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A FRAMEWORK OF TECHNOLOGY MEDIATION IN CONSUMER SELLING: IMPLICATIONS FOR FIRMS AND SALES MANAGEMENT

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Firms regard technology as a strategic tool to enhance sales effectiveness, improve customer service, and reduce costs. Within the context of sales technology, the focus of the paper is on the effect of technology mediation in consumer selling environments. Extant research has typically been at a micro-level and concentrated in two distinct areas: (1) salesperson adoption of sales technology and its effect on salespeople's performance and (2) consumer adoption of technology and the use of technology in decision making. The paper examines the simultaneous effect of technology-mediated selling on both salespeople and consumers, at both micro- and macro-levels.

Marketers have always utilized emerging technologies to sell to consumers more effectively and efficiently. A current example of enhanced technology usage by both consumers and salespeople is in the retail sector at CompUSA stores (Ganapati 2009; Jana 2009). Every major item (e.g., LCD televisions, desktops, and laptops) has an active screen that provides detailed specifications of the product and is also connected to the Internet. The specifications include such details as an image of the back of the LCD television showing connections and ports, and the type of mounting bracket needed for the television. The feature of using technology to provide detailed specifications is also available for items such as hard drives, which consumers access by scanning the item at the end of aisle displays. In addition, the store provides Internet access that allows consumers to compare the price of the item to other online and brick-and-mortar stores. The role of salespeople has also changed in these stores. Salespeople's primary responsibility in a traditional store is to provide the product information that is now available to CompUSA customers through technology. In this context, the salesperson's role shifts to that of problem solver—that is, determining which products and services best meet customers' needs.

In this type of enhanced environment, it is important to reexamine the effect of technology-mediated selling on salespeople and on consumers. Mediation is defined by Merriam-Webster as "to effect by action as an intermediary" (www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/mediating). Technol-

ogy mediation has been examined in learning environments (Muukkonen, Lakkala, and Hakkarainen 2005), social contexts (Flor 2005), and office interactions (Okamura et al. 1993). In the context of this paper, we discuss how sales technologies mediate the relationship between salespeople and consumers. It is intuitive that some technology mediation will enhance salesperson–consumer interactions and some technology mediation will impair salesperson–consumer interactions.

The purpose of this paper is to explicate these relationships. There is considerable literature on adoption of sales technologies by salespeople. However, there is a paucity of research in the area of technology mediation in consumer–salespeople interactions. This paper examines technology mediation in personal selling by developing a framework for identifying technologies that firms should deploy to aid salespeople and consumer interactions. In this regard, we examine the types of technologies and the resistance that consumers and salespeople experience with the utilization of these technologies.

As stated earlier, the paper suggests that the use of technology-mediated selling will change the scale and scope of business-to-consumer selling in terms of both the range of products being sold and the geographic areas in which the products are sold. We structure the paper to discuss three major issues. First, we address the issue of what types of technologies should be used for what types of sales interactions. Second, we address the impact of technology-mediated selling on the sales force. Finally, we address the issues of the change in sales force functions due to enhanced technology-mediated selling.

INCREASE IN USAGE OF SALES TECHNOLOGIES

Due to the large number of consumers and the margins of products, traditional consumer selling was person-to-person, either in stores or at the consumer's residence. In the first

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