Success in Buyer-Seller-Interactions: Developing a Conceptual Framework of a Salesperson’s Interaction Competence

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Abstract

There is little doubt about the importance of buyer-seller encounter in marketing exchanges (Solomon et al., 1985). However, the dynamic nature of a buyer-seller interaction has widely been neglected in scientific research. Based on a literature review, we develop a comprehensive model of buyer-seller interactions to close this gap. In particular, we identify the most important drivers of sales success and discuss the single elements of an encounter in detail. Then, we integrate the drivers and the elements of an encounter in order to describe what a salesperson needs to complete a single step of the selling process successfully. We contribute to the marketing literature by offering a useful framework for future research. In addition, our framework helps managers to analyse their organization’s selling process, provides advice for the selection and training of salespeople, and allows conclusions about the impact of an organization’s climate on buyer-seller interactions.
1. Introduction

Person-to-person interactions are an important part in all (service) offerings in which a buyer-seller encounter is involved (Solomon et al., 1985). Considering this, it is little surprising that the perceived service performance of employees is linked to important measures of organizational success such as customer satisfaction and customer loyalty (e.g. Liao; Chuang, 2004). Moreover, personal interactions can be particularly important for a firm’s innovativeness. An appropriate management of these interactions enables companies to absorb valuable ideas and pieces of knowledge from customers that in turn might lead to improvements of products, services, or processes (Foss; Laursen; Pedersen, 2011). We therefore understand buyer-seller interactions as the “R & D” of services and perceive a direct link between the management of interactions and a firm’s productivity. This is in line with a manager’s perspective, stressing the importance of successful interactions as a critical component in marketing (Peppers; Rogers; Dorf, 1999).

Given the striking role of buyer-seller interactions (BSI), managing interactions is crucial for a company’s success. Interactions take place on the individual level. Therefore an appropriate selection, training, and development of boundary spanning employees are necessary. In addition, creating an organizational environment that fosters interactions is important, especially in service-based industries. So far, however, managers have to rely on their experience and on insights from practitioners. Despite the fact that the importance of interactions with customers has been widely acknowledged (e.g. Ramani; Kumar, 2008), the drivers of successful interactions have not been comprehensively studied on the individual level. Past research has focused on single aspects of interactions such as adapting to the buyer’s style (Franke; Park, 2006) or salesperson’s social competence (Verbeke et al., 2008) rather than on interactions in their entirety. Hence, we contribute to existing literature by investigating different steps of a selling process as proposed by Dubinsky (1980), and Moncrief and Marshall (2005), in order to evaluate what a salesperson needs to be successful in the different stages of an interaction process.\(^1\) Thereby, we assume that salespersons’ aptitudes, skills, motivation, and personal variables are more crucial in some stages of the interaction than in others. Through such insights, implications for the selection and training of sales representatives can be derived from our model. Because of this, our model helps managers to improve service productivity.

The paper is organized as follows: First, a brief description of the buyer-seller interaction is given before we introduce a dynamic model of buyer-seller interaction. Next, we identify key drivers of a sales performance based on a thorough literature review. The manuscript continues with linking the process model of the buyer-seller interaction with the results of our literature review. Thereby, we first describe what a salesperson needs to complete each single step of the selling process successfully, before the chapter concludes with the identification of skills and behaviors that are important throughout the process. Finally, we derive managerial implications from our study, discuss limitations, and suggest avenues for future research.

\(^1\) In the following we refer to salespersons’ key drivers of sales performance for selling products as well as services.
2. The buyer-seller interaction

2.1. Definition of interaction

To build the foundation for our model of buyer-seller interactions, it is important to clarify our understanding of interaction. A variety of definitions of interaction have emerged in social sciences, particularly in sociology (Bales, 1950). A fairly global definition was formulated by Homans: “When we refer to the fact that some unit of activity of one man follows, or (...) is stimulated by some unit of activity of another, (...) then we are referring to interaction” (Homans, 1950, 36). Macharzina (1970) emphasizes this action-response pattern as well, calling it interaction cycle, and underlines the interdependence of behaviors. Besides Jones and Gerard also propagate this principle, in whose view “dyadic interaction commences when two persons begin to behave in each other’s presence” (Jones; Gerard, 1967, 505). In practical terms, this means that an action of person A triggers a response of person B which in turn evokes a reaction of person A, determined by the preceding response, and so on. The actors simultaneously pursue own plans. As a result responses are determined by two stimuli: own and others’ (re)action.

2.2. The buyer-seller interaction as a dynamic process

In 1964, Hughes already stresses that it is necessary to analyze interactions as time sequences because recognizing the dynamic approach of an interaction process helps to get a better mutual understanding of each other and to make better decisions. Thereby, Hughes identifies interaction in a selling situation as a learning process for both actors and deduces “that the buying process consists of a change in a buyer’s awareness and attitudes toward his present needs, his present means for meeting these needs and the products or services being offered” (Hughes, 1964, 176). However, research has largely relied on static models when researching interactions (see e.g. Nerdinger, 2001, for a review).

We acknowledge the dynamic nature of the buyer-seller interaction and hence understand it as a process, which consists of different steps. Our view of the BSI builds on the “seven steps of selling” proposed by Dubinsky (1980), which is the most widely accepted model of the personal selling process (Moncrief; Marshall, 2005). The author describes the selling process as a sequence consisting of the phases 1) prospecting, 2) pre-approach, 3) approach, 4) presentation, 5) overcoming objections, 6) close and 7) follow-up (see Fig. 1). We use the seven steps as a basic framework for describing the BSI, because they are used in virtually every textbook on sales (Long; Tellefsen; Lichtenhal, 2007). Of course, the selling paradigm has changed over time from a selling approach towards a relationship approach (see Moncrief; Marshall, 2005). We take this evolution into account in our analysis by integrating aspects of relationship building and maintaining as suggested by Moncrief and Marshall (2005) to ensure the relevance of our analysis. Our understanding of the close deviates from Moncrief and Marshall (2005) however. The reason for this is that their distinction between both stages is vague at best. We, on the other hand, perceive clear differences between both steps.
In the following, we will give a short description of each step of a typical BSI based on Dubinsky (1980) and Moncrief and Marshall (2005). Since a BSI does not take place in the first two phases (i.e. prospecting and pre-approach), these two steps are neglected in our analysis.

The first meeting with the customer takes place during the approach. Even though this step describes only the first minutes of a sales encounter, it is critical for the interaction. The salesperson attempts to arouse and hold the customer’s interest and to start a dialogue. This is the foundation for the following presentation. Another important task in the approach is to identify and understand the problems and needs of a client. This is particularly important for the later steps of the interaction. Having a comprehensive understanding of the clients’ needs right from the start helps to predetermine the appropriate products and services that should be offered. This saves time and effort in the later stages of the process. This step also involves laying the foundation for a long lasting customer relationship, should it not have been established in previous encounters.

The approach is followed by the presentation. In this step, the salesperson functions as a transmitter of information between the selling organization and the customer. This involves knowing and matching the available products, services, and capabilities of the own company with the customer needs. The salesperson presents the products or service solutions, its strengths and benefits to the client. There usually is a rich pool of information available to the clients through webpages, email communication, etc, prior to the sales call. So the salesperson’s job is it to offer specific knowledge, insights, and expertise and to help the client interpreting and enriching the information the salesperson has already gathered before the sales call (see Weitz; Bradford, 1999). Depending on the complexity of the issue, more than one presentation might be required in this stage.

The next step is about overcoming objections. The role of the sales representatives in this step is the role of a consultant and of a partner of the client. It is the salesperson’s task to discover the true reasons for a client’s resistance to buy and help the client to make a decision. In almost every selling situation salespeople will be confronted with objections to their products or company. They can use these doubts to reveal the customers’ true needs. Therefore it is crucial to listen to the customer carefully. After the true needs and problems have been identified, an effective solution to the clients’ needs is to be created for and sometimes with the customer. The goal of this step is to strengthen the customer relationship by creating
a win-win solution. Hence, there should be no objection left if this stage is performed successfully.

After this, the salesperson takes the initiative to close the sale. Traditionally, the sales representatives would ask for the order and clarify details of the transaction in this step. In the new understanding of the selling process, it becomes obsolete to ask for the business since the goal of the whole selling process is merely to find and create a unique solution for and with a client. If a satisfactory solution is found, the buyer should want to close the sale. However, it might not always be possible to find a perfectly effective solution. Then it might be necessary to end the process of tailoring a solution when it becomes obvious that further consultative efforts will not lead to a noteworthy improvement in the final result. If this is the case, a salesperson should work toward making a final offer. Ideally, the close takes the shape of an ending of one episode in a relationship, where the next encounter is prepared. This is because the seller and the buyer are working together toward win-win solutions and mutually beneficial relationships. Both parties should be satisfied with an interaction and its outcome and be willing to work together in the future.

The last step, the follow-up, is part of the BSI, because the sales process does not end with a decision to buy. Rather, the salesperson continues the customer-interaction. This is to ensure customer satisfaction with the product and to avoid customers’ negative post-purchase concerns to increase customer loyalty. In this step, the sales representative determines whether the solution is working well for the client and helps the client dealing with any problems that might have occurred. In addition, the customer relationship is maintained until the next encounter takes place. This involves continual service and consulting of the client.

The above described steps form an ideal sales process. However, it is important to mention that they do not always occur in sequential order and that not every step is performed in every encounter. Nevertheless, we view this process model as a very useful tool to describe a typical sales encounter and therefore use it for our analysis.

3. Relevant determinants of successful interaction

After having clarified our understanding of the sales process, we will review relevant literature in the next paragraphs to identify key drivers of sales success. We perceive that the literature on personal selling is especially relevant to our analysis and hence we base our literature review mainly on that stream of research.

For their meta-analysis, Churchill et al. (1985) have developed and used six categories to classify the single drivers of sales performance, based on Walker, Churchill, and Ford (1977). Verbeke, Dietz, and Verwaal (2011) refined this classification scheme and suggest that all drivers of sales performance can be classified into one of 18 categories. A key finding of their meta-analysis is that of the tested sub-categories of variables only five (i.e. role ambiguity, cognitive aptitude, degree of adaptiveness, selling-related knowledge, and work engagement) were significant predictors of sales performance. Role conflict, role overload, burnout, dispositional traits, personal concerns, identity, interpersonal skills, cognitive choice, goal orientation, biographic variables, as well as organizational and environmental variables did not show significant relationships to sales performance.
We let their findings guide our analysis, and organize this chapter around the scheme of Verbeke, Dietz, and Verwaal (2011). In other words, we use four of the five significant categories for our analysis (i.e. cognitive aptitude, degree of adaptiveness, selling-related knowledge, and work engagement). Only role ambiguity will not be included in our model since we perceive that to be a category that does not explicitly relate to a single individual but rather to the environment a front-line employee is operating in (see Singh, 1993). On the other hand, the results of the meta-analysis of Vinchur et al. (1998) have encouraged us to discuss the effects of personality traits in our model. In addition, unethical behavior is hampering relationship building (Schwepker; Good, 2007). We believe that this long-term (relationship) perspective also translates to the short-term (interaction) perspective. Therefore we will include ethical behavior into our analysis. Similarly, interpersonal skills were not a significant predictor in Verbeke, Dietz, and Verwaal’s (2011) analysis. But their importance increased when relationship quality was used as a measure for success in sales. Given the focus of many businesses on relationship building and maintaining, it seems to be justified to include this category as well. In this chapter, we identify important variables within each of the categories and summarize the related theory and findings.

3.1. Aptitude

Aptitudes are defined as personality variables and abilities that are given, respectively that cannot be learned or trained (Walker; Churchill; Ford, 1977). In our review, we focus on personality traits and cognitive abilities, respectively on the general mental ability for the reasons described above.

Personality traits are stable characteristics of one’s personality. They are independent of the context and the condition a person is in. The Big Five is the most widely accepted model of personality traits. This model suggests that each person’s personality can be described on five dimensions, i.e. extraversion, will to achieve, emotional stability, openness to experience, and agreeableness (e.g. Barrick; Mount, 1991; McAdams, 1995). Vinchur et al. (1998) reported that will to achieve and extraversion are decent predictors of sales performance. This is not surprising, because it should be helpful to be sociable, assertive, active, talkative, as well as planful, organized, hardworking and thorough when convincing customers to make a purchase. Compared to then, however, the sales professional has become more relationship-oriented. Furthermore, modern sales representatives are supposed to solve problems for and with clients and create unique and original solutions (see e.g. Moncrief; Marshall, 2005; Vargo; Lusch, 2004). The changed role of sales reps, suggests that agreeableness and openness to experience will be important in handling BSIs.

First, already Barrick and Mount (1991) have suggested that agreeableness is now important in occasions in which frequent interaction is involved. We argue that tolerance, courtesy, etc. will enhance the success of a BSI when relational goals are pursued. Should such traits not be present, a customer will find it more difficult and unpleasant to interact with a salesperson. This will eventually result in a client’s wish to withdraw from the business relationship. Second, the fact that salespeople act as consultants, problem solvers, and creators of original solutions means that openness to experience should be helpful in a BSI. When an original solution is to be tailored to solve a unique problem, traits such as creativity, curiosity, and imagination are very
useful. Should salespeople not possess these characteristics, they will have to rely on known standardized solutions.

Apart from personality traits, we include another aptitude (i.e. cognitive aptitude) in our analysis. Cognitive aptitude basically refers to a person’s intelligence and can be measured as general mental ability (GMA), verbal abilities, quantitative abilities, etc (e.g. Vinchur et al., 1998). Due to the limited scope of this paper we focus on GMA, the ability to think flexible and to draw conclusions (Sternberg, 2003). This is justified in our view by the focus of the sales function on problem-solving and co-creation. It is necessary to be able to analyze the situation and problems of a client. To solve the problem, the capabilities of an organization must be well-understood and used in a comprehensive manner. The solution must then be refined in further steps to perfectly meet customers’ needs. Consequently, it is necessary to analyze the current state of the solution and to distinguish between different attributes of the offered product or service to effectively communicate and interact with the client. Salespeople with a high GMA will perform better on these tasks than low-GMA colleagues (Verbeke et al., 2008). We acknowledge that a high GMA is not a sufficient condition for success, and can even be dysfunctional, e.g. a high GMA might lead to an overcharging of clients with information if a salesperson is lacking social competence (see Verbeke et al., 2008). Hence, we include contextual skills in our analysis.

3.2. Skills

Skills can be defined as learned ability to perform a task (Ford; Walker; Churchill, 1983). We focus on micro-skills, i.e. communicating with customers and coping with customers, and on macro-skills, i.e. customer and product/technical knowledge.

In a BSI, it is important to communicate effectively with a client (Dwyer; Hill; Martin, 2000). Especially in the evolved role of sales, it is important to identify a client’s problem in all its facets. In addition, salespeople have to convince the client that the offered solution fit the clients’ needs (Weitz; Bradford, 1999). We assume therefore that empathy, listening, and the ability to convince are crucial skills a salesperson in the partnering role should possess. Only if salespeople are well equipped with these skills, they will be able to communicate effectively throughout an interaction with a customer.

Various definitions of empathy have been suggested and there is some disagreement as to whether it can be seen as trait (e.g. Ahearne; Jelinek; Jones, 2007) or as interpersonal skill (e.g. Rentz et al., 2002). We define empathy as behaviors that indicate that a salesperson cares about the problems and the prosperity of a client (Jones; Stevens; Chonko, 2005), and as an eagerness to help, as well as an effort to understand a client (Ahearne; Jelinek, Jones, 2007). Hence, we view empathy as an interpersonal skill that can be trained. Several studies showed that empathy is important in sales and providing services (e.g. Zeithaml; Berry; Parasuraman, 1996), and specifically in managing interactions (Czaplowski; Olson; Slater, 2002). Empathy is crucial, because its focus is on understanding the interaction partner. This enhances trust on the side of the client and satisfaction with the interaction (e.g. Aggarwal et al., 2005). Trust in turn fosters the exchange of (confidential) information, which is important to engage in extensive problem-solving and co-creation (Weitz; Bradford, 1999).
Another skill that enhances effective communication is **listening** (e.g. Comer; Drollinger, 1999; De Ruyter; Wetzels, 2000), which may be defined as “the cognitive process of actively sensing, interpreting, evaluating and responding to the verbal and nonverbal messages of present or potential customers” (Castleberry; Shepherd, 1993, 36). Ingram, Schieweke Jr., and Hutson (1992) found that poor listening is one of the main reasons for salesperson failure, therefore emphasizing the importance of this special skill. Empirical studies show positive associations between customers’ perceptions of salesperson listening and trust in and satisfaction with the salesperson (Aggarwal et al., 2005; Bergeron; Laroche, 2009), future interactions (Bergeron; Laroche, 2009; Ramsey; Sohi, 1997), perception of service quality, perception of risk, purchase intentions, word-of-mouth communications (Bergeron; Laroche, 2009), adaptive selling (Boorom; Goolsby; Ramsey, 1998) and a positive relationship between listening (assessed from a buyer’s as well as a salesperson’s perspective) and sales performance (Bergeron; Laroche, 2009).

In addition to empathetic and listening skills, successful sales representatives need the **ability to convince**, i.e. the ability to appropriately use influence tactics. Influence tactics are defined as different communicational approaches through which a company’s personnel can try to influence others (Frazier; Roddy, 1991). McFarland, Challagalla, and Shervani (2006) suggest that six different tactics are used in BSIs, i.e. information exchange, recommendations, threats, promises, ingratiations, and inspirational appeal. Influence tactics are used mainly to secure compliance from partners (Frazier; Summers, 1984). A sizable stream of literature has evolved around the use of influence tactics, examining mainly effects on channel members. These studies showed that the choice and the use of influence strategies affect conflict and its resolution (Frazier; Roddy, 1991), satisfaction and trust (Scheer; Stern, 1992), and the relationship in general (Boyle et al., 1992).

Apart from communication skills, a salesperson’s ability to **manage conflict** is another key determinant of successful BSI. This again can be explained by the focus on relationships. When the selling organization pursues relational goals, the success of a BSI is defined in relational outcomes, i.e. maintaining a long-term relationship with profitable customers. Managing conflict becomes a major task to avoid negative effects on the relationship. Indeed, when managed properly, conflicts can even stimulate problem-solving and advance the relationship (Bradford; Weitz, 2009; Weitz; Bradford, 1999).

However, there are various approaches to managing conflict. For example, Thomas (1976) suggests five different approaches, i.e. avoidance, accommodation, cooperation, confrontation, compromise, and collaboration. In addition, there are different types of conflict (e.g. emotional vs. task; see e.g. Jehn, 1995). Depending on the type of conflict, different strategies are most effective when managing conflict (Bradford; Weitz, 2009). Furthermore, the context in which a conflict occurs (e.g. relevance of the issue and the level of commitment to the relationship of the parties) also determines the effectiveness of the different conflict managing approaches (Weitz; Bradford, 1999). Given the complexity and the importance of conflict management, we perceive that a salesperson’s ability to properly handle conflicts is an important determinant of successful BSIs.

Most successful salespeople specify their sales strategy based on the characteristics of the sales situation (Weitz, 1981). Thereby, **salesperson’s ability to adapt to customers in different selling situations** is crucial for superior performance
outcomes (Park; Holloway, 2003). For example, adaptive behavior is positively related to sales performance (Sujan; Weitz; Kumar, 1994) customer satisfaction (Roman; Iacobucci, 2010), relationship quality (Surprenant; Solomon, 1987), and relationship longevity (Cannon; Perreault, 1999). Hence, salespeople are supposed to adjust their sales approach in light of customers’ reactions to a given sales strategy and in light of customers’ current desires, in order to meet their needs and expectations (Spiro; Weitz, 1990). In a service setting, Gwinner et al. (2005, 135) define employee adaptive behavior as “the deliberate modification of the service offering and/or the employee’s interpersonal behavior in a situationally appropriate manner in response to meeting perceived consumer needs.” Thereby, due to the simultaneous production and consumption of many services, the authors pointed out, that adaptive behavior could consist of an interpersonal and an offering component at the same time, which in turn is influenced by customer knowledge, predisposition to adapt, and motivation to adopt. It can also be assumed, that salespeople with a high degree of adaptiveness are more likely to be responsive to their customers and to interact more effectively with them during the service encounter than salespeople with a low degree of adaptiveness.

Apart from these micro selling skills, salespersons also need macro selling skills such as **selling-related knowledge**, in order to interact with their customers more effectively. Thereby, selling-related knowledge refers to “the quantity and richness of knowledge that salespeople use in selling the products and services of the selling firm in ways that might help solve customer problems across different industries” (Verbeke; Dietz; Verwaal, 2011, 411). Selling-related knowledge can be divided into customer knowledge and product/technical knowledge and helps salespeople to co-create solutions for customers (Vargo; Lusch, 2004). More specifically, selling-related knowledge reflects salespeople’s ability to understand the “know-why” of a product, the “know-how” to produce a solution, and the “know-who” to approach (Sujan; Sujan; Bettman, 1988). Existing research has found that salespeople’s expertise positively influences relationship quality (Crosby; Evans; Cowles, 1990; Lagace; Dahlstrom; Gassenheimer, 1991), and customer trust of the salesperson and of the company (Moorman; Deshpande; Zaltman, 1993). Apart from that, customer knowledge helps salespeople to customize the service offering more successfully (Gwinner et al., 2005). Hence, salespeople are supposed to act as knowledge brokers, transferring knowledge about products and solutions to customers during the different stages of the selling and interaction process (Verbeke; Dietz; Verwaal, 2011).

### 3.3. Motivation

Successful front-line employees are often found to be highly engaged and committed to their work (Sonnentag, 2003). Thereby, **work engagement** can be defined as a positive, fulfilling work-related attitude characterized of vigor, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli; Bakker, 2004). As well, work engagement includes similar concepts such as enthusiasm, job involvement and the willingness to work even more as required for the firm (organizational citizenship behaviors) (Verbeke; Dietz; Verwaal, 2011). According to Kahn (1990), work engagement is influenced by a meaningful work role, by psychological safety to express themselves, and by psychological availability of personal resources necessary to engage. Due to their sense of positive attitude toward their job description, dedicated salespeople are
more motivated to take responsibility for their job and to exhibit a proactive work attitude during the sales and customer interaction steps. Hence, existing research has provided evidence for the positive relationship between work engagement and low turnover, high organizational commitment, and positive job performance (Demerouti et al., 2001; Kahn, 1990; Schaufeli; Bakker, 2004). In a similar vein, a survey among customers who recently purchased financial products illustrated that salesperson’s enthusiasm was found to be the most important quality (Bauer, 2011).

Another important ingredient of work engagement is salespeople’s persistency or rather endurance that describes “the length of time devoted to work and continuing to try in face of failure“ (Sujan; Weitz; Kumar, 1994, 40). Lamont and Lundstrom (1977) stated that endurance describes the willingness of salespeople to sharpen selling skills, to develop themselves, and to spend time building close relationships with the client. Thus, endurance is a specific characteristic of salespeople that helps them to change their sales strategy if necessary in order to increase sales performance (Lamont; Lundstrom, 1977).

3.4. Personal variables

Finally, salesperson’s work experience is assumed to have a positive impact on performance (Fu, 2009) due to the positive correlation between work experience and selling-related skills (Weiss, 1990). As well, work experience is positively associated with customer satisfaction and customer trust (Crosby; Evans; Cowles, 1990). Furthermore, a meta-analysis by Franke and Park (2007) confirmed the positive influence of work experience on adaptive selling and sales performance. Since experienced salespeople have dealt with several kinds of customers and selling situations, they are more likely to have a great repertoire of interaction and selling techniques and are more able to use the most effective ones.

3.5. Ethical behavior

The last determinant that we will include in our model of interaction competence is ethical behavior. It has been suggested that ethical behavior fosters the development of trust between a client and its salesperson (Hawes; Mast; Swan, 1989). This has the greatest effect when relationship selling is practiced. Ethical behavior can be costly though in the short-term (Dubinsky et al., 1992). A salesperson might lose some orders by being honest, fair, and transparent, which he could have gained, e.g. by lying about the product or service she offers. However, ethical sales behavior pays off in the long run, because customers will not get frustrated and dissatisfied when they find out that the product or service is not how the sales representative had explained it. This should lead to a willingness to engage in future interactions on the side of the customer (Roman; Munuera, 2005). Because of the focus on customer relationship, we perceive ethical behavior as important in modern sales interactions.
4. **A framework of interaction competency (IC)**

Each step of the buyer-seller interaction is characterized by different challenges and therefore requires different skills and characteristics of the salesperson. In the following paragraphs, we will first describe what a salesperson needs to complete a single step of the selling process successfully. The chapter will conclude with identification of skills and behaviors that are important throughout the process.

The **approach** step in the buyer-seller interaction process describes the first minutes of a meeting of the salesperson with the customer. During this step, the salesperson starts to establish initial rapport by having an opening small talk and by trying to make a good first impression. Salespeople characterized by a high degree of Likability have an advantage in doing so. This personal trait makes it easier for them to create credibility and trust (Andaleeb; Anwar, 1996), and it can be presumed that likability has a positive impact on the openness to interact with each other. As well, customer knowledge will contribute to a positive first impression and allows the salesperson to have a fruitful conversation with the customer, because informed salespeople are assumed to keep the conversation going by asking the right questions and by displaying background knowledge. Because salespeople often do not have a second chance for a making a good first impression (Verbeke; Bagozzi, 2002), salespeople have to be well prepared for the first step of a customer encounter, especially since this step should serve as a springboard to a long-term relationship selling approach (Moncrief; Marshall, 2005).

Next, salespeople should try to determine customers’ needs and desires in this step. Hence, salespersons’ listening skills are an important prerequisite for providing customer solutions in the second step. In a similar vein, salesperson’s mental ability is required to analyze a customers’ situation and problems. Salespeople with a high degree of mental ability are more likely to respond to the customer in an effective manner and tailor a comprehensive solution than salespeople with a low degree of mental ability. Furthermore, experience is of importance in this step. Experienced salespeople know how to behave to initiate a mutually beneficial buyer-seller interaction process, since they have gone through this step many times before and are familiar with this kind of situations. Finally, salespeople need a sense of enthusiasm in order to “electrify” the customers and to build an emotional foundation for further interaction steps.

The approach is followed by the **presentation.** During this step, salespeople need selling-related knowledge in order to customize the product offering. This knowledge includes product, technical, and customer knowledge. Since the presentation focuses on the product or service itself, salespeople have to provide sufficient information about their offering to show their expertise, and to make customers understand the product’s potential to solve the client’s problem at hand. An assertive appearance will be an advantage in achieving this. Therefore, extraverted salespeople will perform stronger in this stage than introverted ones. Due to the complexity of this step, salespeople need a thorough preparation including the evaluation of a large amount of information. Generally, due to the complexity of the issue, and because more than one presentation might be required in this stage, salespeople need endurance and staying power in order to explain and market the product in its entirety. This indicates that salespeople characterized by a high will to achieve are more likely to be successful compared to salespeople characterized by a low will to achieve. However,
the personality of the salesperson (will to achieve and extraversion) needs to be accompanied by enthusiasm and the ability to convince to master the presentation and its complexity. This can be compared to right hardware which is not sufficient for completing a given task without the right software and without being convinced that the solution fits. Furthermore, selling experience is closely related to good presentation skills and product know-how (Johlke, 2006). In a similar vein, experienced salespeople are equipped to deal with the pressure and to succeed during a presentation and are more likely to address the right topics than inexperienced salespeople.

Salespeople are often confronted with customer objections to their products and concepts after the presentation. Thereby, salespeople have to overcome these objections in the third stage. During the third stage, salespeople are supposed to discover the true reasons why customers are hesitating to close the sale. In order to achieve a solution, salespeople should be open-minded and responsive to customers’ needs and concerns. Hence, salespeople have to listen to the customer. If customers feel that they are not taken seriously and that they are treated as anybody else, they may finally decide to refuse to purchase the product. Moreover, it will be easier to overcome objections if both customer and salesperson can also interact on a personal level, since likability is assumed to enhance information flow, credibility, trust, and understanding of mutual needs (Doney; Cannon, 1997). As well, salespeople need cognitive intelligence and selling-related knowledge in order to understand customers’ problems and to provide customized solutions. If salespeople are not able to analyze the current situation, it will be difficult for them to adapt their sales strategy successfully. Consequently, salespersons’ ability to adapt and to react flexible is an important characteristic feature of the third stage.

Because conflicts may arise in the problem solving stage as well, salespeople need conflict management skills to avoid negative effects on the relationship. Instead, skills to manage a conflict during a buyer-seller interaction may even help salespeople to reveal customers’ true needs and to rebuild confidence in the relationship. Nevertheless, salespeople may be exhausted while trying to overcome customers’ objections and to find consensus. Hence, salespeople must express persistency/endurance, and should not feel discouraged by customer complaints and frequent requests for product or offer modifications. With regard to this, especially experienced salespeople may display more endurance and patience on the one hand than experienced salespeople. On the other hand, experienced salespeople may sometimes be reluctant to totally new solution approaches, due to an “I have done this umpteen times before” attitude.

The modern close usually takes the shape of the separation after an interaction and should be used to prepare the next interaction episode in a long-term customer relationship. Sometimes it might also be necessary to bring to an end the process of refining a solution when significant improvements in the final result are not to be expected anymore. We expect sales representatives characterized by a strong will to achieve and likeability to perform best in this stage. First, should it be necessary to bring the problem-solving process to an end, agreeableness becomes an important trait. While the interaction partner is still not entirely satisfied with the shape of the solution, the salesperson has to be able to work toward a compromise. This makes it necessary that the salesperson is courteous and flexible, and able to cooperate. Salespeople need to convince the customer that the solution fits the customers’ needs very well, even though not perfectly. This might be especially complex,
because the relationship should be in the focus of the whole interaction. So the salesperson has to find a way to end the interaction while trying to maintain and develop the relationship further. Such a balancing act is only possible if a sales representative possesses the ability to manage conflict and a sorrow understanding of how to convince people for their own good. While such skills can be practiced, a thorough understanding of the sophisticated mechanisms in play in such situations comes over time. Therefore, work experience is important. Convincing customers for their own good additionally makes a comprehensive understanding of the customer and her situation necessary. When it comes to gearing up for the next interaction episode, a salesperson should act planfully and organized. Thereby, salespeople should guide the customer through this stage thoroughly, so that no open questions or unsolved issues or problems remain. A customer will leave an interaction episode satisfied only when the customers feel that their problem has been solved comprehensively. We feel that again customer knowledge and experience is important to make sure that nothing will be overlooked.

The last stage in the selling process is the follow-up. In this stage, the salesperson makes sure that the sold solution works satisfactorily for the client. This involves monitoring of the customer’s situation and needs, as well as consulting and further improving the sold product/service when problems occur. A general objective is to maintain the customer relationship until the next interaction takes place. To perform well in this post-interaction stage, a salesperson needs to have a strong work engagement and persistency combined with listening skills. This is because the sales representative needs to get in touch with the customer on a regular basis. Even though no problem might have occurred and the salesperson might feel that it is a waste of time to monitor the customer further, it is imperative to continue caring about the client. This requires motivated frontline employees that are willing to go the extra mile for the company. In addition, the effectiveness of all the efforts that a sales representative invests into monitoring can greatly be enhanced when combined with thorough listening skills and a high GMA. This will facilitate analyzing the client’s state of affairs and help to foresee possible problems. Should indeed a problem occur, a high GMA is again advantageous. A comprehensive understanding of the applied technology and the product/service will also be of importance in such a situation. When a problem arises, customers expect that a solid solution will be found quickly. This can only be achieved when the sales representative fully understands the problem. Furthermore, salespeople must be fully aware of what alterations are possible to help the client as quickly as possible. Because salespeople need to react planfully and thoroughly under time-pressure in such situations and because an unexpected problem has to be solved, we expect frontline employees characterized by openness to experience and will to achieve to be especially well-suited for this stage.

As we have showed above, the different steps of a selling process differ quite a bit in what they require from a salesperson to be successful. However, there are also some capabilities that foster performance in all five stages of an interaction. In the modern understanding of sales (e.g. Moncrief; Marshall, 2005), the goal of a BSI is to nurture a profitable and mutually beneficial relationship with a customer. This indicates to us that independent of the stage of the selling process, three types of behaviors are important, i.e. ethical behavior, empathetic behavior, and compliance to interaction norms. As Roman and Munuera (2005) explain, unethical behavior might pay off in the short run, but this might be at the cost of the relationship. While behaviors, such as lying, cheating, manipulating, etc. might increase sales
performance in one interaction, we assume that they will be dismantled after the purchase. This in turn will most likely lead to distrust and the withdrawal from the relationship. Therefore, ethical behavior during the whole interaction process is the foundation of a long lasting relationship. The performance of empathetic behavior is also important in all stages. As mentioned above, empathetic behavior shows that a salesperson cares about the welfare of a client. This has two effects. First, trust is built between the seller and the customer (e.g. Aggarwal et al., 2005), which enhances the exchange of information and thus fosters problem solving during the interaction (Weitz; Bradford, 1999). This in turn enhances the likelihood that a client will be satisfied with the outcome of an interaction. Second, customers will generally feel comfortable with the interaction because they will feel that the salesperson really cares about them and their problems. Therefore, empathetic behavior positively affects the communal component of interactions (Vilnai-Yavetz; Rafaeli, 2003). The idea of the communal component is that an interaction does not only have an exchange component but also a social level. A pleasant interaction on the social level, thereby, contributes to the experience of a successful interaction as does the successful completion of the actual task. Hence, we propose that salespeople should, in addition to showing empathy, act according to some basic interaction norms. These norms refer to the interaction itself and not to specific tasks performed in different stages. The norms mirror socially acceptable behavior in BSIs. Examples for such social behavior are greeting, thanking, smiling, laughing, joking, talking politely, helping the other, and/or cooperate. Anti-social behavior includes swearing, complaining, being annoyed or irritated, yelling, acting inconsiderably, and/or frowning (Vilnai-Yavetz; Rafaeli, 2003). An overview over the developed framework how to manage buyer-seller interactions is given in Figure 2.
5. Conclusions

5.1. Managerial implications

In our model, we have discussed different types of variables. Some of these variables can be influenced by training efforts or by the organizational climate. Because of this, inferences about the right selection, training, and an appropriate organizational environment can be drawn from our model.

In particular, we included aptitudes in our model. Aptitudes are a person’s stable characteristics and cannot be learned (e.g. Churchill et al., 1985). Consequently, managers must pay attention to an applicant’s personality traits and GMA. For doing so, our model is helpful in two ways. First, managers should analyze their sales teams and cast new members with personalities that are yet underrepresented to make sure that their teams will be able to be successful in every step of the interaction process. Second, not every step in the model might be equally important and challenging for each organization depending on their selling approach and industry. For example, the problem solving stage might be more important when highly complex products or services are offered. A company should thoroughly analyze their own selling process and then focus on the personality traits their salespersons need to excel in their very sales process.

As opposed to aptitudes, skills can be acquired (e.g. Churchill et al., 1985). Therefore, specific trainings efforts can be taken to improve the sales force. Our model enables companies to analyze each salesperson with regard to his/her capabilities in each step. The results of such an assessment can be used to assign specific trainings to single employees to improve their performance. In addition, our model emphasizes the importance of interaction norms. Interaction norms play a crucial role in building and maintaining long-time customer relationships. Hence, frontline employees should be made aware of these norms and should practice them. Sales experience belongs to both categories, i.e. selection and training. Salespeople normally gain experience through performing their job. However, it is also possible to foster experience by e.g. providing on the job trainings and mentoring programs. In these programs, employees profit from the experience of senior colleagues, which helps them to build up their own experience faster.

A third category of variables can neither be influenced by training nor through selection. More specifically, work engagement, a motivational state, and ethical behavior can be influenced through the climate and the management itself (Robertson; Anderson, 1993; Roman; Munuera, 2005; Yoon; Beatty; Suh, 2001). Our model outlines the importance of both determinants. Therefore, we encourage managers to critically examine the environment, such as reward system, and managerial support, their salespersons operate in.

5.2. Limitations and future research

Our paper contributes to existing literature by proposing a model of determinants of successful interactions at the individual level. Based on the selling steps as suggested by Dubinsky (1980) and Moncrief and Marshall (2005), we recognize the
dynamic nature of the interaction process. Thereby, we anticipate that our model can especially be applied to salespeople who are offering complex products or services, respectively solutions to customers and when the focus of a business is on long-term relationships rather than on the fast deal. Nevertheless, future research should recognize different types of salespeople (Moncrief; Marshall; Lassk, 2006), since our model might not be valid for all types of sales representatives in a same way. Furthermore, interactions may be different in terms of sales and service processes. For example, an initial purchase may require a more intensive interaction than a straight rebuy. As well, the complexity of the product may influence the specification of the buyer-seller interaction process.

Future research should also try to confirm our suggested model empirically. Thereby, conducting a qualitative study to gain further insights into the interaction process could lead to a substantial improvement in our understanding of interaction effectiveness within the different selling steps. Hence, it would be interesting to find out which competences are needed most across the different stages of an interaction process, precisely how these competences vary in relevance across the interaction stages. Finally, we encourage future research to develop a measurement of interaction competence of salespeople according to the various interaction stages. With this in mind, we believe that our model can be seen as a fruitful avenue for future research.
References


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