APPLICATION OF THE SHORTENED VERSION OF THE SOCO SCALE IN A PERSONAL SELLING CLASS

Jeff W. Totten, D.B.A., PCM
Assistant Professor of Marketing
McNeese State University
Lake Charles, Louisiana

ABSTRACT

The original SOCO Scale was reduced to 10 items by Thomas, Soutar, and Ryan (2001). The author conducted a pretest and a posttest in his Personal Selling class during the Fall 2009 semester. Significant differences by gender, student sales experience and family member in the sales field were identified. The author once again pretested the shortened scale in his Spring 2010 Personal Selling class; however, spousal health problems derailed the planned posttest. Significant differences by gender and student sales experience were found. Paired t-test findings and comparison of the two data sets data are also addressed in this paper.

INTRODUCTION

The Sales Orientation/Customer Orientation (SOCO) Scale was developed by Saxe and Weitz (1982) as a tool to measure the degree of sales versus customer orientation in salespeople. The scale has been tested and applied, in part or in whole, in many studies over the years (e.g., Boles et al. 2001; Brown, Widing and Coulter 1991; Cross et al. 2007; Dunlap, Dotson and Chambers 1988; Jaramillo et al. 2007; Keillor, Pettijohn and d’Amico 2011; Kelley and Hoffman 1997; Pettijohn, Pettijohn and Parker 1997; Rozell, Pettijohn and Parker 2004; Tadepalli 1995; Williams 1998).

Concern has been expressed about possible respondent fatigue and acquiescence bias with the use of the 24-item SOCO Scale. This led Thomas, Soutar and Ryan (2001) to develop a 10-item shortened version of SOCO. They concluded that “using the reduced ten-item set would lose little information” (p. 67). Periatt, LeMay and Chakrabarty (2004) tested the shortened version and found support for its use, noting “it is both parsimonious and effective” (p. 49). However, some researchers have urged caution in the reduction-in-items process (see Panagopoulos and Avlonitis 2008, p. 376; Franke, Rapp and Andzulis 2013).

The purpose of this research was to test the applicability of the shortened version of the SOCO Scale in an academic setting. One marketing professor tested the full version of SOCO in a series of studies in his small personal selling classes over ten years ago, producing some interesting findings (see Totten 2001, 2002a, 2002b, and Totten et al. 2003). Using that professor’s methodology, this author tested the shortened version in his Fall 2009 personal selling class and got the pretest done in his Spring 2010 class before family health problems prevented the posttest from being completed. The null hypothesis was: No increase in customer orientation of the students over the course of the semester (pretest scores = posttest scores). The results of these studies are reported in this paper.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The SOCO Scale as developed by Saxe and Weitz (1982) has come under some criticism over the years. One issue is that researchers have usually assessed customer/sales orientation “from the perspective of the firm in contrast to individual performance” (Wachner, Plouffe and Grégoire 2009, p. 34). Franke and Park (2006) conducted a meta-analysis and concluded that “customer-oriented selling does not consistently lead to sales or other results that managers value, because its effects on manager-rated and objective performance are nonsignificant” (p. 700). Schwepker (2003) also criticized the scale, noting that a sales orientation will help salespeople meet outcome-based performance measurements, at least in the short term. Using the shortened version of SOCO along with performance and selling skills scales, Wachner, Plouffe and Grégoire (2009, p. 40) found that, to achieve performance goals, “the salesperson must have both a customer orientation and the requisite selling skills.” “If a salesperson has low selling skills ( . . .), they perform better by applying a pure sales orientation” (p. 40). Though they used the shortened version, they did not focus on how well it worked as a scale. Bagozzi, et al. (2012) also tested the scale and substituted three scale items that they said worked better (p. 642). A review of the literature did not find any research study that applied the shortened version in the academic setting, like Totten (2001, 2002a, 2002b; Totten, et al. 2003) had with the traditional SOCO Scale.
As researchers had done before, the reliability of the short-
ened-version of the SOCO questionnaire was assessed for
both measurements using Cronbach’s Alpha. The pretest
instrument had a coefficient alpha of .746 (n=25) and the
posttest instrument had a coefficient alpha of .760 (n=32; 
one student didn't mark a response for item eight). Both
reliability measures indicated an acceptable degree of in-
ternal consistency according to Nunnally (1978).

Table 1 shows pre and posttest scale items. The means
and standard deviations for the pre and posttest scale are
in Table 2. As can be seen, the pretest means were higher
than the posttest means on all the scale items. The mean
pretest total score (n=25) equaled 70.56 with a standard
deviation of 8.813. The mean posttest total score (n=32)
equaled 75.39 with a standard deviation of 8.847. A paired
t-test was significantly different based on a paired t-test of
the means (t = -2.695, p = .014).

TABLE 1 Pre and Post Mean Scores for the shortened-
version SOCO Scale Items

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale Item</th>
<th>Pre</th>
<th>Post</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I paint too rosy of my products/services, to make them sound as good as possible.*</td>
<td>5.12</td>
<td>6.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I try to figure out what a customer’s needs are.</td>
<td>8.28</td>
<td>8.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is necessary to stretch the truth in describing a product/service to a customer.*</td>
<td>6.72</td>
<td>6.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A good salesperson has to have the customer’s best interest in mind.</td>
<td>7.56</td>
<td>8.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I try to sell as much as I can, rather than satisfying customers.*</td>
<td>7.88</td>
<td>7.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I offer the product/service of mine that is best suited to the customer’s problem.</td>
<td>7.88</td>
<td>8.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I make recommendations based on what I think I can sell and not on the basis of customers' long-term satisfaction.*</td>
<td>6.52</td>
<td>6.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I take a problem-solving approach in selling products or services to customers.</td>
<td>6.96</td>
<td>7.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I try to sell as much as I can to convince the customer to buy, even if it is more than wise customers would buy.*</td>
<td>6.20</td>
<td>6.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I try to find out which kinds of products or services would be most helpful to customers.*</td>
<td>8.24</td>
<td>8.26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Reverse scored. A score of 9 = True, always. 
**Reverse scored. A score of 9 = False, never.
The pretest mean scores were subjected to independent t-tests to determine if any scale items were significantly different by each demographic variable. No significant differences were found for family member in the sales field. Female students rated one item, “A good salesperson has to have the customer’s best interest in mind,” higher than did male students (8.09 vs. 7.80, t = 2.823, p = .007; equal variances not assumed) and their overall mean score was also higher (70.18 vs. 65.10, t = 2.202, p = .032).

Three scale items and the overall mean scale score were significantly different by students’ sales experience. Students with sales experience rated “I try to figure out what a customer’s needs are” (8.36 vs. 7.52, t = 2.492, p = .017; equal variances not assumed), “I offer the product/service of mine that is best suited to the customer’s problem” (7.86 vs. 7.22, t = 2.859, p = .004) and “I try to find out which kinds of products or services would be most helpful to customers” (8.34 vs. 7.28, t = 2.852, p = .007) higher than did students with no sales experience. Those with sales experience also had a significantly higher overall mean score (70.24 vs. 64.37, t = 2.686, p = .002).

LIMITATIONS
One major limitation is the lack of a posttest for the Spring 2010 class. No assessment of improvement in customer orientation can thus be made. The inconsistency in the scale reliability from one semester to the next is also a limitation and a concern about the scale itself. A third limitation deals with the issue of “borrowed” scales; applying scales developed for use in one setting in another setting (sales field to academia), as noted by Engelland, Alfond and Taylor (2008). Fourth, the lack of controls for other possible explanatory factors is a limitation. Factors that could have been taken into account include type of sales experience (B2C vs. B2B), length of sales experience, and impact of the major sales presentation project, grade, ethnicity, and professor’s focus on customer orientation throughout the term. Then there is the possibility of social desirability bias, in that the students may have responded in the way they felt the professor expected them to respond, instead of providing their true beliefs.

DISCUSSION
It was good to see overall improvement in the scale item mean scores. There were some gender differences, with female students indicating a higher customer orientation than male students did. There also seems to have been a positive impact on customer orientation for those students who had had sales experience. Having family members in the sales field apparently rubbed off on some of the students in the Fall 2009 class, leaving them more customer oriented.

Future research should first begin with a tracking of more factors, e.g., ethnicity, impact of grades, impact of projects, and impact of speakers, on the measurement of customer orientation using the shortened version. Using the shortened version in multiple sections of Personal Selling at larger schools would also be beneficial. This would allow one to measure the effect of class size and professor as well. It has also been suggested that perhaps giving the survey a third time, during the middle of the semester, might also be beneficial (Totten, et al. 2003, p. 153).

REFERENCES


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