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The Power of Self-Oriented Competitiveness

Wyatt Schrock, PhD, Douglas Hughes, PhD, Yanhui Zhao, PhD, Clay Voorhees, PhD, and John Hollenbeck, PhD

Salespeople often have a reputation for being competitive. Indeed, many popular business press outlets identify competitiveness as a “personality trait of top salespeople.”¹ The prevailing view



might be that having a competitive spirit is suitable and favorable in sales domains that are inherently competitive.

However, a long history of research in areas such as philosophy, sports, and economics shows that not all people think about competition (or competitors) in the same way. Accordingly, in this paper, we examine how different competitive orientations affect salesperson behavior and performance

in the workplace. Specifically, we focus on *self-oriented competitiveness* (SOC), defined as a “personality trait that desires and highly values the surpassing of one’s own prior accomplishments or personal bests, independent of interpersonal comparisons.” Our multi-study and multi-method exploration of SOC contrasts with a traditional measure of competitiveness (*other-oriented competitiveness*; OOC), defined in part as “the desire to win and be better than others.”²

Study #1: Developing and Validating a Measure of SOC

The purpose of Study 1 was to develop a reliable and valid measure of SOC. Study 1a, which included the input of salespeople in the insurance industry, ultimately led to a 5-item scale that captured the essence of SOC. An example item is “*Achieving a new personal record (personal best) is something that is important to me.*” Study 1b ultimately showed that the newly developed measure of SOC is statistically different from OOC and several other personality traits, including a desire to learn (“learning goal orientation”), the need for achievement, independence, and perfectionism. Studies 1c, 1d, and 1e were all focused on the difference between SOC and intrinsic motivation. Study 1c showed that the measure of SOC and measures of intrinsic motivation capture statistically different aspects of personality. In Study 1d, we tracked the performance of salespeople from a mobile phone provider for 10 weeks. The findings showed that SOC had significant and positive effects on sales and gross profit; OOC and intrinsic motivation did not. Finally, Study 1e showed that SOC was statistically distinct from more “global” measures of intrinsic motivation (which capture the extent to which individuals are intrinsically motivated in life, not just in sales).

Study #2: A field experiment focused on sales contest design

Our second study was conducted to continue exploring the managerial relevance of the SOC measure. Given research on “person × environment” interactions, and the fact that most sales organizations use some form(s) of sales contests, we explored how salespeople with high levels of SOC and OOC might perform differently in different types of sales contests.

To do this, we partnered with a large company in the financial services industry that relies on hundreds of “inside” salespeople to generate revenue. Working with the company, we developed a one-week-long field experiment with two conditions (i.e., two different sales contest designs). In one contest design (half of the participants), a monetary prize was awarded to the salesperson who outperformed all other salespeople participating in the contest. In the other contest design (the other half of participants), the same monetary prize was given to the salesperson who “had the largest performance gain compared with his or her baseline week.” Our hypothesis was that salespeople with high levels of OOC would perform better in the “compete with others” design and salespeople with high levels of SOC would perform better in the “compete with self” design. In total, 285 salespeople participated in the contests.

After the contest weeks concluded, we measured the performance for each salesperson (i.e., the number of “deals closed”). Our hypothesis was confirmed. In the compete-with-self contest design, salespeople with high levels of SOC realized greater performance lifts. In the “compete-with-others” design, salespeople with high levels of OOC realized greater performance lifts. In general, our findings from Study 2 indicate that competitive orientation (SOC or OOC) affects the way that salespeople respond to sales contest stimuli. The implications of this study are wide-ranging, given data indicating that firms continue to invest billions of dollars each year in sales contests, with an interest in sales contest ideas that work.

Study #3: Competitive orientation, job behavior, and leadership contingencies

Our third study examined the effect of SOC and OOC on three specific workplace behaviors. The first was “*working hard*” (or job effort), measured as the time that a given salesperson spent on the phone selling. The second was “*working smart*.” This measure captured the extent to which a given salesperson plans, remains flexible, and adapts. The third was “*helping behavior*.” This measure (rated by sales managers) captures how much a salesperson helps other salespeople in need and assists the company with tasks such as training. To see how these behaviors might also be a function of the salesperson’s manager, we also measured the sales manager’s “*achievement-oriented leadership behavior*” (AOLB). AOLB (rated by salespeople) captures the extent to which the manager sets challenging goals, encourages continual improvement, and lets salespeople know that they are expected to perform at a high level.

Our results showed that SOC positively predicted both working hard and working smart; OOC was statistically unrelated to these two behaviors. Interestingly, our results also showed that SOC

was positively related to helping behavior; OOC was negatively related to helping behavior. Importantly, working hard, working smart, and helping behavior were all found to be positive and significant predictors of salesperson performance (i.e., the number of deals closed).

Our findings related to leadership behavior (AOLB) were quite interesting. Specifically, we found that in general, AOLB and OOC interacted *synergistically*; the interactions between AOLB and SOC were more *antagonistic*. Our belief is that AOLB can help salespeople with high levels of OOC to focus less on social comparison and more on continuous improvement, high standards, etc. At the same time, for salespeople with high levels of SOC, we believe that this same leadership behavior could be deemed as redundant, unnecessary, distracting, frustrating, etc.

Real Estate Implications

Our findings suggest that SOC is an important trait that differentiates salespeople and significantly influences their behavior and performance (for the better). Thus, rather than solely targeting competitive salespeople who want to do better than other people, firms should also recruit those salespeople who focus on incremental achievements and being better than they were yesterday. Our data suggests that these salespeople will be more likely to work hard, work smart, and help others. Also, leadership efforts should be tailored based on salespeople's competitive orientation. Our data suggests that a “fit” between leadership styles and competitive orientation can create optimal behaviors and maximize performance. Specifically, our data suggests that high levels of AOLB may be more appropriate with salespeople who are focused on “beating others.” Salespeople with high levels of SOC may not find AOLB particularly necessary or motivating.

Finally, our findings also suggest that financial incentives or sales contests can and should be tailored in a way that considers differences in personality traits. Differently competitive salespeople might be more or less interested in or enthusiastic about different sales contest structures. As such, we see our results as more reason for sales organizations to continue creatively experimenting with different sales contest designs. We expect that different designs will align with different preferences or personalities, and we expect that salesperson performance will be maximized when there is alignment.



Recommended Reading

Schrock, Wyatt, Douglas Hughes, Yanhui Zhao, Clay Voorhees, and John Hollenbeck (2021), “Self-Oriented Competitiveness in Salespeople: Sales Management Implications,” *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Sciences*, 49, 1201-1221.

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About the Authors

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Dr. Wyatt Schrock’s (PhD – Michigan State University) research interests include salesperson motivation, sales manager leadership, and brand management. His research has been published in *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management*, *Marketing Letters*, *Journal of Business Ethics*, *Journal of Business Research*, *Journal of Service Research*, *Industrial Marketing Management*, *European Journal of Marketing*, *Journal of International Marketing*, and the *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*. He has presented his research at several academic conferences in the US and abroad. He currently serves on the Editorial Review Board at the *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management*. Dr. Schrock’s research has twice received the annual James M. Comer Award for Best Contribution to Selling and Sales Management Theory. He has also co-authored an academic textbook, *Professional Selling*. Additionally, Dr. Schrock has ten years of corporate experience in a variety of sales, marketing and analyst roles. He has worked for companies such as Procter & Gamble and Gannett. Dr. Schrock teaches Sales Management courses.

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Dr. Douglas E. Hughes (PhD – University of Houston) has a rich academic and professional background in marketing and sales. His well-cited research focuses on how firms may maximize performance through sales organization effectiveness and through the accompanying management of internal and external relationships. Dr. Hughes served as Editor-in-Chief of *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management* and Area Editor at *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* and has published articles in the *Journal of Marketing*, *Journal of*

Marketing Research, Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, Journal of Retailing, International Journal of Research in Marketing, Marketing Letters, Industrial Marketing Management, Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management, and Journal of Service Research. He was honored for the best doctoral dissertation (2009) and best published articles on a sales topic by the American Marketing Association (2011, 2016) and is also the recipient of the 2013 Withrow Emerging Scholar Award, the 2016 Emerald Citation of Excellence Award, and the 2021 and 2016 James M. Comer Award for the Best Contribution to Selling and Sales Management Theory. He was featured on the cover of *Top Sales Magazine* in 2015 along with an article about his research on salesperson motivation. Prior to his academic career, Dr. Hughes served as CEO of a business services firm, as a senior executive in both marketing and sales at Fortune 100/500 consumer products firms, and as a consultant to a variety of companies across multiple industries.

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Dr. Yanhui Zhao's (PhD – Michigan State University) primary research interests fall within the domain of marketing strategy, including brand management, sales management, and inter-organizational relationships. His research has appeared in the *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, Journal of Business Ethics, Journal of Service Research, Journal of International Marketing* and *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management*, among others. His research has been quoted multiple times by news outlets such as CNN Money and BBC News. He received the 2016 James M. Comer Award for the Best Contribution to Selling and Sales Management Theory.

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Dr. Voorhees' (PhD – Florida State University) research focuses on the explanation and management of the dynamics of social exchange and social influence. Within this theoretical umbrella, he focuses on projects related to customer experience management and loyalty, often in service contexts. His research has been published in the *Journal of Marketing, Journal of Marketing Research, Journal of the Academy of Science, Strategic Management Journal, Journal of Retailing, and Journal of Service Research*, among others. He currently serves as the Co-Editor for the *Journal of Service Research*. In 2021, Dr. Voorhees received the Culverhouse College of Business Board of Visitors' Research Achievement Award. In 2016, Dr. Voorhees received the Best Services Marketing Article award from the American Marketing Association, and in 2015, he received the Emerging Service Scholar award from the American Marketing Association's Services Marketing Special Interest Group. In addition, his research has received the 2011, 2012, and 2015 Industry Relevance Awards from Cornell's Center for Hospitality Research and has been featured in media outlets such as *Wall Street Journal, TIME Magazine,*

BusinessWeek, *USA Today*, *U.S. News & World Report*, and numerous other domestic and international periodicals.

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Dr. John R. Hollenbeck (PhD – New York University) holds the positions of University Distinguished Professor at Michigan State University and Eli Broad University Professor at the Eli Broad Graduate School of Business Administration. He served as the acting editor at *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* in 1995, the associate editor of *Decision Sciences* from 1999 to 2004, and the editor of *Personnel Psychology* from 1996 to 2002. He has published over 100 articles and book chapters on the topics of team decision-making and work motivation. Within the Academy of Management, Dr. Hollenbeck has been awarded Fellowship status, and has won the All-Academy Distinguished Educator Award, the Lifetime Achievement Award from both Organizational Behavior Division and the Human Resources Division, as well as the Mentorship Award from both the Organizational Behavior Division and the Human Resources Division.



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