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RESEARCH NOTE

What does adaptive selling mean to salespeople? An exploratory analysis of practitioners' responses to generic adaptive selling scales

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Keywords: adaptive selling; ADAPTS; salesperson behavior; customer attributes; exploratory research.

RESEARCH NOTE

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Abstract

The concept of adaptive selling has been firmly established as a key driver of salespeople's selling performance. To measure adaptive selling, studies commonly use generic items that capture to what extent salespeople adapt their behaviors to customers. Despite the predictive validity of these items, the personal selling and sales research community has criticized the items because high item scores do not reveal specifically *how* and *to what* salespeople adapt their behaviors. This research note aims to instigate academic discussion on these questions by providing a first exploratory analysis of what practitioners read into generic adaptive selling scales. Qualitative interviews reveal that practitioners perceive these scales to encompass four behavioral adaptations to six customer characteristics. A subsequent survey of 289 salespeople shows that when responding to generic adaptive selling scales, salespeople mainly evaluate to what extent they adapt their argumentation and communication style to customers' needs, personality, and body language. This analysis is meaningful from a theoretical stance to clarify the concept and scope of the adaptive selling construct.

Keywords: adaptive selling; ADAPTS; salesperson behavior; customer attributes; exploratory research.

Consider Annie, a salesperson in a car dealership who has just entered a conversation with a potential customer, Berenice. Berenice is a 34-year-old manager who seems sociable and goal-driven and who communicates with a calm voice, carefully choosing her words and using understated body language. To what extent should Annie factor in these characteristics when interacting with Berenice and how should she react to them to increase the probability of making a sale?

Annie's potential adjustment to Berenice's characteristics is known in the literature as "adaptive selling," and is a concept that is commonly accepted as a key success factor in personal selling. Specifically, adaptive selling increases salespeople's job satisfaction (Franke and Park 2006), customers' satisfaction with both the product offered and the salesperson's approach (Román and Iacobucci 2010), and the selling performance of salespeople (e.g., Franke and Park 2006; Jaramillo et al. 2007; Porter, Wiener, and Frankwick 2003).

Interestingly, the concept and common measurement scales of adaptive selling are relatively generic and nonspecific. Adaptive selling is defined as "the altering of sales behaviors during a customer interaction or across interactions based on perceived information about the nature of the selling situation" (Weitz, Suja, and Suja 1986, 175). Salespeople have a high level of adaptive selling when they "use different sales presentations across sales encounters and when they make adjustments during the encounters. In contrast, a low level of adaptive selling is indicated by the use of the same sales presentation in and during all sales encounters" (Spiro and Weitz 1990, 62). In line with this definition, established scales of adaptive selling focus on the question of *whether* a salesperson adapts

his or her behavior to the customer (e.g., Gengler, Howard, and Zolner 1995; Comer et al. 1996; Porter and Inks 2000; Román and Iacobucci 2010; Spiro and Weitz 1990; Vink and Verbeke 1993; Weitz, Sujan, and Sujan 1986). However, adaptive selling scales usually do not capture which *specific* behaviors a salesperson changes based on which *specific* characteristics of the selling situation.

Owing to its generic nature, the concept of adaptive selling has been controversially discussed by the personal selling and sales management community (e.g., Pettijohn et al. 2011; Román and Iacobucci 2010). While the predictive validity of the scales is widely accepted, informal discussions with sales scholars frequently reveal a certain degree of dissatisfaction with the practical implications of research that relies on generic adaptive selling scales. Specifically, scholars note that advising salespeople *to adapt* is of questionable practical value as long as one does not also specify *how* they should adapt. Put differently, in the initially described example, sales research does not provide an answer to the question of whether and how Annie should adjust her behavior on the basis of Berenice's characteristics.

With this research note we aim to stimulate a formal, research-based discussion within the personal selling and sales management research community on the adaptive selling concept and measurement. The ultimate objective of this discussion should be to generate actionable advice for practitioners regarding which adaptive selling strategies they should employ—that is, which specific strategies are responsible for the well documented and previously cited beneficial outcomes of adaptive selling. To reach this objective, a necessary first step is to understand which behaviors generic adaptive selling scales actually measure.

Put differently, which of their behavioral routines do practitioners evaluate when rating generic adaptive selling items?

Providing an initial answer to this question is the key objective and scope of this research note. To this end, we conducted two studies. In our first study, we used exploratory interviews with ten salespeople to understand which strategies are associated with adaptive selling survey scales. Results provide first evidence that salespeople's responses to these survey scales may capture four behaviors (product recommendation, argumentation, communication style, body language) they adapt on the basis of six perceived customer attributes (customers' needs, personality, social status, communication style, body language, relationship length). In our second study, we surveyed 289 salespeople to determine which of these adaptations explain the variance in established generic adaptive selling survey scales. Results show that the variance in these scales can be largely explained by salespeople's adjustment of their argumentation and communication style to customers' needs, personality, and body language.

With these findings, this research note takes a first step toward clarifying the concept and scope of the adaptive selling construct. By drawing on our findings of what constitutes adaptive selling to practitioners, future research may test how these facets of adaptive selling translate to selling performance.

Study 1: Exploring the Specific Facets of Adaptive Selling

Data Collection and Analysis

To understand potential facets of adaptive selling captured by generic adaptive selling scales,

we initially conducted semi-structured interviews with a cross-industry sample of 10 experienced salespeople (sample description in Table 1). Interviews were carried out by telephone or in person and lasted on average 20 minutes (with a range of 10 to 30 minutes). In the interviews, we first asked the interviewees to evaluate their own adaptive selling behavior using established generic scales from Spiro and Weitz (1990). We then asked the interviewees to explain their responses and provide specific examples of their selling practice.

All interviews were audiotaped and subsequently transcribed. Two researchers then independently coded the statements that addressed how salespeople implement adaptive selling and clustered similar statements to categories. Minor discrepancies were resolved through discussion. The analysis revealed two main categories of adaptive selling: salespeople's perceptions of customer attributes that they base their behavior on (hereafter *bases of adaptation*) and behavioral changes based on these perceptions (hereafter *adapted behaviors*; see Figure 1). Within these categories, ten specific bases of adaptation and adapted behaviors emerged (see Table 2).

----- Place Table 1 about here -----

----- Place Table 2 about here -----

----- Place Figure 1 about here -----

Bases of Adaptation: To What Do Salespeople Adapt?

Customers' Needs. Our interviews revealed that salespeople regard the adjustment to customers' needs as a cornerstone or basis of adaptive selling. For example, J explained:

We don't have a unique product or service for which I can say "take it or leave it." Therefore, I have to listen very carefully to what the other person needs to align my service portfolio accordingly in order to have any chances at all."

H confirmed: "I need to know what the customer wants, what's his goal, and when I don't take this into account, I miss the target."

Customers' Personality. Several salespeople we interviewed also explained that they adapt to their perceptions of customers' personality. For example, G elaborated: "If I notice that the customer likes direct communication, then I don't beat around the bush, and if I notice the customer likes talking, then I let him talk." J confirmed: "If somebody is a 'numbers guy,' I can't tell him my life story."

Customers' Social Status. Several salespeople indicated that they adjust their behavior to customers' position in a social hierarchy, such as rank within an organization. As D explained, "You speak differently to a managing director than to someone from order processing, for example." Salesperson A specified this adaptation to a customer's rank within an organization as follows: "When you meet the owner of a company, you don't talk about discount offers. You talk to him about him having a beautiful BMW."

Customers' Communication Style. The salespeople also regarded adapting to customers' communication style as a relevant part of adaptive selling. For example, A explained: "You have to speak the customer's language. This means adapting not only your way of expression or your arguments, but also the length and the complexity of sentences, for example." J added: "You also use technical terms that you pick up from your customer."

Customers' Body Language. Salespeople also explained that they adjust their behavior to customers' body language, such as posture, movement, gestures, and facial expressions. For example, E elaborated: "If a customer has a relaxed attitude, then I will also be more relaxed, and if someone is very businesslike, then you automatically adjust." Beyond merely imitating customers' body language, B explained:

Facial expressions, gestures, and body language are the key features in a sales conversation that tell me where we stand, where we're going, and what customers like or dislike. This is why I'm also keen on face-to-face meetings and personal customer contact.

Customers' Relationship Length. A few interview partners also deemed the adaptation to the length of the customer relationship as relevant. For example, B explained: "In our long-term customer relationships we do not try to achieve short-term success. Not at all."

Adapted Behaviors: Which Behaviors Do Salespeople Change?

Salesperson's Product Recommendation. The interviewed salespeople indicated that they adjust their product recommendation to customers' characteristics. For example, E outlined: "One of my customers is a Muslim. Of course, products which contain alcohol are a no-go for them. As I know this, I react correspondingly and sell products that don't contain alcohol." F confirmed: "If I offer you liability insurance and then it turns out that you are a single parent, I have to expand the product."

Salesperson's Argumentation. Salespeople further confirmed that they adapt their argumentation to customers. G explained: "If I know ten arguments, I don't shoot them all

out. I first check which one fits to what my customer is looking for.... I try to find out what the customer is looking for and then argue that I can deliver exactly that.” J reflected:

If I notice only relatively late in the conversation that I argued in the wrong direction, then it is sometimes simply no longer possible to turn around, because then I would lose credibility. But if I notice it relatively early in the process, then I think it is easy to adjust to the other person.

Salesperson’s Communication Style. The interviewed salespeople also confirmed that they adapt their communication style to customers. G explained, “I try to meet the other person on the same level. This means that when I am talking to the general manager, I try to communicate with him accordingly, even in small talk.” J confirmed: “I automatically adjust the way I speak to the person I talk to.”

Salesperson’s Body Language. As noted above in the discussion of bases of adaptation, several salespeople also indicated that they adapt their body language to customers. In addition to the quotes provided above, F confirmed: “I also mirror customers’ posture. For example, I am mirroring your posture right now.... I don’t think you necessarily want to do that, but it happens automatically.”

Study 2: Linking the Facets of Adapting Selling to Established Survey Scales

Data Collection and Sample

The aim of our second study was to empirically examine the relevance of the bases of adaptation and adapted behaviors from Study 1. Specifically, we sought to examine to what extent the different bases of adaptation and adapted behaviors explain the variance of

salespeople's scores on adaptive selling survey scales. This information is useful to understand salespeople's interpretation of adaptive selling when responding to the adaptive selling measurement items. Accordingly, we surveyed salespeople's adaptive selling using established generic survey scales (Spiro and Weitz 1990; Robinson et al. 2002; Verbeke, Belschak, and Bagozzi 2004) as well as more specific scales capturing salespeople's use of the bases of adaptation and adapted behaviors.

Our sample comprised 289 salespeople (49.1% male, average age 34.6 years) that we had access to via an online panel. As is common with such panels, a response rate is not available. Of the respondents, 21% worked in the retail industry and 10% in hospitality, with the remaining respondents spread over other industries (e.g., financial services, industry engineering, and healthcare). Details on the sample are presented in Appendix 1.

Measures

Main Variables. We measured adaptive selling using six items that are frequently employed in academic studies (Spiro and Weitz 1990; Robinson et al. 2002; Verbeke, Belschak, and Bagozzi 2004). A sample item is "I vary my sales style from customer to customer," which illustrates the generic nature of the scale since it specifies neither the basis of adaptation nor the adapted behavior.

To measure the bases of adaptation, we adapted generic items. For example, for customers' needs the following four items were used for operationalization: "I vary my sales style from customer to customer based on his/her needs," "Each customer requires a unique approach based on his/her needs," "It is easy for me to modify my sales presentation if the customer's needs call for it," and "When I feel that my sales approach for my customer's

needs is not working, I can easily change to another approach.” Accordingly, we adapted the scales for the following bases of adaptation: customers’ personality, customers’ social status, customers’ communication style, customers’ body language, and customers’ relationship length.

We followed the same procedure for measuring the adapted behaviors. For example, we measured the salesperson’s adaptation of the product recommendation as follows: “I vary the product that I recommend from customer to customer,” “Each customer requires a unique product recommendation,” “It is easy for me to modify my product recommendation if the situation calls for it,” and “When I feel that my product recommendation is not working, I can easily change it” (seven-point Likert scale, anchored with “strongly disagree” and “strongly agree”). We similarly adapted the scales for salesperson’s argumentation, salesperson’s communication style, and salesperson’s body language. All items were measured on a seven-point Likert scale (anchored “strongly disagree” and “strongly agree”).

Control Variables. To reduce omitted variable bias, we included several control variables indicated by prior research. We controlled for a salesperson’s age (Levy and Sharma 1994), gender (Levy and Sharma 1994), experience (Shoemaker and Johlke 2002), and self-efficacy (Sujan, Weitz, and Kumar 1994), and for all industries in the sample using dummy variables.

Appendix 2 provides all measures and Table 3 shows descriptive statistics, correlations, and psychometric properties of the variables. To evaluate the reliability and convergent validity of our measurements, we assessed Cronbach’s alpha and conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (see Table 3). All Cronbach’s alpha values exceeded the

recommended threshold of .70 (Nunnally 1978), and all scales fulfill the recommended values for the composite reliability and average variance extracted (Bagozzi and Yi 1988; Fornell and Larcker 1981). Lastly, the squared correlations between the latent constructs are smaller than the average variance extracted from each construct, implying discriminant validity of the scales (Fornell and Larcker 1981).

----- Place Table 3 about here -----

Model Specifications and Results

Model Specification. As outlined previously, our goal was to understand which bases of adaptation and adapted behaviors best explain a salesperson's score on generic adaptive selling scales. Importantly, because salespeople adapt their behaviors according to perceived customer characteristics, a causal relationship may exist between our measures of bases of adaptation and adapted behaviors. To account for this relationship, we specified a corresponding path model: we integrated all six bases of adaptation as independent variables and specified paths on all four adapted behaviors (i.e., $6 \times 4 = 24$ paths). Furthermore, we specified direct paths of all bases of adaptation and adapted behaviors on the generic adaptive selling scale (i.e., $6 + 4 = 10$ paths), thus allowing for mediation analysis (Shrout and Bolger 2002). We are ultimately interested in the total standardized effect of each construct on the generic adaptive selling scale because the effect size will indicate which of the bases of adaptation and adapted behaviors are reflected in salespeople's evaluation of generic adaptive selling items. To factor out potentially intervening effects, we controlled for a salesperson's age, gender, experience, self-efficacy, and industry.

We estimated the model via Mplus 7 (Muthén and Muthén 2012). Table 4 (Model 1) reports the full results, which we discuss in the following. We first turn to the direct effects of all bases of adaptation and adapted behaviors on adaptive selling before taking up the discussion of total effects.

----- Place Table 4 about here -----

Direct Effects. Four bases of adaptation (customers’ needs, personality, communication style, and body language) have positive effects on two adapted behaviors (salesperson’s argumentation and communication style), which in turn positively affect the generic adaptive selling scale. More specifically, salesperson’s argumentation is positively affected by customers’ needs and personality, and salesperson’s communication style is positively affected by customers’ needs, communication style, and body language. In addition, customers’ personality and body language have significant main effects on the generic adaptive selling scale, suggesting that their effects on adaptive selling are only partially mediated by salesperson’s argumentation and body language. To limit cognitive complexity, Figure 2 illustrates these results. The figure depicts all significant paths ($p < .05$) between the constructs in our model. Dotted lines flag constructs and effects that are disconnected from the generic adaptive selling scale.

----- Place Figure 2 about here -----

Total Effects. To test which of the bases of adaptation ultimately manifest in generic adaptive selling scores, we estimated the total indirect effects and total effects of all bases of adaptation on adaptive selling. Results are provided at the bottom of Table 4 and show that three bases of adaptation (customers’ needs, personality, and body language) exhibit total

effects on the generic adaptive selling scale. In addition, customers' communication style exhibits an indirect effect on adaptive selling, but does not emerge as a total effect.

In summary, our analyses suggest that when evaluating generic adaptive selling scales, salespeople factor in their adaptation of their argumentation and communication style to customers' needs, personality, and body language. However, they factor in neither the adaptation of their product recommendation and body language nor their adaptation to customers' social status, communication style, and relationship length. Figure 3 illustrates these findings.

----- Place Figure 3 about here -----

Supplemental Analyses

Robustness Checks. To verify the robustness of our results, we estimated two further models. The aim of Model 2 was to confirm the results' robustness by excluding the control variables. Results are in line with Model 1, which substantiates that our effects are stable. Model 3 contains only the control variables and excludes the adaptive selling categories. The model explains significantly less variance ($R^2 = .26$) than the previous models (e.g., Model 1: $R^2 = .57$). This finding provides evidence that our measures of bases of adaptation and adapted behaviors effectively explain adaptive selling score differences between salespeople.

Common Method Variance. Since the variables in the dataset were collected in the same survey, the results may be distorted by common method bias (Podsakoff et al. 2003). However, common method bias is unlikely to have influenced our results for two reasons. First, we carefully constructed the survey in a way that limits common method variance. That is, we initially informed participants that the scales had no right and wrong answers, asked

them to answer honestly, and assured full anonymity. Furthermore, we measured the dependent variable before the independent variables. This survey design has been shown to limit common sources of common method variance, such as social desirability bias (Podsakoff et al. 2003).

Second, to verify that common method variance did not unduly influence our results, we corrected the correlations for common method variance using the correlation between two theoretically unrelated variables (Lindell and Whitney 2001). As a marker variable we chose the item “How many suppliers play an important role for your customers when purchasing comparable products and services?” The lowest positive correlation between this variable and our constructs is .004, which we used to correct all correlations in our dataset following the method outlined by Lindell and Whitney (2001). As the statistical significances in our correlation matrix remained stable, we conclude that common method bias is unlikely to unduly affect our study (Homburg, Klarmann, and Schmitt 2010).

Multicollinearity. As Table 3 predictably shows, all bases of adaptation and adapted behaviors in our dataset are strongly correlated, a result that may give rise to multicollinearity issues in our analysis. To test for multicollinearity, we inspected the variance inflation factors for a baseline model that includes all direct effects of the bases of adaptations and adapted behaviors on the generic adaptive selling scale. As the highest variance inflation factor is 3.11, multicollinearity is unlikely to unduly influence our results.

Discussion

Prior studies have shown salespeople’s adaptive selling to be an essential success factor for selling performance. Typically, these studies have used generic survey scales that capture to

what extent salespeople adapt their selling style (without specifying behaviors) to customers (without specifying attributes) (e.g., Spiro and Weitz 1990; Robinson et al. 2002; Verbeke, Belschak, and Bagozzi 2004). The generic nature of adaptive selling has led personal selling and sales management scholars to question how findings can be translated into actionable advice for managers. In other words, while sales research has established that adapting to customers is a core ingredient of sales success, how salespeople should specifically change their behaviors, and in response to which customer attributes, has remained unclear.

With our research note, we hope to stimulate a formal, journal-based discussion on how adaptive selling should be implemented. We propose that this discussion may comprise three major streams: (1) generation of knowledge on the bases of adaptation and adapted behaviors that are reflected in practitioners' responses to established generic adaptive selling scales, (2) generation of knowledge on how these bases of adaptation and adapted behaviors translate to sales success, and (3) conceptualization of novel bases of adaptation and adapted behaviors to advance managerial practice beyond current routines. In the following, we briefly discuss these areas.

First, and importantly, we do not suggest that established, generic adaptive selling scales should be replaced. These scales exhibit high predictive validity (Franke and Park 2006; Jaramillo et al. 2007; Porter, Wiener, and Frankwick 2003; Román and Iacobucci 2010) and their generic nature allows researchers to flexibly employ them across different sales contexts. However, to advance knowledge on adaptive selling, we argue that sales research needs to understand which specific bases of adaptation and adapted behaviors are reflected in practitioners' responses to these scales. Our research note takes a first step in this

direction. In Study 1, we found that practitioners associate six bases of adaptation (customers' needs, personality, social status, communication style, body language, relationship length) and four adapted behaviors (product recommendation, argumentation, communication style, body language) with generic scales of adaptive selling. In Study 2 we found evidence that of these ten factors, only five strongly explain the variance in generic adaptive selling scales (adaptation of a salesperson's argumentation and communication style to customers' needs, personality, and body language).

Clearly, these results can be only a first step toward understanding practitioners' perspective on adaptive selling. To build on Study 1, we encourage future research to qualify and extend our inventory of bases of adaptation and adapted behaviors that potentially influence practitioners' responses to generic survey scales of adaptive selling (e.g., Eckert 2006), especially as adaptive selling "is difficult to succinctly define because numerous behaviors can be interpreted as being 'adaptive'" (Pettijohn et al. 2011, 92). To build on Study 2, future research could explore contingencies that determine which bases of adaptation and adapted behaviors are reflected in generic survey scales. Quite possibly industry-, company-, salesperson-, or customer-related factors determine how salespeople interpret and respond to generic adaptive selling items.

Second, future research should test the predictive validity of the bases of adaptation and adapted behaviors that salespeople frequently use for sales performance. Put differently, which of the previously identified bases of adaptation and adapted behaviors *should* salespeople in fact employ to improve their sales performance? In this respect, a best-practice example is the seminal study by McFarland, Challagalla, and Shervani (2006). These

researchers examined how salespeople should adapt their influence tactics (that is, *salesperson's argumentation*) to a customer's self, task, or interaction orientation (that is, *customers' personality*), providing specific recommendations to practitioners.

Within this second stream of research, a further interesting avenue for future studies may be an analysis of which bases of adaptation and adapted behaviors are used although they are *not* linked to sales success. Conceivably, salespeople may form erroneous beliefs about the effectiveness of certain selling strategies (e.g., Mayo and Mallin 2014; Alavi et al. 2018). Specifically, one may hypothesize that salespeople become convinced of the effectiveness of fruitless adaptive selling approaches based on what is commonly known as a type 1 error, or a false positive (e.g., Beck and Forstmeier 2007). That is, a salesperson may make repeated behavioral adaptations that appear to be successful in each case (e.g., an adaptation based on a specific personality trait of the customer). In reality, however, the success may be due to other adaptations that the salesperson is making simultaneously. Over time, the salesperson may develop the misconception that the fruitless adaptation is causally drives selling success. Put differently, the salesperson may commit the “post hoc, ergo propter hoc” fallacy (Woods and Walton 1977). Exposing such misconceptions may significantly advance managerial practice.

Third and last, future research may conceptualize and test adaptive selling strategies that are not yet broadly used in practice but are instrumental in improving sales performance. Studies in this stream may put the personal selling and sales management research community ahead of practice and provide actionable, out-of-the-box recommendations with momentous managerial implications. We hope our research note stimulates such research.

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Table 1
Study 1: Overview of the Cross-Industry Sample

Interview partner	Age (in years)	Industry	Experience in sales (in years)	Experience in current position (in years)
A	55	Housing construction	28	2
B	48	Motorhome and caravan industry	25	3
C	51	Motorhome and caravan industry	23	10
D	35	Mobile energy	13	11
E	29	Foods industry	1	1
F	33	Insurance business	8	5
G	31	Personnel industry	8	1
H	54	Cutting tools	26	2.5
I	29	New cars	7	3
J	31	Staffing service	8	6

Table 2
Study 1: Adaptive Selling Inventory from Qualitative Interviews

Category	Description	Sample Quote from Study 1
Bases of adaptation, that is, perceptions of customer attributes based on which salespeople change their behaviors:		
Customers' needs	Customers' expected benefits of a product or service	"I need to know what the customer wants, what his goal is, and when I don't take this into account, I miss the target."
Customers' personality	Dispositions of customers that manifest themselves in behavior observable to salespeople	"If I notice that the customer likes direct communication, then I don't beat around the bush, and if I notice the customer likes talking, then I let him talk."
Customers' social status	Customers' position in a social hierarchy, such as rank within an organization	"You speak differently to a managing director than to someone from order processing, for example."
Customers' communication style	Customers' tendency to communicate via unique patterns or combinations of code, content, and communication rules (e.g., task orientation, interaction orientation, self orientation)	"You have to speak the customer's language. This means adapting not only your way of expression or your arguments, but also the length and the complexity of sentences, for example."
Customers' body language	Customers' posture, movement, gestures, and facial expressions	"Facial expressions, gestures, and body language are the key features in a sales conversation that tell me where we stand, where we're going, and what customers like or dislike. This is why I'm also keen on face-to-face meetings and personal customer contact."
Customers' relationship length	Duration of the acquaintance between salespeople and customers	"In our long-term customer relationships we do not try to achieve short-term success. Not at all."
Adapted behaviors, that is, specific actions that salespeople change based on the nature of the selling situation:		
Salesperson's product recommendation	Salesperson's choice of which product or service to recommend to customers	"One of my customers is a Muslim. Of course, products which contain alcohol are a no-go for them. As I know this, I react correspondingly and sell products that don't contain alcohol."
Salesperson's argumentation	Salesperson's reasons provided to customers for buying a product	"If I know ten arguments, I don't shoot them all out. I first check which one fits to what my customer is looking for.... I try to find out what the customer is looking for and then argue that I can deliver exactly that."
Salesperson's communication style	Salesperson's tendency to communicate via unique patterns or combinations of code, content, and communication rules (e.g., task orientation, interaction orientation, self-orientation)	"I try to meet the other person on the same level. This means that when I am talking to the general manager, I try to communicate with him accordingly, even in small talk."
Salesperson's body language	Salesperson's posture, movement, gestures, and facial expressions	"I also mirror customers' posture. For example, I am mirroring your posture right now.... I don't think you necessarily want to do that, but it happens automatically."

Table 3
Study 2: Descriptive Statistics, Correlations, and Psychometric Properties

	M	SD	α	AVE	CR	V1	V2	V3	V4	V5	V6	V7	V8	V9	V10
V1: Adaptive selling (generic scale)	5.62	1.02	.88	.56	.88										
V2: Customers' needs	5.62	1.12	.91	.72	.91	.60									
V3: Customers' personality	5.35	1.24	.91	.71	.91	.61	.67								
V4: Customers' social status	4.77	1.54	.92	.75	.92	.40	.46	.65							
V5: Customers' communication style	4.97	1.51	.93	.77	.93	.41	.44	.57	.57						
V6: Customers' body language	5.09	1.51	.95	.81	.95	.52	.53	.62	.45	.65					
V7: Customers' relationship length	5.50	1.31	.90	.69	.90	.36	.43	.45	.37	.47	.41				
V8: Salesperson's product recommendation	5.58	1.13	.88	.65	.88	.55	.70	.52	.44	.45	.48	.37			
V9: Salesperson's argumentation	5.35	1.19	.90	.70	.90	.59	.62	.57	.40	.41	.42	.40	.64		
V10: Salesperson's communication style	5.31	1.27	.90	.70	.90	.44	.48	.55	.53	.55	.62	.33	.48	.51	
V11: Salesperson's body language	4.88	1.45	.91	.73	.92	.56	.61	.60	.49	.58	.58	.39	.59	.57	.72

M = mean, SD = standard deviation, α = Cronbach's alpha, AVE = average variance extracted, CR = composite reliability. All correlations are significant on the $p < .01$ level.

Table 4
Study 2 Results

Path	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
	Full Model	No Controls Model	Controls-Only Model
Direct effects: bases of adaptation → adapted behaviors^a			
Customers' needs → salesperson's product recommendation	.60***	.60***	—
Customers' needs → salesperson's argumentation	.41***	.41***	—
Customers' personality → salesperson's argumentation	.22**	.22**	—
Customers' needs → salesperson's communication style	.31***	.31***	—
Customers' communication style → salesperson's communication style	.24***	.24***	—
Customers' body language → salesperson's communication style	.16**	.16**	—
Customers' social status → salesperson's body language	.23***	.23***	—
Customers' communication style → salesperson's body language	.14*	.14*	—
Customers' body language → salesperson's body language	.35***	.35***	—
Direct effects: adapted behaviors → adaptive selling			
Salesperson's product recommendation → adaptive selling	.09 ^{n.s.}	.09 ^{n.s.}	—
Salesperson's argumentation → adaptive selling	.25***	.23***	—
Salesperson's communication style → adaptive selling	.19**	.16**	—
Salesperson's body language → adaptive selling	-.11 ^{n.s.}	-.08 ^{n.s.}	—
Direct effects: bases of adaptation → adaptive selling			
Customers' needs → adaptive selling	.04 ^{n.s.}	.12 ^{n.s.}	—
Customers' personality → adaptive selling	.22***	.24***	—
Customers' social status → adaptive selling	-.03 ^{n.s.}	-.03 ^{n.s.}	—
Customers' communication style → adaptive selling	-.08 ^{n.s.}	-.06 ^{n.s.}	—
Customers' body language → adaptive selling	.17**	.17**	—
Customers' relationship length → adaptive selling	.02 ^{n.s.}	.01 ^{n.s.}	—
Direct effects: control variables → adaptive selling			
Salesperson's age → adaptive selling	.13***	—	.14**
Salesperson's gender → adaptive selling	.07 ^{n.s.}	—	.11*
Salesperson's experience → adaptive selling	-.04 ^{n.s.}	—	-.02 ^{n.s.}
Salesperson's self-efficacy → adaptive selling	.09 ^{n.s.}	—	.42***
Industry dummies → adaptive selling	YES	NO	YES
R ²	.57***	.51***	.26***
Total indirect effects: bases of adaptation → adaptive selling			
Customers' needs → adaptive selling	.20***	.19***	—
Customers' personality → adaptive selling	.07*	.06*	—
Customers' social status → adaptive selling	-.01 ^{n.s.}	.00 ^{n.s.}	—
Customers' communication style → adaptive selling	.06*	.06*	—
Customers' body language → adaptive selling	-.01 ^{n.s.}	.00 ^{n.s.}	—
Customers' relationship length → adaptive selling	.03 ^{n.s.}	.03 ^{n.s.}	—
Total effects: bases of adaptation → adaptive selling			
Customers' needs → adaptive selling	.24***	.31***	—
Customers' personality → adaptive selling	.29***	.30***	—
Customers' social status → adaptive selling	-.04 ^{n.s.}	-.03 ^{n.s.}	—
Customers' communication style → adaptive selling	-.02 ^{n.s.}	-.01 ^{n.s.}	—
Customers' body language → adaptive selling	.17**	.18**	—
Customers' relationship length → adaptive selling	.05 ^{n.s.}	.04 ^{n.s.}	—

^{n.s.} $p > .05$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed). Standardized coefficients are displayed.

^a We estimated all paths from bases of adaptation on adapted behaviors, that is, 6*4=24 paths. To limit complexity, we display only paths that are significant at the $p < .05$ level.

Figure 1
Adaptive Selling Process Illustration

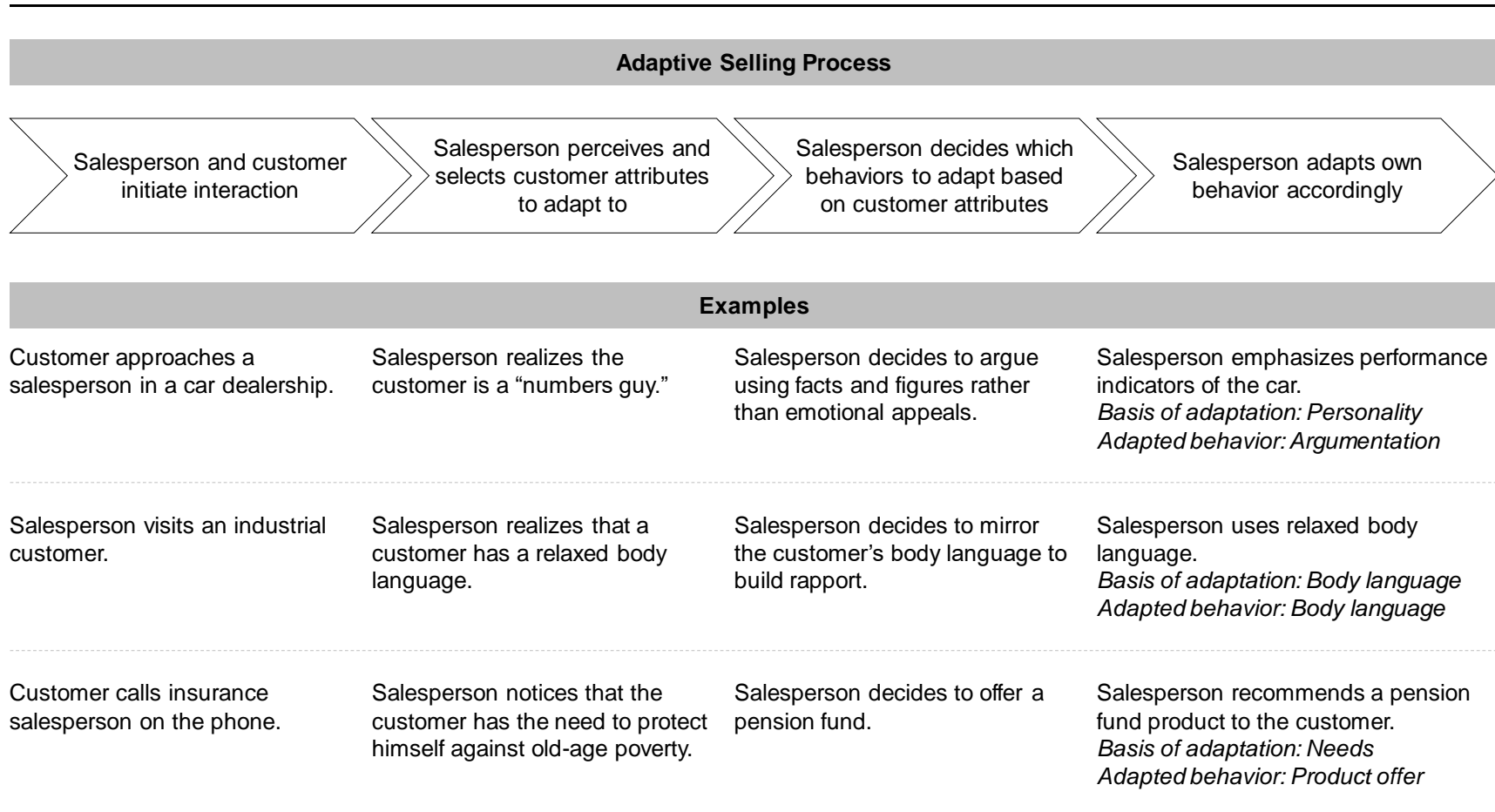
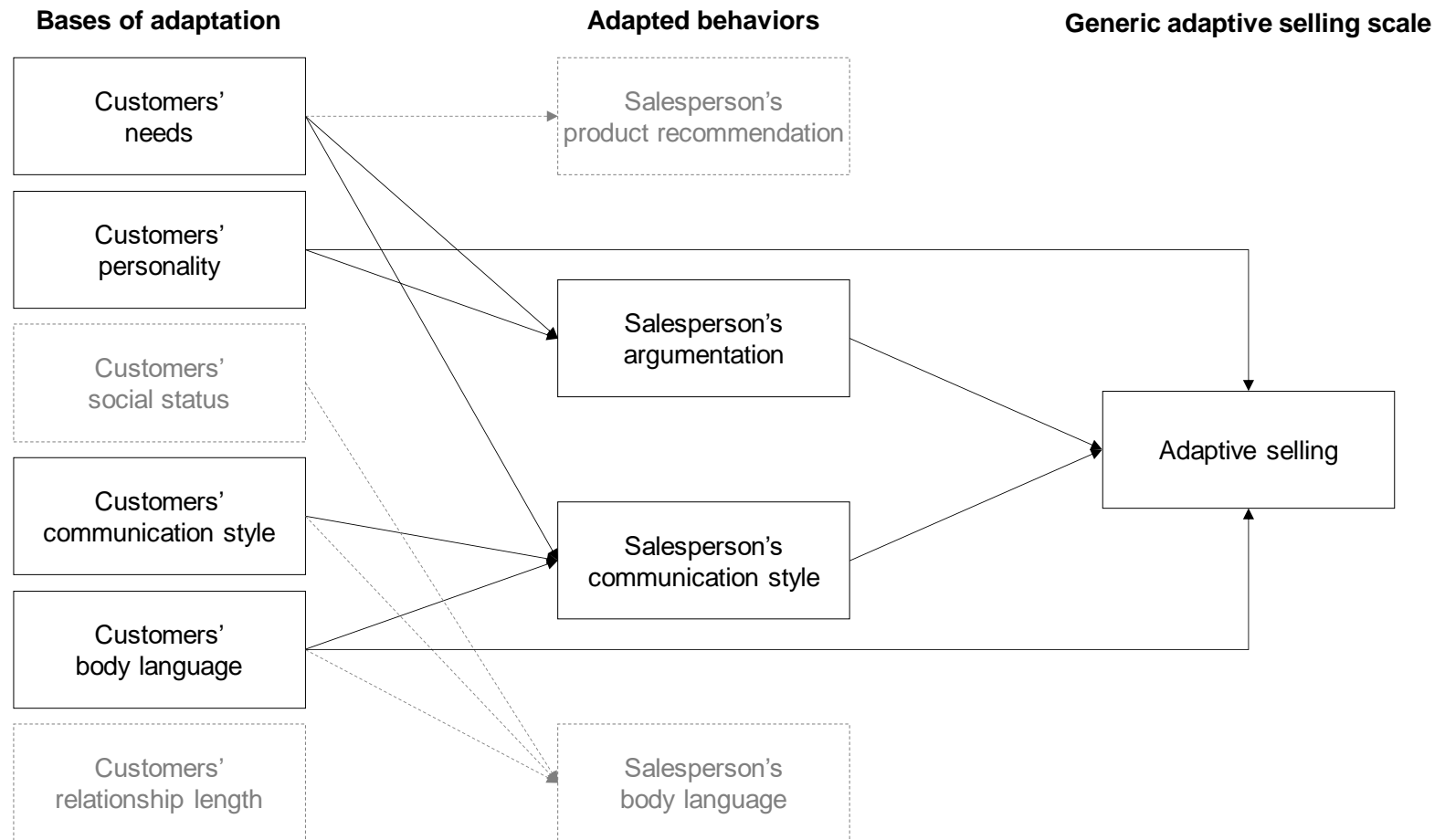


Figure 2

Study 2: Illustration of Direct Effects between Measured Constructs



Note: Dotted lines indicate constructs and effects that emerge as disconnected from the generic adaptive selling scale, our ultimate dependent variable. Thus, when evaluating generic adaptive selling scales, respondents do not seem to factor in these constructs.

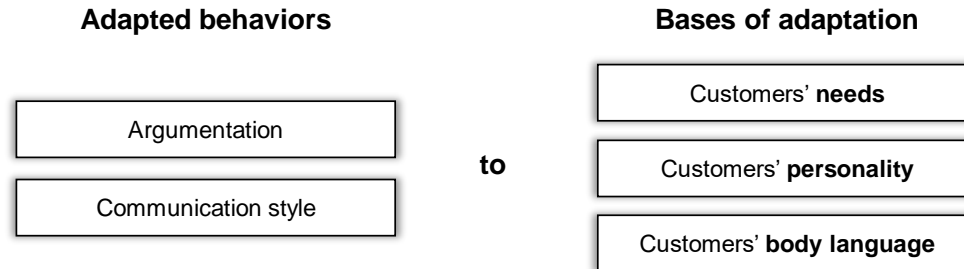
Figure 3

Study 2: Summary of Results



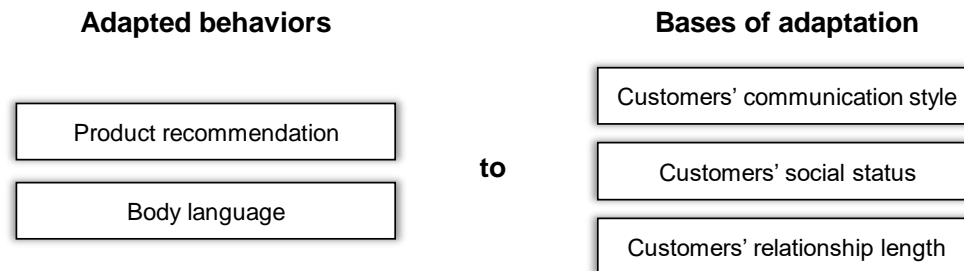
What ***does*** adaptive selling mean to salespeople?

That is, what ***is*** on salespeople's mind when responding to generic adaptive selling scales?



What does adaptive selling ***not*** mean to salespeople?

That is, what is ***not*** on salespeople's mind when responding to generic adaptive selling scales?



APPENDIX 1

Study 2: Sample Composition

Characteristic	Distribution
Gender	
Male (%)	49.1%
Female (%)	50.9%
Age (years)	
< 20	2.4%
20 to <30	34.3%
30 to <40	36.0%
40 to <50	16.6%
50 to <60	7.3%
60 and more	3.5%
Experience in industry (years)	
< 1	0.7%
1 to <3	17.0%
3 to <5	20.8%
5 to <10	22.1%
10 and more	39.4%
Experience in company (years)	
< 1	1.0%
1 to <3	31.5%
3 to <5	22.5%
5 to <10	21.5%
10 and more	23.5%
Experience in position (years)	
< 1	1.4%
1 to <3	42.2%
3 to <5	24.6%
5 to <10	19.7%
10 and more	12.1%

APPENDIX 2

Study 2: Measures and Data Sources

Main variables		
Construct	Measures	Based on
Adaptive selling (generic scales)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I vary my sales style from customer to customer.^a • Each customer requires a unique sales approach.^a • It is easy for me to modify my sales presentation if the situation calls for it.^a • When I feel that my sales approach is not working, I can easily change to another approach.^a • I am very flexible in the selling approach I use.^a • I like to experiment with different sales approaches.^a 	Spiro and Weitz (1990)
Bases of adaptation: Customers' needs, personality, social status, communication style, body language, relationship length	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I vary my sales style from customer to customer based on [his/her needs/personality/social status/way of speaking/body language/how long I have known him/her].^a • Each customer requires a unique approach based on [his/her needs/personality/social status/way of speaking/body language/how long I have known him/her].^a • It is easy for me to modify my sales presentation [if the customer's needs/personality/social status/way of speaking/body language call for it/based on how long I have known him/her].^a • When I feel that my sales approach [for my customer's needs/personality/social status/way of speaking/body language/for my customer based on how long I have known him/her] is not working, I can easily change to another approach.^a 	Spiro and Weitz (1990)
Adapted behaviors: Salesperson's product recommendation, argumentation, communication style, body language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I vary [the product that I recommend/my argumentation/way of speaking/body language] from customer to customer.^a • Each customer requires a unique [product recommendation/argumentation/way of speaking/body language].^a • It is easy for me to modify my [product recommendation/argumentation/way of speaking/body language] if the situation calls for it.^a • When I feel that my [product recommendation/argumentation/way of speaking/body language] is not working, I can easily change it.^a 	Spiro and Weitz (1990)
Control variables		
Construct	Measures	Based on
Salesperson's age	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How old are you?^b 	
Salesperson's gender	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Your gender?^c 	
Salesperson's experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For how many years have you been working in this industry?^b 	
Salesperson's self-efficacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I can always manage to solve difficult problems if I try hard enough.^a • It is easy for me to stick to my aims and accomplish my goals.^a • When I am confronted with a problem, I can usually find several solutions.^a 	Sherer et al. (1995)
Industry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In which industry do you work?^b 	

^a Seven-point Likert scale (anchored "strongly disagree" and "strongly agree"); ^b Open text field; ^c Single choice ("male," "female")