for this study are collected from within the UK general insurance industry and is drawn from interviews with the salesforce and other key stakeholders within one global insurer. This company was selected as it is known to use its salesforce for both customer intelligence and to undertake wider research activities.

Theory and questions

Salespeople have been the subject of many studies on role conflict, role strain and stress (see Holmlund-Rytkonen, & Strandvik, 2005 for a summary). However, the contribution that data collection plays is less well known and this study seeks to provide an insight into this area.

Three research questions have been developed from the literature as follows.

1. Does the role of the salesforce include customer intelligence?

Role theory originates in the sociology and social psychology literature (Goode, 1960). It proposes that human behaviour is guided by the expectations held both by the individual and by other people. Roles specify what goals should be pursued, what tasks must be accomplished, and what performances are required in a given scenario or situation (Heide and Wathne, 2006; Michaels, Day, and Joachimsthaler, 1987).   An individual's performance in a given role will consist of critical behaviours accompanied by optional behaviours for that role (Biddle, 1979). The behaviour that is considered acceptable in any given role can therefore vary and be considered fuzzy (Montgomery, 2000).This leads to the first research question: What is the role of the salesforce and is data collection perceived to be a critical or optional part of that role? In answering this question, the perceptions of both the salesforce and key stakeholders (for example, the Sales Manager and Research Manager) within the company will be identified.

2. Does 'role conflict' exist in the salesperson role?

Role conflict can occur where an individual has two or more conflicting roles to perform and where meeting the core expectations of one role will mean falling short of the core expectations of another (Heide and Wathne, 2006; Price and Arnould, 1999; Rothbard, 2001). This leads to the second research question: Are stakeholders' perceptions of the salesperson role the same or do differences exist between the salesperson and other stakeholders leading to role conflict?

3. Is the salesforce experiencing 'role strain'?

Role strain, also known as role pressure, can occur when there is a conflict in the demand of roles, for example, when an individual does not agree with the evaluation of others concerning his or her performance in his or her role, or from accepting roles that are beyond an individual's capacity (Goode, 1960). In particular, role strain may occur as a result of time constraints and where the individual is forced to honour some roles at the expense of others (Sieber, 1974).). This leads to the final research questions: do requests from the company to engage in data collection result in role strain for the salesperson?

Methodology

Data are collected by means of in-depth interviews with two stakeholder groups: the salesforce and other key stakeholders.

Salesforce: semi structured telephone interviews will be conducted with the salesforce. Interviewing will continue until the data saturation point is reached, although 12 interviews are planned. This number is supported by Guest *et al* (2006) who suggest that 12 interviews may be sufficient to enable development of meaningful themes and useful interpretations. All interviews will be conducted by telephone as the salesforce is dispersed across the UK.

Key stakeholders: Face-to-face interviews will be conducted with key stakeholders within the case company under study. The stakeholders will include the Sales Manager and Research Manager. The Sales Manager is selected as she sets the workloads and scope of activities undertaken by the salesforce. Her perception of the salesforce's role is therefore central to this study. The second stakeholder will be the Research Manager as she is responsible for data collection and intelligence collected within the company and will request use of the salesforce for this purpose as appropriate.

All interviews will be transcribed and two researchers will analyse the transcripts and discuss and compare the key themes identified to understand fully the salesforce's perspective. Comparing and synthesising the data in this way will allow key nuances to be identified and discussed (Morse, 1994).

The focus will be on one case company within the UK general insurance market. This sector was selected as it is known to use its salesforce for customer intelligence and other data collection purposes. The salesforce in question operate between the insurer and the intermediary (the broker). The case company is the UK subsidiary of a global insurer, this company was selected as it matched the aforementioned criteria and access was granted to its salesforce and other key stakeholders.

Data Analysis and Findings

This research is currently work-in-progress and the full results will be presented at conference. What has emerged already is that the case company use their salesforce for a wide variety of customer intelligence and wider data collection purposes that centre of the salesperson's customers. Training is provided to the salesforce on how to undertake research and probe for data when interviewing. Within this particular case it would appear that the salesforce are well utilised in this context. At conference the role of the salesforce in the gathering of customer intelligence will be considered in more detail.

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