



The effects of sales training on sales force activity

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Abstract *This study examines the effects of sales training on sales force performance and customer orientation in the context of small and medium-sized companies (SMEs). The results give empirical evidence of the importance of sales training investment as a means of increasing sales performance. However, more training investment does not imply higher levels of customer-oriented selling. Yet, higher levels of salespeople performance and customer-oriented selling are observed when specific training methods and content are implemented. Additionally, customer-oriented selling positively influences sales force performance, and sales training seems to moderate the relationship between sales force performance and effectiveness. Managerial implications and applications are discussed, and suggestions for future research are presented.*

Introduction

Several changes have affected the personal selling function in recent years. Customers have more information, demand increased levels of customer service and have higher expectations. Furthermore, competition is stronger due to market globalisation (e.g. the single European market), and technology is continually becoming more advanced, especially in the field of telecommunications (Wilson, 1993; Anderson, 1996; Wotruba, 1996). Such changes require new and improved skills from salespeople, which are gained through training (Filipczak *et al.*, 1991; Dubinsky, 1999). Producing the best available product or service is not enough; it has to be sold. If companies are to survive, they must pay great attention to the training of their sales force (Jobber and Lancaster, 1997).

In today's competitive marketplace, personal selling is the key to success for many firms (Anderson, 1996; Baldauf and Cravens, 1999). This is why enhancing the salespeople performance is one of the most urgent tasks managers face (Boles *et al.*, 2000). However, the role of salespeople has in fact expanded beyond the generation of sales and more towards building relationships with customers (Weitz and Bradford, 1999; Wilson, 2000; Ingram *et al.*, 2001). Consequently, salespeople should focus more on implementing a customer-oriented approach, which implies solving customers' problems, providing opportunities and adding value to the customer's business over an extended period of time (Saxe and Weitz, 1982; Flaherty *et al.*, 1999). The empirical studies carried out by Williams and Attaway (1996) and Williams

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(1998) show that customer-oriented selling leads to the successful development of relationships with customers.

Training is a vital component for both the initial and ongoing development of the sales representative (Christiansen *et al.*, 1996) and many companies make substantial investments in training their salespeople (Dubinsky, 1996; Churchill *et al.*, 1997). The literature suggests that training may increase salespeople performance (Walker *et al.*, 1977; Anderson *et al.*, 1995) and customer orientation (Siguaw *et al.*, 1994; Flaherty *et al.*, 1999). Nonetheless, there is relatively less research into how sales training affects salespeople's performance (Honeycutt *et al.*, 1995), and, to our knowledge, no research at all examining the influence of sales training on the sales force's orientation towards customers. As stated by Churchill *et al.* (1997, p. 450): "very little research has been done to determine what effect, if any, sales training has on the sales force".

The purpose of this paper is threefold. First, to analyse the effects of training on sales force performance and customer orientation. Second, to study the relationship between these two variables. Third, to examine the moderating role of sales training in the relationship between sales force performance and sales force effectiveness.

To achieve these objectives, the paper is organised as follows. First, we develop a conceptual framework and present the hypotheses to be tested in our study, in which the sales force is the unit of analysis. Then, we describe the research methodology and present the study results. We then conclude by suggesting the management implications of our results and identifying key areas for future research.

Conceptual model and hypotheses

The conceptual model followed in the research is presented in Figure 1. Our framework suggests that sales training has effects both on sales force performance and customer orientation. Besides, we propose that the latter variable influences the former. Additionally, we formulate that sales training moderates the effect of sales force performance on sales effectiveness. The reasoning for these propositions is explained below.

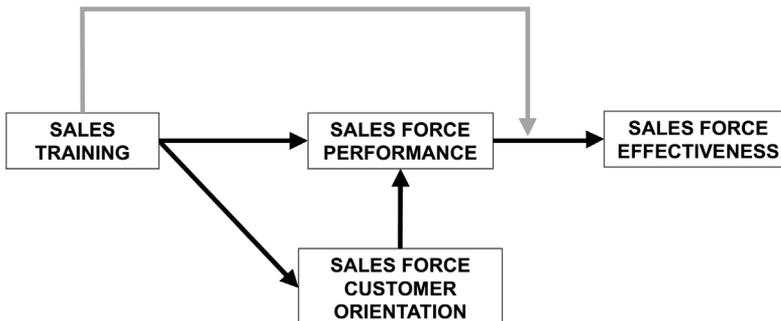


Figure 1.
The consequences of sales training

Sales training effects on sales force performance and customer orientation
Sales training investment and performance. Sales training typically has three stages:

- (1) assessment: establishing training needs and objectives;
- (2) training: selection of trainers, trainees, training facilities and methods, programme content and implementation; and
- (3) evaluation: assessment of programme effectiveness (Honeycutt *et al.*, 1993; Dubinsky, 1996).

It involves the systematic attempt to describe, explain and transfer “good selling practices” to salespeople (Leigh 1987, p. 39). The most common sales training objective is to increase sales performance (El-Ansary, 1993; Honeycutt *et al.*, 1993; Jackson and Hisrich, 1996; Churchill *et al.*, 1997; Donaldson, 1998; Ingram *et al.*, 1997). Salespeople performance represents behaviours that are evaluated in terms of their contributions to the goals of the organisation (Walker *et al.*, 1979).

Skill level is one of the antecedents of sales performance (Churchill *et al.*, 1985; Sujan *et al.*, 1988) and refers to the individual capacity to implement sales tasks (Leong *et al.*, 1989). Research suggests that training may increase the salesperson’s knowledge base and skill level, resulting in higher performance (Walker *et al.*, 1977; Anderson *et al.*, 1995; Churchill *et al.*, 1997). Findings from Ingram *et al.* (1992) suggest that the most significant factors contributing to salespeople’s failure can be addressed through training. Similarly, according to the results of Piercy *et al.* (1998), sales managers rated sales training as one of the most important factors in improving sales force performance.

From this point of view, training enhances learning so that salespeople reach more acceptable performance levels in less time than learning through direct experience alone (Leigh, 1987). Results that partially agree with this influence have been found by Christiansen *et al.* (1996) in an exploratory study based on three companies gathering data from salespeople. Thus, we propose:

H1. The larger the sales training investment, the better the sales force performance.

In addition, the subsidisation of training investment implies that the state shares in this investment by providing a subsidy. This type of financing, as opposed to private financing, means lower accountability for both administrators (the state) and trainees (companies) (Dougherty and Tan, 1999). Similarly, drawing on an investigation of UK and German firms, Hart and Shipman (1991) suggest that the use of public funds for training needs to be monitored closely to ensure that the activity is effectively implemented and provides good value for money. In addition, Baker (1994) points out that poor management attitude towards training may arise from excessive levels of state intervention, i.e. subsidisation.

In relating the above discussion to sales management research, several authors argue that sales training can be effective in achieving training

objectives, the most common of which is geared towards increasing sales performance (Donaldson, 1998), but only if managers have the appropriate attitudes towards and involvement in the training (Honeycutt *et al.*, 1993; Jackson and Hisrich, 1996; Churchill *et al.*, 1997). Therefore, to the extent that training is financed by the state, and given the lower accountability of this investment and its negative consequences on management attitudes, we suggest that training effectiveness in terms of increasing salespeople performance decreases with subvention. All this leads to the following:

H2. Subsidised training has a lower effect on sales force performance than non-subsidised training.

The subsidisation of training determines, to an extent, the training methods to be implemented. Very commonly, this training is implemented in Spain outside business hours, outside the company and by external providers (Alcaide *et al.*, 1996). The effect of different training methods on sales training effectiveness will be addressed in *H3*.

The effects of sales training methods and contents on performance and customer orientation. Customer-oriented selling evolves from the marketing concept, a management philosophy which states that an organisation should strive to satisfy customer needs through a coordinated set of activities that also allows the organisation to achieve its objectives (McGee and Spiro, 1988). Saxe and Weitz (1982, p. 329) defined customer-oriented selling as:

... the degree to which salespeople practice the marketing concept by trying to help their customers make purchase decisions that will satisfy customer needs.

The successful implementation of customer orientation requires that salespeople should have the necessary skills and knowledge to:

- gather information about the customer through effective listening (Ramsey and Sohi, 1997; Boorum *et al.*, 1998);
- analyse and understand customer problems (Leong *et al.*, 1989);
- tailor their offerings to customer needs (Saxe and Weitz, 1982; Boorum *et al.*, 1998).

The company can provide the appropriate training so that salespeople gain the aforementioned resources to become more customer-oriented (Siguaw *et al.*, 1994; Flaherty *et al.*, 1999; Reynolds and Arnold, 2000).

The most commonly used and traditional sales training methods are on-the-job training, individual learning, in-house courses and external courses (Churchill *et al.*, 1997; Donaldson, 1998). Several authors argue that on-the-job training is the most advantageous one in terms of its contribution to sales people performance (Jackson and Hisrich, 1996; Ingram *et al.*, 1997), as it is able to introduce trainees to real-world experience (Jackson and Hisrich, 1996) by giving them the opportunity to put into practice the knowledge and skills previously learned in classroom training (Jobber and Lancaster, 1997; Donaldson, 1998). Moreover, this training method allows the salespeople to

consider customer problems as their own and to become personally involved with the customers (Reynolds and Arnold, 2000).

Apart from these traditional training methods, sales training can be implemented with high-tech methods (e.g. computer-assisted instruction, interactive video and tele-training). On the one hand, empirical studies have shown that companies used them only rarely in the early 1990s (Erffmeyer *et al.*, 1992; Chonko *et al.*, 1993), perhaps due to their high start-up costs and the uncertainty of the benefits associated with them (Dalrymple and Cron, 1998). On the other hand, these methods may be quite effective, in that they are very flexible and require an active and direct participation of the trainee, as opposed to other traditional training methods such as lecturing and conferences (Kahn, 1997).

The content of sales training tends to remain constant over time – focused mainly on the knowledge of the product, the market, the company and sales techniques (Chonko *et al.*, 1993; Churchill *et al.*, 1997). However, there exist a number of subjects that place special emphasis on training salespeople to identify and understand customer needs, work in teams, or how to use a portable computer or the company's new computerised procedures (Churchill *et al.*, 1997).

Regarding the effectiveness of these training topics, Dalrymple and Cron (1998) argue that salespeople need to be taught how the sales process works in order to be productive field sales representatives, thus driving to higher sales performance. However, too much emphasis on the selling process and on presentation techniques may ignore the way in which the customers buy (Donaldson, 1998); therefore, decreasing customer-orientation. The opposite holds true if emphasis is placed on listening and questioning skills (Ingram *et al.*, 1997). In addition, product knowledge is important in helping the customer solve problems (Jackson and Hisrich, 1996) only when its applications, use and benefits are emphasised instead of the technical attributes (Churchill *et al.*, 1997; Donaldson, 1998). Similarly, market and customer knowledge allows the salespeople to identify prospective buyers needing products and services offered by the company (Dalrymple and Cron, 1998) as well as providing salespeople with resources to understand customer needs, and subsequently they ought to be more customer-oriented after training.

All the above implies that training constitutes an ideal way for salespeople to achieve customer orientation as well as performance. However, we maintain that higher training investment does not necessarily lead to a more customer-oriented sales force. This is because, in order to be customer-oriented, salespeople need to be taught specific skills that may not be assured by higher levels of training. Therefore, what really matters are the characteristics of the training – the methods, and, more importantly, the topics covered in the sales training implementation – not the amount of money spent on training. For example, in a sales-oriented company (as opposed to a customer-oriented one) training in sales techniques may focus on high pressure selling and may lead to higher performance in the short term, but definitely not to higher levels of

customer orientation in the sales force (Saxe and Weitz, 1982; Dunlap *et al.*, 1988).

We have seen how the literature proposes that certain training methods and content may be more effective than others depending on the topics emphasised. Nonetheless, the analysis of their effects on sales force performance and customer orientation has not been addressed in the sales literature. Based on the above discussion, we suggest that different training methods and content will be more effective than others in terms of their influence on salespeople performance and customer orientation, which leads us to formulate the following general hypothesis:

- H3.* Sales force performance and customer orientation are influenced by the choice of methods and content implemented during the sales training activity.

Sales force performance and customer orientation

Customer-oriented selling has been positively linked to both customer satisfaction with the salesperson (Goff *et al.*, 1997) and to customer trust in the salesperson (Wray *et al.*, 1994). Furthermore, the practice of customer-oriented selling behaviours leads to the successful development of buyer-seller relationships (Williams and Attaway, 1996; Williams, 1998). However, past research examining the relationship between customer-oriented practices and performance has led to mixed findings. First, Saxe and Weitz (1982) found that customer orientation had significant and positive effects on sales performance only in one of the four scenarios analysed. Later, Howe *et al.* (1994) found no significant relationship, whereas Swenson and Herche (1994) and Keillor *et al.* (2000) found a significant and positive influence of salespeople customer orientation on performance. Theoretically, it is argued that customer-oriented selling is a necessary requirement for salespeople to be successful (Taylor, 1986; MacKay, 1988; Macintosh *et al.*, 1992). All of this leads us to propose a fourth hypothesis:

- H4.* The higher the sales force customer orientation, the better the sales force performance.

The moderating role of sales training between sales force performance and effectiveness

A number of researchers have distinguished between sales force performance and effectiveness (Churchill *et al.*, 1985; Cravens *et al.*, 1993; Plank and Reid 1994; Babakus *et al.*, 1996; Piercy *et al.*, 1998; Baldauf and Cravens, 1999; Grant and Cravens, 1999). The latter has been defined as a summary index of organisational outcomes for which salespeople are at least partly responsible (Walker *et al.*, 1979). Therefore, the variation in salespeople effectiveness is explained by salespeople performance as well as by environmental and organisational factors (e.g. economic conditions, market potential) that go beyond salespeople's control (Walker *et al.*, 1979; Churchill *et al.*, 1985).

Salespeople performance and effectiveness are separate, yet related constructs. Several empirical studies have shown that salespeople's performance has a positive influence on their effectiveness (Cravens *et al.*, 1993; Babakus *et al.*, 1996; Baldauf and Cravens, 1999; Grant and Cravens, 1999). But this relationship may not be the same for every salesperson. The transformation of individual performance into organisational outcomes will also depend on the salespeople's skills to obtain sales or customers of greater interest for the company in terms of market segment or profitability, for example. Because these skills can be achieved through training, we expect that the effect of salespeople's performance on the overall organisational results (sales force effectiveness) should be moderated by the level of training received by salespeople. Thus, salespeople with higher levels of training will tend to be more effective, which implies that their performance has a more direct influence on their effectiveness. Therefore, we hypothesise:

H5. When sales training is high, sales force performance will have a stronger effect on sales force effectiveness than when it is low.

It can be observed that we have not formulated a direct effect of training on sales force effectiveness (e.g. sales). Ingram *et al.* (1997) argue that there is an inherent difficulty in relating subsequent sales results to previously conducted sales training. Additionally, Churchill *et al.* (1997) point out that the relationship between sales training and sales force results is, at best, unclear. This is because "there are many factors other than sales training that can influence sales revenue and profits" (Honeycutt and Stevenson, 1989, p. 217). This is consistent with the above discussion, in which two different, yet related, constructs were separated: sales force performance and effectiveness. The latter is affected by a number of environmental variables (e.g. market conditions, competition) uncontrollable either by the company or its sales force (Walker *et al.*, 1979; Churchill *et al.*, 1985; Cravens *et al.*, 1993; Dalrymple and Cron, 1998). Thus, a direct influence of training on sales force effectiveness is not proposed. Nevertheless, as formulated in *H5*, training reinforces the positive influence of salespeople performance on their effectiveness.

Methodology

Sample and data collection

The population was drawn from the database Dirección de Fomento de la Producción: España 30.000, including for consideration only the Spanish companies that have between 25 and 250 employees[1,2].

We chose SMEs because:

- they represent 99.88 per cent of Spanish companies (Eurostat 1996);
- most of the studies concerning training effects on salespeople behaviour are focused on big companies (e.g. El-Ansary, 1993; Christiansen *et al.*, 1996); and

- according to Siu and Kirby (1996), due to the specific limitations and constraints of small firms, their marketing behaviour differs from that of larger firms, not necessarily following the guidelines of the normative marketing approach.

Empirical research confirming this assumption, in terms of sales management, can be found in the studies of Honeycutt and Stevenson (1989), Peterson (1990) and Honeycutt *et al.* (1994), in which sales management practices differ between small and big companies.

The research method employed was a mail questionnaire addressed to the general managers of the organisations. We chose the general manager instead of the sales manager for four reasons. First, in the context of Spanish SMEs, it is quite common that the sales manager simply does not exist, and the general manager acts as the sales manager (Artal, 1997, 1999). Second, empirical research has found that in small companies, the manager is responsible for assessing training needs as well as assuming budget responsibility (Honeycutt *et al.*, 1994). Third, even if there was a sales manager, we needed information at the company level such as total sales volume, profitability or market share, which are easily made available by the general manager. Fourth, the marketing behaviour of small companies is particularly affected by the motivation, belief, attitude and objectives of the managers (Churchill and Lewis, 1983).

A total of 2,100 questionnaires were sent during the first week of January 1998[3]. Potential participants received a cover letter on university stationery requesting their cooperation, and we also enclosed a self-addressed stamped envelope. By 31 March a total of 246 questionnaires (11.7 per cent) had been returned. The high rate of non-response is consistent with previous sales management research (Swenson and Herche, 1994; Dorsch *et al.*, 1998) and consistent with the relative low response rates that seems typical of business communities (Duhan and Wilson, 1990; London and Dommeyer, 1990). Moreover, response rate was decreased since our research had no company sponsorship and incentives were not provided (Gatignon and Roberston, 1989). In order to assess whether non-response bias was a problem, a comparison of early respondents and late respondents was made on all variables of interest (Amstrong and Overton, 1977). No evidence of non-response bias was found, since no significant difference was found, thus suggesting that some generalisation of the results may be possible.

After eliminating invalid questionnaires (due to incomplete responses or errors in the database used to select the companies) we obtained information from 202 organisations. Of those responding, 57 per cent (115 cases) had implemented sales training activities in the previous two years, which is consistent with previous research (Honeycutt and Stevenson, 1989). These sales organisations employed on average eight salespeople and their annual sales averaged 28.625 million euros. The sales forces[4] represented in the final sample included those contacting organisational (55 per cent) and consumer

buyers (45 per cent). Tangible products accounted for 72 per cent of the sales organisations, compared with 28 per cent for services.

Construct measurement

Different measuring procedures of sales training were used. First, sales training was assessed in terms of the investment made by the company and the total number of hours devoted to this activity in the previous two years. Second, we asked for the percentage of the training investment that had been subsidised by the state. Then, this percentage was multiplied by the training investment, creating the variable subsidised training. Non-subsidised training was then obtained by subtracting subsidised training from training investment. Third, based on the review of the literature (Jackson and Hisrich, 1996; Churchill *et al.*, 1997; Ingram *et al.*, 1997; Dalrymple and Cron, 1998), the most common sales training methods and contents were considered. As for methods: on-the-job training, in-house courses, distinguishing between those run by company trainers or by external providers, external training, whether short courses (five days or fewer) or programmes (six days or more), own-house training, which implies that salespeople are given time off work over a specific period for self-instruction and home assignments, and finally, high-tech training methods were approached as open/distance learning. Training content was: company policy, sales techniques, market and customer knowledge, product education, computer knowledge and team work (see frequencies of these variables in Table I). Training methods and

	Number	Per cent
<i>Training investment</i>		
Firms investing in sales training ^a	115	100.0
Firms where sales training was not subsidised	25	21.7
<i>Methods</i>		
Number of firms providing:		
On-the-job training	61	53.0
In-house courses – run by company trainers	41	35.7
In-house courses – run by an external provider	70	60.9
External short courses – five days or fewer	77	67.0
External training programmes – six days or more	49	42.6
Own-house training	22	19.1
Open/distance learning	13	11.3
<i>Content</i>		
Company policy	15	13.0
Sales techniques	84	73.0
Market/customer knowledge	55	47.8
Product education	41	35.7
Computer knowledge	49	42.6
Team work	16	13.9

Table I.
The characteristics of
sales training in the
sample (frequencies)

Note: ^a The final sample (115) is composed of companies that actually engaged in sales training activities in the last two years

content are categorical variables that take two values, 0 when the company has not implemented such method or content, and 1, in the opposite.

Despite knowing that requesting data for two years as opposed to one would reduce the response rate, we decided to maintain the two-year period due to the fact that sales training effects are long term rather than short term.

In order to assess sales force customer orientation (SCO), two items were adapted from Humphreys and Williams's (1996) scale. This scale measures:

... the salesperson's individualised attention to the customer in order to solve the buyers' needs and the salesperson's desire to provide friendly and expedient service (Humphreys and Williams, 1996, p. 51).

The selling orientation-customer orientation (SOCO) scale developed by Saxe and Weitz (1982) has been widely used in the literature (Swenson and Herche, 1994; Williams and Attaway, 1996), yet it needs to be modified to match the specific characteristics of service companies (Dunlap *et al.*, 1988; Kelley, 1992; Howe *et al.*, 1994). In contrast, the Humphreys and Williams's scale can be applied to both the tangible goods and intangible service areas, which is the case of our sample.

Performance comprises behaviour (the activities salespeople perform) and outcomes resulting from behaviour; the former has been termed behavioural performance, whereas the latter is known as outcome performance (Behrman and Perrault, 1982; Grant and Cravens, 1996). In this study sales force performance (SP) was measured using seven items developed by Behrman and Perrault (1982) that assess outcome performance, which the authors term "sales objective performance". This scale has been used in previous research in the same way as here, that is, through management evaluations of salespeople performance on these seven items (Piercy *et al.*, 1998; Baldauf and Cravens, 1999; Grant and Cravens, 1999). The reason why outcome performance was chosen is that it has been shown to be positively related to sales force effectiveness (Cravens *et al.*, 1993; Babakus *et al.*, 1996; Baldauf and Cravens, 1999; Grant and Cravens, 1999). Therefore, we reckon that, from a management perspective, it is more interesting to analyse sales training effects on sales outcome performance, due to its relationship to effectiveness, as opposed to behavioural performance.

As for salespeople's performance and customer orientation, the managers evaluated the improvements in the previous two years using a five-point Likert scale anchored by one for "nothing" and five for "a lot" (see items in the Appendix). The alpha coefficients were 0.89 and 0.80 for SP and SCO scales respectively, which suggests that the measures have acceptable reliability (Nunnally, 1978). For further analysis, the items of these two scales were averaged to form composite scores.

Traditionally, sales force effectiveness has been measured by total sales volume (Lucas *et al.*, 1975; Bagozzi, 1978, 1980; Ryans and Weinberg, 1979). However, recent research has also considered other indicators, such as market share evolution and profitability (Cravens *et al.*, 1993; Babakus *et al.*, 1996;

Grant and Cravens, 1999). Following these latter studies, the sales force effectiveness was measured using the change in sales volume, market share and profitability in the last two years.

Analyses and results

Sales training effects on sales force performance and customer orientation

In order to test our first two hypotheses, we have run regression analyses. In the first regression, training investment in 1996 is the independent variable, and SP the dependent variable. The 1996 figure for training investment was chosen because SP is measured over a two-year period (1996-1997); consequently, the independent variable to be referred to is 1996, given that training effects will occur only after training has taken place. As can be observed in Table II, sales training investment has a positive and significant influence on salespeople's performance ($\beta = 0.26, p < 0.05$). Therefore, the first hypothesis is supported. On the other hand, as we suggested, the training investment does not have a significant influence on SCO ($\beta = 0.12, p = 0.33$).

Regarding the second hypothesis, a multiple regression was run, where sales force performance was the dependent variable and subsidised training and non-subsidised training, the independent variables. In line with *H2*, beta coefficients point to the fact that subsidised training has a lower effect on sales force performance than non-subsidised training, however, neither of them are significant (see Table II). Nonetheless, we also found that these two independent variables are highly correlated ($\rho = 0.61; p < 0.001$) due to the fact that subsidisation in Spain is commonly established as a percentage of the total investment (Alcaide *et al.*, 1996). Therefore, higher non-subsidised investment in training is associated with higher subsidised investment. Consequently, single regression analyses were run for each of the independent variables. As can be seen in Table II (bottom half), non-subsidised training has a positive and significant effect on sales force performance, whereas there is no effect when it comes to subsidised training, which partially supports *H2*.

In order to test the general hypothesis which proposes that salespeople performance and customer orientation are influenced by the choice of sales training methods and content, a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was run. We used this analysis because:

Independent variable	Dependent variable	Hypothesis	β	<i>t</i> -value	Adjusted R^2	<i>F</i>
Training investment	SP	<i>H1</i>	0.26*	2.051	0.051	4.207*
Subsidised training	SP	<i>H2</i>	0.10 (n.s)	0.606	0.038	1.91 (n.s)
Non-subsidised training	SP	<i>H2</i>	0.20 (n.s)	1.20	0.038	1.91 (n.s)
Subsidised training	SP	<i>H2</i>	0.19 (n.s)	1.36	0.017	1.86 (n.s)
Non-subsidised training	SP	<i>H2</i>	0.30*	2.35	0.074	5.53*

Notes: n.s. = not significant; * $p < 0.05$

Table II.
Regression analyses for
H1 and *H2*

- SP and SCO are correlated ($\rho = 0.72, p < 0.000$); and
- the training methods and content, the independent variables considered here, are measured through categorical variables.

Given that the survey data generated an unbalanced design, the sums of squares of every effect in the design were calculated as the sums of the squares adjusted for every other effect that does not contain it and orthogonal to any effects that may contain it (SPSS, 1997). The analysis, summarised in Table III, reveals that two training methods (on-the-job training and in-house courses run by company trainers) and two training topics (company policy and sales techniques) have significant effects on SP and SCO. Additionally, the MANOVA test provides a significant effect on both variables when the training content is simultaneously related to sales techniques, customer knowledge and computer knowledge.

Regarding training methods, the univariate F tests for each dependent variable indicate that both SP and SCO are significantly different when on-the-job training and in-house courses – run by company trainers – are implemented (see Table IV). Additionally, SP is significantly different when own-house training is provided. Concerning training contents, SP and SCO are significantly different when the content relates to company policy and to sales techniques as well as to sales techniques, customer knowledge and computer knowledge simultaneously. Moreover, salespeople trained in product education had a significantly different SCO. The significant results found in the MANOVA and the ANOVA analyses lead us to support $H3$.

Sources	Wilks' Λ	F -value	p
<i>Main effects</i>			
On-the-job training	0.92	3.55	0.03
In-house courses – run by company trainers	0.93	2.70	0.07
In-house courses – run by an external provider	0.99	0.68	n.s.
External short courses – five days or fewer	0.97	1.02	n.s.
External training programmes – six days or more	0.99	0.16	n.s.
Own-house training	0.96	1.43	n.s.
Open/distance learning	0.97	1.07	n.s.
Company policy	0.87	5.85	0.004
Sales techniques	0.80	10.18	0.000
Market/customer knowledge	0.99	0.15	n.s.
Product education	0.95	1.99	n.s.
Computer knowledge	0.98	0.51	n.s.
Team work	0.97	0.88	n.s.
<i>Significant interaction</i>			
Sales techniques \times market/customer knowledge \times computer knowledge	0.83	1.94	0.05

Note: n.s. = not significant

Table III.
MANOVA (training methods and content as factors)

Table IV.
ANOVA *F*-values and
mean values for
significant effects

Sources	SP as dependent variable		SCO as dependent variable	
	Mean values	<i>F</i> -value	Mean values	<i>F</i> -value
On-the-job training	2.74	4.69**	3.56	6.36**
In-house courses – run by company trainers	2.40	4.69**	3.11	6.36**
	2.37	4.67**	3.14	3.69**
Own-house training	2.77	4.67**	3.53	3.69**
	2.73	2.84*	n.s.	n.s.
Company policy	2.41	2.84*	n.s.	n.s.
	2.83	5.01**	3.77	11.07***
Sales techniques	2.31	5.01**	2.90	11.07***
	2.91	14.75***	3.74	17.24***
Product knowledge	2.23	14.75***	2.93	17.24***
	n.s.	n.s.	3.17	3.67**
Sales techniques × market/customer knowledge	n.s.	n.s.	3.50	3.67**
knowledge × computer knowledge	3.40	2.74**	4.13	3.28**
computer knowledge × customer knowledge	1.95	2.74**	2.71	3.28**
customer knowledge × computer knowledge				
customer knowledge × computer knowledge × market/customer knowledge				

Note: n.s.= Not significant; * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$; **** $p < 0.001$

The direction of the aforementioned relationships was determined by a comparison of the means of SP and SCO (see Table IV). In on-the-job training, the mean values of SP and SCO are higher (2.74 and 3.56 respectively) than when this method is not implemented (2.40 and 3.11 respectively). Conversely, the mean values of SP and SCO are significantly lower when in-house training – run by company trainers – is implemented, whereas SP increases with own-house training.

As shown in Table IV, SP and SCO are significantly higher when the training content is related to company policy and sales techniques. Furthermore, when the training content deals with sales techniques, customer knowledge and computer knowledge simultaneously, both SP and SCO show significantly higher mean values (3.40 and 4.13 respectively) than in any other combination (see Table V). However, product education training reduces SCO. These results will be discussed in the last section of the paper.

Sales force performance and customer orientation

With respect to the fourth hypothesis, Table VI shows the regression analysis results where SCO clearly has a positive and significant effect on SP, thus supporting the predicted relationship.

The moderating role of sales training between sales force performance and effectiveness

Finally, to test the fifth hypothesis, we created a new variable to account for the interaction effect referred to in this hypothesis. The new variable is the multiplication of SP and sales training hours (ST), both components previously standardised. In this case training hours were chosen instead of training investment, since more training hours imply a higher involvement in the training activity by the salespeople (in terms of personal effort, which may not

Sales techniques	Market/customer knowledge	Computer knowledge	SP	SCO
NO	NO	NO	1.95	2.71
NO	NO	YES	2.70	3.58
NO	YES	NO	2.30	3.02
NO	YES	YES	1.96	2.42
YES	NO	NO	2.84	3.71
YES	NO	YES	2.63	3.37
YES	YES	NO	2.77	3.74
YES	YES	YES	3.43	4.06

Table V.
Interaction mean values

Independent variable	β	<i>t</i> -value	Adjusted R^2	<i>F</i>
SCO	0.726	3.231*	0.522	111.129*

Note: * $p < 0.001$

Table VI.
The effects of SCO on SP (*H4*)

be the case with investment) and consequently, more ability to translate their performance into actual company results, i.e. into effectiveness.

We ran three regressions, one for each of the three dimensions with which we measured the dependent variable. Because it was possible that the main effects of the two variables composing the interaction might also be significant, we included these main effects in the regression and used the step-wise method to enter the variables. The analyses, summarised in Table VII (left side), reveal that when sales growth and market share were the dependent variables, the interaction was the only variable that entered in the regression as independent. Not even when running simple regression analyses were ST and SP significant for either of the two dependent variables. Therefore, ST has a statistically significant moderating and positive effect on the relationship between SP and sales growth ($\beta = 0.192, p < 0.1$) and company market share ($\beta = 0.246, p < 0.05$). In other words, when ST and SP evolve jointly there is a positive and significant effect on both sales and market share.

However, when profitability was the dependent variable, all three independent variables entered into the regression. Then a moderated hierarchical regression analysis was used following the method described by Cohen and Cohen (1983). This technique is particularly useful for testing two-way interactions. First of all, the interaction was entered (model 1). Then a second regression equation was calculated entering ST and SP simultaneously (model 2) and the change in adjusted R^2 was evaluated. The data in Table VII (right side) show that adjusted R^2 increases from 0.042 in model 1 to 0.383 in model 2, in which all beta standardised coefficients are significant and have negative values for the interaction and SP. Therefore the last hypothesis is partially supported.

This negative effect of salespeople's performance and the interaction on company profitability deserves further discussion. First, as stated before, salespeople's performance was measured by seven items that comprise the outcome performance dimension, that is to say, only one of the items takes into account the profitability of the sales achieved. Second, profitability is affected particularly by many internal and external factors, such as the financial structure of the company and the interest rates evolution that were not

Dependent variables	Multiple regression analysis				Moderated hierarchical regression analysis			
	Sales growth		Market share		Profitability		Profitability	
	β	Adj. R^2	β	Adj. R^2	β	Adj. R^2	β	Adj. R^2
Independent variables								
ST×SP	0.192*	0.027	0.246**	0.051	-0.903***	0.042	-0.903***	0.383
ST	n.s.		n.s.				0.834***	
SP	n.s.		n.s.				-0.431***	

Notes: n.s.= Not significant; * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$

Table VII.
The moderating role of training (H5)

controlled in this research. Consequently, these factors' effects may overcome the probably significant but small positive effect of salespeople's performance.

Managerial implications and conclusions

The present study shows significant effects of sales training activities, not only on sales force performance, but also on its customer orientation. More training investment leads to higher performance but does not imply higher levels of customer-oriented selling. Yet, higher levels of performance and customer-oriented selling are found when specific training methods and content are implemented. In addition, sales force customer orientation has a positive influence on salespeople's performance, and training seems to moderate the relationship between sales force performance and its effectiveness.

Traditionally, it has been said that a successful salesperson is born rather than made. It has been shown that highly trained sales forces perform better. In addition, conventional wisdom suggests that it is better to invest more in training. Nevertheless, our results suggest that the allocation decision and the source of funding are more important than the amount of money spent.

In this sense, we have found that subsidised training has no effect on sales force performance, whereas there is a positive effect when it comes to non-subsidised training. Thus, consistent with previous research (Baker, 1994), it seems that when training has been subsidised, company involvement with sales training activities is lower, thereby obtaining worse results. In this scenario, as previously argued, subsidising implies that salespeople may attend training programmes designed by external trainers and offered to different companies simultaneously, making adaptation of the training activities to the specific needs of the company difficult, and in turn to the salespeople's training needs as well. Therefore, the subsidisers should try to involve the companies by:

- subsidising part of the cost but not all of it;
- asking them to participate actively in designing the sales training programme; and
- asking management to require evaluation of sales training in order to assess its effectiveness.

The choice of sales training methods and content influences performance and customer orientation. On-the-job training is still one of the most effective methods of training salespeople. However, it is important to combine this method with others, such as in-house training (lectures, group discussions, case studies, role playing, etc.), external training or own-house training that equip the salesperson with the necessary product knowledge, market and company information. Nonetheless, in-house training should be provided carefully in small firms. Peterson (1990) found that in this type of company, in-house training was not a particularly effective training method. This is because trainers have to be good teachers as well as experts in selecting the proper

methods and audio-visual equipment to implement the training successfully (Dalrymple and Cron, 1998). The problem of using insiders in small companies is that they are not specialised exclusively in sales training and, therefore, may not meet salespeople's theoretical training needs (Jackson and Hisrich, 1996). In the context of SMEs, this is precisely why own-house training seems to be more effective in terms of its contribution to salespeople performance.

Some attention also needs to be given to the training content. Salespeople appear to gain higher performance and customer orientation when training content deals with company policy and sales techniques. On the one hand, training in company policies allows salespeople to manage the relationships with customers effectively, because, amongst other topics, they are trained in financing and delivery policies and how to maintain mail and telephone contact with customers (Churchill *et al.*, 1997). On the other hand, in our sample, sales techniques training gives enough importance not only to presentation skills, but also to listening and questioning skills, thus leading to higher levels of salespeople performance and customer orientation.

In addition, product knowledge training reduces salespeople's customer orientation. Maybe this is due to the fact that, in our study, product education training is focused on product technical knowledge rather than on understanding the benefits the product offers the customers. In this sense, we suggest that product knowledge should be oriented to the customer's needs in terms of the benefits sought and the features which provide them.

Furthermore, when sales training deals with sales techniques, customer knowledge and computer knowledge simultaneously, sales force performance and customer orientation are higher. In other words, salespeople need not only to know how to make the sale, but must also understand customer needs and provide greater value by applying new technologies in order to translate their behaviours into higher sales outcome. This reduces the gap in the literature, as recently indicated by Lupton *et al.* (1999), that demands empirical research to identify not only the categorisation of single sales training methods and content, but also the most effective methodology and content combination. Moreover, it is consistent with previous research, which argues that the role of salespeople has expanded beyond the generation of sales and more towards the management of customers and the understanding and satisfaction of their needs (Anderson, 1996; Wotruba, 1996; Weitz and Bradford, 1999; Ingram *et al.*, 2001).

Past research examining the influence of customer-oriented selling on performance has led to mixed results. We have found a positive and significant influence. This relationship can probably be better understood at an aggregate level from the manager's perspective, because as a philosophy, customer-oriented selling is better implemented at the company level and the manager is in a position to develop a global measure of its implementation at the company level. The importance of this finding is twofold. First, it gives further empirical evidence of the incremental ability of customer-oriented behaviours to predict salespeople's performance (Swenson and Herche, 1994; Keillor *et al.*, 2000).

Second, it is in direct contrast to the belief that sales managers should emphasise behaviours other than listening and understanding the customers in order to increase salespeople's performance (Dawson *et al.*, 1992).

Finally, the salespeople that have received more training – in terms of hours, without considering the quality – are more effective in translating their performance in actual sales.

At this point we must also mention some limitations of our study. First of all, the response rate and sample size obtained was considered acceptable, since the research instrument consisted of a detailed questionnaire asking for information over two years, but clearly limits claims to general descriptive representativeness of the findings. Thus, our analysis is confined to exploring relationships between the constructs within the companies studied. Second, data were provided by general managers, given that in this scenario of SMEs, due the small number of salespeople in each company, general managers are responsible for sales training and supervising the sales force; however, this study would benefit from data collected from the salespeople as well. Third, the two items used to measure salespeople, customer orientation may not capture all the dimensions of the concept. Yet past research has also used two items to measure this construct at an aggregate level (Cravens *et al.*, 1993; Baldauf and Cravens, 1999) and, in all cases, alpha coefficients were lower than ours.

Studies analysing sales training effects on performance and customer orientation are very rare. We have considered the effects on sales force outcome performance, yet future research should also take into account behavioural performance. In addition, it would be interesting to analyse training effects on the aforementioned variables at the salesperson level, thus controlling his/her experience, knowledge and personal characteristics. In this scenario it is also possible to introduce the salesperson's knowledge structure and skills so as to see how training can modify them in order to improve his/her performance and also his/her customer orientation. Finally, further research is needed to study in depth the relationship between salespeople performance and customer orientation by taking into account different selling environments. As proposed by Saxe and Weitz (1982), in some situations the impact of an immediate sale outweighs the potential of future sales given by a customer-oriented selling approach.

Notes

1. Data of this research were collected under the "Economic Learning in Training for Enterprises", a project financed by the European Commission under the "Leonardo Da Vinci" programme (UK/96/2/1809/EA/III.2.a/FPC).
2. According to the European Commission (96/280/EC) SMEs are companies that have fewer than 250 employees. Companies with fewer than 25 employees were not included, as it was assumed that they were less likely to have a sales force and less likely to implement sales training activities (Erffmeyer *et al.*, 1992).
3. A random selection of companies from the database was implemented after dividing the population into nine segments (25-50 employees, 51-75/. . .226-250) in order to obtain a sample that includes SMEs of different sizes.

4. In this sample of SMEs, sales organisations are usually composed of only one sales force, due to the small number of salespeople in the company. Thus, in this study, the sales force serves as the sales organisation, which is the unit of analysis.

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Appendix. Scale items for SP and SCO

Sales force performance (SP)

- Produce a high market share for the company.
- Making sales of those products with the highest profits margins.
- Generating a high level of pounds sales.
- Quickly generating sales of new company products.
- Identifying and selling to major accounts.
- Producing sales or blanket contracts with long-term profitability.
- Exceeding all sales targets and objectives during the year.

Sales force customer orientation (SCO)

- Ability to respond quickly and efficiently to requests.
- Overall consideration for the customer.