



Storytelling during retail sales encounters

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 8 January 2013

Received in revised form

6 April 2013

Accepted 6 April 2013

Available online 2 June 2013

Keywords:

Story

Narrative

Sales communication

Influence tactics

Persuasion

ABSTRACT

Many researchers have emphasized the importance of communication in personal selling. Psychologists and researchers in management and advertising have recognized the importance of communication via stories, but this has not extended to research in sales. This paper uses a framework developed from exploratory field work and the literature on stories to investigate storytelling by retail salespeople in three similar experimental studies. The experiments manipulate personal versus business stories across three different topic areas: entity, product, and digression. The results suggest that product stories told from a business point of view may be most effective in enhancing consumers' purchase intentions in onetime sales encounters.

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1. Introduction

When we buy something, we're really buying a story, says Godin. A salesperson's job is to tell the story...The customer comes to exchange money for a story, and they'll believe the one that best matches their worldview...If you tell the salesperson your back hurts, you're saying, "Please tell me a story about the very best mattress that will help my back." (Selling-Power.com, 2012)

Marketers have long postulated communications as a central construct in persuasion and sales (Crosby et al., 1990; Dwyer et al., 1987; Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Vadi and Suuroja, 2006; Williams and Spiro, 1985). Storytelling is likewise viewed as a central part of human communications in such diverse research as psychology (Wyer, 1995), relationships (McGregor and Holmes, 1999), and management (Barry and Elmes, 1997). In spite of this, storytelling by the sales staff has not been extensively examined in the marketing literature.

Psychologists posit storytelling as a key to cognitive reasoning (Polkinghorne, 1988) social interchange (Schank, 1990), memory (Schank and Abelson, 1995) and view of self and others (Gergen and Gergen, 1988; McAdams, 1993). Management researchers have studied storytelling in areas as diverse as the strategy of entrepreneurship (Lounsbury and Glynn, 2001) and organizational research (Pentland, 1999).

In the academic literature, marketing scholars have examined storytelling in advertising (Escalas and Stern, 2003) and brands

(Woodside et al., 2008). There is also a substantial practitioner literature on storytelling in management (e.g. Denning, 2005). As the opening vignette illustrates, some marketing practitioners (e.g. Godin, 2009) ascribe a critical role to storytelling in sales, so-much-so that they view selling as the act of storytelling.

This research addresses the lack of academic inquiry into storytelling in sales by investigating the effect that different types of stories have on consumers' perceptions of the salesperson and the product. It uses three experimental studies based on exploratory research and the diverse literature on storytelling. This research effort thus sheds light on, "the buyer–seller interaction in terms of salesperson influence tactics behavior and the importance of establishing credibility with buyers as a basis of influence (Evans et al., 2012, p. 89)." Storytelling fits neatly into a modern paradigm of sales in which, "Sales leaders must move people, not manage them (Dixon and Tanner, 2012, p. 12)." This will provide information useful to sales researchers for developing future studies, to managers for training salespeople, and to salespeople for honing persuasion tactics.

The paper is organized as follows. First we discuss stories, present the results of exploratory research, and design a framework for the experimental studies. We then introduce our study model and develop corresponding hypotheses. The three experimental studies are subsequently described along with their results and extensive post-study analysis. The paper concludes with a general discussion, managerial implications, limitations, and future research.

2. Storytelling

The definition of story should cover speech acts reported by actors as stories, but it should not be so broad as to become

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meaningless by covering most speech. The definition here is based on Bruner (1986), p. 13 as well as Cohan and Shires (1988), Leitch (1986), and Prince (1980); *definition of story*: a story is a discourse dealing with interrelated actions and consequences in chronological order. Actions and consequences are ‘events’, i.e. processes, situations, or states (Ryan, 1985). To illustrate:

Our firm was struggling to catch up with cell phone makers who introduced smart phones early. But then we entered a joint venture with Microsoft. Now our latest phones are rated as the best in the world.

would be a story by this definition. It links the event (or state) “inferior phones” to the event “best phones in the world” via the causal process of “joint venture with Microsoft”. On the contrary:

Our phones are made through a joint venture with Microsoft.

is simply a disclosure of factual statement because it does not causally link events.

This typical terse or minimal spoken cell phone story is not literature and has few of the trappings associated with novels, folk tales, or even a story on the nightly news. The bad guys (other cell phone makers), the good guys (our firm), the white knight (Microsoft), the complication (we fell behind), and the resolution (best phones in the world) are understood largely through story grammar and the hearer’s background knowledge rather than extensive story development by the speaker.

Narrative transportation theory (NTT) offers one explanation of the power of stories; it relies on other mechanisms than do dual process models like the elaboration likelihood model (Gerrig, 1993; Phillips and McQuarrie, 2010). With NTT, hearers are transported to the story world in which aesthetically based narrative processing predominates over paradigmatically oriented analytical processing (Gerrig, 1994). Narrative processing can produce higher product evaluations via lower negative cognitive response, increased realism of experience, and greater affective response (Escalas, 2007).

Aesthetically based narrative processing is more holistic in nature than the piecemeal or logico-scientific approach of analytical processing (Bruner, 1986). In a world dominated by incomplete information and its associated risk, narrative processing becomes very valuable as a coping mechanism in decision making (Robinson and Hawpe, 1986). Truth in arguments on the other hand relies more on verifiability or falsifiability, which is the domain of paradigmatic or analytical processing and is poorly adapted for dealing with ambiguity (Adaval and Wyer, 1998; Zukier, 1986). Narrative processing accepts the limits of human cognition, relies on context and background knowledge, and discards incongruent pieces of information to create a plausible whole (Bruner, 1986; McGregur and Holmes, 1999; Gerrig, 1993).

3. A framework for sales staff storytelling grounded in exploratory research

Exploratory research conducted by the authors involving qualitative surveys of 238 retail consumers and depth interviews and

field observation of 49 salespeople, sales managers, buyers, and purchasing managers in a business-to-business context was utilized to develop a framework that could serve to guide the experimental studies. In light of this and the literature review, two factors stood out as particularly important and provided a foundation for the experimental work that follows: (1) the primacy of business versus personal relationships and (2) story topic.

Specifically, while salespeople felt the personal relationship came first and then the business relationship, consumers often felt the opposite was true. One common view was expressed succinctly by a junior b-to-b salesperson:

For me it is absolutely personal [first]. (Martin)

Consumers on the other hand indicated that the relationship existed for business reasons and that any personal matters were secondary to the point of being unnecessary in some cases. One mid-career business buyer said:

As far as business decisions it really doesn't have an effect on it, it is just making a connection or breaking the ice for conversations.

Yes I can be a business friend but I am going to make the decision not based upon the relationship but what is best for our company overall through the whole process. (Leo)

This discrepancy in consumer and salespeople’s views regarding the primacy of personal or business relationships was incorporated into our framework via point of view (i.e. personal or first person story versus business or third person story).

Another fundamental aspect of a story is its topic. The qualitative studies and objective observation of salespeople in the field helped us identify three story topics that appear to be critical in a sales context. These topics include: the entity, the product, and digression.

Entity stories are either about the self if told from a personal point of view or the firm if told from a business point of view. Entity stories are perhaps the most versatile type as they can be used as part of rational, emotional/relational, and coercive influence attempts (Evans et al., 2012; McFarland et al., 2006).

Product stories are either about product success known to the salesperson and told in the first person, or product success known to the business told in the third person. Product success stories are particularly suited to the information exchange and recommendations of rational influence tactics and can be utilized in coercive tactics as well.

Digression topics focus on human interests. Human interest personal stories include small talk about activities like a salesperson’s vacation. Human interest business stories could include stories about the economy, the industry, and what competitors are up to. Such stories are well adapted for use in the ingratiation and inspirational appeals of emotional/relational influence tactics. See Table 1 for the framework and story types of the individual cells.

4. Hypothesis development

Building on the exploratory work, three experimental studies were designed to evaluate the impact of the different story types

Table 1
Framework for storytelling by the sales staff.

Point of view	Topic		
	Entity	Product	Digression
Personal	Disclosure of self	Product success—1st person	Human interest—1st person
Business	Disclosure of firm	Product success—3rd person	Human interest—3rd person

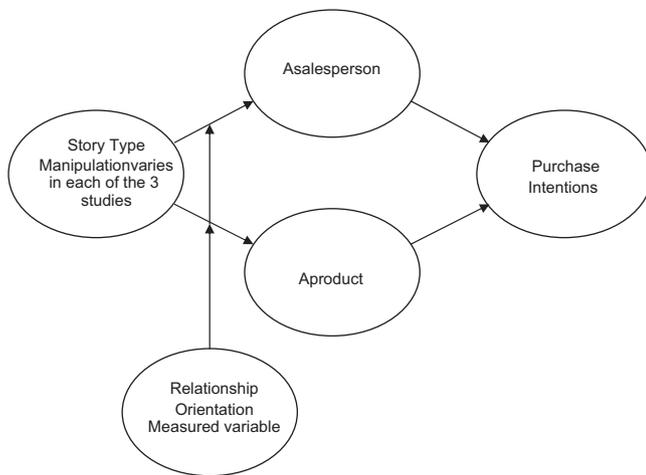


Fig. 1. Theoretical model.

on consumers' attitudes toward both the salesperson and the product (and ultimately on purchase intentions). The first study compared the effect of personal entity versus business entity stories. The second study compared the impact of personal product versus business product stories. The third and final study compared the influence of personal digressions versus business digressions. Fig. 1 offers a graphical summary of the relationships tested in the three experimental studies; we note that while the story manipulation differs across each of the studies, the nomological model tested across all three studies remains the same. Hence, several of the study hypotheses (i.e. H3–H5) are the same across all three studies.

4.1. Hypotheses 1a, 1b, and 1c: The effect of story type on attitude toward the salesperson

Personal stories may more readily access interpersonal scripts and schemas (Bornstein, 1989; Schank and Abelson, 1977), be more pertinent to and diagnostic of the salesperson than the product as an attitude object (Haddock and Zanna, 2000), and be more easily connected to the consumer's self-narratives than are business stories (Gergen and Gergen, 1988; McAdams, 1993). For this reason, we expect to find that

H 1a. Personal stories that make a disclosure about the salesperson will have a greater positive effect on consumers' attitude toward the salesperson than business stories that make a disclosure about the firm. [Study 1]

H 1b. Personal stories about the salesperson's direct product success knowledge will have a greater positive effect on consumers' attitude toward the salesperson than do business stories that reveal the salesperson's knowledge about the firm's product successes. [Study 2]

H 1c. Personal stories concerning human interests will have a greater positive effect on consumers' attitude toward the salesperson than do business stories concerning business related human interests. [Study 3]

4.2. Hypothesis 2a, 2b, and 2c: The effect of story type on attitude toward the product

In contrast to personal stories, business stories access the cognitive schemas and scripts the consumer already holds about the product class (Schank and Abelson, 1977). Business stories will also affect the consumer's self-narrative differently than personal

stories, as personal stories interact and become embedded with the more affective personal portions of the narrative and business stories do the same with the more cognitively based product experience aspects (Gergen and Gergen, 1988; McAdams, 1993). Consequently we expect to find that:

H 2a. Business stories that make a disclosure about the firm will have a greater positive effect on consumers' attitude toward the product than personal stories that make a disclosure about the salesperson. [Study 1]

H 2b. Business stories that reveal the salesperson's knowledge about the firm's product success will have a greater positive effect on consumers' attitude toward the product than do personal stories about the salesperson's direct product success knowledge. [Study 2]

H 2c. Business stories concerning business related human interests will have a greater positive effect on consumers' attitude toward the product than do personal stories concerning human interests. [Study 3]

4.3. Hypotheses 3a and 3b: The moderating role of relationship orientation

Relationship orientation refers to "the desire to engage in a strong relationship with a current or potential partner to conduct a specific exchange (Palmatier et al., 2008, p. 175)." Sales encounters and relationship building impose social, time, and monetary costs on the consumer (Dwyer et al., 1987). High relationship orientation consumers willingly shoulder the added social costs of listening to personal stories while low relationship orientation consumers may penalize a salesperson for imposing such costs.

H 3a. The consumers' relationship orientation will moderate the effect of story type on salesperson evaluations. The effect of personal stories versus business stories on consumers' attitude toward the salesperson will be greater when the consumers' relationship orientation is high than when it is low.

The effect will be different with attitude toward the product as low relationship orientation consumers appreciate the useful information about the transaction while high relationship orientation consumers find their social aspirations thwarted.

H 3b. The consumers' relationship orientation will moderate the effect of story type on product evaluations. The effect of business stories versus personal stories on consumers' attitude toward the product will be greater when the consumers' relationship orientation is low than when it is high.

4.4. Hypothesis 4 and 5: The effects of attitude toward the salesperson and attitude toward the product on consumers' purchase intentions

In linking attitudes to purchase intentions, researchers following Ajzen and Fishbein (1975) rely on the beliefs→attitudes→intentions→behavior psychological model of behavior and accept, "... that the most immediate precursor of behavioral intention is attitude... (Oliver, 1980, p. 461)."

H 4. Consumers' attitude toward the salesperson will increase their purchase intentions.

Likewise, we expect that improved consumer attitude toward the product should result in increased purchase intentions.

H 5. Consumers' attitude toward the product will increase their purchase intentions.

5. The experimental studies

All three studies were very similar and differed only in regard to the story manipulated. Study 1 ($n=140$) evaluated the effects of personal entity versus business entity stories. Study 2 ($n=132$) compared the impact of personal product versus business product stories. Study 3 ($n=155$) assessed the relative impact of personal digression versus business digression stories. Thus each experiment employed a 2 (story type: between subjects manipulation) \times 2 (relationship orientation: hi/lo—measured variable) design.

5.1. Method

5.1.1. Procedure

For each study, undergraduate students from a major university in the south central United States participated in return for extra credit in a course. Participants were randomly assigned in groups to see a one minute video of a sales pitch for a cell phone containing the appropriate type of story. Actor, setting, clothing, lighting, duration, etc. were the same across conditions and efforts were made to ensure that physical cues like smiling and voice pitch were the same as well. The sales pitch consisted of a story along with some separate factual information as would be expected in a natural sales conversation. No brand of cell phone was mentioned during the experiment. Immediately after viewing the video, participants filled out a questionnaire measuring attitude toward the salesperson, attitude toward the product, and purchase intentions. Finally, covariate measures, manipulation checks, demographic questions, probes for suspicion, and debriefing completed the experiment, which lasted about 15 min.

5.1.2. Study variables

Across all three experiments, story type (manipulated) and relationship orientation (measured) served as the independent variables. For the dependent variables, attitude toward the salesperson and attitude toward the product were measured using multi-item, Likert-type scales drawn from the literature and purchase intentions was measured using a semantic differential scale (see Table 2). Two covariates, cell phone involvement and task or experimental involvement, were measured. Finally, two 9-point Likert type measures (anchored by strongly disagree and strongly agree) were used as manipulation checks. Given that within each study the stories differed only in regard to their type or viewpoint (i.e. personal or business), the manipulation checks gauged whether subjects perceived differences in the story's viewpoint by asking the following: "The salesperson's story was about something that he or she did" and "The salesperson's story was about something that the cell phone maker did."

5.1.3. Analytical procedures

The adequacy of the study's measures was evaluated via confirmatory factor analysis. Furthermore, H 1–3 were evaluated via MANCOVA. For each MANCOVA, attitude toward the salesperson, attitude toward the product, and purchase intentions were used as the dependent variables, while story type, relationship orientation, and their interaction terms were used as the independent variables, and lastly cell phone involvement and task orientation were used as covariates. Across all three experimental studies, MANCOVA assumptions related to the dependent and independent variables, homogeneity, normality, and independence were met (Hair et al., 2006). Furthermore, cell sizes were appropriate for MANCOVA (average cell size $n=71$), the correlations between study independent variables were acceptable, and missing data, outliers, and hypothesis guessing were not a problem in any of the studies. Finally, H 4 and 5, which examined the impact of attitude toward the salesperson and attitude toward the

product on consumers' purchase intentions, were evaluated via regression analysis. For all three studies, the regression assumptions of constant variance of the error terms, independence of the error terms, normality, and adequate sample size were satisfied (Hair et al., 2006).

5.1.4. Manipulation checks

Prior to analysis, the success of all manipulations was evaluated. Across all three experiments, the manipulation checks indicated that the manipulation of story type (personal versus business) was highly successful with $p < .001$ for the two manipulation measures across all three studies.

5.1.5. Measurement model

The CFA via LISREL 8.80 results across all three studies were similar and indicated good fit of the model to the data (to avoid redundancy, only CFA fit indexes for study 1 are provided in the text). The CFA fit indexes for study 1 are as follows: $\chi^2=168.47$ (d.f. = 137, $p=.035$); RMSEA = .036; CFI = .99; SRMR = .046. In addition, the composite reliability, Cronbach's alpha, and average variance extracted for all scales were all well above the established standards of 7, 7, and 5, respectively (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). All loadings were significant and of substantive magnitude (Byrne, 2005). The results thus support the unidimensionality, reliability, convergent validity and divergent validity of the measures (see Table 2).

5.1.6. Tests of Hypothesis 1–3

Hypothesis 1 (parts a–c) postulated that personal stories (regardless of topic) would have a stronger effect on consumers' attitude toward the salesperson than business stories. Hypothesis 2 (parts a–c) argued that business stories (regardless of topic) would have a stronger effect on consumers' attitudes toward the product than personal stories. Finally, Hypothesis 3 posited that the effects of story type would be contingent on consumers' relationship orientation. Across all three studies – regardless of story topic (i.e. Study 1: entity stories, Study 2: product stories, and Study 3: digressions) – the MANCOVA results did not support H1, H2, or H3. Specifically, the multivariate main effect of story type was not significant in Study 1 ($F(3,127)=.07$, $p=.98$), Study 2 ($F(3,125)=.74$, $p=.53$), or Study 3 ($F(3,142)=.67$, $p=.58$), though the effects were successfully subjected to more sensitive analysis in Section 6.1 below. Furthermore, contrary to H 3, additional multivariate tests revealed there were no significant interaction effects between the story types and relationship orientation (or any of the additional covariates considered in the study).

5.1.7. Tests of Hypotheses 4 and 5

Hypothesis 4 argued that consumers' attitude toward the salesperson increases their purchase intentions and Hypothesis 5 posited that consumers' attitude toward the product increases their purchase intentions. Both hypotheses generally received support across the three studies. Specifically, in study 1, attitude toward the salesperson ($\beta=.16$, $p=.05$), and attitude toward the product ($\beta=.60$, $p < .01$) predicted consumers' purchase intentions (adjusted $R^2=.35$). In Study 2, attitude toward the salesperson ($\beta=.01$, $p=.93$), did not predict consumers' purchase intentions while attitude toward the product ($\beta=.80$, $p < .01$) did (adjusted $R^2=.53$). Finally in Study 3, attitude toward the salesperson ($\beta=.18$, $p=.05$), and attitude toward the product ($\beta=.63$, $p < .01$) both predicted consumers' purchase intentions (adjusted $R^2=.47$).

Table 2
Studies 1–3 constructs and measures.

Construct, assessment, and items	Std. loading Studies 1–3
Asalesperson (Asp)—adapted from DeCarlo (2005) and Babin et al. (1999) ($\alpha=.947$, CR=.95, AVE=86%)	
1. I like this salesperson	.93, .88, .83
2. I find this salesperson appealing	.91, .95, .89
3. I feel good about this salesperson	.94, .92, .90
Aproduct (Ap)—adapted from Holzwarth et al. (2006) and Heijden et al. (2003) ($\alpha=.941$, CR=.94, AVE=81%)	
1. I like this cell phone	.86, .91, .89
2. I have a favorable impression of this cell phone	.95, .93, .93
3. The cell phone is appealing	.91, .96, .92
4. It seems like a good cell phone	.87, .92, .84
Purchase intentions (PI)—9 pt. scale ($\alpha=.946$, CR=.95, AVE=85%). In the future if I need this product I would consider this one:	
1. Unlikely	Likely .93, .92, .96
2. Improbable	Probable .95, .97, .92
3. Doubtful	No doubt .90, .92, .88
Relationship Orientation (RO)—adapted from Palmatier et al. (2008) ($\alpha=.910$, CR=.91, AVE=77%)	
1. I need a close relationship with this salesperson to be sure I get what I want	.86, .85, .86
2. A close relationship helps me successfully buy this product	.96, .98, .95
3. A strong relationship with the salesperson is very helpful when selecting this product	.82, .86, .87
Cell Phone involvement (CP)—adapted from Voss et al. (2003) using 3 utilitarian and 3 hedonic items ($\alpha=.932$, CR=.93, AVE=.82) Do you feel that cell phones are:	
1. Not fun	Fun .90, .84, .90
2. Dull	Exciting .95, .84, .92
3. Not enjoyable	Enjoyable .87, .93, .88
Task Involvement (TI)—adapted from Gammoh et al. (2006) and MacKenzie and Lutz (1989) ($\alpha=.827$, CR=.85, AVE=65%) Which best describes your involvement while viewing the video:	
1. Uninvolved	Involved .62, .68, .79
2. Concentrating very little	Concentrating very hard .88, .89, .95
3. Paying very little attention	Paying a lot of attention .89, .87, .88

" α " is "Cronbach's alpha", "CR" is "composite reliability," "AVE" is "average variance extracted," "Std. loading" is "standardized loading." All loadings were significant.

6. Post-study analysis

6.1. Further analysis of the proposed main effects

Attitude toward the salesperson and attitude toward the product were regressed on the manipulation checks (recall that MC1 asked if the salesperson told a personal story and MC2 asked if the salesperson told a business story). The manipulation check questions were measured on 9 point Likert scales and thus provided a continuous measure (where greater variance between subjects is possible) analogous to the dichotomous manipulated variable of story type used in the individual studies. Further, the entire 427 cases across the three studies were combined for use in the regression analysis. As each study does vary by topic, this data can no longer be said to come from a true experiment, but may still provide useful insight. Relationship orientation, cell phone involvement, and task involvement were used as control variables in the regression.

First, attitude toward the salesperson was regressed on manipulation check 1 (personal) and manipulation check 2 (business). The result of this analysis revealed that MC1_{personal} significantly predicted attitude toward the salesperson ($\beta=.070$, $p < .05$), but MC2_{business} did not ($\beta=.033$, $p > .10$) (adjusted $R^2=.10$). Conversely, when attitude toward the product was regressed on the manipulation checks, MC1_{personal} did not predict attitude toward the product ($\beta=.046$, $p=.15$), but MC2_{business} did ($\beta=.064$, $p < .05$) (adjusted $R^2=.08$).

The analysis lends support to the proposed main effects of personal versus business stories on attitude toward the salesperson (H1) and attitude toward the product (H2). Using more sensitive measures this post study supports H1 and H2 thus suggesting that a selling story's point of view may influence

consumers' attitude though the effect may be small in this one-shot experimental encounter.

Before proceeding to discuss the second post-study analysis, it is worth noting that the experimental manipulations differed only in their use of first person pronouns in the personal story condition versus third person pronouns in the business story condition. While this controls for potential confounding variables quite well, it makes for a very subtle manipulation that could perhaps be made more powerful in future studies exploring the effect of personal versus business stories. It may likewise be the case that the effect becomes more pronounced with repeated encounters between buyers and sellers. Finally, the effect may vary depending on the stage of the buyer–seller relationship, type of product, or other variables.

6.2. The influence of story topic

Study 1 investigated the entity topic, study 2 the product topic, and study 3 the digression topic. In order to investigate whether story topic was a relevant determinant of consumers' attitudes in sales contexts, we conducted an additional MANCOVA using attitude toward the salesperson, attitude toward the product, and purchase intentions as dependent variables and relationship orientation, cell phone involvement, and task involvement as covariates. The independent variable for the MANCOVA was study topic which took on one of three different values depending on the study: entity topic, product topic, or digression topic, with cell sizes of 140, 132, and 155, respectively. Again this cross study analysis cannot be considered a true experiment but still has the potential to offer meaningful insight.

In the overall model, the main effect of study topic was significant ($F(6,840)=9.17$, $p < .001$). The main effects of study topic on the

dependent variables individually were likewise significant: attitude toward the salesperson ($M_{\text{entity}}=4.97$, $M_{\text{product}}=4.68$, and $M_{\text{digression}}=3.85$; $F(2,421)=15.99$, $p < .001$); attitude toward the product ($M_{\text{entity}}=5.68$, $M_{\text{product}}=6.16$, and $M_{\text{digression}}=4.90$; $F(2,421)=19.53$, $p < .001$); and purchase intentions ($M_{\text{entity}}=5.06$, $M_{\text{product}}=5.34$, and $M_{\text{digression}}=4.42$; $F(2,421)=8.71$, $p < .001$).

Post hoc analysis via ANOVA indicated that with attitude toward the salesperson and purchase intentions as dependent variables, the entity and product conditions each differed significantly from digressions but not from each other ($p < .05$). In contrast, for attitude toward the product as a dependent variable all story topics differed significantly from each other ($p < .05$).

These results indicate that the topic of a sales story is potentially an important predictor of consumers' attitudes and purchase intentions. Perhaps it is more important than personal versus business point of view, particularly in onetime transactions as conducted here. Importantly, the post hoc analyses indicate that digressions are always the worst choice of story type in one-shot retail sales encounters. In addition, the effect of entity stories on attitude toward the salesperson is greater than that of product stories, but not significantly so. For attitude toward the product, product stories have a greater effect than entity stories.

7. Discussion

Stories are ubiquitous in human communication from entertainment to religion, politics, and water cooler talk. This research begins the process of fleshing out a scientific understanding of storytelling during sales encounters and provides a doorway to new insights on sales influence tactics and information elicitation skills. The framework developed here for storytelling in the personal selling area should serve as a good starting point for mapping this phenomenon further experimentally or otherwise. Likewise the definition of story in the sales setting put forward in this research provides a point of departure for expanding scientific inquiry into this important sales topic.

The results and post study analysis offer several valuable insights. First, while buyers and sellers may disagree on the primacy of personal relationships, this discrepancy appears to have a small effect on the efficacy of storytelling in an initial sales encounter. The post-study analyses do reveal theoretically meaningful differences regarding the impact of personal versus business stories on consumer responses: stories rooted in a personal point of view are most likely to influence purchase intentions through their effects on consumers' attitude toward the salesperson while stories told from a business perspective are most likely to influence purchase intentions through their impact on consumers' attitude toward the product. This pattern of effects occurs independently of consumers' relationship orientation. Importantly, our results also indicate that in onetime sales encounters, attitude toward the product are more strongly determinant of consumers' purchase intentions than attitudes toward the salesperson. As a consequence, stories told from a business point of view (which influence purchase intentions through their effects on consumers' attitude toward the product) may prove to be most effective in onetime sales encounters; note too that initial sales encounters typically share essential elements with one-shot retail sales encounters, such as brevity and the need to ensure that the sales process gains momentum.

Second, our results indicate that story topic may prove to be an important determinant of the effects of storytelling in sales encounters. While our exploratory work revealed that digressions are seen as useful stories for ice-breaking or establishing rapport, our post study analyses reveal that such stories are least effective in one-shot encounters with consumers. Moreover, product stories appear to effectively enhance consumers' attitudes toward

products and to be as equally effective as entity stories in influencing consumers' attitudes toward salespeople. Overall, the study results thus suggest that product stories told from a business point of view may be the most effective in maximizing consumers' purchase intentions in onetime sales encounters.

Finally, it is worth underscoring that our methodological approach to investigate the effects of storytelling differs from most prior research in the sales literature. Experiments are seldom employed in sales and relationship research in general. A recent study revealed that while surveys make up 76.9% of sales research lab experiments make up just 5.3% (Plouffe et al., 2008, p. 85). A programmatic research effort into storytelling requires methodological triangulation, here begun by experiments informed by qualitative studies, as inspired by earlier successful experiments in retail selling (Bambauer-Sachse and Gierl, 2009; Ebster et al., 2006). The value of experimental input outweighs the problems of developing confound free yet powerful manipulations over time and the difficulty of learning to replicate sales encounters in a controlled environment for storytelling experiments.

7.1. Managerial implications

The results of our study suggest that product stories told from a business point of view are likely to be most effective in influencing consumer's purchase intentions in onetime sales encounters. The goal of storytelling in one-shot retail sales encounters focused on tangible products should be to ingratiate the consumer with the product and not the salesperson. Specifically, the results of our regression analyses show that product attitudes are by-and-large more influential in one-shot sales situations than attitudes toward the salesperson. Second, while different consumers may want to hear different kinds of stories, it appears that consumers engaged in onetime or initial exchanges prefer stories that focus on the product itself. Such stories appear to maximize consumers purchase intentions both directly and indirectly through their effects on consumers' product attitudes.

In our opening vignette, well-known marketing "guru" Seth Godin suggests that a salesperson's job is to select and communicate stories that match the consumer's worldview. While this is perhaps sound advice, our study results do appear to suggest that certain types of stories may be more or less appropriate in certain sales contexts, independent of individual consumer differences. Specifically, our results suggest salespeople would be well-served by focusing on product stories (told from a business point of view) in onetime sales encounters where the retail product being exchanged is tangible. Based on this finding, we also conjecture that entity stories may be more suitable when products are less tangible and/or consumer services are being exchanged because it is under those types of situations where attitude toward the salesperson may be more critical. Based on our findings it is unclear if there are any circumstances under which digression stories would be of the most value.

While reasonable minds may debate as to whether storytellers are made or born, it appears that firms may obtain a measureable level of return from efforts to train salespeople to select the right type of story in particular types of sales encounters. While not all salespeople may turn out to be great storytellers, selecting the right type of story appears to be a critical aspect of the storytelling process in sales contexts.

7.2. Limitations and future research

As with all research this endeavor was subject to limitations. The participants were not in a natural sales setting but rather viewed a video of a sales pitch as a small group in a classroom. The participants may have reacted differently to storytelling here

because of viewing a video instead of a live salesperson, being in a group of people, or not actually having any interest in purchasing a cell phone at the time of the study. Finally, the participants were a relatively homogenous group of traditional university students.

Future research could naturally seek to address the limitations of this early empirical study. Identifying other relevant variables to manipulate, realistically delivering the stories, employing naturalistic settings, repeated encounters, and replication should be the focus of future experimental efforts.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to express their thanks to Tom Brown, Karen Flaherty, and Mark Houston for their kind assistance during this research.

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