

LEARNING AND PERFORMANCE GOAL ORIENTATION OF SALESPEOPLE REVISITED: THE ROLE OF PERFORMANCE-APPROACH AND PERFORMANCE-AVOIDANCE ORIENTATIONS

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This study revisits the conceptualization and operationalization of salesperson goal orientation, a mid-level construct in the achievement motivation model. Goal orientation has, in recent sales studies, been conceptualized to be comprised of a learning and a performance goal orientation. However, studies examining goal orientation's relationship with salesperson performance and behavior have found inconsistent results. Guided by seminal studies in achievement motivation theory, this study proposes that performance goal orientation is comprised of two distinct components: a performance-approach goal orientation and a performance-avoidance goal orientation, the latter of which is grounded in fear of failure. The contemporary model of goal orientation is tested and compared with the classic model. The results indicate that the classic model more accurately captures salesperson goal orientation and its relationship with salesperson performance. Notably, a performance-avoidance goal orientation is negatively related to salesperson performance.

Salesperson work motivation has long been an important element in sales management research (e.g., Brown, Cron, and Slocum 1998; Cron, Dubinsky, and Michaels 1988; DeCarlo, Teas, and McElroy 1997; Futrell, Parasuraman, and Sager 1983; Kohli, Shervani, and Challagalla 1998; Sujan, Weitz, and Kumar 1994; Walker, Churchill, and Ford 1977). Recent research has focused on achievement motivation theory as an explanation of salesperson work motivation (Brown, Cron, and Slocum 1997; Kohli, Shervani, and Challagalla 1998; Sujan, Weitz, and Kumar 1994; VandeWalle et al. 1999). According to achievement motivation theory, the goal orientation that is adopted prior to engaging in a task or activity establishes a mental framework of how individuals interpret, evaluate, and act in pursuit of their task, or achievement goal. As such, the goal orientation adopted motivates behavior in an achievement setting (Dweck and Leggett 1988). An achievement setting is one in which a prescribed activity requires a display of competence (Dweck and Bempechat 1983; Nicholls 1984). Examples of achievement settings are educational class-

rooms, athletic contests, and, pertinent to the current study, sales interactions.

Recent studies in sales research (Kohli, Shervani, and Challagalla 1998; Sujan, Weitz, and Kumar 1994; VandeWalle et al. 1999), such as those in the psychology disciplines (e.g., Dweck, Chiu, and Hong 1995; Dweck and Leggett 1988; Nicholls 1984), have focused on two distinct goal orientations—learning and performance. The sales studies have hypothesized both direct and indirect effects of learning goal orientation and performance goal orientation on salesperson performance and behavior, although the results have not been entirely consistent.

The indirect effects of learning and performance goal orientation on sales performance have been supported in one study (Sujan, Weitz, and Kumar 1994), while no direct or indirect effect for performance goal orientation was found in another (VandeWalle et al. 1999). In addition, Kohli, Shervani, and Challagalla (1998) found a direct effect of performance goal orientation on salesperson performance but no effect for learning goal orientation. These results contrast sharply with numerous studies set in classroom achievement settings that have consistently found learning goal orientation to be positively associated with classroom performance and performance goal orientation to have a nonsignificant or even negative relationship with performance (e.g., Block et al. 1995; Butler 1993; Button, Mathieu, and Zajac 1996; Elliot and Church 1997; Elliot and Harackiewicz 1996; Onatsu-Arvilommi and Nurmi 2000; Phillips and Gully 1997; VandeWalle, Cron, and Slocum 2001). Furthermore, Sujan, Weitz, and Kumar (1994) found performance goal orientation to have a positive, significant relationship with salesperson effort, while VandeWalle et al. (1999) found no association between these variables.

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These conflicting results may be due to the conceptualization of goal orientation into two components—learning and performance. According to early achievement motivation theorists, such as Atkinson (1964) and McClelland (1951), three orientations exist—a learning goal orientation, a performance-*approach* orientation, and a performance-*avoidance* orientation. Researchers in the psychology and educational psychology disciplines revisited this approach (e.g., Elliot and Church 1997; Elliot and Harackiewicz 1996; Onatsu-Arvilommi and Nurmi 2000; Skaalvik 1997; VandeWalle, Cron, and Slocum 2001) and found empirical support for this earlier theoretical model of achievement motivation that conceptualizes performance goal orientation to be comprised of two components.

The performance-approach and performance-avoidance goal orientations, while exhibiting similar cognitive and affective reactions, result in distinctly different behavior. Individuals with a dominant performance-approach goal orientation seek to demonstrate their ability relative to others for recognition from their superiors. In contrast, people with a performance-avoidance goal orientation act to avoid negative evaluations (Elliot and Church 1997; Elliot and Harackiewicz 1996; Middleton and Midgley 1997; Skaalvik 1997; VandeWalle, Cron, and Slocum 2001).

This paper thus proposes, in consonance with the earliest conceptualizations of goal orientation (e.g., Atkinson 1964; McClelland 1951), that performance goal orientation be partitioned into performance-approach and performance-avoidance goal orientations. This conceptualization results in three goal orientations—learning goal orientation, performance-approach goal orientation, and performance-avoidance goal orientation. Such an approach may well explain and resolve the mixed results found to date in the sales literature.

ACHIEVEMENT MOTIVATION

Achievement motivation theory (Ames and Archer 1988; Atkinson 1964; Dweck and Leggett 1988; McClelland 1951; Nicholls 1984) seeks to explain how people interpret their reality in achievement settings. Achievement settings are those in which individuals approach, participate in, and respond to achievement tasks (Ames and Archer 1988). A central focus of sales researchers and managers alike is identifying those salesperson characteristics that lead to successful sales performance in such settings. Several recent studies employed achievement motivation theory to identify key success factors of high-performing salespeople (e.g., Kohli, Shervani, and Challagalla 1998; Sujan, Weitz, and Kumar 1994; VandeWalle et al. 1999).

Achievement motivation theory asserts that goals are the central determinants of behavior patterns. A behavior pattern encompasses how a person thinks, feels, and behaves in pursuit of a goal (Elliott and Dweck 1988). Goals are “cogni-

tive representations of the things we wish to accomplish” (Harackiewicz, Barron, and Elliott 1998, p. 2). The goals that one chooses represent the way one thinks about pursuing competence. Different goals thus orient a person toward different patterns of cognition, affect, and behavior (Dweck and Leggett 1988).

Current achievement motivation theory utilized in sales research recognizes two major behavioral patterns that govern how salespeople think about themselves and their sales environment and, in particular, how they react to sales challenges and potential failure. These patterns are known as goal orientations and are described as a learning, or mastery, goal orientation and a performance goal orientation (Kohli, Shervani, and Challagalla 1998; Sujan, Weitz, and Kumar 1994; VandeWalle et al. 1999).

Salespeople who hold a learning goal orientation are intrinsically motivated to complete a difficult task and are generally unconcerned about their performance relative to others or meeting some normative standard of performance success. A learning goal orientation is instead characterized by a preference for challenging tasks, the acquisition of new skills and experiences, persistence and enhanced effort in the face of failure, and an overall positive affect toward learning (Kohli, Shervani, and Challagalla 1998; Sujan, Weitz, and Kumar 1994; VandeWalle et al. 1999). Thus, salespeople with a learning goal orientation, in the face of difficult challenges or failure, adopt a pattern of persistence, renewed effort, and improved strategy. This response is described as an adaptive, or mastery, behavior pattern (Dweck, Chiu, and Hong 1995; Nicholls 1984).

In contrast, salespeople with a performance goal orientation are most interested in demonstrating their ability, especially in relation to others, and are least interested in any intrinsic value associated with the task. Salespeople with a performance goal orientation attribute success largely, if not wholly, to ability. Performance goal-oriented salespeople view effort and ability as opposing constructs (Ames and Archer 1988; Nicholls 1984); that is, if one has ability, then one does not need to exert effort to achieve success. To this end, failure is equated with a lack of ability by performance goal-oriented salespersons.

A key assumption of achievement motivation theory is that a person chooses behavior in an attempt to attain desired goals (Nicholls 1984). With a focus on demonstrating their competence, performance-oriented salespeople will avoid challenging sales situations, and thus failure, in an effort to protect their self-worth (Sujan, Weitz, and Kumar 1994). Furthermore, seeing a particularly difficult sales task as a threat, they are likely to “withdraw from the task, make negative ability attributions, and report decreased interest in the task” (VandeWalle et al. 1999, p. 249). Thus, to avoid appearing less than competent, the performance goal-oriented salesper-

son will be susceptible to “helpless” patterns of responses. These responses, motivated by a fear of failure, may include sales call procrastination, avoidance of challenging sales tasks, concentrating on easier sales, and engaging in other less challenging sales activities that more easily demonstrate normative superiority. Achievement motivation researchers refer to these reactions as a maladaptive or helpless behavior pattern (Ames 1992; Ames and Archer 1988; Corr and Gray 1996; Dweck and Leggett 1988; Nicholls 1984).

Mastery and performance goal orientations are not opposing ends of a continuum, it should be noted, but are, instead, independent constructs. For example, it is possible for a salesperson to be concerned about skill improvement while working to outperform other salespeople in the firm (Button, Mathieu, and Zajac 1996). However, in a particular achievement domain, such as a sales setting, one goal orientation usually predominates (Dweck and Leggett 1988; Kohli, Shervani, and Challagalla 1998; Nicholls 1984). This occurs because an individual’s goal orientation is influenced by two factors—the personal characteristics of the individual and the situation or setting (Ames and Archer 1988; Sujan, Weitz, and Kumar 1994). Thus, while a salesperson may be predisposed to a learning orientation, a highly competitive sales environment and a sell-at-all-costs sales manager may cause the salesperson to adopt a performance goal orientation. For example, Sujan, Weitz, and Kumar (1994) found that positive feedback from sales managers influences a mastery goal orientation in the sales force. Kohli, Shervani, and Challagalla (1998) found differences in salespeople’s goal orientation based on their supervisors’ management style. VandeWalle et al. (1999) noted that individual differences in salespeople’s goal orientation dominate unless strong situational cues about competition, evaluation, and rewards arise. Thus, people will adopt the goal orientation appropriate for the setting (Ames and Archer 1988; Duda 1987; Dweck and Leggett 1988; Nicholls 1984).

Empirical Studies of Achievement Motivation in Sales Settings

Goal orientations motivate behavior (Dweck and Leggett 1988; Sujan, Weitz, and Kumar 1994). Since different goal orientations result in different behavior, it is incumbent upon sales managers to understand their association with salesperson performance. Despite the relevance and importance of goal orientation to salesperson motivation and behavior, empirical studies examining it have found mixed results. Sujan, Weitz, and Kumar’s (1994) seminal study in this area hypothesized that a learning goal orientation would result in adaptive behavior, defined as working smart. Learning goal orientation was also hypothesized to positively influence working hard, defined as the overall effort salespeople devote to

their work. Performance goal orientation was hypothesized to positively influence working hard, though not working smart. Both working smart and working hard were, in turn, posited to increase salesperson performance. There was no direct association between goal orientation and sales performance hypothesized.

The main effects involving learning goal orientation and performance goal orientation were supported—that is, learning goal orientation positively influenced both working smart and working hard, whereas performance goal orientation positively influenced working hard. Performance was subsequently found to be positively influenced by both working smart and working hard.

VandeWalle et al. (1999), consistent with Sujan, Weitz, and Kumar’s (1994) study, found that a learning goal orientation was positively related to effort, the overall time and effort expended by the salesperson. However, in contrast to Sujan, Weitz, and Kumar’s (1994) study, no relationship was found between performance goal orientation and effort. Further, VandeWalle et al. (1999) hypothesized and found a positive relationship between learning goal orientation and sales performance that was mediated by several self-regulating variables. However, performance goal orientation was not related to sales performance, directly or indirectly.

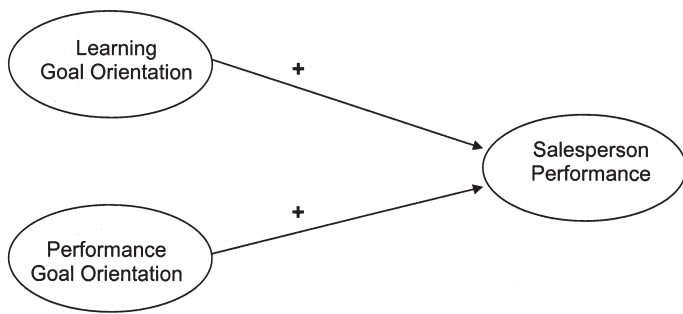
Kohli, Shervani, and Challagalla (1998) proposed that performance and learning goal orientations were both positively and directly related to salesperson performance. However, an analysis of their study’s structural model found a positive relationship between performance goal orientation and performance but, curiously, no relationship between learning goal orientation and salesperson performance.

Overall, achievement motivation theory predicts that salespeople’s goal orientation will influence their behavior in a sales setting. Empirical results in sales settings appear to support this notion. Furthermore, theory suggests that the ultimate influence of a learning goal orientation on salesperson performance should be positive, whereas that of a performance goal orientation should be negative. However, the results of these studies are inconsistent and provide an unsettled picture of the role that goal orientation plays in this regard. The results warrant, we believe, further investigation and explanation, which we seek to provide next.

GAP IN CURRENT THEORY AND RESEARCH: APPROACH AND AVOIDANCE GOALS

Goals are considered mid-level constructs in the achievement motivation model, positioned between dispositional antecedents and behavior (Dweck and Leggett 1988; Elliot and Church 1997). Dispositional antecedents are more distal to, and have less direct influence on, behavior. Achievement goals, in contrast, are considered the “proximal regulator of behavior”—

Figure 1
Contemporary Model



that is, they are considered the primary determinant of behavior in this model (Elliot and Church 1997, p. 291).

Following the lead of contemporary achievement motivation research in psychology (Ames 1992; Dweck and Leggett 1988; Nicholls 1984), sales researchers (e.g., Kohli, Shervani, and Challagalla 1998; Sujan, Weitz, and Kumar 1994) conceptualized performance and learning goals as “approach” forms of motivation (Ames 1992; Dweck and Leggett 1988; Nicholls 1984). That is, both performance and learning goals are conceptualized to focus on, and result in, *positive* outcomes. For example, as previously discussed, Kohli, Shervani, and Challagalla (1998) hypothesized that both salespeople learning *and* performance goals were positively related to salesperson performance. The theoretical basis for this approach to goal orientation implies a lack of distinction between learning and performance goal orientations with regard to their relationship to sales performance. In effect, this approach suggests that sales managers can pursue and emphasize either route in influencing their sales force to achieve sales success. The contemporary model for achievement motivation research in sales is illustrated in Figure 1.

This approach to performance goal orientation differs starkly from the original achievement motivation theorists (e.g., Atkinson 1964; McClelland 1951). These researchers conceptualized motivation in achievement settings to have a positive *or* negative orientation. That is, behavior patterns may be oriented toward the *achievement* of success or the *avoidance* of failure—the latter of which is a topic gaining considerable interest in sales (cf. Dixon, Spiro, and Jamil 2001; Verbeke and Bagozzi 2000). This approach resulted in the partitioning of performance goal orientation into two components: performance-approach and performance-avoidance, the latter of which is failure-focused. As will be discussed, differences in behavior due to goal orientation are particularly distinctive when people anticipate or experience negative outcomes or events (Ames and Archer 1988; Dweck and Leggett 1988; Nicholls 1984), a routine phenomenon in the sales profession.

In recent years, researchers in psychology and, in particu-

lar, educational psychology (e.g., Elliot 1999; Elliot and Church 1997; Elliot and Harackiewicz 1996; Middleton and Midgley 1997; Skaalvik 1997; VandeWalle, Cron, and Slocum 2001) have revisited and reintroduced this “classic” achievement motivation model to the literature. In this approach, three goal orientations are recognized: a learning goal orientation focusing on the mastery of prescribed achievement tasks, a performance-*approach* orientation focusing on a positive evaluation of performance, and a performance-*avoidance* orientation focusing on avoiding adverse judgments of ability.

A performance-approach orientation places emphasis on demonstrating competence and gaining favorable judgments by others. However, in contrast to performance-avoidance orientations, discussed next, performance-approach goal orientations focus on positive outcomes that facilitate the successful completion of a task and the demonstration of competency. The processes that result, similar to those of a learning goal orientation, are excitement, concentration, task absorption, and sensitivity to success-relevant information, all mastery patterns of achievement outcomes (Elliot 1999; Elliot and Church 1997; Elliot and Harackiewicz 1996).

An avoidance orientation, on the other hand, is grounded in fear of failure. As achievement motivation theory predicts, an individual with this orientation will engage in behaviors that will achieve this goal—that is, avoiding the appearance of incompetence. Particularly challenging tasks with relatively high risks of failure associated with them will thus be avoided. As a result, salespersons with this orientation may succumb to, and engage in, maladaptive, “helpless” patterns of behavior such as personal anxiety, task distraction, and a focus on failure-relevant information (Elliot 1999; Elliot and Church 1997; Elliot and Harackiewicz 1996; Elliott and McGregor 1999; Elliott and Thrash 2001; 2004). Other behavioral outcomes such as procrastination and reduction in effort toward the assigned task may result as well. For example, Elliot and Harackiewicz (1996) found, in two experiments involving college students, that performance-avoidance goals resulted in lower levels of intrinsic motivation relative to learning and performance-approach goal orientations.

Performance-Approach and Performance-Avoidance Goal Orientations: Empirical Results

In addition to the Elliot and Harackiewicz (1996) findings previously mentioned, Elliot and Church (1997) measured the achievement goal orientation of 204 undergraduates. Factor analysis clearly partitioned performance goal orientation into approach and avoidance components. The different performance goal orientations also produced differences in motivation and performance. Learning goal orientation facilitated intrinsic motivation, and performance-approach goal orientation enhanced graded performance. Performance-avoidance

goal orientation, however, negatively influenced both intrinsic motivation and graded performance.

Elementary students with performance-avoidance behavior were found to develop a negative self-fulfilling prophecy in math and reading skills in a study by Onatsu-Arvilommi and Nurmi (2000). Students who feared failure avoided skill-improvement tasks and, subsequently, performed poorly on later tests. The self-fulfilling prophecy arises due to the attributional aspects of the performance-avoidance construct. Students who do poorly in a subject attribute failure to a lack of ability. Since performance-avoidance individuals do not see a relationship between effort and ability, they do not put forth the necessary effort to improve their skills. Instead, they disparage or avoid the subject. In a sales setting, salespeople demonstrating analogous behavior would conceptualize sales call failure scenarios, avoid making sales calls to the extent possible, fail on the calls they did make, and, subsequently, curtail their efforts and avoid future calls.

VandeWalle, Cron, and Slocum (2001) reported that undergraduate students with a learning goal orientation performed well on two challenging tasks when provided with performance feedback after the first task was completed. For performance-approach students, this relationship with performance moved from a positive relationship to no relationship after feedback was provided. Performance-avoidance orientation, in contrast, was found to have a negative relationship with performance before and after feedback.

These studies thus support the earlier theoretical model of achievement motivation that conceptualizes performance goal orientation to be comprised of two components. Despite the compelling evidence, grounded in the fear of failure, to include the avoidance of negative outcomes, this classic approach has not yet been operationalized in sales research. However, fear of failure and the avoidance of threatening tasks and objectives are legitimate obstacles to salesperson performance. For example, Verbeke and Bagozzi identified sales call anxiety as an impediment to goal-directed sales behaviors. As they noted: "Sales call anxiety is an irrepressible fear of being *negatively evaluated* and *rejected* by a customer, and it is coupled with a desire to *avoid undertaking* specific functional actions in selling situations" (2000, p. 88, emphasis added).

Dixon, Spiro, and Jamil, in a study assessing salespersons' attributions and behavioral intentions, found that salespeople who attribute failure to task difficulty—a stable, external attribution—simply planned to avoid such situations in the future rather than seek assistance or try a new strategy. As they cautioned with regard to this result: "This represents a difficult coaching scenario for managers, because they must convince their representative not to avoid these situations" (2001, p. 74). Clearly, sales researchers and managers alike could benefit from a better understanding of the avoidance process. This study seeks to begin to fill this gap.

The aforementioned discussion suggests that the contemporary model of goal orientation currently employed in the sales literature does not fully capture the true nature of goal orientation for salespeople. Outcomes, whether measured in terms of salesperson behavior (e.g., sales effort) or sales performance, have been mixed when only approach forms of motivation—learning and performance goal orientations—are used. It is thus proposed that performance-approach orientation and performance-avoidance orientation, along with a learning goal orientation, provide a more well-grounded, theoretically correct perspective of goal orientation in the sales arena. As such, we expect that, consistent with previous studies and achievement motivation theory supporting it, learning goal orientation will have a positive association with salesperson performance. Furthermore, in consonance with classic achievement motivation theory and empirical studies supporting it, we expect performance-approach orientation to have a positive association with salesperson performance, whereas performance-avoidance orientation is expected to have a negative association. The following hypotheses reflect this discussion:

H1: Learning goal orientation is positively associated with salesperson performance.

H2: Performance-approach goal orientation is positively associated with salesperson performance.

H3: Performance-avoidance goal orientation is negatively associated with salesperson performance.

The classic model of achievement motivation is depicted in Figure 2.

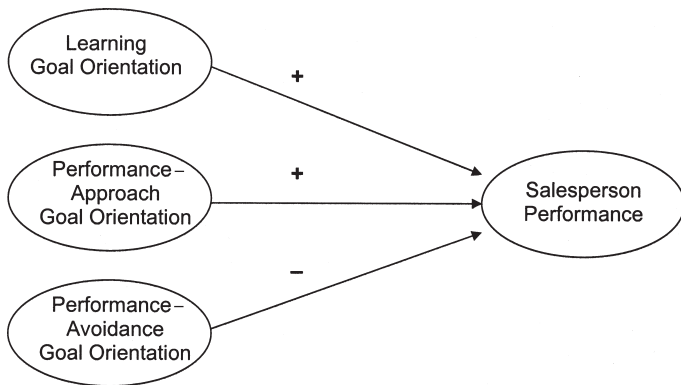
METHODOLOGY

Sample

A national sample of life insurance agents was mailed a self-report questionnaire that appears in the Appendix. Reminder mailings took place approximately three and six weeks after the first mailing. Late respondents were compared with earlier respondents to assess the existence of response bias (Armstrong and Overton 1977). No such bias was evident.

A sample of 1,225 eligible insurance agents located in the United States was sent the questionnaire. The sample was randomly chosen from the 50,000-person subscription list of a life insurance trade journal. A total of 259 responses were obtained from the agents, of which 238 were usable, rendering a usable response rate of 19.4 percent. The sample, representing 41 U.S. states, was predominantly male (90.8 percent). However, this is not inconsistent with the life insurance industry as a whole, which is 84 percent male (Life Insurance Marketing and Research Association 1998). The sales agents

Figure 2
Classic Model



were well educated, as 71 percent of the sample had a college or advanced college degree. The mean age was 52 years, and the average tenure in insurance sales was 17.3 years.

Measurement

Learning goal orientation and performance goal orientation were measured with an 11-item scale used in recent sales research by Kohli, Shervani, and Challagalla (1998) and VandeWalle et al. (1999) based on a scale developed by Sujan, Weitz, and Kumar (1994). Respondents report their goal orientation using a seven-point Likert-type scale anchored by “strongly disagree” and “strongly agree.”

Performance-approach and performance-avoidance goal orientation were measured using a 13-item scale developed by Elliot and Church (1997) and adapted to a sales setting. The life insurance agents reported their goal orientation using a seven-point Likert-type scale anchored by “strongly disagree” and “strongly agree.” The scale items for the goal orientation measures are reported in the Appendix.

A self-report instrument was used to measure sales performance. Salespeople rated themselves on their performance relative to others within their organization in similar selling situations. This self-rating approach is well accepted in sales survey research (e.g., Behrman and Perreault 1982), and, although the potential for biased responses may exist for such measures, no evidence of such bias has been found (Churchill et al. 1985). A scale was created consisting of five sales-related items as reported by the insurance agent: sales commissions earned, exceeding sales objectives and targets, generating new customer sales, generating current customer sales, and overall selling performance (Dwyer, Hill, and Martin 2000). Salespeople were asked to rate themselves on a seven-point Likert-type scale assessing their relative performance within the sales organization (with 1 indicating “far below average” and 7 indicating “far above average”). The items are reported in the Appendix.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The two models were assessed using LISREL version 8.51. The composite reliability for the constructs in the contemporary model ranged from 0.76 to 0.93 (see Table 1). The average variance extracted ranged from 0.47 to 0.66. All measurement items had significant loadings on their corresponding constructs. This, combined with the acceptable composite reliabilities, indicates convergent validity (Fornell and Larcker 1981). All latent-trait construct correlations differ from one, and, for all pairwise comparisons, the confidence interval of plus-or-minus two standard errors around the correlation does not include one, providing evidence of discriminant validity (Anderson and Gerbing 1988; Bagozzi 1980). In addition, discriminant validity was assessed using a nested models test (Bagozzi and Phillips 1982; Baker and Sinkula 1999). Using confirmatory factor analysis, each pair of constructs was tested by freeing and then fixing to unity the phi coefficient between the two constructs. In all cases, the chi-square difference test supported the model with the free phi coefficient, providing support for discriminant validity.

The composite reliabilities for the classic model ranged from 0.69 to 0.93, while the average variance extracted ranged from 0.33 to 0.66. Again, all items had significant loadings on their constructs, and this, along with the acceptable reliabilities, indicates convergent validity. In addition, all construct correlations and their corresponding confidence intervals indicated acceptable discriminant validity, as did the nested models test of discriminant validity.

Structural Models

The fit statistics for each model are shown in Table 2. While the comparative fit statistics indicate relatively comparable models, the absolute fit measure suggests a difference. The contemporary model has a significant chi-square ($\chi^2_{62} = 88.79$, $p = 0.014$), and the classic model has a nonsignificant chi-square ($\chi^2_{114} = 135.06$, $p = 0.087$). Additional support for the classic model is found by examining the squared multiple correlations of the structural equations. The squared multiple correlation for the contemporary model is 0.09, while the squared multiple correlation for the classic model is 0.20. Thus, the contemporary model accounts for 9 percent of the variance in performance, while the classic model substantially improves this, accounting for 20 percent of the variance in performance.

As shown in Table 2, the path estimates for both models reveal a key difference between the models. The performance goal orientation \rightarrow performance path is not significant in the contemporary model ($\lambda = 0.11$, $p > 0.05$). However, the learning goal orientation \rightarrow performance path is significant and positive ($\lambda = 0.25$, $p < 0.05$), consistent with the educational and psychology research literature. In the classic model, learn-

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics

	Learning Goal Orientation	Performance Goal Orientation	Performance- Approach Goal Orientation	Performance- Avoidance Goal Orientation	Performance
Learning Goal Orientation	—				
Performance Goal Orientation	0.307 **	—			
Performance-Approach Goal Orientation	0.204 **	0.653**	—		
Performance-Avoidance Goal Orientation	0.005	0.386**	0.398**	—	
Salesperson Performance	0.266 **	0.152*	0.258**	-0.104	—
Mean	6.01	4.51	4.14	3.20	5.17
Standard Deviation	0.829	1.317	1.702	1.18	0.987
Composite Reliability	0.76	0.83	0.81	0.69	0.93
Average Variance Extracted	0.47	0.55	0.59	0.33	0.66

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

Table 2
Structural Model Results

Path	Unstandardized Coefficient (λ)	Standard Error
Contemporary Model		
Learning Goal Orientation \rightarrow Performance	0.25*	0.09
Performance Goal Orientation \rightarrow Performance	0.11	0.08
$\chi^2_{62} = 88.79, p = 0.014$	Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) = 0.043	
Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = 0.98	Normed Fit Index (NFI) = 0.94	
Nonnormed Fit Index (NNFI) = 0.97	Root Mean Residual (RMR) = 0.054	
Classic Model		
Learning Goal Orientation \rightarrow Performance	0.22*	0.08
Performance-Approach Goal Orientation \rightarrow Performance	0.44*	0.10
Performance-Avoidance Goal Orientation \rightarrow Performance	-0.33*	0.10
$\chi^2_{114} = 135.06, p = 0.087$	RMSEA = 0.028	
CFI = 0.99	NFI = 0.93	
NNFI = 0.99	RMR = 0.053	

* Significant ≤ 0.05 .

ing goal orientation has a significant, positive relationship with performance ($\lambda = 0.22, p < 0.05$), as hypothesized. However, in this model, performance goal orientation is replaced by performance-approach and performance-avoidance orientations. As hypothesized, the performance-approach construct has a significant, positive relationship with performance ($\lambda = 0.44, p < 0.05$), and performance-avoidance has a significant but negative relationship with performance ($\lambda = -0.33, p < 0.05$). Support for H1, H2, and H3 was thus found.

DISCUSSION

This study revisited the construct of goal orientation, a mid-level construct in the achievement motivation model. Sales-

person goal orientation has, in recent sales studies, been operationalized as being comprised of a learning goal orientation and a performance goal orientation. The mixed results of these studies examining salesperson goal orientation's relationship with salesperson performance and behavior provided the impetus to reexamine the conceptualization and operationalization of this key motivational construct.

Guided by seminal studies in achievement motivation theory, this study proposed that performance goal orientation is comprised of two distinct components: a performance-approach goal orientation and a performance-avoidance goal orientation, the latter of which is grounded in fear of failure. The contemporary model of goal orientation—comprised of learning goal orientation and performance goal orientation—was

tested and compared with the classic approach, which included learning, performance-approach, and performance-avoidance goal orientations. The results indicate that the latter model more accurately captures and depicts salesperson goal orientation and its relationship with salesperson performance.

As expected, a learning goal orientation was positively associated with salesperson performance, an outcome not surprisingly found in both models. This result is consistent with the vast majority of the empirical outcomes reported in the education and psychology achievement motivation research literature. However, no relationship was found between performance goal orientation and performance. This result is in consonance with many studies in the achievement motivation literature. Because this conceptualization of performance goal orientation captures both the desire to gain favorable judgments about one's ability, an approach perspective, *and* the desire to avoid unfavorable judgments, an avoidance perspective rooted in the fear of failure, it is possible, if not likely, that this approach is conceptually deficient.

As the results indicate, the earliest conceptualization of goal orientation that partitions a performance goal orientation into approach and avoidance forms of motivation provided a more complete explanation and depiction of this construct. More specifically, the results revealed that a performance-approach orientation has a positive association with salesperson performance. Performance-avoidance orientation, on the other hand, is negatively related to performance, an outcome not observed in previous goal orientation studies involving salespeople but a result consistent with similar achievement setting studies recently reported in the psychology literature (Elliot and Church 1997; Elliot and Harackiewicz 1996; VandeWalle, Cron, and Slocum 2001).

That performance goal orientation is comprised of two distinct components rather than one, as conceptualized in previous sales research, may explain the inconsistent results reported in the Sujan, Weitz, and Kumar (1994) and VandeWalle et al. (1999) studies with regard to the relationship between performance goal orientation and sales effort, as well as the mixed results between the Sujan, Weitz, and Kumar (1994), VandeWalle et al. (1999), and Kohli, Shervani, and Challagalla (1998) studies examining the link, direct and indirect, between performance goal orientation and sales performance.

THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTION AND MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

This study contributes to theory and application in several ways. First, it provides theoretical and empirical support for the classical approach to goal orientation, which recognizes performance goal orientation to have both an approach and avoidance form of motivation, resulting in three goal orienta-

tions. Although the results of this study have been duplicated in classroom studies, this is the first study to apply this approach to goal orientation in a sales setting. That the proposed model had a better fit than that used in recent sales research provides a plausible explanation for the mixed results found in these studies. This suggests that achievement motivation theorists may be well served, going forward, to examine and adopt the classic approach to achievement motivation.

Second, this study has applied and tested a scale measuring the classical approach to goal orientation in a sales setting. Demonstrating acceptable levels of validity and reliability, it thus provides an additional tool for researchers intent on exploring salesperson motivation and performance. Further, the use of this scale by sales managers in the salesperson selection process is possible, providing a means of distinguishing, and potentially eliminating, performance-avoidance-oriented salespeople as candidates for hire. For the existing sales force, this scale could potentially serve as an additional diagnostic tool to assess and retrain underperforming salespeople who may be exhibiting performance-avoidance behaviors (Farr, Hoffman, and Ringenback 1993).

This study contributes to sales management in other significant ways. The results indicate that salespeople are, at least in part, motivated by one of three goal orientations. The first is through a learning goal orientation. A learning goal orientation is a positive or "approach" orientation characterized by a preference for challenges and acquiring new skills. Most notably, learning goal-oriented salespeople are likely to adopt adaptive behavior patterns—renewed effort and improved strategy among them—and persist in the face of failure. The results indicate that this orientation will lead to positive salesperson performance and thus should be supported by sales management.

A second motivational orientation, performance-approach, was also examined and tested. Grounded in an approach form of motivation, a performance-approach orientation's emphasis is on demonstrating competence. This focus on positive outcomes produces constructive processes that result, like a learning goal orientation, in success-focused adaptive behavior patterns. Like learning goal orientation, this study's results indicate that performance-approach orientations lead to positive sales outcomes.

Finally, of equal, if not greater, importance to sales managers are the implications tied to this study's results identifying the existence of a third goal orientation, performance-avoidance. This failure-focused goal orientation tends to foment destructive, "helpless" patterns of behavior. Simply put, salespeople adopting this orientation work primarily to avoid failure. Manifestations of this avoidance form of motivation can include distraction, anxiety, reduced motivation, and a cognitive focus on failure-relevant, as opposed to success-linked, information. Subsequent behaviors may include procrastina-

tion (e.g., call reluctance), inaction, and related self-protection strategies involving cognitive or physical withdrawal from the assigned task (e.g., call avoidance). The obvious outcome of such maladaptive behavior is reduced salesperson performance, as indicated in this study's results.

Most significant to sales managers, goal orientation has been described as both a trait—a stable aspect of personality—and a state, which is able to be influenced by situational cues (Elliot and Church 1997; VandeWalle, Cron, and Slocum 2001). With regard to its state-like qualities, studies have shown that goal orientation can be influenced by treatment variables such as levels of competition, evaluation standards, effort, and self-worth valuation (cf. Ames 1992; Nicholls 1984). To the extent that sales managers have the ability to emphasize such variables—and the likelihood seems high—management has the ability to influence or shape a salesperson's goal orientation in a desired direction. Managers would thus be well served to provide appropriate situational cues to enhance a learning goal orientation, for example, as suggested by Sujan, Weitz, and Kumar (1994). Based on the current study's results, an identical conclusion can be drawn for a performance-approach goal orientation. For example, sales managers should consider carefully controlling and customizing their feedback to each salesperson. Managerial feedback is believed to be an important situational cue concerning desired goal orientation (Button, Mathieu, and Zajac 1996; Kohli, Shervani, and Challagalla 1998; Sujan, Weitz, and Kumar 1994; VandeWalle et al. 1999).

In addition to encouraging learning and performance-approach goal orientations in their sales force, sales managers should consider reducing, if not extinguishing, performance-avoidance orientations in their salespeople. Recent research in the sales literature suggests one means of achieving this, in fact. Sujan (1999) posits that optimism can influence goal orientation and, further, that optimism is a trait capable of being developed. Schulman (1999) provides support for this notion and expressly suggests that management has the ability to instill optimism in its sales force. Similarly, Elliot and Church (1997) posit that a salesperson's competence expectancy can exert influence on goal orientation. These are but two potential routes to minimize a performance-avoidance orientation in salespeople. To the extent that this can be achieved, significant increases in salesperson performance could be realized.

LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Several limitations restrict the ability to generalize the findings of this study to all sales settings. First, the study examined a single industry—life insurance—although the respondents represented a national cross-sample of U.S. life

insurance firms. Salespeople in other industries might produce different results.

The cross-sectional, as opposed to longitudinal, nature of this study is also a limitation. A key unanswered question is, "Does a salesperson's goal orientation change over time?" For example, salespeople's performance may plateau (Feldman and Weitz 1988), or they may experience burnout (Babakus et al. 1999). It would be helpful to know the extent to which a change in motivation contributes to these negative outcomes.

As reported, a large percentage of the respondents were male commissioned salespeople with an above-average education. Thus, female, salary-based, or less-educated salespeople may not share the same relationship between goal orientation and performance as the sample. Younger salespeople, in particular, may adopt goal orientations that are different from people in their fifties. For example, Button, Mathieu, and Zajac (1996) found older people to be more mastery and less performance oriented. Further, older respondents in their study were less influenced by situational cues.

Since this study was exploratory in nature, additional research examining the goal orientation of salespeople is warranted. As noted earlier, goal orientation is a mid-level construct between dispositional antecedents and behavior (Elliot and Church 1997). Examination of the influence of dispositional antecedents on the three goal orientation constructs is a logical extension of this study.

Another area for further research is to examine constructs that should theoretically affect the relationship between goal orientation and salesperson performance. Variables such as self-efficacy (Sujan, Weitz, and Kumar 1994), management control systems (Kohli, Shervani, and Challagalla 1998), and supervisor feedback (VandeWalle et al. 1999) have all been related to goal orientation using the contemporary approach to performance goal orientation. A replication of these studies using the approach and avoidance constructs may offer deeper insights into these relationships.

In summary, this study, although exploratory in nature, has introduced key variables—performance-avoidance and performance-approach goal orientation—to extant models of salesperson motivation and performance. This area is ripe for future research in this important subset of sales force management research.

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APPENDIX

Salesperson Learning Goal Orientation

1. There really are not a lot of new things to learn about selling. (reverse scored)
2. It is worth spending a lot of time learning new approaches for dealing with customers.
3. An important part of being a salesperson is continually improving your sales skills.
4. I put in a great deal of effort in order to learn something new about selling.
5. It is important for me to learn from each selling experience I have.
6. Learning how to be a better salesperson is of fundamental importance to me.

Salesperson Performance Orientation

1. I spend a lot of time thinking about how my performance compares with that of other salespeople.
2. I evaluate myself using my supervisor's criteria.
3. I always try to communicate my achievements to my manager.
4. I feel very good when I know I have outperformed other salespeople in my company.
5. It is very important that my manager sees me as a good salesperson.

Performance-Approach Items

1. I want to do well in my job to show my ability to my family, friends, supervisors, or others.
2. My goal is to outperform most of the other salespeople in my firm.

3. I am motivated by the thought of outperforming my peers in my firm.
4. It is important to me to do better than the other salespeople in my firm.
5. I am striving to demonstrate my ability relative to other salespeople in my firm.
6. It is important to me to do well compared to others in my firm.

Performance-Avoidance Items

1. My fear of performing poorly at my job is often what motivates me.
2. I am afraid that if I ask my sales managers a "dumb" question, they might not think I am very smart.
3. I often think to myself, "What if I do badly in my job?"
4. I worry about the possibility of not meeting my sales goals or quotas.
5. I wish my job was not evaluated according to my sales performance.
6. I just want to avoid doing poorly in my job.

Performance

I would rate my performance on . . .

1. Sales commissions earned.
2. Exceeding sales objectives and targets.
3. Generating new customer sales.
4. Generating current customer sales.
5. Overall, compared to the typical agent in my firm, I rate my performance.

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