J. of the Acad. Mark. Sci.
https://doi.org/10.1007/s11747-017-0569-y

ORIGINAL EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

Customer query handling in sales interactions

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Received: 3 August 2016 / Accepted: 16 October 2017

Abstract Using a novel approach with video-recordings of sales interactions, this study focuses on a dynamic analysis of salesperson effectiveness in handling customer queries. We conceptualize salesperson behaviors, namely, *resolving*, *relating*, and *emoting*, as separate elements of customer query handling and empirically identify the distinct verbal and non-verbal cues that salespeople use to display these behaviors during sales interactions. We draw from compensation effects in social cognition theory to propose that customers' perceptions of a salesperson's effectiveness are prone to trade-offs between competence (resolving behaviors) and warmth (relating and emoting behaviors). Results, robust to endogeneity corrections, support the proposed tradeoffs such that the effectiveness of salesperson's resolving behavior is significantly curtailed, even neutralized, by the salesperson's relating and emoting behaviors. We situate these counterintuitive results within the extant theory and research on sales interactions, and outline implications for practice.

Keywords Customer query handling · Customer interest · Salesperson behaviors · Linguistic cues · Dynamic effects

Customer queries, including questions, requests, objections, and other asks, are common in salesperson–customer interactions (Clark et al. 1994; Clark and Pinch 2001; Packard et al. 2014; Schurr et al. 1985).[1] Queries are motivated by customers' need for more information (e.g., features), greater clarity (e.g., benefits/costs), special requests (e.g., preferred costing), or settling concerns/objections (e.g., counter-claims). In this sense, customers' queries seek to reduce uncertainty as they process how the salesperson's offer/solution pitch fits with their needs and wants (Clark et al. 1994; Clark and Pinch 2001; Daly and Redlich 2016; Hunt and Bashaw 1999, 2001). Handling customer queries is critical to the salesperson's role as a knowledge broker in sales interactions (Cicala et al. 2012; Rapp et al. 2014; Verbeke et al. 2011). Often, high and low performing salespersons are differentiated by how customer queries are handled during sales interactions (Schuster and Danes 1986). Past research has examined salesperson queries—questions, requests, and challenges—that *salespeople* rhetorically pose in sales interactions as part of persuasion tactics and solution selling (Meyer

Mark Houston served as Area Editor for this article.

Electronic supplementary material The online version of this article (https://doi.org/10.1007/s11747-017-0569-y) contains supplementary material, which is available to authorized users.

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[1] While customer queries are sometimes conceptualized as indicative of a negative sales encounter (e.g., difficult customer), we view customer queries broadly as an effort to seek information or clarification regarding the product/service and its use from the salesperson. This perspective is consistent with Willett and Pennington's (1966) conjecture that successful sales encounters are likely to include more requests and objections.

Published online: 10 November 2017

et al. 2017; Moncrief and Marshall 2005; Verbeke et al. 2008), but it largely has ignored *customer* queries.

The source of queries—salesperson or customer—has different functions in the sales interaction process; one is motivated by salesperson effort to "control conversations" (Schuster and Danes 1986, p. 19), while the other is motivated by customer effort to direct the sales communication toward issues that help reduce her/his uncertainty (Campbell et al. 2006). To the extent that customer's queries indicate active asks for meaningful input to her/his decision-making (Clark et al. 2003), the salesperson's effectiveness in handling customer queries is likely to shape the customer's decision-making process. Past research has examined several salesperson specific behaviors such as listening, likeability, competence, affect, influence, and ability (summarized in Table 1) but has largely overlooked the study of salesperson effectiveness in handling customer queries.

Moreover, the review of prior research suggests that the salespeople are known to adapt their behaviors in response to varying customer and situational needs, but extant studies have largely relied on static analysis of sales interactions, paying less attention to their dynamic nature. By focusing on static analysis, prior work has been able to offer only limited insights on the efficacy of salesperson behaviors. In reality, a customer may raise multiple queries during the interaction, each representing an effort to reduce uncertainty. The salesperson's response to one query may lead to another query, in real time and as the interaction unfolds. By aggregating these multiple queries, a static analysis fails to address how salespeople adjust and adapt their query handling techniques during an interaction, behaviors that are key to "adaptive selling… [and] crucial to successful selling" (Clark and Pinch 2001, p. 642). A dynamic analysis of salesperson effectiveness also can reveal how customer interest waxes and wanes during the sales interaction when a salesperson either handles the query and reduces uncertainty (effective) or fails to do so (ineffective) (Bolander et al. 2017). Thus, dynamic variations in customer interest within a sales interaction is expected to provide a useful metric for understanding the salesperson's adaptiveness to ensure effective query handling.

To address these gaps, we conceptualize and empirically examine the dynamic effect of salesperson effectiveness in handling customer queries using data from video-recordings of an experimental simulation of salesperson–customer interactions. Four features of our study are notable. First, our study focuses on those phases of sales interactions where the customer asserts his/her control by raising queries, noting that past research has generally focused more heavily on sales communications where a salesperson asserts control (e.g., persuasion tactics; Plouffe et al. 2016; Sharma 1999).

Second, we conceptualize salesperson behaviors, namely, *resolving*, *relating*, and *emoting*, as separate elements of customer query handling (Campbell et al. 2006; Castleberry and Shepherd 1993; Ramsey and Sohi 1997). We also empirically identify the distinct verbal and nonverbal cues that salespeople use to display these behaviors during sales interactions. In our review (Table 1), we found little prior evidence of either conceptualizing or operationalizing distinct salesperson behaviors for customer query handling.

Third, we theorize and empirically demonstrate the dynamic and joint impact of salesperson behaviors on customer interest, during query handling, as the sales interactions evolve over time. Contrary to findings from extant studies about relational (i.e., warmth) behaviors being universally positive, we draw from compensation effects in social cognition theory to show that customers' perceptions of a salesperson's effectiveness are prone to trade-offs between competence (i.e., resolving behaviors) and warmth (i.e., relating and emoting) (Holoien and Fiske 2013; Swencionis and Fiske 2016).

Fourth, we use video recordings of salesperson pitches for life insurance products to examine the dynamics of the salesperson–customer interactions (Leigh and Summers 2002). Our results reveal that a salesperson's display of resolving behavior enhances the customer's interest in continuing the sales interaction, but displays of relating or emoting behaviors diminish the positive influence of the resolving behavior as customer queries unfold.

Conceptual development and hypotheses

The proposed conceptual model in Fig. 1 shows that our study of salespersons' effectiveness in query handling is guided by: (1) *behavioral* focus on both verbal and nonverbal cues (instead of only one or the other as in prior studies) and (2) *effectiveness* of customer query handling as indicated by observable waxing and waning of customer interest in sales communications. We discuss each in turn.

By focusing on *observable* displays of salesperson behaviors, this study examines sales interactions as they occur dynamically and in practice, rather than relying on aggregated, internalized constructs. We are guided by the notion that salespeople and customers inter*act* and that the main sources of input for their responses are the actions of their counterpart, in terms of what they hear (verbal cues) and see (nonverbal cues). That is, customers cannot "read" a salesperson's mind or intent but only know what the salesperson *says* and *does* through verbal and nonverbal cues. For example, salespeople may describe in words how they understand the customer's query and relay related content to help resolve the challenge posed by the query. They (salespeople) might simultaneously smile to send an emotive signal of the pleasure taken in addressing customer's queries. Although prior research considers salesperson actions in sales interactions, such as listening (Drollinger and Comer 2013; Itani and Inyang 2015; Ramsey and Sohi 1997), few studies conceptualize

Table 1 Review of literature pertaining to salesperson displayed behaviors during customer–salesperson interaction

Study	Substantive Focus	Salesperson Behaviors	Method; Design; Data; Context	Findings
A. Empirical Studies				
Alavi et al. (2016)	Role of customer price importance (CPI) during sales negotiations	CPI sensing, customer orientation, Revenue goal importance	Empirical; cross-sectional; 537 salesperson-customer dyads are surveyed (171 unique salespeople), B2C.	Salespeople differ in their ability to use specific influence tactics. The authors identify three styles they use to create influence.
Plouffe et al. (2016)	Salesperson's use of influence tactics with buyers, internal and external partners	Rational persuasion, exchange, apprising, consultation, legitimation, collaboration, personal appeal, coalition, ingratiation, pressure, inspiration	Empirical; cross-sectional; 109 and 192 salespeople from two firms, perceptual survey measure, B2B.	Salesperson's performance is more impacted due to salesperson's influence on internal and external partners vis-a-vis customers.
Koehl et al. (2016)	Assessing role of sales contest in customer's listening.	Hearing, processing, and responding	Empirical; cross-sectional; 250 sales calls from 90 telesales agents are analyzed, B2C.	Sales contest are shown to negatively influence customer's listening. Specifically, customer's active and passive listening is significantly influenced by sales contests.
Hall et al. (2015)	Relevance of salesperson intuition during sales interactions.	Accuracy (Intuitive, Deliberative), customer orientation, listening, empathy,	Empirical; cross-sectional; 330 salesperson-customer dyads are surveyed (48 unique salespersons), B2C.	Accurate intuitive judgments positively influence salesperson's performance (higher conversion, less selling time). Intuitive accuracy is influenced by domain specific experience and empathy for the customer.
Plouffe et al. (2014)	Assessing salesperson's use of influence tactics during buyer–seller exchanges	Information sharing, recommendations, threats, promises, ingratiation, inspirational appeal	Empirical; cross-sectional; 109 and 192 salespeople from two firms, perceptual survey measure, B2B.	Salespeople differ in their ability to use specific influence tactics. The authors identify three styles they use to create influence.
Arndt et al. (2014)	Customer query handling	Expertise, benevolence	Empirical; Longitudinal; 116 salesperson–customer dyads are video-recorded, B2C.	Customers react positively to credibility-building statements that match their buying style expectations. However, customer objections are best addressed with benevolence tactics, regardless of customers' buying style.
Pryor et al. (2013)	Exploring dimensions of salesperson listening	Sensing, evaluating, responding	Exploratory; n/a; 23/8 in-depth interviews with customer/realty agent, B2C.	Listening has cognitive, emotive, and temporal dimensions. Salesperson's listening enhances the development of buyer–seller relationships.
Hughes et al. (2013)	Competitive intelligence gathering by the salesperson.	Customer orientation, extra-role behaviors, relationship quality	Empirical; longitudinal; survey measures were collected from 686 customers and 48 salespeople, B2B.	Customer orientation, extra-role behaviors, and relationship quality enhance profit margins, share of wallet, and perceived value for adaptive salespeople.
Homburg et al. (2011)	Impact of customer orientation on firm outcome.	Functional orientation, Relational Orientation	Empirical; cross-sectional; 56 sales managers, 195 sales representatives, and 538 customers, perceptual survey, B2B.	Functional orientation positively affects customer loyalty.
Román and Iacobucci (2010)	Impact of adaptive selling confidence and behaviors	Adaptive selling behavior	Empirical; cross-sectional; 210 salespeople and 630 customers, perceptual survey, B2C.	Adaptive confidence acts as an antecedent of adaptive behaviors, which affect the salesperson's outcome performance.
Wood et al. (2008)	How buyers form trustworthiness perceptions	Expertise, likeability, positive/n0egative emotions	Empirical; cross-sectional; 2 × 2 between-subjects experiment with 58 respondents, B2C.	Expertise and likeability of a salesperson increase customer perceptions of salesperson trust.

Table 1 (continued)

Bergeron and Laroche (2009)	Salesperson listening	Sensing, evaluating, responding	Empirical; cross-sectional; 400 buyer–seller dyads, perceptual survey, B2C.	Listening effectiveness is positively associated with service quality, trust, satisfaction, word-of-mouth propensity, purchase intentions, and sales performance.
Kidwell et al. (2007)	Impact of emotions on adaptive and customer-oriented selling.	Adaptive selling, customer-oriented selling	Empirical; cross-sectional; 135 salespersons and managers, perceptual survey, B2B.	Salesperson's ability to accurately judge customer's emotions moderates the impact of adaptive selling and customer-oriented selling on performance.
Grayson (2007)	Differential impact of salesperson's friendship and instrumentality roles	Instrumentality; friendship	Empirical; cross-sectional; 685 direct selling agents, perceptual survey, B2C.	Salesperson's friendship behaviors can have both positive and negative impacts. Conflict between friendship and instrumentality can undermine outcomes, especially when friendships turn into business relationships.
Ahearne et al. (2007)	Salesperson's servicing behaviors	Diligence, information communication, inducement, sportsmanship, empathy	Empirical; cross-sectional; 358 customers, perceptions about the salesperson, B2C.	Salesperson's behaviors are important for building trust and customer satisfaction, which lead to increases in customer share of market.
McFarland et al. (2006)	Salesperson's use of influence tactics during buyer–seller exchange.	Information sharing, recommendations, threats, promises, ingratiation, inspirational appeal	Empirical; cross-sectional; 193 customers and salespersons, perceptual survey, B2B.	Salesperson's use of influence tactics positively affects manifest influence.
Shoemaker and Johlke (2002)	Salesperson query handling	Adaptive selling, product knowledge, firm knowledge, competitor knowledge	Empirical; Cross sectional; 236 salespeople complete a perceptual survey, B2B.	Antecedents of salesperson questioning skills is studied. Adaptive selling and product knowledge is positively associated with questioning ability.
Jacobs et al. (2001)	Verbal disclosures and its reciprocity during buyer–seller exchanges.	Task, social disclosure	Empirical; cross-sectional; interactions of 196 customer–salesperson dyads are video-recorded, B2C.	Reciprocation of task and social disclosures enhance customer's perception of the quality of the sales interaction.
Menon and Dubé (2000)	Role of emotions in buyer–seller exchanges.	Positive emotional cues (joy, delight), negative emotional cues (anxiety, anger)	Empirical; cross-sectional; 126 respondents elicited emotional events from memory, which were coded, B2C.	Salesperson's response that positively disconfirmed customer's normative expectations led to greater customer satisfaction.
Dwyer et al. (2000)	Customer query handling	Direct answer, non-dispute, offset, dispute, comparative item, and turn-around.	Exploratory; Cross sectional; 324 salespeople completed a perceptual survey, B2C.	Out of list of six objection handling techniques, "comparative item method" was found to be avoided by high performers.
Sharma (1999)	Salesperson emotions and impact on persuasion	Credibility, feelings	Empirical; cross-sectional; 2 × 2 × 2 between-subjects experiment with 141 subjects, B2C.	Salesperson's display of positive emotions enhances customer persuasion.
Jap et al. (1999)	Impact of relationship quality on buyer–seller exchanges	Question asking, disagreement, time spent talking, compliance, friendliness	Exploratory; cross-sectional; 7 buyer–seller interactions that are audiotaped, 4 in-depth interviews, B2C.	Higher-quality relationships result from friendliness, less question asking, disagreement, and compliance behavior.
Ramsey and Sohi (1997)	Salesperson listening	Sensing, evaluating, responding	Empirical; cross-sectional; 173 new car buyers, mail survey, B2C.	There is a positive association of listening perceptions with trust in the salesperson and customer anticipation of future interaction with that salesperson.
Shepherd et al. (1997)	Salesperson listening	Sensing, evaluating, responding	Empirical; cross-sectional; 79 salespeople, perceptual survey, B2B.	There is a positive relationship among listening behavior and adaptive selling, sales performance, and job satisfaction.
Humphreys and Williams (1996)	Role of interpersonal process and technical product attributes	Interpersonal process attribute (response rate, consideration, eagerness, ability)	Empirical; cross-sectional; 73 buyers, perceptual survey of salesperson's behaviors, B2B.	Interpersonal process attributes increase customer satisfaction.
Peterson et al. (1995)	Role of salesperson's voice in selling success.		Exploratory; cross-sectional; 26 housewives listened to 21 sales presentations, B2C.	

Table 1 (continued)

		Voice characteristics., rate of speech, pause duration, frequency contours		Salespeople speak rapidly and produce fundamental frequency contours that fell more. Salesperson's speaking rate impacts their sales performance.
Cronin (1994)	Salesperson competence in communication and its impact on performance.	Communication competence	Empirical; cross-sectional; 40 customer–salesperson dyads, perceptual survey after a negotiation game, B2C.	Communication competence enhances salesperson performance.
Clark et al. (1994)	Customer query handling.	Objection handling tactics (non-acceptance)	Exploratory; cross-sectional; 48 sales calls recorded, B2B and B2C.	Non-acceptances are handled implicitly and indirectly.
Schuster and Danes (1986)	Salesperson query handling.	Asking questions, showing solidarity, and providing opinion	Empirical; cross-sectional; 90 sales calls across 5 salespeople, B2B.	Asking questions and showing solidarity increases sales.
Study	Substantive Focus	Salesperson Behaviors	Method	Findings
B. Conceptual Studies				
Campbell and Davis (2006)	Customer query handling	Sociality rights, face wants	Exploratory	Managing rapport during customer objections can help salespersons improve the outcome of the sales interaction.
Campbell et al. (2006)	Customer query handling	Sociality rights, face wants	Exploratory	Managing rapport during customer objections is key for building trust with the customer. Doing so, can help salespersons to move the relationship forward.
Clark and Pinch (2001)	Customer query handling	Humor	Exploratory	The authors critique Hunt and Bashaw's conceptualization and argue that humor instead of being distractive creates an affiliation between interacting parties.
Hunt and Bashaw (2001)	Customer query handling	Humor	Conceptual	The authors respond to critique by Clark and Pinch and support their 2 dimensions of sales resistance and the role of humor in addressing counterarguments.
Comer and Drollinger (1999)	Salesperson Listening	Sensing, evaluating, responding, empathy	Conceptual	Active empathetic listening may facilitate the personal selling process.
Hunt and Bashaw (1999)	Customer query handling	Humor	Exploratory	Sales resistance consists of two types: objections and counterarguments. Counterarguments may be reduced by distraction.
Castleberry and Shepherd (1993)	Salesperson Listening	Sensing, evaluating, responding	Conceptual	Listening is a cognitive process that affects the salesperson's adaptive behavior and performance.
Weitz et al. (1986)	Role of knowledge in selling effectiveness	Adaptive selling	Conceptual	Adaptive selling is influenced by salespeople's knowledge of customer types, sales strategies, and motivation.

The inclusion criteria for Table 1 were studies that focused on behaviors displayed during customer–salesperson interactions (last 30 years). The exclusion criteria were studies that focused on salesperson characteristics, such as ability, motivation, burnout, commitment, empowerment, demographics, or personalities

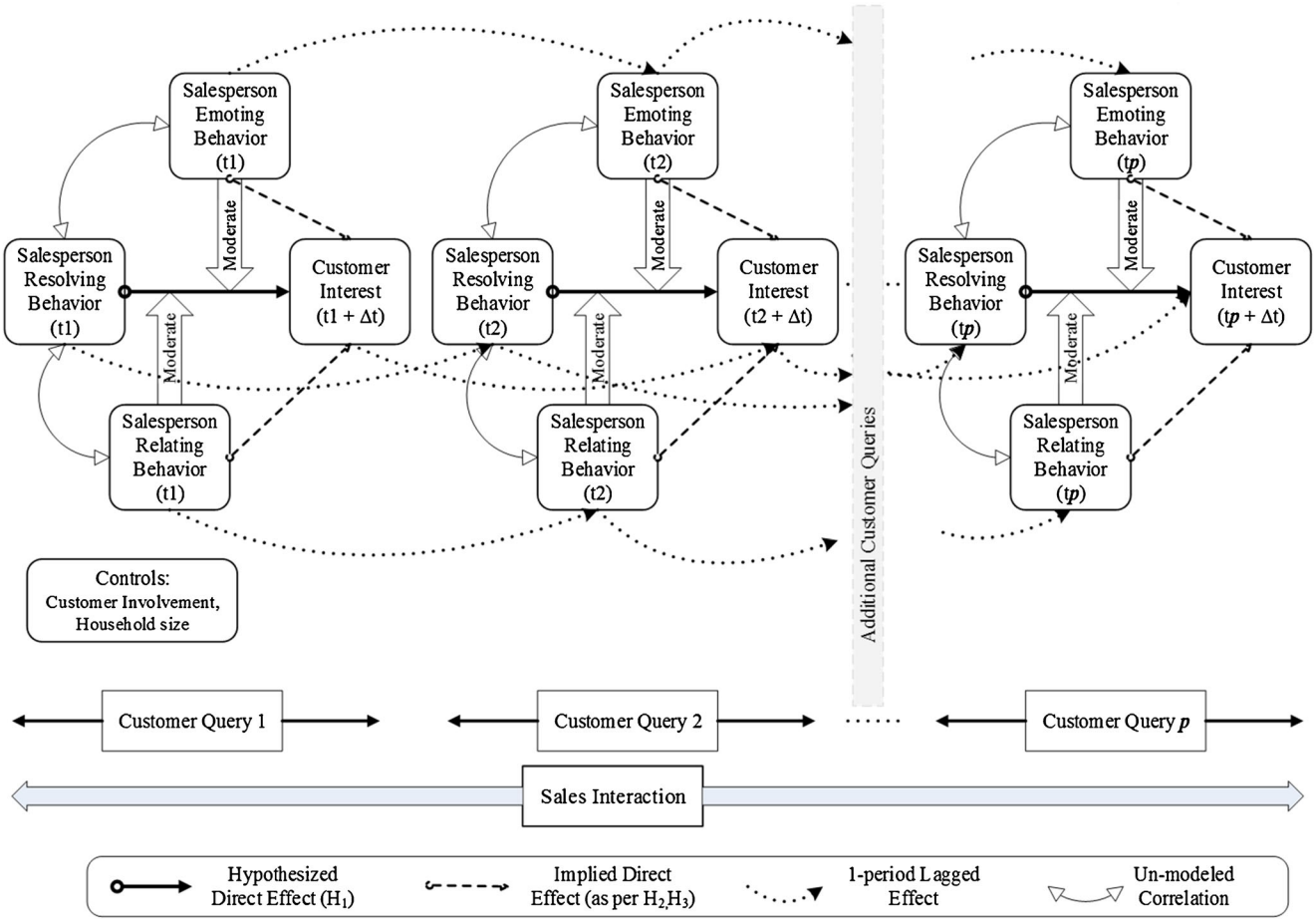

Fig. 1 The proposed conceptual model for time-varying (dynamic) effects of salesperson behaviors in customer query handling

salesperson behavior constructs in terms of observable verbal and nonverbal cues. In conceptualizing these constructs (shown as salesperson resolving, relating, and emoting behaviors in Fig. 1), we draw meaningful, theoretical links to salesperson listening literature, and we offer unique predictions about their impact on customer interest.

Unlike prior studies that focus on post-interaction outcomes, effectiveness of salesperson's query handling behaviors in our study is indicated by a dynamic process-level variable "customer interest," which is the dependent variable of study (Fig. 1). The choice of customer interest construct is based on three criteria: (1) sensitivity to variations within a sales interaction in order to capture how customer response waxes and wanes during the course of the interaction as a salesperson either handles a query to reduce uncertainty (effective) or fails to do so (ineffective), (2) reflecting customer's "on-line" response to salesperson behaviors, where "on-line" implies a response that a customer generates naturally on-the-spot as s/he listens to and processes salesperson's query handling behaviors, and (3) distinctness from a customer response to salesperson behaviors for selling a product/service including salesperson efforts to pitch, persuade, and partner as part of selling.

Renninger and Hidi (2011) have conceptualized and validated an "interest" construct in neuro-psychology with several features that are compatible with the above-mentioned criteria including situational focus, interaction relevance, and affective state. Specifically, Renninger and Hidi (2011, p. 169) show that the interest construct is rooted in events/objects in a given situation in accord with "an individual's… engagement with particular events and objects." In our study, each customer query is a specific situation with its own distinct events (e.g., questions, objections). Likewise, Renninger and Hidi (2011, p. 169) note that interest "involves a particular relation between a person and the environment and is sustained through interaction." Within our study, we accommodate the waxing and waning of customer interest during the sales interaction to reflect their changing relation to the "environment." Finally, Renninger and Hidi (2011, p. 170) note that affect is an "important" and key feature of the interest construct which motivates "knowledge and value [to] develop" keener insight. In our study, customer interest conforms to features of hedonic and heuristic processing that are typical of "on-line" responses.

Based on the preceding, we define customer interest as an affective state that indicates the degree to which the customer

is positively (approach) or negatively (avoidance) activated in response to salesperson query handling. When a salesperson responds effectively to a query, the customer is positively engaged in the sales interaction, resulting in an increase of customer interest. Which specific salesperson behaviors—resolving, relating, or emoting, or a combination thereof—are most effective for prompting this positive increase in customer interest is the subject of our conceptual development.

Effect of salesperson resolving behaviors on customer interest

Customer queries are deliberate attempts on the part of the customer to control and direct the sales communications toward issues and concerns that address their decision uncertainty. As a deliberate effort to redirect the flow of sales communication, customer queries activate a different cognitive processing such that customers closely monitor and evaluate salespersons' behavioral responses to ascertain salesperson effectiveness in paying attention to and resolving their query by providing a response that is relevant, meaningful, and untainted by eagerness to close the sale (e.g., incomplete information, deflecting/digressing). For this reason, we refer to customer query as a "zone of evaluation" for the salesperson and, in this zone, salesperson's efforts to resolve customer queries are critical for retaining and building customer interest. In the salesperson listening literature, Ramsey and Sohi (1997, p. 128) conceptualize salesperson "responding" as an effort to "inform, control, share feelings or ritualize," a behavioral response[2] that is "necessary for further communication to take place." We accordingly conceptualize salesperson's resolving behaviors in a query handling context to include communicating information/evidence, exploring different options, and/or explaining the benefits of a solution, among other possible options. However, unlike prior research, our conceptualization of salesperson resolving behaviors is rooted in verbal displays of behavioral cues that are observable to customers in sales interactions instead of subjective (e.g., self-report) evaluations or generalized patterns (Ramsey and Sohi 1997). By focusing on displayed verbal cues, we mitigate conceptual constraints of past research and consider a wider range of behavioral repertoires that salespeople use to handle customer queries. Specifically, we include displayed verbal cues that indicate listening to customer queries, through acknowledgement (e.g., understand, correct), contextual (e.g., guarantee), and sense making (e.g., solution, overcome) cues, in addition to action (e.g., explore, advise) (Ramsey and Sohi 1997).

[2] In Ramsey and Sohi (1997), the *only* aspect of salesperson listening with behavioral focus is salesperson responding. As such, we draw primarily from the salesperson responding concept but also consider the other two aspects of Ramsey and Sohi's conceptualization—sensing and evaluating—to the extent they are displayed in verbal cues.

Several studies suggest a positive effect of salesperson resolving behavior on customer interest. For instance, in a meta-analysis, Verbeke et al. (2011) show that salespeople who had high selling-related knowledge (i.e., display resolving behavior) were rated as high performers. Similarly, Campbell and Kirmani (2000) show that customers express more positive evaluations of a salesperson who is perceived to offer resolving behaviors, even despite lingering motive suspicions. In a follow-up study, Kirmani and Campbell (2004) report that customers perceive a salesperson as more knowledgeable if she or he consistently displays resolving behaviors. Similarly, Clopton et al. (2001) confirm, in a retail context, that salespeople are more likely to be perceived as experts when they exhibit greater resolving behaviors. Leigh et al. (2014) echo these findings, reporting that better performing salespersons use more distinct resolving cues that are adapted to the selling context.

We further hypothesize that the positive influence of displayed resolving behaviors increases as the sales interaction unfolds within the zone of evaluation. Through the natural progression of a sales interaction, the customer's queries likely gain significance and specificity as the customer attains increasing knowledge about the product/service. At the start of a sales interaction, the customer likely has limited knowledge and thus issues basic and general queries. Later, the customer's obtained knowledge should provoke more specific queries that hold greater significance in decision making. In turn, the salesperson's effectiveness for handling customer queries should grow in importance, in terms of reducing decision uncertainty, as the customer moves toward the end of the sales interaction. This notion of an increasing influence of resolving behaviors resonates with conversational norms; effective dyadic interactions lead partners to share more relevant and salient information over time (Grice 1989). Thus:

H1: A salesperson's resolving behaviors will have an increasingly positive effect on customer interest as the sales interaction unfolds.

Moderating effect of salesperson relating behaviors

Building a relational bond with the customer is a key goal to facilitate sales interactions and favorable outcomes. For example, relational selling requires salesperson behaviors that indicate cooperativeness (Crosby et al. 1990), and empathetic listening that helps build relational bonds with customers (Drollinger and Comer 2013). Therefore, we conceptualize a salesperson's relating behaviors as displayed verbal cues of agreeableness and empathy, designed to advance positive relationships with customers. With a socio-linguistic perspective, Campbell and Davis (2006) show that salesperson relating behaviors address customers' "sociality" rights, consistent

with the notion that interpersonal sales interactions contain key features of social exchanges. Similarly, a salesperson's empathy for customers' queries can indicate effective listening and benefit the sales pitch (Comer and Drollinger 1999; Ramsey and Sohi 1997). Therefore, salesperson relating behaviors should positively moderate the influence of salesperson resolving behaviors on customer interest in query handling.

However, some studies also report opposite, less functional effects of relating behaviors, especially in non-routine or problem-related contexts. Soldow and Thomas (1984) find, for example, that in salesperson–customer negotiations, successful outcomes were associated with a salesperson's greater focus on task (e.g., resolving) rather than relational (e.g., relating) messages. In a study examining the preferences of purchasing agents (customers) who give greater weight to social aspects of sales interactions ("high socializers"), Brown et al. (1993, p. 28) find counterintuitively that, relative to low socializers, high socializers prefer that "salespersons … placed added emphasis on solving the buyer's problem," and relatively less on relating behaviors. An explanation for these conflicting results might reflect the distinctive demands of query handling within the zone of evaluation. Customers seek both specificity and clarity from the salesperson's response: *specificity* to process the potentially unique question the customer has, and *clarity* to provide a response that helps resolve or reframe the underlying issues. Relating behaviors often lack such specificity and clarity, in that they are generalized tactics for communicating an agreeable, empathetic disposition. Customers then might perceive a salesperson's use of relating behaviors, beyond a customary level of pleasantness, as unhelpful in a query handling context. Such behaviors even could be counterproductive if customers perceive them as signs of distraction from or inattention to their specific query.

Compensation effects theory predicts such counterproductive implications of relating behaviors (Holoien and Fiske 2013; Swencionis and Fiske 2016), by focusing on the *perceived* trade-offs between individual *competence* (i.e., skill, agency, and intelligence) and *warmth* (i.e., friendliness, communion and trustworthiness). In social interactions in which impression management is relevant, people's perceptions are prone to compensation effects, such that when they observe a counterpart as high on one dimension (e.g., warmth), they conclude that this person is low on the other dimension (e.g., competence). Holoien and Fiske (2013, p. 34) theorize that these compensation effects stem from generalizations of ambivalent stereotypes in social groups, for which everyday inferences tend to be dominated by mixed characterizations—for example, "elders are perceived as friendly but incompetent, and Asians as intelligent but cold." Robust evidence of such ambivalent stereotypes primes people to expect competence–warmth trade-offs in all their social interactions. A customer query–handling situation differs from impression management, yet they have some features in common. In both social interactions, displays of competence (e.g., resolving) co-occur with warmth behaviors (e.g., relating). To the extent that this co-occurrence may be prone to compensation effects, we posit that a salesperson's relating behaviors negatively moderate the positive influence of resolving behaviors on customer interest within the zone of evaluation:

H2: A salesperson's relating behaviors will negatively moderate the positive influence of resolving behavior on customer interest as the sales interaction unfolds.

Moderating effect of salesperson emoting behaviors

Similar to relating behaviors, salesperson emoting behaviors may negatively moderate the influence of resolving behaviors on customer interest in query handling within the zone of evaluation. Emoting behaviors are displays of emotion in facial expressions, gestures, and body movements, indicated by nonverbal cues.[3] Across diverse sales settings (Grewal et al. 2014; Leigh and Summers 2002), evidence shows that emotions displayed by salespeople affect sales outcomes. Nonverbal cues can capture displayed emotions, due to their two distinct properties: *observability*, such that they are easily accessible to observers, and *authenticity*, in that they are harder to self-regulate (Puccinelli et al. 2010). Nonverbal cues "leak" a salesperson's felt emotions as facial, bodily, and gestural displays, and such behaviors are sufficiently instinctive and hardwired to resist conscious regulation and control. To Bonoma and Felder (1977, p. 170), nonverbal cues are "unintentional displays" that are less "managed" than verbal, presentational, and interaction tactics used by a person to establish "face."

Most research considers displays of positive emotions or emoting behaviors, because it is rare for a salesperson to display negative emotions (e.g., anger, displeasure) in sales interactions. However, a salesperson may display subdued (e.g., neutral) emotions, and we predict that such neutral emoting behaviors are more effective for query handling than are positive emoting behaviors. Our reasoning parallels the rationale we offered for relating behaviors in accord with compensation effects theory. That is, positive displays of emotions are helpful in sales presentations, to communicate energy, excitement, and warmth (Leigh and Summers 2002). But in query handling contexts, concentration (e.g., attentiveness) and competence (e.g., clarifying) are more pertinent demands. Energy,

[3] Emote is a verb, defined as showing or portraying emotions in nonverbal displays. Consistent with this, our conceptualization of emoting behaviors is specific to emotions observed in nonverbal displays, and not to affect as an individual-level difference variable.

excitement, and warmth are inconsistent emotions for such tasks. In an experimental study that asked respondents to display behaviors that signal being "smart, intelligent and competent," Holoien and Fiske (2013, p. 36) find that they displayed significantly less warmth than a control group with no explicit display instructions. Thus, a salesperson's emoting behaviors should negatively moderate the positive effect of resolving behaviors on customer sentiment, and because customers perceive nonverbal cues as more authentic and diagnostic than verbal cues, this moderating effect should be even stronger (more negative) than that of relating behaviors. Formally,

H3: A salesperson's emoting behaviors will negatively moderate the positive influence of resolving behavior on customer interest as the sales interaction unfolds.

Method

Research setting

Our research setting involves a business-to-consumer selling context, namely, personal sales of insurance products. Data for this study were secured from video recordings of salesperson–customer, face-to-face interactions, generated as part of an experimental simulation. Naturalistic research designs that capture sales interactions as they occur in practice are the gold standard, because they are authentic and less prone to self-serving or recall biases (cf. surveys, experiments; Moon and Armstrong 1994). Recording actual sales interactions might be one approach for implementing naturalistic designs, but recording customers during ongoing sales interactions raises privacy concerns and rarely is permitted by firms, except to manage theft and crime. Therefore, we recorded simulated interactions that mimic naturalistic designs. In such simulated experimental settings, participants provide explicit, a priori consent to be recorded, after being recruited to participate. Past research indicates that explicit a priori consent does not materially degrade interaction quality; after a few minutes, participants generally grow unaware of the recording (Penner et al. 2007).

We recruited professional life insurance salespersons and real-life married couples to participate in the simulated experimental design.[4] Each couple was screened from a panel maintained by a national market research firm as candidates for life insurance purchases, such that they were married, 25–45 years of age ($M_{Husband}$ = 34.5 years, SD = 5.26; M_{Wife} = 33.5 years, SD = 5.79), with children ($M_{\#Children}$ = 2.01, SD =1.09), and middle-class in their income (M_{Income} = US$43,641, SD = US$17,862). The recruited salespersons all had prior experience selling life insurance (M_{Exp} = 9 years, SD = 7.2), and they were briefed on the policies available for them to sell, as well as the existence of backroom sales support during the sales interaction. This support included financial needs analysis and ledger forms for term/universal life policies that could be computed for any valid combination of face amount, premium, length of coverage, or targeted cash value. This support was intended to eliminate the need for a follow-up (second) sales interaction to close the sale. Salespersons also received demographic data about the couple (e.g., age, income, occupational status, home ownership, number of children). After the briefings, each salesperson and customer couple entered a room together, were introduced, and began to interact on their own without restraint.

The simulated experiment mimicked an actual sales interaction. However, to maintain anonymity, no actual sales occurred at the end of the interaction, and salespeople had no opportunities to follow up with the participating customer couples. Following the sales interaction, we collected data through a debriefing step, in which we determined customers' purchase intentions and confirmed the perceived realism of the sales interaction. More than 92% of customer couples found the sales interaction similar to an easily imagined, real-life sales meeting, more than 95% agreed that the sales interaction was "quite realistic," and over 81% disagreed with a description of the study as "contrived."

Data quality/sampling Both salesperson-initiated and customer-initiated queries occur during a sales interaction. Salesperson-initiated queries usually aim to gather information about customers' needs (e.g., "Do you currently have any insurance?"), explain the benefits of different insurance plans (e.g., "Plan x is best suited for a family of four"), or offer incentives (e.g., "Buying the plan today will help increase your savings by 12% in next 5 years"). Such queries occur naturally in the sales process, but they are not our focus. Rather, the customer-initiated queries tend to relate to requests for new information (e.g., "Can you provide information on how I can add a dependent to my insurance later?"), clarification (e.g., "How does the deferred payment plan save money?"), or objections to an assertion by the salesperson (e.g., "Why did you say that plan x is better than plan y?"). We followed a three-step process to pull relevant data about these latter queries from the recordings of the sales interaction:

(1) Assess data relevance and quality, including whether the video content features customer-initiated queries and is of adequate quality (e.g., clear audio, video).
(2) Identify sampling units, or segments of the sales interaction that capture a complete representation of a customer-initiated query and corresponding query handling.

[4] Each salesperson and customer couple participated in only one interaction.

(3) Create, validate, and update measurement dictionaries for each focal construct (see Web Appendix A for the process for creating dictionaries).

First, to assess *data relevance and quality*, we used four criteria: (1) focus on 42 sales interactions (the recordings thereof) that constituted the "control group" of a larger study (Evans et al. 2000), (2) exclude non-customer query handling content, (3) retain sales interactions that include a minimum of two customer queries, and (4) ensure audio-visual quality. As a result, we obtained an eligible set of 34 sales interactions, from which we randomly selected 2 interactions for our grounded work. The remaining 32 sales interactions constituted the analysis sample for hypotheses testing. The test sample did not differ from the analysis sample in terms of the sales interaction length ($t = .59$, $p > .10$) or number of customer-initiated queries ($t = 1.02$, $p > .10$).

To identify meaningful *sampling units*, we examined each sales interaction to separate out distinct segments that focused on a single customer-initiated query and the corresponding salesperson response. Each customer query was 20–60 s in duration, and each sales interaction featured 2–14 customer queries (segments) ($M_{Segments} = 5.48$, SD = 2.88). Ambady and Rosenthal (1992) report that a 20-s slice is sufficiently long to draw meaningful conclusions about displayed behaviors. However, studies of nonverbal cues note a lower order of analysis, or *thin* slices, that occur for very brief periods (1–5 s). To capture each nonverbal cue individually and completely, we added 2 s of content before and after each thin slice. Thus, our analysis sample of 32 interactions resulted in 178 distinct segments and 212 and 243 thin slices (for salespeople and customers, respectively) for further analysis.

Measurement libraries To develop the *measurement libraries*, we followed past research to separate each segment into two parts: only audio for verbal cues (salesperson resolving and relating behavior) and only video without audio for nonverbal cues (customer interest and salesperson emoting behaviors). General dictionaries that measure verbal and nonverbal cues are readily available (e.g., Harvard Enquirer; RDAL (Whissell 2009); LIWC (Pennebaker and King 1999); FACS (Ekman and Friesen 2003)), but they lack contextual relevance and are less useful for analyzing specific cues likely to arise in customer-initiated query data. We therefore conducted grounded work to test and validate a measurement dictionary of verbal cues that correspond to resolving and relating behaviors; the measurement library of nonverbal cues relied on the efforts of human coders to provide meaningful, valid measures of customer interest and salesperson emoting behaviors. Table 2 includes the descriptive statistics and inter-correlations for study measures.

Measures

Salesperson resolving behavior Initially, we used the Harvard Enquirer library to identify relevant micro-categories, such as "knowing," "assessing," "problem solving," "motivation," "work," "solve," and "social relation" as a starting point. The result was a set of 3305 words. For context relevance, we asked two domain experts to sort these words into two categories (relevant/not relevant) relative to resolving behavior (based on the construct definitions provided). Excluding the irrelevant words reduced the dictionary to 620 words after three iterations (interrater reliability = .83). Next, we conducted an inductive refinement with the test sample of 2 sales interactions and generated a list of 5 frequently used (at least five times) words by the salesperson that communicated resolving behavior, then cross-compared those terms with the 620-word dictionary for resolving behavior. All 5 words already appeared in the dictionary, so it required no additional changes. Two research assistants classified each word into two dimensions (inter-coder reliability = .89 after three iterations) (Hayes and Krippendorff 2007): (1) "evaluating" words that indicate the salesperson's skill and expertise related to resolving (e.g., why, when, what, while, because) and (2) "responding" words that indicate the salesperson's effort and engagement (e.g., go, do, offer, provide). We thus obtained 269 evaluating and 351 responding words.

Next, we developed an intensity measure for each resolving word. Words such as "evaluate" and "investigate" likely

Table 2 Descriptive statistics and construct inter-correlations

	Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1	Customer interest	1					
2	Salesperson's emoting behavior	.07**	1				
3	Salesperson's resolving behavior	.14**	.15*	1			
4	Salesperson's relating behavior	.10*	.13*	.72***	1		
5	Customer involvement	−.01	.15***	.11***	−.06**	1	
6	Household size	−.03	.04	.14*	−.12**	.34***	1
7	Mean	4.22	4.85	5.91	5.85	5.47	4.14
8	SD	1.16	.91	4.39	5.69	.66	1.05

*$p < .1$, **$p < .05$, ***p < .001

communicate more intense resolving work than terms such as "chance" and "seem." We asked 219 undergraduate students from a large Midwestern U.S. university to evaluate everyday uses of words during sales interactions. At least 10 respondents evaluated each resolving word on a 1–3 scale (1 = low intensity, 3 = high intensity), and the scores were averaged for each word to arrive at an intensity score.

To operationalize resolving behavior, we multiplied the frequency (0/1) of each resolving word with its intensity score (1–3) to obtain an overall score for the resolving behavior displayed in any given segment of customer queries. To account for segment/interaction length, the sum scores were normalized, dividing by the time the salesperson needed to communicate (using time stamps), which provided a weighted measure (see Web Appendix B, Tables B1.1 and B2 for excerpts).

Salesperson relating behavior Relating behavior requires displays of empathy and agreeableness, to strengthen the relationship with customers. We use Whissell's (2009) RDAL and the emotional categories from Pennebaker's LIWC as a starting point (Pennebaker and King 1999). Not all words in this dictionary are relevant to sales interactions. We again create the resolving dictionary with similar steps, such that we identify 244 relating words with acceptable consistency (interrater reliability = .88) (Hayes and Krippendorff 2007), then supplement this dictionary with 3 words obtained from an inductive analysis of the words that raters judged as indicative of salesperson relating behavior in the test sample. Two research assistants classified each word into two dimensions (interrater reliability = .90, after 2 iterations): (1) "agreeable" words that indicate salespeople's display of courtesy, respect, helpfulness, and cooperativeness (Barrick and Mount 1991), including uses of adjectives, interjections, and verbs (e.g., yeah, agree, calm, help, hear), and (2) "empathy" words that signal salespeople's kindness, compassion, warmth, and caring (Goetz et al. 2010), usually denoted by adverbs, adjectives, interjections, and verbs (e.g., apologize, sorry, regret, appreciate). This procedure yielded 79 agreeable and 168 empathy words, scored on a 3-point ("unpleasant/pleasant") scale. Finally, to compute the relating behavior score, we multiplied the frequency of each word in each segment of the analysis sample (1 = present) by its weighted intensity score (1–3 scale) and normalized it by the time-to-verbalize measure (Web Appendix B, Tables B1.2 and B2).

Salesperson emoting behavior For emoting behavior, we used the test sample to generate nonverbal cues, judged according to their valence (positive/neutral/negative) and source (face, body, gesture). Two expert judges viewed thin slices from the test sample to identify 20 specific nonverbal cues associated with salesperson feeling states (7 positive, 4 neutral, and 11 negative) and their salience, by allocating 100 points across the salient nonverbal cue categories. This procedure was refined for clarity and consistency until they achieved acceptable inter-judge reliability (.97) (Hayes and Krippendorff 2007). We also trained two research assistants to code the thin slices of emoting behavior on a scale of 1–7 (extremely negative/extremely positive). Interrater reliability was .89 (.91) for the training (final) coding.

Customer interest Customer interest is manifested in customers' states of attentiveness to the sales communication or interaction. Nonverbal cues are more authentic measures of feeling states than self-reports (Puccinelli et al. 2010). To define the cues to measure customer interest, we used procedures parallel those for the salesperson's emoting behavior. Two research assistants coded thin slices from the test and analysis samples, focused on customers' nonverbal cues, on a scale of 1–7 (extremely bored/enthusiastic). Interrater reliability was .87 (.92) in the training (final) coding (see Web Appendix B, Tables B1.3 and B3).

Model for hypotheses testing

Our data have a nested panel structure, such that sequentially time-ordered segments (ST) are nested within the sales interaction of a unique customer–salesperson dyad (*jk*). Customer interest (CI) is segment specific, as are its drivers (salesperson's resolving, relating, and emoting behaviors), which we anticipate to have time-dependent effects. To accommodate these nested data and dynamic effects, we employ a random-parameters (or multilevel-level) growth model following Greene (2011):

$$\begin{aligned} CI_{jkt} = {} & \beta_{0jk} + \beta_{1jk}ST_{jkt} + \beta_{2jk}RESOLVING_{jkt} \\ & + \beta_{3jk}RELATING_{jkt} + \beta_{4jk}EMOTING_{jkt} \\ & + \beta_{5jk}RESOLVING_{jkt} \times ST_{jkt} \\ & + \beta_{6jk}RELATING_{jkt} \times ST_{jkt} \\ & + \beta_{7jk}EMOTING_{jkt} \times ST_{jkt} \\ & + \beta_{8jk}RESOLVING_{jkt} \times RELATING_{jkt} \\ & + \beta_{9jk}RESOLVING_{jkt} \times EMOTING_{jkt} \\ & + \beta_{10jk}RESOLVING_{jkt} \times RELATING_{jkt} \\ & \times ST_{jkt} + \beta_{11jk}RESOLVING_{jkt} \\ & \times EMOTING_{jkt}xST_{jkt} + \varepsilon_{jkt} \end{aligned} \quad (1)$$

where $\varepsilon_{jkt} \sim iid\ (0, \sigma^2)$

$$\beta_{0jk} = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 INV_{jk} + \alpha_2 HHSIZE_{jk} + \zeta_{jk} \quad (2)$$

where $\zeta_{jk} \sim N\ (0, \sigma^2)$

$$\beta_{mjk} = \gamma_0 + o_{jk} \quad (3)$$

where $o_{jk} \sim N\ (0, \sigma^2)$, where $m = 1$ to 11.

Here, *jk* = customer–salesperson dyad; *t* = time; ST = time-ordered segments when repeated measures are collected, and the first segment is coded as 0 to facilitate interpretation; RESOLVING = salesperson's resolving behaviors, RELATING = salesperson's relating behavior, EMOTING = salesperson's emoting behaviors, HHSIZE = customer household size (ranges 2–7), and INV = customer's product involvement (ranges 1–7).

Endogeneity The sales interaction produces temporally ordered and contemporaneous measures. Although dynamic panel data models, such as Arellano-Bond, are advocated for such data structures, they are not appropriate for our context; we do not have time-varying exogenous variables. Thus, to address endogeneity, we followed the following steps: include a lagged dependent variable, develop instrumental variables, assess validity and strength of the instrumental variables. The details of the approach are outlined in Web Appendix D.

Multicollinearity Salesperson relating and resolving behaviors correlate at .72, so to address the threat of multicollinearity, we used an instrumental variable for RELATING that is orthogonal to RESOLVING. To account for multi-collinearity issues due to inclusion of two-way and three-way interaction terms, we follow a sequential residual centering approach (Francoeur 2013). The details of the approach are listed in Web Appendix E. Subsequently we assessed the VIF which was uniformly less than 10 (range = 1.65 to 5.36) (Neter et al. 1989).

Controls We control for customers' household size and involvement with life insurance as alternative explanations. Prior research indicates that both household size (Showers and Shotick 1994) and involvement (Lin and Chen 2006) have positive relationships with customers' insurance purchases. To measure involvement, we use Zaichkowsky's (1985) involvement scale and sum responses to 20 bipolar adjective scales that indicate the personal relevance of life insurance (e.g., important/unimportant). The scale displayed high reliability (coefficient alpha = .95). Household sizes ranged from 2 to 7 members, with a mean of 4.14 (SD = 1.05).

Results

Validity evidence

A CFA for the resolving and relating behaviors measures as reported in Web Appendix C, produced reasonable fit statistics (χ^2 = 4.6, df = 1, $p > .03$; confirmatory fit index = .98; Tucker-Lewis index = .98; root mean square error of approximation = .14, $p > .05$); composite reliabilities of .81 and .79 respectively; and consistently high (> .7) and significant ($p < .001$) loadings. The constructs also extract significant variance of .70, which exceeds their shared variance of .56, in support of their discriminant validity. Factor scores were derived for both resolving and relating constructs and retained for subsequent hypotheses testing.

Model fit

Women were more involved than men in the life insurance purchase process (mean difference = .15; 95% confidence interval = .06, .22, t = 3.54, $p < .001$), in line with prior research evidence (Crosby et al. 1990; Skinner and Dubinsky 1984). This difference in involvement might reflect three factors. First, wives are often responsible for household budgets and thus may be more fiscally responsible and more highly involved in financial transactions. Second, women generally live longer than men (life expectancies: men = 76.3 years, women = 81.3 years).[5] The purchase of life insurance (often for the husband) thus becomes more important from the wife's perspective. Third, husbands tend to be less involved in interactions with salespeople if the discussion requires dealing with the informational complexities (Crosby et al. 1990). Thus, we focus on data from the female customers in the experiment to estimate the customer interest model (M_F), though we also include results from the men (M_M) for comprehensiveness. Table 3 provides model estimation results for the dynamic impact of salesperson behaviors on customer interest of females as well as males. In a likelihood ratio test, the model with women (M_F) offers superior fit to the data, compared with the control only model (χ^2 (21) = 80.87, $p < .001$, Akaike information criteria [AIC] of 451.4 vs. 571.1) and the model with men (M_M) (χ^2 (21) = 62.45, $p < .01$, [AIC] of 478.6 vs. 561.5).

Hypotheses tests

In support of H1 and as shown in Table 3, salesperson resolving behaviors have a significant and positive influence on customer interest (M_F = .13, $p < .001$) at mean levels of relating and emoting behaviors. The effect of resolving work increases from .24 at the beginning to 1.94 ($p < .001$) by the end of the interaction. Consistent with H2, salesperson relating behavior negatively interacts with resolving behavior (−.16, $p < .001$). Specifically, at the beginning of the interaction (Fig. 2, Panel a), salesperson relating behavior diminishes the influence of salesperson resolving behavior on customer interest from 1.81 ($p < .001$) at low levels (−2SD), to .24 ($p < .001$) at the mean, and to −1.34 ($p < .001$) at high levels (+2SD) of relating behavior. The same pattern emerges at the end of the interaction, where the effect diminishes from 7.63 ($p < .001$) at low levels, to 1.94 ($p < .001$) at the mean, to

[5] www.worldlifeexpectancy.com/USA

Table 3 Estimated coefficients for the dynamic impact of salesperson behaviors on customer interest and purchase intention

Variables	Customer interest (M_F)	Customer interest (M_F) –robustness check	Customer interest (M_M)	Purchase intention (1 = Sold, 0 = Not Sold)
Intercept	3.97 (.40)***	4.14 (.81)***	3.87 (.25)***	−7.69 (2.27)***
Salesperson resolving	.11 (.05)**	.01 (.10)	−.05 (.05)	−.36 (.28)
Salesperson relating	−.06 (.05)	.13 (.11)	−.32 (.06)***	.74 (.33)**
Salesperson emoting	.04 (.05)	−.01 (.09)	−.19 (.05)***	.86 (.35)**
Salesperson resolving × ST	**.13 (.03)*** **	**.14 (.07)** **	**.17 (.03)*** **	−.13 (.28)
Salesperson relating ×ST	.03 (.02)	.14 (.06)**	−.09 (.02)***	.34 (.17)*
Salesperson emoting × ST	.09 (.02)***	−.03 (.07)	.05 (.03)	.39 (.18)**
Salesperson resolving × Salesperson relating	−.63 (.12)***	−.81 (.25)***	−.10 (.13)	.34 (.79)
Salesperson resolving × Salesperson emoting	−1.01 (.11)***	−.85 (.27)***	−.45 (.14)***	−1.11 (.65)
Salesperson resolving × Salesperson relating × ST	**−.16 (.03)*** **	**−.20 (.10)** **	**−.11 (.03)*** **	.34 (.79)
Salesperson resolving × Salesperson emoting × ST	**−.17 (.03)*** **	**−.15 (.08)** *	**−.02 (.04)**	−1.11 (.65)
Customer Interest				**.35 (.19)** *
ST (segment)	−.04 (.02)**	−.02 (.04)	−.07 (.02)***	.09 (.14)
Customer involvement	.14 (.07)*	.09 (.16)	.06 (.03)*	.71 (.33)**
Household size	−.11 (.04)**	−.12 (.09)	.11 (.04)**	.82 (.30)***
AIC	451.4	463.6	478.6	154.0
Log-likelihood (df)	−198.70 (27)	−219.78 (27)	−212.28 (27)	−61.01 (16)

M_F, Customer Interest Model with Female as the DV; M_M, Customer Interest Model with Male as the DV; For the robustness check model, we use empathy scores, along with the lagged dependent variable, as instruments for relating and emoting and problem solving scores along with lagged dependent variable as instruments for resolving. The coefficients in bold are study hypothesis.

*p < .1, **p < .05, ***p < .001

−3.74 ($p < .001$) at high levels of relating behavior. Resolving work thus exhibits a positive, significant effect on customer interest when relating work is less than .2 SD and a negative and significant effect when it is above .9 SD.

Salesperson emoting behavior similarly shows a negative interaction (Table 3) with salesperson resolving behavior (−.17, $p < .001$), as we predicted in H3. At the beginning of the interaction (Fig. 2, Panel b), the effect of resolving behavior decreases from 2.62 ($p < .001$) at low levels (−2SD), to .24 ($p < .001$) at the mean, and to −2.14 ($p < .07$) at high levels (+2SD) of salesperson emoting behavior. The similar pattern at the end of the interaction indicates the influence of salesperson resolving behavior diminishes from 8.96 ($p < .001$), to 1.94 ($p < .001$), and −5.06 ($p < .001$) at the low, mean, and high levels of emoting. Overall, salesperson emoting erases the positive effect of resolving work on customer interest, unless it is below .2 SD and remains non-significant until it is .7 SD. For emoting behavior that is .8 SD and above, salesperson resolving exhibits a negative and significant effect on customer interest.

Robustness and post-hoc analysis

As a robustness check, we used alternative instruments of resolving, relating, and emoting behaviors. The results presented in Table 3 replicate the findings of the hypothesized model analysis.

In additional post hoc analysis, we sought to assess the role of customer interest in shaping the customer's purchase intention at the conclusion of the sales interaction. Purchase intentions were captured during the post-experiment debrief (1 = sold, 2 = not sold, and 3 = no proposal; choices 2 and 3 were combined for not sold option). The results of the probit analysis, reported in Table 3, demonstrate that customer interest mediates the dynamic effect of the salesperson's resolving behavior (.05, SE = .03, 95% confidence interval = .0095, .1202) (Hayes 2013) and the interactive effect of salesperson's emoting and resolving behaviors (−.06, SE = .03, 95% confidence interval = −.1494, −.0143) on the customer's purchase intentions. However, customer interest does not mediate the interactive effect of the salesperson's relating and resolving behaviors on the customer's purchase intentions (−.01, SE = .02, 95% confidence interval = −.0596, 0151).

Discussion and implications

General discussion

In providing theory and evidence of salesperson effectiveness for *customer* query handling during sales interactions, this study makes three notable advances: (1) it examines

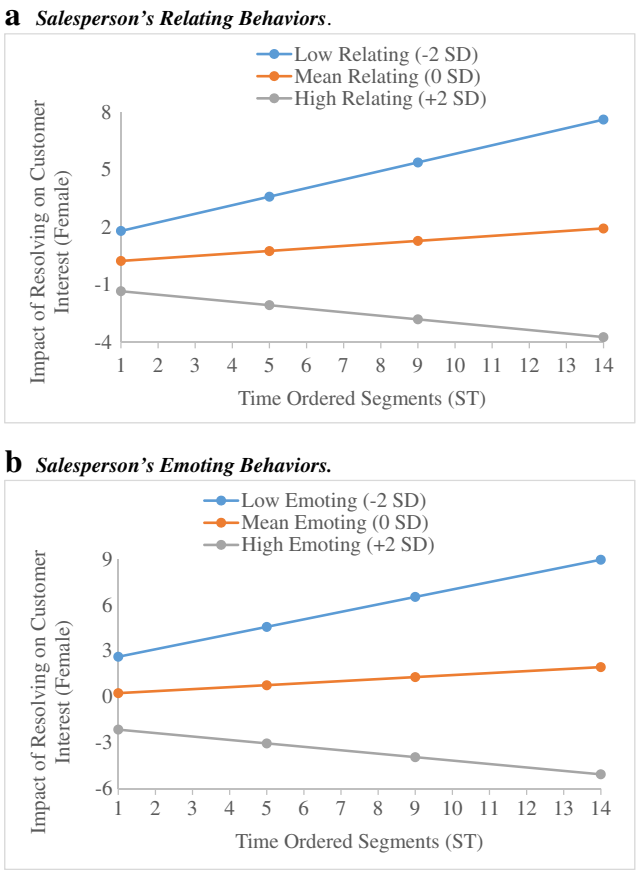

Fig. 2 Estimated effect of salesperson's resolving behaviors at different levels of relating and emoting behaviors

salesperson communications using video recordings of sales interactions to extract resolving, relating, and emoting constructs from salespeople's displayed verbal and nonverbal behavioral cues, (2) it analyzes time-varying (dynamic) effects of salesperson communication behaviors on customer interest in sales interactions, and (3) it hypothesizes (and tests) *negative* moderating effects of salesperson relating and emoting behaviors on the positive relationship between salesperson resolving behaviors and customer interest. Past research has tended to rely on self-report data, static analysis, and main effects of salesperson communications on customer outcomes in query handling literature. Moreover, as noted, the study of queries in the sales literature has focused more on the *salesperson's* use of rhetorical queries in persuasive communications, and much less on the *customer's* use of queries to reduce uncertainty (Campbell et al. 2006). Our study addresses these imbalances by drawing attention to the source of queries—salesperson or customer—and that each triggers disparate dynamics within a sales interaction.

Our study finds that customer queries are a "zone of evaluation" within a sales interaction which constitutes customers' narrowing of their interest on salesperson's competence in resolving their query and penalizing her/him for engaging in relating or emoting behaviors. Specifically, we find that, in this zone, the effect of salesperson resolving behaviors on customer interest grows 8-fold in magnitude as the query handling unfolds, as long as salesperson relating and emoting behaviors remain at neutral levels. This evidence confirms that customers continuously monitor salespeople's efficacy in handling their queries and weigh resolving behaviors more heavily at later stages (when the queries are more significant and specific) compared with earlier stages (when queries are basic and broad). We also find that a salesperson's relating or emoting behaviors diminish the positive influence of resolving behavior; the significant and substantial influence of salesperson resolving behavior on customer interest at low relating behavior gets neutralized, even negated, when relating behavior reaches high levels. In other words, customers severely discount the salesperson's resolving behavior when accompanied by above neutral relating behaviors. The salesperson's emoting behaviors also have a significant negative moderating effect on this relationship, so that the positive effect of salesperson resolving behavior on customer interest at low levels of emoting behaviors reverses and becomes negative at high levels. Together, this counter-intuitive evidence of negative moderating effects suggests that customer perceptions of how queries are handled are governed by compensating effects of salesperson's competence and warmth.

Our study also draws attention to the role of the customer interest construct, and establishes its usefulness for the study of sales communications. The sales literature asserts that salesperson listening is a critical construct in customer interactions because it "requires salespeople to fully attend to, comprehend and respond to each individual [customer]" (Ramsey and Sohi 1997, p. 128). In our conceptual development, customer interest is a mirror counterpart of the salesperson listening construct as it indicates the degree to which *customers* are actively attending to *salesperson* communications. Just as poor salesperson listening can stall and stymie sales communications, so can waning customer interest in salesperson messages. The sales literature has overlooked the customer interest construct, but the neuro-psychological literature has developed and refined an "interest" construct, and validated its usefulness in interpersonal communications (Renninger and Hidi 2011). We extend and adapt this research to define customer interest as an affective state with approach and avoidance qualities to indicate the degree to which salesperson query handling behaviors turn-up or turn-down customer's level of engagement in a sales interaction. Our results show that customer interest is a useful metric for effectiveness of salesperson query handling behaviors, and sensitive to variations *within* a sales interaction. Our study also provides initial evidence that links customer interest and purchase outcome, indicating that customer interest plays a positive and significant role in promoting overall sales outcomes.

More broadly, our study affirms the utility of intermediate-level dependent constructs for examining the dynamics of interpersonal, sales communications. Prior studies tend to use dependent variables that reflect desired sales outcomes including customer satisfaction and sales performance. Such outcomes hold considerable utility in predictive and diagnostic analysis of sales effectiveness taken as a whole. Our study adds to this literature by establishing the utility of "intermediate" outcomes that occur *within* individual sales interactions. Intermediate- and overall-sales outcomes are related in a part-whole association where the whole is more than its parts, and yet without robust parts there is *no* whole. In this sense, customer interest plays a critical role in the sales interactions in that it captures the ebb and flow of customers' state of (positive/negative) activation, which in turn influences other aspects of the sales interaction (e.g., persuasive appeals) ultimately contributing to the sales outcome. Our study encourages future researchers to seek to unravel these various components of and their dynamics within the sales interaction.

Theoretical implications

Our study offers theoretical insights for contextualizing the predictions of compensation effects theory. Competence and warmth represent two fundamental dimensions of information processing in social interactions. Compensation effects theory offers predictions for contextual conditions that favor dominance of competence over warmth, and those that favor warmth over competence (Holoien and Fiske 2013; Swencionis and Fiske 2016). Extending this theory, we theorize that specificity (of customer query) and clarity (from resolution) conditions of customer query handling favor dominance of salesperson resolving behaviors over relating or emoting behaviors. Accordingly, we hypothesize that salesperson's use of relating/emoting behaviors, beyond a customary level of pleasantness, are unhelpful and potentially counterproductive in a query handling context where specificity and clarity are salient. The unequivocal support obtained for these hypotheses encourage further theoretical work to advance the application of compensation effects theory to illuminate dynamics of sales interactions. In particular, it may be fruitful to theorize contextual conditions within a sales interaction where the trade-offs from ambivalent stereotypes are reversed—customers favor dominance of salesperson warmth (e.g., relating/emoting) over competence (e.g., resolving). Likewise, contextual conditions may be theorized where both salesperson warmth and competence are equally weighted. Establishing a contextualized understanding of adaptive selling rhythms that vary warmth and competence features in theoretically predictive patterns promises to offer a rich and rewarding contribution to the study of sales interaction dynamics.

Our study's findings also draw attention to contextual conditions and dynamic analysis that help resolve inconsistencies in past literature. As an example, Arndt et al. (2014) found that salespeople's use of benevolence techniques to address customer objections was more effective than their use of expertise techniques in enhancing overall customer satisfaction. It is important to note that this study neither examined the dynamic impact of salesperson use of benevolent and expertise techniques, nor did it separate out the effect of salesperson persuasion tactics (when salespeople control sales communications) from customer query handling (when customers control sales communications) on overall customer satisfaction. By contrast, Jacobs et al. (2001) used video-recordings of sales communications to show that, in first-time sales interactions, customers give greater weight to task-related information and disclosures (akin to expertise techniques) than they give to social-related information and disclosures (akin to benevolence techniques). Our study suggests that the inconsistency between Arndt et al.'s and Jacobs et al.'s findings may be partially resolved by attending to contextual conditions. That is, the relatively stronger effects of task-related behaviors in Jacobs et al. (2001) study is conditioned on *first-time* sales interactions; the results may well be reversed when interactions involve ongoing relationships. As a result, the unclear articulation of contextual conditions in studies such as Arndt et al. (2014) risk generating findings that are hard to interpret, and difficult to reconcile with other studies in the literature. However, both studies suffer from lack of dynamic analysis of salesperson behaviors. Salesperson use of multiple sales techniques that vary dynamically in a sales interaction is a norm, *not* an exception. To understand mechanisms and outcomes of such sales interactions, studies must eschew approaches that examine main effects of different salesperson behaviors in favor of their moderating effects, and aggregated-over-time effects in favor of time varying effects. In our view, contextual conditions, moderating effects, and dynamic analysis are key features that enable reconciling these inconsistent findings of past research, thereby advancing the sales literature (Bolander et al. 2017).

However, our findings should not be interpreted to theorize that low levels of salesperson relating and emoting behaviors are indicative of successful sales interactions. Our conception of sales interactions is where the control of communications oscillates between the salesperson and the customer. When salespeople make pitches and rhetorically raise queries to guide customer's cognitive attention, salespeople assert control over sales communications. By contrast, when customers raise queries that redirect salesperson's cognitive attention, they seek to assert control on sales communications. A sales interaction is a series of oscillations between salesperson and customer control that together result in a successful outcome. Our study focuses on a particular state of oscillation where the customer asserts her/his control and activates a zone of

Table 4 Summary of the managerial implications

Managerial implications	Useful references	Summary
1. Customer queries require resolving and not relational actions.	Maynard (2014) McDonald (2015) Wuyts (2007) Bock et al. (2016) Bettencourt and Gwinner (1996)	In a benchmark study Zendesk found that apologizing (e.g., sorry) does not enhance customer satisfaction. Instead resolving the problem does. Likewise, getting a "personalized experience" from the insurance agent is found to be less important for overall customer satisfaction in a recent survey of insurance claimants. Wuyts and others have shown that extra-role behaviors, such as being friendly and empathetic, have a negative effect when customers lack a desire for friendliness, or when perceived as an extra-burden.
2. Unintended consequences of resolving focused solutions.	Deelstra et al. (2003) Mende et al. (2017) Spencer (1995)	Salesperson's resolving behaviors can at times appear as a threat to customer's self-esteem. Alternatively, other forms of communication channels (e.g., collaterals) can be used to inform customers of the resolving intent of the organization/employees.
3. Revisit extant sales training	Carnegie (2008) Truter (2009)	Viewing customer queries as objections is an outdated mindset. Instead queries are opportunities to obtain and retain customer interest and influence long term outcomes such as purchase.

evaluation to monitor salesperson's actions; by contrast past research has predominantly focused on the mirror-opposite states where the salesperson asserts control and activates a zone of engagement to develop compelling customer solutions. Past research suggests that salesperson relating and emoting behaviors are particularly effective in building customer relationships. Future research that seeks to advance the understanding of sales interactions to include oscillating conditions of control over its duration is likely to find our analytical approach for dynamic, time-varying effects useful.

Managerial implications

An oft noted attribute affixed to the sales force is its value added in adapting/adjusting to customer needs. Were it so simple. Millions of dollars are invested every year in striving to achieve the ideal state of sales effectiveness.[6] Seeking to contribute to marketers' understanding of how best to prepare a more effective sales staff, this study focuses on how salespeople, within the dynamics of the sales interaction, might improve upon their ability to adapt and respond to customers (please see the summary of the managerial implications located in Table 4). A key component of our contribution is understanding how salesperson's response to customer queries (e.g., need specification, transaction clarification) contribute to obtaining and sustaining customer interest. Our findings clearly indicate the importance of salesperson response to customer queries to be resolution based (as opposed interpersonal relationship based) (Maynard 2014; McDonald 2015).

What remains unclear is how salespeople avoid becoming victims of a customer's query agenda (whether strategically predetermined or spontaneous). Evidence from our study does suggest that the salesperson query resolving behavior retains customer's interest that in turn is linked to intention to purchase. How management improve the salesperson's likelihood of influencing the customer query agenda (e.g., content and sequence) and what implications that have for the sales interaction remains to be seen (e.g., evidence of aggressive intrusion in influencing the customer's query process has been demonstrated to have negative repercussions) (Mende et al. 2017). Many transaction/product settings are awash in feature and option complexities that often experts in respective fields are challenged to sort out. How then does a salesperson elicit the type of dialogue with a customer that both prompts insightful exchange without overwhelming the customer in excessive task complexity? Previous studies may help inform the implications of our findings. Deelstra et al. (2003) found that instrumental support (e.g., product or transactional knowledge provision) might be viewed as threatening to customer self-esteem. Similarly, Mende et al. (2017) found in service co-production settings that even in situations where customer service literacy was low, organizational support contributed to a negative consumer reaction. Thus, with query resolving behavior being important in sustaining customer interest, salespeople must use the resolving act as an opportunity to both inform and direct future queries without overwhelming the customer or creating a context where information asymmetry is perceived as a threat. Alternatively, asynchronous communication (e.g., web site, brochures, point of sale information) that inform customers of key features and benefits may avoid the perceived intrusion, threat and often inherent distrust attributed to salespeople when they are burdened in an information dissemination role (Spencer 1995).

How best to provide transaction and product literacy information such that it does not serve as a deterrent but rather provides important cues to stimulate customer queries might best be informed initially by soliciting input from experienced sales staff. No doubt more successful sales personnel have navigated around this issue (e.g., use of referrals, third party

[6] www.trainingmag.com

rating services or reviews). Whether they have specifically identified the causal sequence is not pertinent, but their knowledge in how best to inform the customer of necessary transaction and product information without losing their interest or introducing a negative valence into the transaction setting may begin to inform management as it seeks to address this issue. Similarly, the counseling psychology literature can also be useful, given the dependency of process dynamics on stimulating and sustaining client engagement within the counseling exchange context.

What also seems clear in this study's findings is the negative consequences of salesperson relating and/or emoting behaviors in response to customer queries. This is particularly more telling as the transaction progresses over time. A number of studies help inform an interpretation of this result and provide some basis for assisting management. The extra role behavior (ERB) literature suggests that ERB activities render the recipient in a mindset of indebtedness (e.g., salesperson offers special favors to the customer creating a sense of obligation) thereby yielding the unintended consequences of salesperson ERB being perceived negatively (Bock et al. 2016; Wuyts 2007). Alternatively, the query handling process provides the salesperson the opportunity to customize the customer experience often calling upon extra role behavior, it is this very flexibility that contributes to high levels of possible role conflict and ambiguity among sales staff and customers (Bettencourt and Gwinner 1996). In short, resolving as opposed to relating behaviors may be more transparent to both the customer and salesperson. In sales settings where management desires sales personnel to engage in relating behaviors, clarifying both the customer and salesperson roles in these settings becomes far more critical and merits inclusion as a formal part of sales training.

With resolving behavior demonstrating such a powerful influence on obtaining and maintaining customer interest, sales interactions are vulnerable to customer queries that digress or in some way break from a logical pattern of query progression. Customer judgment models arguably provide a logical segmentation opportunity by deciphering which customer groupings are inclined to deploy certain decision criteria and query progression. Sales training therefore would focus on tools for identifying customer judgment model patterns potentially by the use of prompts that seek to elicit progressions in customer query protocols. These exchanges may increase the likelihood of more successful and efficient culmination of the sales encounter. Much like chess, once one knows the strategy being deployed by one's opponent, moves, and counter moves are more likely to be anticipated.

Lastly, returning to the customer query and response process, how might the salesperson build the basis for a future relationship? The answer may be in the content and style of the resolving behaviors demonstrated by the salesperson. Establishing a basis for mutual respect, evidence of successfully completing interactions and establishing credibility may lead to opportunities to invest in a broader array of relational exchanges. Salesperson training that encourages engaging in early relational banter should be cautioned in that this may violate the boundaries of the customer's expected norms of the exchange (role specification). Further, as this study reveals emoting (nonverbal cues) negatively affects and erodes the positive impact of resolving on customer interest. Sales training would benefit from videos of salesperson–customer interaction alerting salespeople to the facial and body language quirks they demonstrate. Since non-verbal traits change over time, it is important to periodically revisit this topic in sales training lest salespeople fail to adequately self-monitor.

The power of the customer query–salesperson resolving behavior interaction in building and sustaining customer interest in the sales interaction needs to be at the heart of sales training. Support systems that empower sales staff with the wherewithal to provide thorough and timely resolution to customers' queries are essential for salespeople to obtain and maintain customer interest in a sales encounter. The traditional characterization of customer queries as objections (e.g., anything that stops a customer from buying) fails to get at the heart of the exchange dynamics captured in our study (Truter 2009). Arguably this mindset elicits a cognitive and behavioral response on the part of the salesperson that fails to capture the rudiments of what a platform of query resolving dynamics would suggest. Our findings would suggest that the objection oriented mindset of traditional sales training may be a trap that fails to capture and maintain customer interest Carnegie (2008). These queries irrespective of how they might be characterized as questions, requests, objections, and other asks are opportunities to obtain and retain customer interest, and in the more long-term to win customer trust, which is a far more constructive platform for building a customer relationship.

Limitations

Several limitations are relevant to our study. First, the data are limited to an experimental simulation of insurance selling. To determine the generalizability of reported findings, it would be useful to replicate and extend our study in multiple settings. Second, we develop dictionaries of verbal and nonverbal cues to conceptualize and operationalize constructs of salesperson behaviors that are relevant to customer query handling. This departure from self-reported constructs is a notable diversion from the extant sales management research, but further studies are needed to triangulate and validate the constructs investigated. Third, as per this study's objectives, we examine customer, not salesperson, initiated queries. Future research into how these queries differ in their nature and mechanisms is likely to be useful. Fourth, customer interest captures the ebbs

and flows of customers' state of activation during the query phase of the sales interaction, which in turn may influence other phases of the sales interaction where, for instance, salesperson persuasion tactics dominate. A comprehensive study of the dynamics of interdependence among sales interaction phases is a fruitful direction for future research. Fifth, extant work on improvisation (Banin et al. 2016; Moorman and Miner 1998) might contribute to the creation of a process model explicating the antecedents of salesperson's actions i.e., displayed behaviors (resolving, relating, and emoting) during customer queries potentially providing a more robust representation of the behavioral dynamics depicted in sales exchanges.

Acknowledgements The authors thank Paige Anderson, Ashley Cole, Sabina Shrestha, and Kathryn Plummer for their help with coding of verbal and nonverbal cues.

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