

Mindset and goal orientation in retail sales: contribution of salespeople and managers perceptions

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# **Mindset and goal orientation in retail sales: contribution of salespeople and managers perceptions**

## **Abstract:**

This research presents a first exploration in the field of management sciences, on mindset and goal orientation theories with a qualitative approach through semi-structured interviews. The analysis of 19 interviews of store managers and salespeople show among others : (1) the mindset is present in the speeches of salespeople and store managers, (2) the mindset is specific to an attribute (selling ability or personality in your research), (3) according to salespeople and store managers, customers can also adopt a goal orientation, especially during a visit to the store, and these goals can alter the exchange with the salesperson, especially in terms of the help requested and according to the predominant goal orientation of the salesperson. The theoretical and managerial implications of these results are discussed.

*Keywords: Salespeople, Mindset, Goal orientation*

*Track: Sales Management and Personal Selling*

## **1. Introduction**

When we look at the way things go today, salespeople have a great chance of being bamboozled and challenged by the growing power of the consumer, new patterns of consumption and distribution, and changes in sales methods and techniques. They may be required to adapt their missions in the face of the digital world and technology. In the same way, they are exposed to an ever-increasing level of awareness and to a consumer who has become knowledgeable. The COVID-19 health crisis has also reminded companies of the importance of adaptability to change, as salespeople need to be resilient and agile, which are key elements for being successful (Sharmaa Rangarajan, and Paesbrugge, 2020). This crisis only increases the changes in consumer behavior and the potential challenges for salespeople and retailers (Roggeveen & Sethuraman, 2020). In order to face these challenges, the motivation of the salesperson seems to us to be a determining attitude. In this context, we believe that two motivational theories, the mindset theory and the goal orientation theory, can be an interesting theoretical framework to better understand salesperson motivation and behavior. They appear in the social-cognitive model of motivation by Dweck and Legett (1988), and have shown their application and theoretical and managerial implications for more than 30 years in different fields (education, human resources, sales and marketing). The concept of mindset is used today by companies such as Microsoft or Nokia. While both theories have been investigated in different fields through quantitative and experimental approaches, we consider it important to apprehend them by means of a qualitative approach. Thus, through interviews conducted with salespeople and managers, the objectives of the research are twofold: (1) is the mindset reflected in the speeches of salespeople and store managers? (2) is the mindset specific to an attribute (personality, selling ability)? (3) understanding the link between the salesperson's goal orientations and that he perceives from the customer during the sales exchange. Let us review the origins of and research on the theories of mindset and goal orientation. We will then develop our research objectives, methodology, and main findings. Finally, we will discuss and conclude by pointing out the limits and avenues for future research.

## **2. The theoretical framework**

### *2.1. Mindset theory: decades of research in different fields*

Mindsets are beliefs that individuals may or may not be aware of, which strongly affect what they want and whether or not they succeed in getting it (Dweck, 2017). According to several authors (Chiu, Dweck, Tong, and Fu, 1997; Dweck, 1986), people can refer to two

distinct mindsets<sup>1</sup> regarding their skills and personal attributes (intelligence, sales skills, etc.): the growth mindset<sup>2</sup>, and the fixed mindset<sup>3</sup>. The growth mindset regards skill as a malleable, controllable quality that can be enhanced over time, the second views skill as a fixed, uncontrollable trait (Dweck, 2017). A great deal of research on mindsets has been undertaken in the field of education (Dweck, 2000). In organizations, mindsets affect how managers evaluate their employees and the effectiveness of people's leadership (Heslin, Latham, and VandeWalle, 2005; Heslin & Vandewalle, 2011; Kouzes & Posner, 2019). Other research has demonstrated its influence on employee performance (Zingoni & Corey, 2017). Human resource mindset theory has many applications for career development, training, and organizational development (Han & Stieha, 2020). Novell Machleit, and Sojka (2016) have highlighted the effect of the salesperson's mindset on learning goals, on the search for feedback and on confidence in his selling abilities. Other research explains that when the performance of contact personnel is attributed to effort rather than natural talent, it leads consumers to perceive them as warmer (Leung, Kim, and Tse, 2020). Research on mindset has also demonstrated its validity in the field of consumer behavior (Jain & Waiten, 2020; Yorkston, Nunes, and Matta, 2010). The mindset theory is connected to the theory of goal orientation. Indeed, both theories are found in the socio-cognitive model of motivation (Dweck & Legett, 1988). Individuals' mindset is an antecedent to the goals they pursue.

## *2.2. Goal orientation theory<sup>4</sup> : decades of research in different fields*

Nicholls (1984) and Dweck (1986) laid the foundations for what would become known as goal orientation theory. They introduced the distinction between two types of goals representing two ways of defining and assessing competence: (a) a learning goal: consisting of seeking to develop skills, acquire new skills and master new situations; (b) a performance goal: seeking to demonstrate, validate and prove one's competence by seeking favorable judgments and avoiding negative judgments about one's competence. Goal orientations theory has demonstrated a strong interest in human resource and sales research. Van Yperen, Hamstra, and van der Klauw (2011) demonstrated that, in performance contexts (work, sport and education), individuals with a dominant performance goal had stronger intentions to cheat than those with a dominant learning goal. Matzler and Mueller (2011) reported that a learning goal (vs. performance goal) had a positive (negative) relationship on knowledge sharing with

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<sup>1</sup> The literature also uses the term "*implicit theories*" interchangeably.

<sup>2</sup> The literature also uses the term "*incremental theory*" interchangeably.

<sup>3</sup> The literature also uses the term "*entity theory*" interchangeably.

<sup>4</sup> The literature also uses the term "*achievement goals theory*" interchangeably.

colleagues. In sales, researchers have demonstrated a positive relationship between the salesperson's learning goal and performance (McFarland and Kidwell 2006). Ahearne, Lam, Mathieu, and Bolander (2010) emphasize that for a learning-related change, goal orientations are very important. Significantly, a learning goal encourages salespeople to adopt adaptive sales behaviour (Sujan, Weitz, and Kumar, 1994) and a customer-oriented behaviour (Harris, Mowen, and Brown, 2005).

### **3. Research objectives and research methodology**

As we have developed in our theoretical framework, mindset theory and goal orientation theory have been studied almost exclusively in an experimental or quantitative manner, in the field of management sciences. In all research undertaken in human resources, marketing and sales, no research has undertaken a qualitative methodology with semi-structured interviews for either theory. While quantitative research is necessary to measure linkages, qualitative research is equally necessary to advance research and/or confirm results. Indeed, a qualitative approach would allow us to confirm but also bring unexplored answers. Thus, through interviews with point of sale managers and salespeople, the objectives of the research are threefold: (1) to identify whether the mindset is found in the speeches of salespeople and store managers? (2) to confirm or refute the literature on whether the mindset is specific to an attribute (selling ability and personality in our research)? (3) Do salespeople and store managers identify goal orientations in customers? Do these goals change the exchange relationship between the salesperson and the customer? We partnered with a company in the telecom sector in France to interview 12 salespeople and 7 store managers. We were careful to have different types of salespeople and store managers in terms of gender, professional experience, and diplomas. The interviews took place between April and May 2019, they were recorded and have been transcribed in full. The corpus of data totals 218 pages or 132,393 words. To conduct the interviews, we developed two interview guides: one for salespeople, and one for store managers. The analysis of the recorded qualitative data was inspired by ingrained theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and we performed coding after a floating reading of all the collected material (Huberman & Miles, 1991).

### **4. The main results**

#### *4.1. The mindset of salespeople and managers is important*

Our results demonstrate that (a) the mindset is found in the speeches of salespeople and store managers, (b) the mindset is specific to an attribute (selling ability or personality).

a) We find the two types of mindset (fixed or growth) on personality (8/12 salespeople and 5/7 store managers) and/or selling ability (12/12 salespeople and 7/7 store managers). For example, some managers have a fixed mindset about selling ability: *"You either have it or you don't (...) I think it's innate, or at least that's the way I feel"* (manager 5) ; and some salespeople also have a fixed mindset about sales skills: *"when you sell, you have to have something. For me, you can't learn how to sell (...), it's either you have it or you don't have it"* (salesperson 9).

b) Our results confirm that the perception of the mindset (fixed or growth) varies according to the attribute or domain (selling ability and personality in our research). For example, we find that a salesperson can have a growth mindset of selling ability and a fixed mindset of personality: *"It will only last for a while, because if you're not a salesperson and you force yourself to be a salesperson, you're not going to be happy. It's going against his nature"* (salesperson 6) (fixed mindset of selling ability); *"So it's something that can be learned and that can develop, because I didn't have it at all. I was a person who didn't already speak, basic. I couldn't have a discussion like a normal person. And by dint of learning, pushing myself, working on it, working on it (...) I had it"* (salesperson 6) (growth mindset of personality). We also find the same result among store managers.

#### 4.2. Goal orientation of salespeople and customers: a decisive relationship in the exchange?

Our results demonstrate that : (a) according to salespeople and store managers, goal orientation can also be adopted by customers during their visit to the store and modify the assistance requested from the salesperson ; (b) the confrontation of the goals of customers and salespeople can considerably disrupt the sales exchange.

a) Salespeople have pointed out to us the existence of goal orientation in customers during their visit to the point of sale. Indeed, customers may adopt a learning goal: *"when they come to the store they want at least a confirmation ... or an opinion from the salesperson, or an explanation"* (salesperson 7). Customers can also adopt a performance goal whose objective would not be to receive explanations and knowledge but to prove their knowledge and even provoke the salesman on his field of expertise: *"There are people like that, they are at their best, they look at everything on the Internet, they watch videos, they test the phones, what have you, they do tests that make them value to say 'that I knew and the salesman of the store he didn't know' "* (salesperson 9). We also find the same result among store managers. We also point out that customers with a performance goal would look less for help from the salesperson but more for confrontation: *"selling is difficult because you can hardly tell them*

*anything, they always try to counter, yes it's very complicated, very complicated. I think that some people, to a certain extent, they expect an exchange but perhaps a little confrontational"* (salesperson 9).

b) We can also see that the learning goal of the customer and the salesperson can create a certain tension in the sales exchange. A salesperson with a predominant performance goal seems to have difficulty adapting to a customer who also has the same predominant goal: *"After me it tends to irritate me, when people do things like I know everything, it irritates me, so the exchange becomes more complicated in the sense that I am less open to the exchange"* (salesperson 9). On the other hand, we can say that a salesperson with a learning goal could be more comfortable with a customer who would like to demonstrate his knowledge (performance goal): *"And sometimes the customer will teach me things that I don't know ... that's fine, I say 'you're teaching me something' so I'll take note of what he tells me and I'll set up the next time with the same case. It's good, it enriches me"* (salesperson 5).

## **5. Discussion, theoretical and managerial implications**

This research focuses on Dweck and Legett's (1988) socio-cognitive model of motivation by studying the theories of mindset and goal orientation in a sales context. Our first contribution is methodological by exploring these theories through a qualitative approach by interviewing store managers and salespeople. Our second contribution is to demonstrate that both mindset (fixed or growth) appear in the speeches of salespeople and store managers, and that many of them have a fixed mindset (personality and/or sales skills) predominant. This is important because much research has shown that the mindset of teachers, coaches and managers is critical for their teams (Dweck, 2017). Managers' mindset is a determining factor on employee coaching, evaluation, and organizational citizenship behavior (Heslin et al., 2005; Ozduran & Tanova, 2017). This result is all the more important in the current health crisis situation, where sales techniques must be adapted in view of customer exchanges and transformed consumption patterns; but also because the mindset is contagious (King, 2020). Companies must therefore train managers in the mindset of growth in terms of both personality and sales skills, but also ensure that they have the right mindset when recruiting.

Next, our third contribution is to confirm the literature on mindset (Chiu et al., 1997; Novell et al., 2016), developing that the latter can be different depending on the attribute, in this case a person may have a fixed mindset of personality and a growth mindset of selling ability (and vice versa). This element can be verified with store managers and salespeople.

Therefore, it is important to choose or create a scale to measure the mindset that is not general but relates to the ability and/or attribute being studied (selling ability, personality, ...).

Our fourth contribution proposes that customers should be able to adopt goal orientation, especially during a visit to the store, and alter the exchange with the salesperson, as we have seen in the salesperson's speech. These goals adopted by the customer could be decisive in many consumer sectors such as electronics, multimedia, automotive, telecom but could also be extended to the service sector especially in the context of tourism. This result is interesting because, while the marketing literature has focused on the different goals (motivations) (for example task shopping, social shopping, experiential shopping) that a customer may adopt during a store visit (e.g. Babin, Darden, and Griffin, 1994; Baker & Wakefield, 2012), no marketing research has focused on goal orientation (learning and performance) among consumers. The study of goal orientation in customers could, among other things, enable companies to understand its influence in exchanges with the salesperson, but also, for example, the level of assistance envisaged by the customer with the salesperson. This would confirm work in psychology in a learning context that has demonstrated that people with a predominant learning goal were more willing to ask for help (Nosaki, 2003). Indeed, for example, a customer with a predominant performance goal might be reluctant to ask the salesperson for help or information because it might represent a lack of knowledge and/or ability. This could lead to problems with the cooperation that is often necessary in a sales exchange. We may also question the adoption of a performance goal by the seller and have an effect on the willingness to ask the customer for help from the seller. Butler and Shibaz (2008) have demonstrated that the adoption of a learning goal by teachers leads to a strong demand for help from students. On the other hand, we have reported that the predominant goal orientation adopted by the salesperson and the customer can deteriorate the sales exchange. For example, a salesperson with an overriding performance goal might have a more difficult exchange with a customer with the same overriding goal; the performance goal being a goal for which social comparison is important. As a result, the performance goal may cause the individual to perceive the other as a threat (Darnon, Buchs, and Butera, 2005). By identifying the goal orientation of customers and salespeople, firms might consider assigning a particular salesperson compatible with the customer's goal. This would also help to understand the different tensions during a sales exchange. Moreover, while two studies have demonstrated the effect of the learning goal of contact personnel on service quality and customer satisfaction (Yee, Lee, Yeung, and Cheng, 2013, 2018), we believe that the goal orientation adopted by the customer could have a moderating effect on his or her satisfaction



or on the perceived quality of service. Likewise, companies, knowing the predominant goal orientation of the salesperson and the customer, should take it into account in the analysis and understanding of customer satisfaction studies. Furthermore, when certain brands offer store training for customers, does the customer's goal orientation have an impact on the company's willingness and appreciation of this initiative? It would also be interesting to quantitatively test the link between the customer's mindset and his goal orientation (a relationship demonstrated in the literature in psychology and sales), a relationship not shown in marketing. We may wonder about the consequence of a different mindset between the customer and the salesperson, does it modify the exchange relationship? Indeed, adopting a mindset represents a totally different vision of the world that impacts the behavior of individuals. Moreover, Dweck (2017) explains that they have an impact on interpersonal relationships.

Our research has certain limitations that can be considered as potential future research avenues. The first limitation of our research is to have interviewed only salespeople and managers of a single company. It would be interesting to continue our research by diversifying the companies and sectors of activity. In addition, we could question salespeople and managers in BtoB. The second limitation is that we have not interviewed customers, however, we would like to continue our research and interview customers in order to understand the direction of their goals during a purchase at the store and the links with the customers' mindset and those of the salespeople. Finally, we encourage research to adapt goal orientation measurement scales for customers and test our proposals quantitatively.

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