Executive Summary

“The dose makes the poison”: Investigating the Optimum Level of a Salesperson’s Charisma

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The present article examines the effectiveness of charisma training for sales personnel. A literature review on the concept of charisma and related research on training provide the foundation for a conceptual model and empirical investigation. Charisma is referred to as a learnable social skill, which manifests in particular verbal and nonverbal communication behaviours such as metaphors, stories, anecdotes, body gestures, and facial expressions. The question as to whether and how specific training conditions (sales training, charisma training, simultaneous sales- and charisma training) can improve salespeople’s charismatic appearance and furthermore lead to positive customer response constitutes the content of this article.

A field study with one experimental factor (i.e., training condition) shows that charisma can be taught in a sales context. Individuals who receive charisma training as opposed to sales training are perceived as more charismatic and are evaluated more positively on a customer response measure than salespeople who were not so trained. Furthermore, we hypothesize and find an inverted U-shaped relationship between perceived charisma and customer response (i.e., customer response increases up to an optimal level and then decreases with increasing perceived charisma) and therewith provide a valuable contribution to the literature, since the relationship between charisma and performance outcomes has been implicitly assumed to be linear up to now. We thereby introduce a novel view on charisma and customer response behaviour, as this is the first study to shed light on whether a person, or a salesperson specifically, can reach an optimum level of charisma (i.e., saturation), which in turn induces favourable consumer response. Specifically, our finding suggests that an excessive manifestation or shortcoming of charismatic communication might lead to reactance behaviours in customers in a personal selling situation.

Findings are also relevant for sales executives, store managers, field sales managers, as well as trainers, educators, and consultants. As a consequence, incorporating charismatic communication behaviours into training programs for sales personnel should be considered, as traditional sales trainings were not found to yield the same results. Preliminary results indicate that the basic principles of charismatic behaviours are learnable in a short amount of time. Salespeople who are eager to learn and practice charismatic communication behaviours might improve their overall sales performance considerably and rapidly. In sum, this study shows that charisma is an important construct not only in the literature of political science, management, and leadership, but also in marketing, and should therefore receive greater attention in this context.