

Enhancing International Business Relationships: A Focus on Customer Perceptions of Salesperson Role Performance Including Cultural Sensitivity

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For many manufacturers, success in the international marketplace depends largely on how well they manage their relationships with retailers, distributors, and agents in foreign cultures. Even so, remarkably little effort has been devoted to understanding cultural sensitivity and its role in international business relationships. The authors draw on existing research and 52 in-depth field interviews with Mexican purchasing directors to provide a working definition of salesperson role performance which includes customers' perceptions of cultural sensitivity as a key dimension. A conceptual framework is presented that identifies the antecedents and consequences of salesperson role performance as a guide to future research efforts. Implications for U.S. managers are discussed. J BUSN RES 1998, 42:87-101. © 1998 Elsevier Science Inc.

The quality of a manufacturer's relationships with its foreign retailers, distributors, and agents is an important contributor to international marketing success (Cavusgil and Zou, 1994). Unfortunately, these relationships are often very difficult to develop and maintain (Rosson, 1987). Although the marketing literature emphasizes the importance of adapting sales practices to the needs of foreign customers (Kale and Barnes, 1992), the concept of cultural sensitivity remains a loosely developed notion. Cultural sensitivity is often equated with a general open-mindedness with respect to different cultures and the willingness to understand the ways in which cultures differ. Researchers adopting this view describe the various dimensions upon which people from different cultures vary and assert that managers must "understand" these differences (e.g., Cateora, 1990; Triandis, 1982). Alternatively, cultural sensitivity is assumed when an individual is perceived to act appropriately in foreign cultures.

This view emphasizes that the host's perceptions are paramount and relies heavily on anecdotes to illustrate the serious consequences of culturally insensitive behavior (Kale and Barnes, 1992; Ricks, 1993). These researchers note that foreign channel partners are often upset by a manufacturer neglecting cultural preferences, failing to treat international distributors as equal to domestic distributors, or assuming that a given marketing practice applies to all foreign markets (*Exporting from the United States*, 1988). In contrast, manufacturers that are perceived by their partners as behaving in a culturally sensitive manner are able to develop quality and lasting relationships (Ford, 1980; Rosson, 1984; Rosson and Ford, 1980).

Given the agreed upon interest in cultural sensitivity, it is surprising that the construct of cultural sensitivity remains poorly defined. A more concise definition of cultural sensitivity is needed to permit research on its antecedents and consequences and to help organizations instill this quality in their international sale forces. The purpose of this article is to articulate a definition of the cultural sensitivity construct, illustrate an operationalization in the context of U.S.-Mexican business relationships, and embed the construct in a theoretical framework. In the proposed framework, cultural sensitivity is conceptualized as an important dimension of the customer's perception of salesperson role performance and distinguished from an individual's open-mindedness regarding differences between cultures. The framework emphasizes the customer's perception of salesperson role performance (cf., Brown, Widling, and Coulter, 1991; Michaels and Day, 1985) and provides a mechanism for integrating several literature streams and specifying the antecedents and consequences of salesperson role performance. The research method is described and cultural sensitivity is defined. The constructs in the framework are then delineated and a set of propositions is developed. These propositions are supported by field interviews and research in marketing channels, personal selling and communi-

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cation and serve as a guide for future research. The result is that normative statements about cultural sensitivity can now be operationalized and implemented.

In addition to advancing theory, the article outlines the factors that managers should consider to increase salesperson role performance in international business relationships. Specifically, the model has important implications for the selection and training of international salespeople for selling companies that service foreign buyers directly. The importance of creating an organizational climate that supports the efforts of personnel devoted to building international relationships is also recognized.

Methods

Literature Review

A review of the international marketing and communication literatures reveals several foundations for studying cultural sensitivity. Research on international channel relationships has addressed issues related to cultural sensitivity such as communication, commitment, and relationship quality. Studies of exporter performance have touched on the determinants of international channel relationship success (Rosson, 1987; Rosson and Ford, 1980). This research stream focuses on the initiation, implementation, and review of foreign channel partners (Kale and McIntyre, 1991) and has its origin in studies of domestic channel relationships. In these studies, the relationship outcomes are emphasized at the interorganizational level.

The marketing literature provides many insights on how adaptive or relational behaviors can enhance salesperson performance and buyer-seller relationships (Crosby, Evans, and Cowles, 1990; Weitz, Sujun, and Sujun, 1986). This research has its origins in interpersonal communication, emphasizes the antecedents and consequences of salesperson adaptiveness (Spiro and Weitz, 1990), and is based on studies of relationships within a single culture. In a review of the sales negotiation literature, Graham, Mintu, and Rodgers (1994) note that little is known about what happens in negotiations between partners of different cultures. Also, existing studies report salespeople's self-ratings of customer orientation instead of the seemingly more important customer ratings (e.g., Siguaw, Brown, and Widing, 1994).

An area within the broad discipline of communication has identified intercultural communication competence as its organizing construct (Koester and Oebele, 1988; Ruben, 1989; Spitzberg, 1989). Research in this tradition focuses on individual determinants (motivation, knowledge, and skill) of affective responses (anxiety and uncertainty) that, in turn, influence communication effectiveness (low levels of misunderstanding) in cross-cultural interactions (Gudykunst, 1993; Hammer, 1987). While each perspective offers important insights into cross-cultural relationships, none of the existing views sufficiently addresses the cultural sensitivity construct.

Field Interviews

Following examples in the marketing literature (Kohli and Jaworski, 1990; Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry, 1985), qualitative research was used to identify the cultural dimensions relevant in the context of U.S.-Mexico business relationships. This approach enables a rich examination of the nature of cross-cultural business relationships and provides a broad foundation for theory development. Zaltman, LeMasters, and Heffring (1982) and other methodologists (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) prescribe the appropriate process when using qualitative research in the early stages of theory development.

Because cross-cultural trade relationships vary considerably in nature and intensity, this study focused on the perceptions that Mexican importers have of their relationships with U. S. consumer goods manufacturers of low to moderately priced products. Mexico was chosen because it is the United States' third largest trading partner and a member of the North American Free Trade Agreement. Consumer goods were chosen because a large volume of these goods enter Mexico from the United States each year (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1994). A substantial portion of Mexican wholesalers and retailers import directly from U.S. manufacturers, and senior merchandising managers interact with sales managers based in the United States.

A list of 278 potential respondents was assembled by drawing company names from Bancomext (1993), National Trade Database (1994), and the Directory of Importers in Latin America (1994). The names were cross-referenced in the directories to expand and improve company information (Douglas and Craig, 1983). Each company was then contacted by telephone to verify the existence of the company, its participation in U.S.-Mexico trade and the most senior executive involved in relations with U.S. suppliers. Fifty-eight companies had a direct personal relationship with a U.S. supplier and were able to provide the name of an experienced senior executive. The remaining companies could not be reached in three attempts or purchased U.S. products from a non-U.S. based intermediary. The executives identified were then contacted by telephone to confirm their direct involvement with a sales representative from a U.S. supplier and to schedule an interview. This process ensured that all interviewees were responsible for the importation of products from the United States and had personal contact with a U.S. salesperson. Appendix A describes the level of experience respondents had with U.S. suppliers, the products imported, the company type, and the size of the business.

Following this qualification process, 52 in-depth telephone interviews were completed with senior purchasing managers located in Mexico's largest cities. Their organizations ranged in size from small privately owned businesses to very large chains with over 1,000 employees. Most companies had several stores or field offices. The sample thus reflects a diverse set of viewpoints from several related trade industries (Appendix A) that is appropriate for the qualitative nature of this

study (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Six managers declined to participate.

To develop a rich understanding of cross-cultural business relationships and to illustrate the operationalization of cultural sensitivity in one context, a variety of issues were explored. Following discussions with several trade consultants, academics, and Mexican purchasing directors, the interview format was standardized. To assure that the questions were asked in a consistent manner, the English version of the interview questions was translated into Spanish and back-translated into English by independent translators. After achieving convergence in the translations, the instrument was pretested several times. Next, a bilingual interviewer guided each participant through the interview. The questions probed the managers' experience in four main areas: (1) expectations of capable vendors; (2) positive and negative incidents experienced in the relationship and their causes; (3) the development of trade relationships; and (4) similarities and differences between the U.S. and Mexican business culture (see Appendix B). The notion of perceived cultural sensitivity was explored indirectly to avoid stereotyping, biasing the responses, and imposing a definition of cultural sensitivity. Throughout the interviews the respondents were asked to elaborate on their responses, provide concrete examples, and offer additional insights.

The personal interviews averaged 45 minutes and ranged from 30 minutes to 90 minutes in duration. All but one respondent agreed to be audiotaped and most managers expressed great enthusiasm for the issues explored. The interviews were subsequently translated into English. A different person then confirmed the accuracy of the translation. The resulting 350 pages of transcripts provide many insights into the meaning and consequences of perceived cultural sensitivity in the context of U.S.-Mexico business relationships. Established content analysis procedures were followed (Kassarjian, 1977). Only those insights that were frequently offered by a high percentage of the respondents and that suggest the most rewarding areas for future research are presented.

Cultural Sensitivity

Clarifying the Construct

The definitions of cultural sensitivity offered in the literature tend to be very broad and encompass notions like being "culturally aware," understanding the cultural context of foreign markets and adjusting to cultural differences (Cateora, 1990; Toyne and Walters, 1989). A review of the literature also reveals that cultural sensitivity can be present to varying degrees. Through the use of examples and illustrations, extant research suggests that cultural sensitivity may involve an awareness of cultural differences, the knowledge of why differences exist, and a willingness to accommodate these differences. Such general and broadly encompassing descriptions of cultural sensitivity are problematic for several reasons.

First, the term cultural sensitivity is used to address differ-

ent phenomena and, as such, lacks the precision necessary for theory development. For example, cultural sensitivity is employed in reference to a person's open-mindedness or receptivity to cultural differences (Bhawuk and Brislin, 1992; Gudykunst, 1993). The term cultural sensitivity is also often used to describe culturally appropriate behaviors when dealing with foreign culture (Ricks, 1993; Kale and Barnes, 1992). A clarification of terms is needed. Here, cultural sensitivity is defined as the customer's perception of the degree to which the salesperson accommodates cultural differences. For example, Francis (1991) observed that salespeople who were perceived to adapt moderately to a foreign culture's idiosyncrasies were evaluated more favorably. Individual traits such as open-mindedness are excluded from this definition and conceptualized as antecedents of adaptive behavior. The knowledge of cultural differences and the reasons why they exist is a salesperson characteristic that moderates the effectiveness of adaptive sales behaviors.

Second, culture has a variety of different dimensions that have been explored in the anthropological and sociological literatures. When describing awareness of culture, authors usually refer to a variety of dimensions along which cultures differ. For example, Hofstede's (1980) and Hofstede and Bond's (1988) power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity, individualism, and long-term orientation dimensions are receiving much attention in the literature on international channel relationships (e.g., Kale and Barnes, 1992), international market entry strategies (e.g., Erramilli and Rao, 1993), and sales management (e.g., Agarwal, 1993). Other classification schemes present exhaustive lists of cultural dimensions (e.g., perceptions of time, religion, values, social relationships) important for marketers (Cateora, 1990; Hall, 1976). Given the multitude of cultural dimensions, it is very challenging for researchers and managers to identify those facets that are relevant in a specific context. This complexity may account for the limited research in the literature and impede the development of a concise definition. To make the construct of customer perceptions of a salesperson's cultural sensitivity "workable," the focus here is on a specific subset of culture, namely business culture. Business culture is defined as the way business is conducted both in terms of etiquette and procedures. Within this context, cultural sensitivity is a customer's perception that the salesperson accommodates the customer's buying process needs (i.e., preferred etiquette and procedures) which, in turn, facilitates effective buyer-seller relationships (Szymanski, 1988).

Third, it is important to consider how cultural sensitivity should be measured. Given that cultural sensitivity is the customer's perception of how well a salesperson accommodates the customer in international relationships, it is conceptualized here as a dimension of salesperson role performance (cf. Frazier, 1983). Based on field interviews and the literature (e.g., Cui and Van Den Berg, 1991; Swan et al., 1984, 1988), salesperson role performance is defined as having four impor-

tant dimensions: cultural sensitivity, communication effectiveness, customer orientation, and dependability. The inclusion of cultural sensitivity as one dimension enables extant theory to provide a foundation for studying international business relationships. Communication effectiveness, customer orientation, and dependability are discussed later in this article.

Fourth, the relevant dimensions of business culture vary between each pair of participants from different cultures. Consequently, a specific context must be identified when operationalizing cultural sensitivity. The focus here is on customers' perceptions of salespersons' cultural sensitivity in international business relationships between the United States and Mexico. This approach facilitates the development of a general theory to understand this important construct.

Context-specific Operationalization of Perceived Cultural Sensitivity

Field interviews were conducted to uncover the dimensions of business culture to which, from a Mexican manager's perspective, U.S. managers are sensitive or insensitive. To avoid stereotypical responses, the construct was explored in a variety of ways (see Appendix B). Answers to the questions revealed several differences between the U.S. and Mexican business culture. The key differences that Mexican managers perceived to be critical for U.S. managers to accommodate were then identified.

Three key areas that U.S. salespeople need to accommodate were discussed frequently. The first difference that emerged was a difference in the degree of cordiality and friendship deemed appropriate in the business relationship. Mexican managers described their way of doing business as warmer, more personal, friendlier, more relaxed, and informal. In contrast, U.S. business people were perceived as colder, "totally business," more rigid and formal. For example,

I think personal relationships are less important for Americans. As long as they have the right numbers, that's all they care about.

The relationship [with our vendor in the U.S.] does not extend to friendship. They accord you your proper place and it is a very respectful relationship. Here in Mexico we invite each other to soccer games or other social functions. There is a more open and friendly relationship than with Americans who are more direct.

Unfortunately, many Americans are very cold in the way they conduct business. The relationship is very cold because it is basically commercial.

We look more at the human aspect. I know that it is not all the American people, but in some way in American businesses, the human factor is a spare part.

In most cases, these comments were given as observations rather than criticism. For example, some Mexican managers perceived their partner's different approach as more desirable

due to its professionalism and efficiency. Even so, managers are reminded by such differences that they are participating in a foreign relationship in which common heritage and norms are not present to facilitate the relationship. These results corroborate the observations made by Condon (1985) and McKinniss and Natella (1994) about the nature of business relationships in Mexico versus the United States.

The second difference mentioned in the field interviews pertained to the degree to which the salesperson exhibits an understanding and appreciation of the Mexican culture. This included references to mentality, language, and customs. Some examples offered include:

Some Americans still think that we live on a farm, that we ride horses and wear a hat. It's not their fault, it is due to a misconception because Mexicans living near the border have a very low standard of living.

It is a totally different mentality. That is why Americans have looked for joint ventures with Mexico. Otherwise they will never learn to understand the Mexican mentality.

Our culture is more familiar. The influence of the past is more apparent. We see things differently.

Sometimes different languages can be a problem. Something that's supposed to be a joke makes no sense in the other language and communication is lost right there because people don't know.

The first thing for a supplier to do is recognize that the Latin American way of thinking is not the same as in the United States.

While speaking Spanish was not considered mandatory, the Mexican managers appreciated efforts by U.S. managers to learn basic expressions. Beyond the issue of language, an appreciation of the Mexican heritage and its influence on business practices served as evidence that U.S. managers were sensitive to cultural differences. Condon (1985) also observed that Mexican managers expect a greater sense of history.

The third difference discussed was a difference regarding the perceptions of time and precision of advance planning. The interviewees described their personal interactions with business partners as more flexible and spontaneous than U.S. managers seemed accustomed to. For example,

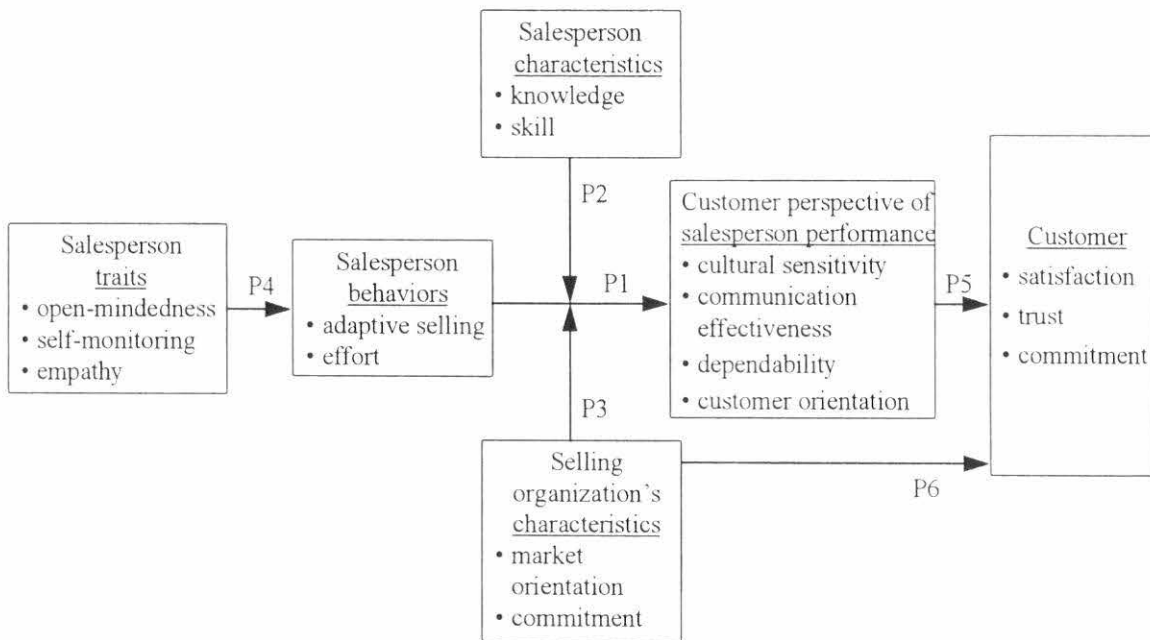
As Latinos, we are more easy going and understanding. When plans change for whatever reason, or if we are late we are more flexible.

Normally, the people in Mexico do not need to be making appointments over the phone, like you do, to visit their clients.

The Americans tend to keep a busy schedule. They don't deviate from this schedule.

We are very informal. We get to our appointments one or two hours late.

The Americans are very strict regarding their working



External Environment

Figure 1. Conceptual framework of salesperson role performance.

hours. In Mexico, you might find people an hour after we have closed the store. We are not so strict.

The Mexican says tomorrow, but he does not say when. The American gives a date.

McKinniss and Natella (1994) describe these tendencies in terms of information-specificity. This means that information in the United States is provided with the assumption that accuracy is paramount. In contrast, information in Mexico is provided without an emphasis on precision. Condon (1985) suggests that respectful answers and the desire to be helpful are more important than accuracy. Since some U.S. and Mexican managers may not operate on the same principle, efforts to carefully plan the future may be difficult.

The three differences discussed represent important facets that salespersons should accommodate to be perceived as culturally sensitive and able to satisfy the customer's buying process needs (Szymanski, 1988). In their business relationships with the United States, Mexican managers will base evaluations of their partner's cultural sensitivity on this partner's appreciation of the Mexican culture, the extent to which personal relationships are developed, and the degree of shared perceptions of time. Measures of cultural sensitivity should be developed for a salesperson's accommodation of each difference.

Research Propositions

Figure 1 depicts the construct of cultural sensitivity as one important dimension of salesperson role performance. The pro-

posed conceptual framework organizes variables identified in prior studies as antecedents or consequences of salesperson role performance. Although relationships among salesperson characteristics, salesperson behaviors, and organizational characteristics have been reported (e.g., Levy and Sharma, 1994), the paths indicated in the model are viewed as most salient to explaining the customers' evaluations of salesperson role performance and their commitment to the relationship. Two sets of factors moderate the influence of salesperson behaviors.

First, salesperson role performance is defined and then a set of propositions based on extant research and field interviews is derived. The constructs and propositions offered are intended to specify a conceptual framework rather than to be exhaustive in terms of the variables potentially relevant in this context.

Customer Perspective of Salesperson Role Performance

Salesperson role performance, as described here, is represented with four dimensions: cultural sensitivity, communication effectiveness, dependability, and customer orientation. These dimensions are syndromic of high-performing salespeople in much the same way multiple norms define relational exchange (Heide and John, 1992; Macneil, 1980). Cultural sensitivity was defined earlier as the customer's perception of the degree to which the salesperson accommodates cultural differences.

Communication effectiveness is defined as how well the salesperson is perceived as providing meaningful, accurate,

and timely information. This definition recognizes the important role international salespeople have in facilitating interfirm communication (Frazier, 1983) and avoiding misunderstandings (Gudykunst, 1993). The formal and informal sharing of meaningful and timely information has been identified as a key construct in the channels literature (e.g., Anderson and Narus, 1990; Morgan and Hunt, 1994). In their study of market research provider-user relationships, Moorman, Deshpandé and Zaltman (1993) provide support for including salesperson communication quality as a dimension of salesperson role performance. The field interviews also reflected the concern for effective communication. Illustrative comments include:

It is important that we meet or talk on the phone, and that the vendor keeps me informed about anything new.

That the supplier be continually alert and in communication with me so that we can verify any modifications there may be.

This has been a very good relationship due to communication. We communicate 2 or 3 times a week asking for or offering our products to each other.

An example of bad communication is this one vendor. I call him and call him, and I send faxes and he does not respond. I want to clear things up, and he won't even answer the phone. Nothing is resolved, and I have 6 to 8 months with this problem.

Both parties should be truthful to each other in order to get good service.

Dependability is defined as the degree to which the customer perceives the salesperson as consistently honoring his or her specific promises. The conscientious fulfillment of promises was a recurrent theme in the interviews. For Mexicans, U.S. suppliers that disregard specific supply agreements are perceived as the cause of many problems. Respondents' comments include:

The most important thing to us is to be serious and fulfill the obligations that have been agreed upon through negotiations.

We have had problems because they don't meet the delivery dates or they don't give us the quality agreed upon, or price changes are unpredictable. . . . Well, it never stops impressing us whenever a vendor fulfills our agreement.

We agree on a delivery date, and then they do not deliver on time. This causes problems that can be very irritating.

Unfulfilled promises are often attributed to a salesperson's mistake or inattention and erode customer perceptions of salesperson role performance. International salespeople are instrumental in ensuring the fulfillment of sales agreements, and those who cautiously make promises and carefully monitor their fulfillment are perceived as more reliable and capable.

The final dimension of salesperson role performance is the

salesperson's customer orientation, defined as the degree to which a salesperson's behavior exhibits concern for the customer (Brown, Widing, and Coulter, 1991; Michaels and Day, 1985). This factor was also prevalent in the field interviews. Some examples include:

One supplier, we really like, pays us visits and has expressed their concern by asking what problems or difficulties we are having.

When a U.S. vendor comes to Mexico, I bring him to the company, I show him our facilities, our offices, I show him our selling style, etc. I want him to have an idea of how we are and how we work. It would be ideal that U.S. companies would do the very same thing.

The vendor had the thoughtfulness to come and find us, to help us select the items that sell in the Mexican market. That is a good gesture and one that demonstrates eagerness to sell and service.

The ideal vendor knows how to listen to the customer and think like the customer. After all that, he will make an offer to the customer.

Influence of Salesperson Behaviors

A wide variety of antecedents of salesperson role performance are suggested by the communication and personal selling literatures to influence a customer's evaluation of the salesperson's cultural sensitivity, communication effectiveness, dependability, and customer orientation. In the framework presented in Figure 1, salesperson behaviors (adaptive selling and effort) directly impact customer evaluations of salesperson role performance (Gudykunst, 1993; Spiro and Weitz, 1990). Adaptive selling is "the altering of sales behaviors during a customer interaction or across customer interactions based on perceived information about the nature of the selling situation" (Spiro and Weitz, 1990, p. 62). Effort is the salesperson's "persistence—in terms of the length of time devoted to work and continuing to try" (Sujan, Weitz, and Kumar, 1994).

The literature and the field interviews suggest that adaptive selling and greater effort lead to better salesperson role performance. Empirical support for the relationship between adaptive selling and sales performance is provided by Sujan, Weitz, and Kumar (1994), Swenson and Herche (1994), and Spiro and Weitz (1990). This research shows that "working smart" (adaptive behavior) and "working hard" (overall amount of effort) increase sales performance using self-reported measures of adaptive selling and sales performance. Figure 1 elaborates on these authors' analyses to propose that the influence of adaptive selling on relationship quality is mediated by customer perceptions of salesperson role performance. In a cross-cultural setting, adaptiveness has been shown to increase communication effectiveness and role performance (Cui and Awa, 1992). Likewise, adaptive salesperson behavior should build perceptions of customer orientation (Predmore and Bonnice, 1994). Conceptually, adaptive selling should increase the cus-

customer's evaluation of salesperson role performance by increasing the relative attractiveness of the focal seller.

The effort salespeople expend on a customer should also improve customer perceptions of salesperson role performance by increasing the customer's sense of value and purchase equity (Oliver and Swan, 1989). Mohr and Bitner (1995) provide support for this reasoning by showing that perceived salesperson effort had a strong positive impact on customer satisfaction even when service performance was poor. Thus, salesperson efforts and behaviors are proposed to have a strong influence on customer evaluations and sentiments (Grewal and Sharma, 1991). Based on the above, the following proposition is offered:

P1: Higher levels of adaptive selling and effort improve customer perceptions of salesperson role performance.

Moderating Role of Salesperson and Organizational Characteristics

The marketing literature suggests that individual and organizational characteristics may moderate the influence of salesperson behaviors on salesperson performance (Weitz, 1981). A variety of types of a salesperson's knowledge and skills have been identified. According to Weitz (1981), product and customer knowledge moderate the relationship between selling behaviors and selling effectiveness. Such information is thought to be organized in an elaborate knowledge structure consisting of categories, classifying clues, declarative and procedural knowledge (Szymanski, 1988; Weitz, Sujana, and Sujana, 1986). Salespeople develop more elaborate knowledge of selling situations through greater sales experience (Sujana, Sujana, and Bettman, 1988).

In the context of international business relationships, several authors have emphasized the importance of studying cultural differences and the reasons why they exist. Hofstede (1980) and Kale and Barnes (1992) argue that international business people can increase their cultural knowledge by learning the dimensions upon which cultures differ. Other important facets of cultural knowledge include an understanding of the appropriate business etiquette and the historical rationale for such cultural norms. Without sufficient knowledge of the foreign partner's cultural context, attempts at adaptive behavior may result in salesperson stereotyping rather than sincere appreciation of the customer (Cui and Van Den Berg, 1991). Salesperson knowledge of customer, product, and culture should improve salesperson behaviors by helping the salespeople to avoid ill-fated adaptations and misdirected efforts. Such knowledge also enables salespeople to anticipate which displays of effort are appreciated by foreign customers (Oliver and Swan, 1989).

The sales literature has identified information acquisition (Weitz, Sujana, and Sujana, 1986), analytical and interpersonal skills (Weitz, 1981) as the key moderators of selling behaviors. Similarly, Gudykunst (1993) proposes that greater skill at gathering and presenting information enables individuals to

engage in more effective communication. Language and managerial skills have also been described as prerequisites for intercultural effectiveness (Cui and Awa, 1992). In general, these skills may be learned through formal or informal education. Without such skills, salespeople will make convenient but often ill-advised adaptations such as disclosing too much or proprietary information when communication breaks down. Accordingly, greater skills reduce the time and effort necessary to prepare for interactions with foreign partners and increase the likelihood of effective adaptation (Weitz, 1981). Well-developed sales skills also enable salespeople to maximize their scarce resources (e.g., selling time). Based on the above discussion, the following proposition is offered:

P2: The influence of salesperson behavior on customer perceptions of salesperson role performance increases with greater knowledge (international sales experience) and higher levels of language and interpersonal skills.

Organizational factors have also been proposed to enhance the influence of salesperson behaviors on customer perceptions of salesperson role performance (Weitz, 1981). While most research on sales performance has focused on what salespeople should do to be effective, there is growing awareness that organizational factors besides compensation influence sales performance (cf., Siguaw, Brown, and Widing, 1994; Sujana, Weitz, and Kumar, 1994). Most of this research emphasizes the influence of organizational factors on salesperson motivation (e.g., Sujana, 1986). It is proposed here that organizational factors have a strong direct influence on the ability of salespeople to perform.

Specifically, these factors increase a salesperson's capabilities which, in turn, increases the likelihood that a salesperson will be able to effectively adapt his/her behavior and presentation to the customer's situation (Weitz, 1981).

Two organizational characteristics are proposed here to moderate the influence of salesperson behavior on salesperson role performance, selling company's market orientation, and commitment to the foreign customer. The generation, dissemination, and responsiveness to market intelligence promoted by a company's policies and rewards has been defined as market orientation (Jaworski and Kohli, 1993; Kohli and Jaworski, 1990). Although market orientation has been discussed as pervasive, resources are likely to be distributed for such activities in each market according to its perceived importance. Accordingly, the distinction is offered that a firm with a strong market orientation toward a foreign market will commit resources to understanding the market and reward its employees for servicing individual customers responsibly (cf., Gundlach and Murphy, 1993). Siguaw, Brown, and Widing (1994, p. 107) aptly summarize the underlying reasoning:

The behaviors of the firm explicated in the market orientation scale are indicative of the level of meaningful support provided to salespeople, the capability of salespeople to

provide superior value to customers, and a philosophical orientation to help guide salesperson conduct.

It seems that the priority given to a foreign market would affect the performance of a firm's salespeople assigned to that market. Siguaw, Brown, and Widing (1994) provide empirical support for the influence of market orientation on sales behaviors. The authors conclude that market orientation leads to greater customer orientation in salespeople. Saxe and Weitz (1982) also show that customer orientation is positively related to the support received by salespeople from their companies. However, selling firm market orientation and commitment are expected to interact with salesperson behavior to influence customer perceptions of salesperson role performance. For example, adaptive behaviors by salespeople may be thwarted by their companies' low levels of market orientation toward the foreign market. Poor availability of foreign market and customer information impinges upon the salesperson's capability to gauge and respond to customer expectation of acceptable salesperson role performance. In contrast, firms that collect, disseminate, and respond to foreign market information can be relied upon by adaptive salespeople to support their development of foreign customer relationships.

The above issues surfaced in the interviews with Mexican managers. They commented that their U.S. suppliers were not always genuinely interested in their market, which restricted the performance of supplier personnel. For example,

Suppliers from the U.S. are often preoccupied with their domestic market to really understand and appreciate our concerns.

Just give us a chance. Don't close the door in our faces without at least knowing what we are capable of doing.

The relatively low priority given to some Mexican customers by the salesperson's organization is also likely to constrain the performance of adaptive salespeople servicing these customers. Similarly, a company's efforts to develop foreign partner relationships may be impaired by nonadaptive selling behaviors. Thus, a second organizational factor that emerged from the interviews and extant literature is a firm's commitment to a particular customer (e.g., Anderson and Weitz, 1992; Kumar, Hibbard, and Stern, 1994; Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Strong commitment to a customer will enable a salesperson to concentrate on the relationship and to mobilize resources to accommodate the customer's requests. In contrast, a salesperson may face much organizational resistance to servicing a customer when the selling firm's commitment is low. The Mexican managers observed that:

My supplier was willing to send me qualified personnel to show my employees in Mexico how to manage the product.

As long as they have in mind that I am important as a customer. And that means they will attend to me quickly.

There are so many things that are involved. Even if the salesperson wants to comply, it is up to other people.

It follows that:

P3: The influence of salesperson behavior on customer perceptions of salesperson role performance increases with the selling company's foreign market orientation and commitment to a foreign partner.

The sales literature suggests that adaptive behavior and selling effort are, in part, the consequence of individual characteristics (e.g., Levy and Sharma, 1994; Spiro and Weitz, 1990). For example, Weitz, Sujan, and Sujan (1986) propose that adaptive sales behaviors result from the capabilities of salespersons and their motivation to practice adaptive selling. In this article the distinction between a customer's perception of cultural accommodation and an individual's general open-mindedness with respect to different cultures is emphasized. Specifically, the model shows how individual traits influence sales behaviors which, in turn, affect customer perceptions of salesperson performance. In the sales literature, salesperson traits such as empathy and self-monitoring have been identified as being related positively to the practice of adaptive selling (Spiro and Weitz, 1990). Open-mindedness and a lack of dogmatism are also relevant in this context.

Empathy refers to an individual's concern for the observed experiences of others and the propensity to take another's perspective (Spiro and Weitz, 1990). Self-monitoring represents an individual's predisposition to attend to the images and impressions that others form of her/him during social interactions (Synder, 1979). Self-monitoring has been described as a trait with two dimensions (Goolsby, Lagace, and Boorum, 1992; Lennox and Wolfe, 1984). Both dimensions—the sensitivity to others and the motivation/ability to exhibit appropriate behavior—have been suggested to antecede adaptive selling (Spiro and Weitz, 1990). Open-mindedness is the degree to which an individual is receptive to new information and situations (Gudykunst, 1993). Such lack of dogmatism enables salespeople to accept new information more easily and predisposes them to adapt their behaviors to their foreign customers (Davies, 1993; Gatignon and Robertson, 1985). Based on the above discussion, the following proposition is offered:

P4: Adaptive selling increases with greater salesperson empathy, self-monitoring, and open-mindedness.

Organizational climate (Kelley, 1992) and market orientation (Siguaw, Brown, and Widing, 1994) may also directly influence certain aspects of salesperson role performance (e.g., customer orientation). Because relationships between individual and organizational characteristics and selling behaviors have been reported and the focus is on customer perception of salesperson role performance, further discussion of these interrelationships is not presented. Rather, the influence of salesperson role performance on customer satisfaction, trust, and commitment is now discussed.

Consequences of Salesperson Role Performance

Several insights obtained from the field interviews and the literature pertain to the consequences of salesperson role per-

formance. The interviews suggested that the ultimate outcome desired in cross-cultural trading relationships is very similar to that desired in intra-cultural relationships. Specifically, the characteristics most frequently mentioned with regard to desirable international relationships were satisfaction, trust, and commitment. This is consistent with the accumulating evidence on relationship marketing. For example, Morgan and Hunt (1994) suggest that trust and commitment are the central constructs operating in domestic business relationships. Channel member satisfaction is also frequently considered a key marketing objective (e.g., Crosby, Evans, and Cowles, 1990; Kumar, Scheer, and Steenkamp, 1995; Scheer and Stern, 1992). While the above studies report on relationships within a single culture, it is suggested that these key customer sentiments apply equally well to international business partnerships, define relationship quality from the customer's perspective, and foretell important benefits for the selling organization (Kumar, Hibbard, and Stern, 1994).

Figure 1 proposes that salesperson role performance directly influences customer satisfaction, trust, and commitment. While some dimensions of salesperson role performance have been shown to influence the customer, the effects of other dimensions and the overall construct have not been examined thoroughly. In this article it is proposed that perceived cultural sensitivity, communication effectiveness, dependability, and customer orientation increases customer satisfaction, trust, and commitment. For example, perceived cultural sensitivity should reduce the distance between the parties which enables open communication and reduced conflict, in turn, facilitating the development of trusting, satisfying, and committed relationships (Ford, 1980).

Effective communication with minimal misunderstandings has also been discussed as a key antecedent to customer trust and commitment (Gudykunst, 1993; Schurr and Ozanne, 1985). For example, Grewal and Sharma (1991) suggest that salesperson credibility, message strength, and clarity lead to enhanced customer satisfaction and loyalty. Bialaszewski and Giallourakis (1985) show that perceived communication usefulness and accuracy are associated with higher levels of customer trust. Communication quality has also been shown to increase commitment (Anderson and Weitz, 1992). Similarly, Clopton (1984) shows that message clarity enhances buyer-seller negotiation outcomes.

The field interviews also suggested that salesperson dependability has a direct influence on the customer's perception of relationship quality in cross-cultural relationships. Mexican managers' comments include:

More importance is placed on the people you work with than the company they represent.

Whenever I have spoken to any of their representatives I have been well-attended. I consider the supplier to be trustworthy and knowledgeable.

For a long-term business relationship, I want a person who

is trustworthy, responsible, somebody who complies with the parameters of our business operations.

Greater customer orientation resulting from adaptive selling is the final dimension of salesperson role performance proposed to increase relationship quality. Saxe and Weitz (1982) found that customer orientation was positively related to cooperative buyer-seller relations. The reason is that studies of adaptive selling are motivated by the presumption that adaptive behaviors elevate customer satisfaction and commitment which ultimately enhances sales management's evaluation of salesperson performance (e.g., Spiro and Weitz, 1990; Levy and Sharma, 1994). In contrast, Morgan and Hunt (1994) observe that opportunistic salesperson behavior decreases trust and commitment. More generally, Frazier (1983) shows that better performance of the seller's boundary personnel with respect to advice, service and delivery reduces a dealer's desire to switch and increases satisfaction. Gassenheimer and Scandura (1993) report that the performance of a manufacturer's boundary personnel enhances dealer satisfaction. In summary, substantial evidence exists to suggest the positive influence of several dimensions salesperson role performance on relationship quality. Thus, it is proposed that:

P5: Higher levels of customer perceptions of salesperson role performance improve customer satisfaction, trust, and commitment.

Organizational Characteristics and the External Environment

To specify the model fully, the direct influence of organizational characteristics on relationship quality is illustrated. This path recognizes that both salesperson performance and organizational factors influence relationship quality (Ruekert and Churchill, 1984). For example, organizational mechanisms that monitor and respond to post-purchase customer complaints and dissatisfaction should increase customer satisfaction and loyalty (Grewal and Sharma, 1991). The influence of organizational factors on customer commitment is also well established in the literature (Anderson and Weitz, 1992; Morgan and Hunt, 1994). The Mexican interviewees commented that many U.S. suppliers were reluctant to dedicate personnel and resources to the relationship, even though partner commitment strongly influenced perceptions of relationship quality. Illustrative comments included:

Our U.S. supplier treats us as if we are a spare part.

I think the most important thing is goodwill on both sides. That neither side wants to have all the benefits leaving the counterpart in a situation which is disadvantageous. This will cause problems in the future relationship.

Sometimes price can be sacrificed over the possibility of lasting business relationships.

Thus, the following proposition is offered:

- P6: Greater selling company foreign market orientation and commitment to a foreign partner increase customer satisfaction, trust, and commitment.

The political economy literature shows that organizations are strongly influenced by their environments (Arndt, 1983; Stern and Reve, 1980). Commonly analyzed environmental dimensions include environmental dynamism, diversity, capacity, interdependence, and concentration (Achrol and Stern, 1988; Dwyer and Welsh, 1985). For example, environmental capacity or the favorableness of economic and demand conditions will directly influence the seller's interest in the foreign market. Frazier and Kale (1989) elaborate on how the economic nature of the importer's environment such as a buyers' market influences the interaction between buyers and sellers. Dimensions of the external environment tend to directly influence organizational characteristics and constrain to some extent how managers can participate in international relationships. For example, the devaluation of the importer's currency may severely limit demand for the seller's products resulting in reduced commitment to the importer. Environmental capacity and the other factors are interesting and important influences in international trade. The model represents this environment as encasing the proposed relationships and views environmental characteristics as secondary influences on the identified variables. Because the focus here is on factors that are amenable to managerial action, the development of propositions is left for future research. However, the political economy literature suggests that the primary influence of the external environment would be on the selling organization's characteristics.

Directions for Future Research

The framework offered is unique in that it adopts the customer's perspective of salesperson role performance which provides a natural conceptual basis for understanding cultural sensitivity in direct international business relationships. The propositions offered represent some of the fundamental relationships that can be derived by taking the customer's perspective of salesperson role performance. Although the propositions are grounded on prior research, much work remains to be done. In particular, the validation of the proposed model should start with developing measures for the construct of salesperson role performance. It is argued that salesperson role performance should be measured by having foreign customers report on salesperson behavior. By definition, the measurement of cultural sensitivity needs to tap customer perceptions. This approach also eliminates the opportunity for salespeople to rate their behaviors very favorably. For example, measures of salesperson reports of customer orientation have been near the ceiling, 7.6 to 7.8 on a 9-point scale (Saxe and Weitz, 1982; Siguaw, Brown, and Widing, 1994) versus 5.7 for customer reports (Michaels and Day, 1985).

To develop measures of perceived cultural sensitivity, it is important to carefully devise context-specific measurement

items for cultural sensitivity. The field interviews incorporated in this study provide rich insights into Mexican managers' perspectives and suggestions for developing operational measures. However, such qualitative data must be elaborated upon with quantitative analyses to allow verifiable conclusions. The development and validation of concrete measures is needed. Once valid scales are available, research should establish that higher levels of salesperson role performance improve customer satisfaction, trust, and commitment. Subsequently, the antecedents of salesperson role performance should be identified and tested. In this article, the individual characteristics discussed are illustrative and not meant to be exhaustive. Future research may begin by exploring these variables, although researchers could easily expand this list given empirical or theoretical justification. Once these factors are understood better, further research can be conducted on the relationships between the antecedent constructs as a logical extension. It is encouraging to note that construct measures for the framework's antecedents and consequences are available in the research referenced.

Researchers should expect numerous challenges when pursuing the propositions advanced. For example, qualifying and motivating respondents may be difficult and costly (cf., Douglas and Craig, 1983). Also, the constructs suggested in the model are complex. For example, it seems prudent to focus on factors that have a strong conceptual relationship to knowledge (e.g., experience) since knowledge is difficult to assess (Spiro and Weitz, 1990; Weitz, Sujana, and Sujana, 1986). Even so, additional field interviews and survey research will provide important insights to senior managers trying to build direct international business relationships.

The propositions advanced provide a structure for studying direct international business relationships. It would be even more challenging and rewarding to examine different market environments, the stages of business relationships, and other forms of international market servicing and selling. Researchers could investigate early versus long-term relationships (Ford, 1980) or the consequences of using technology as a substitute for interpersonal contact. For example, does the care required to be culturally sensitive increase or decrease when transactions are handled via EDI or fax? Researchers could also examine the model extensions necessary when a seller relies on domestic or foreign-based channel intermediaries, a company employs foreign nationals to service the market, or foreign customers are designated as "key accounts."

Managerial Implications

This article summarizes several literature streams and field interviews into a comprehensive framework. When buyers and sellers from different countries engage in direct and interpersonal trade, the conceptual model shows that perceived cultural sensitivity is a key aspect of salesperson role performance in international business relationships. In this study, field

interviews identified the cultural differences between the United States and Mexico. Managers would need to conduct interviews in other markets they service or target to operationalize and apply the model.

International salespeople should recognize that foreign customers judge their performance on cultural accommodation as well as the more established notions of customer orientation, communication effectiveness, and dependability. In addition, the model focuses attention on the antecedents and consequences of salesperson role performance. While factors from the external environment (e.g., market conditions and competitive behaviors) may constrain salesperson role performance, the focus here is on those factors amenable to managerial action. Understanding the impact of salesperson traits on their behaviors and ultimately on customer perceptions of their role performance should provide managers insights into effectively selecting and training personnel for international sales assignments.

The model also highlights the need for marketers to consider salesperson and organizational characteristics as factors that moderate the influence of salesperson behaviors on their customer's perspective of salesperson performance. For example, marketers must recognize that the level of organizational support will determine whether adaptive and conscientious salesperson behaviors translate into stronger relationships with foreign customers. In addition, although a firm may be largely market oriented, this orientation may not extend beyond the domestic market.

The conceptual framework also enriches and clarifies the factors that ultimately drive customer relationships so as to permit more holistic assessments of international salespeople and international marketing efforts at an organizational level (Churchill et al., 1985). It does so by elaborating on the view that customer satisfaction, trust, and commitment are influenced by salesperson role performance and organizational characteristics (Ruekert and Churchill, 1984). For example, a strong organizational commitment may not compensate for poor execution by salespeople responsible for international relationships. A more complete understanding of the interaction between salesperson and organizational characteristics could help senior managers achieve better international relationships by carefully selecting and training salespeople and by adjusting the organization to ensure that an internally consistent approach is taken to accommodate cultural differences between the seller and buyer.

Conclusions

Given the importance of cultural sensitivity to effective international business relationships and its complex nature, cultural sensitivity seems a worthy but challenging topic to study. The definition of salesperson role performance presented here makes it possible to investigate rigorously cultural sensitivity as part of the customer's perspective of international business

relationships. The characteristics of international salespeople and the support they receive from their companies help determine salesperson role performance which, in turn, impacts customer satisfaction, trust, and commitment. The general framework developed in this article provides clear direction for future studies and will hopefully stimulate research on the much neglected issue of cultural sensitivity. Furthermore, the framework provides a basis for studying international business relationships and encourages marketing researchers to integrate findings from marketing, personal selling and communication. Such studies are likely to provide managers with valuable insight on how to achieve quality international relationships by taking steps to promote cultural sensitivity, dependability, customer orientation, and effective communication. Because developing and maintaining successful international business relationships are increasingly crucial areas of managerial concern, the framework offered here is an important step forward.

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Appendix A. Sample Description

Respondent	Experience	Products Imported from U.S.	Company Size	Company Type
1	Moderate	Paper products	Small	Distributor
2	Extensive	Telephones, electronic products	Small	Distributor
3	Substantial	Automotive products	Mid-sized	Distributor
4	Substantial	Sporting equipment	Small	Distributor
5	Not disclosed	Paper products	Large	Distributor
6	Substantial	Rubber products	Small	Distributor
7	Substantial	Industrial shoes	Not disclosed	Distributor
8	Moderate	Compact disks	Not disclosed	Distributor
9	Moderate	Medical products	Not disclosed	Wholesaler
10	Substantial	Toys	Mid-sized	Wholesaler
11	Not disclosed	Paper products	Not disclosed	Distributor
12	Not disclosed	Food and beverages	Large	Distributor
13	Not disclosed	Truck and tractor parts	Small	Distributor
14	Not disclosed	Pharmaceutical products	Large	Wholesaler
15	Substantial	Musical instruments	Mid-sized	Retailer
16	Not disclosed	Video products	Not disclosed	Wholesaler
17	Extensive	Grocery products	Mid-sized	Wholesaler
18	Extensive	Grocery products	Large	Retailer
19	Substantial	Automotive products	Small	Distributor
20	Substantial	Compact disks and cassettes	Small	Wholesaler
21	Not disclosed	Hardware	Small	Distributor
22	Substantial	Books and paper products	Small	Wholesaler
23	Not disclosed	Cereals and grains	Small	Wholesaler
24	Substantial	Tea, seeds and filter paper	Small	Wholesaler
25	Substantial	Medical instruments and pharmaceutical products	Small	Distributor
26	Extensive	Paper products	Large	Wholesaler
27	Extensive	Gifts, minerals and machines	Mid-sized	Importer
28	Moderate	Art, art tools and supplies	Mid-sized	Wholesaler
29	Extensive	General merchandise	Large	Retailer
30	Extensive	General merchandise	Large	Retailer
31	Extensive	Chocolate and cocoa powder	Large	Wholesaler
32	Substantial	Household electronic products	Not disclosed	Retailer
33	Substantial	Sporting equipment	Not disclosed	Wholesaler
34	Extensive	Spirits and liquor	Small	Distributor
35	Extensive	Wheat and cookies	Mid-sized	Distributor
36	Substantial	Video cassettes	Not disclosed	Distributor
37	Not disclosed	Typewriters and computers	Not disclosed	Distributor
38	Extensive	Furniture	Mid-sized	Wholesaler
39	Moderate	Grocery products	Small	Retailer
40	Extensive	Medical books	Small	Distributor
41	Extensive	Books and paper products	Large	Wholesaler
42	Not disclosed	Paper products	Not disclosed	Wholesaler
43	Extensive	Automotive products	Not disclosed	Distributor
44	Substantial	Automotive accessories	Mid-sized	Distributor
45	Substantial	Agricultural and chemical products	Not disclosed	Distributor
46	Extensive	Printer and typewriter ribbons	Not disclosed	Wholesaler
47	Not disclosed	Skin care products	Not disclosed	Wholesaler
48	Substantial	General merchandise	Large	Retailer
49	Substantial	Grocery products	Not disclosed	Retailer
50	Substantial	Electronic products	Small	Distributor
51	Moderate	Telephones	Small	Distributor
52	Extensive	Paper products	Not disclosed	Wholesaler

	Classification	Approximate values
Experience	Moderate	Less than 5 years
	Substantial	6 to 19 years
	Extensive	20 or more years
Company size	Small	Less than 30 employees
	Mid-sized	31 to 49 employees
	Large	150 or more employees

Appendix B. Sample Interview Questions

Desired Relationship Qualities

- How would you describe a seller that you would really like to have a long-term business relationship with?
- What is it that you find important in your relationships with sellers?

Relationship Experiences

- Could you please describe situations in which a seller did something that really impressed you?
- How about examples of situations in which a seller did something that was irritating or upsetting?

Cultural Sensitivity (Indirect)

- In your personal experience, are sellers from foreign countries easier or more difficult to work with? Why?
- Has a U.S. seller ever done something that really impressed you with their knowledge of Mexican culture? What?
- Has a U.S. seller ever done anything inappropriate or irritating? What?
- What can companies do to improve relationships that are a bit more difficult?
- What specific recommendations would you like to offer to an American seller wanting to do business with a Mexican buyer?

Cultural Differences (Direct)

- When relationships with sellers develop, do you feel that there are differences with respect to what country the seller comes from?
 - What are some similarities between U.S. and Mexican business people?
 - What are some differences between U.S. and Mexican business people?
 - How important is (suspected cultural difference e.g., know your partner's family) to you?
 - How important does it seem to a U.S. business person for them to (same as above)?
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