

IMPACT OF PURCHASE IMPORTANCE AND SALESPERSON BEHAVIORS ON RELATIONSHIP LOYALTY

By Richard E. Plank, Joseph J. Belonax, Jr., and Stephen J. Newell

The exchange processes in buyer-seller relationships continue to focus the attention of marketing managers and scholars. However, the role played by salesperson relational and task behaviors in buyer-seller relationships, which consider the importance of the purchase, has received limited attention from an empirical research perspective. This study investigates buyer perceptions of salesperson relational and task behaviors and how they impact buyer evaluation of relationship loyalty with the supplier under different levels of purchase importance. The results indicate that buyer perceptions of relationship loyalty are linked to relationship and task behavior, but it appears that purchase importance has limited or no effect.

Introduction

Salespeople play a vital role in creating and maintaining buyer-seller relationships (Shepherd 1999). Salespeople are responsible for making initial contact, determining client needs, and identifying products or services to satisfy needs as well as providing follow-up support services (Pelham 2002). To make this happen, salespeople engage in certain behaviors to develop and nurture long term relationships with representatives of buying firms. These behaviors, which are categorized as relational and task, are especially vital in accounts that are very large, or for other reasons, considered important. These "major" accounts are often handled under a key account or global account framework (Wilson and Weillbaker 2004; Jones, Dixon, Chonko, and Cannon 2005).

Unfortunately, salesperson relational and task behavior's has received very limited attention in the sales literature (Guenzi, Pardo, and Georges 2006). Specifically, the relationship between purchase importance, salesperson relational and task behaviors and relationship loyalty has not been explored. Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to contribute to the business marketing, sales management, and

procurement literature by providing new insights regarding the influence of salesperson relational and task behaviors and their impact on perceptions of relationship loyalty. In addition, the issue of importance of the purchase will also be examined. Finally a short reflective scale defining both relational and task behaviors was developed and tested for this paper and is an additional contribution. Thus, the study primarily makes a contribution by explicitly examining the impact of salesperson relational and task behaviors on perceived relationship loyalty and how the buyer's perceived purchase importance impacts on this relationship. But, it also adds additional value by providing a measure that may be usable for future research.

Following a review of the literature on key account selling, purchase importance, salesperson relational and task behaviors, and relationship loyalty, we then discuss findings and implications of our empirical study, future research directions, and limitations of the study.

Key Account Selling

Over the past 20 or more years there has been increasing evidence that organizations

are spending more time and effort aimed at developing, maintaining, and growing large accounts that are considered important to management. These have been referred to as major accounts, key accounts and even global accounts, depending on the frame of reference being used by the organization. The fundamental idea behind all of these efforts is that these accounts are of major importance to the seller, and therefore should be handled somewhat differently than smaller accounts. While most of the research examining this issue has been from the perspective of the seller, other researchers have initiated research from the perspective of the buyer (Burt 1989; Pardo 1997; Kumar, Bragg and Creinin 2003).

Research has been broad in scope and is well documented. Recent empirical work has expanded the view and approach to understanding the processes of major account management by focusing on the individual salespeople themselves. For example, Schultz and Evans (2002) examined collaborative communication by account representatives, and linkages to perceived trust, role performance, and synergistic solutions between buyer and seller. Their study was one of the first to examine the linkage between communication behaviors and important outcomes. While these authors could not attribute cause and effect, they demonstrated strong relationships between salesperson communication behaviors and key account management success. Sengupta, Krapfel, and Pusateri (2000) took a broader view and examine determinants of key account salesperson effectiveness. They pointed out that strategic ability and intrapreneurial ability were important determinants of success in major account selling. An earlier work by Millman and Wilson (1996) conceptually defined key

account competencies that resulted in explicit competencies for key account selling.

Of interest to our study is the recent work by Guenzi, Pardo, and Goerges (2006) that explicitly looked at salespersons relational behaviors. They defined four categories of key account managers' relational behaviors and linked relational selling strategy to the use of these behaviors which were broadly defined as customer oriented selling, adaptive selling, organizational citizenship behaviors, and team selling. Their findings suggest that even when a firm adopts a relational strategy it does not always mean that behaviors of salespeople are perceived as such by the buyer. Clearly, one interpretation is that salespeople don't always implement very well the strategy dictated by management. There are many other studies and other conceptualizations as the literature continues to grow. To date, however, there has been no work examining the notion of relational and task behaviors performed by salespeople and their impact on relationship success. While it is often noted that key or major accounts are important to the seller, there has been no examination of the perceived importance of the purchase to the buyer and the impact it may have on buyer-seller interfaces.

Purchase Importance

The organizational buying process is often viewed as dynamic and complicated. To capture these complexities scholars developed classification schemes or taxonomies of purchase decisions that vary from the simple to the complex (Robinson, Faris and Wind 1967; Corey 1978; McQuiston 1989; Bunn 1993). Despite differences in the criteria used to establish these schemes and the number of resulting classifications, they all consider purchase importance as a determinant

classification criterion. Moreover, empirical evidence has indicated that purchase importance influences many aspects of the purchase decision process, such as the size and structure of the buying center (Johnston and Bonoma 1981; Moriarty and Bateson 1982), perceived influence on the decision participants (McQuiston 1989), nature of buying activities (Lau et. al., 1999) information source usage (Bunn and Clopton 1993) and as a moderator variable in the link between satisfaction and loyalty (Wangenheim 2003).

Purchase importance as a situational characteristic has also been shown to differentiate distant arms-length transactional from close collaborative exchanges (Bunn 1993; Cannon and Perreault 1999; Oliver 1990; Day 2000 Hutt and Speh 2004). Finally, Bunn (1993) differentiated the simple "straight rebuy" buying approaches (casual, low routine priority) from the complex "new task" buying approaches (judgmental, strategic).

In summary, the literature on exchange processes suggests that purchase importance influences the nature and the extensiveness of buyer decision-making. With the exception of Wangenheim (2003), this research, however, has not generally examined the impact of purchase importance within buyer-supplier relationships.

Relational Behaviors

Crosby, Evans, and Cowles (1990) referred to relational behavior as a "salesperson's behavioral tendency to develop, maintain and grow the buyer-seller relationship." They found relational salespeople made frequent contact with buyers, solicit buyer disclosure of personal and needs related information, and express to buyers their cooperative intentions. This

constellation of behaviors was found to significantly influence the quality of the buyer-seller relationship, as did the salesperson's attributes of similarity, expertise and trust. Although not explicitly identified as relational behaviors, the research that characterizes buyer-seller relationships identifies salespersons' relational behaviors that lead to particular outcomes. Morgan and Hunt (1994) found that a buyer's perceived trust in the salesperson was positively influenced when the salesperson and buyer shared common beliefs about which behaviors, goals and policies were important and when they shared meaningful and timely information. These relational behaviors, being antecedents of trust, led to increased cooperation and a reduction in both functional conflict and decision-making uncertainty. Doney and Cannon (1997) found that relational behaviors influence buyers perceptions the expertise, likeability and similarity of the salespeople that they interacted with. In turn, these behaviors seemed to positively impact buyers' perception of salesperson trust and their ultimate choice of suppliers. Gao, Sirgy and Bird (2005) found that relational behaviors influence perceptions of supplier trust, dependence and commitment. Consequently, this created less uncertainty when making buying decisions. Dwyer, Schurr and Oh (1987) suggested that buyer-seller relationships evolve through a five-step process. The steps include: awareness, exploration, expansion, commitment and dissatisfaction. A salesperson's relational behavior, helps to move (or hinder) the relationship to the final commitment phase. Belonax, Newell and Plank (2006) found that relational behaviors influence buyer perceptions of salesperson expertise and trust as well as perceptions of corporate expertise and

trust. More favorable buyer perceptions were found when product support services were more important.

In his study of selling, Valentino (2000) using his neurolinguistic programming (NLP) paradigm, uncovered specific relational behaviors that underlie six structural components that allow salespeople to develop rapport. First, the salesperson creates a neutral environment by projecting an open mindedness in his interactions with the buyer. Second, the salesperson creates harmony by mirroring the buyer's speech tempo, mode of perception, energy or emotional state and communication style. Third, the salesperson gains and keeps the buyer attentive by repeating key words, phases and criteria put forth by the buyer. Next, the salesperson creates a feeling of empathy to the buyers' needs and concerns. Fifth, the salesperson draws out positive responses to questions. Finally, a buyer's receptiveness to the relationship is favorably enhanced when the attention of the salesperson is focused on outcomes that are in the best interest of the buyer. It should be noted that rapport plays a fundamental role in establishing good communications. The ability to establish rapport depends on the salesperson's movements and body language, dress and or attire, as well as the use of sensory based language and pace of approach (Valentino 2000; Wood 2006).

Overall, a salesperson's relational behaviors play a key role when establishing buyer seller relationships. Thus we would expect that relational behavior would impact key aspects of relationships between buyers and sellers. For this study relational behaviors were defined as *those behaviors executed by the salesperson whose primary, although not only, objective is to improve*

the personal relationship of the salesperson with significant others in the buying group.

Task Behaviors

Within the context of buyer-seller relationships, salespeople are responsible for performing a number of sales focused tasks, particular importance are those tasks that must be performed to achieve sales call objectives (Moncrief, Marshall and Laask 2006). Though in some cases, the objective may be to make a sale, in other instances, the call objective may be simply to move toward the sale (Rackham 1996). Salespeople are encouraged to develop skills that help them to prospect and qualify buyers, secure sales calls, determine needs, present product or service solutions, overcome buyer objections, obtain agreements to purchase and perform follow-up sale tasks (Futrell 2006; Manning and Reece 2006; Rackham and DeVincentis 1999).

The empirical research on tasks behaviors approaches sales skills as a holistic construct that includes not only those behaviors relevant to the stages of the sales process but also the relational behaviors mentioned previously. Moncrief (1986) developed a six category classification of sales positions by analyzing 121 sales activities. Marshall, Moncrief and Lassk (1999) created taxonomy of sales positions through factoring and clustering 105 sales activities. To create taxonomy of sales positions that reflect changing environmental forces Moncrief, Marshall and Lassk (2006) factored analyzed their earlier identified 105 sales activities into 12 dimensions (factors) of selling and clustered them into six categories of sales positions. Rentz et al (2002) developed a scale to measure selling skills and grouped them into the three main skills conceptualized by Walker, Churchill and Ford (1997):

interpersonal, salesmanship, and technical. These skills represent an individual's "learned proficiency" at performing the necessary tasks for the sales position (Ford, Walker, Churchill and Hartley 1987). Because of the fast-paced changes that occur in today's business environment, buyers place an even greater value on the advice and guidance provided by salespeople.

Consequently, salesperson tasks behaviors are empirically examined now, by some researchers, from a consultative selling perspective. Liu and Leach (2001) defined consultative selling as "the process of professionally providing information for helping customers achieves their business objectives." Their study found that consultative service tasks influenced buyer perceptions of salesperson trust, expertise and overall satisfaction with the seller. Pettijohn, Pettijohn and Taylor (1995) examined the relationship between sales performance and consultative skills and showed that a salesperson's congruent skill (i.e., directness, honesty, and sincerity in what is overtly communicated to the buyer) was positively related to effective sales performance. Pelham (2002) found that the consultative skills of problem solving and adaptive selling positively influenced a firm's sales growth. Experimental studies conducted by DeCormier and Jobber (1993) focused on the similarities between selling and counseling. The results of their experiments showed that sales performance can be enhanced by providing training in adaptive selling skills, micro-skills used extensively in counseling, and the counselor selling process adapted from the meta-model of clinical interviewing developed by Ivey and Matthews (1984).

To summarize, within the context of buyer-seller relationships, salespeople are

responsible for achieving call objectives. To do this they must perform a number of sales related tasks as they work toward this end. While there has been a great deal of work on defining sales behaviors and tasks, the related literature shows only limited work on linking sales behaviors to performance. However, the literature does suggest that task behaviors play an important role in this process. For this study task behaviors were defined as those behaviors executed by the salesperson whose primary, although not only, objective is to achieve the sales goals with respect to the person or persons and organization these behaviors are directed at.

Relationship Loyalty

Relationship loyalty is a term that is related to relationship commitment and is utilized here as it reflects a slightly different, less abstract perspective. Empirically, only Plank and Newell (2007) examined and measured the construct. They developed the construct from the source loyalty definitions in Wind (1970) and Morris and Holman (1988). They defined the term as customer perceptions of whether they will continue to use and remain committed to the supplier (Plank and Newell p62). Commitment is a more abstract term that suggests there will be a continuance of the relationship. Loyalty, on the other hand, is more specific in meaning and a more specific behavioral intention. One can be committed to a relationship, but not loyal to that relationship. In a buyer-seller relationship, loyalty means that the buyer will simply keep buying from the seller by choice. While they may do other things such as tell their colleagues in other companies about the seller, the fundamental essence of loyalty is that they will keep buying out of choice. As Palmer (1995)

noted it is possible for a company to be committed in a buyer-seller relationship as they have no choice, but they may not be satisfied with the relationship and would report they would leave the relationship if the opportunity was available. But if no opportunity exists, they remain committed, but not loyal. Overall, commitment is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition, for relationship loyalty.

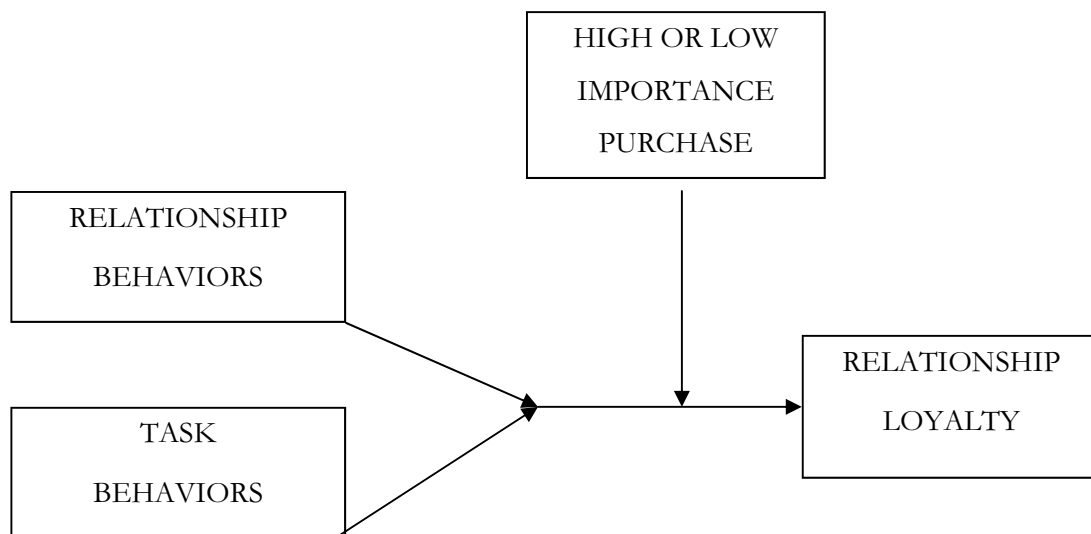
Research Questions

The fundamental questions this research examines are:

The literature reviewed linked behaviors to performance and it is clear that how the salesperson behaves, whether in front of the buyer or at other times (Plank and Reid 1994), will impact on their success. What is less clear is what impact purchase importance has on the relationship between these behaviors and relationship loyalty. Previous empirical research and the typical theoretical perspectives that have been taken in this research provide limited guidance at best.

Figure 1 illustrates the relationships stated in the research questions.

FIGURE 1 Research Model



- Does purchase importance as perceived by the buyer impact on the relationship between the relational and task behaviors performed by the salesperson and the relationship loyalty the buyer expresses.
- How strong is the relationship between task and relational behaviors and perceived relationship loyalty?

Method

The research data was collected using a single wave mail survey from a total of 1400 purchasing managers who were members of the Institute for Supply Management. There were no return deliveries. After 6 weeks, a total of 269 completed usable responses were received for a return rate of approximately nineteen percent. The

distributed questionnaires were identical except that each survey asked the individual answering the questionnaire to evaluate a current supplier relationship that was either "extremely important," or "minimally important" to their business. Of the 269 usable questionnaires returned, 126 were surveys that asked for the respondent to evaluate "extremely important" purchases and 143 were for purchases that were reported to be "minimally important." Relational and task behavior scales were constructed specifically for this study.

While most new multiple item scales are developed following a process first outlined by Churchill (1979). This involves item generation and then empirical pre-tests of those items using statistical rules of thumb to include or exclude items to provide a final multiple item scale. However we chose to approximate the methodology suggested by Rossiter (2002) who, among other things, provides a suggested qualitative methodology to develop a multi item scale.

Specifically we examined the literature as noted above in each area, and from that three researchers created a series of behavioral questions. We began with four relationship indicator behaviors and seven task indicator behaviors which were reduced to three each during the analysis. The analysis was qualitative in nature and asked a group of experts (5) to evaluate each indicator based on the theoretical definition supplied and to rate it in terms of its congruence with the theoretical definition. As will be noted further on, quantitative analysis of the scales indicated this approach was successful, although clearly it does not capture every possible facet of what we mean by relational and task behaviors. The final scale is shown in the appendix.

An additional question in each survey asked respondents to rate the importance of the purchase on a 1-7 scale, low to high importance as a manipulation check. Using ANOVA, the means were assessed and found to be significantly different as predicted thus providing evidence that significant differences in importance exist between the buyers that rated their purchases as "extremely important" and the buyers that rated their purchases as "minimally important."

Relationship loyalty was assessed using a four-item single factor scale, following (Plank and Newell 2007). This scale has previously shown good internal consistency and has significant face validity. This scale is also shown in the appendix.

Non-respondent bias was assessed by analyzing first quartile versus last quartile responses. Comparison between the two subsets revealed no significant differences in the demographics of the sample, indicating no response bias (Armstrong and Overton 1977). As noted below, the demographics of the respondents were similar to the sample frame which provides further evidence of limited or no non-respondent bias.

Table 1 provides a demographic analysis of the respondents who rated their purchases as extremely important and those who rated their purchases as minimally important. Both groups are experienced and work for a wide number of companies as indicated by department size and employment. The gender ratio is typical for ISM membership (ISM Membership Needs Survey 2006).

Also reported are situational factors that were measured in addition to the demographics. These particular variables were chosen because they

TABLE 1 Demographics

Variable	Buyer	Years	Department	Employment
	Gender	Purchasing	Size	
		Experience		

Extremely Important (n=126)

Mean	N/A	14.66	N/A	1274
Std Deviation	N/A	8.50	N/A	2238
Median	N/A	13.0	N/A	400
Frequencies	Male 70	N/A	(1) 12	N/A
	Female 56		(2-3) 35	
			24	
			15	
			(>10) 40	

Minimally Important (n=143)

Mean	N/A	15.07	N/A	1551
Std Deviation	N/A	8.34	N/A	2462
Median	N/A	15.0	N/A	500
Frequencies	Male 92	N/A	(1) 17	N/A
	Female 51		(2-3) 26	
			44	
			13	
			(>10) 44	

Situational Characteristics

Part or all of the business to one supplier	Approved vendor list			
	Part	All	Yes	No
Extremely important	87	50	111	31
Minimally important	81	45	74	51

have been subjected to previous research and were thought to be important descriptors of the purchase

decision process. Both purchase situations in terms of whether or not the business is given to one or multiple

suppliers and the use of a formal approved vendor list are reported. As can be seen both categories have a mix of both situations. Table 2 provides an analysis of the measures used to statistically test the research questions.

Both task and relational behaviors were measured on a seven point scale anchored by strongly agree (7) and strongly disagree (1). Thus, higher scores indicate higher evaluation of behavior.

TABLE 2 Confirmatory Factor Analysis Behavior and Relationship Loyalty Measures

Item	Mean	Standard Deviation	Parameter Estimate (Standardized)
------	------	--------------------	--------------------------------------

Relationship Behaviors

RB1	4.58	1.411	0.7342
RB2	4.85	1.304	0.8833
RB3	4.52	1.505	0.7492
Composite Reliability	.833		
Variance Extracted	.789		

Item	Mean	Standard Deviation	Parameter Estimate (Standardized)
------	------	--------------------	--------------------------------------

Task Behaviors

TB1	4.99	1.259	0.6581
TB2	4.94	1.601	0.8737
TB3	4.56	1.634	0.8140
Composite Reliability	.828		
Variance Extracted	.782		

All Estimates Significant $p < .01$ AGFI = .9680; CFI = .9975; NNFI = .9953; RMR = .0446; Chi-Square = 9.8575; DF = 8; $p > \text{Chi-Square} = 2752$; No significant residuals > 2 standard deviations.

Factors are correlated @ .719

Correlation Matrix

Behaviors	REB 1	REB2	REB3	TAB 1	TAB2	TAB3
REB1	1.000					
REB2	.652	1.000				
REB3	.544	.661	1.000			
TAB1	.349	.476	.452	1.000		
TAB2	.469	.548	.450	.555	1.000	
TAB3	.405	.491	.467	.523	.720	1.000

TABLE 2 Continued

Item	Mean	Standard Deviation	Parameter Estimate (Standardized)
<u>Relationship Loyalty</u>			
Reloy 1	4.28	1.356	.7781
Reloy 2	4.51	1.423	.8389
Reloy 3	4.59	1.442	.8375
Reloy 4	5.10	1.138	.7890
Composite Reliability	.845		
Variance Extracted	.715		

All Estimates Significant $p < .01$ AGFI = .9478; CFI = .9921; NNFI = .9899; RMR = .0276; Chi-Square = 8.9976; DF= 2; $p > \chi^2$.0111; No significant residuals > 3 standard deviations.

Correlation Matrix

	Reloy 1	Reloy 2	Reloy 3	Reloy 4
Reloy 1	1.000			
Reloy 2	.673	1.000		
Reloy 3	.646	.672	1.000	
Reloy 4	.552	.604	.631	1.000

Perceived relationship loyalty was measured on the same scale as the behaviors.

In order to assess the measurement quality, the sets of behaviors were subjected to a structural equation modeling program Proc Calls in SAS. Given that task and relationship behaviors were each measured by three indicators a two-factor confirmatory factor analysis was conducted. As noted in Table 2, the measures are very strong in terms of the assessments used. Strong discriminant validity is indicated by the fit statistics for the two-factor model indicating that task and relationship behaviors are different constructs. The composite reliability and variance extracted for each

individual construct suggests strong reliability of each construct. Given the four indicators used for relationship loyalty, a single factor model was run. Also as shown in Table 2 this was a strong scale. The fit statistics are all strong and the composite reliability and variance extracted both indicate a reliable indicator. Thus we can conclude that the measures subjected to the statistical testing indicated solid reliability and validity given the testing methods utilized.

Findings of the Study

In order to examine the research question, summed scales were created for each of the behaviors and each score was divided by the number of indicators; three in

the case of relationship behaviors and task behaviors, four in the case of relationship loyalty. The statistical test utilized was two regression equations, one for the very important purchases and one for the minimally important purchases. Table 3 reports those results.

As can be seen, regardless of purchase importance, both task and relational behaviors are strongly linked to relationship loyalty and both models explain over 50% of the variation in relationship loyalty. In both cases relational behaviors are more strongly related than task behaviors. In the

TABLE 3 Regression Analysis, Behaviors against Relationship Loyalty For High and Low Purchase Importance

MODEL SUMMARY (High Importance)

R	RSQUARE	ADJ RSQUARE	STD ERROR ESTIMATE	DURBIN W
.721	.520	.512	.75245	1.889
ANOVA	SUM OF SQUARES	DF	MEAN SQUARE	F SIG.
Regression	81.476	2	40.738	71.953 .000
Residual	75.301	133	.566	
Total	156.777	135		

COEFFICIENTS

	STD COEFFICIENT	T	SIG
Constant		3.514	.001
RBI	.436	5.976	.000
TSB	.378	5.178	.000

MODEL SUMMARY (Low Importance)

R	RSQUARE	ADJ RSQUARE	STD ERROR ESTIMATE	DURBIN W
.751	.549	.541	.75607	2.016
ANOVA	SUM OF SQUARES	DF	MEAN SQUARE	F SIG.
Regression	82.109	2	41.054	71.819 .000
Residual	67.453	118	.566	
Total	159.562	120		

COEFFICIENTS

	STD COEFFICIENT	T	SIG
Constant		3.023	.003
RBI	.430	5.741	.000
TSB	.348	4.240	.000

more important purchases, these differences are somewhat less apparent with the relational behavior coefficient being lower and the task coefficient being higher than in low importance situations. Post hoc this probably makes sense as the risk to the buyer is likely to be much greater in more important decisions so that they would be more concerned with the actual task getting done. But relational behaviors are still more important as indicated by the higher beta coefficient. It appears that purchase importance to the buyer has minimal effect on the relationship which would lead one to believe that it also has minimal effect on relationship loyalty in general. Post hoc, using the manipulation check measure of purchase importance and regressing that against relationship loyalty produced a significant model, but with an R^2 of only .036, there is clearly little real impact.

Managerial Implications

With regard to our first research question, the buyer's perception of purchase importance has minimal impact. The beta coefficients for relational and task behaviors in both high and low importance models differ insignificantly.

Regarding our second research question, both relational and task behaviors are significantly linked to relationship loyalty and in both the high and low importance models explain over 50% of the variation in relationship loyalty. While in both models relational behaviors are more strongly related to relationship loyalty than task behaviors, the relational behavior coefficient is smaller and the task coefficient is larger in the high importance model than they are in the low importance model. The larger task coefficient in the high importance model may reflect the uncertainty when making high importance decisions. Thus, buyers might, in general, focus on the task behaviors of salespersons to ensure that correct decisions are made. The larger relational coefficient in

the low importance model may be a reflection of the frequent buyer-seller contact in the routine, repetitive nature of low importance decision making. In this case buyers are more likely to rely on criteria, such as the relational behaviors of salespeople, which enable them to make quick and effortless decisions.

The findings that the relational and task behaviors of salespeople influence the buyer's loyalty to the buyer-seller relationship have several implications for sales training programs: to induce changes in salesperson relational and task behaviors that promote relationship loyalty.

With regard to salesperson task behaviors, sales trainers have long recognized that sales training must provide the salesperson with requisite knowledge (e.g., product knowledge, market and competitive information, company policies and procedures) and selling skills (i.e., how to sell). Selling skills essentially consist of knowing how to do certain things, often referred to as procedural knowledge.

Because purchases made by major account buyers are sometimes of low importance and at other times of high importance, salespeople must be taught procedures consistent with short-cycle selling (low importance purchase) and long-cycle selling (high importance purchase). While both procedures emphasize the task behaviors, beginning with prospecting for customers and ending with closing and servicing customers, long-cycle selling requires additional task behaviors. Long-cycle selling follows a sequential pathway to a sale. That is, certain intermediate objections must be achieved so as to "advance" toward a sale. Obviously these "advances" are unique to the product/services being sold. Therefore, it is important for trainers to ask themselves the requisite questions relating to their industry and determine the specifics that best relate.

The real challenge in sales training is developing salesperson relational behaviors

that develop, maintain and grow the buyer-seller relationship. In this context relational behavior may be viewed as rapport building behaviors and thus the emphasis on sales training should focus on instructing the salesperson on how to manage rapport driving the sales process.

Sales training can be done in a number of ways to develop rapport skills, however, a fruitful approach sales trainers may use is neurolinguistic programming. This six stage approach considers relational behaviors that allow salespeople to develop and manage rapport (Valentino 2000).

First, the salesperson must create a neutral nonjudgmental environment by projecting an open mindedness to the buyer. Second, the salesperson can create harmony by mirroring the buyer's speech tempo, mode of perception, energy or emotional state and communication style. Third, the salesperson can gain and keep the buyer attentive by repeating key words, phrases and criteria put forth by the buyer. Next, the salesperson must create a feeling of empathy to the buyers' needs and concerns. Fifth, the salesperson should draw out positive responses to questions to make the buyer feel good. Finally, the attention of the salesperson should focus on outcomes that are in the best interest of the buyer so as to favorably enhance the buyer's receptiveness to the relationship. It should be noted that the ability to establish rapport depends also on the salesperson's movements and body language, dress and attire, as well as the use of sensory based language and pace of approach.

Following Gremler and Gwinner (2008) we can further examine rapport as a set of behavior types that they identify as attentive behavior, grounding behavior, courteous behavior, connecting behavior, and information sharing behavior. Each one of these types of behaviors can be examined for salesperson competency and both long term

and short term training programs can be built to improve these as they are deemed appropriate for the organization. Both the NLP and Gremler and Gwinner models for rapport building can be used to effectively improve salesperson relational behaviors.

Limitations

This study has many of the same limitations of most survey research: it is based on recall. The sample while a good sampling frame does not represent all purchasing personnel. The response rate of just over 19% raises the question of nonresponse bias as the test used to ascertain this issue is weak at best. The independent and the dependent responses were provided by the same subject, suggesting possible source bias. As always these findings need to be interpreted with caution, however, the measures were very solid and the basis for the sample frame has been utilized many times in previous research. Care was also taken to minimize common method response bias in the development of the questionnaires (Podsakoff et al 2003).

Future Research Directions

Clearly, this exploratory research is the first effort at comparing the impact of relational and task behaviors on relationship loyalty. Further delineation of both relational and task behaviors needs to be undertaken and an effort made to measure a more complete set of behaviors. This would lead the way to determine, within each set of behaviors, whether one or more behaviors seem to be more powerful in their impact on sales performance.

The framework for developing buyer-seller relationships has been hypothesized to consist of five general phases of development (Ford 1980). Research effort

should be made to operationalize the relational and task behaviors within each of the five phases of the relationship process. Then, a study could be undertaken to answer the question "How do relational and task behaviors impact on the relationship development process?" It is critical to take a more process framework to the general research question examined here as relationships among and within variables are likely to be different at different stages in the development.

On a broader level there is a stream of research that has been utilized by for profit organizations to a great extent, but is less developed as an area of academic study. This area is the notion of job competencies and what kinds of competencies are necessary for specific jobs (Montebello 2001; Bartram 2004). With the recent exception of several small studies e.g., Ricks, Williams, and Weeks 2008, this framework has been little used in the area of selling. Currently ASTD is involved in a major project which seeks to develop a global model of competencies relating to the sales function (Lambert 2008). The research outlined here fits into that framework as it seeks to understand which behavioral components have impact on the development and maintenance of buyer-seller relationships. The authors suspect that this competency framework will drive much academic research in the future.

References

- Armstrong, J.S, and T.S. Overton 1977. Estimating Nonresponse Bias in Mail Surveys. *Journal of Marketing Research* 14 (3), 396-402.
- Bartram, D. 2004. Assessment in Organizations. *Applied Psychology* 53(2), 237-238.
- Belonax, J. J. Jr., S. J. Newell and R. E. Plank 2006. Evaluating Product Support Services in Business-to-Business Relationships: The Role of Corporate and Sales Person Source Credibility. Proceedings of the 2006 Atlantic Marketing Association, ed., Jerry Wilson, Charleston, South Carolina: 471-475.
- Bunn, M. D. 1993. Taxonomy of Buying Decision Approaches. *Journal of Marketing*, 57 (January): 38-56.
- Bunn, M. D. and S. N. Clopton 1993. Patterns of Information Use Across Industrial Purchase Situations. *Decision Sciences* 24 (2): 457-478.
- Burt, D.N. 1989. Managing Suppliers up to Speed. *Harvard Business Review* 67 (4): 127-136.
- Cannon, J. P. and W. D. Perreault, Jr. 1999. Buyer-Seller Relationships in Business Markets *Journal of Marketing Research* 36 (4): 439-460.
- Corey, R. E. 1978. Procurement Management: Strategy, Organization and Decision Making. Boston, MA: CBI PublishingCo.
- Crosby, L. A., K.R. Evans and Deborah Cowles. 1990. Relationship Quality in Services Selling: An Interpersonal Influence Perspective. *Journal of Marketing* 54 (July): 68-81.
- Day, G. S. 2000. Managing Market Relationships. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* 28 (Winter):24-30.
- DeCornier, R. A. and D. Jobber 1993. The Counselor Selling Method: Concepts and Constructs. *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management* 13(4): 39-58.
- Doney, P. M. and J. P. Cannon 1997. An Examination of the Nature of Trust in Buyer Seller Relationships. *Journal of Marketing* 61 (April): 35-51.

- Dwyer, R. F., P. H. Schurr and S. Oh 1987. Developing Buyer-Seller Relationships. *Journal of Marketing* 51, (2): 11-27.
- Ford, D.A. 1980. The Development of Buyer-Seller Relationships in Industrial Markets. *European Journal of Marketing* 14(5-6): 339-353.
- Ford, N. M., O. C. Walker, G. A. Churchill, Jr., and S. W. Hartley 1987. Selecting Successful Salespeople: A Meta-Analysis of Biological and Psychological Selection Criteria. In Review Of Marketing 1987, Michael J. Houston, ed., Chicago: *American Marketing Association*, 1987: 103-104.
- Futrell, C. M. 2006. Fundamentals of Selling. Boston, MA: Irwin/McGraw-Hill Companies.
- Gao, T., M.J. Sirgy, and M. M. Bird 2005. Reducing Buyer Decision-Making Uncertainty in Organizational Purchasing: Can Supplier Trust, Commitment, and Dependence Help? *Journal of Business Research* 58: 397-405.
- Gremler, D.D., K.P. Gwinner 2008. Rapport Building Behaviors Used by Retail Employees. *Journal of Retailing* 84(3): 308-324.
- Gross, A. 1952. Salesmanship, New York: The Ronald Press Company.
- Guenzi, P. C. Pardo, and L. Georges 2006. Relational Selling Strategy and Key Account Managers Relational Behaviors: An Exploratory Study. *Industrial Marketing Management* 36(1): 121-132.
- Hutt, M. D. and T. W. Speh 2004. Business Marketing Management, Mason, OH: South Western/Thomson Learning.
- ISM membership needs survey (2006), <http://www.ism.ws/files/membership/MemNeedsSurvey2006.pdf>
- Ivey, A. E. and W. J. Matthews 1984. A Meta-Model for Structuring and Clinical Interview. *Journal of Counseling and Development*. 63 (December): 237-243.
- Johnston, W. J. and T. V. Bonoma 1981. The Buying Center: Structure and Interaction Patterns. *Journal of Marketing* 45 (Summer): 143-156.
- Jones, E. A.L. Dixon, L.B. Chonko, and J.P. Cannon 2005. Key Accounts and Team Selling: A Review, Framework, and Research Agenda. *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management*. 25(2): 181-193.
- Kumar, S., R. Bragg, and D. Creinin. 2003. Managing Supplier Relationships. *Quality Progress*. 36 (9): 24-36.
- Lambert, B. 2008. Is Your Sales Team Stuck in the 1890's? *T&D Journal*, 62(4), 42-48.
- Liu, A. H. and M. P. Leach 2001. Developing Loyal Customers with a Value-Adding Sales Force: Examining Customer Satisfaction and the Perceived Credibility of Consultative Salespeople. *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management* 21 (2): 147-156.
- Lau, G. T., M. Goa and S. L. Phua 1999. Purchase Related Factors and Buying Center Structure: An Empirical Assessment. *Industrial Marketing Management* 28(6): 573-587.
- Manning, G. L. and B. L. Reece 2006. Selling Today Building *Quality Partnerships*, Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall.
- Marshall, G. W., W. C. Moncrief and F. G. Lassk 1999. The Current State of Sales Force Activities. *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management* 23 (August): 261-271.
- McQuiston, D. H. 1989. Novelty, Complexity, and Importance as Causal Determinants of Industrial Buyer Behavior. *Journal of Marketing*, 53 (April): 66-79.

- Miller, Heiman, Tuleja, 2005, The New Conceptual Selling: The Most Effective Proven Method for Face-to-Face Sales Planning, New York City: Business Plus.
- Millman, T. and K. Wilson 1996 Developing Key Account Management Competencies. *Journal of Marketing Practice*. 2 (2): 7-21.
- Moncrief, W. C. 1986. Selling Activity and Sales Position Taxonomies for Industrial Sales Forces. *Journal of Marketing Research* 23(August):261-271.
- Moncrief, W. C., G. W. Marshall and F. G. Lask 2006. A Contemporary Taxonomy of Sales Positions, *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management* 26 (1): 55-66.
- Montebello, A.R. 2001. Effective Competency Modeling and Reporting: A Step-by-Step Guide for Improving Individual and Organizational Performance. *Personnel Psychology* 54 (4), 1034-1037.
- Morgan, R.M. and S.D. Hunt 1994. The Commitment-Trust Theory of Relationship Marketing. *Journal of Marketing* 58(3): 20-38.
- Moriarty, R. T. and J. E. G. Bateson 1982. Exploring Complex Decision Making Units: A new Approach. *Journal of Marketing Research* 19 (May): 182-191.
- Morris, M. M. and J.L. Holman 1988. Source Loyalty in Organizational Markets: A Dyadic Perspective. *Journal of Business Research* 16 (2): 117-131.
- Oliver, C. 1990. Determinants of Inter-organizational Relationships: Integration and Future Directions. *Academy of Management Review* 15 (April): 241-65.
- Palmer, A.J. 1995. Relationship Marketing: A Universal Paradigm or Management Fad? *The Learning Organization*. 3 (3): 18-29.
- Pardo, C. 1997. Key Account Management in the Business-to-Business Field: The Key Account's Point of View. *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management* 17 (4): 17-26.
- Pelham, A. M. 2002. An Exploratory Model and Initial Test of the Influence of Firm-Level Consulting-Oriented Sales Force Programs on Sales Force Performance. *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management* 22 (2): 97-109.
- Pettijohn, C. E., L. S. Pettijohn and A. J. Taylor 1995. The Relationship Between Effective Counseling and Effective Selling Behaviors. *The Journal of Consumer Marketing* 12 (1): 5-15.
- Plank, R.E. and S.J. Newell 2007, The Effects of Social Conflict on Relationship Loyalty in Business Markets. *Industrial Marketing Management*. 36 (2): 59-67.
- Plank, R.E., and D.A. Reid 1994. The Mediating Role of Sales Behaviors: An Alternate Perspective of Sales Performance and Effectiveness. *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management* 14(Summer): 43-56.
- Podsakoff, P.M. S. B. Mackenzie, J.Y. Lee, and N.P. Podsakoff 2003, Common Method Bias in Behavioral Research: A Critical Review of the Literature and Recommended Remedies, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 88 (5): 879-903.
- Rackham, N. 1989. Major Account Sales Strategy, New York; McGraw Hill Companies.
- Rackham, N. 1996. Spin Selling Fieldbook, New York: McGraw Hill Companies.
- Rackham, N. and J. R. DeVincentis 1999. Rethinking the Sales Force, New York: McGraw Hill Companies.

- Rentz, J. O., D. C. Shepherd, A. Tashchian, P. A. Dabholkar and R. T. Ladd 2002. A Measure of Selling Skill: Scale Development and Validation. *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management* 22 (1): 13-22.
 - Ricks, J. M., J. A. Williams, and W.A. Weeks 2008. Sales Trainer Roles, Competencies, and Behaviors: A Case Study. *Industrial Marketing Management* 37 (5), 593-600.
 - Robinson, P. J., C.W. Faris, and Y. Wind 1967. Industrial Buying and Creative Marketing. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
 - Rossiter, J.R. 2002. The C-OAR-SE Procedure for Scale Development in Marketing. *International Journal of Research in Marketing* 19(4): 305-321.
 - Schultz, R.J. and K.R. Evans 2002. Strategic Collaborative Communication by Key Account Representatives. *The Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management*. 22(1): 23-31.
 - Sengupta, S. and R.E. Krapfel, and M.A. Pusateri 2000. An Empirical Investigation of Key Account Salesperson Effectiveness. *The Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management*. 20 (4): 253-261.
 - Shepherd, C.D. 1999 Service Quality and the Sales Force: A Tool for Competitive Advantage. *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management* 19 (3): 73-82.
 - Valentino, A. J. 2000. Personality Selling. Iseling: Vantage Point Publishing.
 - Walker, O. C., G. A. Churchill, Jr. and N. M. Ford 1977. Motivation and Performance in Industrial Selling: Present Knowledge and Needed Research. *Journal of Marketing Research* 14 (May): 156-168.
 - Wangenheim, F. V. 2003. Situational Characteristics as Moderators of the Satisfaction Loyalty Link: An Investigation in a Business to Business Context. *Journal of Consumer Satisfaction, Dissatisfaction and Complaining Behavior* 16: 145-156.
 - Wilson, K. and D. Weilbaker 2004. Global Account Management: A Literature Based Conceptual Model. *Mid American Journal of Business*. 19(1): 13-21.
 - Wind, Y. 1970. Industrial Source Loyalty. *Journal of Marketing Research*. 7(4): 450-457.
 - Wood, J.A. 2006. NLP Revisited Nonverbal Communication and Signals of Trustworthiness, *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management* (26 (2): 197-204.
-
-
- Richard E. Plank, Ph.D., City University of New York, is Associate Professor of Marketing at the University of South Florida Polytechnic. Prior to academia he spent 10 years in business sales and marketing and has research interests in business buying and selling.
- Joseph Belonax Jr., Ph.D., University of Nebraska is Professor of Marketing at Western Michigan University. Prior to academia he spent five years in business sales and marketing and has research interests in consumer and organizational buying behavior.
- Stephen J. Newell, Ph.D. Florida State University, is Professor and Chair of Marketing at Western Michigan University. Prior to academia he spent five years in business sales and marketing and has research interests in sales, advertising and green marketing.

Appendix

BEHAVIORAL INDICATORS*

Relationship Behaviors

- RB 1 The sales person tries to get to know me on a personal level.
- RB2 The sales person is good at building rapport with me.
- RB3 The sales person and I exchange views on a variety of topics.

Task Behaviors

- TAB 1 The sales person presents facts explaining how his/her product/service benefited my company.
- TAB2 The sales person acts like a consultant to me and my company.
- TAB3 The sales person gives strategic business advice to help my company.

Relationship Loyalty

- Reloy 1 I feel loyalty to the salesperson and his/her company
- Reloy 2 I have a strong relationship with the salesperson and his/her company
- Reloy 3 I am committed to working with this salesperson and his/her company
- Reloy 4 I am willing to maintain my relationship with the salesperson and his/her company

*Given the small numbers of indicators used for each construct, reverse coding was not utilized. For each indicator the direction is the same, with the higher number (7 maximum) indicating the most agreement with the statement.