

Market Orientation and Salesperson's Performance in a Hierarchical Linear Modeling Approach

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Abstract

Many marketing literatures identify market orientation (MO) as a key marketing philosophy for firms to establish their sustainable competitive advantages. Previous research also acknowledges the positive significant relationship of MO to firm performance. This paper extends the literatures by examining the cross-level effect of firm's MO to an individual salesperson's performance by using the Hierarchical Linear Modeling approach. The present study uses survey data from 152 sales personnel from 30 housing developers to evaluate the impact of firm's MO to their performance. The result confirms all the MO dimensions having positive cross-level relationship to individual sales performance, except competitor orientation. Thus, the result suggests that the organization with higher MO, in terms of customer orientation, interfunctional co-ordination, profit orientation and responsiveness, the better the sales person performs.

Keywords: Market Orientation, Salesperson's Performance, Hierarchical Linear Modeling, Housing Development Industry, Malaysia

1. Introduction

In the recent Eleventh Malaysia Plan (2016 – 2017), the projection of the construction sector is foreseen to surpass all the other sectors while having the highest Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) with 10.3% by 2020 (EPU, 2015). The swift growth of the sector, presumably, the expected increase in population and urbanization, infrastructure construction will become vital for the nation's transformation to become a developed country. As one of the major sub-sector in the construction sector, the housing development industry is undergoing a market slow down due to the several cooling measures enforced by the government, such as the increase of the estimated cost of construction deposit, cancellation of Developers Interest Bearing Scheme (DIBS) and imposition of Real Property Gains Tax (The Star, 2014, 2015 & 2016).

In tandem with the tough market conditions, the sales force in the Malaysia housing development industry is facing greater challenges to strive for the sales target. Many sales management literatures denote that the sales job is the most challenging and demanding work in the organization. Not to mentioned the housing development business is considered as a high involvement goods as previous research discoursed, where it involves a high risk, high return and high financial commitment due to the product attributes (Chee, Peng, Lee, & Ng, 1996; Tay & Tay, 2007). In addition, previous sales management literatures also reveals that the sales person is constantly exposed under high levels of pressure and conflict where it requires them to be more adaptive and responsive to the changing environment with the increasing complicated demands from the customer (Lussier & Hartmann, 2016; Ryerson, 2008; Wihler, Meurs, Momm, John, & Blickle, 2017). According to an industry report by Ahearne, Boichuk, Chapman, & Steenburgh, (2012), about half of the sales persons failed to achieve their annual sales targets.

By drawing from the resource-based view (RBV), the internal organization factors played an important role in facilitating the sales personnel's sales success. Prior literature in marketing have shown marketing orientation (MO) being closely related to firm's outcome (Kirca, Jayachandran, & Bearden, 2005; Najafi-Tavani, Sharifi, & Najafi-Tavani, 2016). A firm with better MO are known to have better proactiveness to the market needs, and this would facilitate the firm's continuous improvement in integrating internal resources for value creation to the customer (Cacciolatti & Lee, 2016; Chung, 2011). In MO literatures, the MO-business performance is the most widespread research subject topic, where the MO research generally exhibited positive implications to the business (e.g. Andotra & Gupta, 2016; Hussin, Thaheer, Badrillah, Harun, & Nasir, 2014; Takata, 2016; Wang & Miao, 2015).

Despite the plethora of research on MO and business performance, the cross-level effect for MO to sales staff remain scarce where most of the MO-related literatures are focused on the strategic business unit (SBU) or firm level assessment as argued by Pelham, (2009). To date, the research that studies the firm level-MO influences on the sales force are found to be few, such as the sales force behaviour (Pelham, 2009), and attitude improvement (Menguc, 1996; Siguaw, Brown, & Widing II, 1994). However, all the studies as mentioned above are using single sales person as the respondent to assess the firm level influence which raises the subjectivity perceptual bias issue. Since the implementation of MO ultimately would be enforced by the sales staff, not much research has been looked into this top-down approach that has a higher-level effect on the individual sales person's performance. In view of this, this paper intends to examine the cross-level effect of firm level MO to the individual sales force's performance by adopting the Hierarchical Linear Modeling approach since the higher level variables – MO data is taking into account collective efficacy of group attributes in order to overcome the biasness issue as discussed.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Salesperson's Performance

For years, the researchers in business studies have been baffled with the subject – “Why certain organizations are performing better than others?”. This question has been a crucial research agenda for many business research in evaluating the direct and indirect determinants that can improve business performance for many years (Wu, 2003). Many scholars have been looking into the measurement from various aspects, such as data, measures, indicators, metric, methods or techniques in order to capture a precise and relevant outcome. The two most prominently cited scholars in this area of research are Kaplan and Neely (Choong, 2013; Neely, 1999; Taticchi, Tonelli, & Cagnazzo, 2010). Notwithstanding many literatures discussing the performance measures, the explicit definitions are few. Based on the most well-known explanation by Neely, Gregory, & Platts, (2005), they defined the performance measurement where the action of quantification is the measurement process for the performance. However, there is no unification of the measurement due to the complexity of the various disciplinary backgrounds.

The emerging of efforts in developing the conceptual framework to measures the salesforce's performance began by Walker, Churchill, & Ford, (1977) and later with the empirical evidence by Churchill, Ford, Hartley, & Walker, (1985) that served as the base for many sales management research agenda. Through the years, the sales performance construct is becoming more complicated than ever as the sales person's job function has changed considerably (Verbeke, Dietz, & Verwaal, 2010). Generally, the sales performance can be referred to as salesperson's contribution evaluation in achieving the firm's objectives (Baldauf, Cravens, & Piercy, 2001). Due to the significant role of the sales force to the organization success, there are sufficient research on the sales person personal and aptitude antecedents, organizational and environmental factors that have an impact to the sales success (Mathur, Das, & Kanti Paul, 2016; Wihler et al., 2017).

2.2 Market Orientation

There are ample MO definitions given by the scholars, yet, most MO literatures are sourced from Kohli & Jaworski, (1990) and Narver & Slater, (1990). In the early 1990s, Kohli & Jaworski, (1990) defined MO as simple as “*the implementation of the marketing concept* (p.1)”. In that publication, they have delineated a comprehensive framework of antecedents, moderators and consequences of MO after reviewing 35 years of marketing literatures and in-depth interview with 62 marketing managers. Later, the MO definition was further refined to three main dimensions, which are within-organization market intelligence generation, intelligence dissemination and responsiveness that will lead to the customer and employee outcome and business performance (Jaworski & Kohli, 1993). Generally, the scale was recognized as MARKOR in abridged form. Likewise, Narver & Slater, (1990) elucidated MO that consisted of customer orientation, competitor orientation, interfunctional co-ordination, long-term focus and profitability that will lead to the business performance improvement. This scale that was established by Narver & Slater (1990) is known as MKTOR in short.

According to Leo, Alan, Yau, Raymond, & Jenny, (2003), they concluded there are three main pillars in MO which includes customer philosophy, goal attainment and integrated marketing organization after the review of literatures. The customer philosophy refers to the organizational capabilities in identifying the customer wants and needs by adjusting the offers to satisfy that need. Secondly, the achievement of the

organization goals through satisfying the customers. Lastly, the integrated interfunctional department within the organization to fulfil the customer's needs, subsequently achieving the organizational goals.

The performance outcome is always the primary interest in MO literatures. Remarkably, previous research mostly exhibited a positive association between MO-performance link, despite various scales being adopted (Gruber-Muecke & Hofer, 2015; Mahmoud, Blankson, Owusu-Frimpong, Nwankwo, & Trang, 2016; Rakthin, Calantone, & Wang, 2016). Thus, there is no surprise that Deshpande and Farley (1998) described MO-performance linkage are having a cross-national robustness relationship. In terms of MO-sales management literatures, previous literatures also suggests that the firm with better customer orientation, the stronger sales performance can be achieved (Cross, Brashear, Rigdon, & Bellenger, 2007). Under the housing development context, previous research unveiled that the business perceives MO as one of the important elements in managing the housing project portfolio to keep the firm's at the competitive edge (Tay & Tay, 2007). Hence, we propose:

Hypothesis 1: The firm with higher MO will be positively significant to the individual salesforce's performance.

3. Methodology

3.1 Design and Participants

This paper adopted non-probability purposive quota sampling through the industry leading association - REHDA 2014/2015 directory in cross-sectional time dimension. Before the actual survey distribution, five expert panels are invited to review the survey instrument to establish the face validity. During this stage, many issues such as content ambiguities, content design and the measurement scales were able to be addressed and overcome. The respondent needs to be an individual who work in a sales position in any private housing developer in Malaysia. This research data will be obtained from primary sources through personal administered questionnaires due to previous literatures in this industry suffering from a low response rate (Abidin, Yusof, & Othman, 2013; Jaafar, Abdul-Aziz, & Ali, 2010).

Since the multilevel research sample size continue unabated, thus, this research will follow the suggestions from Mass & Hox, (2005) simulation result. A target quota of 5 sales person per organizations is needed, while 30 organizations need to be achieved for organizational level analysis. Due to the sampling method being pre-defined, the response rates were not able to be determined. However, we approached 72 housing developers, and 41 agreed to participate in this survey and the final usable samples are 152 (Level 1, $n= 152$; Level 2, $n= 30$).

Prior to proceeding with any statistical analysis procedures, an independent-sample *t*-test was carried out to test the significance level between the first and last 30 respondents. The early-late waves analysis was found to be non significant for all the constructs. Secondly, procedural and statistical controls were imposed to reduce the common method variance. The procedural controls included improving the scale items (pre-test and adapted bipolar numerical scale) and measurement from multiple sources. Whereas the Harman's single-factor test is used as the statistical controls, and all the predictor variables initial Eigenvalues and extraction sums of squared loadings from the analysis result are below the 50% threshold (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). Therefore, it can be concluded that this paper are unlikely to have non-response bias and common method variance effects.

3.2 Measures

The questionnaires comprise of 35 items based on 5 points Likert-scale that anchor from strongly disagree/ very poor (scale of 1) to strongly agree/ excellent (scale of 5) based on their preferable answers. All the variables' construct have reported a good reliability, $\alpha < .82$. Due to similar specific-context consideration, this research will adopt the scale that was established by Tay & Tay, (2007). In their publication, they have integrated both MARKOR and MKTOR scales since both scales have their own strengths and weaknesses. A final 29 items to measure the MO that consists of customer orientation, competitor orientation, interfunctional co-ordination, profit orientation and responsiveness was adapted in this paper. Nonetheless, all the negative wording items in the original scale have been reversed to streamline all the items to the positive direction to reduce the method bias (Sonderen, Sanderman, & Coyne, 2013). As this is the predictor variable at the organizational level, the questions were designed to begin with "In my company..." or "Our firm..." to differentiate the assessment level.

At the individual level outcome variable, a single item measures are used to assess the salesperson's performance that is adopted from Wang & Miao, (2015). In this paper, the individual sales performance will be evaluated based on individual sales growth (increase of sales volume) as compared to own targets by using perceptual self-report assessment since the variance between objective and perceptual measures are not significant (Chonko, Loe, Roberts, & Tanner, 2000; Cross et al., 2007).

3.3 Goodness of Measures

Since the adoptions of all the constructs are sourced from reputable journals, thus it is not surprising that the analysis output shows all the variable internal consistency reliability is at a satisfactory level ($\rho_c < .88$). Nevertheless, the composite reliability and validity were not able to be obtained for the outcome variable (sales volume) due to it being a single item measures. Based on the result, all the items average variance extracted (AVE) have surpassed the threshold of .50 and the AVE square root has the highest loadings among others the constructs (Hair, Hult, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2014). Thus, it can be concluded that the convergent and discriminant validity are accepted in this paper.

3.4 Aggregation Procedures

Prior to the data aggregation, few data examinations are needed to justify the needs of data to aggregate to a higher level. Firstly, assessment of within-group interrater agreement by mean ($r_{WG(j)}$) at the normal null distribution. The result suggests a high degree of validity within-group at the organization level that is above the benchmark of $r_{WG(j)} \geq .70$. Secondly, the observation of between-group measures through F value from One-way ANOVA analysis. The F value exhibited a sufficient between-group variance. Lastly, the computation between-group to within-group variance are examined by intraclass correlation ICC(1) with the threshold of .05. Overall, the output from $r_{WG(j)}$, F value and ICC(1) have confirmed the needs of data aggregation procedures to L2, see Table 1 (Idris, Dollard, Coward, & Dormann, 2012; James, Demaree, & Wolf, 1993; Peugh, 2010).

Table 1: Means, standard deviation, Composite Reliability, Pearson bivariate correlation, Interrater agreement, *F* value and ICC(1)

	M	SD	ρ_c	1	2	3	4	5	6	$r_{WG(J)}$	<i>F</i>	ICC(1)
1. CUST	4.00	.59	.90	1	.69**	.62**	.52**	.64**	.26	.94	2.30***	.20
2. COMP	3.80	.65	.88	.59**	1	.66**	.35	.57**	.20	.87	1.30	.06
3. INTE	3.70	.76	.92	.49**	.53**	1	.56**	.62**	.43*	.85	2.47***	.22
4. PROF	3.67	.70	.91	.47**	.45**	.52**	1	.64**	.30	.88	2.06**	.17
5. RESP	3.65	.64	.90	.56**	.63**	.66**	.65**	1	.37*	.90	1.23	.04
6. SPER	3.78	.76	-	.34**	.36**	.41**	.41**	.46**	1	.74	1.60*	.11

Notes. CUST= Customer orientation; COMP= Competitor orientation; INTE= Interfunctional co-ordination;

PROF= Profit orientation; RESP= Responsiveness; SPER= Sales performance; Bivariate correlation below diagonal is lower level variables ($n = 152$), above diagonal is upper level variables ($n = 30$).

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed).

4. Results and Discussion

The profiles of the respondents are male (53.3%) and female (46.7%) while the respondents ethnicity are mostly Bumiputera (48%), Chinese (46.7%), Indian (4.6%) and others (7%). In terms of age group, half of the respondents are from the age group of 26 to 35 years old, this is followed by ages 36 to 45 (23%), age below 25 (18.4%), 46 to 55 (7.9%) and lastly, age above 56 is (7%). Most of the respondents are diploma or degree holders (66.2%), high school leavers with 28.4%, and post-graduates and vocational only contributing to 5.3%. In addition, up to 63.8% respondents are at the executive level, 19.1% from middle management, while the remaining 8.6% comprised of top management, board of directors, business owner and others.

The rescaling of the firm's level predictor variables used grand-mean centering with Full Information Maximum Likelihood (FIML) in the estimation setting. Based on the hypothesis, we hypothesize that the firm's level MO will have cross level effect to the individual salesperson's performance. In Model 1a, the result confirms that customer orientation has a positive relationship to the salesperson's performance with $\gamma_{01} = .14$, $SE = .07$, $p < .05$. Secondly, the result in Model 1b indicates that the competitor orientation does not have a significant relationship to the salesperson's performance and thus the hypothesis is rejected. For interfunctional co-ordination, the analysis supports the hypothesis with $\gamma_{03} = .23$, $SE = .07$, $p < .01$. The assessment is followed by profit orientation ($\gamma_{04} = .16$, $SE = .07$, $p < .05$) and responsiveness ($\gamma_{05} = .20$, $SE = .08$, $p < .05$) that indicates both dimensions also being positively significant to the salesperson's performance, see the summary at Table 2.

Table 1: HLM Analysis on cross-level effect of market orientation to salesperson's performance.

Effect	Salesperson's Performance				
	1a	1b	1c	1d	1e
Cross-level effects					
Customer orientation (γ_{01})	.14(.07)*				
Competitor orientation (γ_{02})		.11(.08)			
Interfunctional co-ordination (γ_{03})			.23(.07)**		
Profit orientation (γ_{04})				.16(.07)*	
Responsiveness (γ_{05})					.20(.08)*

Notes. The first value is the unstandardized parameter estimate, and the value in the parentheses is the standard error. $n = 152$ sales personnel from $n = 30$ organizations.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

5. Conclusion

This paper verified the impact of firm level MO to the individual salesperson's performance in the Malaysia housing development context by using Hierarchical Linear Modeling approach. This method is able to produce a totally different result compared to general linear models (i.e. regression and ANOVA) by overcoming the shortcoming and the issue of "*What is true at one level need not be true at another level* (Garson, 2013, p. 6)" as in behavioural research often involves the correlation within clusters. As noted by many research papers, the use of single manager to assess the firm strategy may not able to provide a full picture of the organization but rather as a speculation. By having a survey with another manager under the same organization, the responses to the organization strategy would have varied opinions, and this would have drawn a different result (Bowman & Ambrosini, 1997; Frösén, Tikkanen, Jaakkola, & Vassinen, 2013; Gray, Matear, Boshoff, & Matheson, 1998; Jex & Bliese, 1999; Zachary, McKenny, Short, & Payne, 2011). To overcome such ambiguities, the current research used multiple respondents to assess the firm level MO in answering the calling of previous research with the use of group efficacy to measure the firms' level dimension instead of a single respondent to minimize the consensus issue.

Based on the result, most of the MO dimension exhibited a positive relationship (customer orientation, interfunctional co-ordination, profit orientation and responsiveness) to the individual sales volume increase. As the sales person is the organization's brand ambassador, they are the one who implement the organization's marketing philosophy on the front line. Thus, it is not surprising academic literatures exhibited that the firm with higher MO would provide a better support to the sales staff, which in turn will produce a better sales conversion rate.

As contrary to the previous work, the competitor orientation does not have the impact to the salesperson's performance. Although previous literatures generally exhibited the importance of competitor orientation to the market condition, however, this may not always be beneficial to the firm. If the firm always excessively focuses and overly reacts to the competitor's activity, this may diminish the firm's unique value proposition and eventually lead them to lose their market share as Tay & Tay, (2007) warned. The recognition of the MO dimension to the sales growth linkage is critical, particularly when the firm has

invested so much time and resources in implementing the MO but it did not lead to higher sales growth. The industry practitioners can synergising the current research findings to re-visit the current marketing strategy, and re-allocate the resources appropriately to strive for better sales performance.

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