

The Dimensions of Trust in Salespersons: A Qualitative Research

Ferda Erdem¹, Arzu Açar²

¹Professor, Business Department, Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences
Akdeniz University, Turkey

²PhD Student, Business Management Programme, Institute of Social Sciences,
Akdeniz University, Turkey

ABSTRACT--- *The purpose of this study was to identify the dimensions of trust in salespersons and find if customers and salespersons had different perceptions of trust. Unlike the relevant studies in the literature, this study is a qualitative research in which 13 grocers that purchased the products of a distributor firm and 9 salespersons that sold the products to these customers were interviewed. According to the findings of the study, the grocers and salespersons similarly considered honesty, professionalism, ethical conduct, customer orientation and sincerity as important dimensions of trust in salespersons. It was also found in the study that a reliable salesperson could also build trust in the firm. This study might have a theoretical contribution as well because it draws attention to the importance of trust phenomenon for the current and future debates in the field of marketing behaviours. Furthermore, demonstrating the important role played by the salespersons in the relationship management on behalf of their firms, this study might also have a practical contribution as it emphasizes some of the critical human resources policies.*

Keywords--- Trust, salesperson, customer

1. INTRODUCTION

What the firm expects from the salespersons is not limited to convincing the customers by means of certain sales and marketing tactics. They are expected to develop long-lasting relationship with the customers and manage the relationship for and on behalf of the firm. Young and Albaum (2003) emphasize that the effectiveness of the salesperson-customer relationship is enhanced by trust. Swan et al. (1999) claim that trust between the salespersons and customers has traditionally been critical to develop and maintain a successful sales relation. Trust in salespersons also has a positive impact on the expectation regarding the future of the customer-salesperson relationships. A customer who trusts a salesperson will be more willing to maintain the relationship than the one who has a low level of trust in the salesperson (Kennedy et al. 2001) because communication networks that are based on high levels of trust function more easily and smoothly (Ertong, 2011). Swan and Nolan (1985) as well as Andaleeb and Anwar (1996) draw attention to the relation between the trust of customers in salespersons and the trust in the organization/firm. They claim that if the customer trusts the organization that is represented by the salesperson, this perception will enable them to trust the salespersons. On the contrary, if the organization cannot build up trust, the customers will not easily trust the salespersons. Therefore, trust in a salesperson is, at first glance, a function of the image of the organization that the salesperson represents. However, this can rather explain the beginning phase of a trust relationship. Although trust in the firm may be a reference for the initiation of the relationships; however, trust can be reinforced and maintained only through interpersonal trust relationship and is influenced by the personal reliability of the parties. Particularly the traits of the salespersons that build up or destroy trust have a significant impact on the continuation of the relationship and how the customers perceive the firm. However, studies on trust in salespersons usually measure the customer perceptions. Nonetheless, experiences and impression of salespersons that know what the customers expect from them are also explanatory. Furthermore, trust is a highly complicated phenomenon and we still need a deeper understanding. For this reason, further qualitative studies exploring trust will enable us to discover different aspects of customer - salesperson relationships. This study explores the dimensions of trust in salespersons according the perceptions of both customers and salespersons. The data was collected from the interviews and the sample of the study was comprised of the customers and salespersons.

2. TRUST IN SALESPERSON

Trust means *that one party's willingness to be vulnerable to another party based on the belief that the other party is competent, open, concerned about their well-being in the relationship, and reliable* (Mishra, 1996) and therefore one party expects that the other party will not cause any damage to or abuse her/him (Rousseau et al., 1998). Despite these

general definitions, trust has a complicated construct; the dimensions, functions and results of trust vary by organization-individual relationships; relationships between organizations, acquaintances or foreigners; in formal or social relationships, and in different cultures.

Trust and loyalty defined as relationship values are the vital elements of the business relationships (Zabkar and Brencic, 2004). Tsai et al. (2010) points to the fact that trust reduces uncertainty for the buyers in the relationships of buyers and vendors and thus influences the relationship positively. Doney and Cannon (1997) states that the firms desire to establish more collaborative relationships with their customers and salespersons play an important role in building and developing trust of customers in the firm. Similarly, Mangindaan and Hendriana (2013) draw attention to the fact that firms carry out the customer relations management mainly through salespersons. They emphasize that salespersons' competence, benevolence and problem solving traits make a customer trust the salespersons, while trust in salespersons turns into trust in the management policies and practices of the firm after a while. The study carried out by Swan et al. (1988) that is one of the previous studies on this matter reported competence, customer orientation, dependability, honesty and likeability as the characteristics of a reliable salesperson. Andaleeb and Anwar (1996) developed a model in which they described three variables of trust in salespersons as follows: personal traits of a salesperson (expertise, intentions and likability); tendency and knowledge of the customer to trust; trust in the organization. Swan et al. (1999) performed a Meta analysis in which benevolence, competence and likeability/similarity were determined as the dimensions of trust in salespersons and influenced the customer trust. Tsai et al. (2010) claimed that customers found a salesperson reliable if s/he possesses the ability and extensive knowledge about the goods and services. Although there is a certain degree of consensus amongst these studies on the major dimensions of trust, some of the studies highlighted certain dimensions of trust further. These quantitative studies mentioned on trust in salespersons focused especially on the customer perceptions. In this study, however, both customers' and salespersons' perceptions of trust in salespersons were explored. The main question of this study is "what are the dimensions of customer trust in salespersons?". It is assumed that the answer to this question will also clarify the question "what are the traits of a reliable salesperson?". Besides, both groups were also asked the question "Is there a relationship between trust in the firm and trust in salespersons?".

3. METHODOLOGY

This study explores the trust relationships between the salespersons employed at a distribution company and the grocers that they sell directly and thus have face-to-face and continuous contacts. The research design is qualitative phenomenological research in nature. Data were gathered through face-to-face semi-structured interviews and 13 grocers (male) and 8 salespersons (male) of a distribution firm participated in the research. 9 customers (grocers) involved in the study had been buying products from the same salespersons for 2 years or longer; whereas the rest had been buying from the same salespersons for a period shorter than 2 years. The question "what are the behaviours of salespersons that make customers trust them?" was asked to both grocers and salespersons in the interviews. During the interviews, the grocers were asked to take into account the salespersons that they were engaged in a regular business relationship while making assessments about the trust relationships. Furthermore, both parties were encouraged to tell some of their anecdotes. After the interviews were finalized, the interview notes were first assessed by thematic analysis and then the main dimensions of trust and its content were identified.

4. FINDINGS

The most important finding of the research is that there is strong similarity between the perceptions of the grocers and salespersons with respect to the dimensions of trust in salespersons. Both groups think that trust in salespersons is built up on **honesty, professionalism, ethical conduct and customer-orientation** (Table 1). In addition to these dimensions, salespersons emphasized **sincerity** as another dimension of trust (Table 2). Customers and salespersons had similar ideas about the content of the dimensions identified:

- **Honesty:** Avoid lying, deceiving and cheating the customers.
- **Professionalism:** Being knowledgeable about the products and the company
- **Ethical conduct:** Avoid looking after one's personal interests; respect customers; humanism; being benevolent
- **Customer orientation:** Protect and favour the customers' interests

Additionally, the customers and salespersons stated that there was a relationship between the trust in the company and trust in salespersons. 6 grocers in the customers group thought that *trust in salespersons also built trust in the company*, whereas 4 grocers stated that *trust in the company also built trust in salespersons* and 3 grocers thought that trust in salespersons could be built *thanks to both the company and salespersons*. On the other hand, 6 salespersons stated that *trust in salespersons also builds trust in the company*; 1 salesperson expressed that *trust of the customer in the company*

would also build trust in the salespersons, whereas 1 salesperson stated that trust in salespersons was built thanks to *both the company and the salespersons*. This result shows that trust in salespersons is, for both parties, a critical determinant that builds trust in the company as well. However, it can be stated that salespersons consider their roles more important in establishing a trust relationship.

Table 1: Dimensions of trust in salesperson according to customer (N=13)

Dimension of Trust	Content	Verbatim from Customers
<p>Honesty</p>	<p>Avoid lying, cheating and deceiving, keeping one's promise.</p>	<p>...First I didn't count the products listed by the salesperson. I found for a few times that products were missing. I observed this for a while and I warned the salesperson when I noticed that the products were always missing ... (n:1)</p>
		<p>...they should not cheat me in business I was cheated by one. I lost my confidence ... (n:2)</p>
		<p>...First the salesperson must be honest, we can understand it usually during the invoice check I expect the salespersons to be honest in their jobs... (n:4)</p>
		<p>... If the salesperson is honest, I don't do any wrong to them, and as long as they don't do me any wrong, then they are perfect in my eyes ... (n:5)</p>
		<p>... they must not steal.. I mean they must give me that confidence ... (n:10)</p>
		<p>.....Salesperson must behave properly, must be honest and man of his word... (n:13)</p>
<p>Professionalism</p>	<p>Being knowledgeable, experienced; taking initiative</p>	<p>...salesperson must not be in an effort to sell too much, s/he should supply me as many as I need ... (n:1)</p>
		<p>Salespersons should be aware of all policies and practices of the company Salespersons should work in a way that customers can have the impression that they are dealing with the company directly ... they should have the ability to make their decisions on their own, I mean they shouldn't consult anybody lese they should have the capacity to represent the company when they face the customers. They should put aside their personal problems..... (n:3)</p>
		<p>...But a young salesperson came in before this one, and he was a little bit slow and excited. He was excited probably because it was his first time in this area (n:5)</p>
		<p>.... There must not be missing or excessive products when delivered to me ... (n:13)</p>
<p>Ethical conduct</p>	<p>Avoid self-seeking and selfish behaviours that will bring personal gains; being respectful, possess humanitarian values, being benevolent</p>	<p>...if a salesperson comes and says that a box is forgotten or one is broken. What do we do then? We don't trust him anymore, we try to avoid buying from her/him as much as possible or we check the delivery thoroughly or we buy from somebody else ... (n:4)</p>
		<p>...he doesn't even step inside when I'm pissed off and waits outside the store until I calm down ... (n:5)</p>
		<p>I want the salesperson to be nice to me ... (n:7)</p>
		<p>...salesperson's character is important ...he must be cheerful, and possess the humanitarian values that we are all familiar ..., when a salesperson is not cheerful.. or behave well to me or create problems for me. .. then I don't want to see her/him any more... (n:8)</p>
		<p>..I want the salesperson to be respectful ... If s/he acts impulsively, raises her/his voice, and disrespects me, our relationship will definitely be affected negatively ... (n:9)</p>
		<p>I expect respect!...If the other person has good intentions, you can understand it from her/his cheerfulness ...salespersons should say hi, how are you, are you all right, have a nice working day when he comes in this store ... (no:10)</p> <p>...They don't take account of my financial state, they put a pressure and insist on me to buy more; they try to sell more than I need and want, sometimes they push hard on me. ...they'd better take my orders without creating any pressure ... (n:11)</p>
<p>Customer Orientation</p>	<p>Enable customers to access the possibilities offered by the company (such as campaigns, promotions). Protect customer interests</p>	<p>...I will like it if he gives me the priority for the campaigns and promotions offered by the company. I will trust her/him if he enables me to access the possibilities offered by the campaign more ... (no:2)</p>
		<p>...I expect them to take the maximum initiative. Some say that this is what the company instructs.. but they should favour me, for example, if I'm going through a hard time (no:3)</p>

Table 2: Dimensions of trust in salesperson according to salespersons (N=8)

Dimensions of Trust	Contents	Verbatim from Salespersons
Honesty	Avoid lying, stealing and cheating, keep one's promise, and behave consistently.	<p>...I observed that customers trusted me when I kept my promises....The company did not keep its promise about a campaign; therefore, the customer lost confidence in us... ...We should avoid lying, keep our promises and visit the customers regularly (n:1)</p> <p>...If I'm honest, keep my promises and avoid finding excuses, then I can win the customer trust ... (n:3)</p> <p>..They trust in salespersons who don't lie while selling products, and keep their promises all the time ...Trust comes firstWe should avoid giving the impression that we are cheating them ... When the customers trust you, they can even leave their stores and cash boxes to you ... Sometimes there are some grocers saying "Watch the store for me, I'll be back in a few minutes" and they leave it to you ... In short, they can entrust their all to you when they trust you ... (no:4)</p> <p>...The company might promise to offer a campaign, but it might not keep that promise ... or you could not explain the details properly, and the grocer might misunderstood it ... But you can compensate it, you can explain the details again in a way that the grocer can understand, if you are faulty, you admit it and apologize because the business is going on... You mend your fences with the grocer but it won't be like it used to be before ... (n:5)</p> <p>If I'm telling something, for example making a promise, then I have to keep that promise because I don't make promises that I cannot keep..(n.6)</p> <p>First of all one must be honest so that the customers can trust, ... Trust must come first, then one can keep on working based on respect ... If you can create a bond with the customers, then the rest will come by itself, and you can sell anyhow as you want...(n:7)</p> <p>...There are some salespersons who try to cheat the customers ...in that case, grocers tell that they lose their confidence in them...(n.8)</p>
		<p>... As my word is my bond, the salespersons should also act like that, otherwise, they cannot establish a relationship with me and cannot sell products to me..(n.13)</p>
Customer Orientation	Enable customers to access the possibilities offered by the company and protect customer interests	<p>Customers want to be protected and favoured ... They expect to access any kind of campaigns ... When you took the first step into the store, you have to express that you are there to make the grocer earn money and not to sell a product ... (n:5)</p> <p>When you explain the campaigns to the customer and tell what s/he will earn from that, s/he will understand that you show them the ways to earn money and build up trust in you, then s/he will start saying OK for whatever you tell him (n.5)</p> <p>...The grocers look after their interests, so do the salespersons ... The better a balance you strike between both interests, the better the result will be ... (n:7)</p> <p>I think the customers lose confidence if you don't protect their interests ... For example, we explain them the campaigns that will be to their benefits...This favours the benefits of the customers(no:8)</p>
Professionalism	Being knowledgeable; hide emotions; avoid taking negative conditions personal; solve problems	<p>...there are some customers who pull a long face ... I chat and cheer them up ... Especially when the prices are increased, as they make a loss they stir trouble up ... But I overcome it ... (n.2)</p> <p>... the salespersons should not comment on something that they have no idea, and they should always find a compromise ... salespersons shouldn't act as if they knew it all about the business...furthermore....although we sometimes have a quarrel, I stand behind my job ... I don't take negative conditions personal, I mean I don't take offense ... (no:4)</p> <p>...Especially one has to know the profit margin of the products customers sell, their circulation and also explain the details of a campaign if any ... (n:5)</p> <p>If one any trouble in her/his private life, s/he has to forget it at that moment. ...because s/he has to represent company ... (no:7)</p> <p>...Trust builds up in time, they trust you if you visit them regularly ... For example if you visit them regularly and continuously, then they know at what time you will arrive and arrange the money accordingly ... we should be organized ...(n:8)</p>

Sincerity	Show interest, behaving sincerely, being friendly	<i>...Sincerity is important ... in addition to that, honesty and faith are also important ... customers trust salespersons they have good relations with and who are cheerful ... (n:2)</i>
		<i>...Three aspects are important in a relationship: trust, sincerity, dialogue ... (n:3)</i>
		<i>Customers expect that we ask how they're doing ... they don't want to establish only a business relationship and they want to see us also in private life ... they expect us to pay attention to what they say... They expect us to give ear to their problems ... if they have a problem with their spouses the previous night, they want to tell it to you and relax ... If you show interest in the customers in this way, they will put you in a different position ... They feel close to you and trust you if you guide them to solve their problems ... (n:5)</i>
		<i>... One shouldn't talk about only business with the customers and ask who they are doing.. talk about their families and your own family... (n:6)</i>
		<i>...you should smile at the customers..(n:7)</i>
		<i>...You should be sincere with the customers...(n:8)</i>
Ethical Conduct	Being benevolent; respectful, and possess humanitarian values	<p><i>...this relationship should be considered as a human relationship... for example, I consider the salesperson in a market as a human being first, not a market. When viewed from this perspective, your relationship will improve further... (n:6)</i></p> <p><i>...One has to be respectful and always positive to the customers ... (n:7)</i></p>

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The data of this study exploring the dimensions of customer trust in salespersons was obtained from the face-to-face interviews held with the customers and salespersons. The findings show the main dimensions of trust, while also clarify if there is any difference between the perceptions of customers and salespersons relating to the trust in salespersons. Customers and salespersons describe *honesty, professionalism, ethical conduct* and *customer orientation* as the main dimensions of trust. In addition to these dimensions, salespersons also defined *sincerity* as another dimension that enables customers to trust in salespersons. The fact that both parties had similar views about trust in salespersons increased the reliability of the findings to find an answer to the research question. Salespersons explained the contents of the dimensions via richer anecdotes than the ones told by customers. This was found to be associated with the fact that the salespersons had diversified experiences, as they knew a great number of customers.

The findings show that *professionalism* and *personal traits* of salespersons are jointly important to build up trust. This result also clarifies the characteristics of a reliable salesperson as perceived both by the customers and salespersons. Honesty, professionalism, ethical conduct, customer orientation and sincerity also support the findings of some studies such as Mangindaan and Hendriana (2013): salespersons' knowledge and interaction with customers; Swan et al. (1988): competent, customer oriented, dependable, honest, likeable; Guenzi and Georges (2010): salesperson's customer orientation and expertise; Sirdeshmukh, et al. (2002): operational competence, operational benevolence, and problem-solving orientation dimensions; Andaleeb and Anwar (1996): expertise, intentions and likability. Cheron et al. (2009) stated in their study that the importance of the dimensions of trust in salespersons such as power of salespersons and frequency of informal contacts varied by different countries.

Another interesting finding of this research is that both hem customers and salespersons stated that customers also trusted the firm when they had trust in the salesperson. Particularly, salespersons involved in the study had stronger perceptions of this matter compared to the customers because majority of the salespersons thought that the customers also trusted the firm when they had trust in them. This perception shows that the salespersons internalized the mission to represent the firm and believe that they carry out the relationship management for and on behalf of the firm during a sales process. Therefore, knowledge, skills and performance of candidates relating to the relationship management should be taken into account as a significant human resources policy during their selection for sales positions, their training and performance appraisals. Guenzi and Georges (2010) emphasized the importance of these aspects in the selection and training of salespersons that is the critical staff. Moreover, these scholars also noted that the behavioural performance of salespersons should be evaluated and rewarded as a relationship management performance indicator such as customer retention.

The findings of this research that was conducted on a small sample could be explanatory to a limited extent considering all the dynamics of the customer-salesperson relationship. However, this study might have an original contribution as it draw attention to the similar perceptions of customers and salespersons regarding the trust in salespersons. Furthermore, it is also possible to find some hints for the future studies. Particularly in the light of the findings showing that the salespersons are important factors of the customer-firm relationship, it might be interesting to associate this representation role with some of the organizational theories. For example, questions such as "Does trust in salespersons contribute to strengthening the social capital of firm?; " Is the representation of the firm by the salespersons a topic of stewardship or agent theory?" might be attractive as research questions. Undoubtedly, such major questions require a grounded theory study. Therefore, it should be emphasized that there is a need for more qualitative methods for the future studies to be performed in the field of marketing behaviour. Effective use of these methods would provide original contributions to this field.

In conclusion, a sensitive human phenomenon such as trust has different contents in different types of relationship, which further complicates trust in business relationships. For that reason, there is still a need for discovering the perceptions of the meaning and dimensions of trust and qualitative studies are the potentially rich sources of data for this phenomenon. It is thought that the findings of such studies that would offer a thorough understanding of the customer-salesperson relationship, which is theoretically an example of interpersonal trust relationship, will also have practical implications. Businesses can use these findings in developing certain projections for their relation management and marketing behaviour.

6. REFERENCES

- [1] Andaleeb, S.S. and Anwar, S.F. 1996. "Factors influencing customer trust in salespersons in a developing country", *Journal of International Marketing*, 4(4), 35-52.

- [2] Andersen, P.H. and Kumar, R. 2006. “Emotions, trust and relationship development in business relationships: A conceptual model for buyer–seller dyads”, *Industrial Marketing Management*, 35(4), 522-535.
- [3] Chéron, E. Hallegatte, D. Takahashi, I., Hamaoka, Y., Oh, C. “Antecedents, Consequences, and Mediating Roles of Trust in Relationships between Buyers and Suppliers: A Comparison among North America, Japan, and South Korea”, *Sophia International Review*, 31, 1-28
- [4] Doney, M. P. and Cannon, J.P. 1997. “An examination of the nature of trust in buyer-seller relationships”, *Journal of Marketing*, 61(2), 35-51.
- [5] Ertong, G. 2011. Sağlık sisteminde hekim hasta ilişkisi ve güven unsuru” (The patient physician relationship in health system and trust), PhD thesis, Ankara Üniversitesi SBE
- [6] Guenzi, P. and Georges, L. 2010. “Interpersonal trust in commercial relationships-antecedents and consequences of customer trust in the salesperson”, *European Journal of Marketing*, 44(1-2), 114-138.
- [7] Kennedy, M.S., Ferrell, L.K., LeClair, D.T. 2001. “Consumers' trust of salesperson and manufacturer: An empirical study”, *Journal of Business Research*, 51, 73-86
- [8] Mangindaan, B.M.C and Hendriana, E. 2013. “Creating Customer Trust through Customer Relationship Management in SMEs”, International Conference on Business, Economics, and Accounting, 20 – 23 March, Bangkok – Thailand
- [9] Mishra, A. K. (1996). Organizational responses to crisis: The centrality of trust. In R. Kramer, & T. Tyler (Eds.), *Trust in organizations*, Thousand Oaks: Sage
- [10] Rousseau, D., Sitkin, M., Burt, S.B., Camerer, C. 1998. “Not so different after all: A cross-discipline view of trust”. *Academy of Management Review*, 23, 393-405.
- [11] Sirdeshmukh, D., Singh, J., Sabol, B. 2002. “Consumer Trust, Value, and Loyalty in Relational Exchanges”, *Journal of Marketing*, 66(2), 15-37
- [12] Swan J.E. and Nolan J.J. 1985. “Gaining customer trust: a conceptual guide for the salesperson”, *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management*, 5(2), 39-48.
- [13] Swan, J.E., Trawick, F., Rink, D., Roberts, J. 1988. “Measuring dimensions of purchaser trust of industrial salespeople”, *The Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management*, 8(1), 1-9.
- [14] Swan, J.E., Bowers, M.R. Richardson, L.D. 1999. “Customer trust in the salesperson: An integrative review and meta-analysis of the empirical literature”, *Journal of Business Research* 44, 93–107
- [15] Tsai, M., Chin, C., Chen, C. 2010. “The effect of trust belief and salesperson’s expertise on consumer’s intention to purchase nutraceuticals: Applying the theory of reasoned action”, *Social Behavior and Personality*, 38(2), 273-288.
- [16] Young, L. and Albaum, G. 2003. “Measurement of Trust in Salesperson–Customer Relationships in Direct Selling”, 23(3), 253-269
- [17] Zabkar, V. and Brencic, M.M. 2004. “Values, trust, and commitment in business-to-business relationships-a comparison of two former Yugoslav markets”, *International Marketing Review*, 21(2), 202-215.