

Current Trends and Environmental Changes Impacting Sales Practice

By Ellen Bolman Pullins, Thomas W. Sharkey, Phuoc Pham, and Susan Ann Shultz

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The results include the following: the shift of power to the customer, a return to the importance of price, relationships are important despite many transactions taking place through technology, and firms are more focused on customer intelligence than competitive. In addition, millennials are now moving into management. This transition is as important as all other generational changes have been. They are the first group to grow up with access and early mastery of technology. They take technology for granted and they see it as a necessary way to solve customer problems in a rapid and effective way

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Chances are if you read an article on professional sales, be it a trade magazine, an online magazine, a blog, or even an academic journal publication, you will probably read that a number of dynamics in the environment are changing the way we sell. A variety of disruptions are reported to be happening right now that need to be understood and addressed. Customers have increased access to information and demand increased transparency (Cicala et al., 2014). The nature of competition has changed (Itani et al., 2017). Customer needs for efficiencies and strategic decisions interact with the expansion of digital channels, resulting in an increased need for flexible channels (Agnihotri et al., 2012; deeper relationships (Sashi, 2012) and customized, even co-created, solutions (Rodriguez and Boyer, 2016).

These changes, along with others, mean that the sales role, sales process, buyer-seller relationship and management of the sales function must be adapted to new circumstances. Yet, the funny thing is these oh-my-gosh-this-is happening-right-now statements don't read that different than similar articles from five years

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ago, or ten, or sometimes even more. In fact, some of these changes have become the new norm, with new standard practices. For instance, customers today need more customization, requiring a tailored sales process, not a focused product sale.

Somehow, though, this change continues to be discussed as *happening right now*. The question, then, is which of these factors are currently in a dynamic state and impacting professional selling? What trends do businesspeople see affecting the practice of selling right now? This paper sets out to tackle these questions. Using an action research approach designed to determine the most important dynamics through qualitative surveying and focus groups, we identify the most prevalent *current* trends and their implications for professional selling.

We begin the paper with a brief summary of some of the most commonly identified “trends” reported in both academic and applied articles. We then briefly explain the action research approach used in this paper. After that, we present results of a qualitative survey and follow up focus groups targeted at identifying the most important changes impacting selling right now. We end with a discussion of the implications of our findings for current practice, and a brief mention of limitations and ideas for further research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the following sections, we briefly review some of the most prevalent “current trends” as discussed in the literature.

Customers Actively Searching for Information

The buying behavior of customers continues to change because of the internet. Many customers actively search for information online, including opinions about products and service providers. Buyers continue to increase their use of social media in the buying process, increasing to over 70% of purchasing decisions in some industries (Arnold, 2017). As further evidence, the Conference Executive Board reported that 65% of the typical B2B purchase process is completed prior to the customer talking to a salesperson (Krausova, 2015), much of it occurring through digital channels.

Social Media

The most challenging trend impacting sales today may be the impact of social media in all phases of the sales structure and process (Moncrief, 2017). We know that customers have become more sophisticated at using social media to gain knowledge about products and companies (Ahearne and Rapp, 2010). Salespeople pull customers toward salesperson-generated content by using social media that provides customers control over types of information such as blogs, Twitter, and content communities. These technologies offer customers little control over the length, frequency or timing of communications received. Examples of social media that facilitate push strategies include various types of networking platforms (e.g. Facebook, LinkedIn, and Google+) (Agnihotri et al., 2012). The social media evolution is altering the balance of control from the seller to the buyer as the buyers become “product knowledgeable” (Moncrief, 2017).

Social Media for Customer Research

Itani, Agnihotri, and Dingus (2017) found that social media was an enabler of gathering data about hidden needs that customers have. Social media can promote adaptive selling behavior. Potential gains are so great that some researchers have advocated training or the availability of sales support people with special expertise in social media (Altman, 2016).

Responding to Transparency

Communication between a company and its customers has become transparent. This is a double-edged sword for professional sales. If the interaction is positive it will impact customers’ satisfaction positively. They may even generate positive content about the experience. On the other hand, negative interactions could damage the company or product’s reputation (Xu et al., 2017). This is contained in online ratings that customers provide. Customers’ expectations are growing with respect to how quickly a company must respond. This can be done through online chat, email, or problem-solving posts or videos.

Technology and AI

Over the years, a wide variety of articles have examined specific aspects and applications of technology to personal selling. Past “hot” topics included technology acceptance (Robinson, Marshall, and Stamps, 2005), sales force automation (Rapp, Agnihotri and Forbes, 2008), customer relationship management/relationship selling (Ahearne et al., 2008), and business-to-consumer sales technology usage (Ahearne and Rapp, 2010).

The literature continues to indicate that technology is becoming more important to professional sales as it is integrated more fully with daily activities. On-line sales are more important, particularly in certain industries. Technology can provide tools for salespeople to enhance communication with customers, co-create value, and enrich the customer experience. To take advantage of the benefits of technology, sales organizations must be able to absorb and analyze the huge amounts of data that are becoming available. This analysis only becomes valuable if efficient processes can be developed to extract critical insights (Gandomi and Haider, 2015).

Most recently, Artificial Intelligence (AI) and augmented reality have been introduced in the professional selling space. Dacko (2017) has shown the retailer benefits associated with augmented retailer shopping apps, which will become even more important. Artificial intelligence is another area that is continuing to grow (Ng, 2016), but, at this time, is only having marginal impact and requires large amounts of data. Clearly, both technologies have the potential to significantly impact professional selling.

Moving Customer Experience Upward

“The customer experience originates from a set of interactions between a customer and a product, a company, or a part of its organization, which provokes a reaction. This experience is strictly personal and implies the customer’s involvement at different levels (rational, emotional, sensorial, physical and spiritual)” (Gentile, Spiller and Noci, 2007). Increasingly, more companies engage customers in developing value creation processes such as solution creation (solution customization) and new product development (crowdsourcing, co-creation) (Piyathasanan et al., 2017). An example of this is the

change in the customer’s ability to impact value-adding and marketing mix decisions (Sashi, 2012). Therefore customers do not need to wait to use products to experience them but clients can have exciting experience right before and during making products or services.

Interpersonal Skills and Emotional Intelligence

In B2B selling, we have long known that strong relationships are critical, if not decisive, to the selling process. B2B customers expect enhanced value-added service from salespeople (Singh and Koshy, 2011). Relational strategies are important to the more strategically important accounts. The salesperson is critically important to building long-term relationships. Recent research has begun to find that emotional intelligence, has an indirect, rather than direct, effect on sales outcomes (McFarland, Rode, and Shervani, 2016). Deeter-Schmelz and Sutton (2015) advocate the concept of self-management. This approach requires significant commitment to developing interpersonal skills and emotional intelligence.

Competitive Intelligence

Competitive Intelligence is the process that sales organizations use to collect information about competitors and the competitive environment to increase sales performance (Rapp, Agnihotri, and Baker, 2011). Over time, the internet has developed as a place to learn about customers and companies. We know that salespeople can gather information about competitors from online forums, social network sites, and company blogs (Mangold and Faulds, 2009) and that competitive intelligence can play a pivotal role in value creation (Hughes, Le Bon, and Rapp, 2013). More recently, we have seen that there is a relationship between individual competitive intelligence and performance (Rapp et al., 2015). Competitive intelligence, in this information-intensive age, seems to still be considered an important dynamic impacting today’s selling.

While the literature is replete with these oft-cited important dynamics (trends), we don’t really know which of these various dynamics are most prevalently at work today. Some of these changes have been around for a long while. Take the case of customer relationships. In the 1990s, several noted marketing scholars, such as

Sheth predicted that the role of the salesperson could be disappearing as technology replaced the personal relationship (Stafford 1996). Similar calls can be found today (e.g., Roff-Marsh 2017): “field sales is dead.” Is this a new trend, or an old one? Others, for example value creation, have been around for years. Is it still a dynamic change, or has it become a new norm, integrated into standard operating procedure?

METHOD

Given our research questions, we determined that an action research approach using qualitative description would best meet the practical needs of the study. We set out to determine the current trends affecting sales practice to better help sales organizations strategically address changes. According to Perry and Gummesson, “action research in marketing must address the eternal reality of customer and competitors to marketing management and related importance on analytic generalization. (2004, p. 316)”.

Denscombe (2010) notes that action research engages individuals from a community of practice (a group who share a profession) to identify guidelines for effective practices. Given our purpose to construct practical insight for a community of practitioners, and that our sample was from a community of sales managers, we felt that action research was best suited to our needs. Quality action research for practitioners requires meeting four criteria: credibility, dependability, applicability, and confirmability (Thompson and Perry 2004).

Credibility

In order to assure credibility, we built a qualitative survey based on an extensive literature review of “current trends” used in positioning numerous academic articles published in the past 5 years. These trends were grouped independently by two researchers who discussed and resolved any differences. Knowing that some framing would occur based on the questions asked, we deliberately focused on identifying broad environments. We focused our language on currency and dynamic environment when asking questions.

Based on the literature, we identified seven environments (plus an option for “other”) to explore potential changes affecting sales practice. We developed open-ended

survey questions to explore each and asked participants what new trends in that environment were impacting its sales organization’s strategy and tactics, how they were impacting the sales organization, and how the sales organization was responding. Environments explored were customer, technology, competition, regulatory, economic, global and environmental (sustainability).

To meet the credibility criterion for quality action research for a practitioner audience, we also used multiple sources (Thompson and Perry 2004). Often, only one firm participates in action research. We were able to capitalize on a fairly large pool of expert opinion regarding trends across industries and businesses, with sales managers as our key informants. Open-ended qualitative surveying (qualitative description) provided a way to collect significant amounts of qualitative data.

We identified subjects through a large university sales program’s industry contacts obtaining a randomly generated email list of 200 individuals: sales manager recruiters, partners, and alumni. The pool was diverse spanning a substantial number of business-to-business industries, with variety as to the level of management. Fifty-eight people responded to the survey request and completed the open-ended questions on survey monkey, representing a 29% response rate.

Dependability

Questions were structured into sections with each section briefly describing an environment and then providing large text boxes for the respondent to describe what, if any, new trends were impacting their sales organizations. Participants were able to provide more than one trend in any given environment and could be as elaborative as they chose. Typical respondents provided approximately one trend per environment, skipped one environment, and provided more than one trend for at least one environment.

Action research next asks that data are analyzed and reported in a way that assures dependability (Thompson and Perry 2004). As per qualitative description research, data from the qualitative survey questions were grouped for similarities in each environment, and the group was then described, based on the typical reporting of any trend. This analysis is intended to describe, and thus is not “deep” (Sandelowski, 2000). We began by looking

at trends reported by at least one-third of respondents, paying particular attention to language that they were current or new or different in order to try to retain the focus on trends rather than items which had become new norms over time, and no longer represented current dynamic forces. This coding was conducted separately by two graduate assistants. Following this initial coding, one primary researcher then selected examples from the data and resolved disputes from the initial coding. All decisions made at this step were then reviewed by two additional researchers for soundness against the data, for this step, as well as the next. This iterative coding provided reliability and dependability.

Applicability

The next criterion requires that action research be transferable or applicable across different methods (Thompson and Perry 2004). We employed focus groups as a way to test the applicability of our initial findings from the qualitative survey. The focus group allowed us to share findings from the analysis of the qualitative data, thus assuring that the applicability of the data was strong.

The focus group subjects were a subset of the survey pool (population, not respondents), representing advisory board members of the program who were on campus for a sales program event, and thus represent a convenience sample. The focus group participants represented a variety of B2B industries, including corporate accounting, construction, industrial rental, automotive, industrial equipment, business services, distribution, and consumer products. Nineteen participants were randomly assigned to four focus groups. Experience averaged 15.4 years, and the 63% of the participants were male.

The focus group discussion lasted approximately one hour. One of the research team members began by sharing results of the qualitative study. The facilitator then questioned the focus groups on each trend, asking about their experiences with the trend, confirmation on the interpretation of the qualitative survey data, and prioritization of the trends that they were facing in their industries. Feeding back results from the survey helped to assure the applicability of the findings to the B2B sales context.

Confirmability

Analysis of the focus group data in light of the qualitative survey analysis also helped to assure confirmability. Analysis was descriptive in nature and conducted similarly to the qualitative survey data analysis. Note takers summarized findings at a descriptive level. Faculty facilitators confirmed the summaries. Summaries were then compared across the four focus groups by a researcher who had not coded the qualitative survey data. Results strongly confirmed the interpretation of the qualitative survey results, indicating the data was valid and reliable. Findings of both the qualitative survey and the focus group results are discussed together.

FINDINGS

In the following sections, we present the most significant, most highly prioritized current trends.

Price and Value

Changes relating to pricing and value top the list of trends from the research. Respondents strongly felt that price and value were critical due to the influence of more open information from the internet and technology, along with the commoditization of product itself. One respondent listed a series of changes in pricing and commoditization: *“Fixed pricing, indexed pricing, extended terms. Movement to spreadsheet quoting, and migration from traditional sales methods. Accountants running the larger companies purchasing functions. Procurement focuses on price and not on value. Lack of a win-win attitude.”* As indicated in this respondent’s view of price, *“The attitude of the customer to see what we do as a commodity as oppose to an appreciation for quality work.”* Failure to see points of differentiation result in a depersonalization of the selling process. Email, not the traditional face-to-face delivery, was a preferred delivery mechanism of clients and potential clients *“Everyone seems to want us to email our best price. They want to eliminate the meetings and do everything over the phone, through email and online.”*

Although the transparency of price to the customer has created pricing issues and shifted the balance of power between provider and customer, value and relationship strength can be important differentiators to overcome

this orientation as seen in this response, *“It is an opportunity to build relationships that will give our company a slight edge because we are liked. As long as we are exceeding their expectations, and we have a good relationship, they will use us if we are close in price.”* This differentiation is successful when, as above, the customer is the focus: *“We have to deliver our value in a way that recognized and preferred (by the customer).”*

Customer intelligence as opposed to competitive intelligence

Our research points to a major shift from competitive intelligence to a trend focused on “customer intelligence” and corporate and sales self-knowledge as a method of meeting the demands of a dynamic marketplace.

One organization expressed this trend as *“shifting the paradigm from our company’s need to the client’s needs. Ultimately if the focus stays on the client, we will succeed.”* Another response took this “paradigm shift” a step further, indicating that the customer wants a relationship of collaboration, and although challenging, the opportunity this approach presents is worthwhile. *“Being an innovative solution provider, enables the company (its employees) to be ‘client and project’ centric that fits ideally with the trend of greater collaborative involvement with suppliers; which in itself presents a challenge of always ‘sharpening’ the discrete approach taken with a client and the opportunity to gather opportunities for other projects where the company’s capability and capacities can be best utilized.”*

This paradigm shift is causing organizations to significantly up their game when hiring and training employees. The following responses illustrate this need: *“We’re investing in sales on-boarding and training. Huge investment in mobile apps.” “Keeping up with technology and stressing to our sales force that they must change with the times.” “Concentrating on more e-learning.” “Hiring better, more technically trained talent. Breaking down projects to meet the skill pool of trade people.” “Recertification of our phone skills every 6 months.”*

Corporate self-knowledge was reflected by new resource allocation and strategic initiatives. Respondents described changes in resource allocation as *“Adding marketing resources to understand consumer insights and behaviors, bolstering our innovation pipeline, and investing into more effective branding strategies. We are also taking strategic account planning to the next level to create stronger and stickier business relationships.”*

Improvements in strategy were stated as *“Making sure the people we hire buy into our mission and vision, which embodies our strategies of growth and relationships. We find that community involvement is equally as important as good customer service and quality installs.”* The new environment requires continual effort in areas impacting the customer relationship. *“Continued education of the sales force. Concentrating market solutions and not so much on selling products.”*

Responses throughout the survey were stated in terms of the customer’s voice as opposed to statements about, or framed by, the competition. For instance, one respondent noted, *“Sales representatives are becoming coaches and focused on ROI for the client. The sale must lead to effective results.”* Other respondents frequently used terms like “customer understanding,” and “customer advocacy,” This change to customer-focus is also supported by the number of respondents answering the open-ended questions about competitive trends. All participants had specific input on the trends with regard to their customers, whereas only 42% provided input regarding trends they were seeing with regard to the competitive environment.

Technology

Technology such as the internet, mobile applications, and social media has impacted the way in which organizations interact with and deliver to the customers. Technological developments are now “business as usual.” At this point, respondents didn’t see the technological changes as a new trend. Instead, they seemed to feel that navigating the multi-channel platform presented by multiple technology channels was the most critical current trend. Keeping up with and choosing the best technology to reach the customer is crucial, especially at the decision-making level.

In addition to managing multiple purchase channels, the variety of technologies can be leveraged to assure reach. For example, one respondent stated, *“All social technology trends are affecting us. We are in a business that is a C-level sale: CFO, CEO, CIO. To make this sale you need to get in front of them. We use everything available to us.”* These include *“iPads, mobile apps.”* *“Mobile apps, devices”* and *“social media,”* each listed frequently in many responses. Responses also included: *“Networking through social media,”* *“LinkedIn is a great tool if used deeply, Skype, and teleconferencing.”* There is a definite change in the actual technologies to facilitate the breadth of channels managed via technology: *“People want to rid themselves of their own data centers and move into the cloud.”*

Most respondents saw this trend as an opportunity. *“It definitely represents a huge opportunity for our company to continue to grow in customers because we have built our internet portfolio to meet the need of every internet prospect possible.”*

Speed/Quick Response/Speed to Solution

The speed to which the organization can interact with the customer was identified by a number of respondents to be a key trend. Technology was attributed as a major underlying factor leading to this trend. Activities impacted by speed were the delivery of product, dialogue with the customer, pricing, information requests, and service. Typical responses included *“Tech savvy customers; It is a younger generation purchasing. You have to be well versed in social media; People expect immediate results.”* *“The Pace of Change --> Impacts effectiveness of Value Proposition --> Need for immediate fulfillment.”* Speed was viewed as an imperative, as evidenced in this response which references the need for quickness: *“It’s a challenge with big opportunity. If we don’t execute on our plan to meet customer desires faster we could be marginalized.”*

Generational Shift of Power

The final significant change that is currently impacting professional selling is the new positions of millennials. There was concern for this generation moving into the workforce and entry level sales positions (e.g., Pullins et al., 2011) in the past, but now millennials are employees

and in positions of power in the buying process and respondents were taking note. This demographic influenced the desire for speed of response and chooses more technological tools and mobile applications for engaging in dialogue with salespeople.

Respondents indicated that the generational shift is an important trend that must be addressed: *“Younger buyers are much more acclimated to electronic communications and transactions, the impact of outsourcing on competitive pricing... and the movement from a manufacturing culture to a distribution culture. Millennials are becoming part of the decision-making stream.”*

DISCUSSION

Changing to meet the trends and times is the core of being a successful company, manager, or salesperson. Past significant trends are now taken for granted. Customers are critical and they are empowered by their access to technology that allows them to search for information. Social media has allowed various parties to become influencers in purchasing decisions, which requires firms to react proactively to this challenge. Expectations are that value will be provided with transparency are becoming a given that businesses and salespeople should see as an opportunity.

But, while these changes are becoming more routine and expected, new changes continue to develop. New pricing pressures have developed out of older trends. Customers moved from differentiated products to differentiated service and to differentiated salespeople, but differentiation becomes increasingly difficult, leading to an acceleration of pricing pressures. This lack of differentiation seems to translate to a focus on customer intelligence, deemphasizing the need to focus on competitive intelligence, and representing an opportunity to differentiate by having a better understanding of the customer than competitors.

To the extent that this customer intelligence can be leveraged to understand customers prior to any professional selling engagement is particularly interesting. Multi-channel management and diversity in technological offerings within the channel for communication and selling may represent an emerging

area for differentiation. Speed, built on technology and customer service, also represents an opportunity to differentiate in today's selling environment. Finally, Millennials are moving into increasingly higher levels of the organization and further shape how we do business. Understanding this change is imperative to future success.

One thing that is certain is change. Technology will continue to develop and change at a rapid pace. Channels and customers won't remain stagnant. Salespeople themselves will be different. Winners will be able to anticipate and adapt to constant change.

Managerial Implications

Understanding which trends are most pressing for businesses today provides important insights for managers. Managers can start by building awareness of the importance of price/value trends, customer intelligence, navigation of multi-channels, speed, and Millennials' changing role.

Many of our respondents were very concerned with the continued commoditization of products and solutions and the renewed focus on price that accompanies this lack of differentiation. What exacerbates this focus is the fact that customers now demand information through mediated channels, often without real human interaction, making non-solution-based provision of value more difficult. Today's sales force must figure out how to break through these barriers and get the customer's attention for a genuine human interaction in order to build a relationship.

Firms can promote success here by providing venues and events that encourage interaction, and by encouraging sales force sharing of techniques that work. Once the salesperson has the customer's attention, the focus needs to be on both providing unique value, for instance, Dixon and Adamson's (2011) notion of reframing, and on building loyal customer relationships or price will rule.

Sales forces, today, must also leverage customer intelligence to accomplish this breaking through, and establish a relationship. It seems natural that there is less concern with competition, given the commoditization, which provides the space for a focus on gathering more intelligence about customers. Salespeople need

skills related to both information gathering (including networking and research skills), but also the business acumen to understand the information they do gather in light of the customer's business model.

University hiring of sales majors, and even graduate degree sales programs, continues to be on the upswing (Sales Education Foundation 2017), and sales managers would benefit from a careful consideration of the types of skills which can be garnered from these programs. These professional skills sets may outweigh the traditional "school of hard knocks" in today's selling environment. Successful programs will look at next generation skills, such as using data to anticipate customer needs.

The emphasis on sales-enabling technologies is not new but, increasingly, sales managers are struggling with managing the breadth of choices over the actual application and implementation of technology. Sales managers today need to better understand the choices that the sales force has, and collect metrics that can be used to understand which technology platforms and various channels are most effective for which selling activities.

Sales scholars can perhaps provide additional insights on how customers make decisions on the various channels utilized for differing types of activities in different contexts. For instance, how does the customer choice of ordering channel differ given the degree of relationship with the selling firm or scope of the order being processed? These studies and metrics need to also consider the need for speed. How can the various channels and technologies best be aligned to provide nearly instantaneous responses and delivery? This also means that salespeople need to extend their expertise into operations and distribution as it impacts their ability to respond to and deliver for the customer. Again, increased understanding through good metrics, additional training, and best practice sharing within the sales organization are imperatives.

Finally, a new imperative is rising with regard to understanding millennials as they climb through the ranks of the organization both in selling and in customer roles. Millennials are collaborative and inventive. They are digital natives. They don't think in terms of work-life balance: work and life flow together.

And some believe these characteristics are good; they make good managers (Monych, 2018). Yet the verdict is out on *how* millennials make good managers. And even more interesting, what does this change when they are the customer? Our respondents recognized that things would change. Be alert and adaptive. Expect collaboration, creativity, and flexibility.

Limitations and Future Research

We would be remiss to not mention the potential limitations of our method and analysis. Caution must be taken in generalizing any findings from this sample to specific business contexts. The work was framed by the research environments identified in the literature since questions focused respondent attention on those. Further, although we took precautions to focus respondents on new and current trends, as opposed to older trends that may have become embedded new norms, there is a possibility that there are still lingering perceptions of some older trends as current.

There is also a possibility that the convenience sample shaped the results to some extent. For instance, since these firms are predominantly affiliated with a sales center to develop and recruit students, their focus, and thus their identification of certain trends might differ from the general population of sales managers. Their answers are also embedded in the current time, which may place limitations on the relevance of these trends in the future.

However, this does introduce an important direction for future research ... longitudinal and/or comparative work to see how these trends develop and if they become new norms. In addition, future work should contextualize the findings for specific industries or businesses and could take a deeper look at how firms can best manage address these dynamics.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we set out to identify the most important dynamics currently affecting professional selling practice. Some expected trends that are often cited today, didn't really manifest. For instance, the notion of co-creation was not raised. Surprisingly, instead, respondents expressed concern over a returning focus on price, which led to increased concern on customer

focus and customer intelligence, not on competition. Other expected trends were changing. No longer is technology implementation and new uses the focus, but instead a focus on selection and management of the various options, along with the use of technology for speed. Finally, a key trend identified the promotion of millennials to leadership roles in both the selling and buying organizations. We believe this paper makes an important contribution to understanding the current perspective on the most critical trends of the day, and offers insights on how sales management can best prepare to deal with them for success now and moving forward.

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