

Understanding the Role of Trust and Expertise When Developing Business-to-Business Relationships in France

By Stephen J. Newell, Paul Lapoule and Duke Leingpibul

The importance of developing strong international business associations is essential to achieving success in global business ventures. Thus, it becomes crucial for trading partners to better understand how to more effectively develop and nurture loyal relationships. In this study, we investigate how the components of credibility (expertise and trust) of both the sales rep and the company interact to create long-term business relationships in France. The results indicate that while perceptions of both the rep and company are important in maintaining these business-to-business relationships, contrary to previous research in the U.S., they do not have a direct effect on loyalty. However, similar to studies based in the U.S., company expertise and trust have a direct and significant role in creating loyalty perceptions for French businesses.

INTRODUCTION

Cannon and Perreault 1999 argue that understanding and cultivating business-to-business relationships are essential in developing long-term relationships. Long-term loyal business partnerships result in greater revenues, higher market share and lower costs associated with servicing current customers and acquiring new accounts (Reicheld 1993). This strong bond helps reduce a company's perceived risk that is inherent in all purchase decisions, particularly those with new business partners (Oliver 1999).

Samaha, Beck, and Palmatier (2014) state that when potential businesses partners have different cultures, it becomes even more difficult, and thus more essential, to understand and cultivate these relationships. According to Macquin, et al. (2000, 71-72). "the increasingly global nature of markets poses new challenges to marketers" and call for researchers to investigate "which aspects of selling, if any, are influenced by culture."

One country that is of particular importance in world trade is France. France has the fifth largest economy in the world and the second biggest in the European Union (CIA World Factbook 2015). France is home to some of the largest corporations in the world in industries such as power/energy (Total, GDF, EDF), banking/finance (AXA, BNP), pharmaceuticals (Sanofi), consumer goods (Carrefour, L'Oreal), and air/space/defense (EADS). The French transportation system one of the most integrated and well organized in Europe and has a highly developed telecommunications system, with extensive cable and microwave radio relay networks, fiber optic systems, and satellite systems. Overall, France offers international corporations an increasingly sophisticated framework from which to do business.

As domestic and foreign investment opportunities grow in France, the need to understand the process and the variables which affect the success of business relationships becomes even more important to many firms world-wide. A number of U.S.-focused studies have been undertaken to better understand the different factors that affect loyalty between companies. Unfortunately, relatively little research has focused on determining whether similar variables impact B-to-B relationships in France.

Consequently, the objective of this paper is to better understand if variables that drive western-based business relationships apply similarly in France. Specifically, we investigate whether expertise and trust play significant roles in developing French business partnerships and

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analyze how buyer perceptions of the sales reps and their firms interact and impact assessments of loyalty. The results of this study will help to broaden the usefulness and generalizability of previous research conducted largely in the U.S. and offer important guidelines for creating stronger relationships for companies who are currently engaged in, or are contemplating developing, relationships with businesses in France.

Business Relationships and Culture

The cultural impact on consumption and marketing has become an increasingly important subject for businesses who are contemplating developing international relationships (Soars, Farhangmehr and Shoham 2007). Culture is a set of values and behaviors that a specific group of people adhere to (Cannon, Doney, Mullen and Petersen 2010). Though this broad definition provides some clarity as to what culture is, researchers need more information as to what specifically makes up a culture (Soars, Farhangmehr and Shoham 2007). In his research, Hofstede (1980; 2001) has helped to create some clarity by proposing four dimensions of culture: Individualism/Collectivism; Power Distance; Uncertainty Avoidance; and, Masculinity/Femininity. Samaha, Beck and Palmatier (2014) presented scores among each of Hofstede's four dimensions across 25 different countries. France ranked in the top third of the countries in *individualism*, *power distance*, and *uncertainty avoidance*, while placing in the bottom third in *masculinity*. These scores, in general, reflect the cultural views of most of the other European nations (Samaha, Beck and Palmatier 2014).

Macquin, Rouzies and Prime (2000) provide some insight into how these cultural dimensions affect the interactions between buyers and sellers in business-to-business relationships. According to the authors, countries that are considered to be *individualistic*, view sales reps more favorably and these positive perceptions play an important role in influencing purchase decisions. Contrastingly, cultures with a *collectivist* perspective would put more emphasis on company assessments (and less on evaluations of the salesperson) when choosing a supplier. In societies with greater *power distance*, salespeople would contact and work only with buyers at or below their professional and/or social standing. Decisions the need to be made by buyers at a higher status

would require that the representative from the supplier be of similar rank or prestige. Countries with cultures defined by high *uncertainty avoidance* would be more risk averse and consequently, the sales cycle would be longer and follow a more structured process. In addition, the perceived expertise and the experience of the sales rep would be significant in influencing the decision-making process. Those cultures that are considered less *masculine*, would value relationships based on partnering, nurturing and trust, at both a business and personal level. In addition, effective sales interactions and negotiations in these more *feminine* cultures, would tend to be friendly, amiable and non-confrontational.

As you compare France with the U.S. on the four cultural dimensions, both countries rank high on individualism. In cultures with higher levels of individualism, sales people will be more likely to be perceived as a partner of the buying firm (Macquin, et al. 2000). These relationships tend to be built on an exchange of information that is predicated on the perceived knowledge and expertise of the rep. This expertise is the foundation to build higher levels of trust and relationship quality. Consequently, it may be argued that the role sales reps play in developing relationships between businesses may be similar in both the U.S and France.

Developing Loyal Buyer-Seller Relationships Through Perceptions of Credibility

Relationship marketing has been defined as all marketing-focused activities that help to establish, develop, and maintain successful exchanges with business partners (Morgan and Hunt 1994). Gaining long-term loyalty in these associations between firms is a critical outcome of, and "central" to, relationship marketing activities (Morgan Hunt 1994, p. 23).

Loyalty, in general, can be characterized as *being faithfully committed to a relationship* (Plank, Reid, and Newell 2006; Sirdeshmuck, Singh and Sabol 2002). Overall, if partners recognize that there is value in the business relationship, they are more likely to remain loyal to that supplier (Neal 1999; Payne and Holt 2001; Ravald and Gronroos 1996; Sirdeshmuck, Singh and Sabol 2002). Developing strong loyalty in customers often leads to greater sales and the ability to charge more for products and services (Palmatier, Scheer and

Steenkamp 2007; Reichheld and Teal 1996; Zeithaml, Berry and Parsuraman 1996). One of the key drivers of loyalty in relationships is the assessment of credibility of the partner.

Credibility can be seen as the perceptions of believability, reliability, and plausibility that a receiver holds toward a source (Belch, Belch, and Villarreal 1987). In business-to-business studies, researchers have focused on two types of credibility: 1) those of the company, and 2) those reflecting the individual sales representative (Belonax, Newell and Plank 2007). In addition, most researchers have conceptualized credibility as having two major components. The first, *expertise*, a cognitive, knowledge-based dimension, and the second, the affective-based dimension of *trust* (Dholakia and Sternhal 1977; Hovland, Janis and Kelley 1953; Newell and Goldsmith 2001; Rarick 1963; and, Sharma and Sheth 1997). Recently, a study by Arndt et al. (2014) discusses the importance of using benevolence (trust) and expertise credibility-building statements when addressing objections of the buyer.

Expertise can be defined as the pertinent knowledge and competency possessed by a company or individual (Belonax et al., 2007; Goldsmith, et al 2000; Lagace et al., 1991; Ou et al., 2012). Specifically, Hovland (1953) characterized expertise as the level of competency and capability of an organization has in making and delivering its' products and services. In business-to-business situations, this expertise is established by the buyer when evaluating purchase decisions and this appraisal plays a key role in determining the overall image and credibility of the supplier (Bunn 1993; Newell and Goldsmith 2001) and in creating strong business-to-business relationships (Vincent and Webster 2013). Perceptions of salesperson expertise are established through evaluations of how effective the solutions that are offered by the rep to solve buyer problems. These remedies often require specialized knowledge and experience of the salesperson (Liu and Leach 2001).

Trust plays a central role in buyer-seller relationships (Dowell, Heffernan and Morrison 2013; Solomonson 2012). Trust can be defined as the belief that an individual, group or company will fulfill their promises (Alcaniz 2010; Plank, Reid and Pullins 1999; Wang

2009; Young 2006; Zucker 1986). There are at least two types of trust between business-to-business partners, *firm-specific trust* and *interpersonal trust* (Akrouit and Akrouit 2011; Wang 2009). *Firm-specific trust* is between the supplier and the customer they service and is established through a variety of experiences between the parties. *Interpersonal trust* is developed through interactions with individuals from the supplier company (often sales reps) and representatives from the company being serviced (often the buyers). Consequently, through these exchanges with the sales representatives and the companies they represent, perceptions of trust are developed and have a strong effect on the perceived quality of business relationships (Morgan and Hunt 1994; Wang 2009).

Makaoui (2010), in his study of buyer-seller relationships across several different industries in France, suggest that confidence in a supplier was largely based on assessments of credibility (Barth 2004). This confidence/credibility in a company and its representative is said to be related to perceptions of technical and moral reliability (Akrouit and Akrouit 2010). Technical and moral reliability seem to be closely related to expertise and trust. Technical reliability can be seen as having extensive knowledge of the industry they are in, the products they sell and the ability to address the needs of the buyer in innovative ways. Moral reliability is defined as having honesty and consideration and helps to establish trust in the relationship. Akrouit and Akrouit (2010) argue that both of these create more confidence in business-to-business relationships in France, and that confidence leads to long-lasting loyal partnerships. Other French-based research seems to confirm this. Specifically, Donada and Nogatchewsky (2007) found that when assessing potential French business partners, perceived expertise has a significant effect on reputation, which in effect, creates greater trust and desire to maintain and nurture the relationship.

HYPOTHESES

The following hypotheses revolve around the key role expertise and trust, of the salesperson as well as the company that they represent, play in the development and maintenance of business relationships. Though there have been a number of U.S.-based studies that

have looked at business-to-business interactions between buyer and seller, the number of similar studies of focusing on French buyer-seller relationship have been limited. Of the studies originating in France, a number of articles have focused on trust as an important component of relationship building (e.g. Akrouit et al., 2016; Akrouit 2013). In addition, the importance of competence (expertise) in developing lasting business relationships is also discussed in a few studies (Akrouit 2013; Akrouit 2014). Though the research conducted in France does not specifically test the interrelationship between all of the constructs (expertise, trust, and loyalty of both the rep and their company), past research findings in both the U.S. and in France, provide insight in the development of the following hypotheses in relation to French business-to-business relationships.

Salesperson Expertise and Trust

For salespeople in business-to-business relationships, perceptions of expertise seem to drive trust associations. Specifically, past research suggests that a salesperson's expertise affects trust by establishing greater confidence that the sales representative is knowledgeable and capable (Busch and Wilson 1976; Doney and Cannon 1997; Dowell, Heffernan and Morrison 2013; Liu and Leach 2001; Moorman, Deshpande and Zaltman 1993). Seller expertise has been found to have a significant and positive influence on customer-focused relational mediators including trust (Palmatier, *et al.*, 2006). Other research has shown that customers, who perceive salespeople to have high levels of expertise, view the reps as more trustworthy (Busch and Wilson 1976; Crosby, Evans, and Cowles 1990; Liu and Leach 2001; Swan, Trawick and Silva 1985).

Akrouit (2014), in her study with buyers and sellers in France, confirmed the importance of establishing expertise in business-to-business relationships. The concept of expertise is represented by "seller competence" which she defines as the "know-how of the seller" and the degree to which the supplier "has the requisite competence" needed for developing trust which leads to a quality business relationship (p. 153). Consistently, studies in both the U.S. and in France have suggested that buyer's trust in the sales rep is affected by the level of expertise attributed to the salesperson.

Thus, it is hypothesized that:

H1. A buyer's perceived **Sales Rep Expertise** significantly and positively affects perceptions about the **Sales Rep Trust**.

A number of studies also suggest that sentiments about company expertise are based, in part, on the buyer's opinions about the expertise of the sales rep (Doney and Cannon 1997; Crosby, Evans and Cowels 1990). More specifically, Dimopoulou and Fill (2000) found that as perceptions of salesperson expertise increased, the image of their company was significantly improved. The specific relationship between expertise perceptions of the rep and the company, though not studied directly in France, would seem to be logical. Thus, it is hypothesized that:

H2. A buyer's perceived **Sales Rep Expertise** significantly and positively affects buyer perceptions of **Company Expertise**.

Past research has indicates that relationship quality is significantly affected by perceptions of a salesperson's expertise (Akrouit 2014; Boles, Johnson and Barksdale 2000; Crosby, Evans and Coles 1990; Palmatier *et al.*, 2006). DeVincentis and Rackham (1999) state that buyers who are interested in establishing long-term commitments place great value on the expertise provided by salespeople. Similarly, Lai, Feng-Sha and Cheung (2012) found that salesperson expertise significantly affects the strength of the business relationship in a study of financial institutional customers in Taiwan. In another study, a rep's task behaviors (those actions that suggest an expert understanding of the business situation) have been found to significantly affect loyalty (Newell *et al.*, 2011). In their study, Liu and Leach (2001) discovered that salesperson expertise had a significant effect on the satisfaction of the rep's organization. In addition, they suggest that by establishing customer confidence through consultative behaviors (i.e., expertise), a sales rep can develop greater loyalty with their customers and consequently, prevent potential switching behavior.

In research by Akrouit (2014), it is hypothesized that competence plays a key role in the in the business-to-business relationship and helps to drive loyalty particularly in the "exploration phase" of the relationship

(Akrouit 2012). Consequently, perceptions of salesperson expertise will play a key role in affecting loyalty in business associations in France. It is then hypothesized:

H3. A buyer's perceived **Sales Rep Expertise** significantly and positively affect buyer perceptions of **Loyalty**.

A salesperson's trustworthiness has been found to be correlated with perceptions of company trust (Chow and Holden 1997). Sun and Lin (2010) suggest that greater trust in a retail salesperson leads to more trust in the store. Specifically, they find that person-to-person trust has a stronger influence on loyalty than person-to-firm trust. Another study established a significant relationship between sales rep trust and company trust after the initial sales encounter (Wood, Boles and Babin 2008).

Past French-focused research has not studied separate forms of trust in terms of the sales rep and their company. However, Akrouit (2013) in her study suggests that her use of the term "seller trust" implies the trust established not only on a personal level, but one that includes the company they represent. Consequently, it is presumed that there is a strong relationship between the trust of the rep and the level of trust of the company. Thus, it is hypothesized that:

H4. A buyer's perception of a **Sales Rep Trust** significantly and positively affects buyer perceptions of **Company Trust**.

A number of studies suggest a strong connection between salesperson trust and loyalty (Chow and Holden 1997; Crosby, Evans and Cowles 1990; Doney and Cannon 1997; Foster and Cadogan 2000 Ou *et al.*, 2012; Wang 2009). Trust has been shown to increase cooperation, reduce conflict, lessen the probability of ending the relationship (Morgan and Hunt 1994) and, at the same time, decrease a buyer's decision-making uncertainty (Morgan and Hunt 1994; Gao, Srigny and Bird 2005). Guenzi and Georges (2010) found that as a buyer's trust in a salesperson increased, intentions to purchase again rose and the likelihood of the customer to switch suppliers, decreased.

Akrouit (2012) reported that affective trust (honesty, truthfulness, and connection) was a key attribute when developing business-to-business relationships in

France. Overall, past research has proposed a strong association between buyer perceptions of their trust in the salesperson and the desire to maintain that relationship. Thus it is hypothesized:

H5. A buyer's perceived **Sales Rep Trust** significantly and positively affects perceptions of **Loyalty**.

Company Expertise and Trust

It has been proposed that the knowledge and competency of a business partner affects perceptions of organizational trust (Mayer, Davis and Schoorman 1995). This assumption was confirmed by Newell and Goldsmith (2001), who found a significant positive relationship between perceptions of company expertise and evaluations of company trust. In addition, Vincent and Webster (2013) also determined that beliefs about expertise significantly affected organizational trust assessments.

There have been no specific studies originating in France that have tested the relationships between perceptions of the expertise and trust of a company. However, the importance of competence in driving sales rep trust in French business-to-business partnerships is discussed by Akrouit (2014). It seems that this expertise/trust association would apply to perceptions about the seller's company as well. Thus, it is proposed:

H6. A buyer's perceptions of **Company Expertise** significantly and positively affect perceptions of **Company Trust**.

Research suggests that the greater the company expertise, the more likely customers will develop a strong allegiance to that organization. In a study on developing a socially-responsible image, it was determined that positive opinions of the firm's expertise affected perceptions about company reputation, and consequently, resulted in more loyal interactions with the company (Alcaniz, Caceres and Perez 2010). Similarly, Kantsperger and Kunz (2010) found that financial institutions that had greater "expertise and abilities" were significantly more likely to establish loyalty with their customers.

No studies have been undertaken to test the effects of perceptions of company expertise on loyalty in

business-to-business relationships in France. However, the importance of competence in establishing business partnerships (Akrouit 2013) suggests that expertise is a key element in driving loyalty in perceptions of both the rep and his or her firm. Thus, it is hypothesized that:

H7. A buyer's perceived **Company Expertise** significantly and positively affects perceptions of **Loyalty**.

Past research has indicated an association between company trust and loyalty. For example, for consumers choosing which financial institution to bank with, company trust was the single most important factor in determining loyalty (Kantsperger and Kunz 2010; Ou *et al.*, 2012). Similarly, Shim *et al.*, (2007), found that retail consumers relied on perceptions of company trust when developing loyalty to a store. In business-to-business relationships, trust also seems to have a significant effect on loyalty perceptions. Chow and Holden (1997) found that trust had a strong positive impact on loyalty intentions. Chang *et al.*, (2012) determined that company trust was a key antecedent in gaining commitment to a firm.

Akrouit (2014) emphasizes the role of trust throughout the three stages of business-to-business relationships. Her definition of trust is broad and seems to encompass both the sales rep and the firm. Overall, the role of trust in developing relationships seems to be a key variable in creating long-lasting bonds in French business culture. Overall, research on relationships between customers and companies has indicated a connection between trust and loyalty. Thus, we hypothesize that:

H8. A buyer's perceived **Company Trust** significantly and positively affects perceptions of **Loyalty**.

METHODOLOGY

Questionnaire development

Prior to implementation of the study, a U.S.-based English-speaking researcher, with expertise in the area, formulated the initial survey questionnaire. The questionnaires were adopted from previous research conducted in the U.S. (Newel *et al.* 2011; Newell and Goldsmith 2001), therefore, this preliminary instrument

was subject to a pre-test analysis. Because of the dissimilarity between American and French business environments, it was necessary to modify the survey instrument with instructions and measurement items that are easy for French respondents to understand and comprehend, and are not vague or difficult to answer (Dillman, 1978; Belson, 1981).

To help ensure the content validity of the adopted measures, a group of French practitioners was employed to develop insights into individuals' experiences regarding company expertise, company trust, salesperson expertise, salesperson trust, and loyalty. A team of U.S.- and French researchers finalized the initial survey questionnaire to satisfy the degree of content validity. The team conducted follow-up discussions and made necessary changes to correct all discrepancies.

To help ensure the face validity, the survey instrument was translated into French by a bilingual academic with expertise in business in France, and then back-translated into English by another bilingual business professor. Based upon the back translated version, the bi-lingual French professor then met the American English-speaking researcher who designed the initial survey to fix all minor changes. This was to confirm the similarity of the two versions, such that the scores obtained from the original American English version in the previous research and French version would have similar meaning and interpretation (Mullen, 1995). The finalized French version questionnaire was then used in the pre-test study.

Pre-test

Data from a pre-test that was completed by a group of 35 French MBA students led to the removal of various measurement items due to having modification indices that were strongly irregular, having kurtosis values >2.0 or standardized regression weights <0.4 (criteria suggested by Hair *et al.*, 2006 and Loehlin, 1998). Confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to ensure that the scales appeared to be performing appropriately. This factor analysis also indicated that items on the scales were appropriate. CFA also helped ensure the validity of the retained measures by identifying any abnormality in the factor loading pattern, such as cross or weak loading (see Podsakoff and Organ, 1986).

After reviewing the pre-test CFA result to justify the face validity of the measures and how well they represent the constructs for this study, the pre-test respondents were also asked to identify any measurement items that should be dropped from the survey or be altered (Maurer and Tross, 2000). After using the pre-test respondents' feedback to make the appropriate corrections, the resultant questionnaire was examined by various American and French researchers to confirm that the survey and its instructions and measures were easily understandable (Dillman, 1978, 2000). At this point, the questionnaire was then subjected to an actual study.

Data Analysis

AMOS.22 in structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to examine the study data. Amos, which is a covariance-based SEM, is more appropriate than PLS since all constructs in this study are reflective measurements (Hair et al 2014, Hair, Ringle, and Sarstedt 2011). This methodology is particularly useful for a study such as this that entails constructs that must be evaluated through observable measures and indicators (Steenkamp and Baumgartner, 2000). In addition, the SEM methodology enables simultaneous evaluation of all relationship paths and provides a set of goodness-of-fit statistics (Mullen, 1995), and additionally helps ensure equivalence of constructs, measurement items and samples. These characteristics are essential in order to avoid weakening the validity of substantive inferences in complex research (Singh, 1995; Mullen, 1995). Finally, this approach is a good method to examine relationships between constructs (Steenkamp and Baumgartner, 2000). After the measurement items were purified, subsequent re-running of the measurement models in AMOS confirmed that the proposed models were cohesive and that the data fit each model well. Thus, the models are sufficiently strong to use in such a study.

The Sample

The survey was conducted in paper/pencil format in a classroom environment. The sample of 132 responses were French business professionals, taking MBA classes, who had purchasing responsibilities with their firms at the time they took the survey. To select the sample frame for an empirical study to test the noted hypotheses, it was necessary to find respondents that

had similar levels of experience with these concepts. As indicated by Steenkamp and Baumgartner (2000), this minimizes within-group heterogeneity, reduces measurement and random errors and strengthens the validity of the study. Based on their potential to answer the questionnaire, and their accessibility, the MBA students at a university in France were chosen as the participants in this study. These MBA students generally consist of middle management from various industries. The average years of experience in purchasing jobs is 2.4 years ($M = 2.4$, $SD = 3.48$) and most of the respondents work for a large size firm (small firm=27%, medium firm=20% and large firm=53%). The sample consists of 47% male and 53% female.

Study

Of the completed surveys, 118 were usable for the respondents (14 surveys were discarded, primarily due to illegibility or too much missing data). Confirmatory factor analysis indicates that the measured variables do load onto the constructs in the structural models. In addition, the result of the measurement model evaluation from SEM also ensures the proper loading of all measuring items.

Since the study adopted the self-administrative survey to collect information, the impact from common method bias needed to be addressed (Lindell and Whitney 2001, Podsakoff et al 2003, Chang, Van Witteloostuijn, and Eden, 2010). The Harman's Single Factor test was performed for both products and showed no serious threat from common variance method (e.g. the total variance explained under single factors were less than 0.50 for both products). Although reporting the Herman Single Factor is necessary, this indicator has been criticized by many scholars because of its insensitivity (Podsakoff et al 2003, Lindell and Withney 2001, Chang, Van Witteloostuijn, and Eden, 2010); therefore, another ex-post statistical analyses for examining common method bias is needed (Chang, Van Witteloostuijn, and Eden, 2010). The common latent variable (CLV) approach is used as the ex post statistical analysis in AMOS 22.0 for both products. Again, for all items, the differences of the standardized estimates between models with CLV and without CLV showed very small value (less than 0.20). Therefore, the common method bias is not a threat for this study.

Table I: Statistical Results of the Current Structural Model

Construct	Mean	Deviation	Parameter Est.	Cronbach Alpha (>=0.70)^a	Ave. Variance Extract's (>=0.50)^b
Sales Rep Trust					
SRT 1: I trust the Sales Representative.	3.49	1.56	0.82	0.90	0.73
SRT 2: The Sales Representative makes truthful claims.	3.88	1.61	0.91		
SRT 3: The Sales Representative is honest.	3.71	1.73	0.85		
SRT 4: I believe what the Sales Representative tells me	3.68	1.58	0.84		
Sales Rep Expertise					
SRE 1:The Sales Representative has great expertise	2.89	1.63	0.78	0.85	0.66
SRE 2:The Sales Representative has a great amount of experience.	2.79	1.65	0.84		
SRE 3:The Sales Representative is skilled in what he/she does.	2.86	1.60	0.82		
Loyalty					
Loyalty 2: I would recommend the supplier's company to others	3.21	1.48	0.62	0.81	0.63
Loyalty 4: I have a strong relationship with the supplier's company	3.28	1.58	0.85		
Loyalty 6: I am committed to working with the supplier's company in the future	3.20	1.47	0.88		
Company Expertise					
CoExp 1:The supplier's company has great expertise.	3.08	1.46	0.88	0.87	0.76
CoExp 2: The supplier's company has a great amount of experience.	2.82	1.68	0.88		
CoExp 3: The supplier's company is skilled in what they do.	2.92	1.68	0.85		
Company Trust					
CoTr 1: I trust the supplier's company.	3.19	1.74	0.85	0.89	0.66
CoTr 2:The supplier's company makes truthful claims.	3.38	1.73	0.81		
CoTr 3:The supplier's company is honest.	3.28	1.72	0.85		
CoT r4:I believe what the supplier company tells me	3.59	1.40	0.74		

Notes: ^a Recommended value by Nunnally and Berstein (1994)

^b Recommended value by Fornell, Claes and David G. Larcker (1981)

As shown in Table I, all other constructs met the oft cited targeted Cronbach's α value of ≥ 0.7 (Hair et al., 2006, Nunnally and Berstien 1994). In addition, since all constructs were reflective measurement, the average variance extract was also calculated to help identify reliability (McKinsie, Podsakoff, and Podsakoff 2011) and the results were satisfied (>0.5) (Fornell, Claes, Larcker 1981). As shown in Table II, both Cronbach alpha and Variance Extracted tests presented above provide enough evidence to suggest that this questionnaire exhibits adequate reliability.

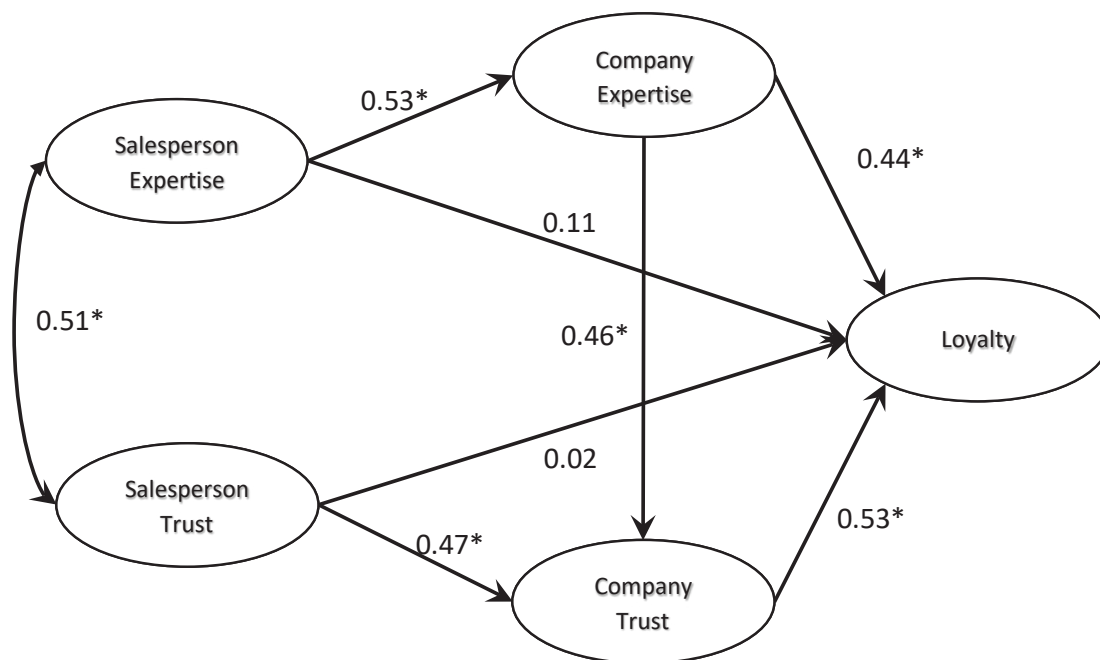
Table II: Fit Indices from SEM Analysis

Fit Indices	Cmin/DF	RMSEA	TLI	CFI	GFI
Recommended Acceptable Fit Value ^a	< 3.0	< 0.80	>0.90	>0.90	>0.85
SEM Results	2.067	0.060	0.928	0.940	0.855

Note: ^a from Hair *et. al* (2006)

As shown in Table II, the structural model's fit statistics indicate that the targeted values were achieved (Chi-Square/DF<3.0; RMSEA<0.08, and etc.) (Hair et al., 2006). These fit statistics, combined with substantive assessments of the scale items suggest acceptable internal consistencies for the construct scales. Although the fit indices might achieve very good acceptable fit range, they are still not in the ideal fit range (e.g. RMSEA <=0.05, Chi-Square/DF < 2.0, and etc). As reflected in Anderson et al. (2005), Churchill (1979), and Hair et al. (2006), we believe that some leniency in statistical rigidity is appropriate for a study that entails modified measurement items, conducted with respondents in another language. Thus, we accept that the findings are appropriate to test the hypotheses.

Next, it was necessary to explore whether the study's model and directional paths between its constructs hold up with the sample group. The result was the determination that the directional paths shown in Figure 1 were consistent with the French samples. Thus, the structural model and findings were accepted as sufficiently strong for this study.

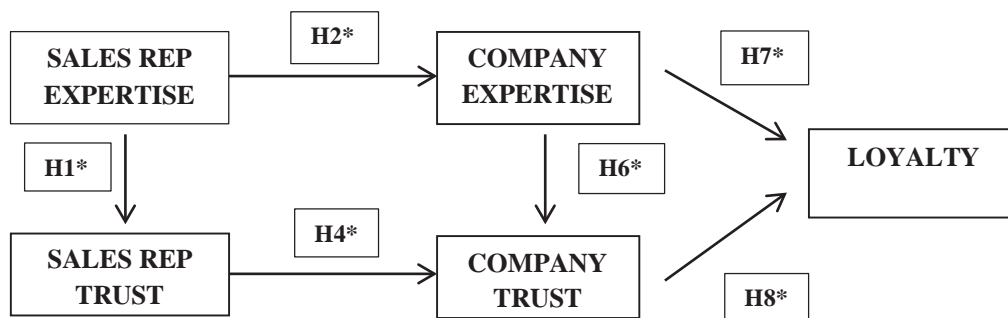
Figure 1
Path Analysis

Note: *Directional Path Weights are Statistically Significant at $P < .01$ level.

Results

With respect to Hypothesis 1, the results indicate that the relationship between Sales Rep Expertise and buyer perceptions of Sales Rep Trust is significant, accordingly, H1 is supported. Hypothesis 2 theorizes a relationship between a buyer's perception of a Sales Rep Expertise and the Expertise of the Company. This association was found to be significant, therefore, H2 is supported. Hypothesis 3 states that a buyer's perception of Sales Rep Expertise significantly affects Loyalty. The results fail to verify this assumption, thus, H3 is rejected. Hypothesis 4 posits that buyer perceptions of Sales Rep Trust significantly affect Company Trust. This theory is supported by the data, hence, H4 is supported. Hypothesis 5 suggests that a buyer's assessment of Sales Rep Trust affects Loyalty perceptions. The results indicate that this relationship is not significant, as a result, H5 is rejected. Hypothesis 6 posits that a buyer's perception of Company Expertise significantly influences Company Trust. The results confirm this assumption, thus, H6 is supported. Hypothesis 7, which specifies that a buyer's opinion about the supplier Company's Expertise significantly affects Loyalty, is confirmed. Thus, H7 is supported. Finally, Hypothesis 8, which states that a buyer's perception of Company Trust significantly influences Loyalty, is confirmed, consequently, H8 is supported (see Figure 2).

Figure 2
Final Model



*- significant

DISCUSSION AND LIMITATIONS

The purpose of this study is to better understand how perceptions of credibility (trust and expertise) interact with the interpersonal (sales rep with purchasing contact) and the inter-organizational (supplier's organization with buyer's organization) to affect French business-to business partnerships. Overall, the results show that expertise and trust play significant roles in developing loyal relationships.

As discussed earlier, cultural values influence buyers' attitudes and behaviors. Hofstede (2001) has indicated that France and the U.S. have, in general, similar cultural viewpoints in terms of uncertainty avoidance, and individualism (both in the top third of the countries that were ranked). Perceptions of power distance and masculinity, on the other hand, were strongly contrasting. In the context of developing business partnerships, however, the two country's similarities are greater than their differences. Specifically, the hypotheses, which were developed largely from U.S. based research, have, for the most part, been confirmed.

When developing business relationships, the results of this study suggest that company expertise and trust are keys to establishing loyalty. In addition, the findings indicate that perceptions of the sales rep's expertise and trust play an important, though secondary, role in developing commitment between firms. Specifically, the expertise and trust attributed to the sales rep helps to establish the expertise and trust of the company they represent, but not loyalty directly – contrary to the findings of some previous U.S.-based studies. The relatively subdued manner in which French sales interactions are practiced and the generally low esteem sales people are held in France, may account for the subordinate effect the sales rep has in forming loyalty (Gschwandtner 1991). Akrouit (2014) discusses the importance of cognitive trust in the “expansion” phase of the relationship, while “affective trust,” gains importance during “maintenance” stage of the partnership between firms. It seems that as the association between partners becomes more mature, trust builds and competence, which is already established, begins to play a secondary role in the maintenance phase of the relationship (Akrouit 2012). Consequently, for established relationships, perceptions of salesperson expertise may not play a key role in directly affecting loyalty.

Limitations

The current research contains a number of limitations. First, since the study focused on a relatively small sample of business professionals in France, the generalizability of the research to other countries is limited. In addition, this sample is relatively small, therefore, future researchers need to increase the size and geographic area where respondents are sampled to the validity of the findings of the study. Also, the present study relies chiefly on quantitative methodology in collection and analysis of the data (though qualitative methodology was used to a limited extent). Therefore, future studies may want to utilize qualitative data collection to gain a more in-depth understanding of the business-to-business relationships and the variables that affect them. Another issue concerns the constructs which were measured using scales originally developed in the United States. Though the instruments show reliability and validity, this is the first study for which they have been adapted for use in France. Thus, more research should be

undertaken utilizing these scales to firmly establish them as acceptable measures for similar investigations on sales relationships in this geographic area.

IMPLICATIONS

Pursuing international business opportunities is an important strategy for many organizations in this increasingly interdependent world (Samaha, Beck, and Palmatier 2014). France, with its large business and consumer markets, represents a significant opportunity for them. Consequently, it becomes important for potential trading partners to understand how to effectively develop and maintain business relationships across cultures. This is the first study to empirically analyze the interrelationship between perceptions of salesperson credibility, corporate credibility and loyalty in Europe. The results provide some key insights for businesses when developing strategies for this region of the world.

The results confirm the importance of trust. Thus, managers need to focus on ways to strengthen this credibility perception with potential business-to-business customers in France. Consequently, a general knowledge of French culture and history is important in developing relationships between the sales representative and the buyer. In addition, at least a basic knowledge of the French language and formal French etiquette is an advantage in establishing trust and respect. This knowledge is particularly important when interacting outside of work at lunches and dinners as well other non-business-related events. These interactions are a great way to get to know the buyer and develop trust in a more personal and intimate way. Providing seminars and training about French business, culture and language to employees who will be interacting with individuals from the company, would be an essential tool in building the foundation for a successful partnership.

In order to convey company expertise, information on corporate history, successful products and service, financial and market share, and other significant data needs to be developed and presented. It should be available in both French and English versions. In addition, information about successful relationships between the supplier and other French business partners

(particularly those firms that both companies have a relationship with) would be a very effective way to establish trust. Also, the use of a respected intermediary to make the initial contact and introduction would be a valuable tool to gain some initial credibility with the firm. In addition to significant knowledge of the supplier, the intermediary should personally know the salesperson that will be representing the firm.

French business people respect sales reps with technical knowledge and applications that help solve their concerns (Gschwandtner 1991). Thus, it is not only important for salespeople to be knowledgeable of their products and services, they need to be able to explain and demonstrate the benefits derived from them. Consequently, training needs to include educating the reps on company, product and service knowledge, as well problem solving and presentation skills, in order to be most effective in the French market. As the findings from this study indicate, by displaying appropriate expertise, of both the rep and his or her company, this helps to develop perceptions of trust with the buyer.

The French are among the most critical countries in terms of their perceptions of business and capitalism (2015 *Edelman Trust Barometer*). Thus, when developing businesses relationships in France, loyalty has to be built over a relatively long period of time (Akrouit and Akrouit 2011). As a result, the seller must provide expertise and trust information to help gain the confidence of the buyer. Informational cues to increase credibility perceptions of the sales rep include the confident way in which they present information, their ability to ask questions to understand the buyer's situation and their adeptness in developing creative solutions to problems. Also, their trustworthiness needs to be demonstrated by following through on all promises, being honest about the benefits of their products/services, and being respectful and polite during all interactions. In addition, as the results of this study indicate, evidence of company credibility is essential in developing these loyal partnerships. Ways in which company expertise and trust can be independently solidified include providing positive company financial and market information, references from satisfied customers, and details on social and environmental initiatives that the company has undertaken to help society-at-large. Ultimately,

patient and sincere exchanges between the organizations and their representatives (buyer and seller), will improve the likelihood of developing long-term business relationships in France (Gschwandtner 1991).

There have been a number of studies that have investigated expertise, trust and loyalty in business relationships. However, most of the research has been conducted in the United States. The current study provides an important opportunity to expand our global understanding of the role of these constructs play outside the United States. Overall, managers need to better understand how to navigate within the French culture and business. By effectively utilizing ways to enhance company and salesperson credibility throughout all stages of the relationship, the probability of establishing long term partnerships with companies will significantly increase. The results can be used to help practitioners, both within and outside of France, to develop more effective strategies to create loyalty with their customers. In addition, this study helps to establish a benchmark for future researchers who want to further investigate business-to-business partnerships in France and other countries in the region.

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