The mediator role of sales force management capability on the relation between market orientation and financial performance

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Resumo
Market orientation has an influence on how sales management works to attract, engage and retain customers. This study demonstrates that sales force management capability is a driver to financial performance when influenced by marketing orientation. Results were found by the exploration of sales management force capability?s three dimensions (sales force structure, talent management, and customer segmentation). To explore these relationships, a survey (n=223) was applied in TIC companies in Brazil. A bootstrap regression technique allowed us to understand how market orientation intensity is determinant to financial performance whereas sales management force capability fully explains this effect. Theoretical and practical contributions are concerned in show that sales force management capability is essential to achieve financial performance, mainly talent management dimension, providing practitioners new understanding to better manage organizational resources.

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Abstract

Market orientation has an influence on how sales management works to attract, engage and retain customers. This study demonstrates that sales force management capability is a driver to financial performance when influenced by marketing orientation. Results were found by the exploration of sales management force capability's three dimensions (sales force structure, talent management, and customer segmentation). To explore these relationships, a survey (n=223) was applied in TIC companies in Brazil. A bootstrap regression technique allowed us to understand how market orientation intensity is determinant to financial performance whereas sales management force capability fully explains this effect. Theoretical and practical contributions are concerned in show that sales force management capability is essential to achieve financial performance, mainly talent management dimension, providing practitioners new understanding to better manage organizational resources.

Keywords: Market orientation, sales force management capability, talent management, financial performance.

1 Introduction

Market orientation (MO) has been explored in marketing literature mainly because its contribution to organizational performance (Kohli & Jaworski, 1990; Narver & Slater, 1990; Thornton, Henneberg & Naudé, 2015; Guo, Wang Hao & Saran, 2018). The core of its concept is to seek for customers and competitor's information, and other environment forces, to make organizational decisions more appropriate to the market (Kohli & Jaworski, 1990; Guo et al., 2018; Mamun, Mohiuddin, Fazal & Ahmad, 2018). This information assists the development of organizational capabilities, necessaries to bring action for companies' daily routines and to reach a more assertive outcome (Morgan, Vorhies, & Mason, 2009). Among a range of organizational capabilities that MO helps to develop, sales capability is one of them (Guenzi, Sajtos, & Troilo, 2016).

Marketing and sales areas in the companies are complementary and important to achieve performance. This occurs because strategies that guide sales and marketing activities must be in line with strategic planning, especially the firm' marketing strategies (Guenzi & Troilo, 2006; Homburg, Vomberg, Enke, & Grimm, 2015).

From this assumption, to generate the market information where companies operate, it is necessary an alignment with the environment, customers and competitors. In addition, it is necessary the development of coordination abilities in order to spread this information across all organization (Narver & Slater, 1990). These factors allow organizations to become market-oriented to a stronger or weaker level and can affect marketing and sales results (Siahtiri, O'Cass, & Ngo, 2014).

Despite many studies regarding MO, there is no complete understanding of its influence on financial performance (FP) or the performance of firms with different levels of this strategic orientation (Guo et al., 2018; Mamun et al., 2018). For this reason, it is necessary to understand this process in a more detailed way, exploring the relation of MO in building sales force management capability (SFMC) and its effects on providing market information in order to attract, engage and retain customers.

Organizations have many challenges to understand the market with high competitiveness. An example of a competitive sector that depends on sales team performance is the Information and Communication Technology Sector (ICT) (BRASSCOM, 2016). In ICT sector there are companies that develop hardware, software and services solutions, which are incorporated by companies from all sectors of the economy (BRASSCOM, 2013). In this B2B context, studies about MO and sales capability are relevant to generate long-term relationships (Weitz & Bradford, 1999; Chang, 2014; Guo et al., 2018).

B2B market focus on customer's relationship, which makes the role of sales force management a necessity. This management is responsible for the leadership, motivation and communication that are reflected on sales team behaviors and how salespeople persuade customers (Baldauf, Cravens, & Piercy, 2001). One of the challenges of sales force management is to ensure talent's attraction from management and development to the final team results, that is, to verify how this sales force helps achieve the planned results (Zoltners, Sinha, & Lorimer, 2008).

The literature suggests that there is a positive relation between marketing orientation and organizational performance (Guo et al., 2018; Mamun et al., 2018). Similarly, the development of marketing capabilities enhances these results shaping firm's strengths to compete at the market (Morgan et al., 2009). However, although there are studies relating MO and marketing capabilities, it is perceived that there is still a latent need to investigate this relationship with specific capabilities, such as SFMC (Morgan, 2012). Therefore, this study aims to verify the mediating role of SFMC in the relation between MO and FP.

There are several studies focusing on sales team's ability or on the salesperson, but little is known about how the managerial process happens to achieve financial goals (Wang and Miao, 2015; Kumar, Sunder, & Leone, 2014; Albers, Raman, & Lee, 2015; Cron, Baldauf, Leigh, & Grossenbacher, 2014). In order to understand how this relation occurs, this study uses the sales force capability approach of Guenzi, et al. (2016), which unlike other authors (Krush, Agnihotri, & Trainor, 2013; Vorhies & Morgan, 2005), presents a distinct construct of personal sales capability. So, there are few recent studies focusing on SFMC, a fact that favors investigations related to this capability (Krush et al., 2013, Siahtiri et al., 2014, Guenzi et al., 2016).

SFMC investigation allows a broad understanding about organization's ability to deal with the sales area, distinguishing it from the individual capability of the salesperson (Guenzi et al., 2016). However, it should be emphasized in this study the roles that each of the SFMC dimensions, such as sales force structure, talent management, and customer segmentation, are investigated on the relation between MO and FP. Understanding SFMC can assist managers in allocating resources. Although sales activities are common, there is still little understanding of how to develop and manage sales force to achieve performance (Guenzi et al., 2016).

Regarding the information above, this study aims to understand the process by which MO can be related to a specific marketing capability, in this case SFMC, and how this contributes to FP when comparing stronger (vs weaker) market-oriented firms.

In a theoretical view, this study aims to understand organizational resources combination, the effects that marketing orientation and SFMC have on FP. In practice, this research contributes to a better understanding of the allocation of resources to obtain superior performance through the management activities of the sales area, enabling the development of more effective sales strategies.

2. Conceptual Framework

Market Orientation on the development of Sales Force Management Capability

Market orientation (MO) concept is related to the development of marketing concept, as a strategic orientation, which leads to a positive result on organizational performance in short and long terms (Ngo & O'Cass, 2012). MO can fit all companies' types, as well customers (Kumar, Jones, Venkatesan, & Leone, 2011; Liao, Chang, Wu, & Katrichis, 2011). Several authors present different but related MO definitions, all in order to provide a better understand of organizational results in an intelligence strategic perspective (Deshpandé, 1999; Day & Wensley, 1988; Kohli & Jaworski, 1990; Narver & Slater, 1990).

Based on these arguments, Kohli and Jaworski (1990) showed that all companies are market-oriented in some level because different resources are used to attract customers and reach a better performance (Kirca, Jayachandran & Bearde, 2005). Some studies have shown positive results on revenues (Ngo & O'Cass, 2012; Guo et al., 2018; Mamun et al., 2018).

However, MO leads to the development of different organizational abilities and activities (Baker & Sinkula, 1999). Specifically, Narver and Slater (1990) explore how activities of acquisition, dissemination of information, and customer value coordination are behavioral dimensions of organizational culture, which involves MO issue. High-level MO companies stimulate the improvement of capabilities which make the relations between customers' expectations and delivered value more congruent (Narver & Slater, 1990; Day, 1994). These activities involve customer, competitors and interfunctional coordination and together it has potential to improve capabilities and financial results (Siahtiri, O'Cass, & Ngo, 2014; Narver & Slater, 1990).

Whereas a lot of marketing capabilities are present in companies, managerial actions and decisions should be strategically oriented to the development of a body of specific capabilities. In this way, the sales force is a strategic oriented marketing capability (Morgan et al., 2009) essential to marketing relationship development (Hombutg et al., 2015), evolving managerial and individual skills (Guenzi et al., 2016).

Sales capabilities have been built from strategic choice's reflection on sales departments activities and involve constant customer contact, business transactions, market diagnosis and responses, as well as credibility and trust construction (Day, 1994; Baldauf et al., 2001). MO, from a cultural perspective, is an antecedent of this capabilities and guides its development since market intelligence is the core of its activities (Morgan et al., 2009). Previous studies have shown that MO influences sales force management capability, presenting an impact on each of its dimensions (Guenzi et al., 2016). However, since MO level (Kohli & Jaworski, 1990) is determinant to a superior performance, we propose that companies with stronger MO will have more influence on their sales management force capability.

H1: Stronger (vs. weaker) market orientation influences positively sales management capability; H1a: Stronger (vs. weaker) market orientation influences positively sales force structure; H1b: Stronger (vs. weaker) market orientation influences positively talent management; And, H1c: Stronger (vs. weaker) market orientation influences positively customer segmentation.

Sales Force Management Capability and Financial Performance

Performance is a complex of results that can be evaluated in organizational and financial shapes. Organizational performance is composed by direct sales results, including volume, market share, and others financial indexes (Baudalf et al., 2001). This means that the way sales team are managed can impact directly on firm's financial results (Cravens, Ingram, LaForge, & Young, 1993; Zoltners et al., 2008).

FP is the achievement of a short-term object, due to relationship actions there are, mostly, present on salespeople job. Salespeople are part of the sales force and organizational abilities aim to manage this team to have better performance (Baudalf et al., 2001).

In this way, SFMC is a fundamental capability on the complex of organizational performance efforts. This capability is related to management activities. According to Guenzi et al. (2016), SFMC is composed by three dimensions - sales force structure, talent management and customer segmentation. Also, several related studies have shown that these dimensions development contributes to financial results (Vorhies & Morgan, 2005; Morgan et al., 2009; Ngo & O'Cass, 2012). Based on these relations, we present hypothesis 2.

H2: Sales force management capability influences positively financial performance; H2a: Sales force structure influences positively financial performance;

H2b: Talent management influences positively financial performance; And, H2c: Customer segmentation influences positively financial performance.

The mediator role of sales force management capability and its dimensions

Market orientation (MO) facilitates the development of marketing capabilities. Marketing mix activities, which are marketing capabilities, are influenced positively by different performance indexes, such as new product development, customer and financial ones (Shin & Aiken, 2012; Ngo & O´Cass, 2012). While marketing capabilities are abilities developed from a strategic orientation, both capabilities and strategic orientation contribute to organizational performance (Morgan et al., 2009). One can note that, by these relations, SFMC, as a marketing capability, also has a mediator role on the relation between MO and performance.

A strong MO leads companies to have more customer and competitor's information, thus improving performance (Guo et al., 2018). When managing these information, SFMC presents activities to potentialize firm customer value proposal (Narver & Slater, 1990; Guenzi et al., 2016). Especially customer information has a massive impact on salespeople activity (Rapp, Agnihotri, & Baker, 2011). More market-oriented companies tend to achieve higher performance, including financial results and even if they use OM as a resource to develop sales abilities they can enhance the effect on performance (Guenzi et al., 2016). For these reasons, we propose that, as MO becomes stronger, SFMC mediates the relation between MO and FP.

H3: Sales force management capability mediates the relation between stronger (vs. weaker) market orientation and financial performance; H3a: Sales force structure mediates the relation between stronger (vs. weaker) market orientation and financial performance; H3b: Talent management mediates the relation between stronger (vs. weaker) market orientation and financial performance; And, H3c: Customer segmentation mediates the relation between stronger (vs. weaker) market orientation and financial performance.

3. Research design, procedures, measures and method

Sampling and Data Collection. To test the proposed hypotheses, a survey (n=223) was performed in the B2B market context. Specifically, we use software and technology companies (ICT) from the South and Southeast of Brazil, which represents 75% of the technology Market in Brazil. (ABES, 2015). Software services and solutions are used in almost all economic sectors (BRASSCOM, 2013), for this reason, these companies need to develop long-term relationship and sales activities (Chang, 2014; Weitz & Bradford, 1999).

Companies were select in meetings in ICT sector associations in the South of Brazil, and in two events, one about e-commerce and other about TIC sector, with 175 respondents. Some companies were selected via Linkedin and others by telephone contact. 245 surveys were sent to CEOs, marketing managers, commercial managers, and salespeople. The return rate was 31%, composed by micro (29%), small (30%), medium (13%) and large (28%) size companies. 78,5% were software developing and solutions companies and 21,5% technologies, information and communications providers services. According to geographic localization, the final sample was composed 57,4% from South and 42,6% from Southeast Brazil companies.

Measurement of Key Model Constructs. Online questionnaire was composed by 32 items. MO was measured using Narver and Slater (1990) scale, SFMC was measured using Guenzi et al. (2016) scales, which presents three dimensions (sales force structure, talent management, and customer segmentation). FP was measured with an adaption of Cruz-González et al. (2015) and Guenzi et al. (2016) scales. All statements were indicated by participants in a 10 points Likert anchored by 1- Completely disagree to 10 – Completely agree.

Convergent and discriminant validity. After performing Exploratory Factorial Analysis, measured items were grouped in index items to each construct. Table 1 shows satisfactory results to related to items loadings (>.868), convergent validity (α>.841), KMO (> .500) and Bartlett's test of sphericity (p=.000), as well as variance explained of 70%.

Table 1

Non-Rotational Factorial Analysis of Constructs

Constructs	Loading Items	Explained Variance	Cronbach Alpha	KMO	Bartlett's Test of Sphericity
Market Orientation (MO)	.790 a .605	70%	.912	.914	.000
Sales Force Management Capability (SFMC)	.929 a .615	82.21&	.909	.874	.000
Sales Force Structure	.929	86.31%	.841	.500	.000
Talent Management (TM)	.857 a .902	77.22%	.852	.721	.000
Customer Segmentation (CS)	.868 a .934	81.37%	.884	.714	.000
Financial Performance (FP)	.769 a .928	76%	.960	.919	.000

Source: The authors (2017), from primary data.

Method of analysis. To test the proposed hypotheses, significant confidence intervals were applied (95%), using bootstrap (n=10.000) method, specifically model 4 of Hayes (2014) regression macros on SPSS software. For small samples, the bootstrap simulation technique shows more reliable results in terms of statistical power and dispenses with the need for normal data distribution (Hayes, 2013). The significant effect is indicated by the absence of signal exchange between the upper and lower limits of the confidence interval. We perform four tests, whereas MO and FP were kept, and the proposed mediators were alternates. This allowed us to understand the influence of SFMC as a unique construct of the proposed relationship, as well as to identify the influence of each of its dimensions.

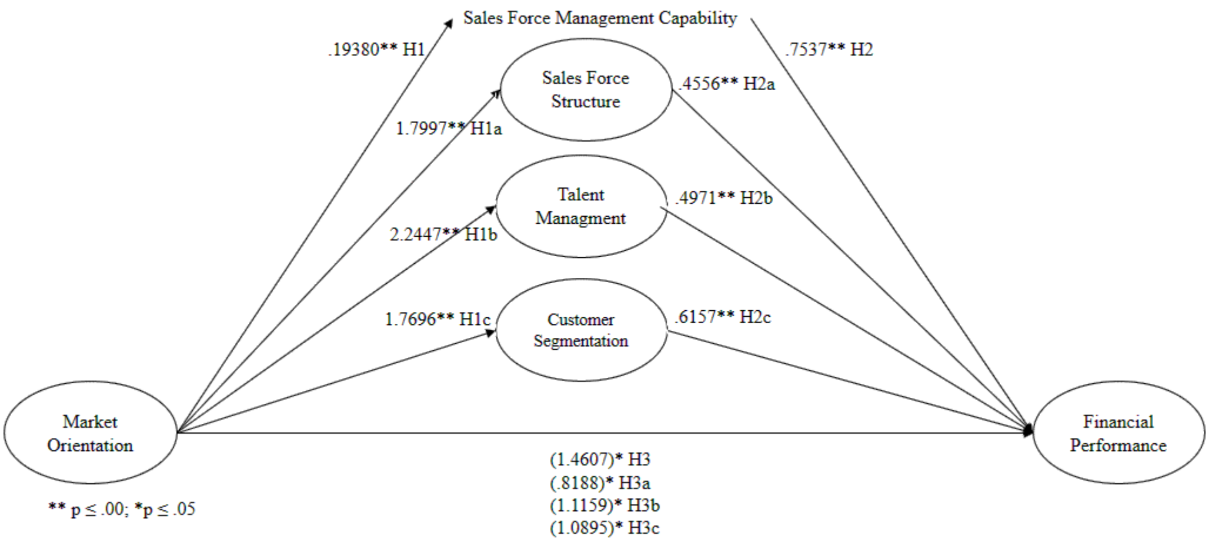
To test hypotheses, the independent continuous variable, MO, was transformed in a binary categorical variable, divided by the median value, creating two groups, the upper median as strong MO companies, coded as 1, and lower median as weak MO companies, coded as 0.

4. Findings

The hypotheses H1, H1a, H1c, H1c, H2, H2a, H2b and H2c were tested by verifying the results of the regressions between independent variable and mediator variable, and mediator variable and a dependent variable, respectively. The hypotheses H3, H3a, H3b and H3c were tested by verifying the mediator effect, resulting of the partial effects of the relations between MO and the mediator, and the mediator and FP (Prado, Korelo & Mantovani, 2014). Figure 1 shows the theoretical model proposed and hypotheses results.

Figure 1

Theoretical model and hypotheses results



Results show significant effects on relations between stronger (vs. weaker) MO and SFMC (Coef. = 1.9380, C.I. = 1.4405 to 2.4356, p= .00), Sales force structure (Coef. = 1.7997, C.I. = 1.1389 to 2.4606, p= .00), Talent management(Coef. = 2.2447, C.I. =3.0421 to 4.5245, p=.00), Customer segmentation(Coef. = 1.7696, C.I. = 1.2493 to 2.2899, p=.00), confirming H1, H1a, H1b e H1c.

There were also significant effects over the relation between SFMC and FP (Coef. = .7537, C.I. = .6379 to .8695, p=.00), Sales force structure and FP (Coef. = .4556, C.I. = .3575 to .5537, p= .00), Talent management and FP (Coef. = .4971, C.I. = .3947 to 5996, p=.00), and Customer segmentation and FP (Coef. = .6157, C.I. = .4943 to .7371, p=.00), confirming H2, H2a, H2b e H2c.

Mediation results showed significant effects. Confirming H3, on the relation between stronger (vs. weaker) MO and FP, SFMC act as a full mediation mechanism (Coef. = 1.4607, C.I. = 1.0694 to .8498, $p \leq .05$). Moreover, sales force structure and FP mediates the relation between stronger (vs. weaker) MO and FP (Coef. = .8199, C.I. = .4732 to 1.1907, $p \leq .05$); Talent management acts as a full mediation mechanism (Coef. = 1.1159, C.I= .7984 to 1.4731, $p \leq .05$); as well as, Customer segmentation (Coef.= 1.0895, C.I. = .7527 to 1.4145, $p \leq .05$), confirming H3a, H3b and H3c.

5. Discussion and Implications

In marketing literature, it is discussed that all companies have a certain degree of MO (Kohli & Jaworski, 1990, Guo et al., 2018; Mamun et al., 2018). According to the results presented, the more market-oriented the more companies develop the SFMC, and the more FP they achieve. Thus, the objective of this research was achieved by presenting the role that this marketing capability plays in the relationship between MO and FP.

The results showed that SFMC plays the role of full mediation on the relationship between MO and FP, corroborating with studies that confirm the mediating role of marketing capabilities (Smirnova et al., 2011; Murray et al., 2011; Shin & Aiken, 2012; Ngo & O'Cass, 2012). This means that the effect of MO on FP only occurs through the influence of SFMC in the analyzed context, which leads to an important theoretical contribution.

This is because the sales management aims to ensure sales force performance to achieve the objectives planned, according to a strategic orientation (Zoltners et al., 2008, Cravens et al., 1993). This management is responsible for the choices that are reflected in team behaviors (Baldauf et al., 2001). Thus, this study demonstrated that firms that make their managerial choices based on the information generated in the market perform better. That is, companies that develop sales force management skills, check changes and anticipate market responses more effectively (Day, 1994).

Thus, SFMC helps to achieve FP (Homburg et al., 2015). One explanation is that the management aims to guarantee the sales team performance (Zoltners et al., 2008). Generally, the manager presents the financial metrics for budget defense and the team itself to have top management support in the investments of the next activities. For this reason, it develops sales activities to increase revenue and profitability (Homburg et al., 2015, Guenzi et al., 2016). Thus, the more MO companies have, the greater the awareness of the importance of sales force development. As a consequence, this capability acts as a driver of FP.

In more details, this study investigated the contribution of each dimension of SFMC in the proposed relationship. It was identified that the greatest contribution of the full mediation effect is given by the talent management dimension (H3b). Thus, market-oriented companies understand the opportunities and threats of the environment, and in this way tend to pay more attention to the recruitment and training of talented individuals. This result highlights the need to align human resources processes and sales management from market intelligence in order to meet the needs of consumers and thus achieve superior FP (Guenzi et al., 2016).

Also related to the mediating effects of the dimensions of the SFMC, it was verified that the variables of customer segmentation (H3c) and sales force structure (H3a) exert less effect than the talent management and their values are close. One interpretation is that structuring the sales force in firms can often include the size and organization of the team that will operate in different markets (Zoltners et al., 2008). Thus, these concepts are close and depending on the company size, so, it is generates similar results.

In the analyzed context, it is critical to developing the sales force management skill to achieve superior performance. It is important to highlight the fact that developing and maintaining a market-oriented organizational culture is an essential prerequisite for high performance (Narver & Slater, 1990), even in a highly competitive sector, such as ICT (BRASSCOM, 2016).

The software industry and service constantly develop new knowledge and technologies, the product life cycle of this sector are shorter (Edison, Bin Ali, & Torkar, 2013), so companies often work from the collaborative way (BRASSCOM, 2016). In addition, software solutions need to be integrated with each other, which leads to a certain standardization of products for use (Sánchez, 1999). This sharing of information and partners leaves companies in a similar way in relation to customer and competitor information. In this way, what can differentiate one company from another is the use of the information raised in the market and how these companies develop skills from them. This study evidenced this assertion by demonstrating the role of SFMC in the relationship between MO and FP.

Thus, this research confirms that the MO influences the SFMC, as well as its dimensions. This reinforces that MO, with its cultural character (Narver & Slater, 1990; Slater & Narver, 1994, Ngo & O'Cass, 2012), allows developing the team management skills of both talent management, sales force structure and customer segmentation.

Theoretical and Managerial Contributions. The results presented contribute to the literature because it presents a greater understanding of the marketing capabilities since this was treated in specific (Morgan, 2012). It is already known that marketing capabilities generate organizational performance, but this research has provided a better understanding of which variable and which specific dimension has the greatest effect on this performance (Morgan et al., 2009; Ngo & O'Cass, 2012).

This study also showed the influence of each dimension of SFMC on FP (H2a, H2b and H2c). Customer segmentation (H2c) was the dimension with the greatest effect on FP. The companies that target their clients tend to be more effective in allocating resources aimed at developing more personalized proposals for each customer profile. Therefore, a higher financial result is attributed to those companies that segment their clients in order to focus their communication and sales efforts on the interaction and development of a specific target market (Guenzi et al., 2016).

In a practical view, the findings show sales managers the role of marketing in the development of sales force management skills and the importance of integrating these resources in order to obtain better results and to develop an competitive advantage (Guenzi & Troilo, 2006; Biemans, Brenčič, & Malshe, 2010; Siahtiri et al., 2014; Homburg et al., 2015). It is relevant to understand the ability to manage the sales force with a greater degree of MO, since these tend to work better with the information coming from the external environment. Thus, there is a clarification on the process by which MO contributes to business outcomes (Kirca, Jayachandran, & Bearden, 2005). The second managerial contribution is that the results show managers that it is paramount to develop SFMC to obtain FP, but also that it is more relevant to manage talent of the sales team, since it exerts a greater influence on FP.

Limitations and Future Research. One research limitation is the application in a single sector of the economy which does not allow to generalize these findings to other sectors. Other limitation is the subjective form we measure the constructs, using latent constructs in this research. Future research can apply this research in different segments, as well as insert personal sales capability to understand individual factors, as there is evidence that SFMC predates personal sales capability (Guenzi et al., 2016).

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