

# THE EFFECT OF INDIVIDUAL MARKET ORIENTATION ON SALES PERFORMANCE: AN INTEGRATED FRAMEWORK FOR ASSESSING THE ROLE OF FORMAL AND INFORMAL COMMUNICATIONS

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To gain competitive advantages, companies expect their sales forces to execute selling strategies consistent with their market-oriented culture. Drawing on understandings of market orientation, organizational communication, and role theory, the author develops an integrated framework demonstrating the performance impact of individual market orientation (IMO) through formal and informal communications. This article also considers the moderating effects of role ambiguity and role conflict in the IMO–performance relationship. Five propositions are developed to bring new insights to these complex and important relationships and to encourage future research into the nature of frontline communication in the implementation of market orientation.

Market orientation (MO), also known as organizational culture, provides norms that guide a firm's marketing implementation process in order to effectively create superior customer value and continually respond to market needs (Narver and Slater 1990; Slater and Narver 1995). In the past two decades, research in this area has made considerable contributions to the conceptualization of MO (Kohli and Jaworski 1990), its measurement (Deshpandé and Farley 1998; Kohli, Jaworski, and Kumar 1993), its impact on organizational performance and overall business strategies (Haugland, Myrtveit, and Nygaard 2007; Kirca, Jayachandran, and Bearden 2005), and its impact on a firm's relations with stakeholders (Ferrell et al. 2010). However, although prior research has greatly advanced understanding of MO antecedents and performance outcomes, there are important voids in the literature.

With regard to the underlying mechanisms that link MO and organizational performance, research has unveiled several mediators: organizational innovativeness (Im and Workman 2004; Ledwith and O'Dwyer 2009), organizational learning (Gebhardt, Carpenter, and Sherry 2006; Hult, Ketchen, and Slater 2005), operational efficiency (Chang et al. 1999), and relationship commitment (Taylor et al. 2008). A successful MO requires an effective information dissemination process by which a market-oriented culture is transferred and

innovative ideas in response to changes in customer needs are communicated (Homburg, Krohmer, and Workman 2004; Homburg and Pflesser 2000). However, prior research has not thoroughly examined the mediating role of communications in MO implementation. Importantly, frontline employees, such as salespeople, play a critical role in this process because of their privilege of interacting with customers. They learn constantly from the marketplace, and communicate the received information about the firm's offerings throughout the organization to keep pace with customers' changing needs. A combination of formal and informal communications is advantageous to salespeople to maximize the quality and quantity of the market information (Maltz and Kohli 1996). A market-oriented salesperson, therefore, should capitalize on different forms of communication (i.e., formal and informal) to exchange information between customers and the specialists from other functions inside the firm in order to satisfy customer needs and increase customer retention (e.g., Reid, Pullins, and Plank 2002). Scholars in organizational communications have shown that effective communications ensure information adequacy as well as information exchanges within the organization and increase organizational performance (Snyder and Morris 1984), but there has been little research addressing how a market-oriented salesperson can exploit different communication channels, which in turn influences sales performance.

The objectives of this article are threefold. First, this article will propose an integrative framework to explain how salespeople's individual MO (IMO) affects sales

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performance through different forms of communications. IMO is defined as an organizational member's practice of integrating customer preferences, competitor intelligence, and product knowledge into the process of creating and delivering superior value to customers (Lam, Kraus, and Ahearne 2010, P62.). Second, this article will investigate potential moderating effects of role perceptions (i.e., role conflict and role ambiguity) that may arise from a salesperson's boundary position on the IMO–performance relationship. The third and final objective of this article is to add to the MO literature by emphasizing the importance of MO at the individual-level.

For a firm to be truly market-oriented, employees must implement its MO strategy and customers must realize its market-focused value. Salespeople's behaviors and attitudes directly affect customers' perceptions of the firm's value delivery. Given the importance of MO to the marketing discipline, there is a need for greater research on the effects of salespeople's IMO on business performance. However, MO implementation is a complex information generation and dissemination process. Problems with role perception, such as role ambiguity and role conflict resulting from boundary spanning positions, are likely to moderate the IMO–performance relationship (e.g., Hollet-Haudebert, Mulki and Fournier 2011; Noble 2008; Singh and Rhoads 1991). A salesperson who experiences conflicting views brought on by lack of information or differences in expectations may try to obtain more information by exploiting different communication channels (Kahn et al. 1964) to perform the sales tasks adequately.

This article contributes to the research on and practice of MO in several ways. Research has identified the importance of formal communications in the generation and dissemination of market information (Kohli and Jaworski 1990; Slater and Narver 1995); however, the mediating role of formal and informal communications in MO implementation has not been thoroughly studied. According to communication theory (Johnson et al. 1994), formal communication is viewed as communication that follows the organizational structure and is contained in formal directives. Informal communication is an interpersonal communication, such as a work-related discussion with co-workers, which does not follow the organizational structure. This article contributes to the field of MO by considering the effects of both formal and informal communications

simultaneously on salespeople's IMO-performance relationship and considering whether sales performance may differ between formal and informal communications.

Research suggests that high organizational MO reduces role ambiguity (Siguaw, Brown, and Widing 1994), but little is known about the effects of role perceptions on relationships between IMO, communications, and sales outcomes. This article will contribute to the field by investigating the moderating effects of role perceptions, as an understanding of the functional or dysfunctional effects of role perceptions on sales performance will help to facilitate the MO process.

Research that relates MO to overall business strategy and firm-level performance has typically used the organization as the unit of analysis, and it is centered on implementing MO strategies, including developing MO culture, collecting and disseminating market information to employees, and coordinating cross-functional connectedness within the firm (Jaworski and Kohli 1993; Kohli and Jaworski 1990; Kumar et al. 2011). The unit of analysis in this article, however, is the individual. This article will extend the emerging research on MO implementation on the front lines by emphasizing the importance of examining the impact of MO at a salesperson level (Taylor et al. 2008; Wang and Miao 2015).

In the next section, the article begins with a literature review that gives an overview of current research in MO, the formality of communication, and the concepts of role ambiguity and role conflict. This section is followed by a demonstration of a conceptual model leading to several research propositions. The article ends with an outline of theoretical and managerial implications and future research directions.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Market Orientation (MO) and Individual Market Orientation (IMO)

Since 1990, MO has been a research priority for the Marketing Science Institute (Swartz 1990). Two conceptualizations of MO can be distinguished: behavioral and cultural (Griffiths and Grover 1998; Homburg and Pflesser 2000). The behavioral conceptualization describes MO as a set of corporate activities, such as generating market intelligence pertaining to current and future customer needs, disseminating market intelligence across departments, and responding to the

intelligence disseminated (Jaworski and Kohli 1993, p.54). The cultural conceptualization describes MO as an organizational culture that most effectively and efficiently creates necessary behaviors for the creation of superior value for buyers and thus continuous superior performance for the business (Narver and Slater 1990, p.21). Narver and Slater (1990) suggest that MO should consist of three behavioral components: customer orientation, competitor orientation, and interfunctional coordination. The three components encompass the activities of market information acquisition and dissemination and the coordinated creation of customer value. More recently, Deshpandé and Farley (1998, p. 226) synthesized both these conceptualizations to define MO as a set of cross-functional processes and activities directed at creating and satisfying customers through continuous needs assessment. In summary, marketing scholars see MO as an important factor that guides an organization to achieve superior customer value and gain competitive advantage in the market.

The MO–business performance relationship has received considerable and continued attention in the literature (Hult, Ketchen, and Slater 2005; Slater and Narver 2000). Current interests in organizations' strategic orientations have moved increasingly from the MO–performance relationship to MO implementation, with particular attention to the link between firm-level MO and the attitudes and behaviors of frontline employees in the organization (Jones, Busch, and Dacin 2003; Langerak 2001; Piercy, Harris, and Lane 2002). For example, research has examined the positive link between a firm's MO and its salespeople's customer orientation (Siguaw, Brown, and Widing 1994). An MO emanates from the firm's culture and management's leadership down through the organization, and it is thus rational to expect the sales force to behave in a manner that is consistent with the firm's MO strategy. However, it can be argued that firm-level MO should be conceptualized and empirically tested differently from individual MO because individuals may show as much heterogeneity of MO as firms do (see Yoo and Donthu 2005). The author agrees and proposes that salespeople's practice of coordinating and integrating marketing intelligence should be the primary focus of an MO study so that an effective and meaningful MO culture can be produced. Recently, attention has been paid to sales force MO and its impacts on sales force creativity and relationship commitment with customers, which,

in turn affect performance (Taylor et al., 2008; Wang and Miao 2015), but these studies use firm-level MO for individual-level MO without providing a clear definition of IMO. The author acknowledges that there is a need to reevaluate the conceptualization of IMO at the salesperson level. The investigation of IMO and its effect on sales performance in this article answers this call.

In a related literature stream, researchers posit that salespeople's customer orientation (CO) positively influences customer responses and sales performance (Cross et al. 2007; Franke and Park 2006; Homburg, Müller, and Klarmann 2011a). Customer-oriented selling is defined as a selling behavior in which salespeople help their customers make purchase decisions that will satisfy customer needs. CO is typically measured at the salesperson level (Saxe and Weitz 1982, p. 344). In a recent study, Homburg, Müller, and Klarmann (2011b) provide strong support for an inverted-U shape relationship between salespeople's CO and sales performance. In testing the performance impact of CO in a service setting, Brown et al. (2002) defined CO as an employee's tendency or predisposition to meet customer needs in an on-the-job context. They found that CO is composed of two dimensions: need and enjoyment. The former refers to salespeople's beliefs about their ability to satisfy customer needs; the latter completes Saxe and Weitz (1982)'s view and refers to the degree to which interacting with customers is inherently enjoyable.

Both IMO and CO are individual-level constructs that refer to salespeople's practice of marketing concept to pursue a long-term goal of satisfying customer needs. According to Lam, Kraus, and Ahearne (2010, p. 62), salespeople's IMO encompasses three types of within-firm learning: customer orientation, competitor orientation, and product orientation. More specifically, IMO includes salespeople's connections with various parties (e.g., expert peers) within the firm for interfunctional coordination in order to create superior value to deliver to target customers. Lam, Kraus, and Adhearne (2010) suggest that there are significant variations in IMO across salespeople, and these differences are a result of social learning processes that take place across different levels in an organization. In contrast, CO mainly focuses on salespeople's interactions with customers. Two underlying factors in CO are identified by Saxe and Weitz (1982): relations and ability to help. The former indicates the degree to which the customer–salesperson relationship is cooperative and long-term

and the latter indicates salespeople's ability to help their customers satisfy their needs. In other words, CO is viewed as salespeople's voluntary tendencies and sense of commitment that directs their selling approach to understand and meet customers' needs for long-term customer satisfaction. Both, IMO and CO call for an integrated and organization-wide method by which selling activities are directed toward providing customer satisfaction and keeping pace with the market, and thus, there should be a strong correlation between IMO and CO. This research area may be potentially explored and addressed in future studies.

Table 1 summarizes the important studies that examine the MO–performance relationship and related mediators. In terms of the underlying process, research has revealed several mediators in the relationship between MO and organizational performance: organizational innovativeness, organizational learning, cost efficiency, and relationship commitment. Many studies have shown that market-oriented firms are more likely to generate innovative ideas in their marketing activities, resulting in better business performance (Im and Workman 2004; Kirca, Jayachandran, and Bearden 2005). Some researchers posit that market-oriented firms can achieve maximum business performance through organizational learning (Gebhardt, Carpenter, and Sherry 2006; Hult, Ketchen, and Slater 2005; Slater and Narver 1995). In the automobile industry, Chang et al. (1999) found that a market-oriented car dealer can improve business performance through efficient operations, such as eliminating substantial administrative and processing expenses. Taylor et al. (2008) found that a sales engineer who possesses intelligence generation, CO, and competitor orientation can improve the business performance through his or her relationship commitment with customers.

The role of communications in MO implementation has received surprisingly little academic research attention. More important, salespeople play an important role in this MO implementation because of their direct interactions with customers. To respond to changes in customers' needs, salespeople must learn not only from regular meetings imposed by the formal organizational structure but also from expert peers with whom they interact frequently and informally. According to Kohli and Jaworski (1990), market intelligence generation and dissemination processes take place through various formal (e.g., meetings, analysis of sales reports), and informal (e.g., informal discussions with trade partners)

communication channels. Kohli and Jaworski (1990, p. 5) highlight the importance of both communication channels in MO implementation by noting that “A formal intelligence dissemination procedure is obviously important, but the discussion with managers indicated that informal ‘hall talk’ is an extremely powerful tool for keeping employees tuned to customers and their needs.” Unfortunately, at this point little academic attention has been paid to the mediating effects of communications between salespeople's IMO and sales performance.

### Formal and Informal Communications

The formality of communication carries a considerable weight in diffusing market information within organizations (Bouty 2000; Mohr and Nevin 1990; Reagans and McEvily 2003). The formal–informal dimension of information dissemination reflects an organization's preferences about the formal structure and involves a continuum mechanistic process (Johnson et al. 1994; McPhee 1985). Table 2 briefly outlines the developments of formal and informal communications in organizational communication research in order to provide a more comprehensive view of this dimension. According to classical theory, Weber (1947) views formal channels of communication as the most influential mechanism facilitating the information dissemination process among communication units. In contrast, human relations theorists argue that employees' needs for social relations bolster the significant function of informal channels of communication in organizations (Roethlisberger and Dickson 1939). This proposition is central to social network research. Common to both themes is the assertion that effective organizational communication positively influences organizational performance because it lubricates the entire information system, which includes adequacy of information, information exchange, supervisory communication, and feedback (e.g., Snyder and Morris 1984).

Early research found that managers thrive on informal and personal communications (Mintzberg 1980), but make little use of formal information because personal sources are considered to be more insightful and provide richer information about certain problems (Daft and Lengel 1984). Moorman's (1995) study argued that informal channels provide better options than formal channels for diffusing information, particularly when organizational members seek conflict

**Table 1**  
**Research Studies of the Mediating Effects in the Relationship Between MO and Business Performance**

<b>Mediators</b>	<b>Author (Year)</b>	<b>Findings</b>	<b>Empirical Basis</b>	<b>Performance Outcomes</b>	<b>Unit of Analysis</b>
<b>Organizational Innovation</b>	Han, Kim, and Srivastava (1998)	Technical and administrative innovations mediate the effect of MO on performance.	134 senior executives in the financial industry	Net income growth and return on investment	Firm level
	Matear et al. (2002)	Innovation mediates the effect of MO on performance.	231 business managers or directors in the service industry	Managers' assessment of firm's financial and market performance	Firm level
	Im and Workman (2004)	New product and marketing program creativity mediates the effect of MO on new product performance.	312 project managers or team leaders in high-tech manufacturing companies	Relative subjective measures of market shares, return on investment, profitability, and sales	Firm level
	Mavondo, Chimhanzi, and Stewart (2005)	Innovation and human resource practices mediate the effect of MO on financial performance.	227 CEOs in the high-tech service and hospitality industries	Financial performance, such as market share	Firm level
<b>Organizational Learning</b>	Kirca, Jayachandran, and Bearden (2005)	Innovativeness, customer loyalty, and quality partially mediate the relationship between MO and performance.	Articles published in ABI/INFORM, Science Direct, and Wilson Business before June 2004		Firm level
	Leidwith and O'Dwyer (2009)	Increased MO improves new product performance, which in turn leads to higher levels of organizational success.	106 respondents from small Irish firms operating in a range of manufacturing industries	Financial measures such as return on investment, sales growth, profitability, and market share	Firm level
	Noble, Sinha, and Kumar (2002)	Organizational learning mediates the effect of competition orientation on return on assets.	Top management's letters to stakeholders in retailing public firms	Return on investment and return on sales	Firm level
<b>Operational Efficiency</b>	Hult, Ketchen, and Slater (2005)	Organizational responsiveness mediates the effect of MO on performance.	217 senior executives in public firms	Return on investment, return on assets, and return on equity	Firm level
	Chang et al. (1999)	Market orientation improves operating effectiveness and cost efficiency, which in turn lead to high business performance.	A total of 161 general managers in the automobile industry from Finland and Poland	Measures such as total sales, relative volume, market share, etc.	Firm level

<b>Relationship Commitment</b>	Taylor et al. (2008)	Intelligence generation, customer orientation, and competitor orientation positively lead to relationship commitment, which in turn leads to high business performance.	216 sales engineers in the industrial robot manufacturing and factory automation firms in Korea	Self-report data on business performance	Individual level
<b>Organizational Communication</b>	The current paper	Formal and informal communications mediate the relationship between individual MO and sales performance, and role ambiguity and role conflict have moderating effects on the IMO-performance relationship through formal and informal communications.	Conceptual paper	Individual sales performance	Individual level

**Table 2**  
**Background Theories of Formal and Informal Communications**

Theory	Key Concepts	Strength /Weakness	Key Insights into Formal/Informal Organizational Communications
The Classical Theory: Max Weber's Bureaucracy (1947)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The focus of organizational hierarchy and administrative control on organizational performance</li> <li>The focus on formalized rules and procedures of organizational members' roles and tasks</li> <li>The emphasis of the rationality in accomplishing activities to achieve organizational goals</li> </ul>	<p><b>Strengths:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Precision, clarity, and strict allocation of organizational authority in handling large and complex organizations</li> <li>Guidelines to handle the routine and predictable tasks</li> </ul> <p><b>Weaknesses:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Insensitivity to individual members' social relations in organizational life.</li> <li>Lack of flexibility and creativity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Formal channels of communication are emphasized as the primary, legitimate, and dominant form of organizational communication.</li> <li>Formal communication is directed by the planned structure and used to indicate which organizational members to communicate with and what to communicate about.</li> </ul>
Human Relations Theory: Roethlisberger and Dickson's (1939) Hawthorne Studies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Recognition of the limited mechanistic view of classical theory on organizational communication</li> <li>The focus of social norms that drive individual social needs of organizational members</li> </ul>	<p><b>Strengths:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Assurance of individual social needs of organizational members</li> <li>Results in developing more satisfying and humanizing organizations</li> </ul> <p><b>Weaknesses:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Superficial implementation of human relations theory with the consequence of manipulative management</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The influence of informal and social lines of communication on organizational member satisfaction is recognized.</li> <li>Informal communication is added to the planned structure and extends the structure by creating informal networks.</li> </ul>

resolution or face a turbulent environment. Homburg and Pflesser (2000) recognized the importance of communication in MO diffusion. They regard market-related communication as part of the norms for a market-oriented culture and test the impact of MO norms on market-oriented behaviors.

As Moorman's (1995) study suggests, market information process is a function of the organizational communication system. Organizations incorporate systems, and these systems involve organizational members who generate, disseminate, and act on shared knowledge. In addition, these individuals are subordinate to the system and conform to its corresponding processes, which represent collective ways of acting or learning. Specifically, the author notes that individual learning contributes to organizational learning, but is insufficient for organizational learning. The propositions of the current research are in line with this view. This article proposes that salespeople's information exchanges through formal and informal channels contribute to the organizational wide information dissemination in MO implementation. Given the distinctiveness of formal and informal communications, the author argues that salespeople's IMO through formal and informal channels significantly influences sales performance.

Maltz and Kohli (1996, p.48) explain that the formal information dissemination process is verifiable and nonspontaneous, while informal dissemination represents spontaneous and not verifiable events. Formal communications tend to be credible because of the formality resulting from the organizational structure; however, informal communications provide greater openness for opportunities to exchange sensitive and confidential information. These definitions are consistent with the background theories of the developments of formal and informal communications from Table 2. In this research, *formal communication* refers to an information exchange process that a salesperson conducts with his or her counterparts in a structured, traceable, formal setting (e.g., a meeting or training). *Informal communication* refers to a salesperson's information exchange process in a spontaneous, unstructured, informal setting (e.g., unscheduled or social events). This research focuses on the forms of communications that salespeople choose to exchange information with their counterparts. Thus, formal and informal communications should be distinguished from communication frequency (i.e., the amount of contact) and

communication quality (i.e., timely, accurate, adequate, and complete communication) (e.g., Johlke and Duhan 2001). However, future research may consider these communication dimensions and investigate their potential impacts on the IMO–performance relationship.

Formal and informal communications are two complementary information dissemination processes (Moorman 1995; Maltz and Kohli 1996). When information acquisition and transmission processes are reduced in formal channels, it is logically inferred that information acquisition and transmission will be fostered via informal channels. Maltz and Kohli (1996) further suggest that informal dissemination mechanisms must be complemented by formal mechanisms to maximize the quality of intelligence disseminated across functions. This research simultaneously takes into account both formal and informal communications in salespeople's MO implementation to capture the entire communication mechanism. More precisely, the interests of this article do not lie in how one communication channel affects the other, but in how salespeople's IMO affects sales performance through these two channels.

### Role Ambiguity and Role Conflict

In a boundary-spanning environment, salespeople face diverse role expectations and demands from both inside and outside the organization. According to role theory (Fisher and Gitelson 1983; Kahn et al. 1964; Schuler 1979), role ambiguity and role conflict are two important interrelated constructs (Behrman and Perreault 1984; Miao and Evans 2007; Singh 1998). Role ambiguity occurs when a salesperson perceives a lack of information about which role to perform or knows the expected role but has unclear information about what behavior to perform and the consequences of that behavior. Role conflict occurs when a salesperson is given various directions and finds inconsistency in the behaviors he or she is expected to have. A large body of research has examined the dysfunctional effect of role ambiguity and role conflict, showing that role ambiguity results in lower job security and lower performance (Bettencourt and Brown 2003; Singh 1993) and customer-oriented selling (Flaherty, Dahlstrom, and Skinner 1999) while role conflict accompanies undesirable outcomes, such as job dissatisfaction, stress, and low commitment (Jackson and Schuler 1985). A recent study notes that role conflict



and role ambiguity have an inverted-U relationship with performance (Onyemah 2008). It is likely that role ambiguity and role conflict resulting from the boundary spanning positions may moderate the IMO–performance relationship. When market-oriented salespeople exchange information with different work partners in an effort to respond to customer needs in a manner that is congruent with the desired orientation, they may experience uncertainty resulting from inconsistent information sources or contradictory demands, each of which has tried to influence them to behave in the way each partner desires. Thus, the effects of role ambiguity and role conflict may affect the impact of salespeople’s MO practice on performance. However, little is known about whether role ambiguity and role conflict are functional or dysfunctional in MO implementation.

## THEORETICAL DEVELOPMENT

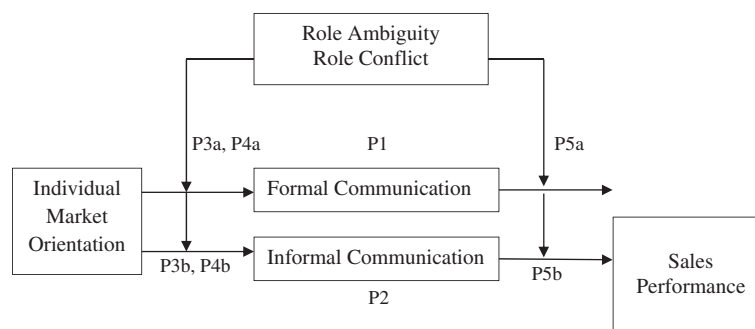
Drawing from theories of organizational communication (Goldhaber 1986; McPhee 1985) as well as MO research (Kohli and Jaworski 1990; Narver and Slater 1990) and role theory (Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman 1970), this article presents an integrated framework demonstrating the performance impact of IMO through formal and informal communications (see Figure 1). This article also considers the moderating effects of role ambiguity and role conflict in the IMO–performance relationship.

## The Mediating Effects of Formal and Informal Communications on the IMO–Performance Relationship

Customer focus and coordinated marketing are two core elements of MO (Kohli and Jaworski 1990). Salespeople’s functions encompass activities related to both elements. For example, market-oriented salespeople engage in activities aimed at increasing customer satisfaction. With a mastery of product knowledge, they are able to identify correct products and services that better meet customers’ needs. To gain competitive advantages, they must be informed about the strengths and weakness of their actual and potential competitors in a given territory. Salespeople’s MO implementation can be viewed as a social learning process by which they learn market information and shared knowledge from available resources and through available channels (e.g., Lam, Kraus, and Ahearne 2010). Market-oriented salespeople must exploit available communication channels (i.e., formal and informal) in order to exchange with others in their organization and master market intelligence related to customers, products, and competitors. With effective formal and informal exchanges, they are able to successfully coordinate marketing resources and deliver the value proposition to their customers.

As more firms come to rely on cross-functional cooperation to support customers’ changing needs, salespeople are encouraged to engage in more communications, particularly informal communication, to obtain information about project development and performance feedback

**Figure 1**  
An Integrated Framework for Assessing Salespeople’s Formal and Informal Communications in the Market Orientation Process



(Pinto and Pinto 1990). The communication literature suggests that formal communication provides security in terms of information accuracy because of its information sources, while informal communication is considered an additional source from which sales reps obtain emotional support because of its accessibility and informality (Johnson et al. 1994; Kraut et al. 1990). Drawing from these insights, this article argues that formal communication providing traceable and credible information renders salespeople knowledgeable about their work and makes them respond in a unified way in front of the client. On the other hand, informal communication on spontaneous and less-monitored occasions helps salespeople verify the accuracy of information and search for immediate support. Market-oriented salespeople are thus able to achieve high performance through formal and informal communications because they gain better market intelligence exchanges aimed at satisfying customers' needs. Thus, two propositions are suggested:

*Proposition 1: Formal communication mediates the positive relationship between salespeople's IMO and sales performance.*

*Proposition 2: Informal communication mediates the positive relationship between salespeople's IMO and sales performance.*

### **The Moderating Effects of Role Ambiguity and Role Conflict on the Relationships Between IMO and Formal and Informal Communications**

The relationship between IMO and formal and informal communications differ in the extent to which a salesperson perceives role ambiguity and role conflict. Research asserts that role ambiguity results from changes in the organizational environment that exceed the employee's span of comprehension (Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman 1970). Such disturbing changes can be caused by complex organizational structures, or rapid growth, or dynamic buyer-seller relationships, which may impose new demands on salespeople and cause confusion from a lack of clarity on the scope and responsibilities of the sales jobs. Research suggests that more communication provides the opportunity to acquire information that may clarify role expectations and reduce role ambiguity (Brashers 2001; Kahn et al. 1964; Schuler 1979). Research has also found that a salesperson's IMO is positively

related to his or her performance (Lam, Kraus, and Ahearne 2010). In other words, a salesperson with a high MO achieves higher performance than a salesperson with a low MO. Formal communications provide high-IMO salespeople with regular and reliable information, and the openness of communication guarantees credibility of the information source. However, informal communications provide high-IMO salespeople with a spontaneous and interactive channel for updating and verifying information received (Kraut et al. 1990). Thus, when experiencing role ambiguity, a market-oriented salesperson is more likely to engage in both formal and informal communications to clarify his or her job expectations. Thus, the following propositions are suggested:

*Proposition 3a: The influence of IMO on formal communication is moderated by role ambiguity, such that the influence is stronger when role ambiguity is high and is weaker when role ambiguity is low.*

*Proposition 3b: The influence of IMO on informal communication is moderated by role ambiguity, such that the influence is stronger when role ambiguity is high and is weaker when role ambiguity is low.*

Role conflict is perceived when various directions are given to a focal person and this focal person perceives inconsistency of expectations from more than one role. When a person reports role conflict, his or her trust in the person or the work environment that imposes the pressure is decreased; he or she communicates less with the person or interacts less with the environment (Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman 1970). In other words, role conflict is likely to lead a salesperson to withdraw from relationships with partners to avoid constant conflicting situations. This means that when a market-oriented salesperson perceives role conflict, his or her intention to communicate formally and informally with counterparts is reduced. Thus, the following propositions are suggested:

*Proposition 4a: The influence of IMO on formal communication is moderated by role conflict, such that the influence is weaker when role conflict is high and is stronger when role conflict is low.*

*Proposition 4b: The influence of IMO on informal communication is moderated by role conflict, such that the influence is weaker when role conflict is high and is stronger when role conflict is low.*

## The Moderating Effects of Role Ambiguity and Role Conflict on the Relationships Between Formal/Informal Communications and Sales Performance

Although there are conceptual reasons to expect that both formal and informal communications are positively associated with sales performance, evidence leads us to propose that the effects of both communication types on sales performance will differ depending on the level of role ambiguity and role conflict. Singh (1998) found that feedback—the availability of information about a salesperson's performance—exacerbates the dysfunctional effect of role ambiguity on job tension but has opposite effects for the relationship between role conflict and job tension. High informational feedback might interfere with a salesperson's learning process and problem-solving abilities when he or she faces considerable uncertainty in performing the work. This finding suggests a dysfunctional aspect of role ambiguity, such that role ambiguity exacerbates the effect of information overload.

Consistent with this line of reasoning, while more communications, through either formal or informal channels, may lead to a greater exposure of market information that results in high sales performance, role ambiguity can dilute this effect. In other words, salespeople's performance may increase because they feel more capable of performing the job with the wealth and availability of information through formal and informal communications, but these positive effects are reduced when they experience role ambiguity because the stress and job tension associated with role ambiguity prevent them from using the information. In addition, role ambiguity can create confusion that runs counter to and discounts the information received through both communication channels.

According to Singh's (1998) study, the availability of information helps salespeople facing role conflict by buffering the negative effects of conflict on job tension. Informational feedback prevents salespeople from being affected by role conflict because they receive enough information that assists them in understanding conflicting demands and aids them in looking for solutions. Salespeople appeared to not experience negative consequences resulting from the stress associated with role conflict. Thus, the positive effects of formal and informal communications on sales

performance are reduced in the presence of role ambiguity, but are not in the presence of role conflict. The following propositions are suggested:

*Proposition 5a: The influence of formal communication on sales performance is moderated by role ambiguity, such that the influence is weaker when role ambiguity is high and is stronger when role ambiguity is low.*

*Proposition 5b: The influence of informal communication on sales performance is moderated by role ambiguity, such that the influence is weaker when role ambiguity is high and is stronger when role ambiguity is low.*

## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

MO implementation comprises a set of activities and behaviors necessary to realize the marketing concept (Jaworski and Kohli 1993), and salespeople hold a critical position in MO implementation. The proposed framework of this article demonstrates how salespeople's IMO affects sales performance through formal and informal communications and provides insights for managers about how role ambiguity and role conflict influence this relationship.

### The Performance Impact of IMO: The Role of Communications

To gain competitive advantages, it is normal for a firm to expect its sales force to execute selling strategies consistent with its market-oriented culture. However, little is known about how MO at the individual level drives sales outcomes through different communication channels. Formal and informal communications are both available under the organizational structure. This article is among the first to consider simultaneously the two communication types in MO implementation. Formal communication provides salespeople with a reliable and traceable platform, while informal communication provides them with a channel that allows them to express feelings that facilitate attitudinal sales effectiveness. In other words, informal channels satisfy a basic need for social support and help employees operate well with their partners creating mutual trust and open communication that promotes MO implementation (Guzzo and Shea 1992; Sundstrom, De Meuse, and Futrell 1990).

Market orientation is a prerequisite for firms to gain competitive advantages (Day 1994), and Gebhardt, Carpenter, and Sherry (2006) suggest that an MO culture requires a firm to create shared market understandings throughout the organization by sending cross-functional selling teams into the market to meet with customers, channels, and influencers. These exchanges then must be consolidated in a shared understanding of the market. To effectively use these exchanges to create an MO culture thus requires both communications when the need for information generation and dissemination is strong.

Recently, the importance of formal and informal communications has received significant attention from business managers. Since 2002, the IBM Institute for Knowledge-Based Organizations has conducted a number of knowledge-sharing studies to better understand how informal communications from communication networks influence employees to distribute information (Lesser and Prusak 2004). Eight years later, McDermott and Archibald (2010) have suggested incorporating the informal networking communities that were once entirely unofficial into a company's formal management structure. In practice, companies like Fluor and Pfizer have tried to do just this by formalizing subgroup informal networks and supervising informal exchanges by assigning goals and giving clear executive supervision. The proposed integrated framework resonates with these studies and practice and suggests incorporating both formal and informal communications when companies are implementing MO culture.

### **The Effects of Role Ambiguity and Role Conflict Cannot Be Underrated in the Transformation of MO Culture**

This article identifies role ambiguity and role conflict as moderators in the IMO–performance relationship. According to the service marketing literature, frontline employees such as salespeople in boundary spanning positions are at higher risk of experiencing role ambiguity and role conflict (Bettencourt and Brown 2003). Research argues that work tensions may emerge from misperceived or conflicting expectations in the presence of formal exchanges through official channels and informal exchanges through non-routine channels (Bagozzi 1978). Singh (1998) proposes that the effect of role clarification is likely to vary with a person's coping

resources and calls for more research on interactional effects with role stressors on job outcomes.

Drawing from these insights, this article captures the effects of role ambiguity and role conflict in two parts of interactions in IMO–performance relationships. The proposed framework provides new insights that extend conventional understanding on the functional and dysfunctional influences of role ambiguity and role conflict. Previous work has shown that role ambiguity and role conflict lead to dysfunctional outcomes (e.g., dissatisfaction, job tension) that cause psychological withdrawal from the job (Singh, Goolsby, and Rhoads 1994). It would seem intuitive that managers should increase role clarification and reduce both role ambiguity and role conflict. Indeed, sales force researchers have suggested adopting marketing controls to guide salespeople and prevent negative consequences from role ambiguity and conflict (Cravens et al. 2004). However, this article reveals that role ambiguity and conflict have differential impacts on the implementation of MO.

In the interaction between role ambiguity and IMO on formal and informal communications, role ambiguity can be functional because it promotes the use of formal and informal communications. A market-oriented salesperson with high role ambiguity is likely to initiate more interactions through formal and informal communications to reduce his or her anxiety caused by the absence of the necessary information to carry out the job (Schuler 1979). However, in the interaction between role conflict and IMO on formal and informal communications, role conflict is dysfunctional because the stress and tension associated with conflicting demands reduce the salesperson's trust with work partners, and, in turn, the salesperson is likely to engage in fewer communications.

This article also argues that in the interaction between role ambiguity and formal and informal communications on sales performance, role ambiguity exerts dysfunctional effects on the relationships between the two communication types and sales performance. High levels of formal and informal communications may generate a great amount of information that interferes with salespeople's learning processes or problem-solving abilities when they are facing high role ambiguity (Singh 1998). However, with informational feedback generated by high levels of communications, salespeople can avoid the negative consequences associated with role conflict.

This article suggests that formal and informal communications should be encouraged in the transformation

of MO culture. When using a mix of both communications, managers should not underrate role ambiguity and role conflict that exert positive and negative moderating effects on the IMO–performance relationship. Specifically, if the firm’s market-oriented strategy is more urgent than increasing sales performance (e.g., product or service development is at an early introduction stage), managers may decide not to reduce role ambiguity immediately when increasing information flows.

## FUTURE RESEARCH

Several avenues for future research arise from this work. First, this article attempts to lay an integrated framework for future MO research at the individual level and shapes a stream of new research on the roles of formal and informal communications in sales effectiveness. Empirical work may follow to test the proposed framework and will allow scholars to examine the nature of the mediating and moderating effects in salespeople’s MO implementation process. For example, the interdependence or interaction of both formal and informal communications and its impact on the IMO–performance relationship can be estimated in an empirical model. These empirical studies can further test the theory and provide additional insights into its appropriateness.

Second, future research should explore additional moderators that may influence the IMO–performance relationship. Variables such as communication quality and communication frequency may have an impact on salespeople’s MO implementation. For example, focusing on achieving high-quality communication and high levels of communication frequency is likely to be time consuming and delay decision making, in turn influencing sales performance (e.g., Maltz and Kohli 1996). Third, individuals may show as much heterogeneity of MO as firms do. When applied to individual behaviors, an ecological fallacy would be committed where the firm-level concept is interpreted as if it is applied to individuals (Yoo and Donthu 2005). Future research should take this into account in operationalizing IMO and investigate this ecological fallacy in empirical work. The author also encourages further research to consider individual factors (e.g., motivation or personal traits) that may influence the IMO–performance relationship.

Lastly, this article focuses on sales performance as the sales outcome of the MO implementation process, but market information processing is fundamentally an interpersonal process that involves commitment

among organizational members (Moorman 1995). Communication is an exchange process and constitutes a social interaction that not only relates to information exchanges but also includes emotional exchanges, such as affection, antagonism, dependency, and support for a fellow member (Haythornthwaite and Wellman 1998; Homans 1958). Future research can examine the proposed model with job satisfaction as another sales outcome. By taking job satisfaction into account, the influences of formal and informal communications in MO implementation would be more pronounced.

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