

## Salesperson-Customer Dyads in the Casino Gaming Industry

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Corporations spend billions of dollars annually on hiring and training salespeople. Therefore, developing extraordinary relationships between sales and customers is essential to corporate success. To meet the increasing demands of customers within the casino gaming industry, corporations must ensure they pair customers with the right salespeople and maximize customer satisfaction and account profitability in return. Considering this industry-wide business problem, the goal of this research is to gain an in-depth understanding of the customer-salesperson relationship. Specifically, with a focus on salesperson competencies, this study explores how customer satisfaction and account profitability are related to the salesperson-customer relationship. This study is the first to empirically evaluate customers together with their primary slot machine salespeople. The result indicates salespeople who possess product knowledge, an understanding of the needs of the customer, honesty, and high communication skills are essential to customer satisfaction and account profitability.*

### **Keywords**

Las Vegas, sales competencies, casino gaming customers, qualitative research, slot machine salespeople, customer relationship management

### **INTRODUCTION**

The sales profession has changed significantly over the last 30 years, advancing swiftly, while responding to an ever-changing marketplace. As businesses become increasingly more competitive, salespeople must adapt to ever-increasing corporate pressure to achieve higher quotas. Correspondingly, sales teams in organizations have increased in strategic importance and in size to meet the demands of an exceedingly competitive marketplace (Piercy, 2006; Rackham, 2000). The most productive salespeople are not bound by traditional practices; instead, they work in ways that yield successful outcomes (Rosenbaum, 2001). Corporations can best support top-selling salespeople by investing in their sales team's knowledge and skills, just as corporations invest in equipment, knowing the economic impact will be favorable to not only the salespeople but the organization (Becker, 2002; Busch, 2013). McEwan et al. (2017) indicate that the effectiveness of a company's goals depends directly on the quality of the sales team. Quality is directly equated to the skills a salesperson has developed (Hughes et al., 2013), and a professional salesperson's skills should be continuously explored and developed.

The casino gaming industry is characterized by intense competition (Legg, 2020; Prentice & Wong, 2015), and slot machine manufacturers seek out only the most highly competent salespeople as their prowess and expertise in sales provide a significant advantage over competitors within the market. Nonetheless, hiring managers and sales directors are not always in tune with the competencies and traits that define a successful salesperson, specifically, how competencies affect sales performance within the account. The job of hiring great employees remains the number one focus of CEOs, and the ever-evasive unavailability of skillful and talented employees is the largest threat to businesses (Cappelli, 2019).

According to Zoltners et al. (2008), securing the right salespeople to represent a company leads to increasing profits and recurring sales. Conversely, hiring the wrong salesperson can cost a company upward of millions of dollars in profit per the wrong person hired (Bruce, 2014; Clifton, 2011; Fatemi, 2016; Smart, 2005). Once a salesperson is hired, an estimated 29% of corporations spend a minimum of \$2,500 annually per person to help the salesperson succeed; yet some companies still miss annual sales targets as the sales force does not possess the qualities needed to achieve their quotas despite additional training (Jones et al., 2007). This in turn leads to much of the sales force voluntarily or involuntarily leaving the company, often going to work for competitors, further perpetuating lost revenue.

The casino gaming industry is not an exception to this challenge. Often, the casino industry has been referred to as a “good old boys” network, being primarily male-dominated and lacking in the employment of minority groups (Davies, 2021). Due to this traditional culture, it is customary practice for salespeople to move from slot machine manufacturer to manufacturer aided by their friendships and contacts; yet salespeople are unaware which skillsets lead them to complete sales transactions, or which aided them in increasing customer profitability. Many salespeople have worked in the casino gaming industry their entire careers and have had long-standing relationships with their corporate casino customers, some spanning decades. Being overly comfortable and forging friendships between customer and salesperson can often blur professional lines, either making it more difficult to say no or easier to say yes to an undesirable sales proposition (Bäckström et al., 2009).

Given that customer satisfaction and account profitability are two key performance measures that indicate the health and strength of an organization, the primary goal of this research was to gain an in-depth understanding of the customer-salesperson relationship. With a focus on salesperson competencies/traits, this qualitative study explored how customer satisfaction and account profitability are related to the salesperson-customer relationship.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Background of Personal Selling**

Personal selling is a profession as old as humankind. Accounts from the Bible spoke of Sadducees selling goods in the markets of ancient Greece and Rome. One of the earliest Bible verses that references selling comes from the book of Leviticus. The account reads as follows: “If you sell land to one of your countrymen or buy any from him, do not take advantage of each other” (The Holy Bible New International Version, 2011, Leviticus 25:14). As it relates to our modern age, in his 2004 work, Friedman attributed the “birth” of the modern salesperson to the development of mass manufacturing in the late 19<sup>th</sup>

and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. American corporations such as Coca-Cola, Carnegie Steel, Wrigley's Chewing Gum, General Electric, and PepsiCo developed modern sales techniques to gain a competitive advantage and drive revenues (Friedman, 2004). A salesperson's role during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries was to facilitate negotiations and transfer goods from the seller to the buyer (Hartmann et al., 2018). This style of selling became known as transactional. Combined with nearsighted goals and short-term outcomes, the primary intent of a salesperson was to convince buyers to hastily purchase a product regardless of a buyer's needs (Jolson, 1997). Transactional selling is often associated with high-pressure tactics or "hard selling" in which the salesperson puts relentless pressure on the customer to make a purchase, which over time has created a negative stigma of sales professionals (Popyk, 2020). Over time, sales, as a profession, evolved and became more respected as it offered individuals a pathway to personal success (Kurtz et al., 1982). As the sales profession gained popularity in America, more people read books to enhance their sales skills during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the popular book *The Man Nobody Knows* (Barton, 1925), Jesus Christ is portrayed as a successful sales executive selling a new, world-altering religious concept surrounded by a select group of chosen men. The book gained popularity and became a bestseller in the mid- to late 1920s. Another sales classic that gained popularity during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (1937), which shares stories Carnegie learned working as a salesperson for Amour. The book focuses on an alternative version of the modern-day concept of customer relationship management in which Carnegie gives advice for building positive relationships and influencing others.

In the 1970s, there was a shift within the sales profession from transactional selling to relationship selling. Relationship selling focuses on developing and growing the relationship with the customer for ongoing mutual long-term benefits (Hartman et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2005; Weiner et al., 2021). Jolson (1997) clarifies, "Instead of viewing selling as a series of struggles that the salesperson must win from a steady stream of prospects and customers of all sizes and shapes, relationship selling or partnering focuses on the building of mutual trust within the buyer-seller dyad with a delivery of anticipated, long-term, value-added benefits to buyers" (p.76).

Even in the modern age, professional selling continues to grow as a career. In fact, all for-profit businesses sell something, either a product or service, and at least 50% of companies that sell a product employ a sales team (Eira, 2024). However, participating in a one-time sales transaction does not define the seller as a professional salesman. This paper defines a sales professional as an individual with deeply ingrained habits, skills, and dispositions acquired through career experiences while embodying the tacit knowledge and practices essential for success in the field of sales (Holopainen et al., 2021). In 2021, there were approximately 13 million sales professionals in the United States, which represented 4.5% of the population. The profession of sales is expanding and is projected to grow at a rate of 7% from 2020 to 2030 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). From 2009 to 2019, sales occupations contributed as much as 20% to the gross domestic product of the United States (Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2021).

Because sales professionals contribute trillions of dollars annually to the U.S. economy (Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2021), sales professionals are a critical component of not only the U.S. economy but corporations worldwide. Personal selling remains a necessary process for corporations to generate profits (Raynor & Ahmed, 2013). Chief Executive Officer of Mobee, Hal Charnley, praises sales professionals with this statement, "Sales associates are, arguably, the most strategic competitive advantage that a company has" (McGregor, 2016, p. 1). Major corporations in the United States spend over \$15 billion

annually on sales training and another \$800 billion on sales incentives (Kodwani, & Prashar 2019), and corporations recognize a highly trained salesforce as one of their most valuable assets (Singh et al., 2015).

Yet, when the wrong salespeople are hired or good salespeople are unsuccessful in meeting revenue targets, millions of dollars are wasted as these salespeople become lost to organizational turnover (Harris et al., 2005; Lai & Gelb, 2019), thereby escalating the costs of sales recruitment and account management (Galea, 2005). Even worse, a company becomes exposed and vulnerable when a salesperson leaves to work for a competitor, potentially leading to further loss of revenue and degraded customer relationships (Kelley, 1988). Hiring successful salespeople with the best-fitting skillsets can yield dividends to the corporation. Both salesperson skills and the frequency with which preferred modeling behaviors are performed tend to result in high employee performance (Dahling et al., 2016).

### **Salesperson Competencies**

Conventional wisdom informs us that successful salespeople possess an optimal skill base and competencies. A basic search for books on “sales skills” on Amazon yields over 80,000 results, indicating an elevated level of interest in the topic. Modern-day sales expert Harvey Mackay (2011) in his book *The Mackay MBA of Selling in the Real World* warns, “Without the right sales skills, something terrible happens: nothing.”

Professional salespeople must be competent in their ability to mitigate the spread of losses in businesses and organizations. They must not only be defensive in protecting market share but also be offensive in taking market share from competitors by exhibiting bold and tenacious sales tactics (Claro et al., 2024). Having competence permits an individual to evaluate and reflect on one’s work efficiently as well as to be accountable for the results of one’s work. Sales competencies can be defined as activities and a cluster of related knowledge, attitudes, and skills that are correlated with performance that is measurable against standards and can be improved through educational initiatives (Parry, 1998). Lucia and Lepsinger (1999) define competency as “a cluster of related knowledge, skills, and attitudes (behaviors) that affects a major part of one’s job (a role of responsibility), that correlates with job performance on the job, which can be measured against well-accepted standards, and that can be improved via training and development.”

Regardless of the numerous definitions of competence, sales competencies can be interpreted via multiple academic angles. A study by Pettijohn et al. (2007) found that customers preferred salespeople who were experts in their company’s product lines and their industry. Customers also preferred salespeople who could facilitate clear communication, expedite orders, resolve issues, understand their needs, and respond to their needs accordingly (Garver & Mentzer, 2000). Comer and Drollinger (1999) delineated the principle of having effective listening skills as a salesperson. The authors argued that the most significant listening stage entailed both active listening and empathetic skills. Further, Comer and Drollinger (1999) defined empathy as the ability to understand another person’s ideas and feelings with a specific degree of accuracy. Empathy further entails listening to an intuitive and literal understanding of meanings. Similarly, Locander et al. (2020) identified empathy as an obligatory element and a vital part of being a successful salesperson because it helps satisfy customers’ needs and interests. According to Wieseke et al. (2013), the distinction of empathy in sales and marketing was introduced by Lipps in 1909. Empathy is considered a stable trait (Comer & Drollinger, 1999), although psychologists argue that empathetic listening is a cognitive skill that can be acquired through social experience.

While numerous empirical research studies examine sales competencies in various industries (Böhm et al., 2020; Busch, 2013; Reinartz & Kumar, 2003), there is yet to be a study that examines salespeople in the casino gaming industry as of the date of this publication. This research, which directly queried corporate casino customers about their salesperson's predominant traits, enhances the existing body of literature by elucidating the complexities of sales competencies, customer-salesperson relationships, customer satisfaction, and account profitability within the casino gaming industry. The various sales professionals working within the casino gaming industry are faced with the prospect of responding to the constant changes in their internal and external environments. Salespeople must possess specific competencies to be effective and thrive in a highly competitive environment. One of the crucial targets of this study identified key competencies that belong to the most successful salespeople as evaluated by their customers.

### **Customer Satisfaction**

Salespeople play a pivotal role within an organization both as ambassadors of the seller's brand and customer relationship builders. Said the vice president of Comite Champs Elysees, "Salespeople are the most important people in our company. They are in front of the customer. They make the difference. Customers buy when they are satisfied" (Merk, 2014). Further, Neslin et al. (2013) established that consumers are always changing, and business success today involves salespeople understanding and addressing customer needs with the goal of customer satisfaction. Shaw (2007) informs us that marketing philosophies advise corporations to implement strategies focusing on customer satisfaction to develop the ongoing relationships necessary to accelerate long-term competitiveness. Salespeople must routinely interact and grow their relationships with customers using strategic planning and sales skills while incorporating value-added selling techniques to increase customer value and satisfaction (Michael, 2020). As Johnston and Lewin (1996) presented in their seminal research, when there are conditions of high-purchase risks, a buyer will be more likely to purchase from a salesperson who has invested the time into developing a relationship than with another vendor or competitive salesperson. Shaw (2007) confirmed that business success today is cultivated via understanding and proficiently addressing the changing demands of customers. This can sometimes limit organizations from registering good profits, but it has positive consequences overall, especially in the long term. As explained by Spiro and Weitz (1990), salespeople must consistently interact with customers through strategic planning in a manner that customers value (Swan et al., 2001).

### **Account Profitability**

Delpechitre et al. (2019) clarified successful selling as the degree to which the parties involved have achieved a common consensus through effective communication, which can be measured quantitatively by the number of products sold to the customer. Correspondingly, the study of salesperson performance is a notable focus within the area of sales force management (Ingram et al., 2007). Rapp et al. (2017) explained that not all salespeople can convince customers to love a business' product offerings, highlighting the critical need for salesperson competencies. A firm's investment in training salespeople, particularly in solution selling, is vital to creating competitive sales forces. The competency of a salesperson is often measured by the number of sales they make and the rate at which they retain customers (Bohm et al., 2020).

Account profitability is directly influenced by these factors, as higher customer retention and satisfaction lead to more consistent and lucrative sales over time. The control measure by which a salesperson is held responsible for account profitability varies from corporation to corporation and within industries. For example, one method of a formal control measure is referred to as outcome-based control. Outcome-based control holds employees responsible for their performance; however, employees still have the freedom to choose their techniques to achieve their goals (Anderson & Oliver, 1987). Sales quotas, also known as sales targets and part of compensation plans, are outcome-based measures that provide corporations with an indication of how successful a salesperson is. Quotas are a “report card” and indicate to the sales manager whether the salesperson has successfully completed the targets and duties required. Sales quotas can be defined as specific goals set for salespeople who are responsible for attaining them over a set period; typically this period is one year (Good & Stone, 1991). Normally, a sales quota is quantitative and based on the number of products sold or the value of the products sold, which increases account profitability (Schwepker & Good, 2012). These quotas are typically linked to account profitability, as they are typically tied to the dollar value of products sold, reinforcing the relationship between a salesperson’s performance and the company’s financial outcomes (Orr, 2012).

### **Customer-Salesperson Relationship**

As corporations strive to meet the ever-growing demands of year-over-year profit growth, particularly in industries like slot machine manufacturing, relationship management becomes paramount. Boles et al. (1997) emphasized building customer relationships as mandatory, noting it is more expensive for a salesperson to acquire new customers than it is to retain old ones. Furthermore, maintaining high-quality relationships with buyers or customers appears to be significant in increasing long-term salesperson performance and competencies (Boles et al., 1997). This alignment between customer satisfaction and salesperson effectiveness is foundational in driving profitability.

The relationship between the customer and salesperson evolves over time, impacting both satisfaction and sales outcomes. The duration of the customer-salesperson relationship can be referred to as the relationship life cycle and represents a critical moderating effect on other context variables that may influence attitudes such as customer satisfaction and salesperson success (Dwyer & Oh, 1988). Kalwani and Narayandas (1995) said salespeople engaged in long-term relationships with customers reduced costs over time at a rate comparable to sales growth. Verhoef et al. (2002) observed that the age of the customer-salesperson relationship moderates the connection between relational structures such as trust and commitment, which are linked to higher volumes of sales and services purchased.

Naturally, all relationships move through a series of stages. A salesperson’s influence on customer satisfaction differs over time as customers also progress through various stages of the relationship, with the highest level of customer satisfaction occurring in the later stages of the relationship (Wilson, 1995). Jap and Ganesan in 2000 informed researchers of a measure referred to as the Relationship Phase and Relationship Duration. This measurement tool assessed the stages of a relationship between two business parties. The first stage is exploration, in which both parties are testing compatibility. The second stage is buildup, in which both parties are receiving benefits and a level of trust has been established. Following is the maturity stage, in which the parties have an ongoing and long-term relationship. Decline is the penultimate stage, in which one or both members are experiencing dissatisfaction and contemplating terminating the relationship. Last is the deterioration stage, in which both parties are discussing

termination of the relationship. A salesperson's ultimate goal is to keep the relationship in the maturity stage to maintain the highest level of customer satisfaction and account profitability.

As relationships deepen, so does the salesperson's influence on customer satisfaction. Crosby et al. (1990) and Jap and Ganesan (2000) found that customers in the maturity and buildup phases of their relationships with salespeople report higher satisfaction and are more likely to continue doing business. The mutually beneficial dynamic that develops in these later stages leads to stronger, more profitable accounts. For this reason, understanding the connection between customer satisfaction and account profitability is essential in evaluating a salesperson's role in achieving these outcomes.

This study examined the relationship between customer satisfaction and account profitability, exploring the competencies and traits that drive salesperson success. Specifically, two overarching research questions were examined: What are the key competencies and traits that define successful salespeople? And how do these competencies relate to customer satisfaction and account profitability?

## **INDUSTRY CONTEXT**

### **Data & Method**

The topics of salesperson-customer dyads and salesperson competencies remain in the infancy stages of research, specifically in the casino gaming industry. While operating within a scope of research that has limited publications, applying a qualitative approach is deemed acceptable (Drumwright, 1994). Qualitative research allows a researcher to provide elaborate interpretations of rich human experiences which can explore new phenomena (Glesne, 2021). It encompasses generating research propositions to discover a new area. The qualitative method thus is adopted to interpret customers' perceptions of salesperson competencies and to explore customers' relationship with salespersons regarding satisfaction and account profitability. For these reasons and considering the researcher's unique background in the casino gaming industry, a qualitative method of data analysis was selected as most appropriate.

The data was obtained from a customer database provided by a major slot machine manufacturing company. The population of the study consisted of casino gaming customers who interacted with a slot machine salesperson from April to June 2022.

As part of this study, it is important to distinguish between two types of customers that are integral to generating account profitability. At the casino level, there is the casino guest or player who engages in gambling on the slot machines but does not interact with the slot machine salesperson or any representative from the slot machine manufacturer. The second type of customer, referred to as the corporate casino customer and hereafter referenced as "the customer" or "customer," typically holds a management or higher-level position and oversees the daily operations of the casino gaming floor. Corporate casino customers frequently meet with the slot machine salesperson. This article focuses exclusively on the casino customer and does not address the casino player or guest.

A convenience sampling method was used in this study. Ten participants, also referred to as corporate casino customers, out of 27 who were asked to participate, agreed to participate in one-on-one, semi-structured interviews. All interviews were administered by one researcher for consistency. All participants

were in Las Vegas and worked in a casino in the slot machine department and had direct contact with a slot machine sales representative within the three months prior to the interview.

The corporate casino customers were recruited either via a personal phone call, text or asked in person by the researcher. The face-to-face interviews consisted of 23 open-ended questions, guided by the researcher to keep the participant focused on answering all questions in as much detail as possible. Due to the agreement with the slot machine manufacturing company, interviews took place during a condensed 8-week schedule between July and August 2022.

The interview questions were categorized by demographic information, the participant's buying experience with his/her primary salesperson, the participant's opinion about the selling approach of the salesperson ranking the most important three sales competencies, the participant's purchasing behavior, and the customer-salesperson relationship life cycle.

## **Analysis**

Otter, a transcription application, was used to record and transcribe the interviews verbatim while accounting for verbal tics and non-verbal vocalizations (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). The interviews were then transcribed in an edited manner and read reflexively. Reflexive readings allowed the researcher to reflect on the researcher's own experiences, knowledge, and biases and how these influenced the interpretations of the text. The data was then subjected to thematic content analysis using substantiated qualitative coding procedures recommended for qualitative research methodology (Flick et al., 2004). In the first cycle-coding, data was able to be seen in a macro sense via free online software called Taguette. Next, similar codes were clustered together and condensed into smaller-pattern codes as part of the second cycle-coding process. Through the process of applying thematic analysis, categories from the material began to develop. The data was then combed through carefully, meanings were interpreted, and patterns emerged that answered the two overarching research questions: What are the key competencies and traits that define successful salespeople? And how do these competencies relate to customer satisfaction and account profitability?

As a last step, responses were compared and sales competencies that occurred most frequently were used to develop the theories that supported the phenomena. Other responses were coded including customers' purchasing behavior, including past, current, and future behaviors, as well as customer satisfaction in direct relationship to the length of years of the salesperson-customer relationship.

## **DISCUSSION**

The first data analysis yielded 109 open codes, which were merged and condensed down into 67 codes. The codes were then grouped into 8 axial groupings including 4 domain groupings selectively coded to address each research question. The 8 axial codes assessed were positive sales traits, negative sales traits, product orientated, salesperson rating by customer, quality time, relationship quality, customer satisfaction rating, and purchasing behavior. The 4 hierarchical domain groups included customer satisfaction, account profitability, sales competencies, and the tenure of the customer-salesperson relationship.



## Description of the Participants

All participants at the time data collection occurred were corporate casino customers who worked in a casino in the slot machine department and had direct contact with a slot machine sales representative within three months prior to the interview. All interviewees were located in Las Vegas, Nevada, and all were men. This is due to the fact that there are few women who work in positions managing the slot departments. In fact, only 24.8% of the casino management positions are held by females (Costen et. al., 2003). This statistic was also supported in this study as less than 9% of the slot machine company's customer database were women. Corporate casino customers, or participants, were hand-selected by the researcher based on the criteria of being able to effectively communicate as well as their availability to take part in the study.

The average age of the participants was 49 with an average of six years in their current position and an average of 23 years' overall experience in the gaming industry. The average time per interview was 19 minutes.

Participants ( $n=10$ ) held various positions within the casinos: (10%) Slot Director, (20%) Casino Manager, (20%) Assistant Slot Director, (20%) Vice President of Casino Operations, and (30%) Director of Casino Operations. Specific details of the participant demographics are illustrated in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
Participant Demographics

Customer Pseudonym	Age	Title	Years in Current Position	Years in Industry	Interview Duration (Minutes)
Andre	61	Casino Manager	3	24	14
Rob	53	VP Casino Operations	10	25	23
Alex	31	Director of Casino Operations	2	9	15
Shane	45	Director of Casino Operations	3	25	18
Jim	62	Casino Manager	17	25	16
Gregg	56	Assistant Slot Director	6	28	30
Aron	53	Vice President Casino Operations	2	28	21
Buz	41	Director of Casino Operations	1	20	27
Dan	41	Assistant Slot Director	14	20	15
Josh	42	Slot Director	2	23	14

*Note:* Names used are pseudonyms.

The following sections explore the analysis of the sales competencies and customer-salesperson relationship in relation to customer satisfaction and account profitability.

## **Sales Competencies**

Content analysis for data collected revealed several key themes applicable to sales competencies. These findings uncovered meaningful customer-salesperson interactions including the impact of salesperson competencies on account profitability and customer satisfaction. The following sections provide explanations and viewpoints of interviewees' perceptions of salespeople including key sales competencies, how satisfied a customer is with the salesperson, and their purchasing behavior.

### ***Sales Trait – Product Knowledge***

A primary recurring theme that surfaced from the interviews was the slot machine manufacturer's products and aspects related to the products, such as features, performance, quality, placement, and pricing. While the product is not sales competency, salesperson product knowledge is necessary for success, as noted by corporate casino customers.

Customer-participant Aron revealed the following relating to his primary salesperson's skills including product knowledge:

She gets back to me at once and understands the business kind of holistically on not only what products work from her company, but what's trending and doing well, industry wide. [Aron, Vice President]

One general manager of a major Las Vegas Strip casino detailed how a salesperson can take ownership of their product. Andre said:

Of a salesperson's ideal traits, for me, it is managing your product on my floors. Maybe not just following through with the next sale but going back to the games that we purchased the last few years and making sure we have them set up correctly. Like, are there some themes that she has seen fail nationally and being honest, like hey, this game is kind of dying, you should get ahead of it and really manage the content. [Andre, General Manager]

Often, interviewees do not have the time or the means to research competitive products as they are preoccupied with the day-to-day management of their property. Interviewees look to their slot machine salesperson to be an expert in their field and in their product. Rob offered his opinion on the relevance of product knowledge:

The number one important sales trait is product knowledge. When our salesman went to present us a new theme or cabinet or whatever else, he had thorough detail of that cabinet and performance numbers, the expertise behind knowing how it's doing in other markets, and being able to reassure us that, hey, this is going to be successful. In our area, and we know in Las Vegas versus other markets, performance is very different. And I don't always have the time to do that kind of product research. That's what I appreciate about my salesperson, he is always prepared. [Rob, Vice President of Casino Operations]

### ***Sales Trait – Understanding Needs of the Customer***

Understanding the customer's needs was another prominent theme that received emphasis in the interviews. Alex recounted his experience with his salesperson, who took the time to understand his needs and the needs of the property:

I think what I appreciate most about my rep is that he understands the needs of the property, of what I expect, and that makes it a great partnership. [Alex, Director of Gaming]

Vice President Josh shared a mutual sentiment with Alex on the importance of understanding his needs; however, he added that part of understanding needs of the customer is collaboration and sharing information:

I would say my sales rep was collaborative. Yes, he would be informative. First, of course, you got to have the information versus all the details, but then he was willing to obviously be collaborative to understand our needs and wants, and what we're looking for. [Josh, Slot Director]

### ***Sales Trait – Pushy***

When a salesperson is not listening or working to understand the needs of a customer, the salesperson may be seen as pushy and focused on their own personal agenda. Buz shared his first experience with what he perceived to be a pushy salesperson:

Initially, I was kind of turned off, like I didn't want to hear about the product. They were a little bit too aggressive on how they were trying to sell their products. I haven't thought about like not wanting to take that person's call or email until this company. And that is mostly because they were too aggressive. It was as if I wasn't given enough time to kind of process their sales pitch. Sure, you have the initial sales pitch, right? I was turned off by that, but at the same time I was looking into their product because I needed it. I looked at it like hey, listen, I need your product and to get it, I have to put up with the aggressiveness. [Buz, Director of Casino Operations]

Another fellow casino operator, Shane, shared a similar experience regarding the transactional style his salesperson had in always pushing for more sales:

She is always pushing for more and more and more, buy more. And, you know, basically doing what she's supposed to do for her company, but that's how it may come across on the other side right now. Don't pitch me, I got it. [Shane, Director of Casino Operations]

Being pushy or aggressive and giving a sales "pitch" had a negative connotation with customers. Another corroboration of previous customers' experiences with aggressive and pushy salespeople was shared by Alex:

It's just a sales thing. You've given me your pitch. I tell you what I want, and you're going to do with that what you want anyway. [Alex, Director of Gaming]

### ***Sales Trait – Honesty***

Honesty and trustworthiness are two interrelated skills that were important to interviewees. Gregg said:

My salesperson seems to always be straightforward and honest about their products, about the pluses of their products and to be honest, the negatives of their products. When they have a problem with timelines, he reaches right out, he doesn't try to smooth it over and hope things turn out better. He lets us know exactly what's going on. Trying to just rip their Band-Aid right off. [Gregg, Assistant Slot Director]

Conversely, lying can be detrimental to the customer-salesperson relationship and leave lasting negative impressions on the customer, at times to the extent that the relationship is irreparable.

You know, the salesman that we were talking about how his stuttering made me laugh? He didn't care that he was lying to me. And I knew he knew he was lying to me. OK, we got through that eventually. But you know, if a salesperson comes up here to meet with me and lies to me, I'm gonna let you know that you lied and it's going to take a long time before I trust you again. [Jim, Casino Manager]

### ***Sales Trait – Communication***

When sharing customers' experiences on the effectiveness of the communication received through the sales process with their primary salesperson, the experiences are vastly diverse. All customers agreed communication is an essential sales skill; however, there is no "one size fits all." At times there is not enough communication, and at other times there is too much.

Buz revealed his frustration with the salesperson pertaining to the level of communication. He said:

If I could change one thing about my salesperson, I would say I need less communication. He overcommunicates. I mean, like, I will come in for my day and I will already have five emails from him. And it is just too much information. He is highly informative, which is a good thing. But too much of communication might be a little bit off-putting. [Buz, Director of Casino Operations]

Whereas other customers, such as Shane, appreciated copious amounts of communication and being updated regularly throughout the sales process:

For me being as busy as I am, I can rest assured in a way knowing that my salesperson always keeps me updated. When I make an order, he immediately sends me the counter-signed agreement along with an estimated delivery date. He also communicates regularly about new product releases and product performance. Communication is really one of the reasons I rate him so highly and as one of the top salepeople in our industry. [Shane, Director of Casino Operations]

While the primary and aforementioned competencies of product knowledge, understanding the needs of the customer, not being pushy, honesty, and communication were repetitive in the interviews; other

competencies were also mentioned, such as spending quality time together, empathy, preparedness, professionalism, and productivity.

## **Customer-Salesperson Relationship**

Recalled accounts uncovered meaningful customer-salesperson interactions, including the duration of the relationship, the background of the relationship (such as when and how the customer was first introduced to the salesperson), the quality of the relationship, the current rating of the relationship, the customer's evaluation of their satisfaction, and the customer's intent for future purchases from their primary slot machine salesperson.

### ***Customer Satisfaction and Relationship Quality***

Content analysis clarified how the length and life cycle of the customer-salesperson relationship impacted areas of customer satisfaction as well as how a customer experiences the quality of the relationship.

Dan, who works for a major casino enterprise, spoke about the importance of having an established relationship during his interview:

I describe our working relationship as comfortable, long term and cooperative. I have a very comfortable established relationship with this person. [Dan, Assistant Slot Manager]

Time spent together in a working partnership is essential to the health of the customer-salesperson relationship, with some customers requiring more time with their salesperson than others. All relationships naturally evolve over time. Some worsen, while some improve. Shane shared his experience on the evolution of the relationship with his primary slot salesperson:

Our relationship has evolved very well. I think that over the years, we've learned how to work well together. And when the plan isn't working as advertised, we plug it right down, and everything gets done quickly. In evaluating the quality of our working relationship, it is safe to say our relationship has gotten better over time, and that makes me feel satisfied. [Shane, Director of Casino Operations]

Many of the interviews revealed a more intimate type of relationship in which a friendship had been established. One customer, Jim, explored the importance of having a friendship with his salesperson:

I mentioned it before, but I think probably the thing that draws me to this person more than anything is their genuineness and sincerity. I think and I believe this comes natural with this individual more than does selling. To me, our relationship and friendship is more important than the product in this case, and so it's a true friendship that we've established and so that makes purchasing the products and all that much easier. [Jim, Casino Manager]

Friendship was a recurring theme throughout the interviews; however, friendship was not a primary indicator of customer satisfaction or relationship quality. Friendships naturally evolved and were more of a byproduct of the relationship as expressed by Buz:

At first when I started working with my sales rep, our relationship was serious and professional, but over time, we have become friends. I'm pretty sure a friendship wasn't my sales rep's intention; it is more of a byproduct of our years working together. After you know someone for five or more years, a friendship just naturally develops, and that makes the relationship better overall. [Buz, Director of Casino Operations]

### ***Life Cycle of the Customer-Salesperson Relationship***

The life cycle of the customer-salesperson relationship positively and indirectly influenced the customer's purchasing decisions, with 9 of the 10 customers stating they were in the maturity stage of the customer-salesperson relationship. One customer, Shane, said it best:

I've known my sales rep for many years, and we have developed a friendship over time. While our friendship does not dictate purchases, our friendship does help me feel good about the relationship, in that I trust this person and I'm willing to go out of my way to try their newest products, and if we have capital that year, I will buy their products over another competitor's products. [Shane, Director of Casino Operations]

### **Purchasing Behavior**

Another important facet of the tenure of the relationship connects to a customer's purchasing behavior. The interviews investigated the association between the quality of customer-salesperson relationships and purchasing decisions, both present and future.

The interview with Aron revealed that although his relationship with his salesperson might not lead to a sale, it would have him try out a new product that could indirectly lead to a sale. He said:

Sometimes, you know, salespeople will have direction from upper management, perhaps, you know, trying to get new product out in the field. And I'm very much open to helping people that I have established relationships with. [Aron, Vice President Casino Operations]

Buz expressed a like-minded sentiment on the topic of purchasing new products:

Our relationship would allow me to probably give something a try, but if it did not work, it just did not work. But at least they could get something on the floor with me and give it a try. [Buz, Director of Casino Operations]

Customers and salespeople spending time together outside the workplace may indirectly influence the customer to purchase a salesperson's product. Shane explained his sentiments on this topic:

I think, and this is just, these are thoughts, just personal thoughts. I know that I have sales account executives that think that, you know, I don't want to use the word "perks," but, you know, concerts and things of that nature are big influences with me. And they're nice, but it's the product that really is the deciding factor on whether we make a purchase. [Shane, Director of Casino Operations]

Contrary to Shane's comments regarding the relevance of gifts and rewards to drive sales, purchasing decisions, according to Rob, should be made in a strictly professional manner regardless of gifts or length and quality of the relationship:

There is a certain amount of trust and loyalty when it comes to the relationship. I would say our relationship opens me up to trying new or different things and may get product on the floor on a trial basis. But as far as I see things, even though you have a great personal relationship, I believe purchases should be based solely upon, you know, good business decisions. Is this a product that works? Is it something that's needed or wanted by my customers to help with our business? [Rob, Vice President of Casino]

The findings revealed strong relationships were forged over time between the customer and the salesperson, with the majority of customers stating their relationship with the salesperson was in the maturity phase. Despite in many cases having extended working relationships (and in many instances, long-term friendships), the customer-salesperson relationship itself did not directly alter customer purchasing decisions but instead had an indirect effect on customer purchasing.

The results provide evidence of both sales traits and actions affecting customer satisfaction and account profitability. In particular, product knowledge, understanding the needs of the customer, honesty, trustworthiness and high communication skills were emphasized in the interviews. Conversely, content analysis revealed that when a salesperson exhibited pushy or aggressive behavior, the result had a negative effect on customer satisfaction and account profitability. The findings also implied the customer-salesperson relationship positively and indirectly influenced the interviewee's purchasing decisions. The longer the duration of the relationship, the more satisfied customers were, with most saying the time spent with their salespeople led to friendship and improved trust, hence, a higher state of achieved customer satisfaction.

## CONCLUSION

Positive sales traits purported to have the greatest influence on customer satisfaction and account profitability were product knowledge, understanding the needs of the customer, honesty, trustworthiness and elevated communication skills. These discoveries were in line with a study by Pettijohn et al. (2007), who observed that customers preferred salespeople who were experts in their company's product lines and their industries. The findings argued that the most significant listening stage entailed both active listening and empathetic skills, which are in line with the studies by Garver and Mentzer (2000), and Comer and Drollinger (1999). On the contrary, content analysis indicated when a salesperson behaves in a pushy or aggressive manner, this sales style has an adverse influence on customer satisfaction and account profitability. Marketing literature indicates that meeting customers' expectations is financially beneficial to the seller as customers feel obligated to increase purchasing behavior (Boles et al., 1997; Homburg et al., 2005). The findings justified the claim that positive communication and interaction are essential in establishing greater trust and loyalty to a specific salesperson and confidence in the salesperson's corporation. The findings of account profitability align with prior research that when a salesperson's product knowledge level is high, the salesperson closes more deals, increasing the value of the account (Mariadoss et al., 2014).

The finding of the length of the customer-salesperson relationship supports the findings from Jap (2001) and Wilson (1995), in that salespeople must be adaptable to changes in the relationship as the relationship moves from infancy to maturity. Several studies also maintain that the life cycle of a relationship, or the duration of the customer-salesperson relationship, is a highly relevant variable highlighting factors that influence customer purchases over time, with more long-term account relationships yielding higher profits when relational standards are present (Fink et al., 2008; Reinartz & Kumar, 2003).

## **Practical Implications**

The discoveries of this research study contribute to academic literature by providing a comprehensive examination of sales competencies, customer satisfaction, and account profitability, with particular emphasis on the duration of the customer-salesperson relationship in the casino gaming industry. Furthermore, the study focused on a rare customer segment — corporate casino customers — and a specialized sales group — slot machine salespeople. As of this publication, this article is the first to report findings between these two niche subgroups.

Salespeople can benefit from this study by gaining valuable insights into the competencies customers value, which directly contribute to increased sales orders. More importantly, this research underscores the significance of relationship management, helping people understand how cultivating long-term relationships with customers can enhance customer satisfaction. By focusing on strengthening relationships, salespeople can create an environment of trust and loyalty that fosters repeat business and improved sales performance. Additionally, the information provided can empower salespeople to refine their interpersonal and communication strategies, thereby improving the quality of customer interactions over time.

Corporations can also benefit by improving customer relationship management programs with the understanding that an initial investment to improve the relationships could lead to long-term savings and profit gains as retaining existing customers is more economically sensible than continually acquiring new customers.

Human resources managers and sales managers aiming to optimize hiring practices and reduce turnover can use these findings to identify the key traits and competencies that lead to higher customer satisfaction and increased profitability. Incorporating personality assessments into the recruitment process will help employers identify candidates with the desired sales traits for building and maintaining strong, long-term customer relationships. Management teams can leverage the insights from this research to design and implement training programs aimed at enhancing best practices for sales personnel. The findings further inform employers about the importance of customer-salesperson life cycle management, allowing them to emphasize improving customer-salesperson relationships by increasing budgets for entertainment of customers outside of work.

To conclude, this research showcases the critical role of continuous improvement and learning in the ever-evolving field of professional selling. By remaining attuned to current trends and best practices in customer relationship management, organizations can ensure their sales force is equipped with the



necessary tools and strategies to stay competitive at the forefront in practice of the sales skills for their industry.

### **Significance of the Study**

There are few scholarly articles that deliberately address the topic of sales competencies within the hospitality industry, specifically the casino gaming industry and slot machine salespeople. For that reason, the results of this study offer insight into salesperson competencies specific to the casino gaming industry. This study was the first to directly query casino gaming customers on the skills and competencies of their slot machine sales representatives combined with the duration of the dyadic relationship as a central focus between customer and salesperson. Within the casino gaming industry, it is common for salespeople to be assigned to select customers for years without any changes, and the relationships are rarely evaluated or quantified. This research culminated in the development of an emerging and dynamic managerial blueprint for corporations, which served as guidance for employee hiring, best practices for salespeople, customer-salesperson life cycle management, sales training, and proper account management. By effectively matching the salesperson with the customer and considering the salesperson's competencies, the quality of customer relationships and account profitability are significantly enhanced.

### **Limitations**

This research was meticulously conducted with a focus on customers and slot machine salespeople operating within the confines of physical casinos, excluding the operations of online platforms. It is important to note that while casino gaming spans the globe, the findings from this study are not generalizable to casinos outside the United States due to the unique cultural and regulatory nuances of casino operations.

Moreover, this study was conducted with a relatively modest sample size. While the sample size allowed for more in-depth exploration of personal experiences, it may have inadvertently led to a degree of homogeneity in the responses. In conclusion, as is inherent with any qualitative design, this study is not immune to the potential influence of the researcher's internal and external biases toward the participants and the material. Regardless of rigorous efforts to maintain professionalism and objectivity, these inherent biases may have affected the interpretation and presentation of the findings.

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