



The Investigation of Underpinning Factors in Effectiveness Sales Performance (Case Study: Food Industry in Iran)

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ABSTRACT

Key Words: sales effectiveness performance, strategic decision-making, marketing skills, sales control management, sales force performance, environmental factors, Iran.

Today, companies are well aware of the significance of sales and attempt to stabilize and/or improve their status in the markets' competitive climate by increasing their sales. The present qualitative research aims to enumerate the factors influencing sales effectiveness using grounded theory to identify the categories underpinning the companies' effectiveness of co-research data collected from 10 experts in Iran's food industry. The collected data were analyzed by coding in the MAXQDA software. Results show that 287 concepts (in terms of repetition) were extracted from the interviews at the first step (open coding). By considering the relationship of the concepts at the axial coding level (the second step), they were narrowed to 26 categories, and final. Finally, they were identified at the third step (selective coding). These themes, i.e., the factors underpinning organizational sales effectiveness, include the firms' strategic orientations, marketing capabilities, sales control management, salesforce performance, and environmental factors. Sales effectiveness was also decomposed into the categories of investment, profitability, market share, and customer satisfaction.

1. Introduction

Companies are faced with significant challenges in their business environment, two of the primary ones being the constantly changing demand of customers and intensifying competition. Now, they need to find ways to improve their performance. In the contemporary world, the feasibility of mass production of commodities and services has allowed increasing supply versus demand; there is no way for producers to satisfy customers. Indeed, the domain of the market and supply cannot be defined by limited tools. Experience shows that organizations that take a traditional perspective on the concepts of customer, commodity, market, sales, purchase, competition, advertisement, quality, and so on are not only destined to fail but also lose their capitals and be eliminated from the market place (Abedi and Zavarei, 2017). In the meantime, the importance of

sales and the use of different methods and tools to succeed in sales to companies cannot be exaggerated. Companies should adopt a proper way to sell their products. The enhancement of sales effectiveness is a key task of sales managers (Deeter and Schmelz, 2017). Today, companies are well aware of the significance of sales and attempt to maintain, stabilize, and/or improve their status in the markets' competitive climate by increasing their sales. Many factors are involved in achieving the goal of effective sales. For instance, the accomplishment of sales effectiveness requires skillful salespeople who can help companies realize their sales goals by recognizing customers' needs and problems and establishing effective relations with them (Tarafdar, 2014). In this respect, it is also important to consider intra-organizational communications quality, especially the relationships between management and sales human resource

(Malek et al., 2018). Since sales strategies that companies develop for themselves can influence the effectiveness or inefficiency of sales (Dehdashti and Purhosseini, 2013), the present research aims to propose a model for better recognition of the factors influencing the effectiveness of sales of companies and the determination of their interrelations.

On the other hand, the issue of sales effectiveness is of higher importance in food industries because food producers are struggling with various challenges for the sale of their products, including economic turmoil, fierce competition, lack of liquidity, the bargaining power of retailers, and perishability. So, effective sales are a prime priority of all companies, which requires exploring the underlying factors and soundly planning for resolving the barriers of food production and sales. The first step to accomplish this goal is to identify the factors influencing the sales effectiveness of companies. A literature review reveals a range of factors within the categories of strategic-orientation of the company, sales management and control, marketing capabilities, and salesforce performance. Accordingly, the research mainly aims to answer the question as to what the factors affecting the sales effectiveness of the companies are.

2. Literature Review

A literature review shows that organizational sales effectiveness can be influenced by environmental, organizational, and salesforce factors, some of which are enumerated here. The first factor that companies should be considered to ensure the effective sales of their products is to develop long-term key strategies. A strategic view of sales enables companies better to monitor the long-term barriers and drivers of sales, thereby enhancing their sales effectiveness (Panagopoulos and Avlonitis, 2010: 46). Researchers suggest that for successful admission into the market, a company needs to establish its strategic orientation towards customers and competitors and employ the innovations required for their production (Kue Na et al., 2019; Cacciolatti & Lee, 2016; Tutar et al., 2015).

They should also have strategies to control production costs (Lee et al., 2015; Altuntas et al., 2013; Theodosiou et al., 2012). Researchers also argue that a strategy to gain competitive advantage and improve performance is the use of the differentiation strategy (Kaleka and Morgan, 2019; Cacciolatti and Lee, 2016; Lee et al., 2015; Murray et al., 2010). In other words, the company should have products that are unique as perceived by customers versus the similar products of the competitors. Brand orientation is also a concept that has been mentioned in the literature as a strategy for companies to accomplish optimal performance in their business (Gromark and Melin, 2011; Baumgarth, 2010). This means that the more the companies move towards establishing, developing, and protecting their brands, the better their business performance will be (REF and REF, 2011), and this is a key aspect of food product sales.

In addition to brand orientation, a company's success in selling its products requires a set of capabilities, which altogether came to be known as marketing capabilities (Dehdashti Sharokh et al., 2017). Ahmad et al. (2014) define marketing capabilities as the ability to exploit resources and inputs, e.g., financial resources and customer database, for optimal sales. Various research works have mentioned different capabilities as the marketing capabilities, including customer relationship management (Massiera et al., 2018), product management capability (Navarro-García et al., 2016; Morgan et al., 2009), pricing capability (Murray et al., 2011), distribution capability (Massiera et al., 2018; Martin et al., 2015), and product promotion capability (Navarro-García et al., 2016). In marketing, companies should have customer segmentation and customer prioritization, and targeting capabilities, too (Inyang et al., 2018). Other marketing capabilities that have less been noted in the research are sales domain design (Piercy et al., 2011) and retail network management (Massiera et al., 2018). Sales domain design refers to decisions on allocating customers to a specific salesforce, determining the geographical configura-

tion of the sales units, and adjusting other parameters to provide an opportunity for the good performance of the individual salesforce (Cravens, 2015: 101). Poor designs adversely affect the performance of salesforce by limiting their opportunities, thereby affecting the organization's sales effectiveness (Piercy et al., 2011: 106).

One factor mentioned in the literature as one of the most effective sales effectiveness factors is the salesforce performance. A salesforce's performance includes different behavioral and outcome dimensions so that behavioral performance is the precursor of outcome performance (Fatima, 2015: 1). The behavioral performance of a salesforce refers to non-selling activities that the salespeople employ to improve their sales (e.g., customer-oriented selling skill, adaptive selling, teamwork, and technical knowledge). In contrast, outcome performance refers to the sales activity's quantitative results (e.g., sales volume and market share) (Agnihotri et al., 2017: 5). Research shows that the development of these two factors plays an essential role in organizations' sales effectiveness (Gustafson et al., 2018: 875).

A factor at the organizational level that may improve the behavioral and outcome performance of salespeople is a sales management and control system, which is by definition designed to condition the selling behavior of salespeople (Guenzi et al., 2013: 96) and even all activities of the company and its people. Sales controls are important for several reasons. They strongly influence a company's economic performance (Echchakoui, 2014) and its customer relationship because salespeople operate at the first line of a company (Albers et al., 2010). Besides, based on many companies' cost structure, it is vital to control the salesforce because they constitute the greatest part of the marketing people, and a great budget is spent on them. Consequently, designing mechanisms to control the salespeople's activities is a paramount field of sales research and activity (Malek et al., 2018: 3). Panagopoulos et al. (2015) note that the effective management of sales

control should encompass formal and informal controls.

3. Methodology

The present research is a qualitative study based on grounded theory. This method uses an inductive approach to identify the underlying categories of the phenomenon in question. In the qualitative phase, the library and field methods were employed for data collection. The field part was composed of two instruments, i.e., in-depth (semi-structured) interviews and the coding of the collected data.

The statistical population was composed of all experts in sales effectiveness in food industries in Iran. The sample size was determined based on the principle of saturation. That is, the researcher kept collecting data as long as new categories or themes emerged, but when the data is saturated, the sampling stops. As such, the present research was saturated with 10 interviews.

4. Results

In the qualitative phase, the data collected from the interviews were analyzed by the coding method in the MAXQDA software package. They were then integrated with the theoretical framework and the conceptual model to develop the research hypotheses.

4.1 Interview data analysis

In this phase, the concepts, categories, and themes were discovered in the coding technique's interviews at three steps of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Table 1 presents the results of this analysis.

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Table 1 The results of the coding of the interviews

Theme	Category	Concepts (frequency)
Company's strategic orientations	Customer-orientation	Considering customers' needs and tastes (2); predicting customers' future needs (3); continuously measuring customer satisfaction (2); creating needs in customers (1)
	Competitor-orientation	Studying and identifying competitors (weaknesses, strengths, strategies, and goals) (3); improving competitiveness versus the competitors (1); helping customers collect data on competitors (2)
	Cost-orientation	Planning to cut unnecessary costs of production and distribution (5); supplying liquidity by reducing current costs (3); making economies of scale or mass production (1)
	Brand-orientation	Trying to be present in regional markets for the sake of brand development (2); managing and investing in brand making (2); stabilizing the presence in the market for brand establishment (1)
	Differentiation	Adding secondary advantage to the product (2); differentiating the appearance of the product (1), different taste (1); making differentiation in ready-to-eat food production (1)
Marketing capabilities	Customer relationship management capability	Fostering trust in customers for establishing a long-term relationship (2); responding and taking responsibility for customers (1); establishing and keeping a close relationship with suppliers and distributors (3)
	Product management capability	Using high-quality raw material (7); using attractive packaging (7); using up-to-date technology in production (5); diversifying products (4); organic production (4); recruiting skillful production people (4); using up-to-date knowledge in production (3); storing strong raw material (2); providing appropriate production infrastructure (1); hiring skillful personnel for production and marketing (1)
	Distribution capability	Timely distribution of products (7); using various distributors (1); recruiting and retaining the best distributors (4); capability of establishing a relationship with distributors (3)
	Promotion capability	Generating attractive advertising content (8); using virtual and social networks for advertising (3); considering rewards and

	<p>Sales domain designing capability</p> <p>Retailing network management</p>	<p>discounts for customers (1); considering special occasions in the year for advertising (1); attending domestic and foreign exhibitions (1); directing government subsidies to promote healthy food (1)</p> <p>Customer segmentation (based on their value or profitability, their demographic characteristics such as place of residence, or their buying behavior) (4); properly designing the geographical area of sales (2); prioritizing customers (based on their importance to the company) (2); determining the size of the salesforce for each domain (4); determining the deployment of a seller's sales time within customers in his or her area (2)</p> <p>Establishing an appropriate mechanism for non-cash sales (6); suitable bids on goods for retailers (3); considering the appropriate profit margin for the retailer (1); selecting quality retailers (5)</p>
Sales control management	<p>Formal control</p> <p>Information control</p>	<p>Continuously training the people (4); evaluating, improving and providing ongoing feedback on staff performance (3); Performance-based promotions and downgrading (1); holding challenging meetings with staff to remove obstacles (1); setting specific goals for personnel (3)</p> <p>Motivating staff with material and spiritual gifts (4); encouraging staff to cooperate (2); creating an environment for mutual respect (2); creating an environment in which staff feel proud of the company (1)</p>
Salesforce performance	Behavioral performance	<p>Salesforce's experience (6); ability to establish a long-term relationship between salesforce and retailers (4); salesforce's commitment (3); salesforce's creativity (2); salesforce's character (2); salesforce's knowledge (knowledge of product features, company production processes and market) (2); flexibility in sales methods (3); using a wide range of sales approaches (3); efforts to provide the best product to the customer according to his or her needs (2); establishing strong working relationships with other people in the company (1); very close coordination with other employees of the company to address the problems of past sales and after-sales service (1)</p>

Environmental factors	Outcome performance	The salesperson's ability to sell new products of the company (3); the salesperson's ability to create more market share for the company's products (2); the salesperson's ability to go beyond the predetermined goals of the company in selling products (2); the salesperson's ability to identify and sell products to the main and effective buyers in the market (2)
	Economic	Economic fluctuations (10); instability in raw material prices (1) Weak government policymaking (6); lack of governmental support (4); changes in governmental policies and laws (3); lack of government monitoring of the market (2); improper governmental quotas on raw materials (1); administrative bureaucracy (1); unsupported licensing (1)
	Socioeconomic	Different market cultures (5); the reduced purchasing power of the people (2)
	Technology	Technological changes in the market (3); dependence on foreign countries for raw materials and technology (1); weak domestic technology (1)
Organizational sales effectiveness	Competitive	Competition pressure in the market (7); extensive incentive and promotion competitions in the industry (2)
	Investment	Increased investment in business development (1); increased investment in research and development (1)
	Profitability	Achieving profit margins versus the company's goals (3); achieving profit margins versus competitors (1)
	Market share	Gaining market share versus the company's goals (4); gaining market share versus competitors (2); gaining sales volume versus the predetermined goals (2); gaining sales volume more than competitors (2)
	Customer satisfaction	Satisfying customer expectations versus the predetermined goals (3); satisfying customer expectations versus competitors (2)

Based on the results, 287 concepts (considering the repetitions) were derived from the interviews at the open-coding step. After the concepts' connections were considered, they were reduced to 26 categories at the axial coding step. Finally, six themes were

identified at the selecting coding step. After these steps were concluded, the research's paradigm and conceptual models were obtained based on the selective coding, which was drawn as shown in Figures 1 and 2 following consulting with the experts.

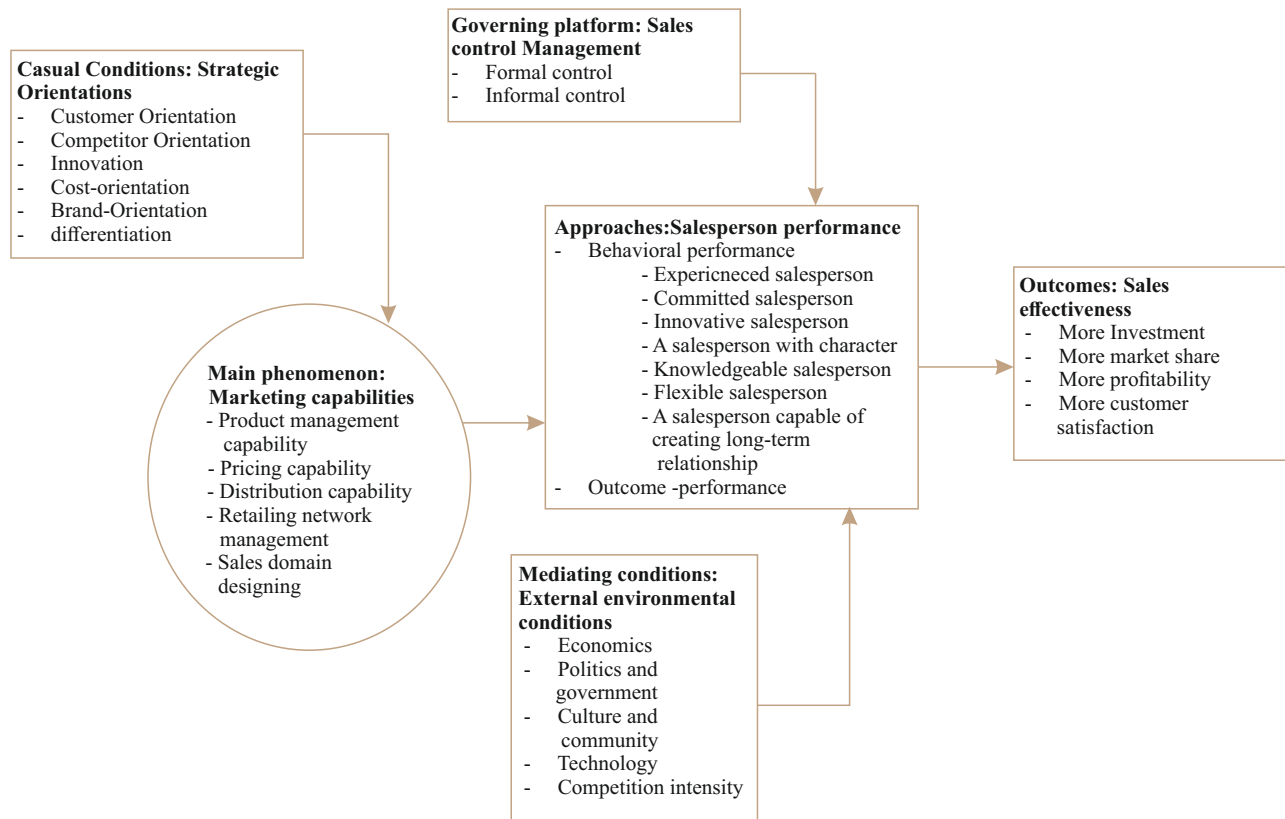


Figure 1 The paradigm derived from the selective coding of the interviews

Figure 2 The conceptual model derived from the selective coding of the interviews in the MAXQDA software package

4.1 *The categories of the model*

A key aspect of grounded theory is the theoretical sensitivity or, in other words, the control of findings derived from the interviews through comparison with

the previous theoretical framework. Accordingly, 66 papers in domestic journals and 120 papers in other countries' journals were assessed, whose results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 The dimensions of the research model and the supporting literature (Source: Research findings)

Theme	Definition	Category	Supporting literature (domestic)	Supporting literature (foreign)
Company's strategic orientation	Strategic orientation refers to how a company adapts to the external environment. It is also used for specific managerial perception, readiness, willingnesses, motivations, and	Customer-orientation	Habibi and Mira (1397); Najji et al. (1397); Dehdashti Shahrokh et al. (2015); Rahimnia and Sajjad (1394); Hakimi (1396); Rahimnia et al. (2012)	Adams et al. (2019); Kuna et al. (2019); Casiolati et al (2016), Tatra et al. (2015), Kumar Panda (2014), Altantas et al. (2013), Theodosius et al., 2012)
		Competitor-orientation		
		Innovation-orientation		

	<p>demands that guide strategic planning and strategic development process (Cacciolatt and Lee, 2016)</p> <p>Strategic orientation refers to how a company adapts to the external environment. It is also used for specific managerial perception, readiness, willingness, motivations, and</p>			Casiolati et al. (2016), Tatra et al. (2015), Altantas et al. (2013), Theodosio et al.
		Customer-orientation	Habibi and Mira (1397); Naiji et al. (1397); Dehdashti Shahrokh et al. (2015); Rahimnia and Sajjad (1394); Hakimi (1396); Rahimnia et al. (2012)	Adams et al. (2019); Kuna et al. (2019); Casiolati et al (2016), Tatra et al. (2015), Kumar Panda (2014), Altantas et al. (2013), Theodosius et al., (2012)
		Brand-orientation	Naija et al. (1397); Dehdashti Shahrokh et al. (2016 and 2017); Ork and Babaei (1394)	Gromark and Laxin (2011), Boomgrath (2009), Napoli (2006), Wang and Merrillis, (2005).
		Cost-orientation	Behzad Nia and Sanobar (1398); Rastegar and Hemmati (2015); Bagheri et al. (2015), Mortazavi et al. (2015); Duty of friends and colleagues (1392).	Kalka and Morgan (2019); Lee et al. (2015); Altantas et al. (2013); Theodosius et al. (2013); Murray et al. (2010).
		Differentiation	Behzad Nia and Sanobar (1398); Rastegar and Hemmati (2016) Bagheri and Et al. (1397), Vazife dost Et.al. (1392).	Kalka and Morgan (2019); Casiolati and Lee (2016); Lee Et al. (2015); Murray et al. (2010).
Sales control management	<p>It refers to the management and other stakeholders' efforts to influence the behavior and activities of the marketing staff to achieve optimal goals (Guenzi et al., 2013).</p>	Formal control	Qarachi and Wahhabi Kashi (1389)	Altintas et al. (2017); Skiba et al. (2016) Panagopoulos (2015); Samaravira and Golb (2014); Ganzi et al. (2013) Evans et al. (2007).
			Informal control	Altintas et al. (2017); Panagopoulos (2015); Genzi et al. (2013), Weitz et al. (1986).

Marketing capabilities	It refers to a complicated set of knowledge, skills, and capabilities present at all levels of an enterprise's business processes (Massiera et al., 2018).	Customer relationship management	Dehdashti Shahrokh et al. (1396); Nasimi and Amiri (1396); Ork and Babaei (1394); Mangali et al. (2016), Golshahi and Zarei (2016)	Kalka and Morgan (2019); Masira et al. (2018); Johnson et al. (2012); Grant and Crowns (1999).
		Product management	Mangali et al. (2015); Moezz et al. (1397); Hosseinzadeh Shahri et al. (2015); Rezaei Dolatabadi and Khaif Elahi (2006); Goodness and clarity (1392); Hajipour et al. (2015).	Kalka and Morgan (2019), Masira et al. (2018); Navarro-Gracia et al. (2016); Martin et al. (2015); Murray et al. (2010); Morgan et al. (2009); Verhiz and Morgan (2005); Lee and Griffin (2004); Leonido et al. (2004); Leonido et al. (2002).
		Pricing	Moezz et al. (1397); Shamabadi and Khodadad Hosseini (2005); Hosseinzadeh Shahri et al. (2015); Respected and trustworthy (1397); Mangali et al. (2015); Nasimi and Amiri (1396); Dehdashti Shahrokh et al. (1396)	Masira et al. (2018); Navarro Gracia et al. (2016); Murray et al. (2010); Morgan et al. (2009); Verhiz and Morgan (2005); Lee and Griffin (2004); Leonido et al. (2002).
		Distribution Promotion	Dehdashti Shahrokh and Pourhosseini (1392 and 1396); Respected and trustworthy (1397); Aghajani and Farzadfar (2013); Mangali et al. (2015); Moezz et al. (1397); Hosseinzadeh Shahri et al. (2015)	Masira et al. (2018); Navarro Gracia et al. (2016); Martin et al. (2015); Murray et al. (2010); Morgan et al. (2009); Verhiz and Morgan (2005); Lee and Griffin (2004); Leonido et al. (2002); Cunningham and Hardy (1974).
		Sales domain design	Dehdashti Shahrokh and Pourhosseini (2013). Dehdashti Shahrokh et al. (1396)	Yin Young et al. (2018); Masira et al. (2018); Panagopoulos and Alonitis (2010); Pierce et al. (2011); Morgan et al. (2009); Leonido et al. (2002); Baldoff et al. (2001); Grant and Crowns (1999). Masira et al. (2018).

		Retailing network management	Rahimi et al. (1397); Mehrafrooz et al. (2013); Aghazadeh et al. (2012)	Grozza et al. (2018); Charles and Schcocker (2017); Altintas et al. (2017); Rosis et al. (2017); Ichako (2016); Ganzi et al. (2013); Sikala et al. (2012); Panagopoulos and Alonitis (2010); Pierce et al. (2011); Paparodimes and Ganzi
Salesforce performance	It refers to the extent to which a salesforce accomplishes predetermined sales goals (Groza et al., 2018).	Behavioral performance	Rahimi et al. (1397); Qaracheh and Wahhabi Kashi (1389); Azizi et al. (2008)	Panagopoulos and Alonitis (2010); Baldoff et al. (2001); Grant and Crowns (1999); Pierce et al. (2011) Babacas et al. (1996).
		Outcome performance	Rezaei Dolatabadi and Khaif Elahi (2006); Charity and enlightenment (2013); Hajipour et al. (2015)	Verhiz and Morgan (2005); Paldoff et al. (2001); Pierce et al. (1999); Babacas et al. (1996).
Organizational sales effectiveness	It refers to how companies accomplish their predetermined sales goals or their sales goals versus their competitors (Vorhies and Morgan, 2005).	Market share Profitability Customer satisfaction	Respected and trustworthy (1397); Dehdashti Shahrokh et al. (2017 and 2016); Dehdashti Shahrokh and Pourhosseini (2013); Shamabadi and Khodadad Hosseini (2005)	
Environmental factors	It refers to the factors that are out of the company's control but affect its production and sales (Panagopoulos and Avlonitis, 2010).	Economic, political, cultural, technological, and competitive	Respected and trustworthy (1397); Dehdashti Shahrokh et al. (2017 and 2016); Dehdashti Shahrokh and Pourhosseini (2013); Shamabadi and Khodadad Hosseini (2005)	Kalka and Morgan (2019); Yangyang et al. (2018); Bosso et al. (2017); Paparoid Damis and Ganzi (2009); Kumar Panda (2014); Ganzi et al. (2013); Altantas et al. (2013); Johnson et al. (2012); Murray et al. (2010); Panagopoulos and Alonitis (2010); Weitz et al. (1986).

5. Conclusion

Companies should take appropriate methods to sell their products - methods that finally result in their sales effectiveness. The data analysis results revealed that a company would achieve sales effectiveness that it can accomplish greater market share, higher profitability, and greater customer satisfaction compared to its own predetermined goals and its competitors, and it makes more investment in its business development. However, none of these is possible without sound strategic orientations. A company should first specify its orientation towards customers and competitors and use all strategic tools, e.g., innovation, cost-orientation, brand-orientation, and product differentiation, to create a competitive advantage in the market. In this respect, the interviewees asserted that the priorities in a company's strategic orientations should be given to predicting the future needs of customers and considering their tastes, studying and identifying competitors (their weaknesses, strengths, strategies, and goals), recruiting a strong and innovative management team, planning to eliminate unnecessary costs of production and distribution, attempting to be present in regional markets for the sake of brand development, and developing differentiation in products.

Another factor that companies need to make their sales effective and was emphasized by the participants frequently is the development of marketing capabilities and their application to sales. The capabilities of customer relationship management, product management, correct pricing, proper and professional distribution, product promotion, sales domain designing, and retailing network management are some factors enumerated by the participants correctly because weakness in any of them can lead to the failure of all attempts of a company for more sales. In this respect, the human factor – or the so-called salesforce performance – is another major factor for companies' success in sales. This factor has been mentioned in most previous

studies. Based on the interviews' results, to ensure effective sales, companies have no way but to recruit a salesforce that is leading both in behavior and outcome. The most frequently mentioned features of behavior performance included rich experience with the ability to establish long-term relationships with retailers, commitment, creativity, knowledgeability, and flexibility. A salesforce's ability to sell a company's new products, gain a greater market share and achieve sales greater than the predetermined goals are among the most frequently noted indicators of the salesforce's outcome performance. In this sense, sales control management, or in other words, the deployment of a mechanism for formal and informal controls in a company for ensuring the effectiveness of salesforce and the control and modification of a company's marketing capability are other primary factors that are necessary for the sales effectiveness of companies. As mentioned in the interviews, training people, including salespeople, continuously evaluating people's performance and providing feedback, motivating people, and creating a cooperation climate are factors that companies have to increase their sales.

It should be noted that environmental or external factors influence all internal activities and efforts of a company for its sales effectiveness. In this respect, economic fluctuations, price volatility of raw material, weak policymaking by the government, changes in regulations and governmental policies, the lack of governmental support, market culture, technological changes of the market, and competitive pressure in the market are some external factors frequently mentioned by the interviewees as the factors that can affect all internal efforts of a company to achieve sales effectiveness and may even deviate all these efforts. So, predicting these factors and planning how to deal with them can greatly ensure companies' success in selling more products.

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