Exploring Sales Techniques through the Minds of Novice and Expert Salespersons

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Neurophysiological recording techniques are helping provide an increased understanding of customers, where such methods are thought to uncover a person's true thoughts and feelings (Fugate 2007). These methods are now being extended to the salesperson to provide insights on selling methods through links with genetic markers and patterns of neuronal firing (Bagozzi, Verbeke et al. 2012). Here, we present an exploratory study using electroencephalographic (EEG) recordings to help salespeople have an increased understanding of their selling methods by looking through their eyes instead of through the eyes of the customer.

In today's market, power continues to shift to customers, and companies must increasingly focus on improving their marketing communication activities to be better than the competition. One aspect for focus is on personal selling, a direct attempt to influence and motivate customers to purchase goods and services by identifying their needs and providing personalized solutions to those needs. When companies focus on customer service, they gain six percent market share per year (Morrison 2001). It stands to reason that companies with experts in personal selling will gain the most. Thus, this study explores what can be discovered from EEG recordings of novice and expert salespersons.

Ten participants (5 expert and 5 novice) were fitted with a standard electrode cap for recording eight channels of EEG using a BioSemi Active Two bioamplifier system connected to a PC. The electrode cap was configured according to the widely used 10-20 system of electrode placement (Homan, Herman et al. 1987). Placement of the cap allowed for the recording of brain activations over the frontal lobe sampled at 256 Hz using active electrodes with a Common Average Reference (CAR). The eight recorded channels were: Fp1, Fp2, F3, F4, Fz, C3, C4, and Cz.

Once fitted with the electrode cap, participants sat still with their eyes open approximately three feet in front of a 21-inch LCD computer monitor which displayed a video clip lasting three minutes in duration of the initial approach used in a sales pitch. A woman was portrayed introducing herself to her male client and orienting him to a software product that she would be presenting. The video was recorded during the National Collegiate Sales Competition held annually at Kennesaw State University (www.ncsc-ksu.org).

Participant activations were measured according to the difference between the distribution of EEG amplitudes when the person was watching the video clip versus when he/she was at rest. Figure 1 illustrates preliminary data obtained from an expert and a novice salesperson who exhibited highest activity in the alpha and beta ranges respectively. The overall results indicate interesting differences between participants per hemispheric differentials (Davidson 1992) and frequencies.

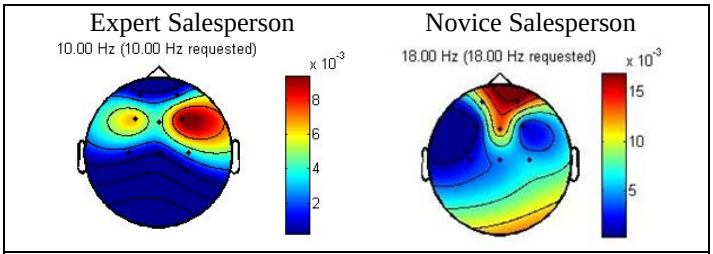

Figure 1. Topological plots of EEG activations across strongest frequencies for an industry expert in sales as compared with a novice.

Overall, this study seeks to lay a foundation for future exploration. It provides encouragement for more research to understand the differences between individuals, perceptions, and the impacts on selling techniques. This knowledge may be integrated into design considerations for computer-based training on sales that incorporates video to help model various techniques. Further, with the use of neurophysiological techniques, a salesperson's unconscious impressions about a customer and the scenario surrounding a sales pitch may be made conscious. Through this consciousness, the salesperson may better adapt his/her own selling techniques to the customer.

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