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Judy A. Wagner, Noreen M. Klein and Janet E. Keith  
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# Selling Strategies: The Effects of Suggesting a Decision Structure to Novice and Expert Buyers

**Judy A. Wagner**

*University of Texas at Arlington*

**Noreen M. Klein**

**Janet E. Keith**

*Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University*

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*This research investigates the impact of selling strategies on selling effectiveness. The authors compare two selling strategies: (1) an agenda strategy, in which a salesperson attempts to influence the structure of the buyer's decision by suggesting constraints that eliminate competitive products from consideration, and (2) a more typical selling strategy that summarizes the target product's benefits. The results show that when sellers use an agenda selling strategy, target products receive higher evaluations and have higher probabilities of being considered and chosen. Buyer expertise moderates this effect, with the agenda strategy in most cases having more impact on novice buyers than on expert buyers. These findings demonstrate the importance of selling strategy to selling effectiveness, suggest the potential benefit for sellers of using selling strategies that attempt to influence the structure of the buyer's decision, and provide support for the contingent nature of selling effectiveness.*

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Selling-strategy formulation is a critical dimension of personal selling effectiveness. Weitz (1978) conceptualized selling-strategy formulation as having two components: selection of a strategic objective and formulation of a message to achieve that objective. His empirical

investigations found that salespeople with better sales records were also better at selecting appropriate strategies. Thus, Weitz established that choosing a good selling strategy is linked to better overall sales performance.

Strategic objectives in selling often involve changing buyers' beliefs and evaluations. However, Weitz (1978) also identified three other strategic objectives that attempt to influence the structure of the buyer's decision. The salesperson may (1) propose decision criteria, (2) guide buyers through the addition or deletion of product alternatives from the consideration set, or (3) attempt to modify the buyer's choice rules (Weitz 1978). If a seller succeeds in influencing the structure of the buyer's decision in any of these ways, some important benefits can follow. Salespeople might be able to focus the buyer's attention on criteria on which the seller's product has a distinctive competitive advantage, such as newly developed technology. Salespeople might also suggest specific product attribute comparisons that would eliminate strong competitors and/or create a smaller consideration set in which the seller's product is more prominent. Thus, altering the buyer's decision structure by influencing decision criteria, the consideration set, or the choice rule has the potential to enhance selling effectiveness.

Given the intuitive appeal of Weitz's proposed objectives, it is surprising to note the dearth of research investigating selling strategies that attempt to structure the buyer's decision. Research on selling strategies has gone in other directions, investigating issues such as closing techniques (Hawes, Strong, and Winick 1996), high

pressure or hard sell tactics (Chu, Gerstner, and Hess 1995), sales presentation arguments (Forrester and Locander 1989), order of product line presentation (Donoho and Swenson 1996), canned versus flexible presentations (Jolson 1975), and the use of proof statements (Milliman and Fugate 1988). Thus, the question of whether it is effective for salespeople to try to influence the structure of the buyer's decision remains open. The current research addresses this gap by operationalizing two selling strategies that differ with respect to the salesperson's attempts to influence the structure of the buyer's decision.

### **AN AGENDA STRATEGY FOR INFLUENCING DECISION STRUCTURE**

Although Weitz's (1978) three strategic objectives for influencing decision structure are straightforward, many challenges exist in creating a sales message that meets those objectives. It is the buyer who ultimately determines the structure of his or her decision. The salesperson can only influence that structure indirectly by making recommendations, which the buyer may or may not follow. However, it seems that the buyer is more likely to accept the salesperson's suggestions about how to structure a decision if these recommendations are a well-justified and natural part of the decision process. Thus, any selling strategy attempting to affect the buyer's decision structure should be compatible with decision processes that buyers normally use.

Studies of decision making show that buyers often simplify decisions by using heuristic processes to eliminate alternatives from the choice set (Andrews and Manrai 1998; Bettman, Luce, and Payne 1998; Crow, Olshavsky, and Summers 1980; Patton 1996). These heuristics often require that an alternative meet various constraints related to product attributes to remain under consideration (Bettman et al. 1998; Tversky 1972). For example, a copier buyer might eliminate from consideration any models with a below-average reliability rating or that lack a 12-hour service guarantee. The use of these heuristics by both organizational and individual buyers (Crow et al. 1980; Patton 1996) implies that a salesperson might influence the buyer's decision structure by suggesting particular constraints to simplify the choice and find the best product. A buyer who uses the suggested constraints will then reject some competitive products while keeping the salesperson's product under consideration. Such a selling strategy might accomplish Weitz's (1978) strategic objectives for influencing decision structure by altering criteria (the suggested constraints), the choice rule (applying the constraints to eliminate alternatives), and the alternatives considered (those that satisfy the constraints).

Hauser (1986) described this potential application of constraints within sales presentations, noting that its effectiveness is an empirical question. We label this selling strategy an *agenda strategy*, following Hauser's (1986) definition of the buyer's agenda as "a sequence of constraints on the order of selecting or eliminating choice alternatives." Some important aspects of the buyer's agenda are the criteria it incorporates, the order in which criteria are applied, and where the buyer places a constraint on each criterion (e.g., 12- versus 8-hour service). Research shows that influencing a decision maker's agenda can substantially alter the probability of choice outcomes (Glazer, Kahn, and Moore 1991; Hauser 1986; Kahn, Moore, and Glazer 1987; Levine and Plott 1977). Anecdotal evidence also indicates that salespeople may be more effective by suggesting choice criteria that lead decision makers to a desired outcome (Mort 1977). In total, these findings imply that a salesperson may attempt to influence the buyer's agenda as a way of accomplishing Weitz's (1978) strategic objectives involving decision structure.

Will using an agenda strategy to accomplish these strategic objectives *always* result in better sales performance than a more traditional selling strategy that does not attempt to structure the buyer's agenda? Weitz's (1981) contingency framework suggests that selling effectiveness depends on interactions between selling behaviors (such as a selling strategy) and other factors. We therefore explore selling-strategy effectiveness under aspects of two contingencies suggested by Weitz (1981): the level of the buyer's expertise (an aspect of the buying task) and the product's competitive position (a salesperson resource). As explained later, buyer expertise is important because it should affect the buyer's need for the decision structure that an agenda strategy provides, while the product's competitive position influences the extent to which a product can be helped by a particular selling strategy. Thus, our research objectives are the following:

1. Formulate a selling strategy that attempts to influence the structure of the buyer's decision by suggesting a particular choice agenda to the buyer.
2. Compare this agenda selling strategy to a more traditional presentation with respect to the buyer's product evaluations, consideration set, and final choice.
3. Test two possible moderators of selling-strategy effects: the buyer's expertise and the competitive position of the seller's product.

These research issues have implications for both marketing academicians and practitioners. Testing strategy effects across several contingencies contributes to theory about selling strategies and begins to establish the bound-

aries of their effectiveness. Understanding these selling strategies can help practitioners decide how and when they might influence the buyer's decision.

### THEORETICAL ANALYSIS OF SELLING-STRATEGY EFFECTS

Selling effectiveness is "the degree in which the preferred solutions of salespeople are realized across their customer interactions" (Weitz 1981:91). Three aspects of selling effectiveness include (1) evaluations of the target product, (2) inclusion of the target product in a consideration set, and (3) choice of the target product. While product choice is the ultimate criterion, favorable outcomes on the other two criteria can also positively influence future sales. We now hypothesize how selling strategy influences these aspects of selling effectiveness.

#### Selling Strategies

A single, accepted taxonomy of selling strategies does not exist. Instead, the literature contains many classifications defined on various dimensions. For example, degree of adaptability defines Dalrymple and Cron's (1995) categories of canned, organized, and tailored strategies. Futrell (1998) describes stimulus-response, formula, and needs satisfaction approaches, which differ in how much of the conversation the salesperson controls. Others combine elements of different taxonomies (Anderson, Hair, and Bush 1999; Jackson and Hisrich 1996). However, no current taxonomy captures the strategic objectives from Weitz (1978), and so we create two new selling-strategy designations, which we label *summary-of-benefits* and *agenda* selling strategies.

In a *summary-of-benefits* selling strategy,<sup>1</sup> the salesperson encourages the buyer to form a positive summary evaluation of the target product by presenting favorable information about its attributes. The salesperson thus focuses on the target product's strengths, with weaker attributes either omitted from the discussion or shown to be offset by one or more significant product benefits. While a *summary-of-benefits* selling strategy may refer to competitors, there is no systematic effort to influence which competitors enter or leave the consideration set. Instead, the salesperson encourages the buyer to use the positive information to form a favorable evaluation of the target product. This focus on a single product is consistent with "processing by brand," in which a decision maker assesses each alternative separately and forms an overall evaluation.

Although the label is new, the characteristics of a *summary-of-benefits* approach are typical of most of the sales presentation types within the literature. All focus on communicating how the target product will benefit the buyer, and they seldom attempt to otherwise structure the

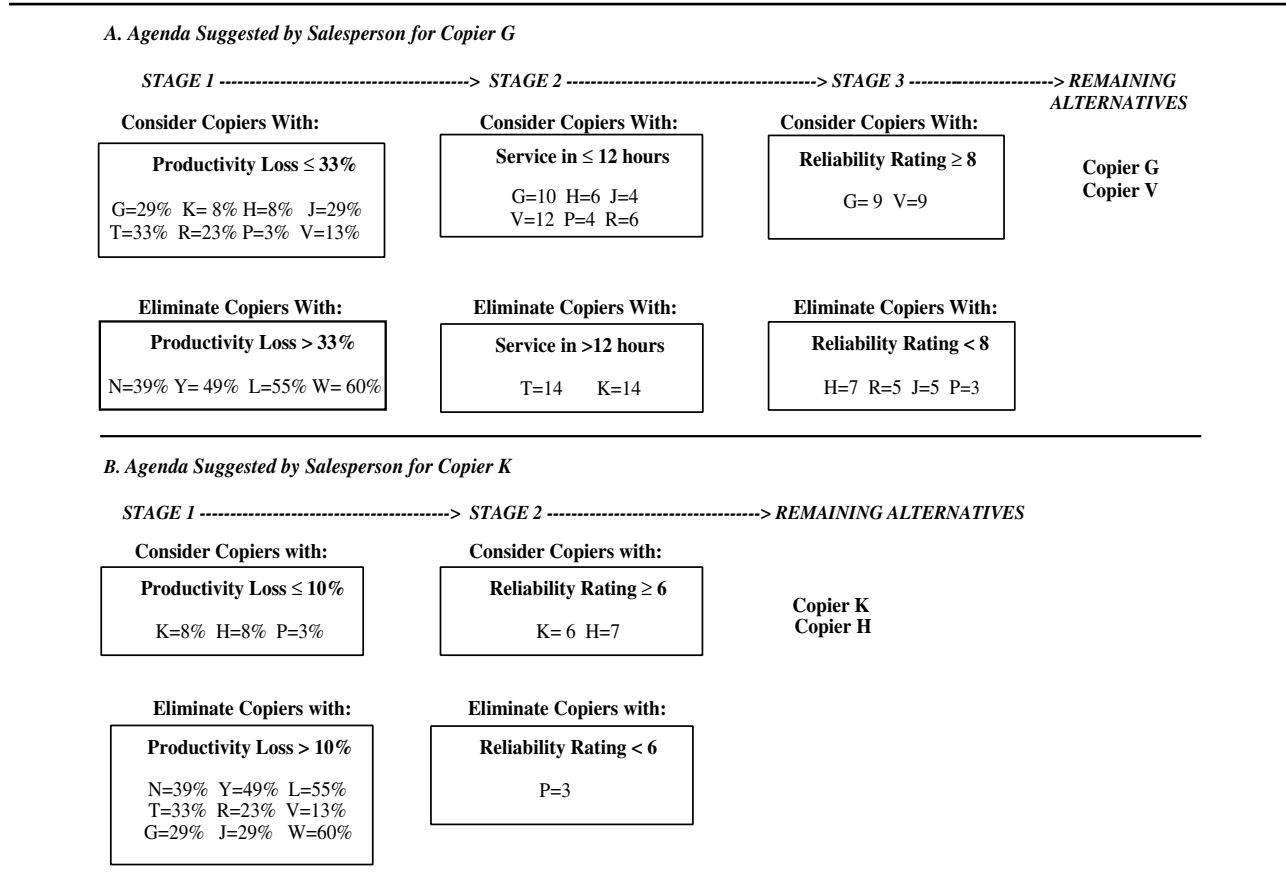
buyer's decision. Thus, the *summary-of-benefits* strategy focuses on providing the most favorable product-related information possible to lead the buyer to a positive evaluation of the product overall. It is the second, the *agenda* selling strategy, that is a departure from the strategies previously discussed in the literature. We therefore describe it here in more detail.

An *agenda presentation*, like the *summary-of-benefits* presentation, focuses on favorable information about the product. However, in addition to information sharing, the salesperson also suggests that the buyer apply a series of constraints to the choice set.<sup>2</sup> Each constraint divides remaining alternatives into two subsets, and the subset that fails to meet the suggested constraint is eliminated from further consideration. At each stage in the agenda, the decision maker may choose from the remaining alternatives or apply a new constraint. An agenda's elimination strategy is noncompensatory, in that an alternative is rejected if it fails to meet a particular constraint regardless of other positive attributes. In decision theory terms, an agenda selling strategy encourages the buyer to use "processing by attribute," which involves comparing all alternatives across a single attribute before moving onto the next attribute. Specifically, the agenda selling strategy proposes an elimination-by-aspects decision process (Tversky 1972), with the salesperson suggesting the specific constraints that will reduce the choice set. However, the buyer is always free to either follow a suggestion or use some other decision process.

Figure 1 illustrates the basis for an agenda strategy's potential effectiveness by showing two agendas that might be appropriate for selling two different copiers. The agenda shown at the top is for a salesperson who represents Copier G, a product that has a 29 percent loss in productivity when making multiple copies. This salesperson therefore begins by suggesting that the buyer eliminate from consideration all copiers with a productivity loss of more than one-third (>33%) when making multiple copies. He or she then provides productivity loss information to help the buyer categorize available models with respect to this criterion and to determine which alternatives the suggested constraint would eliminate. As Figure 1 shows, if the buyer agrees to apply this constraint, Copiers N, Y, L, and W are eliminated. The salesperson next suggests that the buyer reject any model without a guarantee of service calls within 12 hours, which eliminates Copiers T and K. A third stage of the agenda removes copiers with a reliability rating of less than 8 (out of 10), leaving only two copiers (G and V) from which to make a final choice.

The strategic advantage of the agenda presentation is that the salesperson can select and sequence constraints for the buyer that position the salesperson's product to its best advantage and perhaps eliminate tough competitors early in the process. For example, in the second agenda shown at the bottom of Figure 1, a salesperson for Copier

**FIGURE 1**  
**Appropriate Agendas for Selling Two Competitive Products**



K suggests a constraint on productivity loss (no more than 10%), which would eliminate Copier V (at 13%) along with most others. This selling strategy provides a significant advantage for Copier K, given that Copier V is superior to Copier K on service guarantee and reliability. The suggested agenda showcases Copier K's differential advantage and removes a strong competitor (Copier V) because it fails the productivity loss constraint despite its other advantages. A summary-of-benefits selling strategy will also emphasize Copier K's productivity benefit and try to create a very positive product evaluation that will lead to choice. However, if Copier V remains in the consideration set and is independently evaluated by the buyer, that buyer may be less likely to choose Copier K over Copier V. It is important to note that an agenda tries to leverage the target product's assets, but no agenda can eliminate a truly superior alternative that dominates others on all salient attributes.

Both the agenda and summary-of-benefits presentation strategies share several features. Both strategies are compatible with a needs satisfaction selling approach in that they are founded on a salesperson's knowledge of the product features and benefits that are important to the

buyer and that satisfy the purchasing organization's requirements. Both strategies also attempt to focus the buyer on information favorable to the target product in the hope that these features will be weighed heavily in the decision process. Both avoid emphasizing target product weaknesses. Thus, both strategies present identical information about the target product and its benefits.

However, the two strategies also differ in important ways. In addition to the information about the target product's benefits, the salesperson using an agenda strategy encourages the buyer to use specific constraints to eliminate some products from consideration. Then, to ensure that buyers have the information they need to decide whether to adopt the suggested constraint, the salesperson provides information about the relevant attribute for all products still under consideration. In contrast, a summary-of-benefits strategy may occasionally refer to a competitor but does not typically provide detailed competitive information. The agenda strategy's sharing of information about competitors may be part of its advantage, if the buyer is favorably predisposed to a seller who has provided this information. Of course, it would be risky for a seller using a summary-of-benefits strategy to try to gain a

similar advantage by providing competitive information. Without a suggested agenda, the seller risks the buyer using such competitive information in ways that are disadvantageous to the seller's target product.<sup>3</sup>

On the basis of our analysis above, we hypothesize that in general, an agenda selling strategy is more effective than a summary-of-benefits selling strategy. Agendas provide the seller with a way to eliminate strong competitors from consideration, as we illustrated above by showing how Copier K's agenda eliminates a strong competitor, Copier V. In addition, although organizational buyers have been shown to use agenda-like constraints to simplify decisions (Crow et al. 1980), a buyer following the seller's suggested agenda may reduce the number of alternatives more dramatically than he or she would in response to a summary-of-benefits selling strategy. This drop in the number of remaining competitors increases the likelihood of the seller's product being part of the final consideration set and thus the final choice (Wright and Barbour 1975). The agenda strategy also makes explicit comparisons that favor the target product over competitors, which should also improve evaluations of that salesperson's product.

Agendas may also be more effective because they have functional value for buyers. Agendas simplify and organize the decision process, thus helping buyers create a structure for the purchase problem. Furthermore, the seller's suggested use of constraints may mimic, and thus reinforce, the buyer's normal decision strategy. Research shows frequent use of elimination-based decision heuristics such as agenda constraints (Crow et al. 1980). A second functional advantage to the buyer is that a seller using an agenda strategy provides factual information about competitors and the target product. Thus, we predict that the agenda selling strategy will be more effective because it can create favorable competitive comparisons, potentially eliminate competitors, provide valuable information, and simplify the choice process.

*Hypothesis 1:* Compared with summary-of-benefits presentations, with agenda presentation strategies, the buyer is more likely to (a) evaluate the seller's product favorably, (b) include the seller's product in the consideration set, and (c) select the seller's product as the final choice.

The arguments just presented for the greater effectiveness of agenda strategies may be qualified by two factors: the expertise of the buyer and the product's competitive position on product attributes. We now hypothesize how these factors moderate selling strategy effects.

### Buyer Expertise

Alba and Hutchinson (1987) defined buyer expertise as "the ability to perform product-related tasks." Psychological

and marketing research shows many expertise effects on cognitive processes, such as decision rules. These differences provide a basis for predicting how buyer expertise will affect responses to the two selling strategies.

Expert buyers are better than novices at judging the relevance of information, processing information analytically, and recognizing the hidden complexities and deeper structure of a problem (Brucks 1985; Johnson and Russo 1984; Rao and Monroe 1988; Shanteau 1992). These qualities make expert buyers better able to structure decisions and form independent product evaluations, especially when the decision lacks an initial structure but is structurable (Perkins and Rao 1990; Spence and Brucks 1997). Thus, buyer expertise may be particularly important for fairly complex decisions, such as the photocopier purchases studied here.

Within organizational buying, there has been little direct analysis of buyer expertise or knowledge. Instead, purchase decisions are often classified according to the buy grid, with the implicit assumption that the level of buyer expertise increases across the classifications of straight-rebuy, modified-rebuy, and new-buy decisions (Robinson, Faris, and Wind 1967). The buy-grid classification also assumes that acquired experience changes buyer needs, with more expert buyers searching less for information and depending less on salespeople for guidance in structuring their decisions. In total, expertise reduces reliance on salespeople when making decisions, because expert buyers have a stronger mental model of how to structure the decision.

Experts' ability to structure their own decisions lets them operate effectively during a summary-of-benefits presentation. On the other hand, experienced organizational buyers often use noncompensatory eliminations similar to those incorporated in the agenda strategy (Crow et al. 1980; Patton 1996). Thus, an expert buyer may elect to use a salesperson's agenda, as long as it does not contradict the expert's established decision structure.

In contrast, novice buyers lack a well-developed mental model of the decision and so have more difficulty selecting decision criteria, integrating information, and comparing alternatives in response to summary-of-benefits presentations. Also, novices are more likely than experts to need the "across-attribute" comparative information provided by agenda presentations. Thus, the agenda strategy's ability to provide structure and simplify the buying process may have high value for a less expert buyer. Novices are also less likely than experts to have established decision criteria that conflict with those of the agenda, making novices more open to implementing the salesperson's suggested constraints. In total, we predict the following:

*Hypothesis 2:* The favorable effect of agenda presentation strategies (vs. summary-of-benefits presentation strategies) is greater for novice buyers than for

expert buyers for (a) evaluation of the target product, (b) inclusion of the seller's product in the consideration set, and (c) selection of the seller's product as the final choice.

### Relative Competitive Position

Weitz (1981) suggested that the seller's product alternatives are part of the salesperson's resource pool and moderate the effectiveness of selling behaviors. Thus, we propose that a product's *relative competitive position*, which we define as the product's strength relative to competitors on desired attributes, moderates the impact of selling strategy. We first suggest that the hypothesized selling-strategy effects may not materialize for extremely strong products (which will sell under any well-executed selling strategy) or very weak products (which may not be able to eliminate many competitors with agenda constraints). We thus focus our investigation on products that (1) have at least one strength that an agenda strategy can leverage effectively but that (2) face significant competition so that a better selling strategy is a potential asset.

Within these broad boundaries, we examine the effect of our strategies on two products with different positions on important attributes as well as different expected summary evaluations from buyers. The first product has a major strength on one attribute and no major weaknesses on other important attributes, resulting in a better-than-average competitive position within the choice set. We label this product a *strong contender*. The second target product also has a major strength that the agenda can leverage but has a relatively poor position on another attribute that weakens its competitive position. We label this target product an *average performer* because its strength and weakness offset each other to create an average overall position within the choice set. We now assess how these competitive positions may moderate the hypothesized advantage of the agenda strategy over the summary-of-benefits strategy for both consideration and choice.<sup>4</sup>

Hauser and Wernerfelt (1990) modeled the probability of a product entering a buyer's consideration set as a function of that product's expected value to the buyer versus the expected cost of evaluating it. Consider a seller representing the strong contender. Because of its relatively strong showing across salient attributes and therefore high expected value, the strong contender should enter buyers' consideration sets with high frequency, regardless of how those buyers structure their decisions in terms of choice criteria and decision rules. This situation reduces the potential for a selling strategy to influence consideration of a strong contender.

In contrast, a salesperson should have a much tougher time gaining consideration for the average-performer product. Except for buyers who focus on the single attrib-

ute that is the source of most of its competitive advantage, the expected value of the average performer is likely to be outweighed by the expected cost of evaluating it. However, a salesperson using an agenda strategy can suggest that the buyer use constraints that keep the average performer under consideration. Selling strategy should have a larger impact on the average performer's inclusion in the consideration set than on the strong contender's inclusion.

*Hypothesis 3a:* The favorable effect of agenda presentation strategies (vs. summary-of-benefits presentation strategies) on *inclusion in the consideration set* is greater for an average-performer product than for a strong-contender product.

When we consider the criterion of final choice, however, the situation may be reversed. Although the strong contender should often enter the consideration set regardless of selling strategy, it then faces tough competition from other strong products in that consideration set. However, if the salesperson's suggested agenda has succeeded in eliminating some strong competitors prior to this stage, the strong contender's chances of being chosen may significantly improve. With respect to the average performer, we argued above that an agenda may leverage the product's strength and thus boost it into the consideration set. However, during the final stages of making a choice, the buyer is likely to evaluate products in the consideration set more thoroughly, including any attribute on which the average performer is weak (Bettman 1979). This may limit the agenda strategy's advantage over the summary-of-benefits strategy with respect to increasing choice of the average performer. Thus, we predict the following:

*Hypothesis 3b:* The favorable effect of agenda presentation strategies (vs. summary-of-benefits strategies) on *choice* is greater for a strong-contender product than for an average-performer product.

## METHOD

### Design

We tested these hypotheses with organizational buyers who responded to a computer-interactive questionnaire containing simulated sales calls. This field experiment consisted of a 2 (selling strategy)  $\times$  2 (expertise level)  $\times$  2 (relative competitive position)  $\times$  2 (sales-call sequence)<sup>5</sup> between-subjects design. We measured buyer expertise but manipulated selling strategy (agenda or summary-of-benefits) and competitive position of the target product (strong contender or average performer). Selling-effectiveness measures included product evaluation, consideration set inclusion, and choice of the target product.

## Choice Context and Sample

The choice context was a photocopier purchase. This is a fairly complex organizational decision with multiple buying criteria that create a variety of possible agenda constraints. Also, the significant size of the purchase, the heterogeneity of its buyers, and the diversity of copier offerings increases the expected benefit of adapting the selling strategy (summary-of-benefits vs. agenda) relative to the cost of doing so (Weitz, Sujan, and Sujan 1986). Business directories listed organizations whose business might use a midsize copier. Telephone calls identified the individual in each organization with the greatest responsibility for a copier purchase, and 207 buyers agreed to participate. Follow-up phone calls showed lack of time to be the most frequent reason for refusals. The final sample had 128 buyers (62% of those sent materials).<sup>6</sup>

## Choice Set

The buyers made a choice from a set of 12 copiers designed to differ in competitive position and sources of competitive advantage. No alternative dominated others on all attributes, and products with better positions on nonprice attributes had higher prices. The copiers, identified only by a letter (e.g., Copier P),<sup>7</sup> were themselves fictitious but had attribute combinations that were representative of then current products. Three products within the choice set are of special interest. Two of these, Copiers G and K, served as the strong-contender and average-performer target products, respectively. Copier H was designed to be a market-leader competitor to the two targets. All are described in more detail below.

Sales presentations focused on four attributes that were initially selected based on one author's sales experience within the industry. Pretests confirmed the importance to buyers of all four of these attributes, which were reliability, productivity, service call turnaround, and price. Part A of Table 1 shows each alternative's position on the four attributes.

## Study Overview

We mailed to each participant a cover letter; an instruction sheet; product comparison material; a postage-paid return mailer; and a diskette holding a text-based, computer-interactive questionnaire programmed using Ci3 marketing research software (Sawtooth Software 1991). This program allowed buyers to read a script that simulated sales calls from vendors. While the simulation cannot replicate all important aspects of a sales call, it allowed clearer causal inferences about selling-strategy effects while testing the responses of real organizational buyers.

We asked buyers to assume that they must buy a midsize copier for their organization. Because copier buyers typically have access to product information outside of sales calls, we gave buyers a paper attachment showing the Product Comparisons Chart (see Part B of Table 1) along with an explanation of terms used. This product-by-feature matrix specified the basic features of all 12 copiers and stated that all fell within a price range of \$10,000 to \$13,000. The Product Comparisons Chart allowed the buyers to make initial assessments of the 12 products prior to the two unsolicited sales calls and provided a basis for soliciting additional sales calls.

Before each sales call, we described the salesperson as one whom the buyer had purchased from in the past and who was familiar with the buyer's needs. Past interactions were described as focusing on specific purchases rather than ongoing relationships. The same information was given about all salespeople, with the wording slightly varied to avoid excessive repetition.

During the simulation, all respondents received two unsolicited sales calls from salespeople for the target product (either Strong Contender G or Average Performer K) and a market leader (Copier H). The sales call from the target product contained the manipulation of selling strategy. A market leader's sales call helped to disguise the study's focus and ensured that the buyers would encounter at least one strong competitor before making a final choice. Following those two calls, buyers could request and receive other sales calls (*buyer-solicited calls*) and additional pieces of information. Figure 2 shows the sequence of all experimental manipulations, measures, and directions to respondents.

## Manipulations and Measures

*Expertise.* We measured expertise with a five-item scale developed and pretested in accordance with the procedures described in Churchill (1979). Our hypotheses about expertise are based on experts' tendency to have better defined and less changeable decision structures (e.g., criteria, decision rules). However, we asked no direct questions about these aspects of expertise to avoid sensitizing respondents to the agenda selling strategy's attempt to influence that structure. Appendix A contains our more general self-perception measure of expertise, which was taken during both the telephone recruitment stage and the actual study. In our analysis, we used the latter measure, which had a .71 correlation with the prescreening measure.<sup>8</sup>

*Relative competitive position.* We manipulated competitive position by having the target product salesperson represent either a strong contender (Copier G) or an average performer (Copier K). Consistent with the earlier dis-



**TABLE 1**  
**Sales Call Information and Prior Product Information**

<i>A. Sales Call Product Attribute Information</i>							
<i>Copier</i>	<i>Productivity Loss</i> (% reduction in copy speed)		<i>Service Turnaround Time</i>	<i>Reliability Rating</i> (10 = outstanding, 1 = poor)		<i>Price</i>	
G	29		10 hours	9			\$11,800
K	8		14 hours	6			\$11,500
H	8		6 hours	7			\$12,100
Y	49		10 hours	6			\$11,200
V	13		12 hours	9			\$12,400
L	55		16 hours	10			\$13,000
W	60		18 hours	6			\$10,300
T	33		14 hours	10			\$11,800
J	29		4 hours	5			\$12,400
R	23		6 hours	5			\$13,300
N	39		12 hours	7			\$11,500
P	3		4 hours	3			\$10,600

<i>B. Prior Product Information (Product Comparisons Chart)</i>							
<i>Copier</i>	<i>Multiple-Copy Speed</i> (copies/minute)	<i>First-Copy Speed</i> (seconds)	<i>Two-Sided Copying</i> (minutes/seconds for 10 sets of 10 originals)	<i>Variable Enlargement</i> (percentages)	<i>Automatic Feeder Capacity</i> (sheets)	<i>Number of Sorter Bins/Nonsort Capacity</i> (number/sheets)	<i>Manufacturer's Claimed Volume per Month</i> (copies)
H	42	5.5	6 / 55	49 - 202	100	20/250	60,000
Y	40	7.5	8 / 13	50 - 200	50	20/100	50,000
V	42	5.5	6 / 55	49 - 202	100	20/200	55,000
L	40	7.5	8 / 45	50 - 200	50	20/100	60,000
W	40	8.0	8 / 45	50 - 200	50	20/100	50,000
T	45	7.0	7 / 38	49 - 202	100	20/200	50,000
K	42	5.5	6 / 55	50 - 200	50	20/100	50,000
G	45	6.5	7 / 25	49 - 202	100	20/200	55,000
J	45	6.5	7 / 45	49 - 202	100	20/100	50,000
R	40	6.0	7 / 25	50 - 200	100	20/200	50,000
N	40	7.0	8 / 3	50 - 200	50	20/100	50,000
P	45	5.5	6 / 8	49 - 202	100	20/250	45,000

cussion, neither had a dominant nor extremely weak position within the choice set. In line with the strong-contender definition, Copier G had one very strong attribute (reliability), a slightly better-than-average productivity and service call turnaround, and a slightly above-average price. Copier K, the average performer, also had one very strong attribute (productivity), but it had a significant weakness on service turnaround, a slightly worse-than-average reliability, and a lower-than-average price. A third alternative, Copier H, was designed to play the role of a market leader. Copier H was very strong on productivity and service, with average reliability and a higher-than-average price. Except for price, the market leader Copier H dominated the Average Performer K.

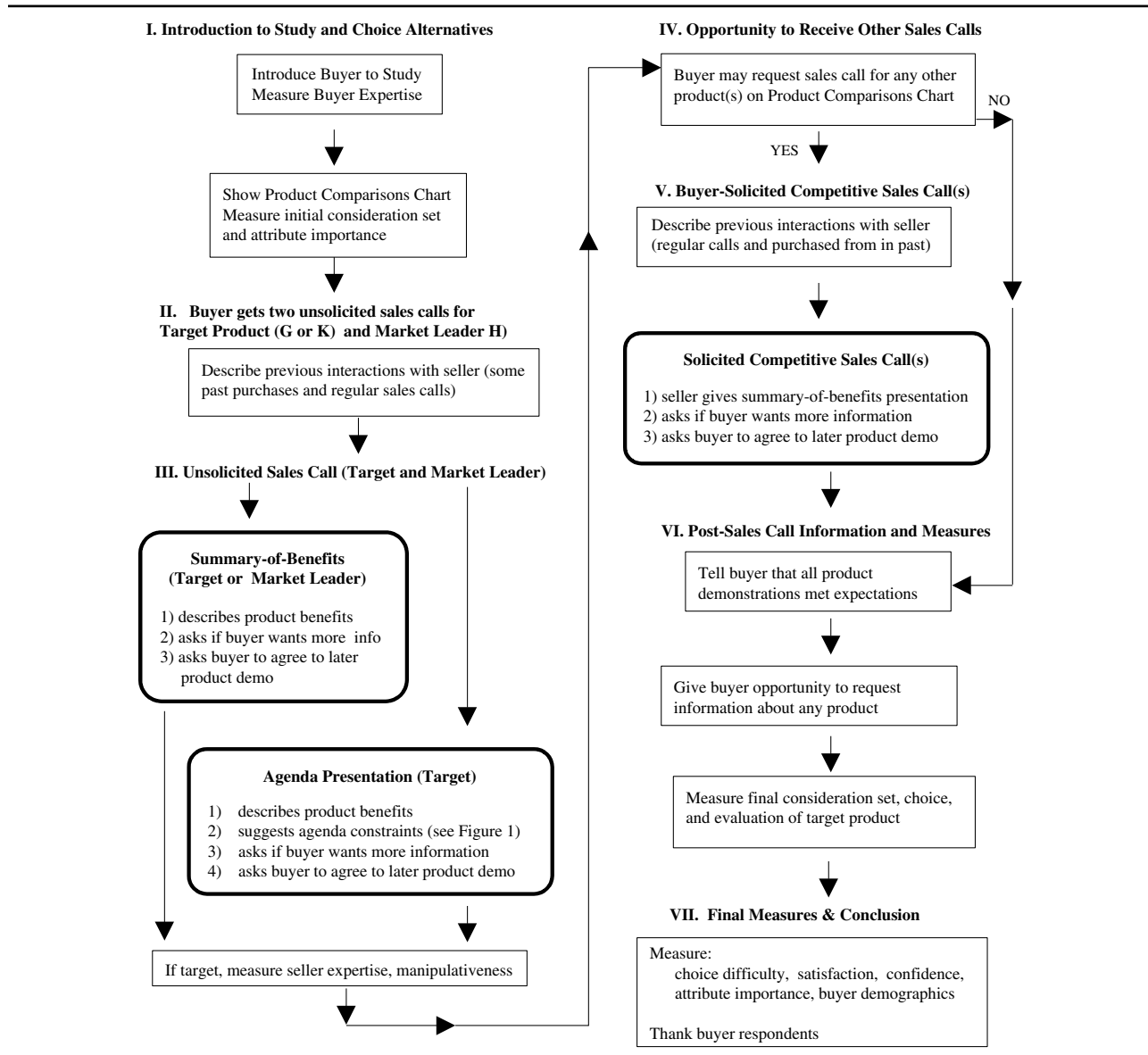
*Sales presentation strategies.* Buyers received either the summary-of-benefits or the agenda presentation for the target product, as defined earlier. In the summary-of-benefits strategy, the salesperson presented favorable information about target product attributes and encouraged the buyer to form a positive evaluation. This approach is consistent

with many presentation types described in the literature (cf. Futrell 1998). Appendix B shows a segment of this selling strategy for the Strong Contender G.

The agenda strategy's initial discussion of product attributes was identical to the summary-of-benefits strategy. However, after the salesperson discussed each product attribute, he suggested a constraint that eliminated competitive products, as shown in Appendix C. For example, in the first stage of the agenda for the Strong Contender G, the salesperson suggested that the buyer not consider copiers with a productivity loss of more than one-third with feeder use. He then listed the products that met that constraint (Group 1) and those that did not (Group 2). The buyer's options at this point were the following:

1. Accept the suggested constraint and eliminate Group 2 copiers from consideration. If the buyer chose this option, eliminated products were not discussed in later stages of the agenda.
2. Reject the suggested constraint that eliminates all Group 2 products. If this response was made,

**FIGURE 2**  
**Overview of Sales Simulation**



buyers were then given the option of selectively eliminating some of the Group 2 alternatives. Thus, they could follow an agenda strategy but establish their own constraint rather than using the one suggested by the salesperson. As with the salesperson's agenda, any product eliminated in this way was no longer discussed.

3. Reject the agenda constraint completely and keep all products under consideration.

After the buyer had responded to the suggested constraint in the first stage of the agenda, the salesperson be-

gan the second stage by discussing a second product attribute and suggesting that a new constraint be applied to all remaining products. The specific agenda for each product (i.e., the order and level of constraints) was based primarily on judgments about which constraints would be most acceptable to buyers and best eliminate strong competitors. Thus, the agenda for Strong Contender G (Part A of Figure 1) had three stages with constraints on productivity, service call turnaround, and reliability—in that order. The suggested agenda for Average Performer K (Part B of Figure 1) had only two stages involving productivity and reli-

ability constraints and avoided its weakest attribute, service turnaround (as did the summary-of-benefits presentation for the Average Performer K). Recall, however, that the salesperson did give buyers a chance to ask for information about any of the four critical attributes after the initial sales presentation was over. In both agenda and summary-of-benefits presentations, price information was discussed at the end after a brief recap of the product's benefits, as copier salespeople typically do in the field.

Overall, two principles guided our development of the presentations in this study. First, we made the presentations as similar as possible with respect to content while maintaining the basic selling-strategy manipulation. The presentation content varied only by the necessary addition of elements inherent to the agenda strategy itself, an explanation of the suggested constraints, and the competitive information necessary to execute those constraints.

A second guiding principle of our presentation design was realism. Sales calls in the field generally involve significant interaction between the buyer and the salesperson. During all presentations, the seller asked the buyer questions, some of which created opportunities in turn for the buyer to ask for information from the seller. For example, salespeople asked questions about specific attributes (see Appendix B) and invited buyers to request whatever additional pieces of product information they wished to specify. In all presentations, the buyer and seller interacted on the issue of a later product demonstration.

*Dependent variables.* Appendix A contains the selling-effectiveness measures. Buyers listed the products in their final *consideration sets* after all sales calls were completed. After making their *final choices*, buyers gave a *product evaluation* of the target product (G or K).

## RESULTS

The sample of 128 buyers included organization owners/officers (33%), purchasing managers and agents (14%), other managers (41%), and secretaries/administrative assistants (12%), with 61 percent having had purchasing responsibility for more than 5 years. Most buyers (86%) had been involved in a copier purchase before, with 71% giving a final recommendation or being a final decision maker on the most recent purchase. Twenty-four percent reported involvement in a single previous copier purchase, 46 percent in two to five purchases, and 17 percent in more than five purchases. The sample therefore contains appropriate buyers with a range of copier purchasing experience. However, few buyers were absolute novices and so should be able to formulate and use copier choice criteria.

Responses to the five-item buyer expertise scale were standardized and averaged, and a median split on this overall measure divided buyers into novices and experts

(median = 4.6,  $\bar{x} = 4.4$ ,  $s = 1.16$ ). The average expertise score was significantly greater for the expert group ( $\bar{x}_E = 5.3$ ) than for novices ( $\bar{x}_N = 3.5$ ,  $t = 2.36$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Buyers classified as experts had higher levels of responsibility in the last copier purchase ( $\chi^2_3 = 11.2$ ,  $p = .01$ ) and had been involved in a greater number of copier purchases ( $\chi^2_4 = 18.6$ ,  $p < .001$ ). However, years of organizational purchasing experience did not differ significantly ( $\bar{x}_N = 9.4$ ,  $\bar{x}_E = 11.3$ ,  $t = 1.42$ ,  $p = .16$ ). Thus, novices are not inexperienced buyers in general but are relatively inexperienced in copier purchasing.

## Manipulation Checks

The selling-effectiveness measures support the intended manipulation of relative competitive position of the target products. Across the entire sample, choice probabilities were .46 for the Strong Contender G and .15 for the Average Performer K ( $\chi^2_1 = 13.88$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Target product evaluations were also better for G ( $\bar{x}_G = 5.39$ ) than for K ( $\bar{x}_K = 4.99$ ,  $F = 4.72$ ,  $p = .032$ ,  $\eta^2 = .038$ ). The intended market leader H was also a strong competitor. When K and H were in comparable conditions (making unsolicited calls with a summary-of-benefits strategy), choice probabilities were significantly higher for H than for K ( $Pr_H = .53$ ,  $Pr_K = .10$ ,  $\chi^2_1 = 8.9$ ,  $p = .003$ ). When similarly compared with the Strong Contender G, choice probabilities for the market leader H were again higher, but not significantly so ( $Pr_H = .42$ ,  $Pr_G = .33$ ,  $\chi^2_1 = .3$ ,  $p = .56$ ).

Buyers rated all attributes as important, supporting their choice as presentation attributes. However, both reliability ( $\bar{x} = 6.9$ ) and guaranteed service time ( $\bar{x} = 6.8$ ) were significantly ( $p < .001$ ) more important than productivity ( $\bar{x} = 5.2$ ) and price ( $\bar{x} = 5.8$ ). Thus, if buyers tend to address the most important criterion first, the agendas used here (which start with productivity) may diverge from those spontaneously constructed by buyers during purchases.

## Analysis Overview

Data analysis followed a generalized randomized block design, with levels of expertise (expert and novice) being the blocking variable. The treatments were the selling strategy and relative competitive position. One approach for analyzing the data is to use a general linear model (GLM) for the product evaluation data and to use CATMOD, a method designed specifically for categorical dependent variables, for the consideration set and choice data. A second approach, the multivariate GLM, allows for the joint analysis of all three selling-effectiveness measures. Joint analysis increases power, controls for experiment-wise error, and improves understanding of the pattern of results. We therefore used both approaches, in each case estimating a saturated model that included

**TABLE 2**  
**Multivariate General Linear Model for Evaluation,**  
**Consideration, and Choice of the Target Product**

Source	Multivariate Results				
	df	Wilks's Lambda ( $\Lambda$ )	F	p	$\eta^2$
Intercept	3	.033	1,135.77	< .001	.967
Strategy	3	.909	3.92	.010	.091
Buyer expertise	3	.961	1.58	.197	.039
Product	3	.887	5.03	.003	.113
Strategy * Expertise	3	.940	2.49	.063	.060
Strategy * Product	3	.983	0.66	.577	.017
Expertise * Product	3	.959	1.70	.171	.041
Strategy * Expertise * Product	3	.971	1.17	.324	.029
Error	118				

Source	Univariate Results					
	Evaluation		Consideration Set		Choice	
	F	p	F	p	F	p
Intercept	3,276.97	< .001	121.84	<.001	63.35	< .001
Strategy	8.08	.005	6.44	.012	6.25	.014
Buyer expertise	3.08	.082	0.35	.556	0.00	.986
Product	4.72	.032	1.19	.278	13.62	< .001
Strategy * Expertise	6.94	.010	2.88	.092	1.08	.302
Strategy * Product	0.16	.693	0.41	.525	0.61	.435
Expertise * Product	0.34	.563	3.43	.067	0.13	.723
Strategy * Expertise * Product	0.30	.587	0.65	.423	3.56	.061
Corrected model		.002		.059		.001

main effects and all interactions for selling strategy, buyer expertise, and product. We then compared the GLM and CATMOD model for consideration set and choice. All models satisfied the fit criteria, and all significant terms using one approach (CATMOD or GLM) were also significant with the other approach. For simplicity, we report the GLM results (Table 2).<sup>9</sup> In this discussion, we report least squares means and use a Bonferroni *p*-value adjustment for post hoc contrasts.

### Effect of Selling Strategy (Hypothesis 1)

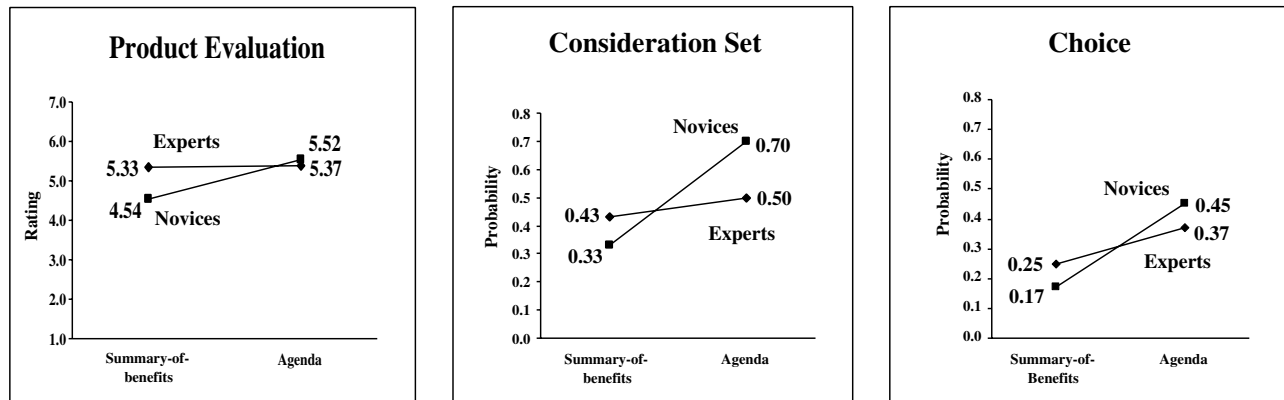
Hypothesis 1 had predicted that the agenda strategy would be more effective than the summary-of-benefits strategy with respect to evaluation (Hypothesis 1a), consideration (Hypothesis 1b), and choice (Hypothesis 1c) of the target product. As predicted, the main effect of selling strategy is significant ( $F = 3.92, p = .010, \eta^2 = .091$ ). Buyers had higher evaluations of the target product when sellers used an agenda selling strategy than when sellers used a summary-of-benefits strategy ( $\bar{x}_{\text{agenda}} = 5.45, \bar{x}_{\text{sob}} = 4.93$ ). In addition, with an agenda strategy, the seller persuaded buyers to include the target products in their consideration sets more often than they did with a summary-of-benefits presentation ( $\text{Pr}_{\text{agenda}} = .60, \text{Pr}_{\text{sob}} = .38$ ). Finally, the agenda strategy helped the seller to close the sale more often.

Target products had significantly higher choice probabilities with an agenda strategy than with a summary-of-benefits strategy ( $\text{Pr}_{\text{agenda}} = .37, \text{Pr}_{\text{sob}} = .20$ ). These results clearly show that a salesperson's selling strategy does matter and that suggesting agendas to buyers as part of the sales presentation has the potential to improve selling effectiveness on multiple dimensions.

### Buyer Expertise Effects on Selling Presentation Effectiveness (Hypothesis 2)

We hypothesized that selling strategy would matter more when dealing with novice buyers than with expert buyers. Experts have more established criteria and procedures for evaluating products and making their decisions and so may be less influenced by the suggestions of salespeople about either the criteria to use or how to make their decisions. The significant Strategy  $\times$  Buyer Expertise interaction in Table 2 shows that buyer expertise does moderate the effectiveness of a seller's selling strategy ( $F = 2.49, p = .063, \eta^2 = .060$ ). Figure 3 graphs this interaction for all three selling-effectiveness variables.<sup>10</sup> For product evaluation and consideration set inclusion, the agenda strategy improves a seller's effectiveness more with novice buyers than with expert buyers, as predicted by Hypotheses 2a and 2b.

**FIGURE 3**  
**Selling Strategy and Selling Effectiveness: The Moderating Effect of Buyer Expertise**



For choice probabilities, the univariate Strategy  $\times$  Expertise interaction is not significant ( $p > .10$ ), but the overall pattern of results coincides with the other two variables. Furthermore, the univariate tests reveal a significant three-way interaction of Strategy  $\times$  Expertise  $\times$  Product for choice ( $p = .061$ ). We explored this interaction with separate post hoc tests of the predicted Strategy  $\times$  Expertise interaction for choice for each product. There is a nonsignificant result ( $p = .59$ ) for the Strong Performer G. Thus, *both* novice and expert buyers are more likely to choose this stronger target product when the seller uses an agenda selling strategy. Contrarily, a post hoc test of the hypothesized Strategy  $\times$  Expertise interaction for choice was significant for the Average Performer K ( $p = .015$ ). When the target product had an average competitive position, selling strategy affected novice buyers more than expert buyers, giving partial support for Hypothesis 2c.

To summarize, novice buyers' evaluation and consideration of a product are more influenced by the selling strategy than are those of expert buyers. However, when it comes to choice, expert buyers may be just as positively influenced by the agenda strategy as novice buyers, provided the target product is relatively strong. It is interesting that expert buyers seem to be more discriminating about allowing the agenda strategy to influence their choices, doing so only when the product has a stronger competitive position. In general, however, these results support our hypotheses about novice buyers being more influenced by selling strategy.

### Product Competitive Position Effects on Selling Effectiveness (Hypothesis 3)

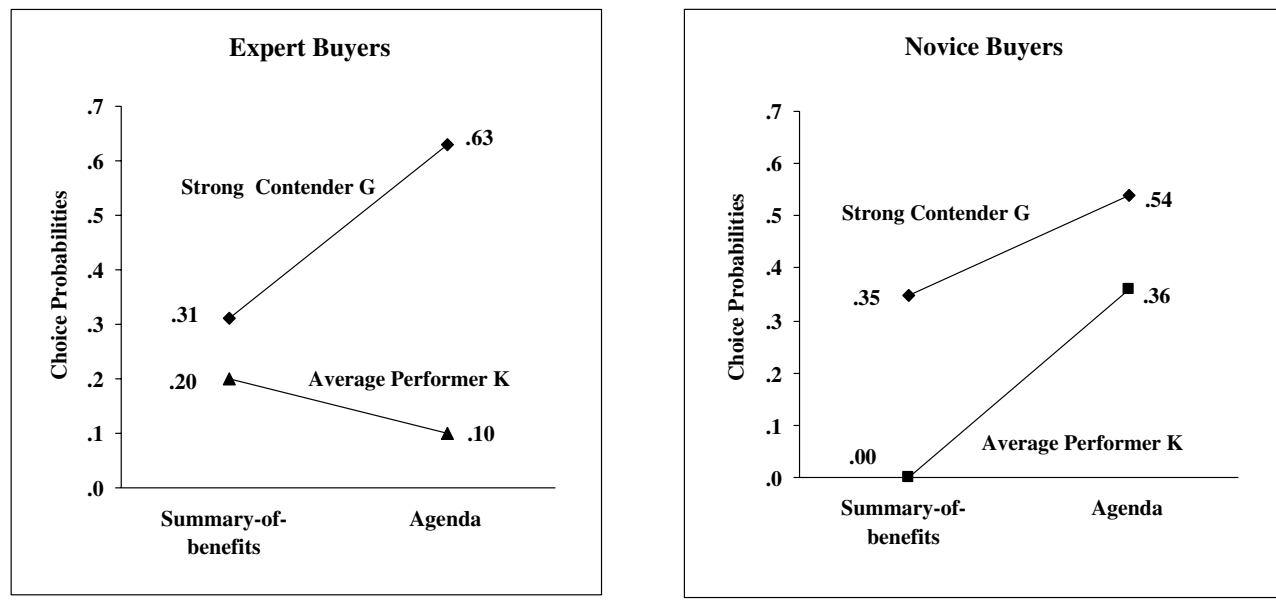
A significant main effect of the product shows that a seller representing the Strong Contender G is generally

more effective than the seller representing the Average Performer K ( $F = 5.03, p = .003, \eta^2 = .113$ ). As discussed earlier, this result supports our desired manipulation of product competitive position. We had predicted that the impact of selling strategy on choice probabilities would be greater for the Stronger Contender G (Hypothesis 3b), while the impact on consideration probabilities would be stronger for the Average Performer K (Hypothesis 3a), and so we turn to the univariate analyses of these two dependent variables to test our hypotheses.

These univariate results do not support either Hypothesis 3a or Hypothesis 3b. The Strategy  $\times$  Product interaction is not significant for either consideration ( $F_{1, 120} = .41, p = .525, \eta^2 = .003$ ) or choice ( $F_{1, 120} = .61, p = .435, \eta^2 = .005$ ). For the Strong Contender G, consideration set probabilities rose from .45 with the summary-of-benefits strategy to .62 with the agenda strategy. For the Average Performer K, the analogous increase in consideration set probabilities was from .30 to .58. Similarly, using an agenda strategy increased choice probabilities from .33 to .58 for the Strong Contender G and from .10 to .23 for the Average Performer K. Thus, it appears that the agenda strategy generally improved selling effectiveness for *both* products tested in this study.

However, we do find qualified support for Hypothesis 3b for expert buyers within the significant three-way choice interaction described earlier. Separate post hoc tests of the Strategy  $\times$  Product interaction for expert and novice buyers show that product competitive position moderates the selling strategy effect as predicted by Hypothesis 3b, but only for expert buyers ( $p = .055$ ) and not for novice buyers ( $p = .568$ ). Figure 4 shows that for expert buyers, the impact of selling strategy is greater when the seller represents a stronger product (Strong Contender G) than when the seller represents the Average Performer K. This result again shows that expert buyers are

**FIGURE 4**  
**Selling Strategy and Selling Effectiveness: The Moderating Effect of Product Competitive Position**



more discriminating than novices about allowing selling strategy to influence their choices.

### Summary of Hypotheses Tests

Our results show that agenda strategies generally improve choice probabilities, consideration set entry, and product evaluation (Hypothesis 1). As predicted, these effects are stronger for novice buyers than for expert buyers (Hypothesis 2). Contrary to our prediction (Hypothesis 3), the impact of selling strategy did not generally differ between the two target products; an agenda strategy enhanced selling effectiveness for both. However, we find some support for a product competitive position effect for the more expert buyers, whose choices were more influenced by selling strategy for the stronger of the two target products.

### DISCUSSION

This research used a computer-interactive simulation to investigate how two different selling strategies, an agenda strategy and a summary-of-benefits strategy, influence selling effectiveness. We now discuss the implications and limitations of the research.

#### Theoretical Implications

Comparisons of the agenda selling strategy to a more traditional summary-of-benefits strategy show the

benefits of attempting to influence the structure of the buyer's decision. Overall, using an agenda strategy improved selling effectiveness in terms of product evaluation, consideration, and choice.

More generally, these results highlight the importance of selling strategy and provide empirical support for the theoretical perspective that the relationship between selling strategy and selling effectiveness is contingent on buyer expertise and product competitive position (Weitz 1981). Given the complexities of buyer-seller interactions, salespeople do not expect a given selling strategy to be equally effective in all types of selling situations. Although the agenda strategy never did less well than the summary-of-benefits strategy, its potential to improve selling effectiveness appears to depend on the expertise of the buyer and (to a lesser extent) on the competitive position of the product. Thus, this research begins to establish empirically some important moderators of the relationship between selling strategy and selling effectiveness.

#### Implications for Salespeople

Our results suggest that agenda presentations represent a potentially important selling tool, meriting consideration by salespeople interested in increasing their selling effectiveness. The findings also offer salespeople some practical guidelines about the contingencies under which each selling strategy would be more effective. These contingencies concern two dimensions recognized as important by salespeople in the field but seldom, if ever, empirically

tested: (1) buyers' expertise levels and (2) the competitive position of the seller's product.

Our findings are consistent with Alba and Hutchinson's (1987) theoretical discussion and previous research about how buyer expertise affects information processing (Brucks 1985; Johnson and Russo 1984; Rao and Monroe 1988; Shanteau 1992). Expert buyers' responses are generally more independent of selling strategies (as in Figure 3), but strategies can influence experts selectively. For the stronger product (but not the average product), an agenda strategy enhanced the choice probabilities of experts just as it did novices'. Thus, when selling to expert buyers, a summary-of-benefits presentation may be more advantageous when presenting an *average* product, while an agenda strategy may be preferable when presenting a *strong* product.

Overall, selling strategy had a stronger impact on novice buyers. This is consistent with the earlier argument that novices lack a well-developed mental model of how to make the choice and therefore respond more positively to the seller's suggested agenda. Thus, an agenda strategy may be widely useful when selling to novice buyers. In total, these expertise differences provide some empirical support for the general proposition that selling strategies should be responsive to differences in how buyers process information (Hunt and Bashaw 1999). Given the importance of the buyer expertise differences shown here, future research should investigate whether salespeople take buyer expertise into account when selecting a selling strategy.

The agenda strategy's success in this study contradicts conventional wisdom about avoiding reference to competitors during a sales call. The risk of such product comparisons is that they may appear to belittle the competition. However, an agenda strategy's two-sided approach, which provides positive as well as negative information about competitors, may deflect buyer reactance. Futrell (1999) noted that detailed competitive comparisons may be effective when they emphasize the target product's unique benefit. While our target products had no *unique* benefits, we show that focusing attention on their relative advantages through the agendas' detailed comparisons strategy may also enhance selling performance.

An agenda strategy may also be useful in accomplishing several goals described by Robinson, Faris, and Wind (1967) for various organizational buying situations, such as educating buyers about the product market and structuring their new-buy decisions. Similarly, an agenda strategy may be useful in gaining entrance to the feasible set of suppliers (i.e., the consideration set) during a modified rebuy. In a straight-rebuy situation, an "out" supplier's suggested agenda may cause the buyer to reconsider the customary choice process, thus lessening the likelihood of a straight

rebuy of a competitor's product. Such a strategy is consistent with the suggestion that an "out" supplier attempt to deroutinize a straight rebuy (Robinson et al., 1967).

### Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Our simulation methodology provided a degree of control that is unattainable in real sales interactions, allowing more confident causal inferences about the proposed relationships. However, simulated sales calls inevitably differ from face-to-face sales interactions, which provide a wealth of cues to both buyer and seller that are absent or less vivid in the computer-interactive setting. Nonetheless, we believe that computer-interactive simulations can include many aspects of sales interaction. A growing body of research shows that human-computer communication is social in nature (Moon 2000) and that in many respects, people treat computers as they do human beings. Nass, Moon, Fogg, Reeves, and Dryer (1995) showed that very simple manipulations could create computer personalities to which people respond as they would to similar human personalities. The differences between human and computer-simulated salespeople are many, but we believe that this simulation approach holds real promise for sales research.

To help the buyers enter into the simulation fully, we attempted to make the simulation as realistic as possible. The study presented actual copier buyers with product descriptions that were representative of existing products, scripts with a conversational style, and exchanges that modeled typical sales calls as closely as possible. The consistency of our expertise effects with theoretical predictions provides some reassurance about the simulation's ability to create a plausible sales context. However, research using salespeople's reports of how buyers respond to their strategies would be an important complement to our controlled field experiment.

Another limitation of the current study is that strategies and decisions that might otherwise evolve during several sales calls had to be concluded here in a short period of time. Our methodology therefore lacks some of the subtlety and finesse with which an experienced salesperson might use agendas. A salesperson is much more flexible in receiving ongoing and complex feedback from the buyer and can adapt agendas more fully (e.g., reorder the constraints) to match the buyer's attribute preferences or need for structure. This added flexibility would be consistent with a needs satisfaction approach to selling (Futrell 1998) in which the seller allows the buyer to specify the order in which attributes are discussed (or used in an agenda strategy). The agenda's applicability to different types of selling should also be explored.

The composition of the sample provides another boundary for our findings. Most participants were managers, company officers, and business owners with purchasing responsibility rather than members of a dedicated purchasing department. Our sample was appropriate to this market because these buyers had primary responsibility for purchasing a copier such as the one being sold in the study. However, it is possible that the responses of members of a purchasing department would differ, especially if they must conform to others' rigid specifications. There were also no true novices within this market. Most copier buyers have used the product and can generate some decision criteria. This high level of minimum expertise is probably more characteristic of organizational buyers than of consumers, who may be completely ignorant of decision criteria for some purchases. Theoretically, the expertise effects we found should hold for buyers with even less expertise because of their greater need for the salesperson's help in structuring the decision. However, it would be desirable to test the generalizability of our empirical results across other samples of buyers.

The two agendas used in our study were effective, but it is yet unclear what kind of agendas work well for salespeople. Optimally, sellers would like to use agendas that (1) eliminate the greatest number or most important of the target product's competitors and (2) are readily acceptable to buyers. It remains an open question whether sellers will be more successful with agendas that quickly eliminate a large number of competitors or agendas that use a greater number of constraints to eliminate those same competitors more gradually. Types of selling agendas are an important topic for future research.

While investigation of the above issues and other contingencies is important, we believe that the current results indicate the potential value of agenda presentations as a selling strategy. In addition, this computer-interactive simulation approach may be interesting to sales researchers who want an experimental context that reflects elements of interactive exchange that occurs during sales transactions. Both the agenda selling strategy and computer-interactive simulations may help salespeople and researchers deal with the complexities of buyer responses.

#### APPENDIX A Measures

##### Buyer Expertise Scale (reliability = .93)

(7-point Likert-type scale, anchors: *strongly agree/disagree*)

1. I understand the features of a copier well enough to be considered an expert when evaluating different brands.
2. I know exactly what product characteristics are needed to select the very best copier.

3. If a friend of mine were buying a copier, I would be an excellent source of information for that friend.
4. If I were asked to make a copier purchase decision today, I would know exactly what to look for.
5. Regarding how to purchase a good copier, I would consider myself more of an expert than most copier buyers.

#### Consideration Set

You have now met salespeople and gotten information on all brands that you were initially interested in. Knowing what you do now, which copiers are you still very seriously considering buying?

#### Final Choice

It is time to make a final selection of the *one* copier that you would purchase if you were asked to buy today. Please type the number that is in front of the *one* copier brand that you would buy today if this were a real purchase.

#### Evaluation of the Target Product

(7-point Likert-type scale, anchors: *poor/excellent*)

I am particularly interested in what you thought of Copier G(K). Regardless of whether or not you chose Copier G(K), how good do you think it is?

#### APPENDIX B

##### Excerpt From Summary-of-Benefits Presentation

#### Introduction, Productivity, and Service Attributes for the Strong Contender G

Hello! It's nice to see you again. I appreciate the opportunity to help you with your purchase of a midvolume copier. You've previously explained your buying criteria to me, and what I'd like to do today is show you what an excellent job Copier G will do for your company.

First let's talk about getting copying done fast. As you know, *time is money!* Fast copying frees up employees to do other jobs, increasing productivity and saving money for your business. Copier G delivers a first copy from glass to output tray in only 6½ seconds. Also, Copier G completes the standard measure of two-sided copying (10 sets of 10 two-sided originals) in only 7 minutes, 25 seconds.

Are productivity goals emphasized in your business?

Press 1 for YES  
2 for NO

Most copiers are advertised as being productive, but buyers have learned they need to be careful about those claims!



Many products rated at 40 to 45 copies per minute fail to deliver that speed during actual use. That's because the rated speed is based on making multiple copies of a single sheet of paper placed on the glass. But, productivity can fall off drastically when the automatic feeder and other copier features are used—sometimes up to 60 percent!

The *good news* is that some copiers maintain productivity levels better than others. Copier G loses only 29 percent of its productivity when using the automatic feeder—less than half the productivity loss of some other products in its class, which can lose as much as 60 percent.

Now think about how important it is to get a quick response when something goes wrong. Even the fastest copier is unsatisfactory without quick repair.

The time that it takes for the repair technician to arrive is only part of the story. The turnaround time until the repair is finished also depends on experienced and well-trained technicians with reasonable workloads and available replacement parts.

Copier G's repair teams do well on all of these! Technicians receive the latest factory training and specialize in repairing particular models. Service vans are stocked with more than 90 percent of possible replacement parts. And, we keep workloads small to maintain our quick response.

Brand G copier owners *never* wait 2 business days (16 hours) for service, as many copier owners do. Brand G's average service turnaround time is only 10 hours, with many calls completed even faster.

A final point to consider is your copier's reliability—perhaps the most important factor in customer satisfaction. Over time, most buyers are only happy if their copier is consistently up and running.

Is buying a copier with high reliability important to you?  
 Press 1 for YES  
 2 for NO

**APPENDIX C**  
**Excerpt From Agenda Strategy Presentation**

**Introduction and Productivity Attribute for the Strong Contender G**

Hello! It's nice to see you again. I appreciate the opportunity to help you with your purchase of a midvolume copier. You've previously explained your buying criteria to me, and what I'd like to do today is show you what an excellent job Copier G will do for your company.

First let's talk about getting copying done fast. As you know, *time is money!* Fast copying frees up employees to do other jobs, increasing productivity and saving money for your business. Copier G delivers a first copy from glass to output tray in only 6½ seconds. Also, Copier G completes the standard measure of

two-sided copying (10 sets of 10 two-sided originals) in only 7 minutes, 25 seconds.

Are productivity goals emphasized in your business?  
 Press 1 for YES  
 2 for NO

Most copiers are advertised as being productive, but buyers have learned they need to be careful about those claims! Many products rated at 40 to 45 copies per minute fail to deliver that speed during actual use. That's because the rated speed is based on making multiple copies of a single sheet of paper placed on the glass. But, productivity can fall off drastically when the automatic feeder and other copier features are used—sometimes up to 60 percent!

The *good news* is that some copiers maintain productivity levels better than others. Copier G loses only 29 percent of its productivity when using the automatic feeder—less than half the productivity loss of some other products in its class, which can lose as much as 60 percent.

Because it is so key, the copier industry has documented measures of productivity. Only you can decide how important this is, but our experience shows that a slowdown of more than one-third frustrates buyers and is unacceptable. So, I've grouped together copiers that fall above and below that guideline. The productivity losses shown next are based on rated multiple-copy speeds ranging from 40 to 45 copies per minute.

As you see, copiers in Group 1 meet the suggested guideline of no more than one-third productivity loss when using an automatic feeder, but those in Group 2 do not. Given this information, do you want to eliminate products in Group 2 from further consideration? If you do, we can focus on Group 1 copiers, which have higher productivity.

Group 1	Loss	Group 2	Loss
G	29%	Y	49%
J	29%	L	55%
T	33%	W	60%
H	8%	N	39%
R	23%		
P	3%		
K	8%		
V	13%		

Do you want to eliminate Group 2 copiers?

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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software used for questionnaire development and data collection.

## NOTES

1. This selling strategy should not be confused with a summary-of-benefits close, which designates a possible tactic for closing the sale rather than the structure of the entire presentation.

2. Due to space constraints, the other types of agendas analyzed in Hauser (1986) are not discussed here.

3. One potential hazard of providing information about competitive products (some of it positive) is that the buyer's awareness or consideration of those competitors may increase. The caution that salespeople typically show about discussing competitors may reflect their awareness of these pitfalls. However, an agenda may reduce some of the risk because it also suggests a way for the buyer to use the proffered competitive information that will ultimately be to the target product's advantage. A second potential hazard of the agenda strategy is that its competitive comparisons may be interpreted as disparagement.

4. The predicted main effect of the agenda strategy on product evaluations is based on the favorable competitive comparisons created by the strategy. It was unclear how or if this effect would differ for products in different competitive positions; we therefore made no hypothesis for product evaluation.

5. The order of sales calls (target and a competitor) was varied to test for order effects. Initial analysis resulted in no significant order effects, and so the sequence variable was not included in the final analyses.

6. The loss of some calling records prevented final calculation of the participation rate. However, an interim assessment had shown that about 15 percent of those who were contacted had agreed to participate. The most frequent reasons for refusal were time pressure and the lack of computer resources.

7. Copiers were named using letters shown to be affectively neutral (Peacock and Davis 1970).

8. A confirmatory factor analysis using LISREL indicates a good fit of the model to the data for measures of buyer expertise, seller manipulateness, and seller expertise. Despite a significant  $\chi^2_{51}$  of 90.13 ( $p < .01$ ), all other fit indices with the exception of the Adjusted Goodness-of-Fit Index (AGFI = .85) met the .90 criterion (Goodness-of-Fit Index [GFI] = .91, Normed Fit Index [NFI] = .92, Comparative Fit Index [CFI] = .96). The standardized Root Mean Square Residual (RMR) of .052 is also below the .08 criterion. Significant factor loadings for each of the individual construct items indicated convergent validity for each construct. The average variance extracted was above .50 for all measures, and construct reliability was above the .60 criterion in all cases: buyer expertise (.93), seller expertise (.88), and seller manipulateness (.74) (Bagozzi and Yi 1991). Finally, the phi matrix indicates that all measures are distinct, despite a strong negative correlation (-.88) between seller expertise and manipulateness.

9. The convergence of our CATMOD model (a method designed specifically for categorical dependent variables) and a general linear model (GLM) are also consistent with a discussion in Hinkelmann and Kempthorne's (1994) authoritative text on experimental design. They argue that the  $F$  test is a very good approximation to the exact test derived from randomization theory. Thus,  $p$  values from an  $F$  test (e.g., within a GLM) should be very close to the exact  $p$  values obtained from the randomization test.

10. Figures represent plots of the cell means because of their greater interest to readers. However, we also examined residual means, which describe the interaction after removing lower order effects (Rosenthal and Rosnow 1985; Ross and Creyer 1993). For all interactions discussed in this article, the results of residual mean calculations support the inferences suggested by plotted cell means.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Judy A. Wagner** (Ph.D., Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University) is currently an assistant professor of marketing at the University of Texas at Arlington. Her primary research interests are personal selling strategies, sales management, and buyer decision making. Her research has been published in *Advances in Consumer Research* and the proceedings of the American Marketing Association and is forthcoming in the *Journal of Business Research*.

**Noreen M. Klein** (Ph.D., Pennsylvania State University) is currently an associate professor of marketing at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. Her research interests include consumer decision making and the behavioral aspects of pricing, and her research has been published in the *Journal of Consumer Research* and *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Making*.

**Janet E. Keith** (Ph.D., Arizona State University) is currently an associate professor of marketing at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. Her research interests lie in behavioral issues in channels of distribution and in sales and sales management. Her studies have been published in journals such as the *Journal of Marketing Research*, *Journal of Marketing*, *Journal of Business Research*, and *Journal of Marketing Channels*.