

## **The Role of Creativity in Sales: Current Research and Future Directions**

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### **Abstract**

The role that creativity may play in facilitating selling success or customer retention has received little attention in the sales or sales management literatures. Yet, given recent changes in the nature of the selling role, creativity itself may be increasingly important. The act of creation is – or, as reasoned below, absolutely should be – part of the professional salesperson’s job and selling arsenal. Based on the current sales and organizational creativity literatures, a classification of timing versus type of creativity is developed and used to derive eight research propositions. Each proposition is related to possible consequences associated with greater sales creativity.

## **The Role of Creativity in Sales: Current Research and Future Directions**

### **Introduction**

The academic sales and sales management literatures are replete with models explaining what makes salespeople perform more effectively (e.g. Zoltners, Sinha and Lorimer 2008). Earlier studies focused on personality characteristics and appearance (Lamont and Lundstrom 1977), adaptive selling capabilities (Weitz, Sujan and Sujan 1986), and flexibility (Castleberry and Shepherd 1993). More recently, relationship development skills (Marshall, Goebel and Moncrief 2003) and the ability to function within a sales team (Deeter-Schmelz and Ramsey 1995) have been identified as key success factors. However, the role of a salesperson's or a sales team's creativity has been largely ignored (Wang and Netemeyer 2004). This is especially troubling since today's world of selling has been radically reshaped by increased global competition, cutting-edge sales technologies, rapid empowerment of buyers, and fragmentation of markets (Moncrief and Marshall 2005). Such new approaches as relationship selling, value-added and consultative selling are critical to sales function-based competitive advantage in an increasingly commoditized business world, and require sufficient strategic planning that can benefit greatly if sales agents and teams exhibit more creative approaches at each step of the selling process (Piercy and Lane 2005).

The role of creativity in enhancing business processes and functional outcomes has long been recognized. By 1943, Joseph Schumpeter was already writing that capitalism evolves primarily through "creative destruction" that produces, through mutations from within, innovative technologies and organizations. Organizational creativity has since been linked to outcomes such as organizational learning (Levinthal and March 1993), strategic differentiation and sustainable competitive advantage (Porter 1996), as well as improved new product

performance (Im and Workman 2004), with these relationships becoming stronger in turbulent environments characterized by high uncertainty and competitiveness (Ford, Sharman and Dean 2008). The evolution of sales from a marginal activity to a strategic value-creating function responsible for integrating internal departments and customer-facing channels for increased organizational productivity (Geiger and Guenzi 2009) and competitive differentiation (Piercy and Lane 2005) logically evokes the need for creativity research in the sales context. Although practitioner-oriented sales literature emphasizes the need for creative, problem-solving sales practices as markets evolve and technology advances (Wang and Netemeyer 2004), very little conceptual, empirical, or theoretical sales literature investigates the role of sales force creativity. To address this gap, the current paper attempts to explore the extant general creativity research in order to derive a series of testable research propositions that would aid us in better understanding creativity's role in selling success today, and could provide new insights for the practicing managers and salespersons regarding the role of creativity in developing customer solutions and satisfaction, and in securing customer delight and profitable relationships (Zoltner, Sinha and Lonmer 2008).

The remainder of this paper begins with an overview of the state of creativity research as it may relate to professional selling today. Following this, a framework is developed leading to testable research propositions that stem from the research gaps in current sales literature and may help marketing scholars develop theory in the area of sales creativity.

### **Creativity Literature as It Relates to Sales and Sales Management**

Traditional creativity literature originated in the area of psychology and can be traced back to Galton's (1869) work on hereditary genius profiling and Royce's (1898) discussion of inventions. Later, Guilford's (1950) calls for creativity research emphasized definitions of the

concept and its antecedents. These aspects were consequently addressed by **five** major research streams in management and business academic literatures. Creativity conceptualized as a collection of **personality traits and behavioral elements** focused on intuition, internal motivation, tolerance of ambiguity and risk, as well as innovative (as opposed to adaptive) problem-solving behaviors (e.g. Barron 1969; Kirton 1989). The view on creativity as **cognitive processing** centered on “outside the box”, divergent thinking and “lateral” associations (e.g., de Bono 1991). Researchers also considered both **motivation** (e.g., Ford et al. 2008), and the role of **knowledge and expertise** (e.g., Stern 1989) in fostering creativity. Finally, research focusing on **organizational drivers** of creativity considered social climate (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi 1988), and organizational culture and work environment (e.g., Amabile 1988; Mumford and Gustafson 1988) as factors promoting individual and team creativity (See Table 1 for examples of some of the major research findings in each stream).

----- *Table 1 about Here* -----

More recent work in the area of organizational creativity emphasizes its effects on social and organizational outcomes, including strategic and tactical competitive advantages (Ford et al. 2008), new product success (Bharadwaj and Menon 2000; Im and Workman 2004), and marketing communications effectiveness (Zinkhan and Watson 1996). Current creativity research also addresses cognitive processes underlying creativity at multiple (individual, group, and firm) organizational levels (e.g. Amabile 1996; Drazin, Glynn and Kazanjian 1999; Hargadon and Bechky 2006), as well as a manager’s role in promoting team creativity (Kurtzberg and Amabile 2001). Other studies attempt to capture creativity dimensions and to arrive at its more comprehensive definition. For example, DiLiello and Houghton (2008) propose

to combine the opposing views on creativity as an intention and an outcome into a two-dimensional construct, with potential and practiced creativity representing different aspects of organizational resources that could boost innovation and productivity.

Little work in the academic sales arena has specifically explored creativity among professional salespeople. Moncrief (1986) concluded preliminary evidence existed suggesting that creativity affects performance. Weilbaker (1990) explored the cognitive and perceptual selling abilities for missionary salespeople. Creativity was one of nine abilities identified as important by salespeople, sales managers, and their customers. He was particularly concerned with creativity as it relates to how they identify customer needs and innovate the ways they approach customers. In 1997, Atuahene-Gima noted that salespeople selling new products require the same high level of creativity as the product launch in the market place. He found that salespeople with an intuitive problem-solving style are more likely to adopt the new product and better support the selling effort associated with it (Atuahene-Gima 1997). Perhaps the most focused creativity research in sales has been conducted by Wang and Netemeyer (2004). They proposed that creativity is essential to such tasks as finding new prospects, identifying the real needs of a customer, and seeking tailored solutions to customer problems. Their findings supported the notion that customer sales depend on understanding problems and tailoring solutions. When salespeople integrate greater creativity into their sales activities, they may be more likely to provide prospects or customers with innovative, useful and thus more desirable solutions through which their problems can be solved and situations improved (Wang and Netemeyer 2004).

Clearly, a problem-solving approach to selling has been accepted for sometime (e.g., Weitz 1998). Eliashberg, Lilien and Kim (1995) noted that since problem-solving increases the

likelihood of sales encounters and long-term relationships, most studies have emphasized the value of using a problem-solving sales approach. As the psychological literature has demonstrated, successful problem-solving is strongly correlated with creative problem-solving (Amabile 1998). Now, couple the fact that little is known about creativity in traditional selling situations with the expanded role of selling today (Piercy and Lane 2005). More strategic thinking requires intensive problem-solving (Beatty 1998), and with more problem-solving comes more need for creativity.

Today's salesperson often must coordinate many needs across multiple functions in both the buying and selling organization. She or he needs to be able to balance two separate sets of objectives and develop win-win alternative solutions so that both parties are satisfied. This salesperson then becomes an integrator of the two firms, not boundary spanning in the traditional sense (Piercy and Lane 2005), but serving as a conduit for a seamless system of problem-solving. The ability to identify information or problems and generate alternative solutions becomes very important, escalating the need for creativity.

One other clearly relevant generalized change is arising within the sales profession. Market sensing requires that successful salespeople be capable of looking beyond their typical role and day to day operations, and understand what is happening in the external environment that is important to the selling firm, much like creative thinkers must sift and sort multiple levels of information to "sense" out what is relevant to the problem at hand (De Bono 1993); to identify information and problems. Also, in the midst of integrating multiple functions, salespeople should be able to both sense relevant information, and develop multiple alternatives that meet a variety of differing criteria if they are to be successful. This requires high levels of creativity.

Being creative entails “sensing” information and responsively generating multiple alternatives. Creativity also involves the ability to combine these sensing and generational activities successfully. Given the variety of activities that salespeople may engage in and the changing nature of the role, an initial distinction related to the timing of creativity needs to be made. A distinction is made between ‘real-time’ and ‘multi-stage’ creativity (Drazin, Glynn and Kazanjian 1999; Ford 1996). Real-time creativity eventuates - largely spontaneously - during the brief time frame in which salespeople operate in the actual presence of customers. By contrast, multi-stage creativity unfolds more deliberately. There, sufficient time exists for more judicious generation, evaluation and selection of creative ideas and approaches through which any resulting solutions are presented to customers more creatively, consistent with the building and maintenance of customer relationships over time.

A second distinction may also be relevant within the sales arena. Creative thinking can be classified into two distinct categories (Woodman et al. 1993). The first, divergent thinking, encompasses the intellectual predilection and applicable abilities of salespeople to create (i.e., originate) numerous inventive, fully-elaborated and diverse ideas. The second, convergent thinking encompasses the intellectual discipline and applicable abilities of salespeople to rationally evaluate, critique and identify those best ideas from any batch created during the divergent creative stage (Woodman et al. 1993). Divergent thinking appears essential to ensuring the novelty and appeal of creative sales solutions, as well as problem-solving. Yet as a necessarily complementary factor, convergent thinking may be every bit as essential as a means to ensure the appropriateness and practical suitability of any ideas selected for pursuit. Few sales professionals are likely to innately possess the intellectual, functional or temporal prerequisites necessary to engage naturally and optimally in divergent *and* convergent creativity. Yet

arguably, most sales professionals could acquire the requisite creativity-inducing predilections and skill sets, if their leadership purposively managed or taught their subordinates in accordance with those facilitating factors (Epstein, Schmidt and Warfel 2008).

When we consider that salespeople need both divergent and convergent thinking processes and that creativity needs to occur in both real time and multi-stage timing, we can consider how these two classifications interact. Combining the two concepts would give us two boxes (see Figure 1). Each of these combinations would result in unique positive outcomes in the selling relationship, which we explore below and present as research propositions.

----- *Figure 1 about here* -----

### **Creativity, Ideas and Sales Success: Research Propositions**

Based on the classification in figure 1, eight propositions were developed. Ultimately, each proposition might be examined empirically in follow-up research. Hopefully, these propositions can help establish a research agenda to direct future research in this area. These propositions are structured such that, collectively, they should ensure that research conducted on creativity focuses on topics that should most benefit sales managers as they try to accommodate the changes facing today's sales professionals.

Salespeople should be motivated to create myriad opportunities - for customers, themselves and the firm they represent. Success in selling today requires the creation of new modes of thinking about customers, and their problems and core issues. The most successful salespeople may tend to create (or innovatively unearth) customer wants or needs where none previously existed (or was known to exist). More successful salespeople may tend to create new solutions or original variations on existing solutions, through convergent thinking. Often, successful ones may create new messages or productive variations on existing messages, and

deliver either through newly created approaches (Moncrief and Marshall 2005). Compared with less creative counterparts, creative professionals may confront evolving environmental challenges more readily and responsibly (Strutton 2008). Best case, creative salespeople should more willingly originate and take ownership of new – and potentially useful - sales ideas that yield solutions superior to the status quo. Even worst case, creative salespeople appear less likely to hold fast to debilitating tenets such as, ‘that’s not how we sell around here’, even when things are not going well. They must be able to think creatively under the pressure of the face-to-face (real time) sales interaction.

Salespeople are also supposed to create value, satisfaction and success for their customers and firms. Given that salespeople routinely encounter challenging yet only loosely structured tasks, many creative ways to satisfy customers exist (Wang and Netemeyer, 2004). In fact, most have yet to be created. Successful salespeople may tend to derive the most effective means of satisfying customers’ problems (De Bono, 1993), through real time, divergent thinking.

So what should salespeople be creating? One practically significant answer is ideas (Amabile 1988). Wang and Netemeyer (2004, p. 806), in fact, describe salesperson creativity as “the amount of new ideas generated ... by the salesperson in performing job activities”. Ideas are neither new products nor new solutions. Yet when properly nurtured and evolved, ideas might culminate in either, or both, desirable outcomes. The pursuit and execution of new ideas may facilitate selling success. The best ideas, those most capable of creating genuine differentiation-engendering value, naturally are rare. Original and useful ideas don’t exist - and thus cannot be emulated - until someone creates them. Any original sales idea’s value is always determined primarily by favorable or unfavorable perceptions that develop inside buyers’ minds. Logically, then, such ideationally-based sorts of perceived value cannot be possibly matched by competitors

until after initial sales efforts have been executed and relationships entered, strengthened or at least sustained as a future possibility (or prospect). When salespeople differentiate themselves or their offerings based on the practical (i.e., useful) value of new ideas they have created, the prospects of competitive bidding or effective competitor responses should be lessened.

*Proposition One: Salespeople who demonstrate more creative alternatives in real time settings will obtain higher levels of differentiation of their solution.*

Another singular advantage may accrue to salespeople who learn how to distinguish themselves based on their ideational creativity (Rasmusson 1999). In a man-bites-dog inversion of what one might expect, this advantage could emerge, often to a salesperson's eventual benefit, because customers can and often will reject genuinely creative ideas rather easily! The rationale is this: when less creative individuals - call them 'traditionalists' - make presentations to customers they typically deliver many reasons why their product should be purchased. A case is presented, usually grounded in evidence supporting their product solutions' superiority to competing solutions. The presumed buyer offers opposing arguments, which traditional salespeople attempt to counter. Unfortunately, in such sessions, buyers function as both judge and jury, and their word - especially, their no - is final. Case closed. And unfortunately, the best reasons to buy have already been presented. Sales opportunity, as well as an opportunity to call again, both lost - perhaps for a long time. Deriving a new case, a new rationale, for re-entering this particular judge's 'courtroom' may prove more difficult for more traditional sales thinkers.

But when more creative salespeople are selling based on the originality and potential usefulness of their ideas, even when those ideas are rejected, in theory there is always another reason and reasonable opportunity to see the customer again. That's because creatively-oriented salespeople can derive new ideas more easily. And creativity-inured salespeople would

understand those new ideas always need to be convertible into new and potentially useful solutions. As compared to less creative counterparts, then, creative salespeople may derive more attractive customer solutions that yield additional reasons and rationales to present to customers. Thus, even if their initial ideas are rejected, creative salespeople may be more likely to earn additional opportunities to meet and sell to customers again.

*Proposition Two: Salespeople who demonstrate more creative alternatives in real time settings will obtain more selling time with customers.*

Arguably, during customer presentations, creative salespeople should focus customer attention on the desirability of their original idea - rather than on reasons for buying the product. If properly derived and vetted, each creative idea should be perceived, rightfully and logically, as being unique to the targeted customer. Naturally, customers then should be more likely to talk about how the idea applies (or not) to their specific needs or problems. As prospects discuss their concerns, core issues and, ultimately core objectives, more creatively predisposed salespeople ought to productively reshape their original creative ideas (via convergent thinking) to address them, sometimes in real-time creative processes. They should be more capable of achieving this outcome.

*Proposition Three: Salespeople that exhibit higher levels of creativity evaluation should be more adaptable in their selling presentations.*

In addition to being more adaptable, using convergent thinking (creative evaluation) in a real time setting should also result in better overall solutions with the customer. A major part of the selling process today is joint problem solving. Being able to work together to match solutions to real customer needs should improve the quality of the solution and provide additional customer benefits from decisions made. We should actually see better buying decisions on the customer's part because of being engaged in this real time convergent process.

*Proposition Four: Salespeople that exhibit higher levels of creativity evaluation in the actual customer interaction, should help the customer obtain better solutions (more benefits).*

Novel, useful and viable economic solutions - an innovative genre derivable only from genuinely creative ideas - cannot be commoditized, at least in the short run. When relationships are created or strengthened based on ideation-based differentiation, it appears less likely that prices would need to be cut to sustain or grow customer share. So when divergent thinking is applied over time in a customer relationship, the prospect of retaining or expanding customer share is improved (Palmatier, Scheer and Jan-Benedict 2007). The ability of salespeople to craft distinguishing value by anticipating, identifying and understanding customers' problems, opportunities or threats more creatively and more strategically through multi-stage processes, and then, based on their own original thinking, engendering and properly selecting unique solutions that address those issues may keep competitors a step behind. Customers will be more satisfied with the salesperson as consultant, and ultimately do more business with the salesperson.

*Proposition Five: Improved divergent thinking by salespeople over the course of the relationship with the customer will result in increased levels of customer satisfaction.*

*Proposition Six: Improved divergent thinking by salespeople over the course of the relationship with the customer will result in increased levels of account penetration.*

Whatever their origins, ideas are potentially transformable into creative and highly desirable solutions for current or future customer problems. This is accomplished through strong convergent thinking capabilities. Often, those customer problems were themselves discovered creatively, originating as sales ideas. The prospects for more easily sustainable, and thus longer-term, relationships with existing customers or prospects thus should expand.

*Proposition Seven: Over time, effective use of creative evaluation by salespeople increases the salesperson's effectiveness at developing long term relationships with customers.*

*Proposition Eight: Over time, effective use of creative evaluation by salespeople increases the salesperson's effectiveness at developing stronger (more resistant, sustainable) relationships.*

These eight propositions are intended to underscore the importance of and possible benefits associated with becoming more creative as a salesperson.

### **Conclusions**

In this paper, several propositions related to the consequences of sales creativity were developed. Hopefully, in the future, these propositions can be examined empirically in various future practitioner and theoretical contexts.

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**Table 1. Select Literature in Organizational Creativity Research**

<b>Personality-Based Creativity Research</b>	<b>Findings</b>
Amabile (1988); Barron and Harrington (1981); Galton (1869); Simonton (1975; 1986); Singh (1986); Woodman and Schoenfeldt (1989)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Specific sets of biographical variables are associated with creative achievement</li> <li>• Personality data interact with biographical data to predict creativity</li> <li>• Antecedent conditions influence personal and cognitive characteristics of individuals</li> <li>• Broad interests, attraction to complexity, high energy, independence of judgment, autonomy, intuition, self-confidence of the individual affect creativity</li> <li>• Persistence, intellectual honesty, internal locus of control are important for creativity</li> </ul>
<b>Cognition-Based Creativity Research</b>	<b>Findings</b>
Basadur, Graen and Green (1982); Basadur, Wakabayashi and Graen (1990); Carrol (1985); De Bono (1991); Ford (1996); Guilford (1977; 1984); Hammond et al. (1986); Sawyer (1991); Sutton and Hargadon (1996)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Associative fluency, fluency of expression, figural fluency, ideation fluency, speech fluency, word fluency, originality are related to creativity</li> <li>• Associative thinking (leaps as opposed to following structured paths) helps finding innovative problem solutions</li> <li>• Ability to generate alternative solutions is a fundamental process underlying creative productivity</li> <li>• Flexibility and elaboration are essential to divergent production</li> <li>• Divergent thinking must combine with convergent thinking for a creative person</li> <li>• Training organizational members in creative thinking causes improved divergent thinking</li> <li>• Systematically employing brainstorming facilitates the creativity of new product proposals</li> <li>• Contextual ambiguity freed people to explore alternative causal relationships</li> <li>• Forces of causal reasoning that restrict attention may results either from individual or the social context that rigidly defines acceptable strategies, provides negative sanctions for failure, or guards against considering alternative explanations</li> </ul>
<b>Motivational Creativity Research</b>	<b>Findings</b>
Amabile (1979; 1988; 1990); Barron and Harrington (1981); Ford et al. (2008); Kanfer and Ackerman (1989); Kurtzberg and Amabile (2001); Mumford and	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intrinsic motivation is a key element in creativity</li> <li>• Environmental settings that provide opportunities and absence of constraints foster creativity</li> <li>• Environmental settings that provide rewards foster creativity</li> <li>• Goals influence motivation through self-regulatory mechanisms</li> <li>• Creative performance may be undermined by expectation of evaluation</li> </ul>

Gustafson (1988); Oldham and Cumming (1996); Woodman et al. (1993)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Culture, resources, technology, strategy, and rewards affect organizational creativity</li> <li>• Individuals whose dispositions make them more likely to be affected by a favorable work environment are more creative.</li> <li>• The creativity of all individuals is raised by a supportive environment.</li> <li>• Interpersonal interactions in teams, group diversity and group conflict can lead to positive (synergy) as well as negative (groupthink) effects</li> <li>• Creative strategic choices arise in response to managers' perceptions of uncertainty and competition; creativity may improve the ultimate effectiveness of strategic choices by 5-10%</li> </ul>
<b>Role of Knowledge and Expertise</b>	<b>Findings</b>
Amabile (1988); Stein (1989)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Both domain-relevant skills (knowledge, technical skills and talent) and creativity-relevant skills (cognitive skills and personality traits) are important for creativity</li> <li>• Though previous experience can prevent from producing creative solutions, no creative behavior can be knowledge-free</li> <li>• Invention can be conceptualized as a new combination of previous experiences</li> </ul>
<b>Organizational-Level Creativity Outcomes</b>	<b>Findings</b>
Bharadwaj and Menon (2000); Im and Workman (2004)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The presence of both individual and organizational creativity mechanisms led to the highest level of innovation performance.</li> <li>• Meaningfulness dimension rather than the novelty dimension of creativity is of greater importance.</li> </ul>

**Figure 1: Outcomes of Creativity Classification**

<b>Creativity Type</b>	<b>Divergent</b>	<b>Convergent</b>
<b>Creativity Timing</b>		
<b>Real Time</b>	More selling time Greater differentiation	Increased adaptability Better Solutions (improved benefit to customer)
<b>Multi-Stage</b>	Increased customer satisfaction Increased account penetration	Longer relationships Stronger (more resistant) relationships