First impressions in buyer-seller encounters: could unique business cards signal seller quality?

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ABSTRACT

This research extends previous findings in consumer behavior streams that demonstrate how the haptic nature of a product will affect an individual's perception of quality. Using the framework of Signaling Theory, this paper examines the effect of a salesperson's use of high-quality and unusual business cards on buyer perceptions in the initial encounter. The results of an experimental design demonstrate that a high-quality and novel business card does positively affect the buyer's perception of the salesperson's efficacy and trustworthiness. Moreover, the positive perceptions partially transfer to the selling firm itself. An additional study examines the interaction of corporate reputation (either positive or negative) with the use of average or high-quality business cards. Negative firm reputations tend to override most, but not all, positive effects of a high-quality business card. For firms with highly positive reputations, the novel use of high-quality business cards can further augment the customer's perception of the trustworthiness of both the salesperson and their firm as compared to the use of average cards. Managerial applications are discussed.

Keywords: Signaling theory, business cards, first impressions, haptics, salesperson trust

INTRODUCTION

Initial buyer-seller encounters are delicate because buyers rapidly assess the salesperson's credibility and trustworthiness and create a long-lasting frame of reference that influences future assessments of the individual's trustworthiness and competence (Ambady et al., 2006; McElroy et al., 1990; Leigh & Summers, 2002). These positive perceptions often serve as an antecedent to long-term trust (Pilling & Eroglu, 1994; Wood et al., 2008). Customers depend heavily on non-verbal cues in the initial encounter because they have no experience with the salesperson's sincerity and efficacy (Swan et al., 1999). Instead, they rely on subconsciously processed holistic assessments of a salesperson (Liu & Leach, 2001; Montepare, 2003). Evolutionary psychology suggests that individuals rely on nonverbal behavior to immediately assess trust and competence, and trust carries the higher importance of the two (Cuddy, 2015; Montepare, 2003). Perceivers will initially categorize another person based on easily observable characteristics such as salesperson appearance, style of dress, gender, body language, and facial expressions (Henthorne et al.,1992; McElroy et al.,1990; Van Zeeland & Henseler, 2018).

This research examines the role of one cue—the business card used by a salesperson in an initial encounter—in forming the customer's first impression. It relies on signaling theory to explore how differing types of business cards can affect the customer perceptions of the salesperson's effectiveness and trustworthiness, and the trust of the selling firm. No research has examined the role of business cards as a cue or communication tool, which is surprising because tangible cues such as uniforms, signage, and atmospherics have long been a fundamental strategy in services marketing (Zeithaml et al.,1985). Yet, business cards have been conceptualized as a tangible cue, which may be particularly important in forming a first impression (Bonin, 2006). Secondly, we examine how the quality of a business card interacts with a selling firm's existing corporate image.

Extant research has explored how various verbal cues in an initial buyer-seller encounter affect customer perceptions. These studies have spanned topics including the use of compliments (Campbell & Kirmani, 2000), ingratiating behavior such as favor-rendering and self-promotion (Strutton, Pelton, & Tanner, 1996), tone of voice and speed of speech (Ambady et al., 2006), foreign accents of the salesperson (Tsalikis et al., 1991), type of sales pitch (DeCarlo, 2005), the use of self-disclosures by the salesperson (Jacobs et al., 2001), salesperson credibility building statements (Arndt et al., 2014), the use of humor (Bompar et al., 2018), and the usage of business acumen with small talk (Kaski et al., 2017).

Similarly, there has been a wide variety of research that examined how buyers initially use non-verbal cues to form attitudes towards salespeople. For example, Petersen and Limbu (2009) found that the act of "mirroring," the act of responding to a customer in a way that matches various dimensions of their posture, voice, facial expressions, etc., increased purchase intentions. A wide variety of non-verbal cues have been studied. These include body language, facial expressions, and gestures in stressful situations (Coffree, 2017; Leigh & Summers, 2002; Pauser et al., 2018;) gender, demographics, and attractiveness (Henthorne et al., 1992; McElroy & DeCarlo, 1999; Krishnan et al., 2019), to name a few. Table 1 identifies major studies in this area (Appendix).

From an international marketing perspective, the exchange of business cards remains an important ritual in many Asian cultures, especially Japan (Kamins et al., 1998). In power distant countries, such as Japan, (Hofstede, 1991), it is important for an individual to be able to identify the status of a counterpart. Like other Asian languages, Japanese has differing levels of language, tone, and body language that hinge on the status of the other individual. A business card can effectively communicate that information, thus allowing the speaker to proceed without fear of making a mistake (Kamins et al., 1998). In the literature stream for services marketing, a significant portion of the focus has been on the effect of providing tangible cues, such as uniforms, equipment, and appearance of service workers, to positively enhance the customer's perception of the service quality (Shostak, 1977; Zeithaml, 1981; Berry & Clark, 1986). "Tangibilizing" the service through positive impressions of physical cues has been shown to increase the consumer's perception of the overall quality of the service. By increasing the tangibility of a service, a firm can raise satisfaction levels and lead to increased customer loyalty (Jamal & Anastasiadou, 2009).

With the growth of communication technology, some skeptics have speculated that the business card is obsolete. However, exchanging cards is a social process that contributes to creating a positive first impression and remains a critical source of information in interactions with international customers, vendors, or business partners (Handley, 2012; Shellenbarger, 2018). Some have placed differing images or graphics on business cards to spark conversation and connection (Bennett, 2012). Anecdotal claims exist that printing cards on materials related to a firm's product line such as cloth or metal, have assisted in increasing sales (Pennington, 2007; Shellenbarger, 2018). The tactile effect of using different materials, designs, and shapes can make the initial interaction more meaningful and memorable (Handley, 2012; Shellenbarger, 2018).

Recent consumer behavior research has focused on other nonverbal cues such as how the feel and weight of an object can influence perceptions. For example, individuals who hold job applications attached to a heavy clipboard perceive the applicants as more qualified for a position when compared to those on a light clipboard (Ackerman et al., 2010). Heavier versus lighter menus have been found to create a perception of greater selection and higher service quality (Magnini & Kim, 2016). When individuals read information on a heavier object, they invest more cognitive effort in addressing abstract issues such as importance, competency of an individual, fairness, and the monetary value of an object (Jostmann et al., 2009). Taste tests of beverages in sturdy cups have elicited higher rankings than the same beverages tested in flimsy cups (Krishna & Morrin, 2007). Ijzermanand and Semin (2009) found that the feel of holding a warm beverage versus a cold one tended to make an individual exhibit more pro-social behavior. Given this evidence, it would seem fruitful to examine how business cards that are heavier, thicker, sturdier, and smoother to the touch compare with standard cards in affecting a buyer's initial perception of the salesperson and selling firm.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

Signaling Theory helps to explain how one party can judge the quality of another party's offer when a clear assessment of quality is not possible (Connelly et al. 2011; Spence, 1973; 2002). According to Kirmani and Rao (2000, p. 66) "signals are actions that parties take to reveal unobserved qualities or skill level in a given area that may not be readily apparent." Researchers have applied signaling theory to a variety of marketing domains where asymmetrical information exists including product placement in movies and television programs (Scott & White, 2016), as a tool to build consumer trust in e-retailing (Arnold et al., 2007), along with a number of studies that examined the signaling effect of prices, brand extensions, warranty offerings, and retailer selection on unobserved product quality (Boulding & Kirmani, 1993; Kirmani & Rao, 2000). To communicate positive information to influence the receivers' actions, the signaler crafts communications to allow the receiver to infer a level of quality in the offer (Connelly et al., 2011; Kirmani & Rao, 2000; Rao & Monroe, 1989). Marketers have used signaling theory in B2B sales where organizational buyers lack knowledge of a supplier's financial position, capabilities, flexibility or long-term commitment to their customers (Stump & Heide, 1996).

Signaling carries a cost to the signaler (Connelly et al., 2011). When consumers perceive a firm's higher than ordinary marketing effort, they attribute that increased effort to a higher quality product (Kirmani & Wright, 1989). Perceptions of higher promotional costs tend to positively influence consumer perceptions of product quality and brand image (Kirmani, 1990; Kirmani & Wright, 1989). However, conflicting information about the firm can make buyers suspicious because it suggests opportunistic behavior (Cohen & Dean, 2005), which is known as "poor signal fit" (Connelly et al., 2011, p 53). In some cases, conflicting information coupled with perceptions of extremely high advertising costs can erode consumer perceptions of the quality of the item (Kirmani & Wright, 1989; Kirmani, 1990).

In the absence of information regarding the salesperson or the firm, customers infer the salesperson's competence and sincerity in an initial encounter by observing non-verbal cues, which is consistent with Signaling Theory (Spence, 1973). Given the intangibility of a service, a tangible cue that signals quality would likely tend to positively influence a potential buyer's perceptions (Mittal, 1999). Therefore, an initial perception of high sales expertise is an important first step in developing long-term trust (Liu & Leach, 2001). As such, we define perceived salesperson expertise as "the buyer's perception of the salesperson's capacity to deliver competent performance" (Belonax et al., 2007, 250).

Because salesperson cues tend to positively influence perceptions of the seller's expertise (Wood et al., 2008), we submit:

H1: Customers will perceive higher salesperson expertise when the initial sales communication is accompanied by a high-quality business card versus an average quality business card.

Trust of the salesperson

Potential customers assess cues in the initial encounter to better gauge if the salesperson seems trustworthy (Leigh & Summers, 2002; Wood et al., 2008). These cues carry significant weight. For example, Shurr and Calder (1986) showed that when salespeople have a lunch meeting with clients to discuss business, an upscale restaurant triggered buyer suspicion compared to an average restaurant. In another example, the use of flattery on customers in retail sales evokes suspicion on the part of the customer (Campbell & Kirmani, 2000). Sellers who project a high level of expertise may be able to ameliorate some uncertainty related to the salesperson's trustworthiness (Sharma, 1990). Perceived salesperson expertise correlates positively with salesperson trust (Doney & Cannon, 1997; Newell & Goldsmith, 2001). The customer's perception of competence and expertise are fundamental indicators of being trustworthy (Swan et al.,1985). Given the combination of the positive signal of a high-quality business card in an initial sales encounter, and the propensity for perceptions of seller expertise to spill over into trust of the salesperson, we submit:

H2: Customers will have higher perceived trust in the salesperson when the initial sales communication is accompanied by a high-quality business card versus an average quality business card.

Branding and association with the firm

Business cards have been conceptualized as one potential avenue to communicate a "brand mark" (Klink, 2003). Brand marks can create meaning and trigger positive affect for the viewer (Henderson & Cote, 1998) and reduce buyer uncertainty in the initial stages (Gao, Sirgy, & Bird, 2005), which is therefore more likely to provoke a purchase (Klink, 2003). Strategies that reduce the buyer's risk by signaling quality are more necessary in services marketing (Murray, 1991). Given that firms expend considerable resources to elicit positive emotional responses (Henderson et al., 2004; Henderson & Cote, 1998), the business card merits a strategic focus because the aesthetics of printed marketing communications can affect reader perceptions. The haptic features of physical marketing materials such as the weight and feel of the document can influence consumer perceptions and signal the seller's intent for a long-term relationship (Raciti & Dagger, 2007), which will positively impact financial performance (Krasnikov et al., 2009).

Buyers in a B2B dyad tend to transfer both perceptions of the salesperson's expertise and trust to the overall trust of the selling firm (Newell & Goldsmith, 2001; Xie & Haugland, 2016). Thus, perceived expertise in a salesperson tends to create more trust in the selling firm (Doney & Cannon, 1997; Wood et al., 2008). Service providers who show they have a high level of efficacy have a positive impact on the selling firm's brand equity and an increased confidence that the firm will act in the customer's best interest (Biedenbach et al., 2019). Signaling theory suggests that even brief encounters with potential customers can create long-term attitudes towards that salesperson (Ambady et al., 2006; Belonax et al., 2007; Wood et al., 2008). When buyers have little information on the selling firm, they initially reduce to decision making uncertainty by trusting their perceptions of the salesperson and transfer that trust to the selling firm (Doney & Cannon, 1997; Gao et al, 2005). Thus, we submit:

H3: Customers will have higher perceived trust of the selling firm when an initial sales communication is accompanied by a high-quality business card versus an average quality business card.

Corporate reputation as a signal

Company reputation has been defined as "a particular type of feedback received by an organization from its stakeholders concerning the credibility of the organization's identity claims" (Whetten & Mackey 2002, p. 401). In initial encounters, customers use the intangible cue of corporate reputation as a reference for the overall quality of the products and services offered, as well as trust of the selling firm (Boulding & Kirmani, 1993; Keh & Xie, 2009; Rindova et al., 2005). Customers rely on a favorable reputation to predict a high level of quality in the firm's performance, which increases their perceived trust of the selling firm (Keh & Xie, 2009). When buyers perceive a brand cue that represents quality from a salesperson, they tend to attribute the positivity of the cue to the selling firm (Wang et al., 2015). Furthermore, they tend to depend on information from industry experts or certifying bodies when assessing corporate reputation because these sources have high source credibility and represent an unbiased party (Wang et al., 2016; Rindova et al., 2005). These institutional intermediaries are “entities that specialize in disseminating information about organizations or in evaluating their outputs” (Rindova et al., 2005, p. 1037). Individuals believe these institutional intermediaries have high levels of access to firm performance and how the company compares to overall industry standards (Rao 1998). For example, Fortune’s list “America’s Most Admired Corporations” is an industry expert ranking, as is “*Consumer Reports”* which publishes product comparisons (Highhouse et al., 2009; Boulding & Kirmani, 1993).

When consumers integrate external signals of seller information, message consistency facilitates a straightforward decision making and tends to reinforce perceptions of high quality of the firm (Broniarczyk & Alba, 1994; Isaac & Grayson, 2017). However, when faced with signal inconsistency, individuals weigh the negative information more heavily. The positive signal does not offset the negative one, and individuals will tend to judge the overall quality of an offer as low (Campbell, 1999; Purohit & Srivastava, 2001). Signal inconsistency creates a powerful anchor that can erode any initial feelings of trust. Another example of the negative consequences of mismatching a positive signal with a negative firm image is found with the offer of a warranty. That is, if corporate reputation is low, offering a warranty as a positive signal will tend to decrease consumer perceptions of performance and quality of the product offering due to the inconsistency of signals (Boulding & Kirmani, 1993; Purohit & Srivastava, 2001).

Based on the propensity for the corporation to serve as a strong cue, we submit:

H4: Customers will perceive no differences in the following when a high-quality card versus an average card accompanies an initial sales communication, if the firm has a low reputation:
a) the effectiveness of the salesperson
b) the trust of the salesperson
c) the trust of the selling firm

H4: If a firm has a low reputation, customers will perceive no differences in the following when either a high-quality card or an average card accompanies an initial sales communication:
a) the effectiveness of the salesperson will be the same
b) the trust of the salesperson will be the same.
c) the trust of the selling firm will be the same.

H5: If firm reputation is unavailable and an average card accompanies an initial sales communication, customers will have higher perceptions of the following, as compared to when the firm reputation is low and accompanied by a high-quality card:
a) the effectiveness of the salesperson will be higher for the average card.
b) the trust of the salesperson will be higher for the average card.
c) the trust of the selling firm will be higher for the average card.

H6: If a firm has a high reputation and an average card accompanies an initial sales communication, it will result in the same perceptions as compared to when there is no reputation information and a high-quality card accompanies the sales message, such that:
a) the effectiveness of the salesperson will be the same
b) the trust of the salesperson will be the same.
c) the trust of the selling firm will be the same.

To examine how consumers perceive different cues in a buying situation, Purohit and Srivastava (2001) demonstrated that when a strong cue such as corporate reputation is low, customers largely dismiss other cues such as a strong product warranty or high retailer reputation. However, when a corporate reputation is high, it tends to have a positive and indirect effect on how consumers evaluate weaker cues, such as a product warranty. In this condition, consumers consider all cues and can enhance their perceptions of overall quality (Broniarczyk & Alba, 1994; Isaac & Grayson, 2017; Purohit & Srivastava, 2001). Cues that are much weaker than corporate reputation can further enhance the appeal of the overall brand or product offering (Carpenter, Glazer, & Nakamoto, 1994). Weaker positive cues for the product may solidify buying decisions because they help consumers to expedite the buying decision (Brown & Carpenter, 2000; Hutchinson & Alba, 1991).

In the presence of a high corporate image, a high-quality business card as a weaker cue could reinforce positive framing of the customer perception. In a study on written communications from marketers, when the document aesthetics are of high quality, it positively affected the client's perception of the offer, and communicated a sense of importance (Raciti & Dagger, 2007). If a selling firm has a strong corporate reputation, it will assist individuals to consider lower level cues that they would have otherwise dismissed, which will further enhance the appeal of the offer (Brown & Carpenter, 2000; Carpenter, Glazer, & Nakamoto, 1994; Purohit & Srivastava, 2001). Thus, we submit:

H7: If a firm's reputation is high and a high-quality card accompanies an initial sales communication, customers will have higher perceptions of the following, as compared to when the firm reputation is high and accompanied by an average, such that:

a) the effectiveness of the salesperson will higher.
b) the trust of the salesperson will be higher.
c) the trust of the selling firm will be higher.

Methodology

To test the constructs and proposed hypotheses, an interpretive study was initially completed, and followed by manipulation checks within. The main study. Our goal was to operationalize both an average business card and a high-quality one into objects that could be used in the main study. Initially, 8 commonly used business cards that had varying levels of thickness, feel, and differences in shape were assembled. Through one-on-one interviews, 10 respondents were asked to feel and handle each card individually. Following that encounter, they were asked to identify the highest quality card and the most average one.

Result across all respondents were consistent. All respondents selected the standard size for most U.S. business cards, a rectangle with a thickness of 0.31 millimeters as the average card. The high-quality card was a rectangle with rounded corners and a smooth silk finish. It was 0.56 millimeters thick. Nine of the ten respondent selected this card as the highest quality card. The lone outlier chose a thicker card with square corners but later conceded that it would be difficult to store. Respondents were then asked to identify the specific characteristics that made them select the designated card as "high quality." Responses included thickness, smoothness, sturdiness, pleasant to touch, and the overall unusual nature of the card that stemmed from the rounded corners. A key component of the high-quality card was how it felt to the touch. The smooth satin finish was unique and not something that can be visibly represented. The feel of the card gave the interaction an element of sensory marketing, which has been associated with triggering positive emotions among potential customers and increasing a firm's sales (Hinestroza & James, 2014.)

Based on these findings, two sets of business cards were created with identical information on them. We minimized color on the card to ensure that the haptic characteristics were the only manipulated factor. A name was selected that was not gender specific – A.J. Evans, Career Consultants, LLC. Manipulation checks on the characteristics of the two cards in the main studies were conducted to confirm that respondents perceived them as either high-quality or average.

Sample and Data Collection

A pen and paper survey was developed that could be accompanied with an actual business card. Upper-level students (juniors and seniors) enrolled in marketing classes at a university in southern California were recruited for the study. Participants received extra credit for full completion. In total, 348 usable surveys were received. To make the situation relevant to students and generalizable to other populations, a scenario was created that would be meaningful to respondents. Specifically, students were given a situation where their graduation was approaching and a relative or family friend had presented them with an offer to pay for a career consulting service that specializes in placing college graduates in their first job. They would make the final selection from a handful of consulting firms. Next, they read a letter from a fictitious career consulting firm that explained the services offered and made marketing claims about the individual's expertise in this field. A copy of the scenario and the letter are included in the Appendix.

Surveys were placed in opaque envelopes randomly assigned to different classrooms of students. Participants were told to read the letter and material enclosed in the envelope, and then respond to a number of measures that assessed their attitude towards both the career consultant and the firm. Based on the knowledge gained in the initial qualitative interviews, we controlled for 2 situations to test H1 and H2 in which included the letter was accompanied by either: 1) an average business card, or 2) a high-quality business card. In subsequent surveys, the remaining hypotheses were tested by controlling for corporate image as either favorable or unfavorable.

Measures

Multi-item measures from existing literature were used to measure the constructs of interest. Two items from Comer's et al. (1999) measures of Salesperson Service Performance were adapted to assess perceptions of the salesperson's efficacy, along with one additional item from Amyx and Bhuian's (2009) research on salesperson trust in B2B sales. A 7-point Likert scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree) was created that included these items: … consultant is very knowledgeable in the field of career development, … consultant is very effective in helping people like me find a good job, … consultant would use good judgement. Three items from Comer's et al. (1999) measures of Salesperson Service Performance were adapted to assess the respondents' perceptions of the firm's brand image using a 7-point Likert scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree). These items were as follows: this consultant's company has a good reputation, this consultant's company has quality people working for them, this consultant's company can be counted on to do the right thing for their clients.

To measure the perceived trust of the sales professional, a 4-item bi-polar 7-point semantic differential scale developed by Campbell and Kirmani (2000) was used. The items included the following: insincere/sincere, dishonest/honest, manipulative, not manipulative, pushy/not pushy. All three constructs demonstrated good psychometric properties and strong reliability with the following Cronbach alpha scores: perceived salesperson efficacy .870, perceived firm trustworthiness .853, and perceived trust of the salesperson .816.

To test the interaction effect of corporate reputation with the type of business cards, two independent variables were operationalized: high corporate reputation and low corporate reputation and controlled for both. The surveys that incorporated this control were identical to the ones used in which no corporate reputation information was provided, with one exception. In addition to reading the survey materials that accompanied the business card, respondents were given additional information on the career consulting firm's corporate reputation. In the high corporate reputation control situation, an additional page followed the letter which stated:
"While you are not familiar with this career counseling firm, your image of it is highly favorable based on what you read about their corporate reputation. After receiving this letter, you browsed a website that provides reviews of businesses that offer professional services such as career counseling. You are pleased to see that this firm has an "excellent" rating of 95 out of 100."

To control for the low corporate reputation situation, an additional page followed the letter which stated:
"While you are not familiar with this career counseling firm, your image of it is not highly favorable based on what you read about their corporate reputation. After receiving this letter, you browsed a website that provides reviews of businesses that offer professional services such as career counseling. You are disappointed to see that firm has only a "barely passing" rating of 60 out of 100."

Manipulation checks

Manipulation checks of all surveys were conducted to ensure that respondents perceived the received business card as either high-quality or average quality. In total, 348 respondents participated in the studies with 173 receiving a high-quality card and 175 receiving one of average quality card. Participants were asked to respond to six different items on a 10-point semantic differential scale for the card they received, which included the following: thin/thick, not smooth/smooth, not sturdy/sturdy, did not have pleasant feel/had a pleasant feel, average/unusual, low quality/high quality. MANOVA was run using SPSS version 24 to analyze the results and relied on post hoc analysis (Sidak option) to minimize any potential increase in the family-wise error. The results supported the operationalization of both the average and the high quality card: all 6 measures designed to differentiate between perceptions of a high quality business card and one of average quality were statistically significant at the $p < 0.001$ level. Table 2 provides the means, standard deviations, significance levels, and F values for all of these measures (Appendix).

Hypothesis testing

To test the proposed hypotheses, MANOVA with SPSS version 24 was used with the Sidak option for the post hoc analysis to minimize the potential for an increased family-wise error rate. For H1, which tested the effect of the different cards on perceptions of salesperson efficacy when no firm image information is available, the analysis revealed significant main effects for the type of business card ($p < .000$). The mean difference test showed a higher level of perceived salesperson efficacy when a high quality versus and an average card was used (high quality M = 6.03 versus average quality M = 5.03). Thus, H1 is supported. For H2, the effect of the type of business card was tested as it relates to the trustworthiness of the salesperson, with no corporate image information provided. The analysis for H2 also revealed a significant main effect as it relates to this construct ($p = .027$). The mean difference test showed a higher level of trust for the salesperson when a high quality versus and an average card was used (high quality M = 5.23 versus average quality M = 4.65), thereby supporting H2. Next, H3 proposed that these positive perceptions would transfer to the selling firm in the form of perceived trust. A significant main effect was also found ($p < .000$). The mean difference test showed a higher level of perceived trust of the selling firm when a high quality versus and an average card was used (high quality M = 5.43 versus average quality M = 4.68).

To test the interaction effects of an established company reputation with the different types of business cards, MANOVA with SPSS version 24 was used. The same pen and paper survey was used, and the marketing communication letter was again accompanied by either a high-quality or average business card. Additionally, a control was added that provided the respondent with insight as to the selling firm's corporate reputation. It was controlled for as either high or favorable, or low and unfavorable by adding one of the two scenarios described above. Based on the signal strength of having a positive corporate reputation, H4a-c posited that if a firm's image is negative, it will override any consideration of ancillary cues such as a business card, irrespective of the quality of the card. The results confirmed that under the condition of low corporate image, there were no significant differences between the use of either card for the outcome measure of trust of the salesperson ($p = .538$) and trust of the firm ($p = .176$). Thus, hypothesis 5b and 5C were supported. By contrast, the perceptions of the salesperson's efficacy were statistically different ($p =.004$), which was not predicted.

To further examine the interaction of a high-quality business card with corporate image, H5a-c compared customer perceptions of the use of an average card with no firm reputation information versus a high-quality card firm with a low reputation. H5a was supported and confirmed that perception of the efficacy of the salesperson was higher with the average card ($p < .001$, Average Card Mean = 5.03, Quality Card Mean = 4.35). Likewise, the trust of the selling firm was higher for the average card in this situation ($p < .001$, Average Card Mean = 4.68, Quality Card Mean = 3.62), thus supporting H5c. However, H5b was not supported, which posited that the trust of the salesperson would be significantly higher for the selling firm ($p = .105$, Average Card Mean = 4.65, Quality Card Mean = 4.32). Although not significant, the means were directionally as expected, and the results approached significance.

H6a-c examined the potential overriding effects of a positive corporate image on the outcome variables when an average card is used. This hypothesis posited that there would be no significant differences in the favorability of the dependent measures when the firm image is high and the message is accompanied by an average card, as compared to the use of a high-quality card with no firm reputation information. H5b confirmed that there were no differences in the trust of the salesperson ($p = .168$), and H5c was also supported with no significant differences between the two conditions ($p = .626$). However, H5a was not supported and showed that perceptions of the salesperson's efficacy were higher in a condition of a high-quality card and no firm reputation as compared to an average card and a high firm reputation ($p = .001$, Quality Card Mean = 6.03, Average Card Mean = 5.42.).

H7a-c posits that positive signals affect the intensity of the outcome measures differently as compared to negative signals and tests whether a high-quality card is more effective than an average card when a high corporate image is present for both situations. H5b was supported and confirmed that even when the corporate image is both positive and identical, a high-quality card evokes more trust of the salesperson as compared to an average card ($p < .001$, Quality Card Mean = 5.56, Average Card Mean = 4.98.). Also supported was H7c, which showed that the trust of the selling firm was higher for the high-quality card situation ($p = .01$, Quality Card Mean = 5.80, Average Card Mean = 5.34.). H7a, which measured the perceptions of the salesperson's efficacy, was not supported ($p = .215$), although the means were directionally consistent with the prediction (Quality Card Mean = 5.64, Average Card Mean = 5.42.).

Table 3 summarizes these findings (Appendix)

Discussion

This research used the theoretical framework of signaling theory to test customer perceptions resulting from the first impression in a sales encounter when a salesperson uses business cards of differing quality. Although signaling theory has been used to examine a variety of contexts, to our knowledge this study is the first to investigate the use of business cards and the interaction with corporate image. This study also adds to the sales literature on non-verbal cues that customers may implicitly process as they form their attitudes of the salesperson and the selling firm. A notable theoretical contribution of this research is the presence of a strong asymmetrical relationship between positive and negative signals. We show that if a negative firm image is present, the use of a high-quality business card as a positive signal will not offset the negative perception related to the trust of the salesperson and the selling firm. However, when the firm image is positive, the use of a second weaker signal, such as a high-quality business card, seems to increase the favorable perceptions of the salesperson and the selling firm. Second, we connect research from consumer behavior that has shown how the haptic features of an item can influence perceptions of an unrelated item. A number of studies have demonstrated that the haptic features of smoothness, weight, and sturdiness can positively affect perceptions of an unrelated object, and contribute to more pro-social behavior (Ackerman, Nocera, & Bargh, 2010). In a similar manner, the fact that the business card can affect the initial customer perceptions in a favorable manner was shown. This fact could play an important role in initiating the start of long-term relationships.

Given the widespread acceptance of the importance of creating positive first impressions in sales encounters (Ambady et al., 2006; Leigh & Summers, 2002; Wood et al., 2008), this study provides specific strategies to sales managers for increasing the success of their sales force. First, for start-up firms or smaller companies with no established reputation, the use of a high-quality business card appears to be an added tool that contributes to creating a positive first impression. While this is not a guarantee of long-term success, it is a critical first step and may be thought of as a necessary, but not a sufficient condition, for future profitable sales. Our study showed that in the condition of no reputation information, a high-quality card, versus an average one, increased perceptions of the salesperson's efficacy in responding to customer needs and trustworthiness and resulted in higher trust of the salesperson. These positive perceptions transferred to the selling firm and resulted in higher trust of the firm. Thus, the use of this tool would seem to be a low-cost investment that could contribute to long-term financial gains.

Establishing trust with both the salesperson and selling firm is an important first step in creating a long-term sense of “authenticity,” which is a core to relationship marketing (Dickinson, 2011

Second, when a firm is considering distinguishing their sales force with the use of high-quality business cards, they need to first consider their existing corporate image. If the firm is saddled with a negative image, any added expenditures related to higher quality business cards would be of limited benefit. Our study showed that a high-quality card did not ameliorate the negative attitudes related to both the trust of the selling firm and the salesperson. Surprisingly, the results did show a positive significant difference in the perceptions of the salesperson efficacy, which was not predicted. This counterintuitive finding is difficult to explain considering past research which shows that when prior knowledge about a firm’s image is negative, it will minimize any cognitive processing of other extrinsic cues (Rao & Monroe, 1989). One possible explanation could stem from a propensity for a customer to view a novel business card as something that the individual salesperson adopted, and external to the firm reputation. This would be an area for future research. However, it generally seems that if a firm has a negative reputation, they should allocate resources to addressing the deficit in their image, followed by some type of integrated marketing communication plan to re-brand themselves in a more positive light.

Third, the situation is more complex when a firm has a positive reputation. These firms can reap additional benefits when they employ a high-quality business card because it can further enhance the first impression of the firm and salesperson in the initial interaction with the salesperson. We found that this additional ancillary signal, though weaker than the strength of the firm reputation, further increased both the trust of the salesperson and the selling firm when compared to using an average business card. Thus, the nominal cost of creating a high-quality novel business card with favorable haptic features would be a useful financial investment.

Limitations and further research

One limitation of this study is that we focused on a service firm. Given that purchases of a service carry greater risk for a buyer (Zeithaml et al., 1985), it might be possible that results could vary if the offering was a product. Future research could explore the differences in customer perceptions and the interaction of company reputation in the context of product dominant transactions. Another fruitful area would be the lasting effect of a high-quality business card on customer perceptions and memory. Although we found that this non-verbal cue created positive outcomes toward the salesperson and selling firm, these results would be more meaningful if we could demonstrate ways that these first impressions accelerated or deepened the relationship. Finally, future research that could test the generalizability of the use of high-quality business cards in more complex or technical industries that require high salesperson knowledge could be especially meaningful.

Table 1
Major Studies of how Non-verbal Cues Affect an Initial Sales Encounter

Authors	Topic	Major Findings
Sharma 1990	The effects of SP education and experience on perceptions credibility	Positive perceptions of SP credibility increased buying intentions, but only when there were low expectations of brand quality.
McElroy, Morrow, and Eroglu 1990	Examined atmospherics on sales calls including personal space of buyer and attractiveness of seller	Proposed that encroaching on buyer's personal space creates negative impressions
Henthorne, LaTour, and Williams 1992	The effect of demographics of SP on first impressions for organizational buyers	Race and gender affect first impressions of SP related to perceived competence, trust and likeability
Pilling and Eroglu 1994	How buyer perceptions of SP empathy and professionalism affect future engagement	Positive perceptions of SP empathy and professionalism increase likelihood for future purchases and continued relationship
McElroy and DeCarlo 1999	Effect of female attractiveness on buyer expectations for future performance and decision confidence	Female SP attractiveness positively affects buyer decision confidence but has minimal effect on expectations for future performance
Leigh and Summers 2002	Examined 5 nonverbal actions: eye gazing, speech hesitations, gestures, clothing and posture	Eye gazing makes sales presentation more credible and increases perception of SP effectiveness. Speech hesitations made presentation less believable.
Wood et al. 2008	Overview of how SP non-verbal, verbal, and firm information interact to create buyer trust	SP non-verbal cues and overall impressions affects perceptions of expertise, likeability, trust, and capability of firm
Coffree 2017	Gestures used by salespeople in stressful versus non-stressful situations	Stressful situations increased SP gestures of glances, feet movement, and reduced smiling
Coffree 2017	Gestures used by salespeople in stressful versus non-stressful situations	Stressful situations increased SP gestures of glances, feet movement, and reduced smiling
Pauser, Wagner, and Ebster 2018	Effects of SP different body language on levels of perceived charisma	The use of symmetrical versus asymmetrical arm gestures and postures increase perceptions of SP charisma, and attitude towards the SP
Van Zeeland and Henseler 2018	Examined the SP use of social cues on perceptions of expertise, likeability, ability, and trust	The use of SP social cues -- smiling, eye gaze and gestures -- elicits favorable buyer behavior
Krishnan, Niculescu, and Fredericks 2019	How observable characteristics of SP, gender, age, ethnicity, and attire, effect appeal to buyer	Results revealed underlying personal biases based on ethnicity and age of SP and match to buyer

Table 2
Manipulation Checks

Card Characteristic	Average Card Mean*	Average Card Std. Dev.	Quality Card Mean*	Quality Card Std. Dev.	Sig.	F Value
Thickness	6.93	2.11	8.38	1.75	.000	48.31
Smoothness	6.57	1.96	8.25	2.12	.000	58.52
Sturdiness	6.48	2.27	8.54	2.09	.000	77.73
Nice to feel	6.72	2.26	8.50	2.10	.000	57.67
Quality	6.34	2.41	8.28	2.15	.000	62.38
Unusual	4.71	2.15	6.60	2.01	.000	71.68

**Note*. Based on 10-point bi-polar scale.

Table 3

H1: If information on a firm's reputation is not available, the use of a high-quality business card versus one of average quality in an initial sales encounter will increase the customer's perception of the salesperson's efficacy.	Supported
H2: If information on a firm's reputation is not available, the use of a high-quality business card in an initial sales encounter will increase the customer's trust of the salesperson.	Supported
H3: If information on a firm's reputation is not available, the use of a high-quality business card versus one of average quality in an initial sales encounter will increase the customer's trust of the selling firm.	Supported
H4: If a firm has a negative reputation, the use of a high-quality business card versus one of average quality in an initial sales encounter, there will be no differences in:	
a) the customer's perception of the salesperson's efficacy.	Unsupported
b) the customer's trust of the salesperson.	Supported
c) the customer's trust of the selling firm.	Supported
H5: If information on a firm's reputation is not available, the use of an average card in an initial sales encounter will result in more favorable perceptions as compared to a firm that has a negative reputation and uses a high-quality business card such that the average card:	
a) will create higher customer perceptions of the salesperson's efficacy.	Supported
b) will create higher customer trust of the salesperson.	Unsupported
c) will create higher customer trust of the selling firm.	Supported
H6: If a firm has a positive reputation, the use of an average business card in an initial sales encounter versus a firm with no reputation information that uses a high-quality card, there will be no differences in:	
a) the customer's perception of the salesperson's efficacy.	Unsupported
b) the customer's trust of the salesperson.	Supported
c) the customer's trust of the selling firm.	Supported
H7: If a firm has a positive reputation, the use of a high-quality business card versus one of average quality in an initial sales encounter:	
a) will create higher customer perceptions of the salesperson's efficacy.	Unsupported
b) will create higher customer trust of the salesperson.	Supported
c) will create higher customer trust of the selling firm.	Supported

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Letter

You will be graduating from college at the end of this term. As a graduation present, a relative of yours will pre-pay for 3 months of a career coaching service.

What is a career coaching service?

Career coaches help clients identify viable new employment opportunities, provide feedback on resumes, cover letters and coach individuals on interview skills.

You will make the final selection of your career coach. Today, you have received the attached letter and business card from an individual that offers this service.

Please read the attached materials and then respond to a series of questions.

To Get a Job, You Need to Steal the Spotlight!

Your diploma doesn't come with a corner office. And while you were busy learning about matrices and management theories, you probably forgot to make some time for Getting a Job 101.

As a Career Coach with over 15 years in the recruitment industry, I've helped many students and new grads write attention-getting resumes, master interview questions and forge a career path that meets present and future needs.

If you really want to land a good position, you need to make job-hunting your full-time job. And you need to learn how best to discover your unique strengths and convey how your education, internships, work experience, and personal experiences make you the best candidate for the job.

My programs and resources will help you develop your self-confidence, create an outstanding resume, ease your concerns about interviewing, develop and execute your job search strategy, and have a coach by your side the whole way through.

My program covers:

- Resume preparation
- Defining your individual strengths and weaknesses
- Strategies for selling your strengths
- Crafting your 30-second elevator pitch
- Job search strategy, execution, and follow-up
- Networking
- Interview preparation
- Debriefing after interviews
- Negotiating the offer

My background includes:

- MBA, Michigan State University
- BS, Communications, University of Texas
- 10 years' work experience at United Parcel Service (UPS) as HR Manager
- 5 years of work experience as a career coach
- Certified Public Speaker and President of Toastmaster's

I am ready to go to work for you! Please contact me by the email address that is found on the attached business card to let me know if we can meet in person.

Thank-you!

A. J. Evans

Vice President of Sales

Career Consultants, LLC