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# An Attitude-Behavior Model of Salespeople's Customer Orientation

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*The goal of this article is to provide deeper insights into the construct of customer orientation at the individual level. The article has three main objectives: First, this study provides a two-dimensional conceptualization of customer orientation that distinguishes between attitudes and behaviors. Second, it explores direct and indirect effects of customer-oriented attitudes on customer satisfaction. Third, the authors propose and examine a positive moderating effect of empathy, reliability, and expertise on the link between customer-oriented attitude and customer-oriented behavior and a negative moderating effect of salespeople's restriction in job autonomy. The analysis is based on dyadic data that involve judgments provided by salespeople and their customers across multiple manufacturing and services industries in a business-to-business context. Results support the authors' two-dimensional conceptualization of customer orientation. The authors also find that customer-oriented attitudes have a direct effect on customer satisfaction. The four proposed moderating effects are also in evidence.*

**Keywords:** *customer orientation; employee attitudes; attitude-behavior model; salesperson characteristics; business-to-business marketing*

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In recent years, marketing researchers and practitioners have been very interested in the concept of customer orientation. Research on this topic has been conducted at two

levels of analysis—the organizational level (e.g., Homburg and Pflesser 2000; Kennedy, Goolsby, and Arnould 2003; Kohli and Jaworski 1990; Rindfleisch and Moorman 2003) and the individual level (e.g., Brown, Boya, Humphreys, and Widing 1993; Hoffman and Ingram 1991). Research at the *organizational* level has focused on the concept of “market orientation” that fundamentally establishes tenets of organizational behavior with respect to a firm’s customers and competitors. In contrast, research at the *individual* level relates to the interpersonal contact between employees and customers. A key aspect of customer orientation at the individual level relates to the “ability of the salespeople to help their customers and the quality of the customer-salesperson relationship” (Saxe and Weitz 1982:343). In this context, customer orientation refers to the employee’s behaviors that are geared toward satisfying customers’ needs adequately.

Despite the quantity of research on customer orientation, there is an important conceptual limitation associated with the extant literature. Specifically, scholars have typically focused on customer-oriented *behaviors* such as discussing the customers’ needs, helping customers to achieve their goals, and influencing customers by providing information rather than by asserting pressure (for an overview, see Donovan, Brown, and Mowen 2004; Thomas, Soutar, and Ryan 2001). Building on previous research, our study draws a distinction between customer-oriented *attitudes* and behaviors. This distinction is relevant from both a managerial and an academic perspective.

First, a key task of managers in charge of customer contact personnel is to implement a continuous customer orientation among employees. An important problem in business practice is that employees can behave or “act” in a

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desired manner (referred to as “behavioral compliants”) but may not actually have established a positive attitude toward these policies (Hochschild 1983). These individuals may not have true enthusiasm for customers even though they might display overt customer-oriented behaviors. In other words, they do not display a strong commitment to customer service (Peccei and Rosenthal 2000).

Thus, the distinction between customer-oriented attitudes and behaviors is critical for managers since they should try to understand and influence both employees’ attitudes and behaviors. Focusing only on customer-oriented behavior is likely to lead to the type of superficial customer orientation described above. Moreover, attitudes are known to be more stable than behaviors (Williams and Wiener 1996). Thus, if managers can establish a high level of customer orientation in their employees’ attitudes, this will generate a higher level of stability in behavior as compared to only training employees to behave in a customer-oriented way. As Peccei and Rosenthal (2000) noted, it is critical to “instill or to strengthen proactive service *attitudes or values* among front line workers as an important route to the desired customer-oriented behaviors” (pp. 562-563). While influencing attitudes is not as easy for managers as influencing behaviors, there are certainly a number of managerial approaches that can influence employees’ attitudes. Managers can either screen on potential employees in terms of their orientation toward customers or they can attempt to instill positive customer-oriented attitudes into employees very early in their training and employment (i.e., before their attitudes become well formed and are difficult to change).

Second, from an academic perspective, this distinction permits an in-depth analysis of the relationship between customer-oriented attitudes and behaviors. An interesting question is whether there are circumstances when customer-oriented attitudes influence corresponding behaviors more or less strongly. Against this background, we analyze moderating effects of salespeople and situational characteristics on the link between customer-oriented attitudes and behaviors. As an example, if job autonomy is low, the salesperson might not be able to transfer his or her positive attitude into positive behavior. Support for the relevance of this issue comes from research in psychology and marketing that has shown in many domains that attitude-behavior relationships are subject to systematic moderating effects (e.g., Fazio and Zanna 1981; Fishbein and Ajzen 1975).

Finally, we can analyze the impact of individual customer orientation on “downstream variables” such as customer satisfaction. Specifically, if we assume that customer-oriented attitudes influence customer-oriented behaviors, which in turn have an impact on customer satisfaction, the question is whether the effect of customer-

oriented attitudes on customer satisfaction is totally mediated by customer-oriented behavior or whether customer-oriented attitudes also have a direct impact on customer satisfaction. Some initial research (e.g., Sharma 1999) has suggested that customers can “pick up” the emotions and attitudes of salespeople independently of specific customer-oriented behaviors. Our study will address this issue and therefore provide a deeper understanding of the mechanisms that link individual customer orientation to customer satisfaction.

These research issues will be addressed theoretically and in an empirical study. To avoid the key problem of common method bias, we examine these issues in the context of dyadic data, capturing judgments from salespeople and their customers. Specifically, salespeople are asked to assess their customer-oriented attitudes, while customer-oriented behaviors and customer satisfaction evaluations are provided by the customers. In addition, to enhance the generalizability of the findings, data are collected from multiple companies in different manufacturing and services industries in a business-to-business context.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous research on customer orientation at the individual level is rooted in two areas—the personal selling literature (e.g., Brown, Widing, and Coulter 1991; Kennedy, Lassk, and Goolsby 2002; Saxe and Weitz 1982) and the services marketing literature (e.g., Brady and Cronin 2001; Brown, Mowen, Donnavan, and Licata 2002). Scholars in these two areas have focused on three main issues: (1) the measurement validation of the Selling-Orientation Customer-Orientation (SOCO) Scale developed by Saxe and Weitz (1982), (2) the identification of antecedents of customer orientation, and (3) the investigation of possible consequences of customer orientation. The measurement-related issues have almost been exclusively examined in the personal selling literature, while both literature streams have investigated antecedents and consequences of customer orientation.

As mentioned earlier, most of the research on customer orientation has conceptualized this construct in terms of behavior. Under this approach, customer-oriented behavior is viewed as the ability of salespeople to help their customers by engaging in behaviors that increase customer satisfaction (Saxe and Weitz 1982).

Most of the research has addressed measurement-related issues (see Thomas et al. 2001 for an overview). The key focus has been an examination of the usefulness of the SOCO Scale across a variety of industries and contexts from the salesperson’s perspective (O’Hara, Boles, and Johnston 1991; Pettijohn, Pettijohn, and Parker 1997; Siguaw and Honeycutt 1995; Tadepalli 1995; Williams

and Attaway 1996), customer perspective (Brown et al. 1991; Michaels and Day 1985), or both (Pilling, Eroglu, and Boles 1994; Thomas et al. 2001). Generally, this research has been supportive of the SOCO Scale as a useful and valid instrument for assessing the sales approach used by a salesperson and/or as experienced by customers.

In addition, the consequences of customer-oriented behavior have frequently been studied. Scholars have found a positive effect of customer-oriented behavior on sales performance (e.g., Boles, Babin, Brashear, and Brooks 2001; Brown et al. 2002), customer's perceived service quality (Brady and Cronin 2001), building buyer-seller relationships (Williams and Attaway 1996), and customer satisfaction (e.g., Bettencourt and Brown 1997; Garland, Reilly, and Westbrook 1989; Goff, Boles, Bellinger, and Stojack 1997; Ramsey and Sohi 1997). There seems to be general agreement that customer-oriented employees are more likely to deliver exceptional service quality and create satisfied customers. Other studies have investigated the possible determinants of customer-oriented behavior at the individual level. These include job satisfaction (e.g., Bateman and Organ 1983; Hoffman and Ingram 1991), leader behavior (Jones, Busch, and Dacin 2003), organizational control (Joshi and Randall 2001), market orientation of the company (Jones et al. 2003; Mengüç 1996), personal traits (Brown et al. 2002), and employee's affect (Peccei and Rosenthal 1997, 2000).

Only a few studies have examined attitude-related aspects of customer orientation. Brown et al. (2002) identified two dimensions of customer orientation (similar to attitudes and behavior) but did not establish discriminant validity between these dimensions. In addition, Peccei and Rosenthal (1997) found a positive effect between an attitude-related construct, called "affective customer orientation of salespeople," and salespeople's customer-oriented behavior. They subsequently drew a distinction between three types of customer orientation based on two key dimensions: "internationalization of customer service" (closely related to the construct of customer-oriented attitude), which refers to the extent to which an employee enjoys dealing with customers and finds customer service activities intrinsically satisfying, and "customer-oriented behaviors." However, they did not provide evidence for discriminant validity between these dimensions. As a limitation of their study, Peccei and Rosenthal (2000) stated, "The behavioral, as well as the attitudinal measures used were self-report. . . . Future studies should extend the measurement of behavior to other sources, such as supervisors, co-workers and/or customers" (p. 581). Thus, previous work has suggested a distinction between attitudes and behaviors. The goal of the present study is to extend this work by investigating the impact of customer-oriented attitudes and behaviors on customer satisfaction. In addition, moderators of the attitude-behavior link are examined.

## THEORY AND HYPOTHESES

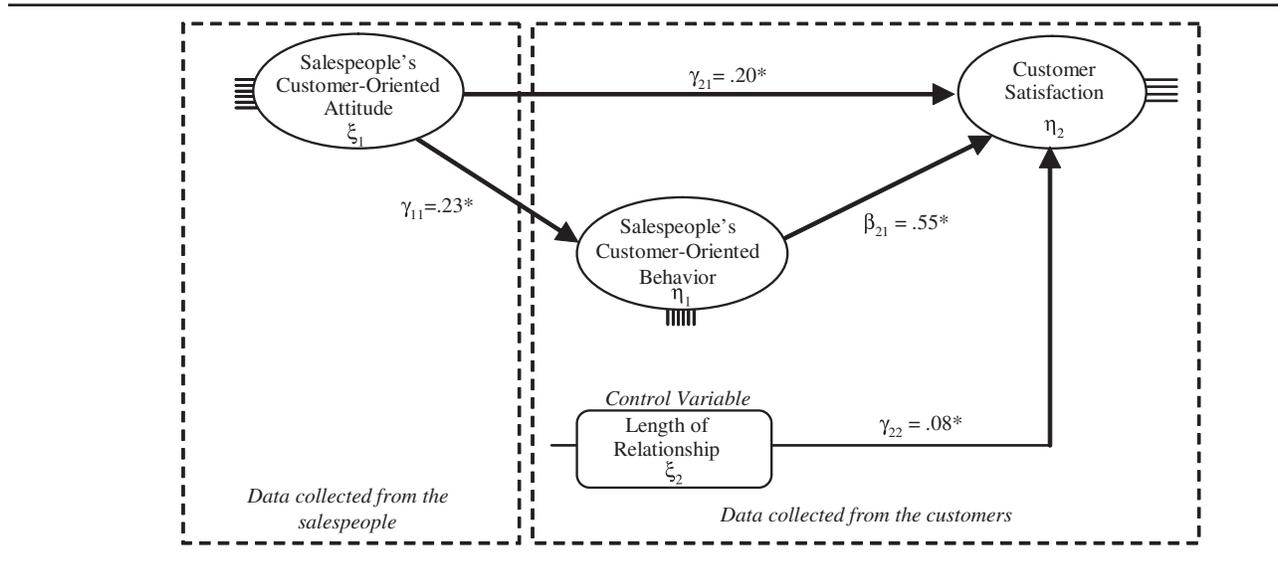
### Two Dimensions of a Salesperson's Customer Orientation

Based on the previous discussion, customer orientation is conceptualized in terms of two dimensions: customer-oriented attitude and customer-oriented behavior. While some researchers view an attitude as a complex, multidimensional concept, consisting of affective, cognitive, and conative components (e.g., Breckler 1984; Zanna and Rempel 1988), others reduce it to a relatively simple, unidimensional concept that refers to the amount of affect for or against an object (e.g., Fishbein 1967; Fishbein and Ajzen 1975). Our conceptualization is in line with this latter view. Accordingly, a *customer-oriented attitude* is defined as the amount of a salesperson's affect for or against customers. It refers to such issues as affinity to be in contact with the customers and the understanding of the importance of customer orientation for both the individual and the company's performance.

*Customer-oriented behavior* is conceptualized in a manner consistent with previous research on customer orientation. According to Saxe and Weitz (1982), customer-oriented behavior is defined as the ability of the salespeople to help their customers by engaging in behaviors that increase customer satisfaction. Examples would include behaviors such as trying to help to achieve the customer's goals, discussing the customer's needs, and trying to influence the customer with information rather than by pressure.

A key aspect of this conceptualization is that these two dimensions of customer orientation are distinct in terms of discriminant validity (i.e., they measure different facets of customer orientation). This differentiation is based on long-standing research in social psychology and marketing that differentiates between these two constructs (e.g., Fishbein and Ajzen 1975; Wilkie and Pessemier 1973). Furthermore, behaviors are less stable than attitudes and can be influenced relatively easily by actions of the firm (e.g., Williams and Wiener 1996), the customers (e.g., Chonko, Howell, and Bellenger 1986), and the environment (e.g., Teas, Wacker, and Hughes 1979). Thus, while short-term change is possible, these behaviors may not be permanent over time (i.e., they change when the situation changes). On the other hand, attitudes, as enduring traits, are more stable than behaviors (e.g., Hansen 1981; Obermiller 1985; Williams and Wiener 1996). It is therefore argued that customer-oriented attitudes are needed to ensure long-term customer-oriented behavior. Thus, if companies truly want to implement a long-term customer orientation strategy, it is important to focus on both attitudes and behavior. From this perspective, customer-oriented attitude and customer-oriented behavior can be

**FIGURE 1**  
**Basic Model and Results of Main Effects**



NOTE: Fully standardized solutions are reported.

\* $p \leq .05$ .

conceptualized as two dimensions of customer orientation. This leads to the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 1:* The two dimensions customer-oriented attitude and customer-oriented behavior are distinct in the sense that they exhibit discriminant validity.

### An Attitude-Behavior Model of Salespeople's Customer Orientation

Based on the dimensions of customer-oriented attitudes and behaviors, Figure 1 presents an attitude-behavior model of salespeople's customer orientation. First, it is argued that the customer-oriented attitude will have an indirect effect on customer satisfaction through the mediating construct of customer-oriented behavior. Second, it is proposed that a customer-oriented attitude influences customer satisfaction, independent of customer-oriented behavior. It is expected that if a salesperson has a positive attitude toward the customer, this will increase the level of customer satisfaction. Third, we investigate selected moderator variables that strengthen or weaken the link between customer-oriented attitudes and behaviors. The framework also includes the length of relationship as a control variable. This construct refers to the amount of time that a business relationship has existed.

In developing the hypotheses, we first focus on the indirect effect of customer-oriented attitudes on customer satisfaction, mediated by customer-oriented behaviors. We propose that the salesperson's customer-oriented attitude has a positive impact on customer-oriented behavior. The

basic notion is that salespeople are more likely to engage in behaviors that are customer-oriented if they have a positive attitude toward doing so. Furthermore, they would be more likely to engage in these behaviors consistently over time because of the enduring nature of attitudes. In other words, salespeople can make a conscious effort to simply change their behavior in the short run, but consistent behavior over time is more likely to occur when there is an underlying attitude causing the behavior (e.g., Ambady and Rosenthal 1992). Theoretical support for this notion is provided by a long tradition of research on the attitude-behavior relationship in social psychology and marketing (e.g., Ajzen and Fishbein 1980; Sheppard, Hartwick, and Warshaw 1988).

Further support comes from research that finds a positive relationship between certain salesperson attitudes and their behavior (e.g., Bhagat 1981, 1982; Brown and Peterson 1993, 1994; Porac, Ferris, and Fedor 1983). For example, job satisfaction has been shown to be positively related to pro-social behaviors in organizations (e.g., helping behaviors—Puffer 1987; Smith, Organ, and Near 1983). Hoffman and Ingram (1992) specifically examined the relationship between employee satisfaction and customer-oriented behavior. Homburg and Stock (2004) found support for the positive impact of a salesperson's job satisfaction on the quality of customer interaction (which includes salespeople's customer orientation, flexibility, openness in providing customer information, and openness to customer suggestions). Furthermore, on the basis of the attitude model suggested by Ajzen (1991) and Ajzen and Fishbein (1980), Schmit and Allscheid (1995)

argued for and found support for the positive impact of an attitudinal construct on customer-contact employees' service orientation. In addition, Kennedy et al. (2002) found a positive effect of a customer mind-set (defined as an individual's belief that understanding and satisfying customers is a central element of his or her job) on employee productivity. Finally, Peccei and Rosenthal (1997) found a positive relationship between the affective customer orientation of salespeople (which is closely related to our construct of customer-oriented attitudes) and customer-oriented behaviors based on a salesperson's evaluations.

Note that the present study represents a different way of examining the attitude-behavior relationship than is typical in previous research. Most of the previous studies have examined how attitudes influence behaviors in the context of a single individual. In the present study, we investigate how one individual's attitude (i.e., the salesperson) influences another person's perception of his or her behavior (i.e., the customer) in the context of a dyadic relationship. Thus, based on this literature, it is proposed that when a salesperson possesses a positive customer-oriented attitude, this attitude will be reflected in his or her behavior toward customers. This leads to the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 2:* The salesperson's customer-oriented attitude positively affects customer-oriented behavior as perceived by customers.

The second stage of the model suggests that customer-oriented behavior has a positive impact on customer satisfaction, which occurs when customers make a positive evaluation that their needs or goals have been met (Westbrook et al. 1978). This proposition is in line with previous research that emphasizes the importance of the customer-oriented behavior of customer-contact employees for customer satisfaction (Hartline, Maxham, and McKee 2000). Other authors argue that customer-contact employees are pivotal in forming a customer's level of perceived service quality (e.g., Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry 1985, 1991). A study by Crosby and Stephens (1987) in the life insurance industry found that clients' satisfaction with their contact person was a significant predictor of overall satisfaction with the service. Other researchers have found that the human interaction component was of importance in evaluating professional services (e.g., Day and Bodur 1978) and retail outlets (e.g., Westbrook 1981). Furthermore, salespeople's customer-oriented behavior has been shown to positively affect overall customer satisfaction and willingness to buy (e.g., Goff et al. 1997; Grewal and Sharma 1991). This leads to the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 3:* The stronger the salesperson's customer-oriented behavior, the higher the level of customer satisfaction.

In addition to the indirect effect mentioned above, we also propose a direct impact of customer-oriented attitudes on customer satisfaction. Theoretical guidance for this issue is provided by research on "emotional contagion" (e.g., Hatfield, Cacioppo, and Rapson 1992). Rooted in social psychology (e.g., Gump and Kulik 1997; Higgins and Range 1996), the basic idea of the emotional contagion concept is that when individuals come in even minimal contact, emotions and attitudinal states can pass between Person A (the initiator) and Person B (the recipient) and leave a permanent trace (Barsade 2002; Gump and Kulik 1997; Hatfield et al. 1992; Rozin and Royzman 2001). The mechanism for the spread of emotions is the automatic and continuous human tendency to synchronize moods and emotional states with others in the immediate environment (Hatfield et al. 1992).

It is important to differentiate the transfer of attitudes based on emotional contagion from attitudinal change that occurs from perceiving a person's behavior. Perceived behavior is observed largely consciously by the recipient and, consequently, the attitude change is defined by individual intentionality and rational evaluation (Marsden 1998). During the transfer of attitudes based on emotional contagion, however, the recipient has little control over the attitudes that are transferred (Marsden 1998) and does not perceive an intentional influence attempt on the part of the initiator (Levy 1992). Furthermore, while an individual has the control over which perceived behaviors he or she considers as relevant, the recipient of an emotional contagion automatically synchronizes the moods and feelings of the sender (Hatfield et al. 1992).

Support for the concept of emotional contagion has been found in the context of salesperson-customer relationships. For example, Howard and Gengler (2001) found that product attitudes were influenced when customers "caught" a positive emotion from the customer-contact employees. Also, both Verbeke (1997) and Pugh (2001) have demonstrated how positive emotions displayed by a salesperson can be transferred to the customer. Finally, Homburg and Stock (2004) used an emotional contagion explanation for the relationship between a salesperson's job satisfaction and customer satisfaction.

In the present study, the key interest is in examining whether a salesperson's customer-oriented attitude translates into a higher level of customer satisfaction. Specifically, it is proposed that the customer's attitude toward a supplier (i.e., his or her satisfaction) becomes infected by a salesperson's customer-oriented attitudes. Pugh (2001) stated, "Customers, when exposed to the emotional displays of employees, experience corresponding changes in their own affective states" (p. 1020). This contagion effect occurs automatically by synchronizing the moods and feelings of the salesperson the customer gets in contact with (Hatfield et al. 1992).

Salespeople are considered as important transmitters of attitudes for several reasons: as the primary link between buying and selling firms, Hochschild (1983) assigned salespeople to the category of "emotional labor jobs." A key characteristic of these jobs is that they require the salesperson to produce an emotional state in a customer (Hochschild 1983). In other words, according to this view, an explicit function of salespeople is to infect customers with their positive emotions.

Second, the importance of attitude transfer between customer-contact employees and customers has been addressed in the selling literature. For example, Sharma (1999) argues, "When customers perceive salespeople's affect toward customers as being positive, they are expected to evaluate the salesperson and his/her products more positively when compared with a salesperson perceived as having a negative affect" (p. 146). Furthermore, Baker, Levy, and Grewal (1992) found a positive relationship between salespeople's affect and shopper affect within the retail sector. This finding is in line with previous research that suggested that when salespeople have a positive attitude toward customers, they may convey their positive emotions to the customers (e.g., Sypher and Sypher 1988). Therefore, this should create positive feelings in customers that should have a positive influence on evaluative judgments such as customer satisfaction (e.g., Forgas 1995).

Third, research has shown that when making evaluative judgments, individuals often use their current affective states as evaluative information (Forgas 1995; Schwarz and Clore 1983). Similarly, other studies have found that positive emotions experienced during the buying and consumption experience should independently influence overall evaluations of satisfaction or dissatisfaction (Westbrook 1987; Westbrook and Oliver 1991).

Furthermore, a number of empirical studies have provided empirical evidence for the positive impact of customer-contact employees' job satisfaction on customer satisfaction (e.g., Bernhardt, Donthu, and Kennett 2000; Homburg and Stock 2004; Schmit and Allscheid 1995). The basic finding is that if a customer has a favorable perception of an employee's positive job attitude, this can positively influence the customer's own satisfaction (e.g., Schmit and Allscheid 1995). Similarly, a study conducted by Pugh (2001) investigated the link between a salesperson's job attitude and customer satisfaction based on emotional contagion and found empirical support for this link. In addition, Kennedy et al. (2002) found a positive effect of external customer mind-set on customer satisfaction.

None of these studies, however, has examined the impact of *customer-oriented* attitudes on customer satisfaction. Consistent with these previous studies, we propose that when a customer-contact employee possesses a positive customer-oriented attitude, this will transfer over and

create positive feelings in the customer, which in turn will positively influence his or her evaluations of satisfaction. This leads to the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 4:* The higher the salesperson's customer-oriented attitude, the higher the customer satisfaction.

## Moderator Effects

Our framework also investigates some important moderators of the relationship between salespeople's customer-oriented attitude and their customer-oriented behavior. As mentioned earlier, the strength of the relationship between attitudes and behaviors depends on the salesperson characteristics as well as the nature of the situation. The selection of moderators was based directly on research of the SERVQUAL concept by Parasuraman et al. (1985, 1991). These researchers identified four characteristics of customer-contact employees that improve the employee-customer interaction and one characteristic of the interaction environment. In their study, three of these employee characteristics were found to be the most reliable and valid: empathy, reliability, and expertise. Therefore, these three variables were included as moderators in our study. A fourth dimension—responsiveness—was not included because it could not be identified as a clearly independent factor in previous research (i.e., it loaded on multiple factors—see Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry 1994). Furthermore, we identified restriction in job autonomy as a potential negative moderator of the relationship. This variable has been heavily studied and identified as a moderator of the attitude-behavior relationship in other contexts (Barrick and Mount 1993; O'Reilly 1989).

*Empathy* is defined as the ability to understand another person's perspective and to react emotionally to the other person (Davis 1983). This definition implies two broad classes of response: an intellectual reaction that refers to the ability to understand another person's thoughts, feelings, and intentions (e.g., Goldstein and Michaels 1985) as well as an emotional reaction toward the other person. Research has indicated a positive impact of empathy on the salesperson-customer communication and interaction (e.g., Comer and Drollinger 1999; Ramsey and Sohi 1997). Furthermore, there is widespread empirical evidence that empathy improves the communication process between employees and customers (e.g., Boorum, Goolsby, and Ramsey 1998; Castleberry and Shepherd 1993).

In this study, we argue that empathy will strengthen the link between the salesperson's customer-oriented attitude and his or her customer-oriented behavior. Specifically, previous research on the attitude-behavior link has shown that attitudes are more likely to predict behavior when individuals think more extensively about the information (Petty, Cacioppo, and Schumann 1983). Since salespeople

with high levels of empathy would think more about, and have a deeper understanding of, the customer's thoughts and feelings, this would strengthen the attitude-behavior link. Alternatively, if the salesperson does not understand how the customer thinks and feels, it is difficult for him or her to behave in a customer-oriented manner. Therefore, high levels of empathy should increase the likelihood that the salesperson is able to transfer his or her customer-oriented attitudes into customer-oriented behaviors.

*Hypothesis 5a:* The higher the salesperson's empathy, the stronger is the relationship between a salesperson's customer-oriented attitude and behavior.

*Expertise* is defined as the presence of knowledge and the ability to fulfill a task (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry 1988). Expertise includes the knowledge of the company's products and/or services on one hand and procedural knowledge on the other (e.g., Mervis and Rosch 1981; Weitz, Sujun, and Sujun 1986). Salespeople with a high level of expertise are competent in problem solving, operating in complex domains, and have a greater knowledge of the company's offer and the needs of their customers.

Previous research on the attitude-behavior link has found that this relationship is strengthened by knowledge and experience (e.g., Fazio and Zanna 1981). In the present context, when levels of knowledge and experience are high, customer-oriented attitudes should be more strongly linked to the salesperson's behavior. In addition, a salesperson may have a positive attitude toward the customer, but unless he or she has adequate knowledge about the product and/or service and the customer, it may be difficult to translate this attitude into customer-oriented behavior. For example, a salesperson with a low level of expertise may be limited in his or her ability to help customers because he or she cannot handle customer questions adequately and/or he or she does not have the ability to ask the "right" questions to understand customer needs. In contrast, salespeople with high levels of expertise can ask the right questions and answer customer questions effectively. Therefore, this makes it easier for the expert salesperson to transfer his or her customer-oriented attitudes into behavior, which in turn strengthens the customer-oriented attitude-behavior link. Thus, we hypothesize the following:

*Hypothesis 5b:* The higher the salesperson's expertise, the stronger the relationship between a salesperson's customer-oriented attitude and behavior.

*Reliability* is defined as a sense of duty toward meeting goals or the extent to which a salesperson makes sure that promised deadlines are met (e.g., Parasuraman et al. 1994). Prior studies have identified numerous favorable

outcomes of employee reliability (e.g., Carman 1990; Cronin and Taylor 1992).

In the present context, a salesperson's reliability should increase the likelihood that he or she can transfer his or her customer-oriented attitudes into customer-oriented behaviors. Specifically, highly reliable salespeople should be better able to consistently perform customer-oriented behaviors such as responding to customer needs, following through on promises to the customer, and meeting deadlines. Thus, high levels of reliability should increase the consistency between customer-oriented attitudes and behavior. Alternatively, low levels of reliability would weaken the customer-oriented attitude-behavior link. We therefore hypothesize the following:

*Hypothesis 5c:* The higher the salesperson's reliability, the stronger the relationship between a salesperson's customer-oriented attitude and behavior.

*Restriction in job autonomy.* Previous research has indicated that certain situational factors can intervene to prevent a behavior from being performed and can therefore weaken the attitude-behavior relationship (e.g., Fishbein and Ajzen 1975). A widely studied variable in this context is job autonomy, which refers to the extent to which employees can decide what tasks to do and how to do them (e.g., Barrick and Mount 1993; O'Reilly 1989; Peccei and Rosenthal 2001). Restriction in job autonomy refers to the extent to which salespeople feel they are unable to make their own decisions in their job and to develop a solution for the customer (Peccei and Rosenthal 2001; Wang and Netemeyer 2002). The key point is that highly controlled employees are not able to use their skills and behave according to their inner feelings (Dobbin and Boychuk 1999; Wang and Netemeyer 2002). Thus, restriction in job autonomy leads to a passive rather than an active work role (Peccei and Rosenthal 2001). Consequently, highly job-restricted salespeople do not have enough flexibility to make quick decisions in favor of the customer (Jamieson and Zanna 1989). Second, highly restricted salespeople may not be able to provide a valued customer an adequate solution for his or her needs because they are only allowed to offer a range of standard solutions and do not have the autonomy to make extraordinary decisions. Evidence for this reasoning is provided by research that argues that job autonomy leads to higher employee efforts to transfer their attitudes into adequate behaviors (Bandura and Cervone 1986). Taking all these things together, we argue that salespeople may have a positive attitude toward customers, but restrictions in autonomy may prohibit them from expressing these attitudes. Consequently, we hypothesize the following:

*Hypothesis 5d:* The higher the salesperson's restriction in job autonomy, the weaker the relationship be-

tween a salesperson's customer-oriented attitude and behavior.

*Length of relationship as a control variable.* As mentioned previously, we included the length of relationship as a control variable. This variable has been identified as a key antecedent of customer satisfaction in several studies (e.g., Dwyer, Schurr, and Oh 1987) and has attracted some research interest in the field of relationship marketing (e.g., Dabholkar, Johnston, and Cathey 1994; Dwyer et al. 1987). Prior research has found that personal loyalty to a company becomes stronger and customer trust in the company increases as the age of the relationship increases (Ganesan 1984). The inclusion of this control variable is particularly important because it is highly plausible that it is positively correlated with both the salespeople's customer orientation and customer satisfaction. Including this construct as an additional predictor of customer satisfaction allows us to determine whether the salespeople's customer orientation has a significant impact on customer satisfaction after accounting for the variance explained by this control variable.

## METHOD

### Sample and Data Collection

To test the hypotheses, data were collected from salespeople and their customers in two phases. First, 1,305 salespeople (who had a clearly defined responsibility by regions or industries for a set of customers) were randomly selected from a list provided by a commercial firm that specializes in developing lists for different industries. To be included in the sample, the respondent had to be responsible for business (vs. end use) customers.

The respondents were contacted by telephone. Depending on their willingness and availability to participate, telephone interviews were carried out either immediately or at a later time. This process yielded 221 telephone interviews over a period of 5 weeks (producing a response rate of 16.9%). Two thirds of the sample were from the industrial goods sector (i.e., machinery, 19.5%; chemical, 14.6%; automotive, 14.6%; plastics, 12.2%; and electronics, 7.9%). The salespeople were primarily involved in selling technical products to business customers. The remaining third were from the services sector (i.e., banking and insurance services), and their main task included selling insurance and financial services. To identify customers, the salespeople were asked for five addresses of their customers during the interviews. One hundred fifteen salespeople were willing to provide contact information for three to five customers. This resulted in a list of 488 customers. An analysis was conducted to compare those salespeople who were willing to provide customer names with those who were not in terms of company and personal

characteristics. Results revealed no significant differences between these two groups. Thus, we felt justified in continuing the data collection of customer information for this smaller set of 115 salespeople.

During the second phase, the customers were contacted in a telephone survey. The goal was to obtain two customer assessments per salesperson from the names provided. Respondents were randomly selected from the list of 488 names, and sampling was continued until there were two customer interviews per salesperson. The identified customers of four salespeople were unwilling to participate in the study. Thus, this process resulted in 222 usable responses for a response rate of 45.5 percent (i.e., 111 dyadic cases consisting of a salesperson response and two related customer responses).

To further increase the sample size, a second wave of dyadic data were collected using the same procedure and respondent base as in the first wave of data collection (i.e., salespeople who could not be reached by telephone in the first wave or had refused to participate because of time constraints). Fifty-three additional usable dyadic cases were obtained, bringing the total number of dyadic cases to 173. For the subsequent data analysis, the two customer responses were averaged, as suggested by Deshpandé, Farley, and Webster (1993) and Morgan and Piercy (1998). Each salesperson was matched with two assessments from his or her customers in order to get a complete data set of salespeople and customer evaluations.

It is important to note that different constructs in our framework are measured with data obtained from different sides of the dyad (see Figure 1). Customer-oriented attitudes were measured from salespeople, while customer-oriented behavior and customer satisfaction responses were collected from customers.

To determine whether the samples of the first and the second wave could be combined for subsequent assessment procedures, a confirmatory factor analysis was performed. The goal was to determine whether the factor loadings were different between the two subsamples. If factor loadings were equivalent across subsamples, they could be combined in subsequent analysis (Mullen 1995). Two multiple-group confirmatory analyses were then run using LISREL VIII for the multi-item measures (Steenkamp and Baumgartner 1998). A statistical test comparing the fit of the two models found no statistically significant differences. Thus, the results indicated that full configurational and partial metric invariances are supported (for each construct, at least two items are metric invariant), and this enabled us to combine the samples from the two waves.

### Scale Refinement

Multi-item scales were developed to measure the relevant constructs in our framework. Whenever possible,

**TABLE 1**  
**Factor Correlation Matrix and Measurement Information**

| Construct                         | No. Items | CR  | AVE | 1                  | 2                  | 3                  | 4                  | 5                  | 6                  | 7                  | 8                  | 9                 |
|-----------------------------------|-----------|-----|-----|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|-------------------|
| 1. Customer-oriented attitude     | 6         | .91 | .64 | ( $\alpha = .84$ ) |                    |                    |                    |                    |                    |                    |                    |                   |
| 2. Customer-oriented behavior (E) | 6         | .80 | .57 | .38*               | ( $\alpha = .78$ ) |                    |                    |                    |                    |                    |                    |                   |
| 3. Customer-oriented behavior (C) | 6         | .98 | .91 | .10                | .05                | ( $\alpha = .98$ ) |                    |                    |                    |                    |                    |                   |
| 4. Customer satisfaction          | 4         | .97 | .87 | .09                | .02                | .56*               | ( $\alpha = .95$ ) |                    |                    |                    |                    |                   |
| 5. Empathy                        | 5         | .96 | .84 | -.04               | .10                | .64*               | .64*               | ( $\alpha = .94$ ) |                    |                    |                    |                   |
| 6. Expertise                      | 9         | .96 | .84 | -.01               | .10                | .60*               | .64*               | .80                | ( $\alpha = .93$ ) |                    |                    |                   |
| 7. Reliability                    | 4         | .97 | .79 | .49*               | .60*               | .09                | .06                | .01                | .08                | ( $\alpha = .92$ ) |                    |                   |
| 8. Restriction in job autonomy    | 4         | .95 | .81 | .09                | .15*               | .08                | .18*               | .21*               | .34*               | .23*               | ( $\alpha = .93$ ) |                   |
| 9. Length of relationship         | 1         | —   | —   | .11*               | .17*               | .15*               | .20*               | .17*               | -.02               | .05                | .01                | ( $\alpha = .—$ ) |

NOTE: E = employee survey; C = customer survey; CR = composite reliability; AVE = average variance extracted;  $\alpha$  = Cronbach's alpha.

\* $p \leq .05$ .

existing measures of the constructs were used. To receive initial guidance in developing the scales, a set of 17 salespeople were interviewed and asked for qualitative feedback on the clarity and appropriateness of the items. Based on this qualitative feedback, items were added or reworded.

After this qualitative phase of scale development, we conducted a quantitative purification of the items. The reliability and validity of the measures were tested according to the standard procedures recommended by Gerbing and Anderson (1988). Second, an exploratory factor analysis was performed on each construct to investigate its unidimensionality and underlying factor structure. Third, confirmatory factor analyses were run with LISREL VIII (Jöreskog and Sörbom 1993). When necessary, the item pools were purified. Confirmatory factor analysis was considered superior to more traditional criteria (such as Cronbach's alpha) in the context of scale validation because of its less restrictive assumptions (Bagozzi, Yi, and Phillips 1991; Gerbing and Anderson 1988). Table 1 shows the confirmatory factor analysis results together with additional reliability information. Analyses were conducted separately for each construct.

Composite reliability represents the shared variance among a set of observed variables measuring an underlying construct (Fornell and Larcker 1981). Generally, a composite reliability of at least .6 is considered desirable (Bagozzi and Yi 1988). This requirement is met for every factor. The values of average variance extracted also provide satisfactory results. As can be seen from Table 1, coefficient alpha values are all over .7. A factor correlation matrix is also shown in Table 1.

In terms of measurement information, *customer-oriented attitude* was measured as the amount of a salesperson's affect for or against customers. This measure is based on the scale for measuring "affective customer orientation" developed by Peccei and Rosenthal (2000). The scale was expanded with additional items generated based on conceptual literature that has investigated employees'

customer-related affect (e.g., Sharma 1999; Williams and Wiener 1996). The scale consisted of six items that captured issues such as enjoying interaction with customers and the conviction that customer interaction contributes to their own personal development in the company the salesperson works for (see Table 2).

*Customer-oriented behavior* was initially measured with eight items, partly adapted from the SOCO Scale suggested by Saxe and Weitz (1982). As this construct was measured from the customer's perspective in our study, we used a reduced version of this "customer orientation" scale suggested by Michaels and Day (1985). After test of reliability, two items were eliminated from the original scale. The remaining items captured such issues as giving accurate representations of what the product and/or service will do for the customers, discussing the customers' product/service-related needs, and the salesperson's influence through information rather than by pressure (see the Table 2 for all items).

Additional scales measured the outcomes of having a customer orientation. *Customer satisfaction* was assessed by using an adapted version of the "satisfaction with a supplier" scale developed by Cannon and Perreault (1999). In line with previous research (e.g., Boulding, Kalra, Staelin, and Zeithaml 1993; Johnson and Fornell 1991), the items reflected overall customer satisfaction with a supplier company rather than any specific dimension of customer satisfaction.

As mentioned earlier, we investigated four moderators that may strengthen or weaken the link between customer-oriented attitude and customer-oriented behavior: empathy, expertise, reliability, and restriction in job autonomy. The detailed items are shown in Table 2.

The first moderator variable, *empathy*, was measured as the salesperson's capacity to obtain and reflect a reasonably complete and accurate sense of the customer's thoughts and feelings. Based on previous research (e.g., Davis 1983; Hogan and Hogan 1984), a five-item scale was generated for the context of employee-customer

**TABLE 2**  
**Measurement Information**

| <i>Measure and Items</i>  | M    | SD   | <i>Item Reliability</i> |
|---|------|------|-------------------------|
| Constructs related to basic effect <sup>a</sup>   |      |      |                         |
| Salespeople's customer-oriented attitude (employee survey)  |      |      |                         |
| I consider myself to be very customer-oriented.   | 4.60 | 0.56 | .70                     |
| I think that customer interaction contributes to my personal development in this company.                             | 4.60 | 0.65 | .69                     |
| I enjoy interacting with customers.   | 4.77 | 0.46 | .70                     |
| Customer orientation is one of my personal goals.   | 4.58 | 0.57 | .80                     |
| Customer orientation is very important within my job.   | 4.66 | 0.54 | .88                     |
| I always have the customers' best interest in mind.   | 4.33 | 0.64 | .72                     |
| Salespeople's customer-oriented behavior (employee survey)  |      |      |                         |
| I try to get to discuss the customers' needs.   | 4.54 | 0.61 | .71                     |
| I answer the customers' questions about products and/or services as correctly as I can.                               | 4.45 | 0.56 | .67                     |
| I try to influence the customers by information rather than by pressure.  | 4.65 | 0.61 | .72                     |
| I try to give the customers an accurate expectation of what the product will do for them.                             | 4.63 | 0.70 | .77                     |
| I am willing to disagree with the customers in order to help them make a better decision.                             | 4.59 | 0.56 | .79                     |
| I try to help the customers to achieve their goals.   | 4.52 | 0.59 | .81                     |
| Salespeople's customer-oriented behavior (customer survey)  |      |      |                         |
| This salesperson tries to get us to discuss our needs with me.  | 4.04 | 1.26 | .97                     |
| This salesperson answers our questions about products and/or services as correctly as he or she can.                  | 3.84 | 1.15 | .95                     |
| This salesperson tries to influence us by information rather than by pressure.  | 3.97 | 1.27 | .98                     |
| This salesperson tries to give us an accurate expectation of what the product will do for us.                         | 3.93 | 1.17 | .98                     |
| This salesperson is willing to disagree with us in order to help us make a better decision.                           | 3.82 | 1.13 | .97                     |
| This salesperson tries to help us achieve our goals.  | 3.94 | 1.19 | .98                     |
| Customer Satisfaction (customer survey)   |      |      |                         |
| We are very pleased with the products and services that this company delivers.  | 3.69 | 0.96 | .96                     |
| On an overall basis, our experience with this company has been positive.  | 3.89 | 1.08 | .98                     |
| This company is first choice for us for the purchase of these products and/or services.                               | 3.80 | 0.98 | .92                     |
| On an overall basis, we are satisfied with this company.  | 3.81 | 1.02 | .97                     |
| Moderator variables <sup>a</sup>  |      |      |                         |
| Salespeople's empathy (customer survey)   |      |      |                         |
| This salesperson has a high level of empathy with respect to our needs as customers.                                  | 3.73 | 0.89 | .93                     |
| It is not difficult for this salesperson to find out our needs.   | 3.56 | 0.89 | .91                     |
| This salesperson tries to find out our needs by adopting our perspective.   | 3.53 | 0.83 | .92                     |
| This salesperson finds it easy to adopt our perspective as customers.   | 3.52 | 0.81 | .93                     |
| This salesperson is able to adapt his or her interaction to our needs in different situations.                        | 3.72 | 0.83 | .93                     |
| Salespeople's expertise (customer survey)   |      |      |                         |
| This salesperson is typically able to find an adequate solution if we have individual requirements.                   | 3.68 | 0.88 | .88                     |
| This salesperson offers us solutions that are very well thought through.  | 3.63 | 0.92 | .88                     |
| This salesperson has the expertise that is needed to understand the information provided by us as customers.          | 3.81 | 0.89 | .92                     |
| This salesperson is very well organized.  | 3.66 | 0.87 | .87                     |
| This salesperson knows his or her company's product and/or service range very well.                                   | 4.00 | 0.91 | .89                     |
| This salesperson is typically very well informed.   | 3.92 | 0.89 | .94                     |
| We perceive this salesperson as a very knowledgeable person.  | 4.00 | 0.90 | .86                     |
| This salesperson hardly makes mistakes.   | 3.51 | 0.76 | .88                     |
| This salesperson knows about the newest developments (new products, new technologies, etc.)                           | 3.74 | 0.85 | .89                     |
| Salespeople's reliability (customer survey)   |      |      |                         |
| We can rely on this salesperson.  | 3.97 | 0.99 | .90                     |
| This salesperson typically makes sure that promised deadlines are met.  | 3.88 | 0.92 | .91                     |
| This salesperson makes sure that our instructions are precisely followed.   | 3.84 | 0.89 | .90                     |
| This salesperson is a very reliable person.   | 3.97 | 0.94 | .93                     |
| Salespeople's restriction in job autonomy (employee survey)   |      |      |                         |
| There is little autonomy in doing my job.   | 3.86 | 0.92 | .89                     |
| The way my job is performed is influenced a great deal by what others (supervisors, colleagues, etc.) expect from me. | 3.99 | 0.95 | .93                     |
| I only have responsibility for decision making at lower levels.   | 3.92 | 0.95 | .92                     |
| I have restricted freedom to act in my job.   | 4.01 | 0.89 | .95                     |
| Control variable  |      |      |                         |
| Length of relationship (customer survey)  |      |      |                         |
| How long does the relationship to this specific supplier exist?   |      |      |                         |
| About _____ years.  | 8.32 | 2.69 | —                       |

a. 5-point Likert-type scales with *strongly agree* and *strongly disagree* as anchors were employed.

interaction. Items covered aspects such as the ability to understand customer needs and adopt a customer perspective. *Expertise* was assessed with an expanded scale of "salesperson expertise" developed by Doney and Cannon (1997). Based on salespeople interviews and salesperson expertise literature (Brown and Swartz 1989), we determined that the important facets of expertise in a customer-employee interaction were the following: being well informed about the company's product and/or service line, the salesperson's self-organization, and conceptual problem-solving skills. The final scale consisted of nine items.

The third employee characteristic, *reliability*, was measured with a four-item scale. Scale development was based on work related to the Reliability Scale developed by Parasuraman et al. (1988). The scale for measuring *restriction in job autonomy* included four items that were generated based on previous research of job autonomy (Barrick and Mount 1993; O'Reilly 1989). Items related to aspects such as level of decision-making responsibility and level of supervisor influence. Finally, the control variable *length of relationship* was measured by one item that captured the age of relationship between the supplier and the customer company in years.

## RESULTS

### Dimensions of Customer Orientation

The first hypothesis examined whether there was a distinction between the constructs of customer-oriented attitudes and behaviors. Discriminant validity was tested based on data collected from two perspectives: the first test was based on dyadic data (i.e., assessments of customer-oriented attitudes by the salespeople and customer-oriented behaviors by customers). Applying the method suggested by Fornell and Larcker (1981), the squared correlation between the constructs of customer-oriented attitude and customer-oriented behavior ( $r^2 = .01$ ) was less than the average variance extracted of customer-oriented attitude (.64) and customer-oriented behavior (.91).

To ensure that discriminant validity between the constructs was not primarily due to the fact that different respondents (i.e., salespeople and customers) answered the items, a second test was conducted that was based on single-source data (i.e., assessments of both customer-oriented attitudes and behaviors from salespeople). For the single-source data, the squared correlation between the constructs of customer-oriented attitude and customer-oriented behavior ( $r^2 = .14$ ) was less than the average variance extracted of customer-oriented attitude (.64) and customer-oriented behavior (.57) as perceived by the salesperson. Thus, according to the criterion established by Fornell and Larcker (1981), these two constructs

demonstrate discriminant validity and appear to measure different facets of customer orientation (support Hypothesis 1).

### Tests of the Attitude-Behavior Model of Customer Orientation

Having found support for the two dimensions of customer orientation, we examine the hypotheses related to the attitude-behavior model of customer orientation shown in Figure 1. LISREL VIII is used to estimate these effects. The overall fit measures suggest that the data provide a good fit for the hypothesized causal model. The Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI = .98), Adjusted Goodness-of-Fit Index (AGFI = .96), and Comparative Fit Index (CFI = .96;  $dff\chi^2 = 1.67$ ) clearly exceed the threshold values recommended in the extant literature (Bagozzi and Yi 1988; Baumgartner and Homburg 1996). Thus, we conclude that the model fits the data well.

Hypothesis 2 suggests a positive impact of customer-oriented attitude on customer-oriented behavior, and this link is supported by the data ( $\gamma_{11} = .23, t = 3.79$ ). This finding is particularly interesting because these two constructs are measured on different sides of the dyad (customer-oriented attitude is assessed by the salespeople and customer-oriented behavior by the customers). Hypothesis 3 proposed that customer-oriented behavior would have a positive impact on customer satisfaction. This hypothesis is also supported by the data ( $\beta_{21} = .55, t = 9.67$ ). Together, the results for these hypotheses support the indirect effect of customer-oriented attitudes on customer satisfaction through the mediating construct of customer-oriented behavior.

Hypothesis 4 examines whether customer-oriented attitudes directly influence customer satisfaction in addition to the indirect effect through customer-oriented behavior. Support for this hypothesis is in evidence ( $\gamma_{21} = .20, t = 5.24$ ). In other words, when salespeople have a positive customer-oriented attitude, this creates higher levels of satisfaction among customers. This finding is particularly interesting because the effect of customer-oriented attitudes on customer satisfaction is not totally mediated by customer-oriented behavior. Furthermore, it is important to note that this finding is based on data that were collected from different sides of the dyad. Customer-oriented attitudes were provided by the salespeople, while customer satisfaction was evaluated by their customers. Thus, customers apparently "pick up" the positive attitudes and emotions from salespeople, and this increases their level of satisfaction.

To assess the variance explained in customer satisfaction by customer-oriented attitudes, we compare two models that are different only with respect to the effect of the customer-oriented attitude on customer satisfaction. In the

**TABLE 3**  
**Results**

| <i>Salespeople Characteristics</i>          | <i>Moderator Variable</i>             |                                       | <i>Hypothesized Effect</i> | <i>Moderated Effects</i>                            |
|---|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|----------------------------|---|
|   | <i>Low</i>                            | <i>High</i>                           |                            | <i>Chi-Square Difference</i><br>( $\Delta df = 1$ ) |
| Empathy (Hypothesis 5a)                     | $\gamma_{11} = .19$<br>( $t = 3.04$ ) | $\gamma_{11} = .39$<br>( $t = 4.21$ ) | +                          | $\chi^2 = 15.32^*$                                  |
| Expertise (Hypothesis 5b)                   | $\gamma_{11} = .17$<br>( $t = 2.54$ ) | $\gamma_{11} = .29$<br>( $t = 3.11$ ) | +                          | $\chi^2 = 9.84^*$                                   |
| Reliability (Hypothesis 5c)                 | $\gamma_{11} = .39$<br>( $t = 3.53$ ) | $\gamma_{11} = .51$<br>( $t = 3.53$ ) | +                          | $\chi^2 = 8.59^*$                                   |
| Restriction in job autonomy (Hypothesis 5d) | $\gamma_{11} = .32$<br>( $t = 4.41$ ) | $\gamma_{11} = .16$<br>( $t = 2.61$ ) | -                          | $\chi^2 = 9.60^*$                                   |

\* Chi-square difference, significant at  $p < .05$ .

first model, the parameter related to the link between salespeople's customer-oriented attitudes and customer satisfaction is restricted to zero. In the second model, a free estimation of this parameter is allowed. The incremental contribution of customer-oriented attitudes is evaluated in two ways.

First, the chi-square difference between the restricted and the more general model (i.e., model where a free estimation of the parameter of the attitude-satisfaction link was allowed) is compared. Since these are nested models with the general model having one degree of freedom less than the restricted model, the chi-square value will always be lower for the general model than for the restricted model. The question is whether the improvement in chi-square when moving from the restricted to the more general model is significant. This would indicate an incremental contribution of the variable customer-oriented attitude on customer satisfaction. In the present study, we find a significant Chi-square difference of 5.89.

Second, the squared multiple correlations for customer satisfaction of the restricted and the general model are compared. Whereas the squared multiple correlation for customer satisfaction is .23 in the restricted model (i.e., where exclusively customer-oriented behavior was the independent variable), the squared multiple correlation for the general model (i.e., including customer-oriented behaviors and attitudes as independent variables) is .36. On the basis of this analysis, we conclude that customer-oriented attitudes do have an incremental contribution to the current behavioral models in the literature.

*Control variable.* Our control variable, length of relationship, bears a positive effect on customer satisfaction. Specifically, the longer the relationship, the more satisfied the customers are with a supplier ( $\gamma_{22} = .08, p < .05$ ).

### Moderator Effects

Hypotheses 5a-5d examined the effects of four moderating variables on the customer-oriented attitude-behavior

link. Three of these moderators (empathy, expertise, and reliability) are hypothesized to strengthen the relationship between customer-oriented attitudes and behavior. As shown in Table 3, support for the moderating effects of these three variables is in evidence.

Specifically, the relationship between salespeople's customer-oriented attitude and customer-oriented behavior (as perceived by customers) is stronger when (a) the empathy of the salesperson is high ( $\gamma_{high} = .39, p < .05$ ) versus when it is low ( $\gamma_{low} = .19, p < .05$ ), (b) expertise is high ( $\gamma_{high} = .29, p < .05$ ) versus low ( $\gamma_{low} = .17, p < .05$ ), and when reliability is high ( $\gamma_{high} = .51, p < .05$ ) versus low ( $\gamma_{low} = .39, p < .05$ ). In all three cases, the chi-square differences are significant at the 5 percent level. Thus, salespeople who are more empathetic, expert, and reliable appear to be more powerful transmitters of their positive customer-oriented attitudes to customer-oriented behaviors.

The final moderator, restriction in job autonomy, is hypothesized to weaken the relationship between customer-oriented attitudes and behavior. Support for Hypothesis 5d is also in evidence as the relationship between customer-oriented attitudes and customer-oriented behavior is weakened when restriction in job autonomy is high ( $\gamma_{high} = .16, p < .05$ ) versus when it is low ( $\gamma_{low} = .32, p < .05$ ). Also, the chi-square difference is significant at the 5 percent level. Salespeople who have restricted job autonomy appear to have a weaker customer-oriented attitude-behavior link.

## DISCUSSION

### Research Issues

Building on previous research, our study proposes a two-dimensional conceptualization that draws a distinction between customer-oriented attitudes and customer-oriented behaviors. The key research contributions of our study are threefold.

First, the results provide support for our two-dimensional conceptualization of customer orientation. Our findings show that customer-oriented attitudes are distinct from customer-oriented behaviors in terms of discriminant validity and that they capture different facets of the customer orientation construct. It is worth mentioning that this evidence was provided when measuring attitudes and behaviors from a single source (i.e., salespeople) as well as by measuring the constructs based on dyadic data (i.e., salespeople ratings on customer-oriented attitudes and customer ratings on customer-oriented behavior). Thus, this two-dimensional conceptualization provides a more complete understanding of psychological drivers of customer-oriented behaviors.

Second, our findings show that both customer-oriented attitudes and behaviors have an impact on customer satisfaction. While customer-oriented behaviors have the stronger link to customer satisfaction, customer-oriented attitudes also have a direct effect. Thus, not only are customer-oriented attitudes a driver of customer-oriented behaviors, but they are also a direct antecedent of customer satisfaction. This finding is relevant from a fundamental theoretical perspective because it supports our reasoning based on the concept of emotional contagion (e.g., Hatfield et al. 1992; Pugh 2001; Verbeke 1997). In other words, results are consistent with the notion that salespeople's emotions and feelings are "transferred" over to or "picked up" by the customer. As mentioned previously, it is likely that this phenomenon adds to the positive feelings that surround the evaluation of satisfaction (Westbrook 1987; Westbrook and Oliver 1991).

Thus, the key contribution of our study is that it provides a more complete framework for understanding a customer orientation as it relates to customer satisfaction. While it is true that customer-oriented behaviors are needed to increase customer satisfaction, focusing only on behavior is not enough. This study highlights the equally important role of customer-oriented attitudes. This is very critical because, as mentioned earlier, employees could visibly engage in customer-oriented behaviors but not be committed to these behaviors internally (i.e., the "behavioral compliants"—Peccei and Rosenthal 2000). To successfully implement a customer orientation, employees need to possess a strong customer-oriented attitude and be committed to providing a high level of service to customers. Furthermore, since attitudes can lead to stability in behavior over time, developing customer-oriented attitudes is critical to ensure the long-term success of a customer orientation.

Finally, to acquire deeper insights into the customer-oriented attitude-behavior link, the current study investigated four moderator effects. Our results show that the customer-oriented attitude-behavior link is stronger when salespeople are more empathetic, reliable, and knowledgeable. In contrast, the link is weaker when job

autonomy is restricted. These findings make an important contribution to the literature because they provide deeper insights into the conditions under which customer-contact employees are able to transfer their customer-oriented attitudes into consistent behaviors. In other words, our study demonstrates that individuals vary in their ability to adopt a customer-oriented attitude, and we identify several critical factors that explain this variability. One area for future research is seen in the investigation of other moderator variables, such as company characteristics (e.g., culture, values) and customer characteristics (e.g., trust, involvement) that affect the strength of this link.

### Managerial Issues

The results of the present study have important managerial implications. The first and most important implication is that approaches to influence customer orientation at the level of individual employees should focus not only on customer-oriented behaviors but also address underlying attitudes.

Avoiding an exclusive focus on customer-oriented behaviors is important for two additional reasons: First, as mentioned earlier, a focus on behavior only could lead to a superficial customer orientation where salespeople visibly engage in customer-oriented behaviors but are not committed to these behaviors internally (as mentioned earlier, the "behavioral compliants"—Peccei and Rosenthal 2000). To fully implement a customer orientation, salespeople need to possess both customer-oriented attitudes *and* behaviors. Second, since attitudes are known to be more stable than behaviors (Williams and Wiener 1996), influencing employees' customer-oriented attitudes allows the company to establish a more continuous and stable customer orientation among salespeople than merely focusing on behaviors. As a consequence, managers could invest less time and energy in monitoring customer-contact personnel because they will generate greater stability.

It must be mentioned, however, that influencing attitudes is not as easy for managers as influencing behaviors. Nevertheless, there are a number of approaches that seem to be promising in terms of promoting customer-oriented attitudes among employees. The most obvious approach is to focus on customer-oriented attitudes when hiring new employees. In other words, applicants can be screened in terms of their orientation toward customers. Salespeople who possess attitudes that are negative toward customers would not be selected for employment since these attitudes may be relatively difficult to change. Those with more positive attitudes would be more attractive for hiring, and these attitudes could be reinforced during training and with proper incentives. On the other hand, when potential employees have more neutral or weak attitudes, these attitudes can be developed through coaching, training, and

incentive programs. These individuals can be educated in terms of why a customer orientation is important to them, the company, and the customer. Since their initial attitudes are not strongly held, it should be possible to develop them through these programs and incentives.

Moreover, managers can influence their employees' customer-oriented attitudes through their leadership style (Hartline et al. 2000; O'Hara et al. 1991). By observing a customer-oriented leadership style, salespeople can "learn" customer-oriented attitudes from their supervisor (e.g., Bandura 1971). In this context, Jones et al. (2003) stated, "A sales manager's behavior is critical in influencing the sales persons' perspectives of the values orientation toward the customer and serving the customer" (p. 326). Also, the individual coaching of salespeople by sales managers has been emphasized as an important technique to influence salespeople's attitudes (Lorge 1999; Rich 1998). In summary, while influencing employees' attitudes is not an easy task for managers, there are a number of approaches that managers can use to foster customer-oriented attitudes among their employees.

The results related to our moderator effects also provide interesting managerial implications. The findings suggest that employees with higher levels of empathy, reliability, and expertise may be more able to transfer their customer-oriented attitudes into consistent behaviors, thereby increasing the levels of customer satisfaction. Therefore, to increase their ability to implement or increase a customer orientation, companies may want to screen for empathy and reliability in their hiring process. In addition, higher level of customer knowledge can increase the salesperson's ability to transfer his or her customer-oriented attitudes to his or her customers. Finally, our results show that restriction in job autonomy is an important situational factor that inhibits the transfer of customer-oriented attitudes. This suggests that removing restrictions in job autonomy will also increase the likelihood that salespeople engage in customer-oriented behavior.

### Limitations and Future Research

There are several limitations of our study and areas for future research that are worth mentioning. First, in this study, we examined overall satisfaction with the company. In doing so, we intended to capture the overall feelings of the customers toward a supplier. Another relevant type of satisfaction in this context could be in reference to the salesperson. Future research should investigate how this variable is influenced by customer-oriented attitudes and behaviors, as well as how it determines satisfaction with the company. While we feel that our theoretical reasoning and the corresponding hypotheses would also apply in this context, studying this issue empirically is certainly an interesting avenue for future research.

Second, in addition to our measure of satisfaction, other measures of performance may be interesting to investigate. For example, Zinkhan (2002) examined measures of loyalty over time, positive word of mouth, and the longevity of the buyer-seller relationship in the context of relationship marketing. These variables may be relevant in the salesperson-customer dyad context as well.

Third, in this study, we focus on selected situational and salespeople characteristics to gain deeper insights into the relationship between customer-oriented attitudes and behaviors. On the basis of the emotional contagion concept, we argue that these characteristics represent factors that enable a salesperson to transfer his or her customer-oriented attitude into adequate customer-oriented behavior. From a conceptual perspective, however, the salespeople characteristics investigated as moderator variables in this study could also be viewed as antecedents of customer-oriented attitudes. Since our analysis is based on multiple group analysis, the presence of such an effect would not affect the findings of our hypotheses testing. Nevertheless, studying the role of these constructs as antecedents of customer-oriented attitudes is an interesting avenue for future research.

Fourth, given the relevance of customer-oriented attitudes revealed in our study, a key topic for future research relates to other factors that influence the adoption of a customer-oriented attitude. It is likely that situational factors would play a key role here. These might include social factors (i.e., do my manager and my fellow employees have this attitude?), training (i.e., is the employee trained to understand why a customer orientation is important and how to implement it?), and the reward structure of the organization (i.e., is the employee rewarded for having this attitude?). Future research is needed to determine the relative influence of all these factors on customer-oriented attitudes. In addition, one could analyze whether these factors have a stronger effect on attitudes or on customer-oriented behaviors.

Finally, the surveyed customers were identified by salespeople, and this may have produced a selection bias. Future research of this nature might employ other methods for sampling salespeople and customers. For example, it may be possible to get a complete list of customers from the salespeople and randomly select customers from this list. Alternatively, one could sample customers first and then obtain the name of the salesperson, who could then be interviewed.

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