PERSONAL SELLING: TOWARDS A THEORY OF DECISION MAKING UNDER CONDITIONS HAVING AN ETHICAL CONTENT

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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes a positive theory of decision making for personal selling under conditions having an ethical content. It provides the conceptual foundations necessary to describe and explain the decision making process of sales personnel, in organizational contexts. Developed from existing conceptual and empirical research, it proposes that the process of decision making *and* the nature of decisions are important to fully understand the factors that contribute to decision making. The main components of the theory discussed here are selling functions, organizational and individual decisions, outcomes and evaluation, and, organizational and environmental variables.

INTRODUCTION

Salespersons operate in a distinct environment and perform unique functions. Organizational boundary spanning gives rise to conflict in selling activities (Walker, Churchill and Ford 1975, Dubinsky et al. 1986). It provides the opportunity for unethical behavior and for some of the conditions necessary for conflict. It places individuals in contact with those who have the propensity to induce ethical conflict arising from potentially differing ethical perspectives.

Existing theories of marketing ethics do not adequately explain the decision making process in the sales area. Ferrell and Gresham (1985) do not adequately address the impact of prior decisions upon on ethical dilemmas, nor contain a moral judgment component which is necessary to understand how individuals evaluate ethical issues. Managerial behavior is not seen as directly impacting upon ethical dilemmas, effecting only individual decision making, and being determined only by evaluation of prior outcomes. Hunt and Vitell (1986; 1991) assume that ethical dilemmas are inherently homogeneous since there is no provision for the *context* of the ethical dilemma. Subsequent research suggests that moral intensity *does* have an influence on the process (Jones 1991). Grounded in cognitive moral development, it assumes an environmental explanation of how people make ethical decisions, although this is an unresolved issue (Tansey 1994). Cognitive theories of moral development have been challenged on conceptual and empirical bases (Tansey et al. 1994). Such theories (i) favor moral absolutist and

relativism, (ii) make a naturalistic fallacy by translating 'how people make judgments' into 'how people *should* make judgments, (iii) contain empirical tests, such as the 'Defining Issues Test' that lend themselves to self-validity, (iv) are politically biased when they classify subjects into stages, and, (v) ignore the context-specificity of ethical differences. Ferrell, Gresham and Fraedrich (1989) postulate ethical issues and behavior evolve from economic and social environments, but provide no explication of the linkages between these factors. Dubinsky and Loken (1989) do not explain the factors that contribute to the creation of ethical conflict, nor describe the impact that managerial behavior may have upon subsequent ethical issues. Wotruba's (1990) ethical framework can also be challenged at conceptual and empirical levels since (i) the appropriateness of the cognitive moral development approach is debatable, as noted above, (ii) there are concerns regarding inter-subject certifiability, (iii) the extent to which it contained analytic or synthetic schemata is problematic and thus raises queries about the relationships between its theoretical concepts and empirical findings, (iv) concerns exist about the reliability of the empirical sales studies used in the integration, and, (v) it does not adequately explain the linkages between managerial behavior and environmental factors.

In essence, the above deficiencies indicate that a positive theory of decision making for the sales area should address the following concerns. First, the theory must allow for the context of the ethical dilemma. Second, an explanation of the factors that *create* the dilemma need to be included. Third, allowing for the impact of managerial behavior on the environment is required. Fourth, alternative perspectives to cognitive moral development are necessary in order to explain the moral evaluation process conducted by individuals. Fifth, grounding a theory solely in absolutist moral philosophy may not fully encapsulate all the circumstances of decision making. Although all the above need to addressed, space limitations here allows for focus on only the first three of the above issues.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE THEORY

The need to account for the nature, purpose and individuals involved in the process of selling distinguishes this theory from others in marketing ethics. First, personal selling is characterized, then, the following sections treat the functions of selling and the individuals within the process. (See the Appendix.)

Personal selling is the conduct of organizational boundary spanning activities where exchange occurs in the form of sales transactions. Selling is central to organizational survival and the resultant demands create pressures between short-term goals and long-term objectives. Personal selling and managerial behavior are unique. Sales practitioners are (i) frequently isolated, (ii) require independence, (iii) operate in 'glass cages', (iv) have performance measures that are easily visible, readily measurable and closely scrutinized, and, (v) are subject to stress resulting from conflicting pressures from their customers and managers (Jolson et

al. 1993). Selling creates unique circumstances which need be allowed for in a theory of decision making. The impact that the *nature* of a moral issue itself has upon decision making, its moral intensity, captures the extent of an issue-related moral imperative in a situation (Jones 1991:372). This dimension is theorized as impacting upon the recognition of moral issues, the making of moral judgments, the establishment of moral intent and the engagement of moral behavior. The influence of moral intensity throughout the decision process is allowed for by the inclusion of those special factors that contribute to the creation of certain types of ethical dilemmas in selling. They are categorized below as 'Functional' and 'Individual.'

Functional

Functional factors include the activities in which sales persons frequently engage and are related to the management of the selling processes. Decisions made in these areas have a subsequent impact on the moral, decision making and outcomes of the decision making process. Such decisions are impacted by other moderators. As noted above, other models do not allow for the impact these activities have on the ethical decision making process. The following section provides support, from existing empirical research, for the impact of these variables on ethical decision making.

Managers alter organizational climate and therefore mitigate the ethical conflict of salespeople (Dubinsky and Ingram 1984). They establish organizational structures that enable salespeople to effectively conduct their boundary spanning activities (Pruden 1969), and promulgate guidelines to enable resolution of conflict (Dawson 1970). Environmental stimuli, as well as the nature of the act, are associated with unethical behavior.

Although duration in a sales position and educational level were unrelated to the salesperson's ethical conflict (Dubinsky and Ingram 1984), role definition by managers has a positive impact on the ability of salespeople to resolve conflicting demands (Dubinsky et al. 1986). Ethical conflict was also associated with the cognitive moral development and social development roles of training, and with the initiation of employees to tasks (Walker, Churchill and Ford 1975; Goolsby and Hunt 1992). Although much of the conflict experienced by salespeople appeared to arise from outside organizations, sales managers may be able to moderate the perceptions of role conflict and ambiguity by the salesperson through supervision and training (Churchill, Ford and Walker 1976). Wider spans of control are associated with the increased role conflict and reduced role ambiguity of sales representatives (Chonko 1982). The initiation structure of sales managers is related to the perceived role conflict of salespeople and indicates that closeness of supervision may decrease the salesperson's flexibility in meeting demands and thus increase conflict (Teas 1981). Leadership consideration and salesforce participation are negatively associated with salespeople's perceptions of role conflict and role ambiguity indicating, that sales managers may be

influential in determining salesforce role stress and role conflict (Teas 1981). Sales personnel have similar perceptions of what constitutes an ethical sales situation (Chonko and Burnett 1983). The amount of role conflict resulting from ethical sources is greater than that arising from the family, job or customer relations (Chonko and Burnett 1983). Increased levels of organizational formalization are related to lower levels of role conflict, and indirectly influence organizational commitment (Churchill, Ford and Walker 1976; Michaels et al. 1988). Source of income is unrelated to the ethical conflict of sales people (Dubinsky and Ingram 1984). Concluding that not only does structure differ with organizational size but fundamental salesforce management activities, research into the relationships between organizational size and management evaluation practices revealed that the size of an organization is related to its salesforce evaluation practices (Jobber, Hooley and Shipley 1993). Sales managers encounter different sales management situations and use different management evaluation practices depending on their organizational size (Shipley and Jobber 1994).

Individual

This section establishes that sales practitioners *have* some characteristics and *exhibit* certain behaviors that *are* different from other groups *and* that these characteristics and behaviors impact the ethical conditions under which they operate. Specifically, this section suggests that decisions made in this area, and which contribute to the *creation* of ethical dilemmas, are dependent upon the characteristics and behavior of the individuals making those decisions.

The profiles of salespeople and sales managers are relatively homogenous, although, compared to salespeople, the greater job satisfaction of sales managers appear attributable to both the tangibility of their compensation, and their ability to cope with job ambiguity and tension. They also appear to have higher levels of internal control, have less conflictful role relations, and are more able to cope with uncertainty, tension, and strain. Unlike salespeople, task specific self-esteem, role ambiguity, and job-related tension are not pervasive determinants of job outcomes for sales managers. People orientation and self-guidedness appear as factors that enable sales managers to motivate their subordinates to better performance. (Bagozzi 1980a).

The determinants of sales performance were ranked as personal factors, skill, role variables, aptitude, motivation, and organizational-environmental factors (Churchill et al. 1985). Dependence, self-confidence, happiness, sociophilia, aggression, and a strong superego, energy, intellectual competence and height are associated with success and failure (Miner 1962; Lamont and Lundstrom 1977). The sales job has unique characteristics that attract and retain individuals with certain characteristics (Walker, Churchill and Ford 1975). Remaining in the position is related to personal attributes and leadership characteristics, as is satisfaction and successful performance, and has an impact on both role conflict and role ambiguity, although there was no confirmation that supervisory style was an antecedent of role conflict (Walker, Churchill and Ford 1975). Supervisory policies and style, such as the frequency of communication and the determination of evaluation standards, influence the perceived role ambiguity experienced by salespeople, and appears to indicate that effective managers, and therefore those remaining in their positions, are those having certain distinguishing leadership characteristics (Walker, Churchill and Ford 1975). Salespeople find with experience that perceived role conflict is not actually conflictful, learn how to manage conflict, develop psychological mechanisms to cope, or quit (Walker, Churchill and Ford 1975).

The ability to handle conflict is associated with experience, demonstrated by the fact that sales managers are apparently more able, than salespeople, to deal with it. Level of motivation, ambition and energy are important traits for promotion to first level sales management (Guest and Meric 1989). The education of a salesperson, particularly the amount of marketing education and the extent of

courses taken are significant predictors of sales performance, commission, salary increases and other performance variables (Harmon and Jenkins 1980).

Salespeople have higher levels of organizational commitment than other professionals (Michaels et al. 1988). Attitudes, work perceptions and performance of salespeople also vary according to career stage (Cron, Dubinsky and Michaels 1988). Motivation, higher than average energy, ambition and intellectual all rank highly as selection criteria for promotion to first level sales management and for their importance in effective sales management. Integrity and a sense of fair play, both of which have ethical connotations, are also important traits (Guest and Meric 1989).

A crucial factor in this component is deontological norms. In this theory, unlike Hunt and Vitell (1986), it is proposed that deontological norms are a characteristic of the individual decision maker and are not determined *directly* by environmental influences such as culture, industry or organization. Rather, they are impacted upon by environmental and organizational moderators. Deontological norms are a factor in the moral evaluation process and assist in the explanation of decision making. The extent to which a specific sales theory is required, depends partly upon the differences between the deontological norms of sales practitioners and other individuals.

A relationship between strong superegos, ethical concern and effective salesmanship was reported by (Miner 1962). Sales managers and sales people have similar perceptions of the situations considered to constitute an ethical dilemma (Dubinsky, Berkowitz and Rudelius 1980). The perceptions of ethical problems appears to be unrelated to business experience and gender, but high, compared to low, Machiavellian sales professionals tended to *perceive* ethical problems as less *severe*, and the lower ethical marketing-related deontological norms of a salesperson were related to lower levels of Machiavellianism; there was also no significant relationship between a sales practitioner's gender and their deontological norms (Singhapakdi and Vitell 1991a; 1992). They suggested that these results be viewed cautiously since the respondents had similar educational and professional backgrounds, and that relating variables (such as competition, rewards systems and hierarchical position) may prove useful in explaining ethical beliefs and decisions. This theory accommodates the potential impact of these factors within the 'selling function.'

Moral Evaluation Component

This component is based partly upon the Hunt and Vitell (1986) theory whose core relationships are supported by the following studies: Singhapakdi and Vitell (1990; 1991a; 1991b; 1992; 1993a; 1993b), Goolsby and Hunt (1992), and, Hunt and Vasquez-Parraga (1993). It was found that (i) sales and marketing managers primarily depend on deontological factors when determining whether a salesperson's selling practices are ethical or unethical, but that teleological factors

also play a role, (ii) the main effect of positive consequences on ethical judgments in a deontological unethical situation and of negative consequences in a deontologically ethical situation is to move ethical judgments towards a neutral position, (iii) the type of ethical evaluation, deontological or teleological, is moderated by the level of organizational formalization such that managers in more formalized organizations, compared to less formalized structures, rely more on teleological considerations, and (iv) as the span of control increases, managers' intentions to intervene are influenced more by teleological factors and less by their ethical judgments (Hunt and Vasquez-Parraga 1993). Deontological evaluations are characterized as being based on rules, compared to teleological ones, where individuals consider consequences when making moral judgements.

The implications from the above for this theory are, first, that since the consequences of a selling dilemma (that is, the outcomes arising from its *nature*), are likely to be beneficial or 'positive' for both salespeople and sales managers, at least in the short-term, there is likely to be a tendency to judge unethical behavior as acceptable. Second, the crucial aspects of selling performance, particularly the measurement of sales results, are highly formalized processes, and that this leads to judgments based upon teleological, rather than deonotlogical, evaluations of ethical issues. This occurs even though other aspects of selling are less formalized. Third, sales personnel, especially managers, permit and design organizational structures that promote teleological evaluations of ethical issues, as demonstrated by the relationship between span of control and intervention, as identified above. In essence, this theory postulates that decisions made in the 'selling component' component facilitate certain forms of ethical evaluations, (notably teleological ones), and inhibit others.

Intentions are intervening variables in that they are seen to be prerequisites to action. Support for intentions being predictors of behavior is cited in studies by Hunt and Vitell (1986), Ferrell, Gresham and Fraedrich (1989), Dubinsky and Loken (1989), Wotruba (1990), and, Jones (1991).

Organizational and Individual Decisions

Organizational decision making is characterised as decisions made by individuals with reference to policies and procedures. Individual decision making is characterized as decisions made with *direct* and *personal* involvement with another participant. This component proposes that whether an ethical dilemma arises from an ethical judgment is influenced by *how* the conflict is created. Stated in other words, this theory postulates that one of the factors necessary to explain and predict ethical decision making is *how* the ethical problem is created. Distinguishing between 'individual' and 'organizational' alternatives within the process provides for a better explanation and prediction of decision making.

In itself, forming an ethical judgment does not create an ethical dilemma. Conflict will only result for individuals where there is a difference between their own (or

desired) ethical standard and behavior, and that *required* of them. This difference induces pressure to take actions that contravene their own moral code. Problems will arise when differences occur on a personalized basis (for instance, directly between a sales person and a customer), or on a non-personalized basis (where the salesperson finds a contradiction between policies and their moral preference). In organizational contexts, decisions are implemented within differing structures, such as varying levels of formality and centralism. The process by which decisions are implemented can range *from* an organization-wide basis, whereby directives are made on a global basis in the form of corporate or department policy, *to* individual directives, where a manager and their subordinate are engaged in the decision process on an individual basis. Ethical dilemmas can arise from decisions made anywhere on this continuum, classified here as ranging from 'organizational decisions' to 'individual decisions', and which essentially reflects the level of involvement in the decision-making process.

It is theorized that alternative decisions made in the 'selling function" component have an impact in the 'decisions' component. Support for this proposition is provided by Pruden (1969) who suggested that the *non-formal* system is the mechanism by which managers modify the working or technical behavior of people, and serves a different purpose to the *formal* system. Dubinsky and Ingram (1984) claimed that sales managers can influence the ethical conflict of salespeople by influencing organizational climate. Role conflict is defined as "when a person experiences incompatible job demands or expectations from his or her role-set members" (Dubinsky and Ingram (1984:345), but *how* the pressure originates is *not* clearly defined.

That salespeople find with experience that conflict is not actually conflictful, learn how to manage it, develop psychological mechanisms to cope, or quit (Walker, Churchill and Ford 1975), suggests that as well as learning about the standards and policies of companies, sales practitioners also learn about the *processes* of decision making. Salespeople may learn which standards can be, and which are actually implemented, and what the consequences of behavior may be. They may learn (i) about manipulating policies in the context of boundary-spanning activities, (ii) about the reporting of behavior that may contradict policies, (iii) which policies can only be subjectively evaluated and those which are clearly enforceable, and, (iv) which policies may not be used to direct individuals to perform specific behaviors.

Further to this, the psychological response where individuals alter personal morals to cope with their environment (or quit), and which leads to the self-selection of a relatively homogeneous group in terms of ethical standards and behavior, may encourage decision making on either an organizational or individual basis. Closeness and input into the determination of standards was theorized as being associated with conflict since it allowed salespeople the flexibility with which to respond to the conflicting demands of customers and company (Walker, Churchill and Ford 1975). That a manager's decision style influences the criteria and

processes used in resolving ethical dilemmas tends to support the need for distinction within the decision making process (Michaels et al. 1988).

Outcomes and Evaluation Components

This component includes those factors related to performance, rewards and punishment, and, feedback and learning. Hunt and Vitell (1986) and (Wotruba (1990) do not allow for the impact of ethical or unethical behavior upon such moderating influences as customers, corporate policies or the environment.

This theory suggests that the evaluation of behavior may have an influence at individual, environmental, and organizational contexts. First, arising from their boundary spanning role, outcomes that are known only to salespeople are possible. In reiterations of the decision making process they may subsequently make decisions based on this 'private' evaluation of past behavior. Support for this comes from the suggestion that "the propensity toward ethical action seems situationally specific as per ethical relativism and could significantly decrease in a situation where one's actions would not be discovered by others (Barnett and Karson 1987:381). The evaluation and reinforcement of outcomes by organizational and environmental groups, has also been established collectively in studies including those by Bellizzi and Hite (1989), and, Bellizzi and Norvel (1991).

Organizational and Environmental Variables

This component comprises the moderating influences categorized as Organizational and Environmental. Organizational variables include the product range, corporate culture, corporate policies. Environmental variables include legal, economic, social, technical, political and environmental conditions. This theory suggests that the evaluation of past behavior has an impact upon the decision process in three distinct ways. The influences upon the decision making process are from: (i) organizational moderators that alter the conduct of selling activities, (ii) the environment which impacts upon the individual *directly*, and, (iii) the impact that the environment has upon the individual *through* the organization. Investigations into moderating factors and ethics include those into competition, policies, comparison of the ethical beliefs of service and product salespeople, codes of ethics, and, culture Dubinsky and Ingram (1984), (Dubinsky, Berkowitz and Rudelius 1980), Dubinsky, Ingram and Rudelius (1985), and, Singhapakdi and Vitell 1991a; 1991b).

CONCLUSION

This theory proposes a theory of decision making in sales management under conditions having an ethical content, advancing relationships that are supported by conceptual and empirical evidence. It better allows for relationships between selling and sales management behavior and various components of the environment. It suggested that rather than using individual or environmental factors as the primary explanation of decision making, understanding the context of the sales dilemma is also required. This meant that an explanation of the factors that contribute to the creation of ethical conflict in personal selling is a necessary component of theory.

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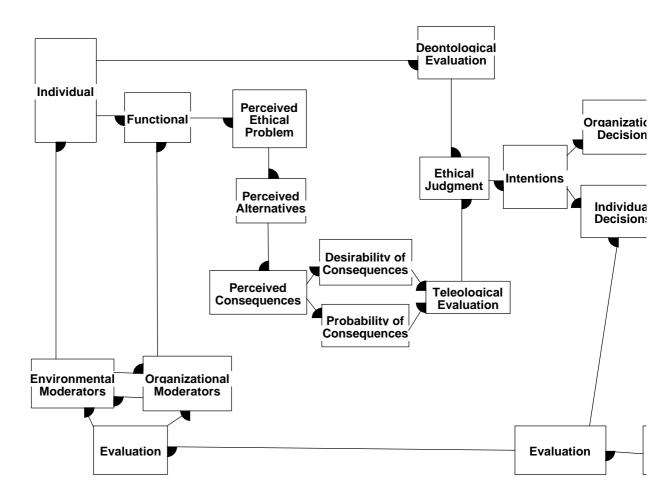
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