An extensive amount of prior research has been conducted on how a salesperson can increase his or her performance from a buyer's perspective (Pettijohn et al. 2000). One way in which a salesperson can improve a buyer's perception of his or her performance is to meet that buyer's expectations (Oliver 1974). Buyers have expectations about a variety of things such as service levels, price, features/benefits, product/service performance, and the salesperson's level of product/service knowledge, just to name a few (Darmon 2005).

Prior research examining complex methods to improve salesperson performance by meeting expectations has been shown to be a useful pursuit (e.g., Fang, Evans, and Landry 2005). However, easily implemented methods of improving salesperson performance through met expectations, while also beneficial in improving salesperson productivity and enhancing long-term buyer–seller relationships, receive little attention. Managers and researchers often overlook simple, easily implemented methods of improving performance through the meeting of expectations, mistakenly believing that simplicity implies ineffectiveness (Ashkenas 2007).

Our study investigates the impact of the salesperson making the expected number of face-to-face sales calls, from the buyer's perspective, on both behavioral outcomes and the buyer's evaluation of the salesperson's overall performance. Boujena, Johnston, and Merunka (2009) stated that a buyer perceives benefits in his or her interaction with a salesperson across four dimensions: interaction frequency, salesperson professionalism, interaction quality, and salesperson responsiveness. There is a stream of research in how meeting expectations of responsiveness (Delvecchio et al. 2003), professionalism (Pilling and Eroglu 1994), and interaction quality (Madaleno, Wilson, and Palmer 2007) influence dyadic relationships.

Buyers have expectations concerning the number of times salespeople should call on them in a given time period (Tosi 1966). It is hypothesized that by achieving this ideal number, a salesperson can improve the buyer’s perception of his or her performance. Tosi (1966) has shown that matching a buyer’s expectations for the number of times they are contacted face-to-face with the actual number of face-to-face sales calls in a given time period can strengthen the buyer–seller relationship. Tosi's finding is critical because improvements in a buyer’s perception of salesperson performance, if feasible to implement, may have long-term implications for profitability and customer retention (Oliver 1980).

Our research is important because several of the relational aspects in this study have been linked to buyer continuance (Ganesan 1994), which results in increased profit (Reichheld...
While the increases may be small in nature, the small increases in sales coupled with an increase in the duration of the relationship can generate large increases in total sales over time. The purpose of this study is to assess whether differences exist in dyadic relationships between salespeople who meet versus those who do not meet buyer expectations.

**CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

In this study, the difference between a buyer’s expectations and a salesperson’s actual performance will be addressed by examining the difference between the ideal number of face-to-face sales calls that a buyer would like to receive and the actual number of sales calls the buyer receives in a given time period (e.g., one month). While there are a variety of ways in which buyers and sellers can communicate (telephone, fax, e-mail, etc.), the strongest, deepest form of communication is the face-to-face sales call (Weitz, Castleberry, and Tanner 2007). Face-to-face communication is the only form of communication that gives both parties the opportunity to communicate in real time and be privy to each other’s nonverbal cues (Weitz, Castleberry, and Tanner 2007). In a sales call that is not conducted face-to-face, salespeople experience a decrease in useful information obtained of around 50 percent, because of the loss of nonverbal cues. If the sales call is not by telephone, the salesperson loses an additional 10 percent due to not being able to hear the buyer’s voice characteristics. In addition, non-face-to-face forms of sales communication tend to play a supporting role in the sales call. Cano, Boles, and Bean (2005) found that even with the wide range of communication technology available for use in business-to-business relationships, buyers and sellers still prefer face-to-face communication as their primary form, especially when the information is important or sensitive. Ferrell, Gonzalez-Padron, and Ferrell (2010) found that the use of technology in sales communications was preferred more as an enhancement than as a primary means of communication.

A multigroup structural equation model will be developed comparing one group in which the salespeople did not meet the buyer’s ideal number of sales calls, referred to as the “UE group” (unmet expectations), with a second group in which the salespeople met what the buyer viewed as ideal, called the “ME group” (met expectations). The way the model is presented is meant to exhibit a “domino effect.” The presence/absence of a gap between actual and ideal sales calls serves as a catalyst that influences—and is likely to cause significant differences in—relationships between several constructs common in buyer–seller relationships. The presence/absence of this gap is the basis for the creation of the two groups. Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the model being studied.

**DISCONFIRMATION THEORY**

Disconfirmation theory forms the theoretical foundation for the current study. Disconfirmation theory (Oliver 1980) presents a process model of human behavior in which one forms a pre-use expectation or belief about something (e.g., a product or service). After experiencing the product or service, one forms a post-use perception about the product or service. Three post-use perceptions can result in (1) confirmation, (2) positive disconfirmation, and (3) negative disconfirmation.
When a salesperson meets what a buyer perceives as an ideal number of sales calls, the buyer will experience confirmation of expectations. The buyer had an expectation in mind, and it was met. If there is a gap between actual and ideal, the buyer is experiencing disconfirmation. Exceeding what a buyer perceives as ideal results in positive disconfirmation; failing to meet what a buyer perceives as ideal is negative disconfirmation.

However, this study is designed to examine only what occurs when a salesperson meets/does not meet a buyer's expectations. There are two reasons for this. First, it is likely that there is no additional benefit gained from exceeding a buyer's number of ideal sales calls. Exceeding a buyer's ideal number of calls will have diminishing, and eventually negative returns. The relationship is most likely an inverted U shape (Lodish 1971).

The second reason is that, upon collection of the data, only seven subjects (less than 10 percent) exceeded what their buyers felt was ideal, and none of them exceeded the ideal number by a significant margin (the highest was two). A chi-square difference test was run between a model of the ME group including these seven exceeders and a model not including them. There were no significant differences from the ME group model with or without the seven exceeders. These seven subjects were removed from the study for fear that their inclusion may somehow bias the results. The study will focus only on confirmation (meeting what a buyer perceives as ideal) and negative disconfirmation (not meeting what a buyer perceives as ideal). Prior research has shown that when a buyer experiences confirmation of expectations, the results can be increased satisfaction and intent to repurchase (Smith and Hunt 1987). Research also shows that when a buyer experiences negative disconfirmation, complaint behavior experiences a significant increase (Kivela, Inbakaran, and Reece 1999).

**LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT**

**Actual Versus Ideal Number of Sales Calls per Month**

When a buyer is considering purchasing from a given supplier, the buyer forms certain expectations concerning what outcomes will occur within the relationship (Oliver 1980). For example, a buyer will form an expectation about the number of times sales calls should be received from the salesperson in a given time period (ideal number of sales calls). From this expectation, the buyer will be able to form an evaluation of the supplier and the salesperson's actual number of sales calls. It is likely that a buyer's perception of what is ideal could be influenced by past relationships with salespeople (Vroom and MacCrimmon 1968). Given that there is little literature on disconfirmation theory with regard to expected number of sales calls, the literature pertaining to disconfirmation theory and service quality, which contains actual versus ideal number of sales calls under its umbrella of concepts (Kumar, Venkatesan, and Reinartz 2008), will be examined.

Service quality is defined as the difference between a customer's expectation and perception of the service delivered (Santos and Mathews 2001). According to Parasuraman, Berry, and Zeithaml (1985), the size of the gap that occurs between a buyer's expectation of a supplier's performance and the buyer's perception of actual performance is an antecedent of service quality perception. Dwyer, Schurr, and Oh (1987) and Morgan and Hunt (1994) indicate that a positive relationship exists between shared values and relationship commitment. Shared values are defined as the degree to which a buyer and a supplier “have beliefs in common about what behaviors, goals, and policies are important/unimportant, appropriate/inappropriate, and right/wrong” (Morgan and Hunt 1994, p. 24). For example, when a supplier and buyer share the same views about the appropriate number of sales calls and a salesperson acts to make the appropriate number of sales calls, confirmation occurs.

**Perceived Commitment**

Rutherford et al. defined buyer's perception of the salesperson's commitment as “the buyer's belief about the salesperson's desire to develop a stable relationship, the buyer's belief about the selling firm's willingness to make short-term sacrifices to maintain the relationship, and the buyer's level of confidence in the stability of the relationship” (2008 p. 248). When a salesperson involves the buyer by asking his or her opinion of what is ideal, the buyer will take this as an indication that the salesperson is committed to the relationship. However, when a buyer perceives that he or she is nurturing the relationship more than the salesperson, the opposite occurs (Jap and Ganesan 2000). Ross, Anderson, and Weitz (1997) found that outcomes experienced by buyers are more positive when they perceive the commitment of the salesperson to be higher than their own.

**Satisfaction**

Dwyer, Schurr, and Oh (1987) defined satisfaction as a positive affective state caused by a buyer's evaluation of all the aspects of his or her working relationship with a salesperson. Using a customer-oriented approach generates a higher level of satisfaction than a selling-oriented approach (Goff et al. 1997). Westbrook (1981) found that interpersonal factors influence a buyer's evaluation of instrumental factors, which are the more quantifiable factors typically considered in a buyer–seller relationship. For example, the greater the rate of constructive communication concerning the ideal number of sales calls, the higher the level of buyer satisfaction (Selnes 1998).
Perceived Commitment and Satisfaction

In their study of retail buyers, Jap and Ganesan (2000) found that retailers who perceived their suppliers to be more committed to the relationship had increased levels of relationship satisfaction. When buyers and salespeople work together, the buyer’s perception of compatibility will increase.

Increased perceptions of compatibility, along with financial and product/service quality improvements that potentially occur as a result, causes an increase in buyer satisfaction with the salesperson (Anderson and Narus 1990). One way mutuality and compatibility can be communicated to a buyer is by a salesperson inquiring about and delivering an acceptable number of sales calls. Previous research on expectancy (Vroom and MacCrimmon 1968) has shown that when a buyer’s expectations are met, one outcome is an increased level of satisfaction. This leads to our first hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1a: A buyer’s perception of a salesperson’s commitment will be positively related to the buyer’s satisfaction with the relationship.

Hypothesis 1b: The relationship between a buyer’s perception of a salesperson’s commitment and the buyer’s satisfaction with the relationship will be significantly stronger when the salesperson meets the buyer’s expectations.

Trust

Interpersonal trust, as defined by Rotter (1980), is one’s generalized expectation that another individual’s word or promise can be relied on in the absence of contrary evidence. Doney and Cannon (1997) found that frequency of calls positively affects a buyer’s trust in the salesperson. Communication bolsters trust in a buyer–seller relationship by lowering conflict, resolving disputes, and coordinating perceptions and expectations (Etgar 1976). Anderson and Narus (1990), indicated that communication holds the unique position of being both an antecedent and outcome of trust. Past communication builds trust, which then influences and improves future communication. Therefore, if past communication from a salesperson is perceived by the buyer as being “frequent and of high quality, as well as relevant, timely and reliable,” the buyer’s level of trust will increase (Morgan and Hunt 1994, p. 26).

Perceived Commitment and Trust

Perceptions of a salesperson’s specific commitments to a buyer–seller relationship, that is, the positive statements and actions of a salesperson that a buyer uses to make judgments about the salesperson’s level of commitment, will increase a buyer’s trust in a supplier (Ganesan 1994). Doney and Cannon (1997) found that trust emerges through a buyer’s “interpretation and assessment” of a salesperson’s motives. The buyer analyzes the communication and behavior coming from the salesperson, which generates the buyer’s perceptions regarding the salesperson’s intentions (Lindskold 1978). When expectations are met, buyers will form a belief that these expectations will continue to be met in the future. This belief leads to the buyer developing a level of trust with the salesperson (Oliver 1974), therefore, we posit:

Hypothesis 2a: A buyer’s perception of salesperson commitment will be positively related to the buyer’s trust in the relationship.

Hypothesis 2b: The relationship between a buyer’s perception of a salesperson’s commitment and the buyer’s trust in the salesperson will be significantly stronger when the salesperson meets a buyer’s expectations.

Commitment

Perceived Commitment and Commitment

Commitment is the psychological and sociological bond that gives buyers and sellers in a relationship the desire to work through difficulties (Tellefsen and Thomas 2004). If a buyer perceives the salesperson is committed to the relationship, this will lead to the buyer being more committed (Anderson and Weitz 1992). Typically, for a relationship to last, buyers and sellers in stable relationships have similar levels of commitment to one another. Gaps in commitment lead to unstable relationships due to one party’s relative vulnerability compared to the other (Heide and Miner 1992). This is a classic example of Gouldner’s (1960) “norm of reciprocity” at work. If a buyer perceives the salesperson is committed to him or her, the buyer feels an obligation to be committed back to the salesperson:

Hypothesis 3a: A buyer’s perception of a salesperson’s commitment will be positively related to the buyer’s commitment to the relationship.

Hypothesis 3b: The relationship between a buyer’s perception of a salesperson’s commitment and the buyer’s commitment to the relationship will be significantly stronger when the salesperson meets a buyer’s expectations.

Satisfaction and Commitment

Satisfaction reinforces the buyer’s decision to participate in a relationship, which, over time, leads to commitment (Fornell 1992). Tax, Brown, and Chandrashekaran (1998) found that a customer’s satisfaction with how a complaint is handled has a positive effect on customer commitment to a supplier. Some sources do exist that would specify the reverse relationship between the two variables commitment and satisfaction (e.g.,
Stumpp et al. 2009). However, the overwhelming majority of research, as well as all research that has examined a sales or service context, positioned the relationship with satisfaction being the impetus, while commitment is the outcome:

Hypothesis 4a: A buyer's satisfaction with a salesperson will be positively related to the buyer’s commitment to the relationship.

Hypothesis 4b: The relationship between a buyer's satisfaction with a salesperson and the buyer's commitment to that salesperson will be significantly stronger when a salesperson meets a buyer’s expectations.

Trust and Commitment

When a buyer commits to a relationship, the buyer is making him- or herself vulnerable to the salesperson (Morgan and Hunt 1994). The buyer is relying on the salesperson to interpret and evaluate the buyer's wants and needs as well as to find satisfactory solutions to problems. If the salesperson has opportunistic intentions, the buyer could suffer harm. Buyers will be more committed to salespeople who have earned their trust (Morgan and Hunt 1994). Tellefsen and Thomas (2004) have shown that the link between personal trust and commitment is of importance in business-to-business service relationships. Services cannot be examined in advance. As a result, one of the factors a buyer must use in making an evaluation of the level of commitment he or she is willing to make is his or her level of trust in the supplier (Parasuraman, Berry, and Ziemthaml 1991), which leads to our next hypothesis:

Hypothesis 5a: A buyer’s trust in a salesperson will be positively related to the buyer’s commitment to the relationship.

Hypothesis 5b: The relationship between a buyer’s trust in a salesperson and the buyer’s commitment to the relationship will be significantly stronger when the salesperson meets a buyer’s expectations.

Perceived Performance

Performance is defined as an evaluation of salesperson behavior based on the benefits he or she brings to the organization (Churchill et al. 1985). Stank, Emmelhainz, and Daugherty (1996) found that information exchange has a direct, positive effect on evaluations of salesperson performance. Cunningham and Roberts (1974) found that the level of service quality provided by a salesperson directly influences a buyer's perception of supplier performance. Tyagi (1985) found that a key factor influencing performance is the motivation of the sales representative. A motivated salesperson will strive to determine the buyer’s ideal number of sales calls and meet that number.

Commitment and Perceived Performance

Since no research exists on how an individual buyer’s personal commitment to a salesperson affects his or her perceptions of a salesperson’s performance, the parallel research done in the area of relationship commitment, which looks at how commitment affects performance, will be drawn upon. Research conducted in the European airline industry examined commitment and its effect on the service performance gap—the asymmetry that occurs when performance does not meet expected standards (Chenet, Tynan, and Money 2000). Findings indicate that relationship commitment positively influences perceived performance, mediated through cooperation. According to Oliver (1974), confirmation of expectations indirectly influences salesperson performance:

Hypothesis 6a: A buyer’s commitment to a salesperson will be positively related to the buyer’s perception of the salesperson’s performance.

Hypothesis 6b: The relationship between a buyer’s commitment to a salesperson and the buyer’s perception of the salesperson’s performance will be significantly stronger when the salesperson meets a buyer’s expectations.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

Business customers of a Fortune 100 firm selling high-tech communication systems were surveyed for our study. Each customer spent, on average, $1 million annually with the selling firm and was designated by the selling firm as a national account. The sales force identified a key informant in each account that was in the best in position to respond to questions in the survey. Seventy-four percent of those surveyed were buyers who also had additional responsibilities within the firm, the rest held the title of purchasing agent. Sixty-eight percent of the respondents were male and had over seven years of work experience in his or her present position. Firms that were international in scope made up 41 percent of the sample, and 58 percent had annual sales in excess of $75 million. Concerning organization type, 28 percent were involved in manufacturing, 29 percent in service, 6 percent in wholesale, 7 percent in retail, and 28 percent were categorized as other. Of the purchasers, 5 percent performed the function solo while the other 95 percent were part of a buying center. Concerning the main purchaser, 2 percent were chief executive offices, 7 percent were vice presidents, 26 percent were managers, and the remaining 65 percent were classified as other.

Four hundred randomly selected subjects received the questionnaire through the mail. The questionnaire was sent a second time to increase the response rate. A total usable sample of 203 respondents (210 if the subjects that exceeded
what is ideal were included) was obtained for a response rate of 50.75 percent. Of the 203 respondents, 82 said that their ideal number of face-to-face contacts was more than their actual number of face-to-face contacts (the UE group), while the other 121 said that their actual number met their ideal number (the ME group).

Although the sample size for each group may be considered low by traditional structural equation modeling (SEM) methods, research done by Marsh et al. (1998, p. 213) shows that samples sizes as small as 50 can legitimately be tested if the ratio of indicators per factor is at least 4 to 1. The indictors-to-factor ratio in this study's proposed model is 4.8 to 1. The Marsh et al. (1998, p. 214) study does limit the generalizability of its findings, stating that for sample sizes less than 100, 6 to 12 indicators per factor is what is preferred. However, the guidelines of the Marsh et al. study, combined with work done by Boomsma and Hoogland (2001), indicate that sample size, while small, is not causing skewed or inaccurate results.

All of the constructs are reported by the buyers, potentially causing issues of common method bias (Podsakoff et al. 2003). However, the resulting tests indicate that common method variance is not a problem. Table 1 contains all the scale items, their source, and their reliability estimates. The measures for buyer’s perception of salesperson performance were developed specifically for this study. Before designing the questionnaire, depth interviews and focus groups were

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item Description Summary</th>
<th>Reliability</th>
<th>Scale Type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Commitment (4 Items); Anderson and Weitz (1992)</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>7-point Likert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My account executive is willing to make long-term investments in helping us.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My account executive sees our relationship as a long-term alliance.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My account executive is willing to do whatever it takes to make our sales grow.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My account executive has a strong sense of loyalty to my firm.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction (5 Items); Dwyer, Schurr, and Oh (1987)</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>7-point Likert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In general, I am very satisfied with my relationship with my firm’s account executive.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall, my account executive is a good person to do business with.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My account executive provides a satisfactory level of service.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All in all, my company’s account executive deals fairly with me.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall, my account executive is an asset to my company.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust (8 Items); Crosby, Evans, and Cowles (1990)</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>7-point Likert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My account executive can be relied upon to keep their promises.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There are times when I find my account executive to be a bit insincere. (reverse coded)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I find it necessary to be cautious in dealing with my account executive. (reverse coded)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My account executive is trustworthy.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My account executive and I play a game—they try to sell me a lot of product and I try to avoid buying it. (reverse coded)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My account executive puts my firm’s interests before his own.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some people, including my account executive, are not above “bending the truth” to create the impression they want. (reverse coded)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I suspect that my account executive has sometimes withheld certain pieces of critical information that may have affected my decision making. (reverse coded)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment (5 Items); Anderson and Weitz (1992)</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>7-point Likert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have a strong sense of loyalty to my account executive.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am always on the lookout for other salespeople to purchase from. (reverse coded)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If another account executive had a better product, I would use it, even if it meant losing my account executive. (reverse coded)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am not very committed to my account executive. (reverse coded)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am patient with my account executive when they make mistakes that cause me trouble.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Performance (2 Items); Current Study</td>
<td>0.93*</td>
<td>7-point Likert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would rate the performance of my account executive as excellent.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My account executive performs better than most salespeople I deal with.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Value is a correlation coefficient.
conducted with approximately 50 salespeople, sales managers, and staff managers in the supplier firm. In addition, depth interviews were conducted with customers who purchases the firm's products or services. Scale development was guided by the input received from field interviews.

Analysis and Results

Data were analyzed using LISREL 8.7. A confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to test that the relationships between observed and latent constructs behaved as expected. The measurement model showed good fit, according to the standards recommended by Hu and Bentler (1999). The model had a chi-square of 349.22 with 189 degrees of freedom ($p < 0.00$), and displayed strong fit statistics (SRMR [standardized root mean square residual] = 0.04, CFI [comparative fit index] = 0.99, RMSEA [root mean square error of approximation] = 0.06).

The UE group had a chi-square of 319.52 with 197 degrees of freedom ($p < 0.00$). The fit statistics indicate good fit (SRMR = 0.05, CFI = 0.98, RMSEA = 0.07). The ME group had a chi-square of 279.05 with 197 degrees of freedom ($p < 0.00$). The fit statistics (SRMR = 0.05, CFI = 0.98, RMSEA = 0.07) indicate that the data fit the model. The multi-group analysis was performed in accordance with the three-step process recommended by Steenkamp and Baumgartner (1998). The first step in the multigroup analysis was to test for configural invariance. The result of the multigroup comparison was a chi-square of 701.68 with 388 degrees of freedom ($p < 0.00$). Both the ME group and UE group had an SRMR of 0.05. The combined CFI was 0.97, and even though the RMSEA is marginal at 0.09, the results still meet Hu and Bentler's (1999) criteria for good fit. These results indicate that configural invariance holds.

The next step was to examine metric invariance. The resulting multigroup analysis had a chi-square of 710.82 with 405 degrees of freedom ($p < 0.00$). Both the ME group and UE group had an SRMR of 0.06 and the combined CFI was 0.97. While the RMSEA was 0.09, overall, Hu and Bentler's (1999) criteria for good fit were met. Metric invariance was tested with a chi-square difference test, the results of which were a chi-square of 9.14 with 17 degrees of freedom ($p = 0.00$). Since the model was not significantly affected, metric invariance holds.

The final step was to test for scalar invariance. The final multigroup analysis resulted in a chi-square of 725.87 with 416 degrees of freedom ($p = 0.00$). The ME group had an SRMR of 0.05 and the UE group had an SRMR of 0.06. The combined CFI was 0.97 and the RMSEA was 0.08, meaning that all of the statistics fall within Hu and Bentler's (1999) recommended standards. The chi-square difference test between the scalar model and the metric model resulted in a chi-square of 15.05 with 11 degrees of freedom ($p = 0.18$). The model can now be tested for differences in the relationships between the two groups.

In order to test the directional hypotheses (H1a–H6a), parameter estimates must be examined for both significance and direction. H3a and H5a were partially supported, while the rest of the hypotheses received full support. Complete results for H1–H6 can be found in Table 2. Differential hypotheses (H1b–H6b) were tested by creating a second scalar model in which the link being investigated was held to equality. There is no chi-square difference test needed for H3b and H5b because the parameter estimates for each relationship were not significant for the UE group and significant for the ME group. This outcome provides support for H3b and H5b. Overall, all hypotheses were supported except for H1b. Complete results for H1b–H6b are in Table 2. A graphic representation of the results is in Figure 2.

DISCUSSION

Perceived commitment was found to positively influence satisfaction in both groups. This outcome is expected; however, there was not a significant difference between the two groups concerning the way perceived commitment affects satisfaction. This result was unexpected, as we had previously hypothesized (H1b) that the ME group would have a significantly stronger relationship between perceived commitment and satisfaction than the UE group. Perhaps the link between perceived commitment and satisfaction will persist even if the buyer does not feel the salesperson is maintaining enough contact. While the buyer would like to see the salesperson more, the lack of contact may not be viewed as a lack of commitment. The buyer may understand that he or she is not the only client the salesperson has; and while the salesperson's communication regularity may be subpar, the buyer still views the salesperson as well intentioned. Also, while buyers may desire more contact, they may realize that if something urgent is needed, they can always initiate contact with the salesperson. This knowledge will lead to the buyer achieving at least a minimum level of acceptable satisfaction with the salesperson.

There is some support for this explanation in previous research. Hung and Wong (2007) found that, when controlling for performance, effort alone was enough to increase a customer's satisfaction with a salesperson or relationship, regardless of outcome. The results of these studies indicate that if a buyer perceives a salesperson being committed (trying their best, putting forth effort, etc.) regardless of results, this is enough to increase customer satisfaction.

Another issue that may be at work here is a lack of attractive alternatives. The company from which the data were acquired is a long-time leader in its field. According to Sharma and Patterson (2000), the presence of attractive alternatives does
Table 2
Summary of Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hypotheses</th>
<th>UE Group</th>
<th>ME Group</th>
<th>Chi-Square Difference</th>
<th>Result</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>H1a</td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td>0.81</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H2a</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H3a</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Partially supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H4a</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>0.97</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H5a</td>
<td>-0.1</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Partially supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H6a</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td>1.37</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>t-Values</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>H1b</td>
<td>8.34</td>
<td>9.78</td>
<td>0.03, df = 1 (p = 0.86)</td>
<td>Not supported</td>
</tr>
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<td>H2b</td>
<td>8.39</td>
<td>11.16</td>
<td>4.59, df = 1 (p = 0.03)</td>
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<td>H3b</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>3.74</td>
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<td>H4b</td>
<td>2.38</td>
<td>5.96</td>
<td>6.42, df = 1 (p = 0.01)</td>
<td>Supported</td>
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<td>H5b</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>2.52</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H6b</td>
<td>10.85</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>10.52, df = 1 (p = 0.00)</td>
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</table>

Notes: N/A = not applicable; df = degrees of freedom. All significance was measured at the p < 0.05 level. Values in italics indicate nonsignificance.

Figure 2
Model Results

Notes: Hypotheses in italics indicate no significant differences between groups. PC = perceived commitment; SAT = satisfaction; COM = commitment; Per. PERF = perceived performance.
moderate the link between commitment to a relationship and satisfaction with that relationship. The fact that the company is a leader in its field may mean that even if the buyer is not fully satisfied, he or she may still decide to remain with the current supplier because it is still the most attractive option, even with service that does not meet expectations.

The link between a buyer's perception of a salesperson's commitment and the buyer's actual commitment to that salesperson was significant only for the ME group. This result needs some further explanation. Perhaps, while the buyers in UE group may perceive the salesperson as committed even with their lack of contact, the buyers are unwilling to commit to that salesperson. The buyers are more than willing to do business, but this lack of meeting expectations is causing them to want to keep their options open. In case of a service failure, the buyer wants to have alternatives available, so the buyer continues to do business with other firms and salespeople as well, possibly by adopting a multiple supplier strategy to spread the risk around.

The link between trust and commitment was significant only for the ME group. This unanticipated result may have an explanation similar to the perceived commitment–commitment linkage. If a buyer feels that his or her expectations are not being met, the buyer may still have trust in a salesperson. However, the salesperson's inferior performance leads to that buyer being unwilling to commit to that salesperson. The buyer trusts that the salesperson will act in the buyer's best interest and not take advantage of him or her; but the buyer has no faith in that salesperson's ability to perform consistently and fulfill his or her obligations.

Implications

The results of this research provide evidence that when a salesperson contacts a buyer with the expected frequency, as perceived by the buyer, the buyer is more committed to and more trusting of the salesperson. Given these results, salespeople who meet this ideal number will see increases in relational aspects. In addition, the buyer–seller relationship is more likely to continue long term as opposed to relationships where relational aspects are held to a minimum.

The findings suggest that when the salesperson reaches the ideal number of calls, the buyer perceives the salesperson to be more committed to the relationship and also evaluates the salesperson's performance as being higher. The level of perceived performance in the ME group was 5 percent higher than the level for the UE group. Given this information, salespeople can increase their level of performance as rated by the buyer by matching ideal and actual number of sales calls. While a 5 percent increase in perceived performance for one customer may not seem like much, considered over time across the entire customer base of a firm there could be great implications for improvement in financial performance. Reichheld and Sasser (1990) found that a 5 percent increase in performance can lead to an almost 100 percent increase in profits.

Also, regardless of whether one perceives a 5 percent increase as trivial, the minimal amount of effort necessary to obtain the proper information and implement the strategy makes it almost senseless not to consider. After managers obtain this information, they should consider the costs of making additional sales calls. Recent studies estimate the cost of one face-to-face sales call to range from $400 to $1,200 (Weitz, Castleberry, and Tanner 2007). Prior research has suggested using the customer lifetime value framework (Rust, Zeithaml, and Lemon 2004) to determine which buyer–supplier relationships are worthy of this increased attention.

Given that a manager chooses to pursue matching actual and ideal number of sales calls for customers who are deemed profitable, there are several ways in which a sales manager can obtain this information. Call reports could be reviewed to see how often the customer is called on. Many sales managers already monitor the call frequencies of their sales force through a customer relationship management system. Managers could determine the buyer's desired level of sales calls. This information could possibly be obtained by (1) having the sales force ask the buyer, (2) using a customer satisfaction survey, or (3) the sales manager contacting the buyer directly. While there will be some expenses involved in obtaining this information, the costs may be minimal considering the possible long-term increases in profitability.

Examining the individual linkages reveals some additional implications for practitioners. This study extends our understanding of a buyer's perception of salesperson commitment on the buyer–seller relationship. Building on the Anderson and Weitz (1992) model, which examined commitment within a distribution channel context, the current study examines the outcomes of buyer's perception of commitment within a sales context. Consistent with the Anderson and Weitz study, this study finds that buyer's perception of salesperson commitment is related to buyer's commitment. Furthermore, the significance level examined within this study is at the 0.05 level, whereas in the Anderson and Weitz study it was at the 0.1 level; it therefore yields stronger support for the existence of the relationship. This example of Gouldner's (1960) norm of reciprocity indicates that if buyers feel that salespeople are committed to them, their company, and to the relationship, they will respond in kind by exhibiting their own commitment, and thereby reducing their propensity to leave.

Sales managers can take advantage of this information; for example, returning calls in a timely manner, delivering on promises, and handling issues of dissatisfaction quickly and completely can vastly improve a buyer's perception of salesperson commitment, in turn leading to a buyer that is more committed to the relationship. Sales managers should
train their salespeople to make consistent, although not too frequent, contact with each of their customers to assess any needs/dissatisfactions, in turn letting the buyer know the salesperson is aware of their unique needs and wants (LaForge, Young, and Hamm 1983).

Limitations and Future Research

Like all studies, this research has some limitations. The first issue encountered was that this study examined only results from the perspective of the buyer. With additional insight from salespeople, more information could have been obtained as to why they choose to call on buyers a certain number of times in a given month. These relational dyads would allow researchers to search for gaps in congruence across a variety of relational and other aspects that would provide additional insights and predictive capability into the interpersonal nature of the relationship between a buyer and a salesperson.

Also, the generalizability of this research may be affected due to this study examining only one selling firm in relation to many buying firms. Another issue is the examination of commitment–trust linkages in the model. These relationships would be best examined in the long term through a longitudinal study. The cross-sectional snapshot in time may not provide the clearest picture of what is at work within these linkages.

A third issue is the lack of longitudinal data. According to Oliver (1974, 1980), expectations change over time. What is being examined now is a point in time. A much more robust and revealing analysis would be to have several time periods for each buyer, more preferably some in which expectations were met and some in which they were not. This way we can see how a shift from expected to unexpected affects the buyer on an individual level.

Finally, the self-report nature of the study may have some unintended impact. This study, like many done in both sales and marketing, uses the self-reporting of its subjects to assess constructs and their relationships with other constructs. Self-reporting can lead to the possibility of attribution error, that is, attributing the cause of a phenomenon to something stable and internal when the cause is actually something contextual and external. Future research using relational dyads, as mentioned above, would be necessary to further advance this stream of research; using this should reduce (and possibly completely eliminate) problems with attribution error. An additional step to prevent attribution error is for future research to pull call logs from a company’s customer relationship management system instead of using buyer self-reports.

This study presents many areas for future research. First, research should be done to see if these linkages translate to the selling firm level as opposed to the salesperson level. The second area for future consideration is how the studied outcomes affect a buyer’s decision to continue in a relationship with a supplier. Also, the connections between perceived and actual constructs should be examined to determine the degree of accuracy. Research should examine congruency and disparity in a buyer’s perception of a salesperson’s performance and the managerial evaluation of that salesperson’s performance. Also, the question of how well a buyer’s perception of a salesperson’s commitment relates to that salesperson’s actual commitment should be addressed.

In a separate vein, another avenue of future research would be to examine how meeting buyer’s expectation across all forms of contact (face-to-face, telephone, other technology) affects salesperson performance. While it has been put forth in the current study that face-to-face sales calls are most important (see also Weitz, Castleberry, and Tanner 2007), it is not as if other forms of contact do not matter. This would give a more complete picture as to how communication can be used to strengthen the buyer–seller relationship. Finally, future research should examine additional dimensions of interaction with salespeople: interaction quality, relationship quality, and salesperson professionalism (Boujena, Johnston, and Merunka 2009).

CONCLUSIONS

This research provides a starting point for the topic of how actual versus ideal number of sales calls in a given time period affects the buyer–seller relationship. This research examined a model based on interpersonal interactions. The study addressed a gap in the service quality literature dealing with service levels in business-to-business relationships, establishing an additional way in which service quality can be evaluated (number of sales calls per month). In addition, the study reinforces the relationships between service quality and five aspects of a buyer–seller relationship (perceived commitment, satisfaction, trust, commitment, and perceived performance). Finally, this research positions actual versus ideal number of sales calls as having a significant influence on the relationships between common buyer–seller constructs. In essence, salespeople who call on their customers the ideal number of times, as opposed to failing to reach the buyers ideal number, will experience an overall positive effect that will help strengthen the relationship in the long term.

REFERENCES


