

## SALESPERSON NETWORKING BEHAVIORS AND CREATIVITY: EXPLORING AN UNCONVENTIONAL RELATIONSHIP

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*A great deal of emerging research explores the antecedents and outcomes of salesperson creativity. However, relatively fewer scholarly endeavors have delved into assessing the social antecedents of salesperson creativity. Addressing this issue, the current research focuses on the link between one critical social antecedent in sales research, namely that of networking behaviors, and creativity among salespeople. Specifically, we include customer and professional networking behaviors and study their direct, interactive, and curvilinear effects on salesperson creativity. Empirical findings show that professional networking as well as customer networking are positively related to salesperson creativity. Further, we demonstrate the non-linear effects of professional networking on the salesperson's creativity. Finally, we report that the salesperson's creativity is positively related to adaptive selling. These findings suggest that salesperson networking behaviors must be examined and carefully leveraged to gain tactical advantages.*

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### INTRODUCTION

Creativity is used generally to describe the generation of novel and useful ideas, products, processes and solutions (Perry-Smith, 2006; Scott & Bruce, 1994). Scholars consider creativity as a critical skill for relationship management (Bradford et al., 2010) and the development of innovative sales approaches (Strutton, Pentina, & Pullins, 2009). One area that is relatively sparse within the salesperson creativity literature lies in the social antecedents of the salesperson's creativity (Amabile, 1983; Woodman, Sawyer & Griffin, 1993). In the profession of selling, which by nature is built upon social communications (Bagozzi, 2006), a salesperson's job is embedded within an array of social interactions (Bradford et al., 2010). Further, research reinforces the value of social interactions, because "social interactions with others in a domain should enhance one's understanding of the area and facilitate the generation of approaches that are feasible and unique" (Perry-Smith, 2006, p. 86).

The value of social interactions lies in the inherent information sharing, which enables creativity (Amabile & Khaire, 2008). One common form of salesperson social interactions is their networking behaviors, the degree to which salespeople engage in social interactions that possess the potential to assist them in their work and career (Forrett & Dougherty, 2004). Networking behavior has been noted as an important ability for one's career (Todd, Harris, Harris & Wheeler, 2009), and serves as a means of enhancing one's growth and development (Thompson, 2005). Hence, we suggest that networking behaviors plausibly lead to creative behaviors and enable greater adaptation in one's selling efforts.

This paper focuses on two common forms of salesperson networking behaviors, that of customer networking and professional networking. Salespeople must network with customers in order to develop and maintain relationships; and customers provide a source of ideas and understanding. Similarly, professionals may share their insights and best practices and provide exposure to information that may be critical to understanding the environment. The salesperson's quest lies in uniting the information from these respective

parties and incorporating them into the salesperson's own knowledge base. With an increased knowledge base, salespeople can pursue adaptive approaches in their selling behaviors (e.g., Weitz, Sujan & Sujan, 1986). Yet, the extent to which these networking behaviors can individually and synergistically enhance creativity has not been examined. It is plausible that the salesperson who increasingly engages with customers devotes less time to engage in professional networking opportunities. Thus, we examine the consequences of greater levels of customer and professional networking when evaluated individually.

Building upon the logic that "simple linear effects might be masking much deeper fundamental forces" (Singh, 1998, p. 69), past research (e.g., Johnson, 2014; Johnson & Sohi, 2014; Rapp, Bachrach & Rapp, 2013) has integrated non-linear effects into sales examinations. Because the inclusion of such non-linear terms can enhance the probity of sales relationships and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the effects of networking behaviors on salesperson outcomes, we propose and examine the curvilinear effects of salesperson networking behaviors on creativity. The literature supports our approach, as sales researchers have recently revisited salesperson-related variables such as customer orientation (Homburg, Müller, & Klarmann, 2011) and report non-monotonic relationships between such variables and performance. For the current research, we utilize the idea of information load that is defined as "complex mixture of the quantity, ambiguity and variety of information that people are forced to process" (Weick, 1995, p. 87) and explore the possibility that when salespeople are excessively engaged in networking behaviors, their creativity may be impacted.

In sum, our over-arching research goal is to evaluate the impact of networking behaviors on creativity and adaptive selling. To do so we develop a model linking networking behaviors to salesperson creativity and adaptive selling. We examine the linear, interactive, and curvilinear effects of networking behaviors (customer and professional oriented) on salesperson creative behaviors. We test our hypothesized linkages with a sample of

salespeople and conclude with results, implications and pathways for future exploration. In doing so, our research responds to recent calls for research on creativity in sales (Agnihotri, Rapp, Andzulis & Gabler, 2014) and we contribute to the literature and practice by (1) drawing research attention to a widely-acknowledged but seldom examined component of salesperson networking behaviors, (2) providing broader evidence of the value of networking behaviors in enhancing salesperson creative behaviors, (3) developing a foundation for actionable management practice, as behaviors are visible, diagnostic, and able to be trained and monitored.

### SALESPERSON CREATIVITY

Creativity is a critical success factor for organizations (Lassk & Shepherd, 2013; Miao & Wang, 2016). Despite its ability to add value to the organization (Groza, Locander & Howlett, 2016), it has been one of the under-researched area in the sales literature (Evans, McFarland, Dietz & Jaramillo, 2012).

Past research has analyzed creativity as both an exogenous and an endogenous variable and has shown various antecedents and outcomes of creativity. The recent research has delved into a number of personal and attitudinal antecedents that plausibly enhance creativity. Specifically, Lassk & Shepherd (2013) show that the emotional intelligence of salespeople is related positively to creativity, and Groza et al. (2016) show that certain thinking styles can also enhance creativity. Relatedly, Sousa & Coelho (2011) posit that organizational commitment of frontline employees increases creativity in the job; and Gong, Cheung, Wang & Huang, (2012) argue that customer trust increases employee creativity.

Further, a limited number of explorations have hypothesized that certain antecedents, after some point, may have diminishing levels of returns on creativity. As such, this line of research has analyzed the non-linear antecedents of creativity. Gilson and Shalley (2004) show that organizational tenure has a non-linear relationship with creativity, such that moderate levels of tenure will result in the greatest level of creative behaviors. Similarly, Zhou, Shin, Brass, Choi & Zhang (2009)

empirically demonstrate that the number of an individual's contacts possesses a curvilinear relationship with creativity, thereby exhibiting an inverted U-shape relationship; and Suh & Badrinarayanan (2014) find that international experience possesses a curvilinear relationship with creativity.

Creativity also adds value to the organization, customer outcomes and the relationship process. The literature demonstrates that salesperson creativity may help in achieving customer satisfaction (e.g., Strutton et al., 2009), assist in developing customized solutions to customer problems (Wang & Netemeyer, 2004), and be useful in identifying customers' latent needs (Coelho, Augusto & Lages, 2011). Similarly, Coelho et al. (2011) argue that creative employees are better able to service their customers and solve customers' problems in an efficient manner; and creativity has been found to increase service behaviors (Agnihotri et al., 2014) and sales performance (Agnihotri et al., 2014; Martinaityte and Sacramento, 2013).

From our review of the literature, we surmise that recent studies has examined primarily attitudinal rather than behavioral antecedents of creativity. Further, knowing that one of the key elements to successful sales performance lies with the salesperson's adaptive selling abilities (Franke & Park, 2006), the literature examining links between the two variables is relatively sparse.

For our study, we examine creativity in a manner consistent with past research. Our conceptualization focuses on the salesperson's creative behavior, the generation of novel and useful ideas, products, processes and solutions (Ganesan & Weitz, 1996, Perry-Smith 2006, Scott & Bruce, 1994; Wang & Netemeyer, 2004). As such, our research question lies in what salesperson behaviors produce the creative behaviors that enable adaptiveness (i.e. where does the source of information emanate).

## MODEL DEVELOPMENT

### Networking Behaviors

Two prominent creativity models (Amabile, 1988; Woodman et al., 1993), propose that

social-based factors are important antecedents to creativity. Social interactions enable an information pipeline for the salesperson to add to their existing conceptual networks and understanding. The information pipeline provided by social interactions is important, as sales creativity results from both the acquisition of useful information, and its integration with existing knowledge to produce novel and useful ideas and behaviors (Wang & Netemeyer, 2004). Therefore, when the salesperson is faced with a task or problem, he or she reactivates the stored, relevant information which may be combined with the new information thereby enabling the commensurate response mechanism—a creative response (Coelho & Augusto, 2010; Agnihotri et al., 2014).

Similarly, the literature on organizational socialization re-affirms the value of social interactions, especially within work contexts. Socialization is defined as “the process by which an individual acquires the social knowledge and skills necessary to assume an organizational role” (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979, p. 3). Socialization involves a series of personal interactions which provide a pathway toward enhanced communication (Gupta & Govindarajan, 2000), and these social interactions enable individuals to learn about skills and information to conduct their position (Van Maanen and Schein, 1979).

One type of social interaction that is important to salespeople lies in their networking behaviors. Networking behaviors are “aimed at building and maintaining informal relationships that possess the (potential) benefit of facilitating work-related activities of individuals” (Forret & Dougherty, 2001). Networking behaviors represent an individual's investment to develop fruitful relationships. Similarly, networking behaviors have been shown as a means to exchange important information and resources (Joshi, 2006; Tsai & Ghoshal, 1998)

Networking behaviors enable salespeople to associate with individuals who can aid them in their career, such as by providing information, knowledge and even competitive intelligence. For salespeople, networking behaviors have long been recognized as an important tool for their careers. Scholars note the importance of

networking behaviors, as it has been observed as an important career skill (Todd et al., 2009), and an approach to personal growth and development (Thompson, 2005). For instance, managerial success is related to the time invested in social networking (Luthans, Hodgetts & Rosenkrantz, 1988); and the ability to develop and perpetuate relationships aids in an array of employment-related endeavors (e.g., Forret & Dougherty, 2004).

### Conceptual Model

When applied to our research context, our conceptual model incorporates two common forms of salesperson networking, that of customer networking and professional networking, as antecedents to creative behavior. The customer networking variable describes the extent to which the salesperson develops and nurtures relationships with potential and existing customers. The literature reaffirms the value of customer networking, as scholarship has noted that “salespeople span the boundary between the firm and its customers, they are responsible for developing, maintaining, and expanding these customer relationships” (Bradford et. al., 2010, p. 240).

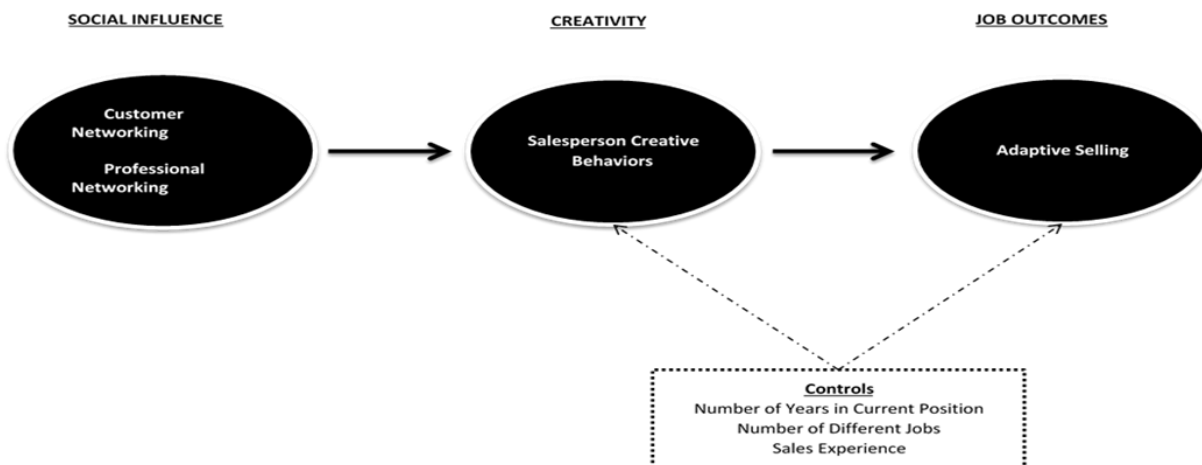
Our second antecedent lies in professional networking which describes the extent to which the salesperson develops and nurtures relationships with other industry professionals who have the potential to assist the salesperson with his/her work and career. Past research on

professional networking has shown its positive effects on sales outcomes. Clarke (2011) argues that participation in external networking events has positive effects on the self-efficacy of the salespeople. Further, Hartmann, Rutherford, Hamwi & Friend (2012) argue that participation in professional associations, an integral way to enhance external networking, increases the information flow for the salespeople by giving reliable information such as business trends. However, the effects of professional networking on creativity remains unexplored.

Further, our conceptual model follows the literature in seeking greater insight into the effects of these antecedents (Singh, 1998). As such, we seek to understand whether synergistic effects of the antecedents exist or whether beyond some optimal point, the positive effects of these antecedents diminish. As such, we test for interaction effects between the variables as well as the non-linear effects of the variables on creative behaviors. Finally, we integrate the link between creativity and adaptive selling. By doing so, we contribute to the literature by empirically determining how networking (both professional and customer) can help enhance the creativity of the salespeople.

*Customer Networking Behaviors and Salesperson’s Creative Behavior.* In our first hypothesis, we argue that customer networking behaviors are positively related to the salesperson’s creative behaviors. Research

**FIGURE 1:**  
**Theoretical Model**



suggests that a key factor for creativity lies in the exposure to diverse and novel information (Baer, 2010). We suggest that as the salesperson increasingly interacts with customers, the salesperson is exposed to a diversity of information.

First, research suggests that diverse forms of knowledge can emanate from one's customer base, which enable the exchange of information, awareness and understanding (Verbeke, Franses, Le Blanc, & Van Ruiten, 2008). Networking with customers enables the transfer of rich information (Daft & Lengel, 1986), and "the ability of information to change understanding..." (p. 559). Specifically, customer networking provides access to information about industry trends, local environments and potential impacts to the customer. By personally meeting and interacting with customers, salespeople are able to create greater understanding of information and unravel patterns, needs, marketplace trends. Second, the organizational behavior literature notes that tacit knowledge- knowledge that is sticky, complex and difficult to codify and transmit to others (Szulanski, 1996), is best relayed through personal interactions (Lu, Leung, & Koch, 2006). As the salesperson's networking behaviors increase, she is effectively building a tacit information pathway. Such information becomes a key knowledge resource for salespeople and can help salespeople promote actionable insights and thus develop novel ideas on serving customers. Because exposure to such new information is a key factor for creativity (Baer, 2010), networking with customers should have a positive impact on creativity.

Third, scholars (e.g., Sethi, Smith & Park, 2001) highlight the value of customer information and interpersonal interaction, as it enables greater understanding of needs, and may impel the salesperson to explore and develop greater original answers to meet the customers' challenges. In sum, as the salesperson's degree of customer networking increases, it enables exposure to a diversity of information, the opportunity to receive tacit information and an understanding of the customer that may propel the salesperson to integrate the new information into their existing knowledge and seek to develop unique and

novel solutions for their customer base.

H<sub>1</sub>: The greater the level of salesperson customer networking, the greater the salesperson's creative behaviors.

*Professional Networking Behaviors and Sales Creative Behavior.* We also suggest a greater extent of professional networking enhances the salesperson's creative behaviors. As noted by scholars (Newell & Simon, 1972), the exposure to perspectives that exist beyond an individual's focus, enables the individual to add to her knowledge stock and thereby enhance her potential "network of possible wanderings" (page 82). As the salesperson increasingly networks outside of the firm, she is exposed to unique ideas, perspectives and opinions that should enhance one's ability to develop a broader base of ideas and potential solutions within the sales domain. For instance, professionals may choose to attend seminars or conferences with the goal of gaining knowledge and information from others within their industry.

In addition, research has shown that information sharing increases among those with similar functional backgrounds (Bunderson & Sutcliffe, 2002). Hence, professional networking with other salespeople may create conduits of information and learning from others for future application. In effect, this unique and novel information gained from professional networking can add to one's personal repertoire of ideas, options, and worldviews, thereby enabling greater creative sales behaviors. Hence, we suggest the following:

H<sub>2</sub>: The greater the level of salesperson professional networking, the greater the salesperson's creative behaviors.

*Curvilinear Effects.* Recently, researchers have started arguing a potential curvilinear relationship between networking behaviors and creativity, suggesting a point of diminishing returns may exist (Baer, 2010). Hence, we suggest there may be some optimum degree of networking (e.g. customer and professional) on the salesperson's creative behaviors.

Further, one theory suggests that socially-based variables may possess a positive effect up to a point; however, beyond this point, the positive effect diminishes. For example, the social/

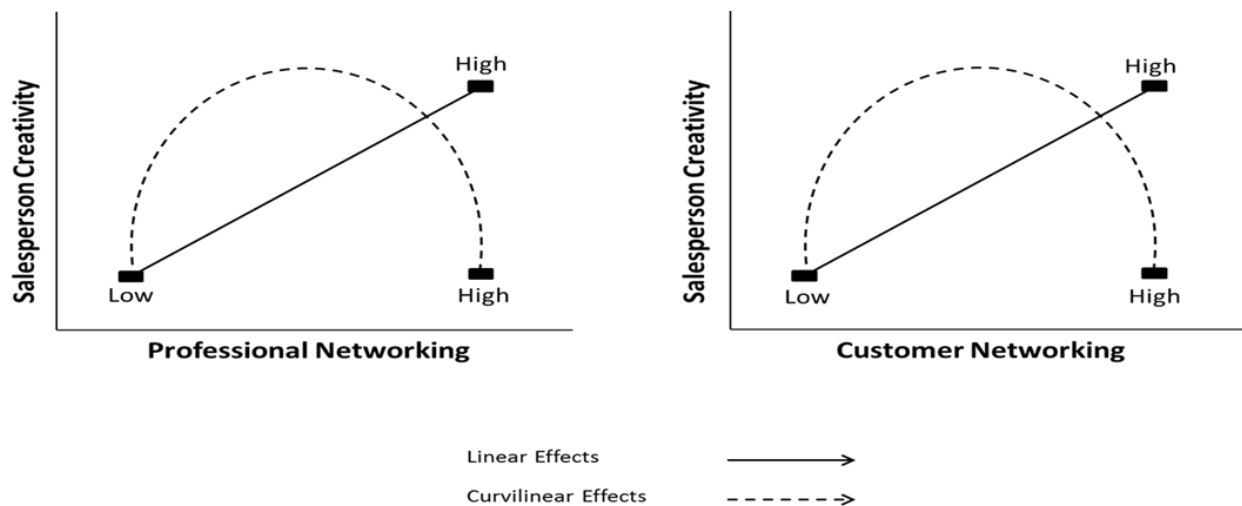
contextual factors evaluated through cognitive evaluation theory suggests the presence of non-linear effects. Cognitive evaluation theory states that contextual factors can play both an informational as well as a controlling role (Deci & Ryan, 1985) depending upon the situations. For example, in an organizational context, if an employee perceives contextual inputs as “supporting autonomy and promoting competence” such inputs have positive effects and are considered as *informational*. However, as the contextual input increases to a greater level it begins to yield a negative influence because it begins to represent *controlling* presence on the individual and employees “perceive them as pressure to think and behave in specified ways” (Coelho et al., 2011, p. 33). Therefore, we suggest it is important to test whether a nonlinear effect is possible between the networking variables and the salesperson’s creative behaviors.

Networking behaviors should positively affect salesperson creativity; however, it is possible that beyond some level, such behaviors may in fact hurt creativity. Conventional wisdom and theory supports the notion that a customer network helps salespeople access information and exposes the salesperson to a diverse level of information. However, it is also important to recognize the idea of maximum information

variety (Krackhardt, 1992). Beyond a certain level, customer networking interactions may effectively bring too much information. Salespeople who overly pursue customer networking behaviors may very well end up with information abundance that may be too diverse or difficult to interpret. Under such circumstances, the salesperson may find it difficult to develop and execute a creative response. Hence, a point of diminishing returns to customer networking may occur.

Similarly, with professional networking, the ability to sort, classify, and arrange the diverse information from other professionals may yield information overload. The greater levels of information may effectively create challenges for the salesperson in arranging and cataloging the information in novel and innovative ways (Hunter, 2004). The literature notes the potential for information overload in sales (Dixon, Gassenheimer & Barr, 2002) as well as the constraints on information processing (Simon, 1990). The additional information emanating from a high level of professional networking may effectively strain the salesperson and their temporal and cognitive resources. As such, as the salesperson’s professional networking extends beyond some optimal point, it may effectively deplete the salesperson’s ability to integrate these resources

**FIGURE 2:**  
**Hypotheses of Linear and Curvilinear Effects of Professional Networking and Customer Networking on Salesperson Creativity**



within their existing knowledge base, and thereby reduce their creative behaviors.

Hence, we submit:

H<sub>3</sub>: The effect of salesperson customer networking on salesperson's creative behaviors decreases as the extent of customer networking increases, such that an inverted u-shaped curve is expected.

H<sub>4</sub>: The effect of salesperson professional networking on salesperson's creative behaviors decreases as the extent of professional networking increases, such that an inverted u-shaped curve is expected.

*Interaction of Customer and Professional Networking.* We suggest that the simultaneous use of professional networking and customer networking may be synergistic. That is, a greater degree of customer networking and professional networking would effectively create a greater level of salesperson creativity. We align our approach with the literature on group cognition and creativity where researchers argue that it is the combination of expected *and* unexpected or obvious *and* non-obvious information emerging from social interactions that enhances creativity in group settings (e.g., Hargadon, 1999). In the sales context, a combination of customer and professional networking would provide insight and information diversity which would propel salesperson creativity. For instance, while customer networking may enable the flow of information regarding needs and resources, information emanating from professional networking, such as best practices and process enhancement, may serve as a worthy complement.

H<sub>5</sub>: Customer networking and professional networking interact in a synergistic manner, such that the greater the level of customer networking and professional networking interaction, the greater is the level of salesperson's creative behaviors.

### Outcome of Creativity

*Adaptive Selling.* Lastly, we hypothesize the positive downstream effects of creativity on adaptive selling. Adaptive selling has been described as, "the altering of sales behaviors

during a customer interaction or across customer interactions based on the perceived information about the nature of the selling situation" (Weitz et al., 1986, p. 174). Adaptive salespeople gauge cues from their customers (Franke & Park, 2006) and perform customer-oriented tasks (Arnett & Badrinarayanan, 2005; Hughes, Bon & Rapp, 2013). Similarly, Chen & Jaramillo (2014) show that adaptive selling is positively related to customer loyalty.

Reviews and meta-analytic studies, that have examined the antecedents of adaptive selling, suggest that the primary research focus has been on either salesperson or characteristics of the firm (Franke & Park, 2006; Román & Iacobucci, 2010). Franke & Park (2006) show that gender and experience of the salesperson are significant antecedents of adaptive selling behavior. They show that adaptive selling behavior increases with the experience of the salesperson; and female salespeople are more adaptive than male salespeople. Chai, Zhao & Babin (2012) empirically show that learning orientation serves as a significant positive predictor of adaptive selling behavior. Similarly, Limbu et al. (2016) purport that salesperson interpersonal skills such as empathy enhance adaptive selling behavior. Román & Iacobucci (2010) show that firms' customer orientation is positively related to adaptive selling. We extend the past research on adaptive selling by showing creativity as an important antecedent of adaptive selling behavior.

Weitz et al. (1986) suggest that effective adaptive selling results from both knowledge (how and when to adapt) and motivation. The development of more elaborate selling knowledge requires that salespeople possess the ability to acquire useful information and integrate it with existing sales knowledge (Weitz et al., 1986). Selling knowledge may emanate from the salesperson's own selling experience (Franke & Park, 2006), the sharing of experiences by seasoned, and senior salespeople or from the firm sharing market research (Sujan, Weitz & Sujan, 1988). However, adaptability may often require an expanded search for new technologies, ideas, and methods that can improve or completely change existing routines (Basadur & Gelade, 2006).



This premise suggests that new, unique ideas and information provide a means to update the salesperson's knowledge and thus increase their adaptive selling ability. For the salesperson that possesses creativity, she may be motivated to continually seek useful information to integrate with her existing knowledge and in effect expand her total knowledge base. This expanded knowledge base allows the salesperson to broaden her personal array of approaches and service solutions, which effectively allows the individual to adapt continually to dynamic sales environments.

H<sub>6</sub>: The greater the salesperson's creativity, the greater the salesperson's adaptive selling.

## METHODOLOGY

We obtained our sampling frame from a commercial list of salespeople employed within the real estate industry. We received 223 surveys, of which 217 were usable for a response rate of 12.5 percent. To examine for the potential for non-response bias, we tested for differences between early and late respondents on the outcome measures (Armstrong & Overton, 1977). The test yielded no significant differences between the groups, thereby suggesting non-response bias is unlikely to influence our study.

### Measurement

When possible, we used or adapted existing, validated measures (Appendix A). All measures were seven-point Likert scale and used multiple items.

*Salesperson creative behaviors* was adapted from the literature (Ganesan & Weitz, 1996; Scott & Bruce, 1994). It is a four-item Likert scale describing the salesperson's ability to generate new and novel ideas (e.g. "I try to be as creative as I can in my job"). *Adaptive selling* was adapted from the previous work in the sales literature (Robinson, Marshall, Moncrief & Lassk, 2002). It is a four-item Likert scale describing the salesperson's flexibility in approach (e.g. "I can easily use a wide variety of sales approaches").

The *customer networking behaviors* scale is a five-item Likert scale describing the degree to

which the salesperson interacts with clients. The scale emanated from previous networking scales (Forret & Dougherty, 2001; Michael & Yukl, 1993; Wolff & Moser, 2006) and items were adapted to our research context. The *professional networking behaviors* scale is a five-item Likert scale describing the extent to which the salesperson develops and nurtures relationships with other industry professionals who have the potential to assist the salesperson with his/her work and career (e.g. "Attend seminars or training with others in my profession in order to build my network"). The four-item scale was adapted to our context from previous networking scales (Forret & Dougherty, 2001; Michael & Yukl, 1993; Wolff & Moser, 2006).

*Control Variables.* To control for other potential influences on our study, we integrated three control variables. We controlled for the experience level of the salesperson, including the *number of previous sales positions*, their *sales experience* and the salesperson's *current tenure within the organization*. The literature suggests that sales experience and the tenure in an organization can plausibly enhance sales performance, creativity and adaptive selling (Franke & Park, 2006; Verbeke, Dietz & Verwaal, 2011).

### Data Analysis

We used the two-step approach that begins with the evaluation of the constructs and then estimates a structural equation model (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). EQS software was used for the structural equation model. The use of SEM versus hierarchical regression technique lies in its usefulness in avoiding measurement error complications and detecting misspecifications in a hypothesized model (Raykov, 2000). For the confirmatory factor analysis, the measurement model reflected adequate fit with the data. Key fit statistics include  $\chi^2=134.359$  (102 d.f.), CFI= .99, NNFI = .98, RMSEA=.038 (.017, .055)

For each construct, we calculated the average variance extracted (AVE). The average variance extracted for each construct was greater than .50, except the professional networking which was .48. Then, the AVE for all constructs was compared with the shared



variances among all constructs (Anderson & Gerbing 1988). As the AVE was greater than the shared variances for all pairs, discriminant validity is indicated. Additionally, we used a series of chi-square difference tests to compare models in which two constructs held to unity with the freely estimated model. In each comparison, the freely estimated model possessed better fit than the covariance-constrained models. The results demonstrate discriminant validity between the constructs (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988). Next, we calculated composite reliability for all constructs. The composite reliabilities ranged from .78 to .92, thereby meeting the .60 threshold (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Overall, we purport that the constructs demonstrate adequate reliability and validity. Table 1 describes each construct's composite reliability, average variance extracted (AVE) and the correlations among the constructs.

To reduce the potential for common method bias, we used informed respondents. On average, our respondents possessed over 13 years within their current organization and 21 years of selling experience (Table 2). Our respondents possess a high degree of sales experience. The respondents' mean for years of sales experience is 21.0 years. When examined in combination, we surmised that our respondents possessed the knowledge and experience for our research questions and this ability potentially reduces the opportunity for common method variance. Further, to assess

common method bias, we used Harmon's one-factor test. We compared our measurement model with a second measurement model in which one latent factor accounts for all variables. A chi-square test was used to compare the two models. The one-factor model reflected a significant difference in fitting the data than the measurement model did. Hence, we suggest that common method variance does not create a potential risk to our analysis. Next, we conducted an exploratory factor analysis in which we found four distinct factors explaining 70.15% of the cumulative variances. When we specified only one factor, only 32.92% of the variance was explained (Lindell & Whitney, 2001; Malhotra, Kim & Patil, 2006). Therefore, we conclude that the potential for common method bias to contaminate our analysis is attenuated. In addition, we incorporate non-linear hypotheses; and research finds that non-linear terms are not impacted by common method bias (Evans, 1985). Within the structural model, we included a common method factor. In this approach, the latent variables' items are loaded onto their respective latent variable as well as the method factor a common method factor (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee & Podsakoff, 2003).

We also followed best practices regarding multicollinearity by standardizing all observed variables (Agustin & Singh, 2005). Further, the model contains nonlinear terms. Hence, we used the unconstrained model approach (Marsh, Wen & Hau, 2006; Seevers, Skinner & Kelley,

**TABLE 1:**  
Correlations, Composite Reliabilities, and Average Variances Extracted

Constructs	C.R.	Ave.	1	2	3	4
1 Professional Networking	.78	.48	--			
2 Customer Networking	.92	.70	.354**	--		
3 Sales Creativity	.81	.52	.289**	.336**	-	
4 Adaptive Selling	.844	.64	.169*	.157*	.407**	--

Correlations reported are significant at the 0.05 level (two-tailed) \*\*: significant at  $p < .01$ ; \*: significant at  $p < .05$

2007), that has been previously utilized within the marketing literature (Homburg et al., 2011). For each quadratic term, we squared each indicator. As professional networking and customer network possess four and five indicators, respectively, we calculated four and five squared items for each construct (i.e.  $x_1^2, x_2^2 \dots x_4^2$ ;  $z_1^2, z_2^2 \dots z_5^2$ ). For testing the proposed interactive effects in H<sub>5</sub>, Interaction term was created by multiplying each of the items of customer networking scale with those of professional networking scale (i.e.  $x_1z_1; x_1z_2 \dots x_2z_2 \dots x_4z_5$ ).

**TABLE 2:**  
**Salesperson Characteristics**

Sales Experience (years)	21.15
Tenure in Firm (years)	13.5

*Results.* The fit indices of the structural model suggested a reasonable model fit ( $\chi^2 = 878.83$ ,  $df = 483$ , CFI = 0.92, NNFI = 0.90, RMSEA = 0.067 (90% CI = 0.055, 0.068). Table 3 reflects the results of the structural equation model. First, we found customer networking behaviors were positively related to salesperson creativity (H<sub>1</sub>:  $\beta = .19$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Similarly, we found the relationship between professional networking and salesperson creativity was positive and statistically significant (H<sub>2</sub>:  $\beta = .34$ ,

$p < .05$ ). The quadratic term for customer networking was not statistically significant (H<sub>3</sub>:  $\beta = -.066$ ,  $p > .05$ ). Hence, H<sub>3</sub> could not be supported. Interestingly, we find a non-linear effect of professional networking on salesperson creativity. The negative coefficient associated with the quadratic (-.792) along with the positive main effect of professional networking to salesperson creativity (.342) suggests that the fourth hypothesis is confirmed. Our fifth hypothesis examined the potential for a synergistic effect between the two forms of networking on creativity. This hypothesis was not supported, (H<sub>5</sub>:  $\beta = .405$ ,  $p > .05$ ). Our final hypothesis found that the effect of creative sales behaviors was significant and positive on sales adaptive behaviors (H<sub>6</sub>:  $\beta = .500$ ,  $p < .05$ ). In terms of our control variables, we did not find statistically significant relationships between the controls and salesperson creativity or the controls and adaptive selling.

## DISCUSSION

Recently, scholars have started challenging researchers to approach the sales domain with a new lens, that of viewing salespeople as knowledge brokers (Verbeke et al., 2011) embedded in a multitude of relationships (Bradford et al., 2010). Accordingly, the focus

**TABLE 3:**  
**Results of Analysis**

Hyp.	Independent Variable	Dependent Variable	Standardized Coefficient	t-value	Results
H <sub>1</sub>	Customer Networking	Salesperson Creativity	0.19	2.14	Supported
H <sub>2</sub>	Professional Networking	Salesperson Creativity	0.34	2.65	Supported
H <sub>3</sub>	Customer Networking <sup>2</sup>	Salesperson Creativity	-0.07	-0.556	Not Supported
H <sub>4</sub>	Professional Networking <sup>2</sup>	Salesperson Creativity	-.79	2.27	Supported
H <sub>5</sub>	Professional Networking x Customer Networking	Salesperson Creativity	.405	1.358	Not Supported
H <sub>6</sub>	Salesperson Creativity	Adaptive Selling	.500	4.466	Supported

### Model Fit

$\chi^2$	878.831
df	483
NNFI	.90
CFI	.92
RMSEA	.062 (.055, .068)

turns to the means by which knowledge is garnered by salespeople. The current study uniquely demonstrate that networking behaviors play a critical role that can be utilized in producing creative solutions and greater adaptive behavior. Our analysis, regarding the conventional relationships, shows that customer and professional networking are valuable.

The findings of this study contribute to better understanding the ever-evolving role of the salesperson. As Bradford et al. (2010) discuss, the nature of an embedded salesforce may enable the creation and transfer of tacit knowledge. This knowledge may enable the development of new, unique and novel information. Our results demonstrate that a significant amount of unique value can be accessed by both professional and customer networking behaviors. Moreover, our results support that networking behaviors should not be viewed as a binary option of either/or. Instead, our data suggests the necessity and value of both forms of networking.

Specifically, our findings reflected a direct linear effect from professional networking to salesperson creativity. This supports the contention that there is value in networking with a diverse set of individuals external to the firm. Professional networking behaviors expose the salesperson to a variety of ideas, processes and needs. This new knowledge and information can be integrated into their existing, personal knowledge stocks to effectively allow the salesperson to move upward on the personal learning curve and effectively allow creative behaviors to flourish. As the level of customer networking behaviors increases, the salesperson may draw from an environment that is conducive for the transfer of new perspectives and novel information. With this information and understanding, the salesperson may be able to generate a number of new methods, processes and sales activities that enable her to better adapt to the customer's needs. Similarly, the results demonstrate the value of an embedded salesperson in multiple collectives. Such findings contribute to the under-researched domain of networking and is consistent with the recent calls for research on networking (Macintosh & Krush, 2014).

While prior research on adaptive selling emphasizes the importance of developing selling knowledge, it does not explicitly acknowledge the role of creativity. The proposed framework suggests that creativity serves as an element for the adaptive foundation that aids the salesperson in an ever-changing environment. While past research has equivocally accepted that creativity is different from adaptive selling (Wang & Netemeyer, 2004), there has been a lack of research on determining the relationship between these two constructs. Our finding contribute to the research on creativity by explicating the relationship between adaptive selling and creativity and showing that creativity is an antecedent to adaptive selling behavior.

Contrary to our position, the interactive effects of professional and customer networking behaviors on creativity did not find the empirical support. Although, we outlined theoretical support from the literature, the lack of empirical evidence suggests that these behaviors may not have a complementary link. It can be interpreted that both professional and customer networking behaviors influence creativity but for different reasons and therefore we did not find an interactive effect on creativity.

We further extend the literature by proposing and examining a diminishing return beyond a certain level of professional networking practices. Considering the positive direct effect of such behaviors on creativity, it can be deduced that merely increasing the amount of professional networking behavior may not be sufficient to realize its benefits and in fact, excessive professional networking may ultimately hurt salesperson creativity. This study provides evidence that there exists an optimal level of professional networking behaviors for salespeople when it comes to enhancing their creativity. Our approach corresponds with the call from the sales researchers to avoid limiting the sales literature to "the-more-the-better" perspective and to consider "nonlinear relationships between key phenomena" (Johnson, 2014; Homburg et al., 2011, p. 68).

### Managerial Implications

With the significance of networking as a backdrop, we suggest several implications to sales managers. First, we suggest that networking behaviors be viewed as major investments in equipping the salesperson. As the salesperson role continues to evolve as a polycentric, knowledge broker, it will be imperative for the salesperson to have access to information. We suggest that it will be the salesperson's networking behaviors, in part, which will provide the foundation for sales success. Hence, managers must do more than simply encourage salespeople to network. Managers will need to create an environment that fosters and the control systems that encourage customer and professional networking.

Second, we suggest that value emanates from our approach of measuring actual behaviors. The value of measuring sales networking behaviors is that behaviors may be trained, monitored, incented, and evaluated. Thus, sales networking behaviors can be both an important method to direct salesperson efforts and a diagnostic tool to assess the potential for salesperson success. Third, by providing empirical support for creativity as antecedents of adaptive selling, we offer managers an opportunity to make their salespeople aware of this pathway. Most of the practitioners' training models for adaptive selling focus on individual salesperson differences or firm differences, and thus largely ignore the acquisition of information through relationships inside and outside of the firm. Such managerial practices seem at odds with the paradigm currently adopted by the marketing literature and its focus on the value of relationships. Our results demonstrate the unique value and novel information acquired through networking behaviors.

For the practitioner, we suggest that networking behaviors are not merely a means to create a potential source of sales prospects but in today's environment, networking behaviors are a means to generate a useful pool of creative solutions. Hence, the salesperson should assume a strategic orientation regarding the development of networks. Within this perspective, the development of networks

ensures a pipeline of information and knowledge that could plausibly create greater job security. Finally, we do not suggest nor believe that networking does not have diminishing returns. We advocate that the sales force and the sales managers cooperatively develop a plan that logically prioritizes networking behaviors and the resources that will support such an investment in time. Our results show that there is a diminishing effect of professional networking on salesperson's creativity.

### Limitations and Future Research

In this section, we outline the limitations to our study. However, one should note that the study's limitations yield a number of future research paths as well. For instance, since this study was cross-sectional, no claim is made to causality, even though theory and prior research suggested the hypothesized relationships. In order to overcome this limitation, scholars could conduct a longitudinal approach to studying networking behavior.

Our study assumes that networking provides information; however, we inferred rather than directly measured various forms of information acquisition. Future research could incorporate various forms or characterizations of information and knowledge to further our understanding. Further, our emphasis examined the benefits of networking behaviors in connection with creative behaviors. However, it may be interesting to see if networking behaviors have direct effects on other established constructs such as adaptive selling behaviors and customer oriented behaviors.

Also, networking may not always be positive, especially from the firm's perspective. For example, research suggests that employees with strong externally based networks may plausibly have higher turnover, because they have more access to jobs outside the organization but also because they have less solidarity within the organization (Brass et al., 2004). Along the same line, creativity could also produce negative outcomes. More recently, scholars argue that creativity is expected "to exercise both positive and negative effects on performance" (Soda & Bizzi 2012, p. 99). Therefore, future researchers also need to discuss the dark side of creativity.

Finally, we examine salespeople in only one industry, so scholars should be cautious when generalizing the findings across all sales contexts. Future research could use a sample across multiple industries. Additionally, future research could examine individual, firm and contextual differences that plausibly affect creative behaviors within sales.

Our conceptual framework and networking behavior measures provide a foundation that could stimulate additional research on the role of networking behavior in personal selling. As noted by scholars, research on networking in sales has been limited, particularly, research focusing on the value of networking behaviors that contribute to salesperson performance, beyond those of interacting with customers.

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**APPENDIX A:**

**Adaptive Selling (Adapts SV)** (Robinson et al. 2002;)

- *I like to experiment with different sales approaches*
- *I can easily use a wide variety of sales approaches*
- *When I feel that my sales approach is not working, I can easily change to another approach*
- *I am very flexible in the selling approach I use.*

**Creative Behavior** (Ganesan and Weitz 1996; Scott and Bruce 1994)

- *When new trends develop, I am usually the first to get on board.*
- *I am on the lookout for new ideas*
- *I try to be as creative as I can in my job.*
- *My boss (Others) thinks I am creative in my job.*

**Professional Networking** (Forret and Dougherty 2001; Michael and Yukl 1993; Wolff and Moser 2006)

How frequently do you:

- *Make presentations at seminars or workshops that may aid you at work*
- *Attend conferences to develop professional or industry contacts*
- *Attend seminars or training with others in my profession in order to build my network*
- *Take part in trade association meetings that are pertinent to my industry*

**Customer Networking** (Forret and Dougherty 2001; Michael and Yukl 1993; Wolff and Moser 2006)

How frequently do you:

- *Meet with clients and customers to discover how to satisfy their needs*
- *Call or visit with clients who can provide good information*
- *Ask current clients for referrals*
- *Keep in touch with clients regarding their needs*
- *Contact clients about current issues*