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The proactive behavior of younger salespeople: Antecedents and outcomes

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The Proactive Behavior of Younger Salespeople: Antecedents and Outcomes

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The purpose of this study is to model and test some of the antecedents (individual characteristics) and outcomes (selling performance) of proactive behavior among younger salespeople. Using social cognitive theory agency perspective, we extend the existing proactive behavior literature into the sales domain. We sampled 278 industrial salespeople and tested a model to confirm that younger salespeople tend to engage in proactive behaviors when they are intrinsically motivated, confident in the tasks of selling, and willing to take risks. Proactive behavior, in turn, resulted in our salesperson sample demonstrating high levels of behavior performance and job involvement. Our findings may help sales channel managers begin to assess the potential role of proactive salespeople within their sales organization. Understanding that proactivity (both directly and indirectly) impacts selling performance, managers might specifically attempt to identify salesperson proactive behavior characteristics during the interview process.

Keywords: characteristics, performance, personality, proactivity, sales channels, salespeople, United States

Professional selling is important in marketing channels because the requirements for productive exchange relationships between a seller and buyer hinge on the ability of sellers to create and promote value. Value creation is critical for the development of productive long-term relationships among channel members and has become an area of increased research and practice interest in the professional sales domain. As leaders of the professional sales channel, sales managers have a vested interest in hiring and promoting individuals with a “problem solving” mentality and “make things happen” attitude. These types of individuals are known for taking charge and being proactive when obstacles to their sales and marketing mission arise. Thus, salespeople through their proactive approach to the market may maximize the efficient operation of the professional sales marketing channel.

Proactive behavior has been of interest to researchers in the areas of sales and marketing for some time (Thomas et al., 2010). It has been identified as a way for individuals to intentionally and directly change current circumstances that impact their situation, both personally and professionally (Bateman & Crant, 1993). Proactive behavior has been broadly characterized as an active facilitation of meaningful personal or environmental change (e.g., Bateman & Crant, 1993; Grant & Ashford, 2008) and has been shown to impact individual job performance, job satisfaction,
and affective organizational commitment (Thomas et al., 2010). From a marketing channels perspective, proactive behavior can be viewed as a means to enhance exchange relationships. Pelton, Strutton, and Lumpkin (2001) describe a category of human interaction (i.e., ideational relationships) whereby an exchange partner is viewed by the other as a conveyer of ideas, ideals, and opinions. These values provide the basis for the development of norms that guide behaviors in future interactions between exchange members. Thus, salespeople who demonstrate proactivity are well equipped to deliver value to their customers due to their propensity to affect change based on a clear understanding of exchange partner needs.

Sales managers have a vested interest in hiring salespeople who have a propensity to be proactive since research has found that proactive behaviors among salespeople are a key factor in generating higher levels of sales performance (Morris et al., 1990; Pitt et al., 2002). However, managers are likely to be challenged in finding proactive salespeople, especially when many of their new hires tend to be younger and inexperienced reps. Since little is known about the specific drivers of proactivity among younger salespeople, a manager may not know what personal characteristics to look for during the interview process.

To address this managerial issue, we explore the literature gap in proactive behavior among salespeople to better understand some of the antecedents and outcomes. We focus our attention on younger salespeople because this is the demographic of sales recruits that sales managers frequently interview for entry-level sales roles. We use a social cognitive theory agency perspective (Bandura, 1986) to extend the existing proactive behavior literature by modeling some of the key personal characteristic drivers and two types of sales behavior consequences of proactive behavior among a sample of younger business-to-business salespeople. Antecedents are based on some of the personal characteristics that (according to the literature) define an individual as proactive. Outcomes are based on determinants of selling performance that research has found to be critical in developing long-term customer relationships (i.e., behavior performance, and job involvement). Our findings are designed to help sales managers begin to identify some of the important characteristics of proactive business-to-business salespeople as they continually look for ways to maximize the effectiveness of their salesperson new hire recruitment and selection efforts. Our contributions to the marketing channel literature provide insight into some of the determinants and outcomes of professional sales channel selection decisions that maximize value in buyer-seller long-term exchange relationships.

**THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Social cognitive theory (SCT) agency perspective is our theoretical lens for understanding the characteristics of proactive behavior within the sales domain. SCT considers an individual’s capacity to exercise control over the nature and quality of one’s life and recognizes that “people are producers as well as products of social systems” (Bandura, 2001, p. 1). Bandura (2001) considers four features of SCT: intentionality, forethought, self-reactiveness, and self-reflectiveness. Intentionality represents future actions to be performed. It is more than an expectation or prediction; intentionality is the proactive commitment to execute the future actions. Forethought recognizes that people establish goals, consider the consequences of prospective actions, and choose the path with the greatest chance of success. Through forethought, people motivate themselves and select courses of action in consideration of future outcomes. In addition to intentionality and forethought, self-reactiveness recognizes that individuals are also motivators and self-regulators. Individuals not only make choices and action plans, but they give shape to future courses of action by motivating and regulating their execution. Last, self-reflectiveness recognizes that people evaluate the motivation, value, and meaning of life pursuits. At this level, people address conflicts between choices and decide to act in favor of one choice over another.

Thus, the direct personal agency perspective of SCT helps us explain individual behavior as being shaped and controlled by internal dispositions and environmental influences. People, as producers, are not just reactive. They are self-regulators of motivation and self-organizers of their thoughts and actions. These actions operate partly through internal standards and evaluative reactions to their own behaviors (Bandura, 1991).

This theoretical presentation of SCT may be operationalized in the domain of professional selling. We identify characteristics that are predicted to impact proactive behavior. In turn, such proactive behavior is predicted to impact environmental (sales) outcomes.

**Individual Characteristics and Proactive Behavior**

The intentionality feature of SCT “is not simply an expectation or prediction of future actions but a proactive commitment to bring them about” (Bandura, 2001, p. 6). Bateman and Crant (1993) describe proactive behavior as a dispositional construct that identifies differences among people in the extent to which they take action to influence their environments. In a sales setting, proactivity may serve to establish, build, and maintain buyer-seller relationships as such behaviors center on taking action to affect change and solve customer problems.
Employees are often asked to meet company objectives during times of rapid change in technology, regulations, and the competitive environment. Top performers recognize their environmental constraints and create circumstances that facilitate personal and organizational success (Ashford & Black, 1996; Chan & Schmitt, 2000). In the domain of professional sales, seminal research investigating the determinants of performance over the past three decades has centered on salesperson individual characteristics as an important set of variables impacting performance both indirectly and directly (see Churchill et al., 1985). How salespeople choose to put forth effort in their role, are confident in the tasks required to sell, and view risk taking necessary to succeed are three characteristics that vary by individual. Age and experience levels of salespeople may also account for the extent in which these characteristics affect sales performance. Therefore, we focus our study on three of these salesperson individual antecedents predicted to impact proactive behavior: intrinsic motivation, task confidence, and risk aversion.

**Intrinsic Motivation**

Motivation is considered in two features of SCT: forethought and self-reflexiveness. In addition to being planners, people motivate and regulate themselves in guiding their actions in anticipation of future events (Bandura, 2001). This type of internal motivation has been characterized as intrinsic work motivation and is defined as the “motivation to engage in work primarily for its own sake because work itself is interesting, engaging or in some way satisfying” (Amabile et al., 1994, p. 950). The psychology literature reinforces the anticipation that individuals will behave in a proactive manner when they find their tasks intrinsically interesting and enjoyable—proactivity increases challenge and fulfills an individual’s basic need for competence and autonomy (Parker et al., 2010). When work is viewed this way, an employee will be more likely to behave proactively because he or she views the behaviors as a means to improve the work situation and to provide protection against becoming detached from work when difficulties arise (Ohly & Fritz, 2007).

Crant (2000, p. 455) suggests that people can have different motivations for engaging in proactive behaviors, some of which are intrinsic in nature. In support of this, he writes

> Someone might be proactive because of a desire to help others, such as selling the issue of gender equity at the workplace. Alternatively, a person might be proactive to create conditions that will help him or her become a star performer, such as identifying promising customers or seeking feedback on previous performances.

Recent study of motivation and proactivity provides some evidence of this relationship between a worker’s intrinsic motivation and proactive behavior. For example, Unsworth and Clegg (2010) studied this phenomenon in the context of engineers’ propensity to proactively generate new ideas on the job. They found a relationship between workers’ positive feelings and emotions about their work and proactive creativity on the job.

Thus, an intrinsically motivated salesperson should value things such as personal achievement and success as well as selling for the mere challenge and feeling of performing a useful service (Oliver & Anderson, 1994). Intrinsic rewards come from within the individual (related to feelings and interpersonal factors). Based on this discussion, we propose that the individual characteristic of intrinsic motivation should directly impact proactive behavior tendencies among salespeople.

**Hypothesis 1:** Salesperson levels of intrinsic motivation will be positively related to proactive behavior.

**Task Confidence**

Task confidence or perceived self-efficacy occupies a pivot position in the causal structure of SCT. Task confidence considers people’s beliefs in their capability to exercise some measure of control over their performance and environment. Unless people believe they can accomplish their objectives, they have little incentive to act or persevere in the face of difficulties (Bandura, 2001). Task confidence has been shown to increase an individual’s persistence and willingness to overcome obstacles—which are determinants of proactive behavior (Bandura, 1997; Frese & Fay, 2001). Kanfer et al. (2001) found that an individual’s proactivity relative to a job search was positively correlated with his or her self-efficacy toward the task. Other studies point to perceptions of self-efficacy and task confidence as being related to dimensions of proactivity such as suggesting improvements (Axtell et al., 2000), problem solving, and taking charge to affect change (Morrison & Phelps, 1999). More recently, Parker et al. (2010) confirmed that an individual’s self-efficacy in their role predicted dimensions of proactive behavior that include envisioning, planning, enacting, and reflecting. Relative to proactive behavior, Frese and Fay (2001) found that an important determinant was an individual’s expectation that he or she feels confident that his or her efforts will have an impact on the outcomes. People with high self-confidence and control appraisals were proposed to search for opportunities to act and to actively search for information. And Frese et al. (2007) found
that task- and self-confidence appraisals led to greater personal initiative.

In the sales context, such initiative could be viewed as means for salespeople to take proactive measures to assess a situation and execute behaviors to impact change in the customer’s environment. Based on this notion, we expect that salespeople who possess the confidence in their selling abilities to more readily engage in proactive behaviors. Based on this discussion we propose:

**Hypothesis 2**: Salesperson levels of task confidence will be positively related to proactive behavior.

**Risk Aversion**

The element of risk exists in any contemplated action and is contemplated in the forethought feature of SCT, which considers “that people set goals for themselves, anticipate the likely consequences of prospective actions, and select and create courses of actions likely to produce the desired outcomes and avoid detrimental ones” (Bandura, 2001, p. 7). The study of proactive behavior suggests that individuals will not engage in proactivity if they perceive the effort too costly relative to the potential benefits. In essence, people assess this risk in terms of time, money, energy, or other resources necessary to invest in proactive actions (Aspinwall, 2005). Perceived risk will likely revolve around self-oriented concerns, such as the threat to one’s ego of making mistakes (Ashford et al., 2003; Parker et al., 2010). Morris et al. (1990) found that sales professionals demonstrated a reasonable awareness of the risks involved in work ventures; in addition, they systematically attempted to manage and minimize such risks. Salespeople as calculated risk takers will engage in proactive behavior to the extent that it supports their goals. For example, a commissioned-based salesperson is at high risk of not bringing home a paycheck if he or she does not make any sales. However, these same salespeople are willing to take on a certain degree of risk knowing that the upside of commission sales is unapped earning potential.

To realize these benefits, proactivity is necessary for uncovering sales opportunities (e.g., prospecting), taking action to confirm appointments (e.g., cold calling), and proposing solutions to affect change in the customer’s business (e.g., closing). Based on this discussion, we propose a negative relationship between an individual’s tendency to avoid risk and proactivity.

**Hypothesis 3**: Salesperson propensity to avoid risk will be negatively related to proactive behavior.

**Proactive Behavior and Outcomes**

Proactive behavior has been positively linked to performance and performance related outcomes. Bateman and Crant (1993) studied the proactive behavior impact on selling performance among 113 industrial salespeople employed by a major European vehicle manufacturer. They found that about 8% of variation in objective sales performance could be accounted for by proactive behavior. In a subsequent study of sales performance of real estate agents, Crant (1996) used objective measures (sales volume, number of listings obtained, and commission income) to assess the effects of proactive behavior on performance. He found that proactive behavior explained a small (8.3% of the variance) but significant amount of these objective measures of agents’ job performance. The study also confirmed that the more proactive the behavior of the salesperson, the more highly the effectiveness of that salesperson was perceived by his or her supervisor.

**Sales Behavior Performance**

Sales researchers have been interested in sales performance for some time (Singh & Koshy, 2010; Zallocco et al., 2009). The sales literature distinguishes between two types of selling performance (Anderson & Oliver, 1987; Cravens et al., 1993; Oliver & Anderson, 1994). Sales outputs or outcome performance is objectively measured and based on quantifiable results such as revenue, units, profits, and market share. Given data to confirm these types of sales outputs, salespeople can be objectively measured relative to performance. It has also been conceptualized that sales performance could have a behavioral component and be observed as the various skills and activities that are important to fulfilling the responsibilities of the sales job (e.g., making sales calls, adaptive selling, teamwork, sales presentations, sales planning and sales support activities). Since such behaviors are subjectively assessed and observed, they are harder to measure. To this end, researchers have taken care to measure and test performance output/outcomes and behaviors separately. However, there is consensus in the literature that selling behavior performance directly impacts selling output performance. The premise is that certain selling behaviors (especially in relationship selling) are necessary to produce sales outputs (Babakus et al., 1996; Piercy et al., 1999; Piercy et al., 2012). Given this distinction and the importance of behavior performance as a driver of outcome performance, our study focus is on the impact that salesperson proactivity has on behavior performance.

As defined earlier, proactivity centers on the extent to which people take action to influence their environments by taking action to affect change. For salespeople, this
translates into the sales behaviors required to establish, build, and maintain buyer-seller relationships. Examples of these types of behaviors include making sales calls to conduct thorough needs analysis using insightful questioning, developing proposals designed to match solutions to meet customer identified needs, and executing post-sale follow-up to ensure satisfaction (to mention a few). According to the sales performance literature, such actions are indicative of behavior performance. Thus, we propose the following relationship:

**Hypothesis 4:** Proactive behavior will be positively related to sales behavior performance.

### Sales Job Involvement

Job involvement is a cognitive belief or attitude—a state of psychological identification to which an individual values the work and personal investment in their job (Marshall et al., 2004). It involves the internalization of values about the goodness and importance of one’s work (Blau, 1985; Holmes & Srivastava, 2002; Kanungo, 1982) and a representative conceptualization of the degree of affiliation a salesperson experiences with his or her sales role. Individuals who display high levels of job involvement consider their work to be a very important part of their lives. Within the context of salesperson effectiveness, job involvement is a relevant consequence of various internal feelings including drivers of one’s effort, belief in one’s abilities, and personal drive to take action and affect change (Brown et al., 1993; Brown & Leigh, 1996).

Research in the sales context finds that a salesperson’s degree of job involvement is a result of effort and willingness to engage in certain types of job behaviors (Chonko, 1986). Examples of such behaviors include problem solving, relationship building, taking action to correct deficiencies, and team building, to mention a selected few. Dimensions of proactive behavior share common attributes with job involvement. For example, both construct definitions refer to the desire to engage in problem solving to affect change. Much like proactive individuals, salespeople more involved in their jobs will take action and corrective steps to make situations better or present solutions to correct deficiencies. Based on this discussion, we predict the following relationships between salesperson proactive behavior and sales job involvement:

**Hypothesis 5:** Proactive behavior will be positively related to sales job involvement.

A tenet of SCT is that individuals will account for their environment when making decisions that impact their actions. In the context of the study of sales, it is important to consider the role of sales organizational constraints that may indirectly guide salesperson actions. We do this by considering a behavior-based sales control construct to account for any model variability stemming from the rules, policies, and demands from the sales organizational environment. Given constraints and reporting/behavior requirements that the organization may impose on salespeople (e.g., sales call, forecasting, sales reporting, use of Customer Relationship Management (CRM) systems, and other behavioral requirements), the degree of proactivity that salespeople exhibit may be limited. Based on this discussion, a model of the hypothesized relationship and results is presented in Figure 1.

### METHOD

An online survey was developed to collect the data. A cross-company and -industry convenience sample of business-to-business salespeople in the United States was identified to complete this survey. Salesperson participation in the study was solicited through a combination of researcher and student solicitation. For the latter, undergraduate students (for extra credit) identified salespeople who would be willing to take the survey. For those agreeing to participate, a survey link was provided to them upon the researchers verifying that they met the necessary criteria of selling to get an order (versus to take an order as in the case of retail sales).

A total of 308 business-to-business salespeople started the survey, 292 of whom finished it for a completion rate...
of 95%. From these, 278 were considered usable (due to excessive missing items), making the final completion rate about 90%.

The top industries represented were business services, health care/medical, manufacturing, and automotive. On average, study respondents were male (65%), 28 years of age, had a little over 5 years of selling experience, and earned on average 71.4% of their compensation from salary. Relative to the industry average age of an industrial sales representative (42.0 years), our study sample was substantially younger (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013).

Study constructs were measured using multi-item measures adopted from existing literature (see the Appendix for sample items from the measures used). Intrinsic motivation was measured using 10 items from the scale developed by Aldefer (1972). We used the scale developed by Wang and Netemeyer (2002) to measure task confidence using 12 items. Risk avoidance was measured using five items from the scale developed by Gomez-Mejia and Balkin (1989). A 15-item proactive behavior scale was used from the measure developed by Bateman and Crant (1993). For the outcome variables, we measured sales behavior performance using 5 items from the performance scale developed by Piercy et al. (2001). The original measure combined performance output items (e.g., sales revenue, units, profit margins) and performance behavior items (e.g., sales calls, proposals delivered, post-sale support activities) that were reflective of a salesperson’s overall performance. Our adaptation of the scale was carefully constructed to capture the behavior performance components while maintaining the reflective nature of the original scale used by Piercy et al. (2001).

In deciding which items from the original performance scale to use to measure behavior performance, we referenced other research to delineate behavior performance items from output performance items. For example, the literature (Anderson & Oliver, 1987; Cravens et al., 1993; Oliver & Anderson, 1994) is relatively clear that behavioral performance consists of the various skills and activities that are important to fulfilling the responsibilities of the sales job. These include making sales calls, adaptive selling, teamwork, sales presentations, sales planning, and sales support activities. There is also consensus in the literature that selling behavior performance is an important determinant of salesperson overall performance since it directly impacts selling outcome performance. The premise is that certain selling behaviors (especially in relationship selling) are necessary to produce sales results.

Sales job involvement was measured by adapting 9-items from the scales developed by Kanungo (1982). To control for constraints posed by the sales organizational environment, we used a measure of managerial behavior-based sales control system using 9-items from the scale originally developed by Piercy et al. (2001).

### ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Convergent validity of the model measures was confirmed by computing the average variance extracted (AVE). According to Fornell and Larcker (1981), convergent validity is judged to be adequate when AVE equals or exceeds .50. All AVE values for model variables fell within this range. All scale items used had loading factors above .708, which are considered acceptable as the AVE is computed as the loading’s squared value (.708^2 = .501). In our case, each of the scale items used exceeded these thresholds. Furthermore, all Cronbach’s alpha scores exceeded the .70 threshold recommended by Nunnally (1978) to ensure construct reliability. Last, all measurement items had significant loadings on their corresponding constructs. This result, combined with the acceptable composite reliability measures, indicated convergent validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

To test discriminant validity, we conducted an analysis to ensure that each item is associated with only one construct; that is, no item loaded more highly on another construct than it did on the construct it intends to measure (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Green et al., 2000). All single items’ correlation (to their own scale) exceeded that of any of the other scales, thus demonstrating discriminant validity of the model constructs. Based on this as well as the checks for reliability and validity discussed, we conclude that the measures used in our study appropriately represent the constructs of interest.

To ensure an adequate measurement model fit, we assess the indicator reliability for each item within each construct as well as overall construct composite reliability, average variance extracted, and discriminant validity. According to Hair et al. (2014), measurement model fit assessment in partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) is accomplished through close inspection of this reliability and construct validity measures. Collectively, values of these measures fell within acceptable ranges, leading us to conclude that our measurement model was adequate.

Podsakoff et al. (2003) report that common method variance is prevalent in most data collection where the subject reporting both predictor and dependent items are the same person. To account for common method bias, we conducted a Harmon’s Single Factor Test. By loading our scale items into SPSS and running a factor analysis (forced single factor with no rotation), we noted that the amount of variability explained by the single factor was 40%. According to this test, if less than
50% of the variability is explained by a single factor, common method variance should not be a significant issue. Table 1 illustrates these properties.

SmartPLS (Ringle et al., 2005) was used to estimate the measurement model and test the hypothesized path relationships using a (partial least squares) structural model (Anderson & Gerbing, 1998). Partial least squares was used because it has no distribution constraints and is appropriate for analyzing relatively smaller samples (Chin, 1998). In addition, Chin et al. (2008) advocate the use of PLS path modeling when researchers have to estimate a complex model capturing attitudes and behaviors using a predictive model, such as ours. Alternative, covariance-based structural equation models are full-information procedures that are less appropriate for predictive models using unobservable latent variable constructs because even one wrongly specified structural path or one construct with weak measures will affect all other estimates throughout the covariance-based structural equation model. PLS path modeling, being a component-based least squares alternative, is more robust to these issues.

The model fit and test of individual hypotheses was assessed by examining the magnitude (beta coefficient) and statistical significance (t value) of the path estimates. The results are summarized in Table 2.

Support was found for Hypothesis 1 as the path between salesperson intrinsic motivation and proactive behavior (PB) was significant ($b = .13, t = 1.86$). The hypothesized positive relationship between salesperson task confidence and PB was significant ($b = .57, t = 9.08$); thus Hypothesis 2 is supported. Limited support for Hypothesis 3 was found as the hypothesized negative relationship between salesperson risk avoidance and PB was marginally significant ($b = -.09, t = 1.45$). Overall, the three individual (proactive) characteristic antecedents of our model explained about 47% ($R^2 = .47$) of propensity to exhibit proactive behavior.

Results for the outcomes portion of our model showed confirmatory results for our hypothesized relationships. Specifically, the (Hypothesis 4) predicted positive relationship between PB and sales behavior performance was significant ($b = .36, t = 4.69$), as was the positive relationship between PB and sales job involvement (Hypothesis 5; $b = .35, t = 5.57$). To ensure that the constraints of the sales organizational environment were accounted for, the managerial behavior-based sales control–proactive behavior path was tested.

### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std Dev</th>
<th>t-value</th>
<th>p-value</th>
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<td><strong>PB</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>RiskAvoid</strong></td>
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</table>

### Table 2

<table>
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<th>$b$-value</th>
<th>t-value</th>
<th>Comment</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>IMotiv → Proactive</strong></td>
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<td>1.86**</td>
<td>Hypothesis 1 supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TaskConf → Proactive</strong></td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>9.08***</td>
<td>Hypothesis 2 supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>RiskAvoid → Proactive</strong></td>
<td>-0.09</td>
<td>1.45*</td>
<td>Hypothesis 3 limited support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Proactive → BehPerf</strong></td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>4.69***</td>
<td>Hypothesis 4 supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Proactive → JobInvol</strong></td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>5.57***</td>
<td>Hypothesis 5 supported</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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IMotiv = intrinsic motivation; TaskConf = task confidence; RiskAvoid = risk avoidance; Proactive = proactive behavior; BehPerf = sales behavior performance; JobInvol = sales job involvement; MgrBBSC = managerial behavior-based sales control.

*p < .10; **p < .05; ***p < .01.
This control variable did not significantly impact PB in the model results ($b = .02$).

**DISCUSSION**

Using an SCT agency perspective (Bandura, 2001), we extend the existing proactive behavior literature by modeling antecedents and outcomes among younger salespeople. Antecedents are based on some personal characteristics that define an individual as proactive. Outcomes are based on determinants of selling performance. Sales managers need salespeople with the confidence to proactively identify and present solutions to customers that address business problems and opportunities. Our study enables us to assess proactivity as an important marketing channel component to building long-term exchange relationships between seller and buyer. This act of exchange requires a social process, and, for social exchange to occur, each participant must have a conscious objective and a willingness to adapt his or her behaviors to achieve mutually sought outcomes (Blau, 1967). This notion directly relates to our central construct of proactivity, as the salesperson (channel partner) will exhibit certain behaviors designed to deliver value to help the buyer achieve organizational goals. Proactive salespeople do this by adapting to changing environmental conditions, creating solutions to identified customer problems, and taking action to implement change.

Our study found that even younger proactive salespeople have strong levels of intrinsic motivation and a high degree of confidence in their abilities. These salespeople show a propensity for independent thought and action and have the confidence that they can execute their plans successfully. As explained by the research of Pullins et al. (2011), a characteristic of the millennial generation of salespeople (typically 20-something years of age) is that they are generally confident, hopeful, and optimistic. This may account for our younger salesperson sample demonstrating such high degree of selling ability confidence.

The marginally significant relationship between risk-taking propensity and proactive behavior within salespeople might be explained in a number of ways. Salespeople work for a company, which, for the most part, reduces their risk of having to create their own job and paycheck. Furthermore, risk may not be as prominent in younger salespeople because they lack the perspective of a more experienced and mature rep who has engaged in many more opportunities, understands what is necessary to win against their competition, and generally has more confidence in their ability to execute. Thus, the element of risk may not be a highly significant factor in the selling process for younger salespeople who are more inexperienced. This thought process might be similar to that of rock climbers, who do not see their activity as risky; however, the general public may not hold that same view.

Additionally, our study found that the proactive behavior of salespeople is linked to positive sales performance. Even in a younger sample, proactive salespeople strive to meet the needs of their customers through the products, services, and capabilities of their organization. This may be a function of the sales training these reps received both prior to entering the workforce (e.g., college) and via new hire training and mentoring programs. Generally speaking, it is the approach to solving business issues and addressing business opportunities that enables proactive salespeople to succeed when others may not.

Specifically, we found proactive behavior to be positively related to sales job involvement and sales behavior performance. For our younger salesperson sample, higher levels of job involvement (e.g., “I love my job”) and behavior performance (e.g., “taking care of my customers”) are indicative of a high level of service and support to their customers. Therefore, proactivity impacted sales performance via the job involvement and behaviors that our younger salespeople sample demonstrated. It is also likely that sales output performance would be impacted via the selling behaviors and job involvement that younger salespeople demonstrate.

This makes sense (post hoc) based on the notion that our measure of proactive behavior centers on items relative to taking action, affecting change, and problem solving. Such items are indicative of selling activity that is focused on a customer orientation versus a more transactional selling orientation designed specifically to drive sales outcomes such as revenue, margins, and share (Mallin & Pullins, 2009; Saxe & Weitz, 1982). This confirms that a proactive nature based on a problem-solving approach to selling takes time in that the single-call sales transaction is replaced by a series of more time-consuming customer meetings to identify needs (problems), propose solutions, and get commitment.

We might also speculate that although proactivity is a desired trait for salespeople, the immediate impact on sales results may not be realized among newer sales reps. This also confirms that it takes time for younger salespeople to understand the sales relationship development process. More specifically, customers will make commitments to salespeople only after credibility, dependability, and trust is established (Morgan & Hunt, 1994).

To be sure, further research is needed to examine the relationship between the proactivity of salespeople and the specific conditions under which they have a positive or negative impact on sales output performance and
overall channel efficiency. Additionally, future research may want to consider the relative importance of proactive behavior in different sales channel roles as well as for salespeople in different career stages and varying years of organizational tenure. Alternative and comparative perspectives of salesperson proactivity from various stakeholders such as sales managers and customers is an area worthy of further exploration.

This study may also help sales managers begin to assess the longer-term impact of proactive salespeople within their sales organizations and sales channel selection strategies. Understanding that proactivity (both directly and indirectly) affects selling performance and contributes to long-term buyer relationships, managers might specifically attempt to identify some of these proactivity characteristics during the interview process. Asking a candidate about a situation that demonstrated his or her proactive nature (e.g., the situation, tasks, actions, and results) might give a manager good insight as to whether the salesperson is likely to demonstrate proactive behaviors in the selling role. Questions to reveal the important antecedent characteristics (e.g., motivation, confidence, risk taking) can give a manager further insight into whether a younger candidate has the internal makeup to demonstrate proactive behaviors.

LIMITATIONS

Although our study provides some interesting insight to managers and researchers, some limitations must be pointed out. First, our study used SCT agency perspective as our theoretical lens. Future research could consider a locus of control as a complementary theoretical perspective.

Second, our study centered on three individual characteristics (antecedents) that we judged to be relevant for this study based on our assessment of personal characteristics that map to the dimensions of proactivity (initiating action, desire to impact change, problem-solving orientation). Although these antecedents explain over 47% of the variance in the proactive behavior construct, subsequent research might investigate other or additional personal characteristics via an extended model.

Third, we did not know how many salespeople were invited to complete the survey. Therefore, it was impossible to compute the actual response rate, so we reported the completion rate.

Finally, the survey respondent for predictor and dependent variables were the same person. According to Podsakoff et al. (2003), this is the main cause behind common method variance/bias. Although our single-factor test produced a result within acceptable limits, this issue still poses a minor limitation, which might confine our study findings to being somewhat speculative.

REFERENCES


APPENDIX
Sample Items from the Measures Used

Intrinsic Motivation ($a = .91$; 7-point scale; rate the degree that the following are extremely important to you): 10 items
- Developing new skills and knowledge at work. (.828)
- Opportunity for independent thought and action. (.864)
- Interesting work. (.851)

Task Confidence ($a = .92$; 7-point scale; rate the degree that the following describes you): 12 items
- When I make plans, I am certain I can make them work. (.828)
- When I set important goals for myself, I always achieve them. (.822)
- When unexpected problems occur, I handle them well. (.792)

Risk Avoidance ($a = .91$; 7-point scale; rate the degree that the following describes you): 5 items
- I would not describe myself as a risk taker. (.950)
- I do not like taking too many chances to avoid making a mistake. (.958)
- I am seldom the first person to try anything new. (.970)

Proactive Behavior ($a = .94$; 7-point scale; rate the degree that the following describes you): 15 items
- I feel driven to make a difference in my community and maybe the world. (.775)
- I tend to be a powerful force for constructive change. (.822)
- Nothing is more exciting than seeing my ideas turn into reality. (.796)
- I love being a champion for my ideas, even against others’ opposition. (.821)
- I am great at turning problems into opportunities. (.780)

Sales Job Involvement ($a = .92$; 7-point scale; rate the degree that best describes aspects of your job): 9 items
- I am very much personally involved with my job. (.822)
- To me, my job is a large part of who I am. (.818)
- I like to be absorbed in my job most of the time. (.812)

Sales Behavior Performance ($a = .90$; 7-point scale; rate the degree that best describes aspects of your job performance): 5 items
- I make a high number of sales calls on my customers. (.821)
- I generate a high number of sales proposals and presentations to my customers. (.886)
- I provide a high level of post-sales service and support to my customers. (.841)

*The standardized loadings for each item appear in the parentheses.