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► To cite this version:

Maryse Koehl, Juliet F. Poujol, John F. Tanner Jr. The impact of sales contests on customer listening: an empirical study in a telesales context. *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management*, 2016, 36 (3), pp.281-293. 10.1080/08853134.2016.1186556 . hal-02013750

HAL Id: hal-02013750

<https://hal.science/hal-02013750>

Submitted on 26 Jan 2021

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The impact of sales contests on customer listening: an empirical study in a telesales context

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(Received 26 October 2014; accepted 3 May 2016)

Companies often use sales contests to achieve short-term objectives to motivate salespeople and to boost sales. However, sales contests also may encourage salespeople to adopt less relational behaviors and limit their ability to manage customer relationships, as manifested in their customer listening practices. Therefore, this study, based on a natural field experiment, examines the effects of a sales contest on customer listening. In so doing, four dimensions of customer listening (passive, active, adaptive, and assertive listening), associated with a process of listening (*Hearing, Processing, and Responding*), were identified. The study helps clarify the effect of a sales contest on these four dimensions of customer listening by telesales agents. The results reveal that this sales contest exerts negative effects only on the active and passive customer listening, not on the adaptive and assertive customer listening. The study sheds light on how sales contests influence important behaviors such as customer listening, as well as on the nature of customer listening itself.

Keywords: sales contests; customer listening; call center; telesales

Adapting to the customer is a principal component to building strong relationships, whether adapting the content of a sales presentation to a customer's needs or the style of the presentation to a customer's social style or both (e.g. Castleberry and Tanner 2014). Customer listening is a foundation to adaptation. A salesperson cannot be customer-oriented unless he/she

(1) develops a good understanding of customer needs through effective listening (Ramsey and Sohi 1997; Baroom, Goolsby, and Ramsey 1998), (2) analyzes and understands customer problems (Leong, Busch, and John 1989), and (3) tailors products and services to meet customer needs and solve their problems (Saxe and Weitz 1982; Baroom, Goolsby, and Ramsey 1998). (Pelham and Kravitz 2008, 415)

Yet to date, little research has examined the effects of common sales management practices, such as sales contests, on customer listening.

While research has examined the effects of compensation plans on listening (Aiello and Kolb 1995; Roman, Ruiz, and Munuera 2005), sales contests provide the opportunity for field experimentation due to their relative brevity. Sales contests tend to influence salespeople to be sales-oriented rather than customer-oriented, inciting salespeople to achieve specific sales objectives over a short time period. Researchers have identified outcomes contrary to developing relational benefits, such as aggressive sales techniques, overstocking customers, and being less reactive to customer's demands (Murphy 2004). Even when

contests are designed to avoid these negative consequences, incentives may alter salespeople's customer orientation and long-term orientation (Garrett and Gopalakrishna 2010; Poujol and Tanner 2010) and then indirectly influence the development of the customer relationship.

Customer listening is an important relational component because of its influence on customer trust and satisfaction (Ramsey and Sohi 1997; Aggarwal et al. 2005; Drollinger and Comer, 2013). Notwithstanding the importance of listening, customer listening remains insufficiently studied in sales force management research, especially in telesales where its practice is so crucial. In fact, only one study has examined customer listening in a call center context: De Ruyter and Wetzels (2000) show the importance of listening behavior in a call center and their positive impact on customer satisfaction, trust, and loyalty. That study, however, examined customers' perceptions of salesperson listening, rather than actual listening behavior. In this study, we leverage a natural field experiment to evaluate listening of telesales agents.

We first review literature pertaining to the concept, modalities, and effects of sales contests, according to a relational perspective, then provide the conceptual background of customer listening. Following our presentation of the study framework, the results of a natural field experiment involving call center salespeople are presented and implications for management and research are discussed.

Table 1. Sales contest characteristics and salespeople's relational behaviors.

Sales contest characteristics	Modalities	Effect on Relationships	Authors and year
Nature of the objective	Quantitative or qualitative	Qualitative objectives would limit the negative effects of sales contests	Sharma (1997)
Competition format	Individual or collective	Collective format is more conducive to relationship-based selling and stronger internal (team) relationships	Poujol and Tanner (2010); Lim and Chen (2014)
Budget	Open or closed	A ranking can induce sabotage of other salespeople	Drago and Turnbull (1991);
Number of winners	Small or medium	High proportion of winners is better if social loss aversion is strong	Lim (2010)
Reward	Monetary or not, structure of the reward	Prize values should be unique and rank ordered; monetary reward is preferred but no study on the impact of reward on CRM	Lim, Ahearne, and Ham (2009); Hollet-Haudebert et al.(2015)
Duration	Short, medium or long term	Short-term duration negatively impacts interactions with customers	Garrett and Gopalakrishna (2010)
Frequency	Low or high	Low frequency is better for customer orientation of salespeople	Poujol and Tanner (2010)

Literature review

The sales contest: a relational perspective

Companies frequently rely on sales contests, short-term incentives to raise sales efforts (Lim, Ahearne, and Ham 2009) because they encourage salespeople to achieve a specified goal. From a researcher's perspective, though, contests provide a short-term alteration in control systems (e.g. Anderson and Oliver 1987; Miao and Evans 2013), thus giving an opportunity to examine the influence of the contest on behaviors and important outcomes in a field setting. Murphy and Dacin (1998) explain that this managerial tool offers a stimulus for performance beyond that generated by a regular salary. The precise objective of the sales contest often aligns with existing goals, such as achieving sales quotas. By nature, sales contest correspond to an outcome-based sales control system (Anderson and Oliver 1987). Given that sales contest focus on short-term goals, there is a tendency to concentrate on immediate rather than long-term goals (Anderson and Oliver 1987). As a result, the challenge is to design a contest that balances motivation against possible negative outcomes such as anti-relational behaviors.

Sales contests have distinct characteristics and modalities, including (1) the nature of their objectives (quantitative or qualitative), (2) the competition format (collective or individual), (3) the budget (open, with a threshold to reach, or closed, with a fixed ranking of winners), (4) the number of winners (low or medium), (5) the type of reward (monetary or not, structure of the reward), (6) the duration (short, medium or long), and (7) the frequency (low or high). These different characteristics and modalities in turn may affect how sales representatives perceive and react to customers. Prior research has identified which modalities salespeople tend to prefer and

those likely to motivate, but few has considered the effects different modalities have on relational behaviors (see Table 1).

Type of objective

The type of objective, whether quantitative or qualitative, likely affects salespeople's relational behaviors. Most sales contest objectives are set in quantitative terms, such as an increase in sales. However, firms might also include qualitative objectives, such as customer satisfaction, as a means to limit the negative effects of sales contests (Sharma 1997). Murphy (2004) shows that safeguards and ethical rules can help maintain the customer relationship, as an alternative to a qualitative sales framework.

Competition format

Most firms use individual competition formats because individual performance is easier to measure; however, group formats outperform individual when the strength of social ties among the group members matters (Lim and Chen 2014) and when cooperation and mutual assistance is important (Drago and Turnbull 1991). In a collective format, salespeople's customer orientation is more likely to be preserved (Poujol and Tanner 2010), supporting relationship-based selling. It would be interesting to examine the impact of contests that combine individual and collective formats on relational behaviors.

Budget and number of winners

A sales contest might set several goal levels, depending on the type of budget (open or closed) and number of winners.

Contestants care about the value of the prizes they receive, as well as their contest outcomes relative to other contestants. Changing the proportion of winners in a contest can alter the reference points contestants use to make these social comparisons. Some researchers note that closed competitions can induce sabotage of other salespeople, even if they are on the same sales team (Drago and Turnbull 1991). As cooperation become increasingly important in sales organizations, Lim, Ahearne, and Ham (2009) note the importance of a sales contest prize structure that does not endanger cooperation within the sales force.

Rewards

Determining rewards is a crucial question in designing a contest (Murphy, Dacin, and Ford 2004; Lim, Ahearne, and Ham 2009). Companies often use a mixture of rewards, combining bonuses, gifts, gift vouchers, or travel vouchers; vary them for different levels of the competition; or offer participants a choice. Noncash prizes, in which the perceived differences in monetary value are less precise, do not lead to a reduction in effort when compared to cash prizes (Lim and Chen 2014), though inside salespeople prefer cash (Hollet-Haudebert et al. 2015).

Duration

The length of a sales contest also provokes debate with regard to motivation versus relationship quality. Generally, it should be rather short, to keep salespeople motivated throughout the entire process but too short may result in the fridge effect, overstocking, and forward buying (Murphy 2004). Structuring sales contests with different deadlines could limit the disadvantages of excessively short competitions though, by rewarding salespeople according to the final results (Poujol and Fournier 2007).

Effects of sales contests on salespeople's relational behaviors

In sum, sales contest design can affect salespeople's behaviors and attitudes toward their clients. For example, they might feel encouraged to adopt more aggressive sales techniques, overstock clients, or express less patience in their efforts to sell more (Sharma and Sarel 1995). Murphy (2004) classifies salespeople's problematic behaviors, citing (1) decreased mutual assistance and information sharing among sales representatives, (2) reckless risk taking, (3) negligence of other work, (4) emphasis on the contest product to the detriment of other products, and (5) forward selling and overstocks as the most dangerous of problematic behaviors, especially for customer relationship quality. When they engage in such behaviors, salespeople are unlikely to listen to their customers and offer

appropriate products because the rewards accrue only for the sale of a focal product.

Studies related to the impact of sales contests on relational behaviors of salespeople remain limited. No research addresses their effect on customer listening behaviors, despite the potential influence on salespeople's customer orientation and adaptability (Pelham and Kravitz 2008). Yet in spite of the importance of listening to adaptive selling and customer relationship building, the effects of common sales management tools such as sales contests on customer listening have not been examined.

Customer listening is a key antecedent of customer trust, satisfaction, and loyalty. As Ramsey and Sohi (1997) note, clients who think salespeople are listening to find appropriate solutions are more likely to trust, to feel more satisfied and to continue in the relationship. Therefore, this study focuses on the customer listening, an important relational component performed by salespeople during their interactions with clients, both during and outside of sales contest periods.

Customer listening

Scholars have taken several approaches to customer listening. Some have focused on individual factors that determine listening while others have portrayed listening as a function of techniques, an application of which yields various levels of listening quality. Still others have focused on a process of listening consisting of several steps.

Individual components

Salesperson conditions strongly determine customer listening, including patience, concentration (Alessandra, Wexler, and Barrera 1987), emotional intelligence, human warmth, and open-mindedness. Empathy may be the main determinant, though, of effective listening (Lewis and Reinsch 1988; Castleberry and Shepherd 1993; Comer and Drollinger 1999). Effective listening requires 'perceiving a person's precise internal framework of reference and with its components and emotional significance in order to feel them as if we were that person but without ever forgetting the "as if"' (Brunel and Martiny 2004, 477). Empathy takes three forms: thought (verbal dimension), emotion (emotional dimension), and action (interactional synchrony) (Brunel and Martiny 2004). Both Covey (1989) and Tracy (1995) integrate empathy to extend the concept of empathetic listening and Comer and Drollinger (1999) consider empathy as an active form of listening. That is, Active Empathetic Listening (AEL) consists of receiving verbal and non-verbal messages and evaluating the meaning by putting the self into someone else's shoes. 'It's a form of listening practiced by salespeople in which traditional active listening is combined with

empathy to achieve higher form of listening' (Drollinger, Comer, and Warrington 2006, 162).

Levels and techniques

Comer and Drollinger (1999) propose a graduated listening model based on the degrees to which listeners (e.g. salespeople) seek knowledge about the message provider (e.g. customer). In line with Alessandra, Wexler, and Barrera (1987), they distinguish marginal, evaluative, and active listening, and then integrate AEL. Thus, a salesperson moving up this hierarchy would first hear without listening, then listen to the literal meaning of the words but without perceiving any non-verbal dimensions, and finally process the message fully and respond to continue the discussion. The addition of empathy ensures the salesperson's strong involvement in listening, such that he or she grows closer to the client to learn about and understand him. Thus, empathy makes listening stronger, because the listener sincerely desires to be totally involved in what is being said (Covey 1989; Tracy 1995).

To engage in customer listening, salespeople might adopt two main techniques: passive or active. Passive listening implies being silent; active listening suggests an effort to give meaning to messages received and signaling this search for understanding to the message sender. By questioning and reformulating the message, active listeners reveal their desire to understand the exact meaning of verbal and non-verbal messages. Thus it promotes

exchanges that provide information clarity and express interest in verbal and non-verbal components of interpersonal communications. Active listening generates a better effectiveness in the interaction between a seller and a customer (Brooks 2010).

Process

Process-oriented researchers have largely adopted a definition of listening as 'the cognitive process of actively sensing, interpreting, evaluating, and responding to the verbal and non-verbal messages of present or potential customers' (Castleberry and Shepherd 1993, 36). Listening as a process includes several steps creating an ordered construct of listening (Ramsey and Sohi 1997). These steps are Sensing, Interpreting, Evaluating, and Responding (Steil, Barker, and Watson 1983), or SIER, as illustrated in Figure 1.

The first step, *Sensing*, involves taking in all messages (verbal, non-verbal and paraverbal, or tone, silence, laughs, etc.) coming from the sender. The second step, *Interpreting*, implies an active participation from the receiver to find the meaning of what is sent and said by the sender. In the third step, *Evaluating*, the listener exploits knowledge to convert what was perceived into information, sorting by importance or relevance. The fourth step, *Responding*, is the formulation of a response that translates the understanding of the sent message.

The SIER process was integrated into the sales literature in the 1990s (Castleberry and Shepherd 1993;

The application of the process of listening is dependent on the law of listening defined by Steil as following: Listening = Ability + Willingness to listen

Figure 1. The listening process (SIER) (Steil, Barker, and Watson 1983).

Ramsey and Sohi 1997; Comer and Drollinger 1999). Process-based researchers defined listening in sales as 'the cognitive process of actively sensing, interpreting, evaluating and responding to the verbal and non-verbal messages of present or potential customers' (Castleberry and Shepherd 1993, 36). Some studies combine the middle two steps into a single step called *Evaluating* (Ramsey and Sohi 1997) or *Processing* (Castleberry and Shepherd 1993; Comer and Drollinger 1999). This step, *Processing*, implies an assignment of meaning to incoming messages and includes questions intended to add meaning through directing responses. Consistently though, a listening process starts with *Sensing*, continues with *Processing*, and finishes with *Responding*: the formulation of an answer that expresses the cognitive mechanisms in place, producing a balance between the messages emitted and the messages received, whether verbal or non-verbal.

Adding empathy to the process produces the concept of AEL (Comer and Drollinger 1999). However, empathy is also separate from the process, considered by some as an antecedent to effective listening (Steil, Barker, and Watson 1983; Aggarwal et al. 2005).

Customer listening by salespeople has been studied in diverse business sectors (e.g. automobile, Ramsey and Sohi 1997; industrial, Comer and Drollinger 1999; pharmaceutical, Limbu and Javachandran 2012; financial, Bergeron and Laroche 2009; insurance, Goby and Lewis 2000). These studies on customer listening focus on face-to-face sales, even though sales communications also occur through mediated and multiple channels, such as the telephone. Telesales creates a unique context, in that the message senders and receivers cannot see each other and cannot rely as much on non-verbal elements (e.g. eye contact, body language, mimics, and facial expressions) as they might in face-to-face interactions. Rather, messages are verbal and paraverbal; non-verbal elements of the interpersonal communication are not available. In call centers, salespeople handle calls continuously, with limited time and in noisy conditions, so the discussion context is very different from a face-to-face setting.

Listening is a predictor variable in several studies, predicting client satisfaction, customer trust (Ramsey and Sohi 1997), sales performance (Castleberry and Shepherd 1993), and relational sales (Drollinger and Comer 2013). Customer listening also serves as a dependent variable in studies of personal and professional sales determinants (Roman, Ruiz, and Munuera 2005), though such studies generally ignore the impact of a sales contest. As a dependent variable, customer listening might depend on parameters linked to the execution of sales tasks, in the presence or absence of sales contests.

Generally, researchers separate the techniques of listening from the processes of listening, though they can be associated (Koehl 2009, 2014). Passive and active listening are techniques of listening associated with the *Sensing*

and *Processing* steps. When sensing, the receiver does not speak and is taking in all stimuli. When processing, the receiver searches for the meaning that is implied in the exchange by questioning, reformulating, and applying knowledge. In a telesales context, considering the exchange is only oral between telesales agent and customers without the ability to observe non-verbals and considering the working conditions, the process of listening is applied in a short time and concentrated on verbal and paraverbal components. These particularities and the results of the literature review lead us to retain a listening process with three steps: *Hearing*, *Processing*, and *Responding*.

Hypotheses

Prior research on commission-based compensation plans indicates a potential negative effect on customer listening (Aiello and Kolb 1995; Roman, Ruiz, and Munuera 2005). The compensation plan influences selling techniques and financial motivations (Kurland 1996). Honeycutt et al. (2001) suggest that sellers adopt selling approaches with an 'open, without pressure' approach if compensation is not primarily commission-based; conversely, salespeople adopt a 'closed, with pressure' approach when on commission-based plans. A contest, with the opportunity for additional cash earnings, prizes, or recognition based on sales volume, may orient sellers toward less listening. Contests may promote a more directive sales approach at the detriment of listening, as the sales rep seeks to maximize sales for the sake of winning. Further, since salespeople or telesales agents are frequently constrained to meet quotas or goals for phone calls in a given time period, contests focused on quantitative objectives may disrupt the quality of listening.

Where, though, is this disruption greatest? We expect, based on the perspective of Honeycutt et al. (2001), that a contest will likely yield behaviors that are more closed, with pressure. If so, we would expect that the presence of a contest would result in fewer practices of good customer listening. That is, a contest may increase self-serving motivation to the detriment of the listening. The listening process based on the steps *Hearing*, *Processing*, and *Responding* may also be negatively affected during a period of sales contest conducting to formulate the following research hypotheses:

H1: A sales contest has a negative impact on Hearing.

H2: A sales contest has a negative impact on Processing.

H3: A sales contest has a negative impact on Responding.

Empirical study

Study context

This natural field experiment involves observing listening practices during the treatment of calls made by 90 telesales

agents. These telesales agents work in an inbound call center that manages the customer portfolio of a specialized mobile phone provider. Their profile presents the following characteristics: more than half are between 20 and 25 years old, are male (56.5%), and have less than 18 months of experience. One-third has a high school diploma, one-third a bachelor's degree and one-third has some graduate school education. Temporary telesales agents are not included in the study.

The telesales agents consider each inbound call a sales opportunity. They are not limited to scripts, which grant them more freedom in their conversations with clients. Each telesales agent has received training on a sales process that includes listening. Management recommends 10 minutes as a time limit per call in order to discover how customers use their mobile phone so as to propose new options and up selling adapted to their needs. Calls with poor reception or high levels of ambient noise were eliminated from study so as not to misinterpret observations.

This study, conducted over several months, spans periods marked by a sales contest and those without any contest, so it is possible to evaluate the agents' customer listening practices across both the presence and the absence of a sales contest.

The sales contest was designed by experts in incentive operations (see [Appendix 1](#) for details). The objective was to increase sales of options and upselling. The sales of options and upselling were assigned points and those points could be converted into prizes (e.g. high-fidelity equipment), depending on the number of points accumulated. Prizes were awarded after 90 days, while commission is paid monthly. Commissions are paid on individual sales results and quality measures and the relative weight of commission varies somewhat by sales agent. The contest had both an individual and collective (team-based) format.

Participation in the contest was not mandatory and those agents who chose to participate are entirely autonomous as they recorded themselves by signing up online through a dedicated intranet space. An internal communication plan explained the sales contest and attempted to motivate telesales agents to participate. Specific eligibility rules required accomplishment of a minimum threshold of selling of options and upselling; failure to reach the threshold eliminated the telesales agent from the contest. Furthermore, controls and sanctions sought to prevent fraud, and management conducted customer satisfaction calls after a random sample of sales to ensure that satisfaction levels were maintained. Clearly stated rules established conditions for elimination or sanctions.

The results were communicated via monitors visible to all agents and via their email. Since sales can be canceled by customers, contest results were not made final until 90

days after the contest ended, ensuring that only real sales would be considered.

Evaluation of customer listening practices

To evaluate the telesales agents' customer listening practices, a researcher worked closely with the call center's quality department and gained real-time access to the agents' telephone lines. The assessments of calls included two groups of telesales agents randomly selected: sales contest participants and non-participants (between-subjects). The dependent variable is individual listening behavior. The evaluations of the participants (within-subjects) spanned both the contest period and a non-contest period, which featured no sales incentive programs (e.g. no temporary 'flash sales' created by managers to offer one-off sales incentives), to enhance the reliability of the results.

For this telesales context, which differs from face-to-face sales settings, existing measures of customer listening, such as the AEL scale (Comer and Drollinger 1999) or the ILPS (Interpersonal Listening in Personal Selling) scale (Castleberry, Shepherd, and Ridnour 1999) are not appropriate. Instead, a preliminary exploratory study was conducted to evaluate customer listening in telephone-mediated relationships. The results of this exploratory qualitative study completing an extensive literature review allows to find potential items for the evaluation of customer listening (Koehl 2009, 2014). Then, telesales experts working in a different call center reviewed the items. Through this collaboration, theories about listening were integrated with earlier observations to formulate items suitable within the context of telesales and a process of listening. The formulated items have been then submitted to telesales experts of the selected call center who were responsible for ensuring service quality in the treatment of the calls. The items have been analyzed both independently by practitioner experts, and then collaboratively with the researcher to assess listening practices and process employed on sales phone calls. Results were compared and conclusions formulated to avoid biases in evaluation; differences were noted and precisions in formulations were given. For each formulated item, details of evaluation were specified in an index form. For example, for the item 'formulates clear questions', weighted elements are the degree of precision to validate an understanding via questions such as: 'do I understand correctly? It is not clear for me, can you give me more information, more precise please? "For the item" expresses his/her empathy', weighted elements are: 'yes, I see; yes, I understand; I agree with you'. After tests of evaluations on calls and convergent notation between telesales experts and researcher, all inbound calls selected for the study were evaluated by the researcher who worked in the conditions of a real professional laboratory. The researcher, equipped with a headset, evaluated only calls by a phoning

connection without knowing and seeing telesales agents and by being focused only on selected listening items that characterize the treatment of an inbound call avoiding all risks of dispersion and external perturbations.

The evaluations of practices of customer listening included a pretest on 150 inbound calls. The items were analyzed with a principal component analysis with a varimax rotation, revealing four listening dimensions that explain 72.44% of the total variance, 45.12% through active listening, and 10.75% through adaptive listening. The four dimensions reflect four listening techniques: passive listening, active listening, as well as two new dimensions: adaptive listening and assertive listening (Cronbach's $\alpha > .9$, Bartlett test = .000, Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) index close to .9). These four listening techniques are confirmed with a control of reliability on 320 calls (Cronbach's $\alpha > .9$, Bartlett test = .000, KMO index close to .9). They have a direct link with the steps of the listening process retained for the study including the three steps *Hearing*, *Processing*, and *Responding*. This operationalization of the listening process is then used to evaluate inbound calls.

For telesales agents, passive listening consists of listening to messages sent by clients over the telephone line while being welcoming and receptive (*evaluated items: identifies the mobile status of the call, doesn't repeat the customer, is receptive*). In this respect, the agent does not ask clients to repeat the reasons for their calls or specify their needs. This dimension matches the *Hearing* step of the listening process. With active listening (*evaluated items: uses responses to continue the dialog, formulates clear questions, formulates questions to continue the dialog, uses objections to continue the dialog, expresses his (her) empathy, is in the relationship, reformulates essential points*), telesales agents ask questions, express empathy and reformulate or confirm key points. The agent is focused on the conversation and seeks to extend it, which parallels a *Processing* step in the listening process. Both adaptive listening (*evaluated items: gives an adaptive response to customer's needs, gives an adaptive response to customer's questions, gives a response in cohesion with the objectives of the mission*) and assertive listening (*evaluated items: answers without pressure by being affirmative, respects the customer in his (her) words, doesn't formulate rapid conclusions, masters his (her) emotions*) represent responses, based on the previous steps, in line with the *Responding* step of the listening process. Telesales agents position themselves as specialized sales advisors and become involved in what the client is saying, which promotes balanced communication. Whereas adaptive listening implies that the agent adapts to the messages expressed by the client, assertive listening indicates that the agent actively expresses statements about one's own professional skills, while still respecting the client and without coming to a hasty conclusion.

Once the four dimensions of listening were identified, the researcher evaluated inbound calls in real time on a 7-point scale from very bad (1 point) to excellent (7 points). The evaluation of listening began from the beginning of a connection with a customer to the conclusion of the call. Specialized software allows for the following of any connection with customers. When a customer contacts the call center, the call is identified and the listening practice is evaluated for the telesales agent taking the call. The calls were randomly selected and monitored at three different points throughout the days and at different hours. Each telesales agent is followed with an identification number to assure anonymity. This approach avoids asymmetries in abilities that might influence outcomes. The age, gender, and position (level and type) of those studied were consistent with the profile of the employees within the call center and the individual factors did not significantly influence any of the variables of interest. Evaluations of calls during the sales contest included telesales agents who voluntarily agreed to participate, who work in the frontline service area, and who were eligible according to the rules of eligibility (see [Appendix 1](#)).

Results

The data related to the evaluations of the telesales agents' customer listening practices underwent an analysis of variance and means comparisons, conducted with SPSS software. The results pertain to both within- and between-subject findings regarding telesales agents. First, the between-subject data related to 250 call evaluations reveal significant results for passive ($p = .04$) and active ($p = .00$) listening, but not for adaptive or assertive listening ([Table 2](#)). The test of the mean comparison of factorial scores indicates the impact of the sales contest was negative on passive and active listening. That is, telesales agents who participated in the sales contest exhibited less passive and active listening than telesales agents did outside the contest period. This negative impact in turn should affect the *Hearing* and *Processing* steps of the listening process and result in poorer quality customer listening during a sales contest period validating H1 and H2.

The within-subjects results include 162 call evaluations; the impact again is significant for passive ($p = .04$) and active ($p = .07$) listening but not for adaptive or assertive listening techniques of listening or *Responding* part of listening ([Table 3](#)). This test of the comparison of means of the factorial scores shows a negative impact of the sales contest on passive and active listening. That is, telesales agents who participated in the sales contest exhibited worse customer listening when answering incoming telephone calls during the sales contest period but better customer listening outside of the contest period. This negative impact similarly affected the

Table 2. Impact of a sales contest on customer listening (between-subject).

	Hearing Passive listening	Processing Active listening	Responding	
			Adaptive listening	Assertive listening
<i>F</i> (1; 161)	4.019	14.478	0.466	1.879
<i>p</i>	0.046	0.000	0.496	0.172
<i>Comparison of means of factorial scores</i>				
No contest	0.093	0.174	0.032	0.094
Sales contest	−0.169	−0.315	−0.058	−0.116

Table 3. Impact of a sales contest on customer listening (within-subject).

	Hearing Passive listening	Processing Active listening	Responding	
			Adaptive listening	Assertive listening
<i>F</i> (1; 249)	4.151	7.583	1.594	.342
<i>p</i>	0.043	0.007	0.209	0.559
<i>Comparison of means of factorial scores</i>				
No contest	0.175	0.234	0.109	0.050
Sales contest	−0.143	−0.192	−0.089	−0.041

Hearing and *Processing* steps of the listening process and led to poorer quality customer listening.

Thus, the study results confirm the original research proposal: a sales contest has a negative impact on customer listening, and as hypothesized, several steps of the listening process are negatively affected. The negative results during contest periods are particularly significant for passive and active listening implying the steps *Hearing* and *Processing* of the listening process. Adaptive and assertive listening also suffer poorer results during contest periods but the differences are not statistically significant to confirm the H3. Thus, the negative effect may be considered partial and not global, because it is only significant for passive and active listening implying the *Hearing* and *Processing* steps of the listening process. Only H1 and H2 are supported; H3 is not (Figure 2). Overall though, the quality of the customer listening declines when a sales contest is in effect, according to both the within- and between-subject findings.

Discussion

This study advances understanding of listening and contests in several ways. First, the influence of a contest is not uniform across all forms of listening. Second, some forms of listening are surprisingly relatively unimportant when considering short-term performance outcomes. These findings require some reconsideration of adaptive selling and the role of contests in managing salesperson behavior and performance.

This study provides evidence that listening is negatively influenced by a sales contest; however, the observed

negative impacts of the sales contest on the *Responding* dimension of listening (adaptive and assertive listening) are not significant. Thus, even if a telesales agent fails to hear the client (*Hearing* dimension) or becomes less involved in the conversation (*Processing* dimension), he/she still can offer a response that is coherent with sales objectives and advising the client.

Two possible explanations for the contest's effects on listening can be made. First, the contest focused salespeople to seek specific outcomes; in an effort to accomplish these outcomes, salespeople gave short shrift to passive and active listening. Given the stronger sales outcomes for those participating in the sales contest, the shortcut did not damage short-term sales outputs, suggesting that these aspects of listening may not be important. Pryor, Malshe, and Paradise (2013) note that customers look for expressions of empathy, which may increase the importance of *Responding* (adaptive and assertive listening techniques). Future research should consider whether *Hearing* and *Processing* dimensions of listening (passive and active listening) are important to customer satisfaction with the call experience and other possible outcomes, and whether there is some minimum threshold that signals sufficient interest on the part of the salesperson.

Further, a combination of salesperson knowledge and sales process simplicity may contribute to the salesperson's ability to shortcut the process. Thus, in an effort to achieve higher levels of sales, salespeople may have made strategic decisions as to what could be dropped from the call without hurting chances for the sale. While this study controlled for experience and the environment involved fairly simple

Figure 2. Results of the impact of a sales contest on customer listening.

selling, a more complex setting may lead to findings that shortcuts cannot be taken, no matter the nature of incentives. Thus, research regarding control systems should examine contextual factors that may influence the relative effectiveness of the systems.

The second explanation for these findings is that the specific modalities of the sales contest examined in this study limited the effects of the contest on the *Responding* dimension of listening (adaptive and assertive listening). These modalities aimed to protect the customer relationship quality for the focal firm, but the sales contest still hindered *Hearing* and *Processing* steps (passive and active customer listening). This negative impact might not be global, in that the sales contest did not affect adaptive or assertive listening significantly, but a lack of passive and active listening over time may significantly disrupt relationship quality, particularly in relation to empathy and signals that the sales agent does not want to understand the customer's messages. Poor quality active listening also implies poorer understanding of the client and its needs, which may lead to lower relational quality and threaten the continuation of the relationship.

The results also might reflect the rules and guidelines associated with this particular sales contest. Boosting sales was the primary goal, but rules included constraints on sales persistence. The controls, set at different levels, assign sanctions if salespeople force sales or achieve incoherent (and possibly fraudulent or harmful) results. This qualitative approach aims to safeguard against sales misconduct potentially explaining why sales contest did not affect adaptive and assertive listening techniques significantly. That is, a failure to engage in the *Responding* dimension of listening might imply sales misconduct and

invoke sanctions for the salesperson. The telesales agents in this study thus may have avoided pressuring clients to prevent being punished.

During the sales contest, telesales agents asked the client to repeat more often, a sign of reduced *Hearing*. Exploration of the client's needs and expectations through questions or restatements (active listening) is also not as frequent. This result may reflect the salesperson's stronger orientation toward a presentation of new offers in line with the sales contest incentives, as well as an increase in speaking relative to listening. However, because adaptive and assertive listening are not significantly negatively affected, the sales contest seemingly does not create a sufficiently strong anti-relational orientation that the sales conversations end abruptly. The customer relationship is not entirely unbalanced, and forced sales due to pressure do not appear to occur, which likely is due to the qualitative rules of the contest, as noted previously.

Effective listening is an important element in the adaptive selling process (Spiro and Weitz 1990; Castleberry and Shepherd 1993; Shepherd, Castleberry, and Ridnour 1997) and this study, with the identification of adaptive listening, offers additional insight into how listening can be important for adaptive selling (Koehl 2015). Adaptive listening allows sellers to signal deeper empathy and a customer focus to contribute to the application of adaptive selling. The salesperson searches for understanding that enable customer-specific solutions and with the practice of assertive listening, he/she is situated in the step *Responding* without applying pressure and without jumping to conclusions. Thus, an important contribution is the distinction of adaptive and assertive listening.

Customers rely on listening behaviors as signals of empathy (Pryor, Malshe, and Paradise 2013). As such, an interesting validation study would include the customer perspective of adaptive and assertive listening. If these are truly distinctive forms of listening behavior, they should reflect differentially in customer responses. For example, future research could consider whether these are additive or multiplicative in influencing customer perceptions of empathy.

This study further suggests that adaptive selling supporting a customer orientation can be managed through outcome controls (the qualitative rules of the contest). Contests, as one form of controls (cf. Miao and Evans 2013), have been shown here to influence listening in potentially dangerous ways but not at the expense of short-term outcomes. Thus, this study helps to integrate several theoretical approaches to understanding salesperson performance. Indeed, the contest creates modifications in working conditions of sellers. Therefore the particularities of the context of selling generated by the presence or absence of a contest appeal consideration. 'The nature of the selling situation' (Weitz, Sujan, and Sujan 1986) that is included in the concept of adaptive selling can also find a new delimitation with the consideration of the working conditions of sellers who are implied or not in incentives operations such as contests.

These findings suggest that adaptive selling supporting a customer orientation can be managed through outcome controls (Anderson and Oliver 1987), in this case the qualitative rules of the contest. Thus, this study helps to integrate several theoretical approaches to understanding salesperson performance.

Managerial implications

At a managerial level, the study results should raise awareness of how sales contests alter salespeople's listening practices to the possible detriment of global customer listening quality. To avoid the potential customer relationship damage, managers should set qualitative objectives in addition to quantitative goals and determine limits for the various modalities of the sales contest. Specific rules associated with the sales contest might help ensure customer listening; a call processing framework also might remind sales agents of their ethical responsibilities and the need to ensure the high quality of their relationships with clients.

With regard to designing the sales contest modalities, the choice of rewards should be consistent with the company's regular compensation plan. When pay incentives focus on productivity, salespeople seek to achieve their sales objectives without listening (Aiello and Kolb 1995), such as through sales approaches that are closed or pressuring, especially if they are paid by commission (Honeycutt et al. 2001). In this study, the rewards were not financial, which

might explain the partial negative impact of the sales contest. This finding indicates that managers must choose sales contest rewards carefully and is to be considered with the results of the works of Lim, Ahearne, and Ham (2009).

Because the results show negative effects of a sales contest for only two dimensions of listening (passive and active), corresponding to *Hearing* and *Processing* steps of listening process, a sales contest is not inherently anti-relational; instead, it creates a temporary microclimate of the cultural and ethical climate of each company. As Bergadaà (2005) explains, well-established ethical rules can help companies ensure that their employees act in conformity with their corporate culture. A sales contest, implemented in a particular professional context with unique rules, seemingly should be able to induce specific objectives that are both ethical and relational. In implementing sales contests, managers should therefore adopt principles for high quality customer relationships and select qualitative measures, such as those used to assess customer listening. In this sense, a contest can constitute a management tool for developing better quality contacts even when also trying to increase sales.

The results of this study further indicate that when tele-sales agents work without scripts, there is diversity in call management. Training, then, becomes important, not only in what to say but also in how to listen.

Limitations

This study includes several limitations that suggest pathways for further research, in addition to those opportunities noted earlier. All calls came from one firm with one set of work conditions. A cross-sectional sample would complement this field experiment by confirming or refuting our initial results and scale development.

In this study, we can infer that *Hearing* and *Processing* dimensions of customer listening (passive and active listening) may not be that important to sales outcomes since sales performance improved for those participating in the contest. Future work should consider other outcomes, such as customer satisfaction with the sales call experience and effects on longer term relational outcomes. Further, direct testing of the effects of listening types on sales outcomes should be conducted. For example, questions such as whether a minimal threshold of passive and active listening must be met or whether complexity of the setting influences the importance of listening should be examined.

Sales contest scholars should also consider how sales contests with varying modalities (e.g. duration types of rewards, etc.) influences customer listening. For managers seeking to protect customer relationship quality yet apply sales contests, further research should also clarify the effects of safeguards or ethical conduct rules. An interesting question would be whether a contest could not only be

used to meet sales goals but also to contribute to the organization's ethical culture or to role clarity by addressing specific salesperson behaviors such as listening. Research into contest modality and effects on customer listening and other specific behaviors could help immensely with questions of contest impact.

Further research into other explanatory factors (covariates), such as the company's and manager's customer orientation, could enrich this research, to the extent some of the variance might be linked to these variables. Additional research also could investigate in greater depth which variables contribute to explain a telesales agent's listening habits. The term *call center* covers a wide range of situations both organizationally and in terms of the business function. Moreover, it would be productive to consider other characteristics of call centers; for example, the nature of the calls (incoming or outgoing), the type of selling and marketing activity, and the business sector (B-to-B or B-to-C). This great diversity of call centers is one of the variables that potentially can influence salespeople's listening. In addition, the evolution towards *contact centers* reflecting the diversity of contact media and format suggest that listening may not be limited to aural sensory of verbals, but should perhaps include text. Customer listening researchers should consider crossover into digital listening in social media and email.

Conclusion

This field experiment led to the identification of additional dimensions in customer listening, as well as the influence of a sales contest on listening. The negative impacts on two listening dimensions, *Hearing* and *Processing*, imply poorer listening quality when salespeople are participating in a sales contest in a call center setting. The results highlight the need to consider customer listening as a key dependent variable in sales studies and particularly as a dependent variable on the conditions of incentives on sales. Beyond serving as a tool to motivate salespeople and boost sales, a sales contest also affects salespeople's relational behaviors; thus, continued research must consider the complementarity between customer listening and the management of customer information through the use of mediated channels. These results indicate that customer listening research is still maturing, and significant opportunity lies ahead in this area of research.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Appendix 1. Characteristics of the sales contest.

Criterion	Description of each criterion
Nature of the objective	Quantitative objective: to increase sales of product options and upselling on several segments of customers
Competition format	Individual and collective format: Individual telesales agents and teams of telesales agents (minimum of six telesales agents and maximum of thirteen telesales agents with a single team leader)
Budget and Ranking	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Closed budget: selective ranking with a pre-determined number of winners• Ranking depended on total points• In the case of a tie between agents, the agent who closed the most long term sales was the winner• In the case of tie between teams, the team which had the smaller number of telesales agents eliminated for failing to meet the minimum sales limit was the winner
Rewards	Extrinsic: Material prizes: Hi-Fi equipment
Length and Period	Four weeks The end of one year on two months: November and December
Frequency	Low: No other incentive plan during this period
Internal communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>before the sales contest</i>: at the end of October, an email was sent announcing contest; informative and motivational spots on the sales contest via televisions on the phoning platform• <i>during the sales contest</i>: display of messages with results via video monitors on the phoning platform and by email• <i>at the end of the sales contest</i>: display of a provisory ranking on the dedicated intranet space before dissemination of the final ranking three months after (in respect with the time of sustainability of sales)
Modalities of participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Participation is voluntary• To be eligible for prizes, the participant had to reach a minimum sales level for options and of upselling• Transformation of each sale into points based on size and type of sale, as well as whether the customer was new or current
Controls and sanctions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Regular analysis of results• Wave of control with outbound calls towards customers after the treatment of the inbound calls• Daily, weekly controls on sales• Telesales agents ruled ineligible (eliminated) if high rate of cancelations, decrease in customer satisfaction (based on wave of control), or evidence of high pressure (based on wave of control)• Restitution of Hi-Fi prizes if identification of fraud after diffusion of results and attribution of prizes