

CONFIDENCE AND ENTHUSIASM: EFFECTS IN STUDENT ROLE-PLAY EVALUATIONS

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Confidence and enthusiasm are among the attributes sales managers list as a desired characteristic in sales candidates (Johnson, 1990); sales training and pedagogy should thus inspire, promote, and instill confidence, both as a specific, task oriented individual ability and a generalized competence. Confidence and enthusiasm enhance sales performance (Bagozzi, 1978) and are among the few attributes seen as essential in missionary selling (Weilbaker, 1990). Beyond personal selling and persuasive communications, confidence and enthusiasm have been noted as contributing to performance in a number of contexts including teaching (Babad, Avni-Babad, & Rosenthal, 2003; Lincoln, 2008), student success (Shrauger & Schonn, 1995), product development (Howell, 2005), and the courtroom (Cramer, Brodsky, and DeCoster, 2009b).

Thus, while confidence and enthusiasm is shown to improve performance across a multitude of contexts, very little of this literature empirically demonstrates this connection in role-play presentations (e.g. Taute et al., 2011). Indeed, there is a dearth of research on the role of confidence and enthusiasm in personal selling over the past two decades (Cramer et al., 2009a). Accordingly, the current research first demonstrates that differences in levels of enthusiasm and confidence are evident in student role-play presentations; subsequently showing that the single measure of these attributes is correlated with student presenters perceived product knowledge and overall performance ratings. We follow with a further examination of the relationship between the single item measure of confidence and enthusiasm and overall role-play presentation ratings.

Hypotheses

The attributes of confidence and enthusiasm are efficacious in sales presentations (Bagozzi, 1978; Heiser, 2005); demonstrating a lack of confidence is detrimental to the perceived value of products (Heiser, 2005). Prior research also suggests that confidence and enthusiasm are essential to salesperson performance (Johnston et al., 1989; Weilbaker, 1990); collectively these studies imply there are individual differences in confidence and enthusiasm which contribute to salesperson performance. We expect similar differences with respect to confidence and enthusiasm; thus our study begins with an analysis of individual differences on the confidence and enthusiasm score.

H1: There are significant differences between individuals on the item 'enthusiasm and confidence' in the role-play sales presentation.

In as much as theoretical literature on personal selling overwhelmingly supports the relationship between evidence of confidence and enthusiasm and sales outcomes (Bagozzi, 1978; Johnston, et al., 1989; Weilbaker, 1990), we test each individual in two undergraduate class sections (n=30 and n=40 respectively) in this study for a correlation between individual scores on the item 'confidence and enthusiasm' and total presentation score. We also examine the relationship in aggregate by testing overall correlations between the variables.

H2: There is a significant correlation (+/-) between (a) individual and (b) group mean evaluations of confidence and enthusiasm and total presentation scores.

In the samples described here, presenting individuals select their own product or service offering; there is no reason, therefore, to assume that those evaluating these presentations have any other than casual knowledge of the product or service being offered in the presentation. However, Heiser (2005) suggests that evaluations of confidence and enthusiasm in the salesperson directly ascribe to the value of the product or service being offered. We thus suspect that individuals observing these presentations may infer levels of product knowledge from the confidence and enthusiasm exhibited by the sales person in the presentation.

H3: There is a significant correlation between (a) individual and (b) group mean scores on 'confidence and enthusiasm' and evaluations of 'product knowledge'.

Researchers have noted that positive traits, experiences, and emotions may not exhibit strictly monotonic effects on outcome variables (Davis, 2008). Communications and legal research have also found that moderate levels of confidence lead to better interpersonal communications, while extreme displays of confidence lead to poorer outcomes (Cramer, et al., 2009b). We thus posit that confidence and enthusiasm is nonmonotonic—that is, there is a curvilinear effect of confidence and enthusiasm in role-play sales presentations, with a lack of confidence and overconfidence both producing less effective overall sales presentations.

H4: There is a curvilinear (inverted U-shape) relationship between students' rankings on the NCSC item measuring confidence and enthusiasm and overall sales effectiveness.

Results

Individuals are found to differ from the class mean significantly in both positive and negative directions and the differences are even starker with scored differences in one sample ranging

from 7.26 to 9.66 ($t(30) = -9.62, p < .000$) and from 6.5 to 9.59 ($t(25) = -8.10, p < .000$). In the one section 8 individuals were found to significantly lack confidence and enthusiasm while 10 showed superior confidence and enthusiasm and 22 did not differ significantly from the class mean. In section 2, (N=30), 8 individuals were found to significantly lack confidence and enthusiasm while 10 showed superior confidence and enthusiasm and 12 did not differ significantly from the class mean. These results offer support for hypothesis 1.

Sixty-two (89%) of the individuals exhibited a correlation between scores on the item 'confidence and enthusiasm' and their total score for the presentation while only 8 did not. This finding offers substantial support for hypothesis 2(a). As a group, this relationship is significant ($r = 0.772 (69), p < 0.000$), offering support for hypothesis 2(b). Also, 42 (60%) exhibited a significant correlation between the item 'confidence and enthusiasm' and the item 'product knowledge'; evaluators of role-play sales presentations often infer product knowledge from the enthusiasm and confidence of the salesperson in partial support of hypothesis 3(a). As a group, this correlation is significant ($r = 0.619 (69), p < 0.000$) offering support for hypothesis 3(b).

A series of linear regressions evaluates hypothesis 4. For the control variables of the five sales phases, the approach, presentation and close were significantly related to overall sales performance. The linear term for confidence and enthusiasm was significant and positive in step 2 indicating the presence of a linear relationship with sales performance. In step 3, both the linear and quadratic terms for confidence and enthusiasm produced significant effects and explained 94.5% of sales presentation variance. Model 3 produced significant positive linear and significant negative quadratic effects indicating support for hypothesis four. Confidence and enthusiasm contribute to better sales presentation performance up to a point where the negative effects change the direction of the curve.

Discussion

The results of the analyses point toward a complex relationship between confidence and enthusiasm and sales presentation effectiveness. The first analysis demonstrates a significant individual difference between subjects on ratings of confidence and enthusiasm in two different sections of students. Our second analysis suggests that these ratings of confidence and enthusiasm are correlated, at the individual and group level, with perceived product knowledge and total presentation scores. The observed differences in confidence and enthusiasm contribute, or are detrimental, to evaluations of the salesperson's product knowledge and total scores awarded the presentation. Finally, there is a curvilinear relationship between the item

'confidence and enthusiasm' and total presentation scores suggesting an individual ideal point, beyond which the salesperson may become overly animated or domineering to the detriment of the presentation.

References available upon request