



Press release

Berlin, March 18, 2026

ESMT Berlin study: Why salespeople fear selling radical innovations

Companies invest heavily in breakthrough technologies, from industrial software to AI-powered platforms. Yet many radical innovations fail not because customers reject them, but because sales teams hesitate to promote them. A new study by ESMT Berlin reveals a key psychological barrier behind this hesitation: salespeople's fear of "losing face" in front of customers.

The study was co-authored by [Bianca Schmitz](#) (ESMT), [Julian Schmalstieg](#) (Freie Universität Berlin), [Olaf Ploetner](#) (ESMT), [Andreas Eggert](#) (Freie Universität Berlin), and [Johannes Habel](#) (University of Houston). The article "[Selling Radical Innovations](#)" has been published in the peer-reviewed journal *Industrial Marketing Management*. Drawing on 69 in-depth interviews with managers and sales professionals, as well as two large-scale surveys of nearly 400 industrial salespeople in the U.S. and UK, the researchers identify a hidden emotional mechanism that can undermine the successful commercialization of radical innovations.

Radical innovations are products that are technologically new and target unfamiliar customer groups. They often require salespeople to move beyond their established expertise. Unlike incremental product upgrades, these offerings involve new technologies, new buying centers, or entirely new business models. The study shows that salespeople often anticipate "consultation failures," such as giving incorrect information, being unable to answer customer questions, or making promises they cannot keep. These expectations trigger fear of negative evaluation by customers and ultimately a fear of public embarrassment or losing professional credibility.

"This is not just about lacking knowledge," says Bianca Schmitz, lecturer and director of knowledge transfer at the Bringing Technology to Market (BTM) Center at ESMT. "It's about the fear of being seen as incompetent. For many sales professionals, that is a powerful emotional barrier. But success in selling radical innovation depends less on mastering every technical detail and more on creating an environment where curiosity and collaboration replace perfectionism."

The data show that this fear significantly reduces innovation-selling performance, which in turn can cause even strong products to struggle in the market when sales teams fear reputational damage. The researchers find that fear of losing face is particularly strong among salespeople who have very high self-expectations, show low readiness for change, or have limited experience dealing with uncertainty. Surprisingly, top performers with strong identities as product experts may struggle more when selling radically new offerings that require collaboration and learning on the go.

At the same time, the study shows that radical innovations can improve sales performance when salespeople feel supported and confident. The psychological barrier, not the product itself, often determines the outcome.

"Companies cannot expect radical innovations to succeed if they only train sales teams on product features," says Olaf Ploetner, professor of management practice and director of the BTM Center at

ESMT. “What makes the difference is building strong consultation support systems, encouraging adaptability and change readiness, and redefining the sales role from solo expert to collaborative problem-solver who works closely with specialists.”

About ESMT Berlin

ESMT Berlin is a leading global business school with its campus in the heart of Berlin. Founded by 25 global companies, ESMT offers master, MBA, and PhD programs, as well as executive education on its campus in Berlin, in locations around the world, online, and in online blended format. Focusing on leadership, innovation, and analytics, its diverse faculty publishes outstanding research in top academic journals. Additionally, the international business school provides an interdisciplinary platform for discourse between politics, business, and academia. ESMT is a non-profit private institution of higher education with the right to grant PhDs and is accredited by AACSB, AMBA, EQUIS, and ZEvA. It is committed to diversity, equity, and inclusion across all its activities and communities. www.esmt.berlin

ESMT Berlin press contact

Lennart Richter, Press Spokesperson

Phone: +49 160 552 139 3

lennart.richter@esmt.org