

The link between the supplier's relational selling strategy and its key account managers' relational behaviours

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Abstract: This paper defines and tests a model of relationship selling management from key account managers. Through an integrated review of different streams of research (on personal selling, sales management, key account programs and relationship marketing) we contribute to a better understanding of the links between a firm's relational selling strategy and its key account managers' behaviors. From a managerial point of view, the paper shows that a relational selling strategy - at the supplier's level - is not always associated with the appropriate key account managers' behaviors. From a theoretical perspective, the study deepens our understanding of key account management program and informs us of the discrepancies between marketing strategy and its functional implementation in the sales department.

Keywords: Relationship Selling; Key Account Management

Introduction

Anderson (1996) pointed out that the fundamental goal of the salespeople in the new millennium is to develop long-term, mutually profitable partnerships with customers. This perspective emphasizes the importance of sales force behaviors in gaining customer trust (Doney and Cannon, 1997; Swan, Bowers and Richardson, 1999) aimed at developing long term buyer-seller relationships. In most cases relationship marketing strategies are actually implemented by salespeople, but it is important to underline that the goals, and the components of the relational approach may differ between sales and marketing managers: as pointed out by Strahle and Spiro (1986) there is a lack of empirical evidence of the existence of a link between marketing strategies, sales force objectives and activities, and compensation policies. As a matter of fact, there are often discrepancies between marketing strategies and their functional implementation in the sales department's objectives and activities (Strahle, Spiro and Acito, 1996).

Starting from these considerations, the main purpose of this article is to contribute to a better understanding of the role played by key account managers' relationship selling behaviours in the implementation of the firm's relationship selling strategy. Key account managers fulfill the role of an enabler or promoter of an existing relationship (Pardo, 1999). Their task is to minimize friction within the relationship and optimize fit between the supplier's value offer and a key account's needs (Weitz and Bradford, 1999).

The paper is organized as follow. First, we identify and define such behaviors that are supposed to be linked to a relational selling strategy. This is done by means of an integrated review of different streams of research on personal selling, sales management and relationship marketing, aimed at building a comprehensive framework of relationship selling management in a key account context. Next, we hypothesize how relational selling strategy may be linked to key account managers' behaviors. Then, hypotheses are tested using structural equation

modeling. Finally, we discuss theoretical and managerial implications, outline limitations of the study and highlight future research opportunities.

Literature review

In this paragraph, we first define the notion of relational selling strategy. Then, we describe the different key account manager's behaviors that are supposed to be implemented in the context of such a strategy.

Definition of a relational selling strategy

A relational selling strategy might be defined as a strategic approach developed by a supplier which wishes to establish long term and mutually profitable relationships with some of its clients. Jolson (1997) described relational selling as “the building of mutual trust within the buyer/seller dyad [to] create long term relationship, alliances and collaborative arrangements with selected customers” (p. 76). For Grönroos (1996), a relational strategy is “to identify and establish, maintain and enhance relationships with customers and other stakeholders, at a profit, so that the objectives of all parties involved are met” (p. 9). Oftenly, a relational strategy had been presented in opposition with a transactional strategy. Slater and Olson (2000) consider these two approaches as the opposite sides of the continuum of all the possible marketing strategies. According to these authors, a relational selling strategy is based on the supplier and customer interdependence, an exchange of critical information, trust between partners and a stable relationship, which allows each party to benefit from a fair return on its investments. This opposition between a transactional and a relational approach is also present in the work of Christopher, Payne and Ballantyne (1991). These authors use the term “relationship strategy” to highlight the “need to be constantly focused on the relationships when developing a business strategy” (p. 34). According to them, a relational

strategy is the process by which relational marketing is implemented. The objectives of the supplier are then to reinforce the satisfaction and loyalty of its customers as well as the perceived quality of its products and services (p. 9). Therefore, developing a relational selling strategy consists of positioning the establishment of durable and profitable relationships with customers at the heart of the strategic process of the firm. As Christopher *et al.* (1991) wrote “a tactical focus on customer service and quality is necessary but not sufficient. A relationship strategy is also necessary to bring about the desired delivery of value to the customer” (p. 35).

Definition of relational behaviors

When a company pursue a relationship selling approach, its sales force is supposed to adopt relational selling behaviours (Wotruba, 1996). In this study we focus our attention on four classes of salespeople relational behaviours: customer oriented selling, adaptive selling, organizational citizenship behaviors and team selling.

Customer oriented selling (COS) is a selling approach consistent with the building of long-lasting positive relationships between the buyer and the seller (Saxe and Weitz, 1982). It is considered to be an important class of relational selling behaviors (Williams, 1998; Weitz and Bradford, 1999). The scale developed by Saxe and Weitz (1982) and shorten by Thomas, Sutar and Ryan (2001) included questions to evaluate the following characteristics of the customer oriented sales process: (i) a desire to help customers make satisfactory purchase decisions; (ii) helping customers assess their needs; (iii) offering products that will satisfy customers’ needs; (iv) describing products (and services) adequately; (v) avoiding descriptive or manipulative tactics; and (vi) avoiding the use of high pressure selling.

Adaptive selling (AS) is defined “as the altering of sales behaviors during a customer interaction or across customer interactions based on perceived information about the nature of

the selling situation” (Weitz, Sujan and Sujan, 1986). Then key account managers exhibit low level of adaptive selling when they use the same sales presentation in and during all customer encounters. In contrast, a high level of adaptive selling is indicated by the use of different sales presentations and communication styles across encounters (Spiro and Weitz, 1990).

Organisational citizenship behaviors (OCB) are voluntary behaviors performed by the workforce, not explicitly evaluated and rewarded by the company, which can be expected to increase the firm’s overall performance (Posdakoff and MacKenzie, 1994; Netemeyer *et al.*, 1997). In a personal selling context, four types of organizational citizenship behaviors had been categorized. *Sportmanship* is defined as “willingness on the part of the salesperson to tolerate less than ideal circumstances without complaining ... railing against real or imagined slights, and making federal cases out of small potatoes” (MacKenzie, Posdakoff and Fetter, 1993, p. 71; Organ, 1988, p. 11). *Civic virtue* is viewed as a behavior in which “a salesperson responsibly engages that show concern for the company and employee initiative in recommending how the firm can improve operations” (Netemeyer *et al.*, 1997). *Conscientiousness* reflects behaviors above and beyond the role requirements of the firm – working extra hours, returning phone calls, respecting the organization’s rules and regulations. Finally, *altruism* is viewed as a behavior that involves assisting others with company tasks (e.g. helping new recruits get oriented, sharing information) (MacKenzie, Posdakoff and Fetter, 1993).

As for *team selling* (adopting a new scale), it has been pointed out that the relationship selling approach implies the creation of sales teams devoted to the creation of value for the customers (Anderson, 1996; Narus and Anderson, 1995; Wilson, 1995). As a consequence, the key account manager is typically described as the captain or leader of a selling team who is authorized to select technicians and other specialists that meet with specialists on the buying side (Georges and Eggert, 2003). Jolson (1997) indicates that key account managers spend

about 70% of their time performing maintenance function such as selecting, debriefing, leading and coordinating members of their teams.

Conceptual framework: the relational selling strategy – key account managers’ behaviors link

Unfortunately, poor empirical research exists regarding the links of a company’s relational selling strategy to its key account managers’ behaviors. Consequently, we hypothesize that RSS should be associated to key account managers’ relational behaviours in general (figure 1):

insert figure 1 about here

Relational selling strategy and customer oriented selling

Customer oriented salespeople have to engage in the often difficult process of discovering their clients’ needs and designing products and services that provide the ultimate benefit to the buyer. Moreover, Saxe and Weitz (1982) argued that customer oriented individuals would defer short-term returns for long-term dividends. Thus, it may be stated that key account managers will engage in customer oriented selling when they expect future transactions (i.e. a long-term seller-buyer relationship opportunity) with the buyer and his/her firm considers the customer as a source of future business. This leads to the first hypothesis:

H1: Relational selling strategy is positively related to KAM’s customer oriented selling

Relational selling strategy and adaptive selling

When a supplier engages in a relational selling strategy, developing and managing customer relationships are the main components of the key account manager's role. One of the biggest challenge for these individuals is to consistently deliver messages to customers in a manner that specifically target the needs and wants, and concerns of each individual buyer (Sengupta, Krapfel and Pusateri, 2000). This is important because key accounts do not operate in the "aggregate" and they are constantly increasing their demands that the selling organization as well as their representatives adopt customized approaches to their specific desires (Jolson, 1997)). Thus, the second hypothesis can be stated as follows:

H2: Relational selling strategy is positively related to KAM's adaptive selling

Relational selling strategy and organizational citizenship behaviors

Sales-related organizational citizenship behaviors are categorized as encompassing four types: sportsmanship, civic virtue, conscientiousness and altruism (MacKenzie, Posdakoff and Fetter, 1993; Posdakoff and MacKenzie, 1994). Such behaviors seem particularly relevant and consistent with the relational selling approach, because they facilitate positive internal relationships, within the selling company's departments and colleagues, which are a prerequisite for building and maintaining positive external relationship with customers. Therefore, the third hypothesis dealing with relational selling strategy and the four dimensions of organizational citizenship behaviors can be stated as:

H3a: Relational selling strategy is positively related to KAM's sportsmanship

H3b: Relational selling strategy is positively related to KAM's civic virtue

H3c: Relational selling strategy is positively related to KAM's conscientiousness

H3d: Relational selling strategy is positively related to KAM's altruism

Relational selling strategy and team selling

As for team selling, it has been pointed out that the relationship selling approach implies a shift towards the creation of sales teams devoted to the creation of value for the customers (Anderson, 1996; Georges and Eggert, 2003). These cross-functional selling teams are necessary because an individual salesperson does not possess the knowledge or intrafirm influence to propose and implement a program that has the potential for building a competitive advantage for the seller-buyer dyad. As a consequence, in a relational context, key account managers spend most of their time managing the activities of a team rather than simply managing their personal activities (Weitz and Bradford, 1999). Against this background we hypothesize:

H4: Relational selling strategy is positively related to KAM's team selling

Methodology

The following section addresses the sampling procedure chosen to collect the data analyzed as well as the measures employed and the methodology used to test our hypotheses.

Sampling procedure and sampling profile

Our quantitative study focuses on key account managers. This population is not compiled in a complete list, preventing us from drawing a straightforward probability sample. Instead we had to generate a list of respondents first. Potential respondents were identified through a snowballing procedure which is particularly well suited for special populations that are difficult to access (Dawes and Lee, 1996). Overall, 220 questionnaires were sent out with 103 (47%) being returned. Therefore, the sample of this study included 103 KAM belonging to sales organizations operating in different selling environments such as consumer and industrial products and services.

Measures

Based on literature review a set of possible items was generated for each construct. The development of new scales entail careful delineation of the construct's domain and its distinct aspects. In the case of relational selling strategy (RSS) a reliable four-item measurement instrument was developed by Slater and Olson (2000) and used in this study. Organizational citizenship behaviors was measured through the 12-item scale proposed by Netemeyer et al. (1997). To measure the customer orientation variables from the short form of the Saxe and Weitz (1982) SOCO scale, as proposed by Thomas *et al.* (2001), was used. In order to measure adaptive selling, we adopted the Robinson *et al.* (2002) scale which is a short version of the original scale proposed by Spiro and Weitz (1990). Because no generally accepted measure of team selling (TS) exists in the sales literature, a new six-item survey instrument was developed. The questionnaire was pre-tested with 25 key account managers participating in a Key Account Management Program in SDA Bocconi Business School, Milan, Italy, in November 2002. After some minor adjustments, the resulting items were included in the final survey (see appendix for scale items).

Model estimation

Our seven hypotheses were tested using partial least square (PLS) latent path model. PLS is a non-parametric estimation procedure (Wold, 1982). Its conceptual core is an iterative combination of principal components analysis relating measures to constructs, and path analysis capturing the structural model of constructs. The structural model represents the direct and indirect non-observational relationships among the constructs. The measurement model represents the epistemic relationships between the observed variables and the constructs. PLS can accommodate small samples (Wold, 1982) and it provides measurement assessment which is crucial to our study as we have a rather limited sample size and develop

some new measures, respectively. In addition, it avoids some of the restrictive assumptions imposed by LISREL-like models (Dawes and Lee 1996). A detailed description of the PLS model is provided by Wold (1982) and Fornell and Bookstein (1982). Using the bootstrap procedure (Chin, 1998) packaged in the PLS-Graph software (version 1.8), one can calculate the standard deviation and generate an approximate t-statistic. This overcomes non-parametric methods' disadvantage of having no formal significance tests for the estimated parameters.

Results

In this section we first present our measurement analysis and then the results concerning the test of our hypotheses.

Scale development and purification

Following standard procedures for developing psychometrically sound measures (Churchill, 1979), several steps were taken to ensure reliability and validity of the multi-items scales. In a first step, reliability analysis was conducted by calculating Cronbach's alphas. For all the constructs, Cronbach's alphas exceeded the 0.7 threshold (Nunally, 1978). In a second step, principal component analyses with varimax and oblimin rotations were conducted for the variables contained in each hypotheses. For organizational citizenship behaviors, because of poor reliability, we had to drop the three items (citi4, citi5 and citi6) measuring civic virtue. Consequently, hypothesis H4b was not tested.

Structural equation modeling

The PLS results are interpreted in two stages : (1) by assessment of its measurement model, and (2) by assessment of its structural model (Fornell and Larcker, 1982). The properties of the measurement model are detailed in table 1. They replicate the positive findings from

exploratory factor analysis. All but three items loadings are higher than 0.6 (Falk and Miller, 1992). The items measuring organizational citizenship behaviors (citi1, citi9 and citi12) with a low factor loading had to be dropped. After this adjustment, the Rho of Jöreskog (Werts, Linn and Jöreskog 1974) was generally satisfactory. It ranged from 0.88 to 0.98, well above the established standard (Nunnally 1978).

insert table 1 about here

Convergent validity was confirmed as the average variance in manifest variables extracted by constructs (AVE) was at least 0.51, indicative that more variance was explained than unexplained in the variables associated with a given construct. One criterion for adequate discriminant validity is that the correlation of a construct with its indicators (i.e., the square root of the AVE) should exceed the correlation between the construct and any other construct. The findings shown in table 2 suggest discriminant validity. All diagonal elements are greater than the off-diagonal elements in the corresponding rows and columns.

insert table 2 about here

Table 3 reports the standardized B1 parameter which is based on the total sample, and the standardized B2 parameter which is obtained from bootstrap simulation. Differences between both parameters are low, indicating stable estimates. In accordance with our hypotheses, all parameters were found to be positive¹. Bootstrapped standard deviations and t-values (Chin, 1998 ; Guiot, 2001) confirm the significance of hypotheses H1, H2, H4c, and H5. Two

¹ Some t-value are negative but as the items loadings for the exogenous variables are negative, the relationship is positive between the endogenous and exogenous constructs.

hypotheses (H4a and H4d) are non-significant and one hypothesis (i.e. H3b) was not tested because of measurement problems.

insert table 3 about here

Discussion and implications

This research questioned the link between the supplier's relational selling strategy and its key account managers' relational behaviors. Thanks to a literature review, we first defined the notion of relational strategy and then identified five different relational behaviors. Finally, we proposed and tested a conceptual framework.

The quantitative study realized among 103 key account managers partially confirmed our general proposition: there is a significant link between a supplier's relational selling strategy and its key account managers' behaviors. However, this link is not significant for certain categories of behaviors. More precisely, a supplier's relational selling strategy has no significant link with organizational citizenship behaviors (except for conscientiousness dimension of this concept). On the contrary, our research showed a positive and significant link with customer orientation, adaptability and team selling.

Homburg, Workman and Jensen (2000) identified key account management as a very important subject for academic research and highlighted the scarcity of studies on that area. Therefore, on a theoretical level, our research contributes to a better understanding of key account management implementation. On a managerial level, a first implication of our work is to recommend the creation of key account managers positions for those suppliers who wish to develop a relational selling strategy with their most important customers. This recommendation is in accordance with the work of Homburg, Workman and Jensen (2002).

Actually, the authors argued that a supplier is more efficient with a key account program – whatever its form – than without it... A second managerial implication of our work is that top management should urge key account managers to adopt all the relational behaviors which contribute to the maintenance of long term relationship with key accounts. Indeed, our research clearly shows that key account managers do not cultivate organizational citizenship behaviors (especially sportsmanship and altruism).

Limitations and future research

As in any empirical research, the results of the present study cannot be interpreted without taking into account the study's limitations. Furthermore, this research generates some researchable questions that should be addressed in future research projects. First, the relatively small sample size can be regarded as a limitation. By definition, however, key account relationships are not numerous. In many industries, some dozens or even less key accounts exist, making large-number research virtually impossible. Instead of neglecting empirical research and relying on conceptual frameworks only, we recommend the application of statistical methods that are particularly well suited for small samples (e.g. PLS and the bootstrap method). This way, complex models can still be stably estimated. Second, the snowball sampling method may raise concerns with respect to the generalization of the results (Churchill 1991, p. 542). Strictly spoken, only a straightforward probability sample ensures generalization. For pure probability sampling, a complete list of the population were required – a condition that cannot be fulfilled in our case. Under these circumstances, snowball sampling appears as a pragmatic solution. As long as the initial set is heterogeneous and relatively large, this should lead to a good approximation of pure probability sampling. Against this background, replication studies that evaluate the generalization of the findings are of high priority. Finally, the result of this research establishes that a relational selling

strategy is positively linked to specific key account managers' behaviors. However, it is possible that other employees also adopt these behaviors. In other words, our study does not allow us to conclude that key account managers are the only employees who actually implement the supplier's relational selling strategy. In that sense, it might be interesting to compare regular salespersons' behaviors with key account managers' practices. Indeed, if other employees also adopt relational behaviors, new questions might be raised. Is the supplier exclusively engaged in relational selling strategies with all its clients (at the expense of other forms of exchange more transactional)? If it is the case, is it a strategic choice or a relational drift? In that last case, it might signify that the regular salespersons adopt relational behaviors with clients that do not justify such investments.

Appendix: scale items

Construct	Measure description
<i>Relational Selling Strategy^a</i>	The parties expect this relationship to last a lifetime (rela1)* It is assumed that renewal of agreements in this relationship will generally occur (rela2)* The parties make plans not only for the terms of individual purchases, but also for the continuance of the relationship (rela3) The relationship with this key account is essentially “evergreen” (rela4)
<i>Organizational Citizenship Behaviors (sportsmanship)^a</i>	Consume a lot of time complaining about trivial matters (citi1)* Tend to make “mountains out of molehills” (make problem bigger than they are) (citi2) Always focus on what’s wrong with my situation, rather than the positive side of it (citi3)
<i>Organizational Citizenship Behaviors (civic virtue)^a</i>	“Keep up” with developments in the company (citi4)* Attend functions that are not required, but that help the company image (citi5)* Risk disapproval in order to express my beliefs about what’s best for the company (citi6)*
<i>Organizational Citizenship Behaviors (conscientiousness)^a</i>	Conscientiously follow company regulations and procedures (citi7) Turn in budgets, sales projections, expense reports, etc. earlier than required (citi8) Return phone calls and respond to other messages and requests for information promptly (citi9)*
<i>Organizational Citizenship Behaviors (altruism)^a</i>	Help orient new agents even though it is not required (citi10) Always ready to help or lend a helping hand to those around me (citi11) Willingly give of my time to others (citi12)*
<i>Customer Orientation Selling^b</i>	I try to figure out the key account’s needs (soco1)* I have the key account’s best interest in mind (soco2)* I take a problem solving approach in selling products or services to the key account (soco3) I recommend products or services that are best suited to solving problems (soco4) I try to find out which kinds of products or services would be most helpful to the key account (soco5)
<i>Adaptive Selling^a</i>	When I feel that my sales approach is not working, I can easily change to another approach (adap1)* I like to experiment with different sales approach (adap2) I am very flexible in the selling approach I use (adap3) I can easily use a wide variety of selling approaches (adap4) I try to understand how this key account differs from others (adap5)*
<i>Team Selling^a</i>	I help this key account to get in touch with the different specialists of my firm when needed (team1) I place at the disposal of this key account different experts from my organization (team2) I organize visits and meetings between the different departments of both companies (supplier and key account) (team3) I share information about this key account with my colleagues of other departments (team4) I spend time to coordinate the different employees of my firm involved in the relationship with this key account (team5) I have established a stable and well defined team of specialists to deal with this key account (team6)

^a measured on a 7 point scale ranging from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree”

^b measured on a 9 point scale ranging from “Never” to “Always”

* item was deleted based on refinement procedures described in the text

Table 1
Scale properties and the measurement model (PLS)

Construct	Indicators	Factor Loadings	Rho	Average Variance Extracted
Relational strategy	Rela3	0.93	0.98	0.78
	Rela4	0.83		
Adaptive selling	Adap2	-0.80	0.97	0,74
	Adap3	-0.85		
	Adap4	-0.92		
Sportmanship	Citi2	-0.79	0.97	0,75
	Citi3	-0.94		
Conscientiousness	Citi7	0.86	0.95	0,67
	Citi8	0.78		
Altruism	Citi10	0.83	0.98	0,79
	Citi11	0.94		
Customer orientation	Soco3	0.79	0.93	0,77
	Soco4	0.93		
	Soco5	0.91		
Team selling	Team1	0.63	0.88	0,51
	Team2	0.63		
	Team3	0.78		
	Team4	0.75		
	Team5	0.67		
	Team6	0.72		

Table 2
Discriminant validity (PLS)

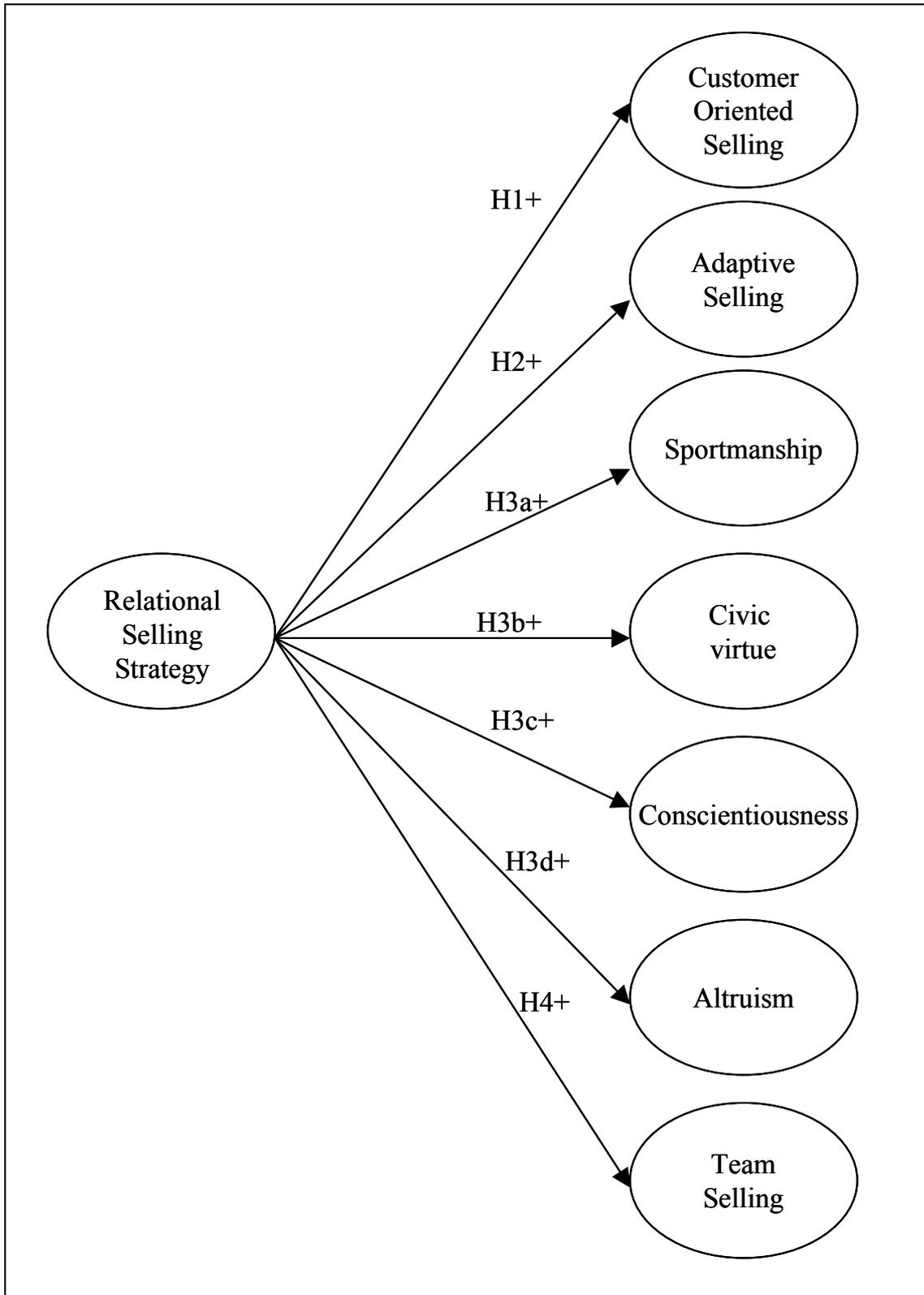
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Relationship Strategy	0.88						
Adaptive Selling	-0.19	0.86					
Sorptmanship	-0.10	0.14	0.87				
Conscientiousness	-0.24	0.002	-0.15	0.82			
Altruism	0.06	0.06	-0.25	0.29	0.89		
Customer Orientation	0.22	-0.12	-0.31	0.09	0.26	0.88	
Team Selling	0.26	-0.21	-0.18	0.14	0.05	0.41	0.71

Note: bold numbers on the diagonal show the square root of the AVE; numbers below the diagonal represent construct correlations.

Table 3
Parameter estimation of the causal model by the bootstrap method (PLS)

Hypothesis	B1 parameter	B2 parameter	Standard Deviation	t-value	Sig. at the 5%level
H1: relational selling strategy → customer oriented selling	0.22	0.31	0.08	2.34	✓
H2: relational selling strategy → adaptive selling	-0.19	-0.24	0.09	-2.09	✓
H3a: relational selling strategy → sportmanship	-0.10	-0.15	0.09	-1.17	
H3b: relational selling strategy → civic virtue	Non- tested	Non- tested	Non-tested	Non- tested	Non-tested
H3c: relational selling strategy → conscientiousness	-0.24	-0.25	0.08	-3.10	✓
H3d: relational selling strategy → altruism	0.06	0.12	0.07	0.97	
H4: relational selling strategy → team selling	0.26	0.31	0.08	3.17	✓

Figure 1
Conceptual framework



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