

The Central Role of Salesperson Communication Strategies and Behaviors in Buyer-Seller Relationships: The Customer Perspective

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Sales research has previously investigated the distinct influence of communications on buyer-seller relationships. However, specific communication strategies and behaviors that drive strong buyer-seller relationships require further exploration—particularly from the customer perspective. This research examines how salespeople’s communication strategies and behaviors influence overall customer perceptions of the buyer-seller relationship. Data collected from 206 customers of a mid-size B2B selling firm reveal that communication strategies and behaviors influence sales performance via a two-step mechanism. Results indicate that when salespeople enact specific communication-based strategies in their buyer-seller interactions, perceived quality of the relationship is improved, and objective sales performance is enhanced. Managerial implications and suggestions for future research are offered.

INTRODUCTION

Despite considerable global advancements in business technology, sales systems, and organizational tools for customer relationship management, the value communication adds to buyer/seller interactions still remains pronounced. As one salesperson from the B2B firm utilized for this study noted during a qualitative interview: “communication is how you get people to say yes.” Several communication-based strategies and behaviors have emerged through sales research, but more attention is warranted in understanding how customers perceive such strategies and behaviors (Schrock et al., 2016). The importance of the buyer-seller relationship is evidenced by previous research demonstrating the effects of prosocial behaviors on these relationships (Mangus et al., 2017), the impact of salesperson trust on relational outcomes (Newell, Lapoule, and Leingpibul, 2018), and the influence of customer orientation on buyer-seller relationship development (Williams, 1998). As boundary spanners, salespeople are especially well-suited to engage

with customers and build strong relationships. This research aims to further the understanding of the buyer-seller relationship, particularly as it is influenced by communications.

As the integration of sales and service continues in the organizational climate (Vargo and Lusch, 2004; Moncrief and Marshall, 2005), salespeople are increasingly being required to initiate, build, and maintain customer relationships well after the initial point of sale. However, buyer-seller relationships are not often examined from the customer’s point of view as much sales research is conducted from the vantage point of salespeople, sales managers, and sales firms (Johnson, Friend, and Horn, 2014). This study offers an important contribution to the sales domain as it uncovers customers’ perceptions of communication-based sales strategies, behaviors, and buyer-seller relationship quality. The relevance of this research is further evidenced by studies which suggest there is a growing disconnect between business-to-business (B2B) salespeople and their buyers (CSO Insights, 2018), and more recently studies which indicate significant changes in communication style have created shifts in buyer-seller interactional processes (Ahearne, et al., 2022). The present study aims to address these key changes in B2B selling and offers valuable insights from the customer’s point of view.

The importance of service employees and salespeople in maintaining positive customer relationships has long been understood by sales and business researchers

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(Bettencourt and Brown, 1997). Service employees of all types can uncover customer wants, needs, and expectations due to their close proximity to and communication with customers (Netemeyer, Maxham, and Pulling, 2005). Specifically, salespeople are in a unique position to handle direct communications with customers. Close customer contact is the cornerstone of customer relationship management (CRM) and has been shown to positively impact customer retention and profitability (Parasuraman and Grewal, 2000; Ryals and Knox, 2001). This research addresses the need to better understand what drives the quality of buyer-seller relationships and what role communication plays in the development of such relationships.

Additionally, this research adds value through its use of the customer perspective. Tuli, Kohli, and Bharadwaj (2007) found statistically significant differences between customer and salesperson perceptions of customer solutions, customer services, and customer relationship maintenance. The study at hand measures constructs from the customers' point of view, providing valuable insight into buyers' thought processes and perceptions. Since sales research often neglects to capture the valuable buyer perspective (Johnson, Friend, and Horn, 2014), this research contributes to the literature by offering an enriched understanding of buyer-seller relationships and how they are impacted by communications.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

To understand how salesperson communications affect perceived buyer-seller relationship quality, this research identifies key sales strategies and behaviors which rely upon communication style, frequency, and effectiveness. Sales strategies intended to bolster customer relationships are important as they can become a key factor influencing a customer's overall satisfaction with the firm (Schneider and Bowen, 1999). Previous research also indicates that specific selling behaviors influence the ways in which salespeople initiate and foster buyer-seller relationships (Chakrabarty, Brown, and Widing, 2013).

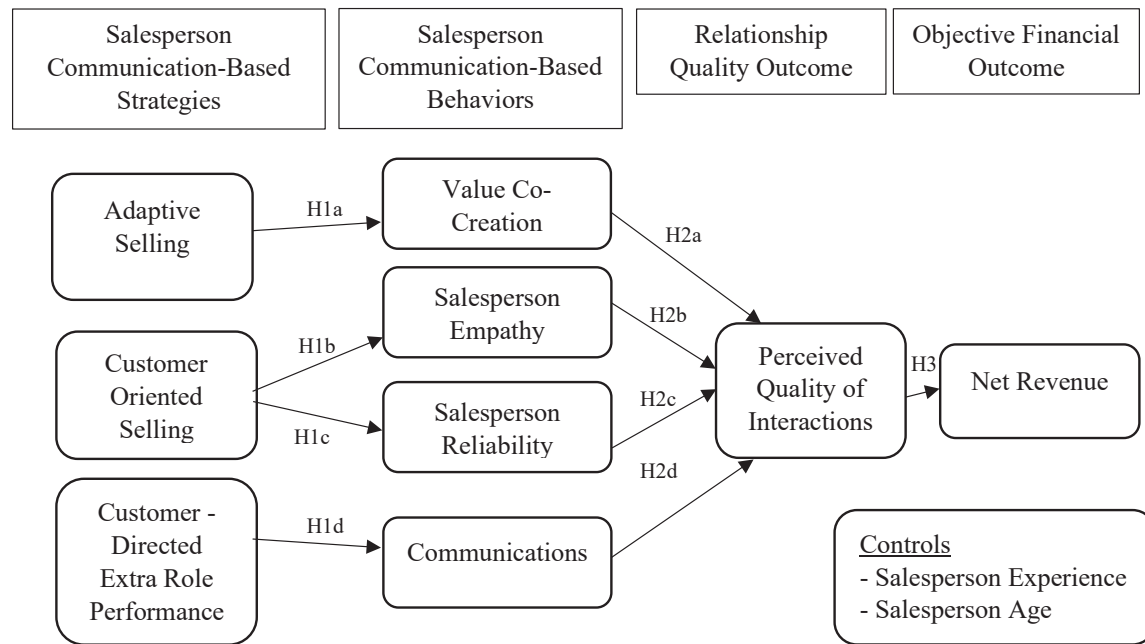
Social exchange theory provides an appropriate theoretical framework for understanding how customers

respond to the communication strategies and behaviors evidenced in buyer-seller relationships (Wetzel, Hammerschmidt, Zablah, 2014). Social exchange theory has a rich history throughout academic literature (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1974) and is embedded within a mapping of different norms—most notably the norms of reciprocity and governance.

Using the tenets of social exchange theory, this research uncovers how parties engaging in repeated exchange behaviors (i.e., communication-based interactions over time between customers and salespeople) respond to actual and perceived relational benefits with exchange partners (Wetzel, Hammerschmidt, and Zablah, 2014). The proposed model relies on the notion that sales strategies enacted by salespeople will be perceived in the eyes of customers as beneficial to the buyer-seller relationship and will ultimately result in improved perceived quality of interactions and sales performance. When salespeople enact communication strategies and behaviors that enhance their relationships with customers, the norms of reciprocity dictate that customers will respond by reciprocating greater sales and higher rates of repurchase (Wetzel, Hammerschmidt, and Zablah, 2014). The conceptual model can be found in Figure 1.

Adaptive Selling

Adaptive selling is defined as “the altering of sales behaviors during the customer interaction or across customer interactions based on perceived information about the nature of the selling situation” (Weitz, Sujan, and Sujan, 1986). Extant literature demonstrates that adaptive selling can improve salesperson effectiveness (Weitz, 1981) as it allows salespeople to customize and reformat their communications in accordance with the individual customer (Franke and Park, 2006). Adaptive selling requires that salespeople build and leverage strong knowledge bases to meet customer needs and communicate this knowledge effectively (Morgan and Stoltman, 2013; Chonko and Jones, 2005). The notion of salespeople adapting to their individual customers is indicative of greater selling success, and this outcome is seen across a variety of dependent variables such as customer loyalty, intent to repurchase, and satisfaction with the firm (Wang, Wang, and Hou, 2016).

Figure 1: Conceptual Model

Adaptive selling throughout previous literature has been shown to provide concrete benefits to the exchange relationship (Kidwell, McFarland, and Avila, 2007; Wong, Liu, and Tjosvold, 2015). These benefits include design and delivery of specially adapted products/services and specially adapted sales pitch communications intended to meet customers' specific needs. According to the norm of reciprocity in the social exchange theory framework, when salespeople provide their customers with concrete benefits, customers will perceive a higher level of value in their business relationship. Therefore, it is hypothesized that adaptive selling behavior will generate concrete benefits to the customer-salesperson exchange relationship, primarily in terms of value co-creation, leading to the first hypothesis:

H1a: Adaptive selling behavior will have a positive effect on value co-creation.

Customer-Oriented Selling

Highly customer-oriented salespeople excel at "inferring the beliefs, desires, and intentions of customers and communicating these inferences effectively" (Chakrabarty, Brown, and Widing, 2014). Customer-oriented salespeople possess a broad perspective of the

selling situation since they identify customer needs, communicate solutions to satisfy those needs, and collaboratively handle objections and disagreements (Homburg, Müller, and Klarmann, 2011). Customer-oriented selling has been empirically shown to enhance customer satisfaction through a leveraging of customer knowledge (Homburg, Wieseke, and Bornemann, 2009). The positive relationship between customer-oriented selling and performance has been previously demonstrated in sales literature (Martin and Bush, 2006; Franke and Park, 2006; Jaramillo et al., 2007) and customer-oriented salespeople have proven to be important to the success of a variety of sales organizations (Brown et al., 2002; Stock and Hoyer, 2005). Specifically, customer-oriented selling has been linked to long-term customer satisfaction (Homburg, Wieseke, and Bornemann, 2009). This research builds on the work of Chakrabarty, Brown, and Widing (2013) who cite a lack of research on the interactions between selling strategies like customer-oriented selling and relational outcomes.

Social exchange theory provides insight into why different levels of customer-oriented selling lead to heterogeneous relationship outcomes between

customers (Anderson & Japp, 2005). Because customer-oriented selling reflects a salesperson's inherent intuition of customer needs, it is believed to influence the relationship dimensions closely tied to a salesperson's good-naturedness and ability to fulfill obligations of the business exchange.

According to social exchange theory, governance norms establish an appropriate set of responses to perceived relationship benefits which are received by customers (Homans, 1974). For example, if a salesperson engages in high levels of customer-oriented selling in their dealings with a buyer, the norm of governance dictates that customers perceive the relationship as stronger in response.

Empathy has been shown to heavily (and positively) influence interpersonal relationships in the work of personality psychologists (Rychlak, 1973). When a relationship experiences high levels of empathy and understanding through communication, both parties in the relationship experience perceived benefits. Similarly, reliability is an important construct for business relationships which requires efficiency, ability to address needs, and trust that the business partner will fulfill obligations. For example, in the work of Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Barry (1985) and Parasuraman and Zeithaml (1991), reliability was shown to positively influence customer-employee interactions. It is hypothesized that salesperson empathy and salesperson reliability will be positively affected by customer-oriented selling.

H1b: Customer-oriented selling will have a positive effect on salesperson empathy.

H1c: Customer-oriented selling will have a positive effect on salesperson reliability.

Customer-Directed Extra Role Performance

Customer-directed extra role performance is defined as the "degree to which the service employee goes the extra mile" in serving customers during the employee-customer interface (Netemeyer, Maxham, and Pulling, 2005). These authors suggest that customer-directed extra role performance reflects the employees' extra efforts to take initiatives that improve service when they communicate with customers, as well as conscientious

extra efforts to respond to customer concerns. Previous literature has demonstrated that service employee role-prescribed behavior has been found to positively affect customer satisfaction and loyalty (Bettencourt and Brown, 1997; Maxham and Netemeyer, 2003). Further, customer-directed extra role performance has been found to positively affect customer perceptions of relationship quality as well as service quality through customer delight and increased intention to repurchase (Schneider and Bowen, 1999; Maxham and Netemeyer, 2003). Effective customer-directed extra role performance requires that employees engage customers, patiently listen to concerns, and quickly communicate suitable resolutions (Netemeyer, Maxham, and Pulling, 2005).

According to social exchange theory, quid pro quo responses driven by the reciprocity norm shape customer responses to specific salesperson strategies (Wetzel, Hammerschmidt, and Zablah, 2014). Unlike adaptive selling which is enacted through training, and customer-oriented selling which is characterized as an aspect of the salesperson's personality, customer-directed extra role performance is volitional and dependent upon specific communication-based actions. Social exchange theory maintains that customers will rely on informational cues to determine the set of responses likely to maximize their own utility in a series of repeated exchanges (i.e., a relationship) (Rapp et al., 2013). The activation of the reciprocity norm leads to the belief that when salespeople engage in customer-directed extra role performance, it will be perceived by customers as a valued benefit to the relationship which can be captured by tangible actions like communications. As customer-directed extra role performance is volitional and dependent upon communication style and frequency, we hypothesize:

H1d: Customer-directed extra role performance will have a positive effect on communications.

Salesperson Value Co-Creation

While customers increasingly become more informed and seek more meaningful interactions with companies (Ahearne et al., 2022), value exchange becomes a critical function in the business environment (Pralhad and Ramaswamy, 2004). This is particularly true for salespeople who maintain close contact with customers.

Value co-creation is defined as “the integration of resources during interactions between buyers and sellers” (Jaakkola and Hakanen, 2013).

Value co-creation relies on the notion that customers are active members of the exchange. This is driven by greater consumer-to-consumer communication and increased firm transparency (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). Thereby employees (such as salespeople) who maintain close relationships with customers become key facilitators of value co-creation in the context of the buyer-seller relationship. A salesperson’s prominent role in this relationship allows them to anticipate and respond to evolving customer needs and, in turn, enhance value for these customers. The emerging view is that value is not solely embedded in the products or services offered by selling organizations, but that value is also co-created through the resource integration and communication between buyers and sellers (Jaakkola and Hakanen, 2013).

Salesperson Empathy

Starting with early explorations by Tobolski and Kerr (1952), salesperson empathy is now recognized as a necessary component of successful buyer-seller relationships (Gerlach et al., 2016). In the context of sales, Plank, Minton, and Reid (1996) define empathy as “an individual’s perception that another person demonstrates that s/he both feels and understands the other individual’s situation”.

Sales researchers have previously drawn parallels between empathy and successful selling (Sager and Ferris, 1986), with studies demonstrating the impact of salesperson empathy on sales effectiveness seen as early as Tobolski and Kerr (1952). Gilbert and Boyer (2020) more recently illustrated that sales training can positively affect the preponderance of empathy, furthering the relevance of this variable in the body of literature.

A strong tendency toward empathetic behaviors can enable a salesperson to strengthen relational understanding and buyer-seller relationships can enhance their success via higher levels of empathy. This is evidenced by the increased frequency of repeat sales, customer referrals, testimonials, and favorable word-of-mouth communications seen when a salesperson is more empathetic (Dawson, 1992).

Salesperson Reliability

Firms are continuing to advance close customer-supplier relationships in line with the changing dynamics of the marketing climate (Bitner, 1995). One construct which has emerged from this change in the marketing concept is salesperson reliability. Defined as “a sense of duty toward meeting goals or the extent to which a salesperson makes sure that promised deadlines are met” (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Barry, 1994; Stock and Hoyer, 2005), many studies have uncovered a positive link between employee reliability and customer outcomes (Cronin and Taylor, 1992).

Salesperson reliability should increase the likelihood that a salesperson can effectively and consistently communicate to the extent that positive customer-oriented attitudes and outcomes are realized. Notably, highly reliable salespeople have been found to more consistently perform customer-oriented behaviors such as communication (Stock and Hoyer, 2005).

Salesperson Communications

Communication is an important factor in both business and interpersonal relationships. Enhanced communication between customers and salespeople increases value, and the importance of meaningful communication in establishing successful relationships is a widely accepted notion even outside of business. Communication is defined as both “formal and informal transference of thoughts, opinions, and information between partners” (Anderson and Narus, 1990). The quality of communication is important because effective communication leads to fewer conflicts and problems between parties in a business relationship (Zhang and Zhang, 2014). Communication has also been shown to yield stronger ties between salespeople and buyers (Williams, Spiro, and Fine, 1990). Adequacy, timeliness, openness, and accuracy are all critical components of effective communication (Zhang and Zhang, 2014), and effective communication across boundaries is a key element of collaboration (Kotler, Bowen, and Makens, 2006).

Perceived Quality of Interactions

Perceived quality of interactions refers to the degree to which buyers and sellers believe that their interactions

are productive (Moorman, Zaltman, and Desphande, 1992). Stronger relationships between salespeople and customers are theorized to bring enhanced understanding of the individual customer context and, in turn, more productive interactions (Moorman, Zaltman, and Desphande, 1992). In the business context, perceived quality of interactions between marketing managers and researchers was uncovered as a key variable impacted by relationship trust and relationship involvement (Moorman, Zaltman, and Desphande, 1992). These authors noted that higher levels of trust and deeper levels of involvement made managers more willing to share strategic information and hold longer discussions with marketing researchers. This propensity to communicate positively influenced the overall relationship between the two parties.

As salesperson communication behaviors are highly indicative of the overall success of the buyer-seller interaction, it is hypothesized that a positive influence of these behaviors on customers' perceived quality of interactions will emerge. Social exchange theory provides the theoretical underpinning for these hypotheses because it suggests that the behavioral response to the norm activations of governance and reciprocity will lead to greater perceived benefits in the customer-salesperson relationship (Wetzel, Hammerschmidt, and Zablah, 2014). These perceived benefits felt by customers are hypothesized to lead to higher perceived quality of the overall relationship interaction, leading to the following hypotheses:

H2a: Salesperson value co-creation will have a positive effect on perceived quality of interactions.

H2b: Salesperson empathy will have a positive effect on perceived quality of interactions.

H2c: Salesperson reliability will have a positive effect on perceived quality of interactions.

H2d: Salesperson communications will have a positive effect on perceived quality of interactions.

Salesperson Performance

This research employs the use of an objective financial measure of salesperson performance supplied by the participating firm. Net revenues achieved, percent-to-

quota, and sales goal attainment are all appropriate variables to explore when considering the overall success of a salesperson (Schrock et al., 2016). The conceptual model proposes a linkage between the customer's perceived quality of the interaction and an objective measure of salesperson performance in the form of net revenue.

Social exchange theory provides an additional link between perceived quality of interactions and objective sales outcomes as the theoretical framework relies upon the idea of the norm of reciprocity. The perceived benefits of a quality and productive relationship are hypothesized to lead to reciprocation in the explicit form of increased sales.

H3: Perceived quality of interactions will have a positive influence on salesperson net revenue.

METHODOLOGY

Sample and Data Collection

Preliminary interviews were conducted with 21 salespeople and managers at a U.S.-based logistics and distribution company. In-depth interview questions were framed to assess the organization's priorities regarding customer relationship management, and the qualitative insights derived allowed for a better understanding of the organizational climate and industry. The sales force structure at the firm encouraged close relationships and communications with customers to improve both satisfaction and retention, making this organization an appropriate context for the present research.

After the salesperson interviews concluded, survey data were collected from customers of the focal firm. The ability to survey customers was valuable as much sales research is limited by the sole use of a salesperson or organizational perspective (Johnson, Friend, and Horn, 2014). Surveys were distributed to the entire customer base to avoid selection bias (responses only from those customers whom salespeople favored strongly) which may have potentially detracted from the validity of the results (Wasserman and Faust, 1994). Bolander et al. (2015) offer credence for limiting the survey to a single firm's customer base as it allows for the control of many external factors like differences in corporate culture, industry biases, variants in company size, and so forth.

The final sample was 206 customers out of a total 354 customers for a response rate of 58%, providing a robust view of the firm's customer base (Wasserman and Faust, 1994).

Measures and Operationalization

Constructs were measured using established instruments with acceptable psychometric properties and evidence of scale efficacy. Items were measured on a seven-point Likert scale from (1) strongly disagree to (7) strongly agree and met psychometric criteria for rigor, reliability, and validity. (Robinson et al., 2002; Weitz, Sujan, and Sujan, 1986). Where appropriate, scales were adapted to reflect the customer rather than salesperson context of the study (Chen and Jaramillo, 2014). Adaptive selling was measured using a three-item scale developed by Chen and Jaramillo (2014) and Robinson et al. (2002). Customer-oriented selling was measured using a four-item scale developed by Martin and Bush (2006). Customer-directed extra role performance was measured using a four-item scale developed by Netemeyer, Maxham, and Pulling (2005). Value co-creation was measured using a six-item scale adapted from Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004), Ettlie and Reza (1992), and Walter, Ritter, and Gemunden (2001). Salesperson empathy and salesperson reliability were measured using three-item scales established by Stock and Hoyer (2005). Communications was measured using a three-item scale developed by Le Meunier-FitzHugh and Piercy (2007). Perceived quality of interactions was measured using a five-item scale developed by Moorman, Zaltman, and Desphande (1992).

Finally, net revenue achieved for one fiscal year was used as an objective financial measure of salesperson performance. All salespeople were employed for the duration of this year, and their net revenue achieved was supplied by the firm. A matching procedure linked the customer survey data to their respective salesperson's net revenue achieved. Control variables included in the model were salesperson experience and age, in line with prior work in sales literature (Groza et al., 2016).

Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling

Data were analyzed using partial least squares-structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM), a component-based

approach to structural equation modeling where latent variables are fixed (Hwang et al., 2010). The primary objective of PLS-SEM is to maximize the variance of endogenous variables within the model which are explained by exogenous variables (Bolander et al., 2015; Hair et al., 2014). PLS-SEM yields both measurement and structural models and analyzes the two sub-models independently using a fixed-point algorithm (Hwang et al., 2010).

This predictive analysis is appropriate for the objectives of this study. The sample size of the dataset ($n=206$) is more amenable to estimation using PLS-SEM, while other techniques are more sensitive to sample size and require larger samples to run effectively (Wong, 2010; Wong, 2013). Because of the sample size and the predictive nature of the conceptual model, PLS-SEM was determined to be an appropriate method of analysis.

RESULTS

As seen in Table 1, all items loaded significantly on their corresponding factor and composite reliabilities exceeded .84, while AVE values exceeded .5 for each construct, establishing internal reliability and convergent validity (Hair et al., 2014). The Fornell-Larcker criterion established discriminant validity by determining that the AVE for each construct exceeded its squared correlation with all other constructs. This suggests that constructs shared more variance with their associated items than with other constructs (Hair et al., 2014). A further test of discriminant validity included examination of heterotrait-monotrait ratios. None of the ratios were found to be greater than .85, the threshold for establishing empirical distinction among constructs (Mangus et al., 2017).

Table 2 lists the results of model testing using a bootstrapping technique to determine significance. In terms of salesperson communication-based strategies and their impacts on salesperson communication behaviors, all hypotheses were supported. Adaptive selling strategy was found to have a significant impact on value co-creation in support of H1a ($\beta = 0.616$, $p = 0.000$). Customer-oriented selling strategy was found to have a significant impact on both salesperson empathy (H1b) and salesperson reliability (H1c) ($\beta = 0.763$, $p = 0.000$; $\beta = 0.764$, $p = 0.000$). Customer-directed extra

Table 1: Scale Items and Measurement Properties

Adaptive Selling	Loadings	AVE	CR
1. My salesperson designed his/her sales presentation to respond to my specific needs.	0.940	.836	.938
2. My salesperson effectively modified his/her sales presentation to my needs.	0.948		
3. My salesperson recognizes the strengths and weaknesses of his/her products or services.	0.852		
Customer-Oriented Selling	Loadings	AVE	CR
1. My salesperson has my best interests in mind.	0.888	.800	.941
2. My salesperson achieves his/her goals by satisfying my needs.	0.863		
3. My salesperson tries to find out what services would be most helpful to me as a customer.	0.918		
4. My salesperson gives an accurate expectation of what products/services will do for me.	0.907		
Customer-Directed Extra Role Performance	Loadings	AVE	CR
1. My salesperson goes above and beyond the “call of duty” when serving me.	0.912	.820	.948
2. My salesperson is willing to go out of the way to make me satisfied.	0.921		
3. My salesperson voluntarily assists me even if it means going beyond job requirements.	0.903		
4. My salesperson often helps me with problems beyond what is expected or required.	0.885		
Value Co-Creation	Loadings	AVE	CR
1. We share responsibilities with [the firm] and its salespeople.	0.615	.611	.903
2. [The firm’s] salespeople can contribute to the value that we provide them.	0.827		
3. [The firm’s] salespeople regularly visit with customers.	0.77		
4. Business functions at [the firm] are integrated to better serve my needs.	0.748		
5. I engage in joint problem solving and decision making with [the firm’s] salespeople.	0.862		
6. I am in constant dialog with my salesperson [at the firm].	0.842		
Salesperson Empathy	Loadings	AVE	CR
1. My salesperson has the highest level of empathy with respect to my needs.	0.925	.850	.945
2. My salesperson easily adapts to my perspective.	0.921		
3. My salesperson is able to adapt my interaction to my needs in different situations.	0.921		

Table 1: Scale Items and Measurement Properties

Salesperson Reliability	Loadings	AVE	CR
1. My salesperson is a very reliable person.	0.940	.890	.961
2. My salesperson typically makes sure that promised deadlines are met.	0.949		
3. Customers can rely on [the firm's] salespeople.	0.942		
Communications	Loadings	AVE	CR
1. My salesperson meets with me at least once a quarter to discuss market trends and developments.	0.939	.888	.960
2. My salesperson spends time assessing my future needs.	0.946		
3. I get together with my salesperson periodically to plan responses to changes taking place in our business environment.	0.941		
Perceived Quality of Interactions	Loadings	AVE	CR
1. Disagreements between my salesperson and me tend to be handled productively.	0.698	.726	.929
2. My meetings with my salesperson produce novel insights.	0.831		
3. My salesperson displays a sound strategic understanding of my business in their interactions with me.	0.912		
4. My salesperson is very team oriented in their interactions with me.	0.894		
5. My interactions with [the firm's] salespeople are productive	0.908		

Table 2: Hypotheses Testing Results

Hypotheses	Support	Path Coefficients & P-Values
H1a: Adaptive Selling Behavior → Value Co-Creation	Supported	0.616 (p = 0.000)
H1b: Customer-Oriented Selling → Salesperson Empathy	Supported	0.763 (p = 0.000)
H1c: Customer-Oriented Selling → Salesperson Reliability	Supported	0.764 (p = 0.000)
H1d: Customer Extra Role Performance → Communications	Supported	0.550 (p = 0.000)
H2a: Value Co-Creation → Perceived Quality of Interactions	Supported	0.175 (p = 0.004)
H2b: Salesperson Empathy → Perceived Quality of Interactions	Supported	0.326 (p = 0.001)
H2c: Salesperson Reliability → Perceived Quality of Interactions	Supported	0.210 (p = 0.019)
H2c: Communications → Perceived Quality of Interactions	Supported	0.287 (p = 0.000)
H3: Perceived Quality of Interactions → Net Revenue	Supported	0.086 (p = 0.039)

role performance was also found to have a significant impact on salesperson communications in support of H1d ($\beta = 0.550$, $p = 0.000$).

Additionally, in terms of salesperson communication behaviors and their impacts on the perceived quality of interactions, all hypotheses were supported. Salesperson value co-creation had a significant impact on perceived quality of interactions in support of H2a ($\beta = 0.175$, $p = 0.004$). Salesperson empathy was found to have a significant impact on perceived quality of interactions in support of H2b ($\beta = 0.326$, $p = 0.001$). H2c was also supported as salesperson reliability had a significant impact on perceived quality of interactions ($\beta = 0.210$, $p = 0.019$). Further, salesperson communications had a significant impact on perceived quality of interactions in support of H2d ($\beta = 0.287$, $p = 0.000$).

Similarly, perceived quality of interactions had a significant, positive influence on net revenue, lending support for H3 ($\beta = 0.086$, $p = 0.039$). This indicates all hypotheses from H1 through H3 were supported in the model.

DISCUSSION

This study applied social exchange theory in the context of buyer-seller relationships to uncover the underlying impacts of salesperson communication-based strategies and behaviors on relationship quality and salesperson performance. Results suggest that communication is essential in buyer/seller interactions as salespeople act as boundary spanners between organizations and customers. According to one sales representative at the focal firm, “salespeople are the ones driving the message”. The results of this study lend credence to that statement by providing empirical evidence that salesperson communication-based strategies drive the communication-based behaviors which ultimately improve important customer perceptions of quality in buyer-seller relationships.

Theoretical and Conceptual Contributions

At the customer level of perception, all proposed communications-based strategies and behaviors had positive effects on relationship quality. Customers who perceived that their salespeople were engaging

more highly in these communication-based strategies and behaviors also perceived better quality within the relationship. It can be inferred that the positive effects of such strategies and behaviors provide insight into contributing factors which cause customers to perceive higher quality in their buyer-seller relationships. The underlying theme of communications is evident as the tested strategies and behaviors were all heavily reliant upon various aspects of communication. Furthermore, perceived quality of interactions had a strong positive influence on salesperson net revenue achieved. This final effect demonstrates the overall impacts of communication-based strategies, behaviors, and relationship quality on salesperson performance.

Managerial Implications

This study offers key insights for sales organizations regarding salesperson selection/hiring, training, and improvement of the customer experience. Firms should prioritize hiring salespeople who score highly on trait empathy, adaptability, and customer orientation as these qualities show positive correlations with customer perceptions of overall relationship quality. The positive financial impact on net revenue solidifies the managerial relevance of these relationship-enhancing traits and provides sales firms with an incentive for using personality or other aptitude tests during the selection and hiring process for salespeople (Tett and Christiansen 2007).

Training salespeople to engage in communications via adaptive selling strategy (custom-tailoring sales presentations to each individual buyer), customer-oriented selling (emphasizing extroversion and customer relationship management tools), and customer-directed extra role performance (establishing guidelines for recovery after service failures or other operational setbacks), has strong empirical backing based upon this research. Structuring training programs to emphasize these strategies and behaviors via role plays and other exercises can lead to greater customer perceptions of buyer-seller relationship quality and increased net revenue.

Key findings from this research provide insight into customer perceptions of specific strategies and behaviors enacted by salespeople, with a thematic

focus on communications. Salespeople who foster quality relationships with their customers reap distinct benefits (i.e., higher net revenues achieved), and customers who perceive a high level of quality within their buyer-seller relationship may be more satisfied with their interactions and less likely to defect from the company—an important finding for practitioners. Sales managers should seek to continuously improve the customer experience by emphasizing the significance of buyer-seller communications and the strategies and behaviors which facilitate such communications. Facilitating and promoting regular best practice sharing among salespeople can build an environment of heightened customer focus and a strong culture valuing team success.

Limitations

As with all research studies, certain limitations do impact insights derived from the analysis. First, all studies based solely on survey data suffer from an inability to infer causality. The relationships proposed and tested were correlational, therefore inferring cause-effect is outside of the scope of this study. While scales used to measure constructs were empirically tested for adequate reliability and validity and intended to maintain the highest degree of robustness, surveys are inherently limited to correlational results.

Second, while the data were collected from customers representing many different firms, there was only one focal sales organization. A broader network of firms may have provided a richer picture of a wider variety of salespeople and organizational strategies. The focal sales firm was typical of many B2B sales organizations in that it strongly encouraged fostering close customer relationships through “winning and dining” and other relationship-building methods. Not all sales organizations employ these tactics, so testing customer perceptions of salespeople from a variety of different organizations, with a variety of different customer approaches, would provide greater generalizability to the broader sales context.

Future Research Directions

Future research may build on the findings of this study by identifying and testing more factors which could

potentially improve or diminish the salesperson/buyer relationship. While understanding the communication mechanisms that drive buyer-seller relationships is undoubtedly important, determining which variables can enhance or detract from those relationships is also a worthwhile pursuit. Considering the influence of factors such as resiliency, self-efficacy, conscientiousness, and customer mindset would enrich the results of the study at hand. Future research may also seek to uncover moderating variables that may have significant impacts on the proposed paths, thereby diminishing the positive influence of communication-based strategies and behaviors.

In addition, future research may consider distinct tools through which salesperson/customer communications take place and the interactional effects such tools may have on communication quality. With the pronounced growth in mobile and social media technologies, it may be beneficial to examine if the hypothesized relationships vary across face-to-face, digital, or hybrid interactions between buyers and sellers. Schrock et al.’s (2016) meta-analysis of the *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management* maintained that relationship marketing strategies within the context of sales is a sadly under-researched area. After uncovering the linkage between salesperson performance and customer-perceived relationship quality, it is clear this is a research direction deserving of further study.

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