

# The Effect of Salesman Similarity and Expertise on Consumer Purchasing Behavior

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From a managerial standpoint, the important question about salesman-customer interaction is how the salesman's behavior affects the outcome. What can the salesman do to shape the course along which the interaction proceeds? Are certain selling strategies and techniques more effective than others in this regard [4]? Brock [2] partly examined this question by comparing the selling efficacy of a paint salesman perceived as similar but inexperienced against the same salesman perceived as dissimilar but experienced. In the similar-inexperienced condition, the salesman emphasized that the magnitude of his own consumption of paint was the same as the amount being purchased by the customer; in the dissimilar-experienced condition, the salesman reported his own magnitude of consumption to be 20 times that of the customer's prospective purchase. The results indicated that similarity was more important than experience in the attempts to persuade customers to buy higher- as well as lower-priced paints than originally intended.

Following Howard and Sheth's [7] concepts, Brock's findings would suggest that customers purchasing paint are following either "Limited Problem Solving"<sup>1</sup> or "Routinized Response Behavior"<sup>2</sup> decision processes involving psycho-social versus problem-solving game playing. Psycho-social game playing is the customer's reliance and use of the perceived power and attractiveness of the communicator in making purchase decisions. Problem-solving game playing can be defined as the customer's reliance and use of the perceived competence and trust, i.e., credibility, of the communicator in making purchase decisions, with experience and expertise being dimensions of competence [6, 8]. Thus, salesman attractiveness manifested in similarity of paint consumption

with the customer was more effective in producing successful influence attempts compared to a higher level of salesman competence which might be more effective for situations requiring the customer to adopt a problem-solving orientation. (The customer may be problem solving-oriented in most of the situations dealing with innovations, or, in short, in all situations where he is in the "Extensive Problem Solving stage" of decision making [7].<sup>3</sup>)

The research design used by Brock may have confounded the effects of salesman similarity and expertise. The conditions of similar-experienced and dissimilar-inexperienced were not included in his study. The effects of similarity versus experience needed to be compared under two or more levels for each variable before warranting any general conclusions.

Evans has shown that the more similar in demographic and life-style characteristics the parties in the selling dyad are, the more likely a favorable outcome—a sale of a life insurance policy. The attractiveness of the salesman produced by the similarities between the salesman and customer has been used as the theoretical basis for Evans's findings [4, 5].

Power, attractiveness, and credibility characteristics of communicators have been formulated by Kelman [8, 9] to produce three respective types of influences on the customer: compliance, identification, and internalization. Kelman has hypothesized that the great-

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<sup>1</sup>Limited Problem Solving is when the buyer's criteria for choosing brands are well defined and structured but the buyer is undecided about which of a set of brands is the best for him [7, p. 27].

<sup>2</sup>Routinized Response Behavior is where the buyer not only has well-defined and structured choice criteria, but also strong predisposition toward one brand [7, p. 27].

<sup>3</sup>Extensive Problem Solving refers to the early stages of repetitive decision making, in which the buyer has not yet developed well-defined and structured choice criteria [7, p. 27].

er the communicator's perceived credibility by the recipient, the greater the likelihood that the recipient will accept the influencing message because it is congruent with the recipient's value system, i.e., internalization has occurred. The effects of perceived salesman similarity and expertise on customer purchasing behavior for a new product are investigated in this article.

### HYPOTHESES

The following hypotheses were formulated to examine the effects of the selling strategies discussed on customer purchasing behavior:

- H<sub>1</sub>: The greater the perceived expertise attached to the salesman, the greater the likelihood of purchase by the customer.
- H<sub>2</sub>: The greater the perceived similarity attached to the salesman, the greater the likelihood of purchase by the customer.
- H<sub>3</sub>: For an Extensive Problem Solving stage in consumer decision making, perceived expertise of the salesman produces a greater likelihood of purchase by the customer than perceived similarity of the salesman.

### METHOD

The research design used in the study is depicted in the figure. The design incorporated two levels of expertise and two levels of similarity which enabled comparisons to be made between treatment levels and across treatments. Letters shown in the cells of the figure are for later reference. A control group of subjects received no treatment during the study.

A salesperson attempted to induce purchase of a new product innovation by consumers shopping for 8-track stereo music tapes in a small music store in Augusta, Georgia. The salesperson was a woman in her late thirties who was the communicator for all four treatment conditions. She was a part-time employee of the store and worked Thursdays through Saturdays. The salesperson was a high school graduate and had not been trained in marketing theory or sales psychology. She was not informed of the predicted

results of the study and no additional compensation was offered to her.

### Product

The product was the "HCC-2001, Head and Capstan Cleaner Kit," manufactured by Becht Electronics, Burbank, California. The kit included two felt pads, heading cleaning solution, and cartridge to be used to clean 8-track tape players. The following statement about the kit was made by the owner of the music store:

All music tapes lose the oxide coating when being played, making the player dirty and harmful to tapes, so the item has real and universal utility to the owner of any 8-track tape player. A very small percentage (probably less than 5%) of tape player owners have a tape player cleaning cartridge, and these are the old abrasive type, which can scar the head and do little for the capstan. Also such devices do not have the selling appeal of a current hit recording, so most retail tape outlets do not offer such a device. Most outlet operators are not even aware of the need for periodic cleaning.

It is normal for the user to play his unit until it becomes unusable and/or it begins to destroy expensive tapes one after another. Then, the unit is taken for repair to a shop, where it is repaired by a thorough scrubbing with a solvent.

Purchasing the kit was assumed to involve Extensive Problem Solving for the buyer, since the product had been introduced to the market during the month of the experiment and none of the firm's six competitors carried the product. The six competitors were visited during the course of the study by a shopper wanting to buy "some type of cleaning stuff or kit" for his tape player. Two competitors had knowledge of such devices but stated that demand was not great enough to carry them.

The product was somewhat technically complex and its safe use was assumed to be important to a user since the product had to be connected to the tape player. The kit was mounted on cardboard, enclosed in a plastic container, and had a retail price of \$1.98. Operating instructions were printed on one side of the cardboard.

### Procedure

The salesperson attempted to induce customers, who had just purchased one or more tapes, to make an additional purchase of the cleaning kit. Selected customers were randomly assigned to one of the four treatment conditions and to the control group. Treatment conditions were typed and copies placed below the cash register in the store after the copies were randomly mixed. Space was available on the copies to record purchase information. Blank copies represented the control group assignment.

After the customer moved to the cash register area to pay for selected tapes, the salesperson looked at

### RESEARCH DESIGN

	Similar		Dissimilar	
	Purchase	No Purchase	Purchase	No Purchase
High Expertise		A		B
Low Expertise		C		D
Control	Purchase	No Purchase	E	

the top treatment copy under the register and administered that particular treatment. A display box containing 20 of the cleaning kits was near each cash register throughout the experiment. The display box always contained 20 kits during the study. Purchase response was recorded immediately after the customer left the store. The copy of the treatment remained in its top position until the next subject selected came to the cash register. The salesperson removed the previous customer's treatment copy at this time, noticed her role for this new subject, and administered the treatment. The treatments consisted of the four combinations of two similar-dissimilar and two expert-non-expert levels. A total of 30 customers were assigned to each combination and to the control group.

The salesperson's expressed prior purchase versus nonpurchase by herself of the musical tapes being bought by the customer were the operational definitions of levels of perceived similarity. Levels of perceived expertise were defined as the salesperson's oral instructions on how to operate the tape cleaner versus her expressed inability to operate the cleaner. Specifically, the following sales appeals were combined to form the four treatment conditions shown in the figure:

*Similar.* I hope you enjoy the tapes. They are of very good quality. I have these same ones in my collection and play them often.

*Dissimilar.* I hope you enjoy the tapes. They are of very good quality. I don't have any (. . . same type of music as buyer has selected) tapes. Mine are all (. . . most opposite type of music, e.g., rock-and-roll versus classical, soul versus country and western, religious versus party) tapes.

*Expert.* Here is a device we have on special that will clean the dirt and tape oxide from the guides, the head, and especially the drive wheels of your tape player. You just put a few drops of this cleaner on these two pads, stick it in just like a tape, let it run for about ten seconds while you wiggle this (point to head of cleaning bar). It will keep the music clear and keep the tapes from tearing up by winding up inside the player. It's only \$1.98. Would you like one?

*Nonexpert.* Here is a thing we have on special that they tell me will keep your tape player clean. I don't really know how it works, but you can read the directions right here on the package as to how to use it and what it does. I never have used one, and really don't know anything about playing tapes except how to listen to them, but this thing is supposed to help the tape player a lot. It's only \$1.98. Would you like one?

Other operational definitions of similarity and expertise could have been used, which implies theoretical and managerial constraints on examining the findings of the study. Customers in the control group did not receive any sales presentation but could

purchase the product from the display box on the counter near the cash register. Any questions asked about the product by these customers were answered by the salesperson. No customer was rejected for requesting information. The salesperson responded to questions in the treatment role as required. The amount of additional information requested by the customer was recorded. Few customers requested further information. Store policy was to accept cash, check, or charge card and no discrimination was made for method of payment.

### Rating of Appeals

Perceived differences of the communicator for the four treatment conditions were examined in a pretest. Students in one class at the University of South Carolina rated the salesperson using the four appeals on the following qualities for 7-point Likert scales: cold-warm, nonexpert-expert, makes me *not* want to buy-makes me want to buy, and salesperson *not* familiar with my needs-salesperson is familiar with my needs.

Soul versus country and western was used for the dissimilar condition in this pretest. The written appeal given the students began with the following:

Assume you have just purchased some 8-track stereo cartridge tapes, and as you are paying for them, the salesperson says: . . .

The students were randomly assigned to receive one of the four treatments by randomly mixing the copies of the appeals. The students were told that answering the questions was not connected with the course, not to place their names on the paper, and questions would be answered afterwards. Treatment sample sizes were

Table 1  
MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS ON  
RATINGS OF THE APPEALS

Question anchors	Group			
	A	B	C	D
Cold-Warm				
$\bar{X}$	5.31	4.00	4.93	3.50
$\sigma$	1.70	1.41	1.38	1.83
Nonexpert—Expert				
$\bar{X}$	4.46	3.38	1.93	1.83
$\sigma$	1.81	1.89	.83	1.03
Makes me <i>not</i> want to buy— Makes me want to buy				
$\bar{X}$	5.00	3.94	2.57	2.33
$\sigma$	1.63	1.61	.85	1.30
Salesperson <i>not</i> familiar with my needs—Salesperson familiar with my needs				
$\bar{X}$	4.92	3.81	2.64	2.08
$\sigma$	1.80	1.80	1.23	1.00
Sample size (n)	16	14	13	12

$n_A = 16$ ,  $n_B = 14$ ,  $n_C = 13$ , and  $n_D = 12$ .

Results were statistically significant for each of the four rating questions ( $F$ -tests,  $p < .01$ ). The results were further examined following Tukey's procedure [1] for the various  $A$ ,  $B$ ,  $C$ , and  $D$  comparisons for each rating question. All results were either statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ) or supported preconceived hypotheses in directions of mean differences. Predicted hypotheses for the cold-warm question included:  $\bar{X}_A > \bar{X}_B$ ,  $\bar{X}_A = \bar{X}_C$ ,  $\bar{X}_A > \bar{X}_D$ ,  $\bar{X}_B > \bar{X}_C$ ,  $\bar{X}_B = \bar{X}_D$ , and  $\bar{X}_C > \bar{X}_D$ . The predicted hypotheses for the expertise question included:  $\bar{X}_A = \bar{X}_B$ ,  $\bar{X}_A > \bar{X}_C$ ,  $\bar{X}_A > \bar{X}_D$ ,  $\bar{X}_B > \bar{X}_C$ ,  $\bar{X}_B > \bar{X}_D$ , and  $\bar{X}_C = \bar{X}_D$ .

The means and standard deviations for the student responses to the four questions are listed in Table 1. The results support the assumption that similar-dissimilar and nonexpert-expert sales presentations were perceived according to hypothesized differences.

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The different proportions of customers purchasing the cleaning kit in the four treatment groups were statistically significantly different. A total of 24 (80%) of customers receiving the expert-similar treatment purchased the product, while only 4 (13.3%) of those receiving the nonexpert-dissimilar treatment and those in the control group purchased the product. Results of the four treatments and the control group are shown in Table 2.

The similar-dissimilar conditions within the expert and nonexpert conditions were combined to test the first hypothesis. The data are shown in Table 3. The first hypothesis was supported. Over 66% of the customers hearing the expert treatment purchased the product versus 21.6% purchases among customers hearing the nonexpert treatment ( $p < .001$ ). The phi-coefficient [10] for these data was equal to .453.

The nonexpert-expert conditions within the similar-dissimilar conditions were combined to test the second hypothesis. The data are shown in Table 4. The second hypothesis was supported. While 55% of the customers hearing the similar treatment purchased

**Table 2**  
RESULTS OF PURCHASING BEHAVIOR FOR THE  
FOUR TREATMENT GROUPS IN PERCENT

Expertise	Purchase	No Purchase	n
Expert			
Similar	80.0%	20.0%	30
Dissimilar	53.3	46.7	30
Nonexpert			
Similar	30.0	70.0	30
Dissimilar	13.3	86.7	30
$\chi^2 = 30.65$ , 3 d.f., $p < .001$ .			
Control	13.3	86.7	30

**Table 3**  
RESULTS OF PURCHASING BEHAVIOR FOR TWO  
EXPERTISE GROUPS IN PERCENT

Expertise	Purchase	No purchase	n
Expert	66.7%	33.3%	60
Nonexpert	21.6	77.4	60

$\chi^2 = 24.63$ , 1 d.f.,  $p < .001$ .

**Table 4**  
RESULTS OF PURCHASING BEHAVIOR FOR TWO  
SIMILARITY GROUPS IN PERCENT

Similarity	Purchase	No purchase	n
Similar	55.0%	45.0%	60
Dissimilar	33.3	66.7	60

$\chi^2 = 5.71$ , 1 d.f.,  $p < .009$ .

the product, only 33.3% of the customers hearing the dissimilar treatment purchased. The phi-coefficient for these data was equal to .218. These results show a 45% sales gain in the use of expert versus a nonexpert sales presentation ( $40/60 - 13/60$ ), and a 22% sales gain in the use of a similar versus a dissimilar presentation ( $33/60 - 20/60$ ).

The difference in the phi-coefficients of .453 (expert-nonexpert) and .218 (similar-dissimilar) was examined to test the third hypothesis. The test for difference between dependent correlations [3, pp. 193-4] was statistically significant ( $t = 1.85$ , 117 d.f.,  $p < .05$ , one-tailed test). The third hypothesis was confirmed; the perceived expertise of the salesperson produced a greater proportion of purchases than the perceived similarity of the salesperson.

The synergistic effect of expertise and similarity on increasing sales is apparent from Table 2. The combination of the expert and similar presentations appears to have been a particularly effective method to increase sales for this relatively new product over the sales level that might have been typical with the salesperson having no active role (13.3% for the control group).

### LIMITATIONS

Customers excluded from the study may have biased the outcome if, for some reason, the excluded type of customers would have been more influenced by the similarity conditions than the expertise conditions. However, precautions against this possibility were taken by insuring that the salesperson did not learn of the treatment to administer until after a customer had been selected for the study. However, the study was limited to the population of subjects receiving one of the four treatments and the control group.

The study was further limited to one product in one store located in a particular geographic area. The results may have theoretical and managerial applications but should not be generalized without further replications being performed.

### CONCLUSIONS

The findings fit into the theoretical adaptation of Kelman's framework [8, 9] made by Howard and Sheth [7]. Assuming that a product innovation, such as the one incorporated in this study, would cause the consumer to engage in Extensive Problem Solving, attempts to influence internalized values of the customer may be more effective than attempts to seek identification with him.

Further research would be useful for measuring the effects of compliance as well as identification and internalization across the three decision stages proposed by Howard and Sheth. The research conclusions point to the possible need for strong retail sales support to get customer trial and adoption of new products which may require Extensive Problem Solving. It may indeed be advantageous "for a company not to introduce power and attractiveness attributes in its symbolic communication (mass media and personal selling) in all of those situations where the

consumer is primarily problem-solving-oriented" [7, p. 353].

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