

Executive Summary

Firm Actions to Develop an Ambidextrous Sales Force

The changing nature of sales has blurred the once distinct boundaries between sales and service roles. Firms are increasingly expecting their salespeople to meet service-based performance goals while concurrently requiring them to meet sales targets. Similarly, service personnel are often expected to discover unmet customer needs during service encounters in order to identify up-selling, cross-selling, lead generation, and other sales opportunities. These combined behaviors refer to service-sales ambidexterity, which is defined as, engagement in both customer service provision and cross-/up-selling during service encounters.

Firms across different industries recognize that service-sales ambidexterity can be crucial for nurturing key accounts in strategic business markets and for tasking frontline employees to deliver greater levels of service to their best customers. While many firms are embracing service-sales ambidexterity, it is not clear how firms cultivate employee ambidexterity within their sales forces. That is, how can firms select, train, motivate, and enable their sales force to engage in both sales- and service-related activities in a balanced approach that will lead to greater sales force and firm performance? Furthermore, what business environmental conditions exist that can further augment this performance?

The authors of the study utilize information gathered from senior sales executives in 170 business-to-business firms across multiple industries to address these research questions. They find that ambidextrous firms— or, those that balance service and sales-related elements when selecting, training, motivating, and enabling their sales force – enjoy greater sales force and firm financial performance. Specifically, firms that are ambidextrous at implementing sales force skill enhancing practices via selection and training, enjoy higher levels of sales force performance, which, in turn, increases the financial performance of the firm. This improved performance for ambidextrous firms is even greater for firms that also exhibit high levels of ambidexterity in systems that enhance sales force motivation (i.e., metrics and incentives) and practices that enhance opportunities for the sales force to engage in both service and sales-focused activities (i.e., data and tools use). Finally, the study finds that highly ambidextrous firms performed even better in markets categorized with high levels of intense competition, suggesting that service-sales ambidexterity, when achieved, can provide firms with better results even in the most competitive markets.

As the authors say: “Service-sales ambidexterity is critical for sales forces in today’s competitive business environment. Our results provide important insights for how firms can leverage human capital resources and firms’ systems and processes to cultivate ambidextrous sales forces.” Even if firms struggle to achieve service-sales ambidexterity quickly, it is a goal worth pursuing which can deliver greater performance improvements. Accordingly, the study authors conclude: “It is important for firms to reevaluate their sales force systems and processes and discover ways to implement changes that will lead to greater service-sales ambidexterity cultivation in their sales forces.”