

The Drivers of Business Performance: Does Sales Force Strategy and Network Capability Matter?

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ABSTRACT

Many factors that SMEs must consider in driving their business to achieve success. This study attempts to identify and analyze the factors that can encourage the business performance of SMEs by considering sales force strategy and network capability. This study also examines the mediating role of network capability in the influence of sales force strategy on business performance. This study used a quantitative approach, with 140 creative SMEs in Bandung, West Java, as the respondents. The data was collected using a survey and further analyzed using regression and path analysis with SPSS 25 software. The findings indicated that sales force strategy and network capability positively influenced business performance and that sales force strategy influences network capability. Furthermore, this study confirmed that network capability mediated the relationship between sales force strategy and business performance. This study provided implications for both practice and theory.



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INTRODUCTION

Trade shows (trade bazaars) are special events that regularly bring together stakeholders from a particular market or industry under one roof, for example, producers/sellers and customers/buyers. In a trade show, exhibitors physically display their products and services to visitors under the guidance of the organizing entity (Bauer & Borodako, 2019; Rai & Nayak, 2020; Silva et al., 2022a). In general, exhibitors place a diverse staff at the booth, such as technicians, executives/top management, sales force, and marketing department (Haon et al., 2020; Silva, 2021). Booth staff is the main service provider to exhibitors during a trade show, so staff selection is crucial (Liu, 2019; Rangarajan et al., 2021). The general function of sales in exhibitions is to meet and interview customers to explore and determine what they need (Dicecco, 2018; Reddy et al., 2019). Therefore, from an exhibitor's point of view, a trade show is an event that allows one to promote products/services, generate prospects, and negotiate sales (Bloch et al., 2017; Rai & Nayak, 2020; Haon et al., 2020). Regardless of his position as a seller, sales can also play an espionage role in seeking information regarding customers and competitors during trade shows (Johan et al., 2019). The sales force is a group whose primary

role is interacting with customers and whose goal is building relationships and closing sales (Kotler & Armstrong, 2018; Johan et al., 2019; Waiser, 2021).

As mentioned, SMEs participating in exhibitions often employ teams from various departments and management levels (Haon et al., 2020; Prasanna et al., 2021). However, the teams used in the trade are generally not ideal (Chou, 2021). For example, using diverse employees at the booth does not optimally fulfill its function as a sales representative. Few organizations employ a diversified team at the booth, especially small and medium-sized companies (Silva et al., 2022b). In this case, many exhibitors may employ people with inadequate customer service skills. As a result, inconsistencies persist between exhibitor and exhibitor preferences affecting business performance (Silva et al., 2022b). Previous studies have not considered that small companies (SMEs) generally have limited resources (Johan et al., 2022). Besides, trade shows are expensive (Nayak, 2019) and require substantial resources (Domfeh et al., 2018).

On the other hand, Deo et al. (2020) argued that more important than the number of staff at the booth is their ability to interact quickly with clients (visitors) and respond to their inquiries effectively, thereby Fang & Ding (2020) suggested adequate training. Liu (2019) presented a model with antecedents and consequences for exhibitor booth personnel commitment consisting of exhibitor pre-exhibition decisions regarding human resource commitment to a particular trade show.

Despite the importance of practical advice from Dicecco (2018; Good & Calantone, 2019; Panagopoulos et al., 2018) for operationalizing the sales force on exhibitors, the existing research on predictors and outcomes is still limited. For example, Li (2020) has not linked network capabilities in explaining how business performance can be improved. The network's ability to acquire and distribute knowledge is critical to an organization's success and competitiveness, especially in exhibitions (Sarwar et al., 2021; Johan et al., 2022). In this case, the ability of business networks is important for companies to acquire knowledge to compete and improve business performance (Farida, 2021; Liu et al., 2020). Large organizations have substantial financial and managerial resources for acquiring and processing knowledge. Conversely, SMEs have limited size and resources that must be addressed because they can hinder the progress of SMEs themselves (Cenamor et al., 2019; Farida & Nuryakin, 2021; He et al., 2022).

Previous studies have linked network capabilities to organizational outcomes, namely firm performance, knowledge management and innovation (Cenamor et al., 2019; Farida, 2021; Liu et al., 2020). However, previous studies have inconsistent results: network capabilities do not affect business performance. However, at the same time, other studies have found a positive relationship between built networks and business performance (Jiang et al., 2020). Piazza et al. (2019) stated that managing business networks can cause differences in business performance.

Therefore, this study aims to fill the existing research gaps in sales force strategy literature that still needs further expansion and exploration. In addition, the inconclusive results of how network capability is linked to business performance must also be addressed to obtain a clearer

understanding. The role of sales force strategy, network capability and business performance of Bandung's small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) will be examined.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sales Force Strategy, Network Capability, and Business Performance

The sales force is one of the elements in the marketing mix, namely promotion and is an important factor in increasing sales performance (Silva et al., 2022a). Kotler & Armstrong (2019) stated that the sales force is a group whose job is to promote and sell products and services. The salesperson's role consists of identifying and analyzing customer needs while providing solutions to customer problems (Agnihotri, 2021) and developing customer relationships (Moutot & Bascoul, 2008; Sedaghatnia et al., 2018). According to Cron et al. (2014), a sales force strategy aims to provide value to customers to create a winning organization. Sales force strategy is defined as a series of strategic decisions that determine the areas in which the sales force will focus its attention and the role of the sales force in creating customer value consistent with the company's and business units' overall strategy (Silva et al., 2022a). Several aspects of this definition should be noted. First, this definition of sales force strategy suggests that the sales force should focus on value creation that enhances customer satisfaction and contributes to high-profit levels (Kotler & Armstrong, 2019). Second, the sales force strategy must lead to profitable organizational marketing strategies (Kotler & Armstrong, 2019; Hartmann & Lussier, 2020).

Bhargava & Rubel (2019) suggested that a sales force strategy requires an organization or company to have competent human resources to implement the strategy properly. Third, sales force strategy is determined by a series of strategic decisions: customer priority, the scope of customer relationship types, portfolio of sales force capabilities, and sales force structure and management support systems to support organizational performance in increasing its profits. In this regard, Sant'Anna et al. (2020) stated that an organization with a reliable sales force can improve organizational performance in achieving business growth. A sales force is sometimes called a market-driven strategy (Cravens & Piercy, 2013). Important characteristics include a company's market orientation, customer focus, competitor focus, competitor intelligence, cross-functional coordination, and performance metrics, which can improve business performance (Cravens & Piercy, 2013; Bartol et al., 2017).

H₁. Sales force strategy has a positive effect on business performance.

McGrath et al. (2019) stated that network capability is one of the factors that function as an organizational resource to improve business performance, and the capability of the organization's sales force can influence it. Johan et al. (2022) mentioned that the sales force influences network capability. Similarly, Silva et al. (2022b) stated that the sales force's role could influence a business organization's performance. Furthermore, Farida (2021) connected network capability with different organizational outcomes, namely firm performance, knowledge management, and sustainable learning and performance. Udriyah et al. (2019) stated that the difference in business performance may be caused by the organization's management

of knowledge and resources. Therefore, based on this explanation, network capability is considered a factor that can intervene in an organizational sales force. Therefore, this argument is directed toward this hypothesis:

H₂. The sales force has a positive effect on network capability.

Network Capability

Network Capability is a factor that functions as a professional resource to improve organizational performance (Silva et al., 2022b). Silva et al. (2022b) stated that the organization must understand the decision to choose a potential market. The network determines the company's access to market locations. Therefore, networking capabilities are development activities that enable organizations to develop, manage and exploit opportunities through healthy connections and relationships. These networks, connections, and relationships are correlated with increased business performance and can reduce threats arising from the environment. The current literature uses different terms, such as entrepreneurial business networking, business networking, and entrepreneurial networking capabilities (Faroque et al., 2022). This study used the term network capability and investigated it in the context of SME entrepreneurs (Johan et al., 2022). It is considered an organization's ability to induce, build, and exploit internal and external organizational relationships. The researchers argued that building network capabilities is beneficial for organizations in improving business performance. Networking capabilities are essential for organizations, especially SMEs, as they substantially assist in building new and current business processes. Martín et al. (2022) added that network capabilities support SME businesses at every stage to achieve sustainable growth.

H₃. Network capability has a positive effect on business performance

Organizations need to exploit their knowledge and resources to be more innovative and competitive than their competitors to respond to the challenges and uncertainties in the business environment. Zaefarian et al. (2017) argued that organizations must build and maintain strong relationships and connections with stakeholders to compete. In this case, connections are important for creating knowledge and exchanging information to identify potential opportunities and threats. Karami & Tang (2019) assumed that organizations that build networking capabilities and develop social capital have the potential to be more innovative in their business to improve organizational performance.

According to Johan et al. (2022), network capabilities can increase administrative access in achieving its goals. Silva (2021) stated the importance of a network in the context of SMEs to overcome resource and performance limitations. Networking capability is also the organizational capacity to form and use social relations to gain access to various resources. The network capabilities of an organization will not be realized if the organization does not have qualified human resource capabilities. Furthermore, network capabilities will increase if the sales force organization is good.

H₄. Network capability mediates the relationship between sales force strategy and business performance.

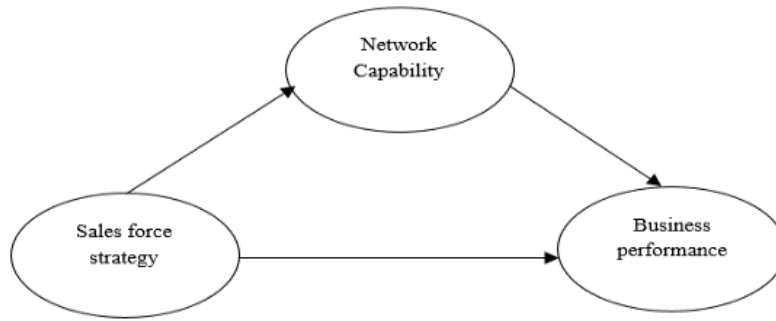


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

RESEARCH METHOD

This study used a quantitative approach to measure and understand the causal relationships between variables. Descriptive analysis is based on data collected during systematic research on the facts and characteristics of the object studied, which is then interpreted based on theory and literature. This study was interpreted to understand the relationship between sales force strategy, network capabilities, and business performance in SMEs in Bandung. The population of this research was all creative SMEs in Bandung, with 140 respondents. The sample was the entire population. The sampling technique was carried out using the accidental non-probability sampling method. The data obtained were further analyzed using regression and path analysis with SPSS 25.

Variable Measurement

Each questionnaire item was measured using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1-5, with point 1 indicating that the respondent strongly disagreed, while point 5 indicating that the respondent strongly agreed with the statement. This study used the research variables of sales force strategy, dynamic capability, and business performance. Research instruments in data collection were developed from relevant previous studies. Salesforce is measured by four items adopted from Johan et al. (2019). Network capability was measured by four items adopted from research by Johan et al. (2022). Finally, business performance is measured by two items adopted from research by Johan et al. (2019).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Characteristics of Respondents

Based on the characteristics of the respondents, this study found that, in general, most SMEs in Bandung have employees between 10 to 20 people, as many as 72 people or 51%. Based on the type of industry, most respondents were culinary, with 81 respondents or 44%. Finally, based on long-standing, most respondents had run a business for 2 to 3 years, with 72 respondents or 49%.

Table 1. Respondents' Characteristics

Category	Amount	Percentage
Number of employees		
Less than 10	25	19%
10-20	72	51%
21-30	43	30%
More than 30	-	
Industry type		
Fashion	36	32%
Culinary	81	44%
Etc	23	24%
Long-standing		
Less than 2 years	14	9%
2-3 years	72	49%
3-4 years	37	29%
More than 4 years	17	13%

Source: Processed primary data, 2022

Validity and Reliability Test

The validity test in this study was conducted using Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA). Confirmatory Factor Analysis is a multivariate analysis method to confirm whether the measurement model built is under the hypothesis. The results of the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy (KMO MSA) and the validity test with Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Validity Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling		
Adequacy.		.547
Bartlett's Test of Approx. Chi-Square		2162.827
Sphericity	df	406
	Sig.	.000

Source: Processed primary data, 2022

The research results show that the value of the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy (KMO MSA) is greater than 0.50, which is 0.547; Hence, the existing data is feasible for factor analysis.

Table 3. CFA Test

	Component		
	1	2	3
SF1			.899
SF2			.868
SF3			.863
SF4			.866
NC1	.895		
NC2	.880		
NC3	.917		
NC4	.914		
BP1		.938	
BP2		.957	
BP3		.925	

Source: Processed primary data, 2022

Based on the stage 2 CFA test, all items have been grouped according to the above indicators and results. All statement items are declared valid with a loading factor value above 0.50.

Table 4. Reliability Test

Variable	Cronbach Alpha	Information
Sales Force Strategy	0,973	Reliable
Network Capability	0,979	Reliable
Business Performance	0,975	Reliable

Source: Processed primary data, 2022

The reliability test results showed that all question items from the four variables studied were reliable because they had a Cronbach Alpha value of > 0.70.

Multicollinearity Test

Table 5. Multicollinearity test

Relationship	Tolerance	VIF	Information
Sales force strategy through Network capability	0,881	1,135	No multicollinearity
Business performance	0,881	1,135	No multicollinearity

Source: Data in process, 2022

Table 5 shows all variables have tolerance values above 0.1 and VIF values below 10. Hence, the regression model in this study did not occur in multicollinearity.

Hypothesis Test

The Influence of Sales Force Strategy on Network Capability

Table 6. Hypothesis test 1

Regression Coefficient	Constant	t-value	Sig.	Adjusted R ²
0,395	24,358	4,395	0,000	0,113

Source: Data in process, 2022

From the regression analysis results, the regression equation is $M = 24.358 + 0.395X$. The regression equation shows that the coefficient value of the sales force strategy is 0.395, meaning that if the sales force increases by one unit, network capability will increase by 0.395 units. The results of the regression test statistic obtained a t count of 4.395 with a significance value of 0.000 because the significance value is less than 0.05 ($0.000 < 0.05$), and the regression coefficient has a positive value of 0.395. The hypothesis states that the sales force strategy's positive influence on network capability is accepted.

The Influence of Sales Force Strategy on Business Performance

Table 7. Hypothesis test 2

Regression Coefficient	Constant	t-value	Sig.	Adjusted R ²
0,792	11,616	8,664	0,000	0,340

Source: Data in process, 2022

From the results of the regression analysis, the regression equation is as follows: $Y = 11.616 + 0.792X$

The regression equation shows that the coefficient value of the sales force strategy is 0.792. If the sales force strategy variable increases by one unit, business performance will increase by 0.792 units.

The Influence of Sales Force Strategy through Network Capability and its Impact on Business Performance

Table 8. Hypothesis test 3

Regression Coefficient	Constant	t-value	Sig.	Adjusted R ²
0,440	19,858	4,821	0,000	0,134

Source: Data in process, 2022

From the results of the regression analysis, it can be seen that the regression equation is as follows: $Y = 19.858 + 0.440 M$.

The results of the regression test statistic obtained a t count of 4.821 with a significance value of 0.000 because the significance value is less than 0.05 ($0.000 < 0.05$), and the regression coefficient has a positive value of 0.440. The hypothesis states that a positive influence of sales force strategy through network capability on business performance is proven.

Path Analysis

Based on the regression analysis, the influence of the sales force strategy through network capability and its impact on the business performance of SMEs in Bandung in Figure 2.

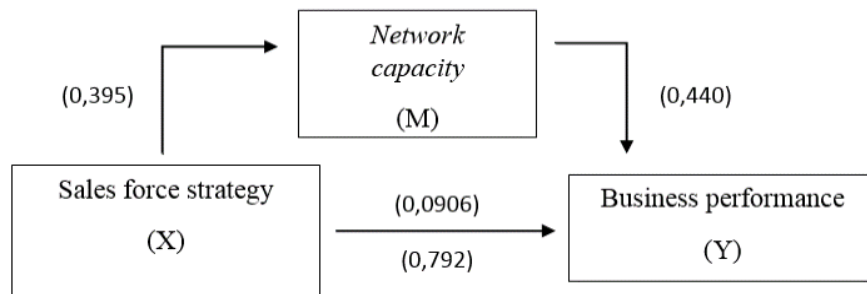


Figure 2. Path analysis

Direct Effect: $r(x,y) = 0.792$. Indirect Effect: $r(Vme, x) \times r(y, Vme) = 0.395 \times 0.2293 = 0.0906$. The calculation results above show that the magnitude of the influence of the sales force strategy through network capability and its impact on SME business performance is 0.0906.

Sobel Test

Sobel analysis in this study was used to determine the indirect effect of the mediating variable, namely network capability. The results of Sobel’s analysis in this study are presented as follows.

Table 9. Sobel Test 3

Matrix					
VARIABEL IN SIMPLE MEDIATION MODEL					
Y	Business Perfom				
X	Sales force				
M	Network				
DESCRIPTIVES STATISTICS AND PEARSON CORELATIONS					
	Mean	SD	Business	Sales For	Network_
Business	35.9310	4.9759	1.0000	.5867	.3739
Sales for	30.7103	3.6873	.5867	1.0000	.3450
Network_	36.4966	4.2248	.3739	.3450	1.0000
SAMPLE SIZE					
145					
DIRECT And TOTAL EFFECTS					
	Coeff	s.e.	t	Sig (two)	
b (YX)	.7917	.0914	8.6640	.0000	
b (MX)	.3953	.0899	4.3951	.0000	
b (YM.X)	.2293	.0831	2.7605	.0065	
b (YX.M)	.7011	.0952	7.3659	.0000	
INDIRECT EFFECT And SIGNIFICANCE USING NORMAL DISTRIBUTION					
	Value	s.e.	LL 95 CI	UL 95 CI	Z
Sig (two) Effect	.0217	.0906	.0132	.16800	2.2954
FARICHILD ET AL. (2009) VARIANCE IN Y ACCOUNTED FOR BY INDIRECT EFFECT: .0164					
***** NOTES *****					
----- END MATRIX -----					

Source: Processed primary data, 2022

Based on the Sobel test above, the influence of the sales force strategy through network capability and its impact on the business performance of SMEs in Bandung, in this case, the magnitude of the indirect effect is 0.0906, which is the result of multiplying the coefficient between b (M.X) and b (YM. X) = $0.3953 \times 0.2293 = 0.0906$. The mediation coefficient value

is 0.0906, with a significance value of 0.0217. It turns out that the value is less than 0.05. Thus, the fourth hypothesis, “There is an influence of sales force strategy through network capability and its impact on the business performance of SMEs in Bandung,” is proven.

Discussion

This study aims to determine the influence of a sales force strategy on business performance mediated by network capability in SMEs in the city of Bandung. The research showed that a company could utilize one of the tools in marketing salespeople’s ability. According to Bhargava & Rubel (2019), the sales force is the spearhead to achieve sales success in the organization. The sales force role represents the company’s ability to interact with consumers. In addition to carrying out sales activities, the sales force acts as a strategic approach to obtaining external information. In high market competition, the sales force approach is a strategic choice for companies in obtaining information related to the external environment (Sharma et al., 2021). This information is useful for companies to detect opportunities and threats that come so that they become capabilities for the organization. Good et al. (2019) defined the sales force as all employees who sell products and services directly and provide information regarding ongoing business operations. Thus, Kalyani & Saravanan (2020) and Johan et al. (2019) revealed that salespeople’s ability could increase network capability in organizations.

The creation, capture, sharing and exploitation of knowledge in a company or organization refers to the ability of an organization to form a network (Silva et al., 2022a). Network capabilities generally require the right synergy of many initiatives in the company and the capabilities of their resources. The main goal of network capability in organizations is to collect, classify, store and disseminate all the knowledge needed so that companies can grow and develop. This study supported previous research by Bolander et al. (2015) and Silva et al. (2022a), finding that network capability positively affected business performance. According to Johan et al. (2022), network capability is the ability of organizations to initiate, develop, and utilize internal organizations and relationships between external organizations. Network capabilities are crucial for organizations to obtain information to improve business performance. This study supported previous findings that network capability positively and significantly influenced business performance.

Also, the results confirmed that when a company has a good sales force, it will be useful for them to improve their network capabilities. In this study, SMEs in Bandung have utilized the sales force strategy to understand their customers, product trends, the character and movements of their competitors, and most importantly, to analyze information. It allows SMEs in Bandung to reformulate their strategy using their skills to build and improve their business performance.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the effect of sales force strategy on business performance with network capability as a mediating variable. This study found a significant relationship between

sales force strategy and network capability, sales force affected business performance, and finally, network capability was found to mediate the relationship between sales force strategy and business performance in SMEs in Bandung. After doing research, the results could be achieved because this research found a significant relationship between direct and indirect influences that could affect the business performance of SMEs in Bandung.

The practical implication of this research is that the ability of SMEs to expand the network will increase knowledge of new ideas in finding or developing existing products that affect business performance. SMEs already running will be able to continue to grow and survive in the competition. This study also enriches the literature on the importance of sales force, network capability, and business performance. The limitation of this research is that it only explored the relationship between the sales force and network capability on business performance in small and medium enterprises. Further research is suggested to identify factors that can affect business performance, such as knowledge exploration and internal learning or technology adoption and can be done by adding moderating variables that are likely to affect the relationship between the variables analyzed in this study.

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