

# Salespeople service delivery in the era of demanding customers

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## Abstract

On the basis of the Service-Dominant Logic (SDL) and salesperson after-sales service behaviors framework, this paper examines how sales representatives should respond to the increase in customer demandingness and expectations. Sales representatives can use different after-sales service behaviors to fulfill the needs of demanding customers and to drive higher satisfaction through the creation of customer value.

## Introduction

During the last decade, the pendulum of power within commercial relationships has been steadily moving toward the customer side (Hu *et al.*, 2009; Srivastava and Kaul, 2014). Customers are increasingly becoming more demanding in terms of received value (Flint *et al.*, 2011) and customer experience (O'Hern and Kahle, 2013). On the other side, boundary spanners, including salespeople, are influenced by customers' expectations and demands because of the innate nature of the exchange process within customer-seller relationship (Jelinek *et al.*, 2006). Customer demandingness refers to the demands and expectations of customers in offering-needs fit, cost, quality, support, and delivery by the sellers and their offerings (Li and Calantone, 1998). The origin of the surge in customer demandingness is caused by the ongoing trend of customer empowerment (Verbeke *et al.*, 2011) and the increased access to information by customers, both leading to better educated and knowledgeable customers. Despite the efforts taken by most selling organizations to better correspond to the steady rise in customer demandingness and sophistication (Agnihotri *et al.*, 2017a; Jaramillo *et al.*, 2013), selling firms are still overlooking customer demands, and are not creating the appropriate value and service experience for their customers (Paesbrughe *et al.*, 2017; Sandström *et al.*, 2008). The customer-facing function (CFF), i.e. a salesperson, has a key role in keeping pace with customers' demands and creating value within customer-organization relationship (Anderson and Huang, 2006; Haas *et al.*, 2012; Sheth and Sharma, 2008). The CFF can let customers experience higher levels of value by showing different service behaviors when responding to their demands (Vargo and Lusch, 2008; Wu *et al.*, 2015). Because of the CFF's in today's market, research is paying more attention to the effects of customer demandingness on today's boundary spanners' behaviors and performance (e.g., Agnihotri *et al.*, 2017a; Banin *et al.*, 2016; Jaramillo and Mulki, 2008; Kumar Madupalli and Poddar, 2014; Poddar and Madupalli, 2012; Terho *et al.*, 2017; Wang and Netemeyer, 2004).

Service organizations, on the other side of the customer-organization relationship, are being caught flat-footed, and perceive higher levels of customer demandingness as, at best, inconvenient. This paper contradicts such misconception by highlighting that customer demandingness can actually result in higher levels of customer satisfaction, on the condition that the CFF is demonstrating particular post-sale service behaviors that drive additional value to customers. Despite the high expectations demanding customers have, the ability of the CFF to adapt their post-sale service behaviors levels to satisfy these expectations can result in higher customer value and satisfaction. Grounded on the Service-Dominant Logic (SDL) (Sheth and Sharma, 2008; Vargo and Lusch, 2008) and the post-sale service behaviors framework (Ahearne *et al.*, 2007), this paper examines the favorable impact of the CFF demonstrating different service behaviors on value-based and relational outcomes. Despite the overall accepted importance of building long-term relationships with customers (Ahearne *et al.*, 2007; Manning *et al.*, 2011), the service behaviors that are visible for customers after a sale has been made are overlooked in the current literature (Agnihotri *et al.*, 2017b). Starting from the demanding customer, this paper empirically examines how the CFF can create customer value in a service environment. Furthermore, this study indicates that the CFF should

demonstrate higher levels of post-sale service behaviors — diligence, inducements, information communication, and sportsmanship — to the more demanding and expecting customers.

## **Theoretical framework**

### **Service-Dominant Logic (SDL)**

The introduction of the SDL has been a serious game changer in the marketing domain. The core of SDL is founded on a move from a product-based to a service-based exchange system, and has been of interest to both many scholars and practitioners. Vargo and Lusch (2004) have laid the groundwork for SDL by proposing eight foundational premises that were the initial cornerstones of SDL. Later, Vargo and Lusch (2008) revised the old premises, added new ones, and defined a total of ten premises of SDL. While several scholars have conceptually argued that the CFF has a critical role in value creation for customers and value appropriateness for firms (e.g., Blocker *et al.*, 2012; Haas *et al.*, 2012; Manning *et al.*, 2011), there is only a limited body of empirical research on the CFF's role in creating customer value (Echchakoui, 2015; Plé, 2016; Sheth and Sharma, 2008).

Prior research has made use of the SDL theorem to explain the CFF's role in the success of service-based marketing, as well as how the SDL premises relate to the personal selling sphere (e.g., Blocker *et al.*, 2012; Hohenschwert, 2012; Le Meunier-FitzHugh *et al.*, 2011; Sheth and Sharma, 2008).

### **Customer value and the customer-facing function**

SDL is a backbone to create value for both parties – organization and customer – in the service ecosystem (Gummesson *et al.*, 2010; Vargo and Lusch, 2008). Value creation is essential in marketing and sales (Boksberger and Melsen, 2011; Martelo Landroque *et al.*, 2013; Parasuraman, 1997). Customer value is defined as customer's "overall assessment of the utility of a product based on the perceptions of what is received and what is given" (Zeithaml, 1988, p. 14). When an organization succeeds in deriving additional customer value through a service-to-service exchange with its customers, the organization is said to gain one of the major competitive advantages and key differentiators of the organization's offerings (Vera and Trujillo, 2013; Woodruff, 1997).

### **Service behaviors by the customer-facing function**

Service exchange is the process of providing additional benefits to customers (Lusch *et al.*, 2007). An increase in the delivered benefits to the customer will lead to higher levels of customer value (Ulaga and Eggert, 2006; Woodruff, 1997). Correspondingly, customers strongly prefer customer-facing employees who are creating superior value over other employees of the same or competing selling organization (Echchakoui, 2015; Murali *et al.*, 2016). This is supported by the claim that customer value does not only lie in the offering itself, but in the service exchange (Vargo and Lusch, 2004).

## **Hypothetical development**

### **Customer demandingness and post-sale service behaviors**

The pace of which customers' demands are changing is leading to a more dynamic market, and hence organizations need to use effective and efficient go-to-market strategies to match this ongoing trend (Chang *et al.*, 2010; Patterson *et al.*, 2014). Customer demandingness possesses a critical challenge that organizations face with customers' demands and expectations rising steadily (Thull 2010; Jaramillo, Mulki, & Boles 2012; Atkinson & Koprowski 2006; Jones *et al.*, 2005; Arnett, Macy, & Wilcox 2005). Demanding customers are known for their high expectations about salespeople's offerings and the ability of organizations to respond to their ever-increasing requests (Wang & Netemeyer 2004). Customer demandingness varies substantially between customers forcing salespeople to exert additional efforts to learn about different customers' needs and requirements (Wang & Netemeyer 2002).

Customer demandingness can stimulate the CFF to be more efficient and effective in satisfying customer demands and meeting their expectations. Banin *et al.* (2016) claim that customer demandingness motivates CFF to make extra efforts — 'going the extra mile' — when serving customers (e.g., engage in improvisational behaviors). Building on the above, it is hypothesized that:

**H<sub>1</sub>:** *Customer demandingness is positively related to (a) diligence, (b) inducements, (c) information communication, and (d) sportsmanship service behaviors.*

## **Service behaviors and customer satisfaction**

One of the ongoing objectives for the CFF, i.e. salespeople, is to improve customer satisfaction (Brink and Berndt, 2008). In general, customer satisfaction indicates an overall relationship performance and represents an accumulated customer experience across interactions and exchanges. Service is the means of providing additional benefits to customers (Lusch, Vargo, & Brien, 2007). Any increase in customer benefits will automatically lead to superior customer value (Ulaga & Eggert 2006; Woodruff, 1997; Graf & Maas, 2008). Ahearne et al. (2007) identified multiple after-sales service behaviors, such as diligence, inducements, information communication, and sportsmanship of sales representatives that can be used to improve customer relationship quality, especially customer satisfaction. While value does not lie in the offerings itself (Vargo & Lusch 2004), the after-sales service behaviors by salespeople are part of the service exchange that can increase benefits and reducing costs for customers (e.g., Anderson et al., 2007), thus, leading to higher customer value.

At the fundament of service exchange, Vargo and Lusch (2004) claim that the CFF, i.e. the salesperson, is the glue between in-house skills, company's intelligence, and other operant resources for the benefit of the customer. Service exchanges characterized by skills, knowledge, information, and other processes are essential for creating customer value and building stronger customer relationships (Sheth and Sharma, 2008). Based on the above discussion, it is hypothesized that:

**H<sub>2</sub>:** *CFF service behaviors: (a) diligence, (b) inducements, (c) information communication, and (d) sportsmanship are positively related to customer satisfaction.*

## **Service behaviors, customer value and customer satisfaction**

### *Mediating effect of customer value*

Service behaviors are aimed at personalizing the relationship with customers and a sign that the salesperson cares about the customer potentially leading to customer satisfaction. Ahearne and his colleagues (2007) found that the service behaviors – diligence, information communication, inducements, and sportsmanship – have positive and direct impacts on customer satisfaction. However, customers may also question salesperson's intentions and motivations for giving preferential treatment. Customers may perceive that the service behaviors are unnecessary and thus an indication of customer manipulation (Schwepker and Hartline, 2005).

The CFF can deploy different service behaviors to add value and reduce sacrifices experienced by customers. For example, through higher levels of information communication with customers, customer-contact representatives can explain the optimal usage of the bank's services (e.g., credit card) used by the customer to optimize the benefits (e.g., cash back rewards) and/or reduce sacrifices (e.g., answering customer's questions and not forcing customer to look to the answers him/her-self). Moreover, diligence can reduce customer sacrifices (e.g., time spent waiting for clarifications and/or receiving repetitive incomplete responses to customers' concerns). Based on the prior discussion, it is said that the positive relationships between post-sale service behaviors and customer satisfaction are mediated by customer value. Based on that, it is hypothesized:

**H<sub>3</sub>:** *The positive relationships between (a) diligence, (b) information communication, (c) inducements, (d) sportsmanship, and satisfaction are mediated by customer value.*

## **Methodology**

### **Sample and data collection**

In this study, the retail banking sector was chosen as a relevant context for testing the model proposed. This type of banks deals with individual customers (Vera and Trujillo, 2013). The data used was collected in collaboration with two retail banks. A survey was developed with the help of banks' management teams to check the appropriateness of the questionnaire used. Executives from the banks provided feedback before distributing the questionnaires to customers. Based on the feedback received, only minor adjustments were made to better fit the retail banking context, as well as to be better suited to the respondents. The banks' management teams have supervised the data collection process. Individual customers were chosen randomly. Customers who accepted to participate in this study were asked to think about the CFF, i.e. salesperson, whom they have an ongoing relationship with, and he/she is responsible for managing their businesses with the bank. In both banks, the employees of the CFF were responsible for different customer service tasks and sales tasks. The invitation to participate have included information about the academic purposes of the study. We also stressed that the study will serve as an evaluation tool for the performance of the CFF. The minimum relationship length between the customer and the bank is one year. Long-term relationships were established and multiple interactions have

occurred between the customer and the CFF. Participants were guaranteed anonymity and full confidentiality of their responses. The final sample collected includes completed responses from 279 customers. Respondents mean age is 41.2 years. Females constitute 45.88% of the sample. The customer-bank relationship duration average is 7.42 years.

### Measures

Measures of the constructs used in the questionnaire were adapted from prior studies. The measures are composed of multiple items and were anchored on a “7-point agreement Likert scale” with the following range: “1=strongly disagree” - “7= strongly agree”. Table 1 includes correlations, descriptive statistics, and square root average variance extracted. All the measures utilized with their source, loadings, “composite reliability” (CR), “Cronbach’s alpha” ( $\alpha$ ), and “average variance extracted” (AVE) are summarized in Appendix A.

**Table 1: Correlations, descriptive statistics, and square root average variance extracted**

	CD	DI	IND	INC	SP	CV	CS
Customer Demandingness (CD)	.86						
Diligence (DI)	.19	.76					
Inducements (IND)	.08	.46	.80				
Information Communication (INC)	.26	.65	.47	.76			
Sportsmanship (SP)	.27	.57	.32	.47	.78		
Customer Value (CV)	.13	.25	.33	.36	.24	.81	
Customer Satisfaction (CS)	.18	.39	.36	.41	.33	.61	.79
Relationship Duration	.11	-.09	.06	.06	.07	-.03	.10
Average	5.46	4.61	2.76	4.49	4.73	4.71	4.56
Standard Deviation	1.23	1.18	1.48	1.25	1.13	1.15	1.25

Correlations  $\geq .18$  are significant at  $p < .05$ ; square root average variance explained are along the diagonal.

### Measurement model

The fit of the measurement model, and validity and reliability of the measures used were examined by conducting a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). In the first measurement model tested, poor fit [ $\chi^2 = 775.52$ ,  $df = 279$ ;  $\chi^2/df = 2.78$ ; GFI = .83; CFI = .89; RMSEA = .09; PClose = .00; SRMR = .07] was found with several items loaded poorly on their respective constructs. After dropping these items, the model adequately fits the data [ $\chi^2 = 402.29$ ,  $df = 185$ ;  $\chi^2/df = 2.18$ ; GFI = .91; CFI = .95; RMSEA = .06; PClose = .00; SRMR = .05]. The reliability and validity of the measures used were evaluated by calculating the CR,  $\alpha$ , and AVE of each measure. The CR and  $\alpha$  of each of the measures used were greater than .7 cutoff level, providing reliability to the measures (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). To test the convergent validity of the measures, AVE values and all loadings were checked. All items loaded significantly at  $p < .01$  on their respective factors. At the same time, the AVE of each of the measures utilized were greater than .5 with the lowest equals to .58 of the total construct variance providing evidence of convergent validity (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). To check the discriminant validity, we compared the square root of the AVE for each construct with the associated correlations the construct has with other constructs found in the model. In all the cases examined, the square root of the AVE exceeded the inter-factor correlations.

### Analysis and results

To examine the relationships hypothesized ( $H_1$ ,  $H_2$ , and  $H_3$ ), a direct-effects model was tested first. The direct-effects model doesn’t include the customer value construct. The standardized coefficients were assessed with their relative significance level. Each latent construct was represented as a single index by averaging the items scores of the construct measure (Bandalos, 2002; MacKenzie and Lutz, 1989). The direct-effects model achieved a good fit [ $\chi^2 = 30.50$ ,  $df = 11$ ;  $\chi^2/df = 2.77$ ; GFI = .97; CFI = .96; RMSEA = .07; PClose .07; SRMR = .05]. Table (2) presents a summary of the results of all models tested.

**Table 1: Results**

Relationship		Direct-effects model	Mediated-effects model	Mediated-effects model with marker variable
H <sub>1a</sub>	Customer demandingness → Diligence	.18**	.18**	.18**
H <sub>1b</sub>	Customer demandingness → Inducements	.02	.02	.02
H <sub>1c</sub>	Customer demandingness → Information communication	.25**	.25**	.24**
H <sub>1d</sub>	Customer demandingness → Sportsmanship	.28**	.28**	.29**
	Diligence → Customer value	—	.12*	.12*
	Inducements → Customer value	—	.14*	.14*
	Information communication → Customer value	—	.30**	.30**
	Sportsmanship → Customer value	—	.08	.08
H <sub>2a</sub>	Diligence → Customer satisfaction	.17*	.10	.10
H <sub>2b</sub>	Inducements → Customer satisfaction	.14*	.06	.06
H <sub>2c</sub>	Information communication → Customer satisfaction	.21**	.05	.05
H <sub>2d</sub>	Sportsmanship → Customer satisfaction	.15*	.12*	.12*
	Customer Value → Customer satisfaction	—	.52**	.52**
	Customer-seller relationship duration → Customer value	—	.00	.00
	Customer-seller relationship duration → Customer satisfaction	.07	.06	.07
	Gender → Customer value	—	.08	.08
	Gender → Customer satisfaction	.03	.00	.00

Significance level: \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; Gender (female = 0; male = 1)

In H<sub>1</sub>, positive relationships between customer demandingness and post-sale service behaviors, (a) diligence, (b) inducements, (c) information communication, and (d) sportsmanship, respectively (H<sub>1a</sub>, H<sub>1b</sub>, H<sub>1c</sub>, and, H<sub>1d</sub>), were hypothesized. The results demonstrate a positive relationship between customer demandingness and diligence ( $\beta = .18$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Moreover, results provide evidence to the significant positive relationships between customer demandingness and information communication ( $\beta = .25$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and customer demandingness and sportsmanship ( $\beta = .28$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Surprisingly, the positive relationship hypothesized between customer demandingness and inducements was not supported with a non-significant (*n.s.*) coefficient ( $\beta = .02$ , *n.s.*). Thus, H<sub>1a</sub>, H<sub>1c</sub>, and, H<sub>1d</sub> were supported. Further, H<sub>2</sub> proposed direct positive relationships between post-sale service behaviors and customer satisfaction. Findings matched the hypothesized relationships with significant positive relationships between post-sale service behaviors and customer satisfaction; diligence ( $\beta = .17$ ,  $p < .05$ ), inducements ( $\beta = .14$ ,  $p < .05$ ), information communication ( $\beta = .21$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and sportsmanship ( $\beta = .15$ ,  $p < .05$ ). The results found support for H<sub>2a</sub>, H<sub>2b</sub>, H<sub>2c</sub>, and H<sub>2d</sub>.

In H<sub>3</sub>, it is proposed that the relationships between post-sale service behaviors and customer satisfaction are mediated by an increase in customer perceived value. For that, a mediated-effects model with customer value construct was tested. In this model customer value is included as a mediator of the relationships between sale service behaviors and customer satisfaction. The model demonstrated a good fit [ $\chi^2 = 30.95$ ,  $df = 12$ ;  $\chi^2/df = 2.58$ ; GFI = .98; CFI = .97; RMSEA = .07; PClose = .09; SRMR = .04]. To test the mediating relationships proposed (H<sub>3a</sub>, H<sub>3b</sub>, H<sub>3c</sub>, & H<sub>3d</sub>), the methods recommended by (Preacher and Hayes, 2008) were utilized. The results demonstrate a positive relationship between customer value and customer satisfaction ( $\beta = .52$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Furthermore, diligence, inducements, information communication, ( $\beta = .12$ ,  $p < .05$ ;  $\beta = .14$ ,  $p < .05$ ;  $\beta = .3$ ,  $p < .01$ ), respectively, were significantly related to customer value. Opposite to what was hypothesized, sportsmanship was not significantly related to customer value ( $\beta = .08$ , *n.s.*). After adding customer value to the model, not all

the positive relationships between post-sale service behaviors and customer satisfaction (H<sub>2a</sub>, H<sub>2b</sub>, H<sub>2c</sub>, & H<sub>2d</sub>) found in the direct-effects model remained significant. More specifically, when adding customer value to the model the direct relationship between salesperson diligence and customer satisfaction became non-significant ( $\beta = .10$ , *n.s.*). Furthermore, the relationships between inducements and customer satisfaction ( $\beta = .06$ , *n.s.*), and information communication and customer satisfaction ( $\beta = .05$ , *n.s.*) became non-significant. While sportsmanship has a non-significant relationship with customer value, the results confirm a significant positive relationship sportsmanship has with customer satisfaction ( $\beta = .12$ ,  $p < .05$ ). The results were reexamined using a bootstrap analysis with 5000 resamples and 95% confidence intervals for testing the significance of the indirect effects. The findings of the mediating role of customer value are summarized in Table (3). In sum, the results support (H<sub>3a</sub>, H<sub>3b</sub>, & H<sub>3c</sub>). The possible effects of customer relationship duration with the bank and customer gender (female = 0; male = 1) on customer perceived value and customer satisfaction were accounted for.

**Table 2: Mediation analysis**

Mediated relationships		Dependent variable Independent variable	Direct-effects model	Mediated-effects model	
			Customer satisfaction	Customer value (95% CI)	Customer satisfaction (95% CI)
H <sub>3a</sub>	Diligence → Customer value → Customer satisfaction	Diligence	.17*	.12* (.03,.21)	.10 (-.01,.21)
H <sub>3b</sub>	Inducements → Customer value → Customer satisfaction	Inducements	.14*	.14* (.02,.25)	.06 (-.04,.17)
H <sub>3c</sub>	Information Communication → Customer value → Customer satisfaction	Information communication	.21**	.3** (.14,.48)	.05 (-.09,.18)
H <sub>3d</sub>	Sportsmanship → Customer value → Customer satisfaction	Sportsmanship	.15*	.08 (-.06,.21)	.12* (.01,.23)
		Customer value	—	—	.52** (.41,.62)

Significance level: \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$

## Discussion

In the last decade, the antecedents of superior customer value have attracted the attention of many marketing scholars and practitioners. One of the underlying reasons is the higher levels of perceived customer value result in better satisfied customers, hence, benefitting the selling organization. The difficulty in achieving this overarching goal, however, is that customers are becoming more and more demanding (Hartmann *et al.*, 2018). Research calls to further examine the service behaviors antecedent customer value have been poorly addressed. Building on the SDL, we find that the CFF, i.e. a salesperson, has an immense impact on customer value by stating the right value propositions, in line with the customer demands and the associated service expectations. In dealing with demanding customers, the CFF has shown a new type of adaptability through increasing the levels of certain post-sale service behaviors. Such adaptability is a coping strategy that the CFF can use to meet the demands of customers. The findings suggest that salespeople extend their efforts exerted in post-sale services when customers demand more. This study has extended the service marketing literature by examining the impact of customer demandingness on post-sale service behaviors, which, in turn, can drive customer value and satisfaction.

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