Consistency or Complementarity? Optimizing Multi-Channel Selling Based on Online Click-Through Data

Essi Pöyry
Aalto University
essi.poyry@aalto.fi

Petri Parvinen
Aalto University
petri.parvinen@aalto.fi

Richard G. McFarland
West Virginia University
rmcfarland@mail.wsu.edu

Abstract

Adaptive selling has been seen to increase sales performance and influence tactics provide means to exercise it. However, adaptive selling has only been studied in single-channel contexts. Multi-channel contexts offer particular opportunities to improve adaptive selling by providing information about customers’ information processing styles in one channel that can be fed into another channel. In a field experiment, 138 customers were first approached by email and then by phone by professional salespeople of a financial services provider. Based on online click-through data about each customer’s proneness to a specific influence tactic, the salespeople used either a consistent or a complementary tactic in the phone call. Contrary to general belief, the results indicate that the use of complementary influence tactics in different channels outperforms the use of consistent influence tactics. The study thus contests the generally accepted notion of consistency in marketing communications and provides evidence of channel-specificity of persuasive messages.

1. Introduction

Adaptive selling is defined as “the practice of altering sales behaviors during customer interactions based on perceived information about the nature of the selling situation” [42]. As a sales work approach, it has been documented to improve a salesperson’s job satisfaction [18], customer’s satisfaction with the salesperson and with the product [36], and, ultimately, sales performance [1, 6, 18, 21]. A central tenet of adaptive selling is that accurate and detailed customer information enables influential adaptive selling behaviors. These behaviors can be identified as effective use of seller influence tactics, and the better the salespeople are at identifying differences between buyers, the better they are able to adapt and use the most effective influence tactics with those buyers [29]. Traditionally, customer information acquisition has been based on personal observations by salespeople, but customer relationship management and sales force automation systems have been seen to provide an opportunity to enhance the premises for adaptive selling [1, 20, 35].

As firms increasingly use multiple channels in their sales work, there is a clear need to seamlessly integrate information about buyers and their behaviors between the channels. Moreover, in order to be able to practice adaptive selling in multi-channel environments, customer information is central. However, research lacks evidence on how customers’ ways of processing information and reacting to seller’s influence attempts vary across channels.

Theoretically, information processing across channels offers contradictory perspectives. Marketing literature has confirmed that, within one channel, consumers differ in their ways of responding to influence attempts [4, 23, 29]. Elaboration likelihood model (ELM), on the other hand, suggests that persuasive messages that complement a person’s existing attitude base (mismatching attitudes and arguments) have a particularly strong effect on attitude change [16, 33, 27]. When considering the effect of different channels on persuasion, media richness literature suggests that different kinds of tasks and messages should be matched with the ‘richness’ of the media [12] while integrated marketing communications literature argues that differentiating messages in different channels should not come at the expense of having “one look, one voice” [15, 34].

As we can see, research provides conflicting arguments on whether or not sellers should seek consistency in their influence attempts. Hence, the purpose of this research is to study sales performance when salespeople adapt to potential customers in a personal selling situation using information about their information processing style retrieved from an electronic channel. To do this, a field experiment was conducted in which salespeople of a financial service provider practiced adaptive selling in telesales by using information about their prospect customers’ proneness to an influence tactic acquired from email click-through data. The influence tactics used in the sales calls were either consistent or inconsistent (i.e., complementary) with the influence tactic which a prospect customer had clicked in the email. For each sales call, we measured call outcome and the...
salesperson’s satisfaction with the sales call and the influence attempt.

The objective of this paper is to study how using prior knowledge on customers’ responses to influence tactics influences persuasion attempts in other channels and in later stages in the sales process. The results have several theoretical implications. First of all, we contribute to the ELM literature by describing attitude change in a multiphase attitude change process. We also provide new clarifying knowledge on channel-specificity of persuasive messages, which contributes both to psychology and sales literatures. For managers, the study provides a method to practice adaptive selling in multi-channel environments, which utilizes the opportunities of tracking and analyzing customers’ click-through data.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 Technology-aided adaptive selling

The concept of adaptive selling has been widely studied in the personal selling and sales management literature and its significance has been strongly recognized [42, 18, 39]. Salespeople’s adaptive selling behaviors are characterized by the study and observation of individual customers, preparation of sales presentations according to their specific features and needs, and the alteration of the presentation based on their reactions and responses [39, 42]. The key in adaptive selling is that the salesperson is able to acquire, analyze, and use customer information properly in sales situations [42]. The more accurate information salespeople have about the client, the more capable they are in their adaptive selling behavior [20].

As a personal selling practice, adaptive selling has frequently been attributed with having a positive effect on sales performance [1, 6, 18, 21]. Research has also found other positive outcomes. Adaptive selling behavior increases a salesperson’s job satisfaction [18] and customers’ satisfaction with the sold product and with the salesperson [36]. The positive outcomes are a result of customers perceiving customized sales presentations as more valuable and persuasive because their specific needs and beliefs have been considered [42]. At the same time, customers react differently to different stimuli, which further justifies why the same sales presentation may not be useful with all customers [18, 36]. Finding the most effective stimulus increases the probability of customers conforming to a salesperson’s arguments and suggestions.

Recently, the use of sales technology has appeared as a significant antecedent of successful adaptive selling. For example, Hunter and Perreault [20] found out that a salesperson’s sales technology orientation positively affects the effective use of information in sales work and thereby adaptive selling behaviors. Similarly, Ahearne et al. [1] investigated actual technology usage records and witnessed a positive relationship between salespersons’ IT use and adaptability in sales situations. Rapp, Agnihotri and Forbes [35] saw a particular positive relationship between the use of CRM tools and adaptive selling behaviors. All of these results are in line with the original conceptualization of adaptive selling: the more information salespeople have on customers and the more accurate the information is, the better they are able to adapt to the customers [42]. The main advantage of sales technology in regard to adaptive selling has been seen to be the easy and fast access to detailed customer information. CRM-based account history enables a salesperson to consider, for example, the previously accepted and declined offers and make amendments to his sales presentation accordingly.

Traditionally, adaptive selling practice has been studied and considered in personal, face-to-face sales situations, but technology has brought forth the need and possibility to apply and integrate adaptive selling to other sales channels. Previous literature has studied adaptive selling in call centers [17], online stores [23] and virtual worlds [26]. The studies show that adaptive selling is indeed possible to practice also in other than face-to-face channels but they are challenged by the number and degree of information cues available (e.g., body language) and the possibility to receive and give immediate feedback [17]. Kaptein and Eckles [23] argued that it is possible to detect consumers’ proneness to different influence attempts by tracking their reactions to text-based stimuli online. They found that consumers are heterogeneous in their proneness to different tactics, and, over time and over different product categories, the same customers tended to be consistent in their “persuasion profile”.

Prior research, however, fails to acknowledge how the effectiveness of various influence tactics differs between sales channels. Sales force automation literature has touched upon the multi-channel issue by studying digital information provision to human sales agents [35]. But, as adaptive selling is not only about making changes to sales behaviors based on objective customer demographics (as informed by CRM systems, for example), cross-channel adaptation should also be based on the knowledge about customers’ differential proneness to different persuasion attempts. This perspective, however, is missing from the existing literature.

2.2 Individual differences in responses to influence tactics
Attitude change and persuasion are central questions in sales and marketing: Why do some messages persuade a consumer to change his mind or influence his behavior while some messages do not have this effect? Petty and Cacioppo’s [33] elaboration likelihood model (ELM) is a popular theory about the formation and change of attitudes. According to the model, persuasion can be characterized as the relative operation of either central or peripheral route to persuasion. Attitude change via the central route is likely when individuals possess both the motivation and ability to evaluate message arguments thoughtfully with cognition. On the contrary, attitude change occurs via the peripheral route when individuals use some heuristic or cue as the primary basis of their judgment because they lack the motivation or the ability to consider the message arguments carefully. Affect-based attitudes are also a signature of the peripheral route.

Notable in ELM is the base of the existing attitude and the base of the argument that tries to change the attitude. Research has shown that attitudes based on affect can be more easily changed with a cognitive, rational argument and vice versa [30, 31, 33]. This has been said to be because arguments that match a person’s existing attitude base challenge the adequacy of his previous evaluation and induce counterarguments [7, 30]. Additionally, attitude change has been seen to be particularly strong when the persuasive message complements the new attitude base, leading to a comprehensive pattern of affect and cognition [27].

In line with ELM, previous research by Kelman [33] suggests that changes in attitudes and actions produced by social influence may occur through different processes and that individual differences in processing social influence are the reason why people respond differently to different persuasion attempts. Three influence processes have been identified: internalization, compliance, and identification. Internalization occurs when an individual accepts influence because the content of the induced behavior is intrinsically rewarding. Compliance refers to a process where an individual accepts influence because he hopes to achieve a favorable reaction from another person or group. Identification occurs when an individual accepts influence because he wants to establish a self-defining relationship to another person or a group. Internalization corresponds to Petty and Cacioppo’s [33] central route of persuasion while compliance and identification correspond to the peripheral route.

If elaboration likelihood and influence processes determine why a person is influenced by a specific message, influence tactics provide specific argumentation tools to take the influence processes in action [19, 29]. Influence tactics are defined as communicated influence attempts that an influencer uses in order to gain a desired response from the target [19]. As consumers differ in their proneness to interpersonal influence [4] and different influence tactics have diverse impacts on different buyers [29], a seller needs to recognize the proneness of individual customers to different influence tactics and use those tactics that resonate with each customer. McFarland, Challagalla and Shervani [29] found that six specific tactics influence people in a personal selling context: information exchange, recommendations, threats, promises, ingratiations, and inspirational appeals. As influence tactics base on influence process theory, the researchers argue that information exchange and recommendations operate through internalization, threats and promises through compliance, and ingratiations and inspirational appeals through identification [29]. In the ELM realm, the two former tactics motivate the person to elaborate the message via the central route and the four latter tactics motivate to process the message via the peripheral route.

2.3 Sales communication across different channels

The advantages of multi-channel selling were first recognized over two decades ago [32], and the development of digital sales channels created a boom in interest in this domain. Digital channels enable companies to sell and market their products with no geographical or time-related restrictions and they typically carry lower operating costs. However, ‘offline’ sales channels are still very much in use and often considered necessary in, for example, closing larger deals. Consequently, many companies see different sales channels as complementing each other [37, 45]. In regard to multi-channel selling, prior research has emphasized mainly issues such as the optimal channel mix and channel conflicts [2, 22, 37, 38]. While research focusing specifically on customer responses to different sales approaches in different channels is missing, media richness and integrated marketing communications literatures have analyzed channel specificity from the perspective of persuasive communications.

According to Daft and Lengel [12], media richness refers to the ability of a medium to reproduce the information sent over it. The richness depends on the speed of feedback, number of cues, degree of personalization, and language variety of the medium. The richer the medium, the more complex and more tacit knowledge can be transmitted. Media richness continuum regards face-to-face as the richest medium and the least rich media are formal numeric media such as computer outputs. Electronic media such as emails carry some upsides to static media such as letters but are less rich, i.e. lean, than for example telephone [43]. In general, media richness theory assumes that, for equivocal tasks, the richer
the media, the better task performance is [12]. Empirical evidence however shows that, for clearly defined and controlled tasks, media richness does not necessarily improve decision quality [13, 40] but when considering higher-level goals with longer-term impact, media richness can improve performance through improved relational performance of the actors [43].

In integrated marketing communication (IMC) literature, the notion of cross-channel consistency is a central yet disputed topic. Early research argued that marketing communication should be integrated, which is achieved by aligning all communications in a way that they are as consistent as possible and that an organization and all the messages and signals it sends should have “one voice” or “one personality” [3, 14, 15, 34]. This traditional view on IMC has been defined as the notion and the practice of aligning messages, symbols, procedures and behaviors in order for an organization to communicate with clarity, consistency and continuity within and across formal organizational boundaries [10]. Later, there have been many critical arguments about the lack of conceptual and methodological clarity within the IMC literature [10, 25, 41] and the concept of consistency has been under scrutiny. Indeed, as the IMC literature and examples of IMC often stay on a purely conceptual level, there is little empirical evidence beyond anecdotal examples of what needs to be integrated and how [11]. Christensen, Firat and Torp [10] call for more “flexible integration” that accounts for the changes in the marketplace and the inability of organizations to control all the messages they send out.

Evident in both media richness and IMC literature is that they do not take a direct stance on what kinds of sales and marketing messages are fit to which channel or whether the channel choice per se has an effect on whether a person is persuaded or not. Media richness literature discusses mainly tasks that are performed as a team or as long-term partners, and its application to sales research is scarce. While IMC generally supports the notion that client communication originating from an organization should follow the same personality and voice, the degree of needed consistency remains unsolved. In other words, in multi-channel selling, we do not know whether same or different persuasive messages should be used in different channels.

2.4 Hypotheses

The objective of our study is to study how using prior knowledge on customers’ responses to influence tactics influences persuasion attempts in other channels and in later stages in the sales process. In academic literature, the level of detail in customer knowledge has been seen to improve salespeople’s adaptive selling abilities [20] and our study assumes that besides the knowledge of customer features, knowledge of customer responses to influence tactics influences how well salespeople are able to perform. Kaptein and Eckles [23] found that consumers have varying proneness to different influence tactics and using a ‘wrong’ tactic can even produce negative outcomes. Moreover, the same study revealed that consumers are consistent in their preference to same influence tactics over time and over product categories. This provides reasons to believe that customers react favorably to the use of the same influence tactics they have previously in other channels shown preference to. IMC literature also encourages companies to communicate with consistency to prevail clarity and understanding [15, 34].

However, as the attitude change literature has shown, consumers may be more easily influenced when their existing attitude base is being complemented with a sales strategy that is based on a different route of persuasion. In particular, attitudes that are based on affect may be more easily changed with a strategy that is based on cognition and vice versa [27, 30, 31, 44]. When considering persuasion or attitude change in a multi-channel context, media richness theory encourages communicators to use different media for different kinds of tasks due to their inherent differences to reproduce information [12]. Hence, the strong evidence for the “mismatching effect” and the media richness differences between typical sales channels, such as telephone and email, make us hypothesize the following:

H1: A better sales call outcome will result when an influence tactic for a sales call is complementary to, rather than consistent with, an influence tactic first used in an email message.

H2: A salesperson’s satisfaction with a sales call is greater when an influence tactic for a sales call is complementary to, rather than consistent with, an influence tactic first used in an email message.

3. Methodology

To test customers’ reactions to different influence tactics in different sales channels, we conducted a field experiment with a well-known financial services firm. The firm does not use a brick-and-mortar channel, but it uses both telephone and face-to-face sales channels. In addition, the firm supports an online channel and it frequently communicates to and with its customers via email. The experiment was run in conjunction with two different sales campaigns that promoted 1) pension insurance for small business owners and 2) investment funds for private customers. For the pension insurance campaign, the target customers were selected from a commercial
customer information provider’s database (small business owners, not existing customers) and, for the investment campaign, from the selling company’s own customer database (existing customers who had not bought investment services before). The experiment settings in both campaigns were identical and they consisted of two phases that represent different stages in a sales process: a marketing email promoting the offered service and a subsequent telephone call to remind the customer and ask if she/he was interested in the offer.

The marketing email consisted of a general informative description of the offered service and two different sales arguments that encouraged the customer to click the message. By clicking either link, the customer was forwarded to a website providing more information. The arguments were presented next to each other and their order (which one on the right and which one left) was randomized.

The arguments were designed to represent different influence tactics that were as different from each other as possible. According to McFarland, Challagalla and Shervani [29], recommendations and inspirational appeals influence different kinds of buyers. Recommendations are proposals that convince a customer of the offering’s benefits with clear and logical arguments (central route of persuasion). Inspirational appeals, on the other hand, are proposals that arouse enthusiasm by appealing to the target’s values, ideals and aspirations (peripheral route of persuasion). The operationalization of the arguments was pretested with 41 university students to confirm that they indeed represented the intended influence tactic as described by McFarland, Challagalla and Shervani [29].

In the second phase of the experiment, the selling company made phone calls to the customers using the same influence tactics that were clicked on by prospects in the emails: recommendations or inspirational appeals. Only one tactic was used in each call and the tactics were randomly assigned to the customers. All the five salespeople, who participated in the study, were instructed by the researchers regarding the nature of the arguments with construct definitions and example arguments.

In addition, we controlled for customers, who had not opened the email at all (no response) and who had opened the email but had not clicked either tactic (low response), by making similar sales calls to them as well. According to a MANOVA test, call outcomes of both of the control groups were significantly worse compared to the customers who had clicked either one of the links in the email ($F = 7.856, p < .01$). This was expected. However, no difference between the low and no response groups and the responded customer groups were found when accounting for the used influence tactic ($F = .064, p = .938$). This finding supports the idea that any difference in the call outcomes between the customers who had clicked either one of the links in the email results from their differential proneness to either consistent or complementary influence tactics in different channels. There were no statistically significant differences in the salespersons’ satisfaction with the sales calls when comparing the groups with different response levels.

The research set up resulted in a 4 (customer clicked recommendations/ customer opened email but did not click either tactic/ customer did not open email) x 2 (salesperson used recommendations/ salesperson used inspirational appeals) between-subject factorial design with eight treatment groups. Immediately after each sales call, the salespeople filled in a short questionnaire that included the following questions: “I was well able to use the given influence tactic in the phone call”, “I was very satisfied with the sales call” (scale 1–5: 1 = completely disagree, 5 = completely agree), and “What was the outcome of the sales call?” (1 = no deal, 2 = further negotiations, 3 = deal), which represent the dependent variables of this study. The first two reflective items were used to form a construct “call satisfaction” and the second was a formative measure of the call outcome.

4. Results

Altogether 138 usable sales calls were completed. Table 1 presents the number of completed sales calls by each salesperson and the outcomes of the calls. Two of the salespersons were involved in both of the sales campaigns and hence completed more calls than the other three salespersons.

The hits rate (the share of deals of all the calls, A/A+B+C) of the pension campaign was 6.4% and 17.2% for the investment campaign. Some additional deals were later achieved out of the ‘further negotiations’ cases but they were not included in the analysis as the purpose was to examine customers’ immediate reactions when influence tactics were

employed in a multi-channel sales process. In terms of the positive call outcomes (A or A+B), no statistically significant differences were found between the salespersons. Moreover, gender of neither the salesperson nor the customer had an impact on the outcome of the call.

Table 2 presents the means and standard deviations for call outcomes and salespersons’ satisfaction by each treatment group.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for treatment groups: means (standard deviations)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Clicked influence tactic (A)</th>
<th>Used influence tactic (B)</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Call outcome*</th>
<th>Call satisfaction**</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Recommendation</td>
<td>Recommendation</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>148 (.686)</td>
<td>2.45 (.893)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendation</td>
<td>Inspirational appeal</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>2.00 (.89)</td>
<td>2.84 (.96)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inspirational appeal</td>
<td>Recommendation</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>150 (.84)</td>
<td>2.37 (.793)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inspirational appeal</td>
<td>Inspirational appeal</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>142 (.852)</td>
<td>1.82 (.837)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opened email</td>
<td>Recommendation</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>120 (.332)</td>
<td>2.44 (.398)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opened email</td>
<td>Inspirational appeal</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>125 (.447)</td>
<td>1.84 (.96)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not open email</td>
<td>Recommendation</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>108 (.277)</td>
<td>1.88 (.506)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not open email</td>
<td>Inspirational appeal</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>131 (.602)</td>
<td>2.03 (.798)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: * Measured on a 1-3 scale (1 = no deal, 2 = further negotiations, 3 = deal)  
** Measured with two items on a 1-5 Likert-type scale (1 = completely disagree, 5 = completely agree)

To inspect the effect of using the consistent versus complementary influence tactic in the phone call to what the customer clicked in the email, we excluded the control groups (low and no response to the email) and conducted a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA). The mean scores of the use of consistent and complementary influence tactics are presented in Table 3 and the results of the MANOVA test in Table 4.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics for consistent and complementary treatment groups: means (standard deviations) (low and no response customers excluded)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Influence tactic consistency</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Call outcome</th>
<th>Call satisfaction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Consistent</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>1.45 (.677)</td>
<td>2.15 (.914)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complementary</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>1.78 (.760)</td>
<td>2.58 (.890)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. MANOVA results (low and no response customers excluded)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of variation</th>
<th>Call outcome F-statistic</th>
<th>Call satisfaction F-statistic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interaction (AxB)</td>
<td>4.558*</td>
<td>5.626*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clicked influence tactic (A)</td>
<td>1.912</td>
<td>7.607**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Used influence tactic (B)</td>
<td>1.098</td>
<td>.175</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: * = p < .05, ** = p < .01

As the results show, our hypotheses are supported in that influence tactics in different channels have an interaction effect on sales call outcome (F = 4.558, p < .05) and salesperson’s satisfaction with the sales call (F = 5.626, p < .05) and that influence tactic complementarity resulted in higher average call outcome (M = 1.78, SD = .760) and satisfaction (M = 2.58, SD = .890) than influence tactic consistency (M = 1.45, SD = .677, and M = 2.15, SD = .914, respectively). According to an ANOVA test, the difference was significant for call satisfaction (F = 4.363, p < .05) and close to being significant for call outcome (F = 3.951, p = .05).

5. Discussion

This study advances our knowledge about the use of influence tactics in multi-channel selling. It investigates the performance implications of directing information about customers’ proneness to a given influence tactic in an online channel to a human salesperson who uses the consistent or complimentary influence tactic in a sales phone call.

5.1 Contributions to theory

As the results show, mismatching a customer’s proneness to a specific influence tactic in the sales call with a complementary influence tactic improves sales performance. In other words, the best outcome was obtained when a salesperson used a different tactic that what the customer had responded to in the email. We provide three theoretical reasons for this: argument complementarity in multiphase attitude change, channel-specificity of persuasive messages and inconsistency of individuals’ responses across channels.

Argument complementarity in multiphase attitude change

The results support the assumption that, in a multi-staged decision making process, complementary influence tactics better convince a customer of the benefits of the offering. This supports the ELM model and related findings that attitudes based on cognition can be more easily reinforced with an affective rather than cognitive argument [30, 31, 33, 44]. Indeed, this strategy seems to provide ‘new’ reasons for individuals to believe the influencer’s message as it does not contradict or challenge their existing attitude. The previous research, however, has considered only single-staged tasks with participants whose – usually very strong – attitude base has been pre-defined and the argument has been deliberately matched or mismatched with the existing attitude. Our study contributes to the ELM theory by stating that, in a multi-staged decision making process, a person’s attitude towards a product can be reinforced by providing arguments that are complementary to each other. In other words, when decision making (i.e., attitude change) requires multiple steps, complementary arguments should be used during the different phases of interaction.
The results indicate that different sales channels resonate differently with different influence tactics. Media richness theory categorizes communication channels based on their speed of feedback, number of cues, degree of personalization, and language variety [12, 43]. In our study, the used media were email and telephone that differed on speed of feedback (email: slow; telephone: fast), number of available cues (email: limited visual; telephone: audio), and on degree of personalization (email: impersonal; telephone: personal). There are only few instances in the existing media richness literature that have considered the possibility of different communication channels possessing different persuasive capabilities. As a notable difference, Levin, Hansen and Laveria [28] argue that channels low in media richness, such as blogs, should use rational, cognitive arguments for persuasion because the leanness of the media inhibits them to convey complex, emotionally-laded messages.

This argument is further strengthened by the findings of the present study. We found that the influence tactic that the customer had clicked in the email had a significant main effect on call outcome and salesperson’s satisfaction with the call, and the most effective tactic in the email was the rational ‘recommendations’ tactic. This supports the idea that non-personal, mainly text-based communication channels are limited in their ability to convey emotional arguments such as inspirational appeals. Consequently, we argue that media richness differences between sales and communication channels determine their persuasion premises and their consequent ability to influence through either the central or peripheral route to persuasion [33]. We also urge IMC research to consider these and other similar findings to define the level of consistency needed in sales communications, for instance. Clearly, the use of influence tactics in different channels should not be harmonized.

Inconsistency of individuals’ responses across channels

The results carry theoretical implications also to the study of differences in consumers’ responses to influence tactics and adaptive selling. Notably, as Kaptein and Eckles [23] revealed, consumers are heterogeneous in their proneness to different influence tactics, and, over time and over different product categories, the same customers tended to be consistent in their responses to influence attempts. We found that general persuasion profiling is not sufficient in multi-channel sales. Similarly, adaptive selling literature has assumed that buyers are consistent in their ‘buyer types’ and that salespeople should match the use of influence tactics to the respective buyer types [29]. These types do not seem to be as consistent and universal as previous literature makes one to assume and they may be more context-dependent than previously suggested. Interestingly, our study also showed that complementing influence tactics in different channels improves salespersons’ satisfaction with the sales call, which provides new avenues to study the management of personal selling practices. A new interaction situation in a new channel is a new persuasion challenge for the salesperson, and knowing that a new angle in the presentation increases the probability of a positive outcome is important.

Finally, we support the idea that using CRM and/or SFA tools in tracking customer features improves adaptive selling (and thereby sales performance) in human-to-human sales situations [1, 20, 35]. To this literature, we provide evidence that tracking customers’ proneness to a specific influence tactic can be revealed from their online behavior and the information can be used as a basis for adaptive selling. The ability to tease out and record the responses to influence tactics in different channels enables building and utilizing a more refined picture of customers’ persuasion profiles.

5.2 Managerial implications

During the past years, there has been a tendency to analyze customer behavior with an increased detail and sophistication. New data sources and continuous tracking of customers’ doings and sayings have led companies to perceive ‘big data’ as a competitive advantage in many business areas [5, 8]. Practical examples of sales tasks where big data could be used are, however, scarce. The present study provides a best practice to implement a data-led multi-channel sales process where customers’ online click-through data is used as a basis of adaptive human sales work. These considerations are increasingly important as companies are facing a need to increase their sales processes efficiency by controlling costs related to human sales work. At the same time, ‘personal touch’ in sales is considered important and both online and offline channels are expected to understand customers better and demonstrate that understanding to a greater extent.

The study shows that information about customers’ proneness to a specific influence tactic in an online channel can be planted to human sales personnel and the process of doing so can produce positive sales outcomes. Somewhat surprisingly, however, salespeople should use complementary influence tactics in different stages of the sales process. This is in line with the ELM model that suggests that ‘mismatching’ of arguments and attitudes leads to higher persuasive power [30, 31,
alesperson’s so be useful as buying rurrent attitude towards an offering. Then, as said, salespersons should use a complementary influence tactic (based on either central or peripheral route of persuasion) than what the customer has responded to. This finding also sheds critical light on the conservative idea of integrated marketing communication, which highlights consistency in all communication [14, 34]. Instead, we encourage companies to find the best and most persuasive sales arguments in each sales context and channel and dismiss the idea that repeating the same message in the same way in every channel would be the most beneficial for the sake of clarity and consistency.

Another managerial implication that the study provides is the differential ability of different sales channels to possess persuasive power and to persuade through the peripheral route to persuasion. The findings indicate that the fact that some online channels are rather low in media richness (e.g., emails, text-based websites) inhibits them to convey emotionally-laded influence tactics, such as inspirational appeals. Skilful human salespersons are, on the other hand, able to use both rational and emotional sales arguments in their sales call. This should be considered when planning both single- and multi-channel sales presentations. Furthermore, we echo Vickery et al.’s [43] suggestion that B2B firms should use a mix of different media (face-to-face, telephone, personal email) because a purposeful combination of rich media fosters a customer’s sense of closeness to the provider. Our study provides an empirical basis to emphasize that the chosen influence tactics for each channel should respect the strengths and limitations of that particular channel. Human salespeople also need to be left with something additional and complementary to say, as complementarity boosts their confidence and harnesses the human capability to inspire and adapt.

5.3 Limitations and future research

As for any research, there are limitations in the present study. A factor that was not controlled for was the order of the channels in the sales process. We cannot be completely certain whether the studied channels carry inherent differences in regards to their persuasive capability or whether the differences in consumers’ reactions to influence tactics in different channels were due to the order of the channels in the sales process. Prior research on hedonic and utilitarian consumer behavior argue that hedonic value propositions start to play a role in consumers’ decision making process only after an utilitarian hygiene level has been met [9]. This could explain why consumers who responded to the rational influence tactic (recommendation) first were the most willing to accept the salesperson’s inspirational proposal in the second stage of the process; they were already assured that the utilitarian threshold was exceeded. As this may be the case, future research should study the use of influence tactics in multi-channel selling by including the order of the channels as an additional variable. Studying the same effects in other contexts would also be useful as buying financial services might follow a different kind of decision path than other kinds of purchases.

The choice of the influence tactics may also affect the results of the study. Since there are multiple other influence tactics to choose from than only recommendations and inspirational appeals (e.g., McFarland, Challagalla and Shervani [29]), future research should consider other combinations of the available tactics. Additionally, as the way a consumer’s proneness to a particular tactic was operationalized as a ‘choice’ between two tactics (click to one of two links), we cannot know whether the results would have been different if separate treatment groups were presented with only one tactic in the email and a click to that tactic would have been interpreted as proneness to it. Using only one influence tactic is a common practice in email marketing and therefore worth studying. We, however, argue that the way the proneness was detected in our study revealed more information about the customer – it not only revealed that a particular tactic worked or did not work but it also revealed that the tactic worked better than the other tactic and eliminated some of the self-selection bias of those who would have clicked something anyway.

In general, studying adaptive selling with real salespeople in an experimental setting is challenging as the company had to ensure that no sales deals are jeopardized because of the study. During the sales calls, no intrusion of the researchers was allowed. This, however, can be seen to increase data validity because the sales campaigns were part of usual business of the company and not a separate study conducted in a vacuum. Before the campaigns, the salespeople were instructed to use the influence tactics in the way the academic literature conceptualizes them, but, in the end, the way they were actually used was up to each salesperson. The focus of using either tactic was particularly on the beginning of the phone call but with longer calls (more than ca. 10 minutes) multiple tactics were probably used, intentionally or not. The future research should explore new methods to study salespeople and their adaptive selling behaviors in actual sales situations. The present study, however, provides needed variety in the research methods used in studying the practice of adaptive selling by studying repeated interactions across sales channels with in a real-life setting.
6. Conclusion

The present study has successfully investigated adaptive selling in a multi-channel sales context. Contrary to an intuitive belief, it is most beneficial if the customer is presented with complementary influence tactics in different channels rather than using one consistent argument that is known to be effective. This is, in fact, in line with the ELM model and its suggestion that ‘mismatching’ emotional and rational arguments might enhance attitude change. The finding can also be reasoned with the media richness theory, and the differential ability of different channels to influence and persuade. Second, we contribute to the adaptive selling literature by linking customer online tracking and human-to-human sales work. While prior research has highlighted the importance of the salesperson’s knowledge structure in adaptive selling, the proposed research provides companies with a concrete method of practicing effective multi-channel sales.

7. References


