GENDER DIFFERENCES IN BUYER PERCEPTIONS OF SOURCE CREDIBILITY AND CONFLICT IN BUSINESS-TO-BUSINESS RELATIONSHIPS

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As females continue to break the gender barrier and work in positions where they have a major impact on the buying and selling activities in business firms, questions arise as to whether they react differently to buying situations than similarly employed male purchasing professionals. Previous research in this area has been mixed. This study was developed to focus on two specific variables within the buyer-seller relationships, namely differences in perceptions of sales person credibility and conflict. This study employed a sample of over 400 professional purchasing personnel. The results of the analysis suggest that female purchasers, in professional purchasing situations, have significantly different perceptions of salesperson/buyer conflict and have different perceptions of salesperson trust and expertise than their male counterparts. The results of the study are discussed and avenues of future research presented.

INTRODUCTION

"Relationship marketing" has emerged as a top priority for most firms (Day 2000). Given the ever-changing competitive environment, it is not surprising that business marketers continue to ask the question, "How do buyers and sellers create and maintain relationships with each other?" Of course, it is recognized that these relationships vary from distant transactional arm's length to close collaborative ones (Dwyer, Schurr and Oh 1987).

Research focused on buyer-seller relationship in business markets has advanced knowledge by positing and empirically demonstrating how these relationships are influenced by information exchange, operational linkages, legal bonds, cooperative norms, supply complexity adaptations by sellers and buyers, availability of alternative suppliers, supply market dynamism (Cannon and Perrault 1999), buying decision uncertainty (Oliver 1990; Gao, Sigry and Bird 2005), purchase importance, task uncertainty, choice set size, perceived buyer power (Bunn 1993), commitment and trust (Wilson and Mummalaneni 1986; Morgan and Hunt 1994; Doney and Cannon 1997), and loyalty (Reichheld, Markey and Hopton 2000; Gilles, Rigby and Reichheld 2002; Plank and Newell 2006). As the preceding suggests, a number of constructs have been shown to be relevant to understanding buyer-seller relationships. However, despite its significance to buyer-seller relationships, the empirical literature on source credibility and conflict is extremely limited. Additionally, the impact of gender on relationships has received little attention from researchers. In an effort to address the limited empirical investigations we chose to examine these constructs.

Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to contribute to the business marketing and procurement literature by providing new insights about the role of gender on buyer-seller relationships. More specifically, this paper will examine how gender influences buyer

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perceptions of source credibility and conflict from an organizational buyer-seller perspective. Following a brief review of the literature on source credibility, conflict and gender, we present a study that examined the impact of gender on the perceptions of salesperson trust and expertise, as variables indicative of source credibility, and the cognitive and affective dimensions of conflict. We then discuss these findings, and implications.

BACKGROUND

Source Credibility

What exactly is meant by the credibility of a source? In a landmark study of advertising by Hovland, Janis and Kelley (1953) the perceived credibility of a communication was shown to be made up of two dimensions: the communicator's perceived expertness and trust. The subsequent research on source credibility has been limited mostly to scale development (Ohanian 1990; Lafferty, Goldsmith and Newell 2002) and the impact of source credibility on consumer reactions to advertisements (Bochner and Insko 1966; Sternthal, Phillips and Dholakia 1978; Goldberg and Hartwick 1990; Lafferty and Goldsmith 1999; Goldsmith, Lafferty and Newell 2000). Conceptually, it is understood that credibility has both a cognitive component regarding the expertise of a spokesperson and an affective component regarding the trustworthiness of a spokesperson.

Although research on source credibility has been limited mostly to consumer marketing, salesperson trust and expertise have been examined to understand their role in buyer-seller relationships. With regard to the trust component, it has been shown to decrease buyer decision-making uncertainty (Morgan and Hunt 1994; Gao, Sirgy and Bird 2005) increase cooperation, reduce the propensity to terminate the relationship, and reduce conflict (Morgan and Hunt 1994).

Empirically, the role salesperson expertise plays in fostering trust has been examined by numerous authors. Busch and Wilson (1976) showed that customers who perceive salespeople with high levels of expert power were viewed as more trustworthy. Moorman, Deshpande and Zaltman (1993) found that researchers' expertise provided the foundation for trust. Crosby, Evans and Cowles (1990) showed that perceived expertise of an insurance salesperson was a significant predictor of customer trust. Newell and Goldsmith (2001) found a positive relationship between expertise and trust in their study on corporate credibility. Finally, Doney and Cannon (1997) found that salesperson expertise was positively related to the buyer's perception of salesperson trust. Apparently, the salesperson's expertise builds a buyer's trust by increasing the confidence that the salesperson can keep promises made to the buyer.

Conflict

Conflict is a natural part of social behavior. In fact, the very nature of buyer-seller relationships involves conflict. For instance, the act of exchange involves both a sale and a purchase. The seller seeks to obtain the best (highest) price from the exchange, and by contrast, the buyer hopes to negotiate the lowest possible price.

Two of the first researchers to examine conflict in organizations were Guetzkow and Gyr (1954). Although different forms of conflict examined have varied based on research objectives (Jehn and Mannix 2001), researchers have primarily focused on two types of conflict, affective and cognitive. Affective conflict is by its very nature emotional and reflective of the interpersonal incompatibility that causes friction between two people. Cognitive conflict represents disagreements originating over ideas, opinions, policies, procedures, and are generally task oriented and focused on judgmental differences about how best to achieve common objectives (Jehn 1992).

The study of conflict in buyer-seller relationships is important because of its pervasiveness and its potentially negative and positive effects (Thomas 1976, 1992). As Coser (1956) states, "When people come together they require disharmony as well as harmony, dissociation as well as association, and conflicts whether these are by no means altogether disruptive factors."

However, conflict is most often associated with negative consequences and thus something that should be avoided in relationships. Studies have found that affective conflict can make buyers less receptive to the ideas of sellers (Jehn 1992), cause too much energy to be devoted to discussing, resolving, or ignoring conflicts, which takes away from achieving business and relational goals (Jehn 1992; Amason 1996), and negatively impact on the relationships loyalty between buyer and seller (Plank and Newell 2006). In contrast, some previous literature has found that cognitive conflict can have a positive impact on relationships (Jehn 1995). Specifically, in certain circumstances, cognitive conflict leads to more discussion between parties, which then result in changes that actually strengthen the relationship (Emiliani 2003; Jehn and Mannix 2001; Jehn 1995).

Gender

Past research has failed to indicate that gender of the purchaser plays a significant role in buyer-seller relationships. A review by Pullins, Reid and Plank (2004) of eleven studies of gender differences from a buyer's perspective, suggested that the past research offered inconsistent evidence of gender differences in purchasing. Pullins et al. (2004) conducted a study of gender related differences in buyer perceptions of salespeople. They failed to find any significant gender related differences for any of the variables investigated, including perceptions of sales person trust, the only variable relevant to the current study.

Although not focused on business relationships, consumer behavior research has shown differences in buying processes by gender. In their study of evaluation processes, McGuiness and Pribram (1979) found that females are more sensitive than males to all stimuli (except smell) and indicated that these basic differences may contribute to other more complex processes. Meyers-Levy (1989) and Nowaczyk (1982) concluded that males and females differ in the ways in which information is processed, in particular that women respond to non-verbal stimuli by evolving more associative, imagery-based interpretations and more elaborate descriptions than males (Meyers-Levy 1989; Darley and Smith 1995). Females were also found to exhibit greater sensitivity to the particulars of information relevant to others than males when making judgments (Meyers-Levy and S. Ternthal 1991). Females have also been shown to use both their right (affective) side of their brain and a left (cognitive) side for most information tasks, whereas males use specific hemispheres of their brain for certain tasks: right side for visual and left side for verbal (Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran 1991).

A study by Watts et al. (1982), showed that females were more empathic (e.g., considered both self and others) than males which considered more items highly focused on self. Relatively little attention has been given to the role of empathy in developing relationships between buyers and sellers. This is surprising given that research has shown that empathy is the basis for individual differences in cognitive processes that enable individuals to accurately assess and understand emotions (Jordan, et al. 2002; Wolff, Pescosolido and Druskat 2002). Finally, females have been shown to be guided by communal goals of forming affiliations and fostering harmonious relations with others (Meyers-Levy 1988) and tend to be cooperative, interdependent, intrinsically motivated and risk adverse (Areni and Kiecker 1993).

GENDER, SOURCE CREDIBILITY AND CONFLICT

This study seeks to answer the question: "Are there gender differences in buyer perceptions of salesperson expertise and trust, cognitive conflict and affective conflict in buyer-seller relationships?" Although the limited empirical studies on gender differences in buyer-seller exchanges remains inconclusive, consumer studies of gender differences on buying processes create an opportunity to examine the role of gender differences in perceptions of relationship exchanges.

As mentioned previously, the buyer's perception of salesperson expertise and trust establishes the credibility needed to create and maintain effective relationships. Given their cooperative nature, goal of fostering harmonious relations, integrated approach to information tasks (left and right brain), heightened empathy and risk aversion, it is likely that female buyers' perception and subsequent interpretation of the salesperson's expertise and trust is biased positively. Their positive evaluation may be more favorable than is warranted; however, it allows buyers to confirm their overall beliefs.

It would seem that the cooperative nature of females, their heightened empathy and desire to maintain harmonious relations, would combine to bias positively their perceptions of conflict. Regardless of whether the conflict is cognitive or affective, disagreements that can be resolved amicably provide a "medium through which problems can be aired and solutions arrived at" (Deutsch 1969). Accordingly, female buyers are likely to perceive conflict, if any, as functional (positive) as opposed to dysfunctional (negative), and subsequently view conflict resolved amicably as a consequence of the buyer's perception of trust and expertise of the salesperson. Stated more formally, the following hypotheses are based on an analysis of the extant literature regarding gender, salesperson expertise and trust, and cognitive and affective conflict.

Hypothesis 1: Female buyer perceptions of salesperson expertise will be greater than male buyer perceptions of salesperson expertise.

Hypothesis 2: Female buyer perceptions of salesperson trust will be greater than male buyer perceptions of salesperson trust.

Hypothesis 3: Female buyer perceptions of cognitive conflict will be less than male buyer perceptions of cognitive conflict.

Hypothesis 4: Female buyer perceptions of affective conflict will be less than male buyer perceptions of affective conflict.

METHOD

The data for the research was gathered using a mail survey. The mailing was conducted using a random sample from a total of 5000 names of members of the *Institute for Supply Management*. After purging names without company affiliation, the questionnaires were sent to a randomly selected set of 2000 potential respondents in a single wave with no follow up. There were no return deliveries. After six weeks, a total of 434 completed usable responses were received for a return rate of 21.7 percent.

Of those responding, 60 percent were male and 40 percent were female. The purchasing experience ranged from one year to forty years with the mean being 14.87 years. The most common industry the respondent worked for was manufacturing (49.5 percent) followed by transportation (11 percent), and services (31 percent), though 19.6 percent chose "other." The number of employees that worked at the respondent's company ranged from 1 to 9999, with the mean being 1405.

Measures

For this study, four measures were used to test the hypotheses, salesperson expertise, salesperson trust, cognitive conflict and affective conflict. The measures for salesperson expertise and salesperson trust were taken from a semantic differential scale developed by Ohanian (1990). Each of the measures consisted of five items. The measures for affective and cognitive conflict were slightly modified from those used by Amason (1996). The modifications were made to fit the context of this study. The measures all displayed excellent internal consistencies with alpha coefficients ranging from .868 to .951 as shown in Table 1.

The hypotheses were tested using Analysis of Variance. Table 2 reports those results.

As can be seen in the table, three of the four hypotheses are supported. Hypothesis 2, which is not supported, has means in the right direction, but falls above the .05 criterion used for this study.

DISCUSSION AND IMPICATIONS

Consistent with our expectations, female buyers perceive salespeople as having more expertise than male buyers perceive salespeople. Additionally, female buyers perceive less conflict in exchange relationships than male buyers perceive in exchange relationships. An explanation of this study's empirically supported hypothesis may be approached from the extant literature on gender differences.

Because we investigated gender holistically, we cannot draw any conclusions regarding which of the female characteristics represent significant antecedent influences on buyer perceptions. However, the cumulative impact of female physiological, psychological, sociological and cultural differences, reflected in communal goals, result in a greater sensitivity to both personally relevant information and information relevant to others.

Additionally, although the following are essentially suppositions, they nonetheless represent directions for future research. The empathy dimension of emotional intelligence may allow female buyers to listen to different viewpoints and seek effective solutions without feeling threatened and consequently perceive conflict, if any is perceived at all, in a more positive (functional) manner. The aversion to risk may compel female buyers to rely more heavily on the expertise and trust of the salesperson so as to reduce their decision-making uncertainty. Females, guided by the communal goal of fostering harmonious relations, may bias positively their exchange relationships with the salespeople they encounter in their role of organizational buyers. Finally, given their conceptual nature and greater sensitivity to alternative viewpoints, female buyers, to lessen the occurrence of conflict, may conceivably create a more congenial atmosphere for the explicit purpose of facilitating buyer-seller negotiations. Again, an argument can be made that context of the situation, as a surrogate for time, may cause these differences to manifest themselves.

LIMITATIONS

Given this is a mail questionnaire study that relies on the recall of a sample, the usual issues with that methodology exist. While the sample and response rate is reasonable, it does not represent all parties who interact in a buyer-seller situation, as does most research of this type. Since the data was collected from a single source, common method bias may exist. This research followed some of the suggestions by both Mclaughlin (1999) and Podsakoff et al. (2003) to minimize that potential.

CONCLUSION

This research has indicated some significantly statistical differences of perceptions of male and female purchasing managers toward salespeople who call on them in the development and maintenance of business-to-business buyer-seller relationships. What sets this research apart from previous research is the significant grounding of this research in consumer behavior theory.

Arguments have been made recently, notably by Pullins, Reid and Plank (2004), that differences in gender reactions to buyer-seller

TABLE 1
Coefficient Alpha Standardized Reliabilities

Construct	Coefficient Alpha	Average Inter-item Correlation	Range of Correlations
Salesperson Trust (5 items)	.951	.795	.724-.898
Salesperson Expertise (5 items)	.951	.794	.732-.863
Affective Conflict (4 items)	.875	.637	.582-.697
Cognitive Conflict (3 items)	.868	.686	.673-.704

TABLE 2
Hypotheses Testing Using One-way Analysis of Variance

A. Hypothesis 1 - Gender and Salesperson Perceived Expertise

Groups	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Means
Between Groups	8.169	1	8.169	6.859	.009	M 5.28
Within Groups	460.908	387	1.191			F 5.58
Total	469.077	388				

B. Hypothesis 2 - Gender and Salesperson Perceived Trust

Groups	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Means
Between Groups	4.582	1	4.582	2.976	.085	M 5.59
Within Groups	600.558	390	1.540			F 5.81
Total	605.140	391				

C. Hypothesis 3 - Gender and Cognitive Conflict

Groups	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Means
Between Groups	10.803	1	10.803	15.875	.000	M 2.54
Within Groups	272.879	401	.680			F 2.21
Total	283.681	402				

D. Hypothesis 4 - Gender and Affective Conflict

Groups	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Means
Between Groups	7.332	1	7.332	14.516	.000	M 1.87
Within Groups	205.582	407	.505			F 1.59
Total	212.914	408				

relationships are becoming much less apparent. They suggest this might be due to over thirty years of gender bias legislation and by the general constraints of an organization's culture, rules, and procedures imposed on organizational buyers. While this generally may be true, this research suggests that some specific perceptual differences may be present. Understanding how these and other gender perceptions impact buyer-seller relationships is an interesting and potentially fruitful area of future research and may have some significant implications for business practice.

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