

**THE IMPACT OF MISMATCH BETWEEN SALESPERSON COMMUNICATION  
AND BUYER'S NEEDS ON MUTUAL RELATIONS  
COMPETITIVE PAPER**

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## **Abstract**

**Purpose of the paper and literature addressed:** Despite the important role of communication in the business-to-business sphere, little attention is given to it in publications. The so far conducted research on adapting communication focused on the level and scope of information exchange or marketing in general. However, the explanation to what degree communication, and particularly taking into account buyer needs in communication, has an effect on buyer-salesperson relationships is missing. Therefore, this paper is based on a thesis that salesperson communication at variance with buyer expectations leads to deterioration of buyer's trust, satisfaction, commitment and willingness to recommend the salesperson.

**Research method:** The paper is founded on research conducted in 2009 among 379 professional buyers working in enterprises in Poland.

**Research findings:** The paper defines elements of communication indispensable to maintain relationships of specific parameters (trust, satisfaction, commitment and recommendation). It also indicates that the extent to which not adapting communication has an effect on buyer-salesperson relationship does not depend on trust which buyers have in salespersons, compared to other sources of information.

**Main contribution:** The effect of the paper is indicating the areas of communication towards which salesperson should direct their efforts and such areas which even if lacking conformity do not have a negative effect on buyer-salesperson relationships.

**Keywords:** communication behavior, interaction, adaptive selling, relationship effects, professional buyers behavior

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**INTRODUCTION**

Loyalty of the business customer is based not only on product features but also on convergence of personal and social forces that exist between professional buyers and key contact personnel within supplier firms (Oliver 1999, 33-44). The role of key contact personnel in satisfying customers in business market is important (Bendapudi, Leone, 2002, 83-101; Homburg, Stock, 2004, 144). What is more, it has been revealed that well-functioning buyer-salesperson relationships improve the financial as well as non-financial performance of both buyers and salespersons (O'Toole, Donaldson, 2002, 197-208).

Personal selling is - by nature - a personal communication that seeks to inform buyers about products in an exchange situation (Agnihotri et al. 2009, 475) and relations and networks between enterprises are essentially formed through interpersonal communication (Olkkonen et al. 2000, 403-409). In the opinions of many authors communication is of key significance in the relationship process between buyers and salespersons. It can be perceived as the main element of the relationship (Guenzi et al. 2007, 121-133). Communication is treated as the essence of coordinating organisation's behaviours and is defined as the "glue" holding together the co-operating enterprises (Mohr, Nevin 1990, 36-51). The role of communication is so significant that it has been proposed to treat it as the basic index of relationship lifespan (Mohr, Spekman 1994, 135-152).

The paper is based on a thesis that communication may be one of the elements that shape buyer-salesperson relations. In general, research results indicate that there is a link between buyer-salesperson relations and their mutual communication (Webster, Sundaram 2009, 103-113). Based on the work of Oliver (1980, 460-468) we assume that the chance of positive evaluation of communication with the salesperson by the buyer is related to their pre-interaction expectations that create a frame of reference from which a buyer makes post-interaction comparative judgments. When a judgment leads to a worse-than buyer's frame of reference comparison than dissatisfaction likely occurs (Lewin, 2009, 283-289). The paper is intended to show how mismatching between buyer's expectations and salesperson communication performance impacts their relations.

This issue is important due to the fact that customer (dis)satisfaction influences an organization's current and future performance (Anderson et al. 1994, 53-66) as it is an important source of competitive advantage (Lemon et al. 2000, 109-127). This study responds to the call for more research examining salespeople's service behaviours required to satisfy business customers. In contrast to the more frequently adopted approach which is about getting to know the effects of salesperson activities, it has been decided to determine the effects of undertaken activities which do not meet customer expectations. The paper makes references to studies conducted in the framework of interaction/network theory through focusing on communication, information source uncertainty and relationship characteristics, which are often identified as elements of this approach (Johanson, Mattsson 1987, 34-48; Möller, Halinen 2000, 29-54; Claycomb, Frankwick 2010, 252). The paper becomes part of this line of research by developing and testing the influence of failing to meet buyer expectations towards salesperson communication on their relations, and enriches the existing literature through studying the outcome of failure in communication process on the basis of survey data collected from 379 purchasing professionals. We indicate that mismatching expectations has an effect on the relations, but the scope of this effect depends on the buyer's attitude to the salesperson as a source of information. The conclusions from the

paper may be important for sales managers and salespeople alike, as they should be aware of the impact of communication incompatible with customer expectations.

The issue of buyer-salesperson relations has been given quite a lot of attention in the literature according to an established conviction that buyer-salesperson relationship is an important resource serving to create the competitive edge on both sides (Claycomb, Frankwick 2010, 253). At the same time, few empirical studies have specifically focused on communication between them and its effect on mutual relations (Gurau 2008, 169; Claycomb, Frankwick, 2010, 255). Usually it is treated as the environment in which interactions take place or communication from the perspective of the company and not the people who establish the relations (Williams et al. 1990, 434-442). Little attention has been devoted in research to the question of adaptation in the field of communication in business-to-business relations and impact of communication style on customers' attitudes (Webster, Sundaram 2009, 103-113). The few so far conducted studies on adapting communication focused on the level and scope of information exchange (Holmlund, Kock 1995, 109-121; Brennan et al. 2003, 1636-55), communication (Claycomb, Frankwick 2010, 253-255) or marketing in general (Achrol et al. 2000, 180-194).

The paper is organized as follows. In the next section the theoretical framework for the present study is established. The essentials of communication and its impact on relations are discussed and hypotheses are offered. It was necessary to conduct empirical studies in two stages: to determine the needs of buyers in the field of communication with the salesperson in the first stage and then to verify the adopted hypotheses in the second stage. The paper concludes with a discussion of findings, including implications for further research.

## THEORETICAL FOUNDATION COMMUNICATION

In a broad perspective, communication comprises all forms of contact, including written and verbal communication, and interaction (Alajoutsijärvi et al. 2000, 1270-89), whereas Anderson and Narus (1990, 42-58) see communication as the sharing of meaningful information between two firms, whether formal or informal. The term "communication" is ambiguous. As early as in 1970 Dance collected 95 definitions of communication and concluded that none of them embraces all approaches to communication (Dance 1970, 201-210). The foundations for today's approach to communication lie in studies conducted in 1940-1965 when communication models deeply rooted in marketing were created: the persuasive act model (Laswell, 1948, 203-243) and the mathematical model (Shannon, Weaver 1949). Their focus is on who communicates what to whom and how, thus they exhibit a rather instrumental approach to communication. These concepts had a lasting effect on subsequent works on communication, therefore in the literature communication is often presented as transmitting information from one place to another. In the paper a functional approach to communication has been adopted, concerned with determining the impact of communication on an enterprise, particularly on organising and developing relationships as well as facilitating the exchange (Shockley-Zalabak 1993).

The existence of relations between two organisations means that they have established a channel of communication, built around personal relationships of the employees, on mutual exchange standards, electronic exchange of data or integrating production management systems (Evans, Wurster 1997, 73). Communication is often regarded in the context of processes of exchange or forming relations between enterprises, but this phenomenon would also need to be regarded at the level interpersonal relations (Alajoutsijärvi et al. 2000, 403-409). Analysing communication at such a level facilitates the understanding of the relationship between the enterprises (Wren, Simpson 1996, 64). Communication between

salesperson and buyer forms a mutual relationship (Dwyer, Shurr 1987, 11-27). Together with relationship structure communication creates an environment for interactions between both parties (Wren, Simpson 1996, 66, 71-73).

In the marketing literature, the communication construct is defined with the use of information content (Mohr, Nevin 1990, 36-51), amount, frequency, and quality (Palmatier et al. 2006, 138), accuracy, timeliness and adequacy of exchanged information (Mohr, Spekman 1994, 138-139) as well as the way the information is exchanged. In accordance with the functional approach to communication its content is worth exploring from the point of view of communication participants' aims. For the buyer it is important to receive important information (satisfying the information needs), from a personal or impersonal source (Moriarty, Spekman 1984, 137-147) that is credible (Sweitzer 1976, 334-339) and delivered on time (Anderson, Narus 1990, 42-58).

The form of the exchange, sometimes referred to as the style, is defined by direction, frequency, medium and exerting influence (Wren, Simpson 1996, 71-73; Mohr, Nevin 1990, 36-51). Communication may be one- or two-way. The first case is described by the classic communication models – the transmitter is active in providing information, and the receiver passively takes it in. Such an approach to communication as a monologue was adopted in transactional marketing. Two-way communication based on a dialogue was emphasised in relationship marketing (Andersen 2001, 167–182; Grönroos 2004, 99–113). Frequency of communication influences the amount of transmitted information. In every relationship there is a minimal frequency of communication indispensable to maintain it, and a borderline frequency, on the other hand, exceeding of which has a negative effect on the relationship. The medium plays a vital role in communication – taking into consideration the direct nature of business-to-business relations it can be direct or indirect (Mohr, Nevin, 1990, 36-51). Communication can be informational in character when the aim is to reach understanding between the process participants. In the case of persuasive communication, its fundamental characteristic is such influence of the transmitter on the receiver to urge them to voluntarily accept and adopt new behaviours and attitudes according to the transmitter's intention (O'Donnell, Kable 1982, 9).

#### BUYER'S EXPECTATIONS TOWARDS COMMUNICATION

An expectation is a belief maintained by someone that something may happen in the foreseeable future (Andersen et al. 2009, 816). Expectations are the most important antecedents of satisfaction (Fornell et al., 1996, 7-18; Oliver 1980, 460-468; Zeithaml 1988, 2-22), as the achievable level of satisfaction is dependent on the level of expectations. Some evidence suggests that satisfaction should not be treated as unidimensional construct and it has two coexisting dimensions, satisfaction and dissatisfaction for the same individual experience. Both dimensions can be researched autonomously (Mackoy, Spreng 1995, 53-54).

In business-to-business relations the link between expectations and satisfaction is stronger than on the consumer market since individual buying decisions have a direct influence on the suppliers' condition (Cronin, Morris 1989, 41–49). Professional buyers devote more time and effort to determine the needs, and analyse and evaluate offers, which affects their developing expectations. It is assumed that such purchases are more conscious than in the case of consumption product purchases.

Buyer's expectations are not constant and undergo changes as a result of previous contacts with the salesperson, with other information sources and due to recommendation (Anderson et al., 1994, 53–66; Fornell et al. 1996, 7-18). As a consequence of the experiences norms are formed which shape and determine the level of buyer expectations.

Research indicates that buyer expectations of the salesperson at the beginning of the relationship are relatively high not only in reference to the product but also the service process (Lewin 2009, 286-287). This also means high expectations of the quality of communication with the salesperson (Claycomb, Frankwick 2010, 254).

In terms of communication, expectations are about how the partner will be communicating (Meyer et al., 1985, 151–155), but also that they will accept the set norms. Andersen et al. 2009, 818-819) on the basis of an overview of research claim that in buyer-salesperson relations expectations are concerned with understanding the other party. In the field of communication one may therefore expect that factual expectations of buyers are linked to their tasks in obtaining information. Buyers expect the salesperson to facilitate access to information, which will be possible to structure and analyse and will enable buyers to have control over the buying process (especially in new or complex buying situations) (Bunn 1993, 38–56).

Determining information needs of buyers is an important challenge for the supplier as obtaining by the buyer good-quality information may positively affect the purchase decision (Petersen et al. 2005, 14–25). According to the integrated model of buying behaviours buyers need information about: the product's quality, price, delivery, service and the supplier's image (Bharadwaj 2004, 317–322). Basing on the advantages expected by institutional buyers their information needs concern such areas as: products, services and relations as well as costs to be incurred in order to gain the advantages (Lapierre 2000, 122-144). Taking into consideration elements of the supplier's offer it is information that makes it possible to evaluate the offer's value, feasibility, availability and diversity and effectiveness of the service (Bennett 1997, 151-156). So far, however, it has not been empirically assessed how – according to buyers - the information should be provided by the supplier.

In the context of incomplete information on the side of the buyer or salesperson, both parties develop their expectations of the partner's affective elements such as assessment of their character (Andersen 2001, 167-182) or the other person's features (Williams, Spiro 1985, 434-442). Attention is paid not only to the message, but also the communication style, which creates its context allowing for building trust and credibility, so the atmosphere conducive to co-operation (Hallen, Sandstrom 1991). Expectations regarding the quality, frequency and scope of the partners' communication efforts are therefore important (Hall, 1976).

#### THE IMPACT OF COMMUNICATION ON RELATIONS

A number of scholars focus on the role of communication in relationship development. In business-to-business relations the main task of communication is ensuring partners' understanding of intentions and capabilities and laying the foundations for relationship development. The quality of information and its exchange affect the success of the relationship (Mohr, Spekman 1994, 135-152)..

Communication cannot be brought down to only information transfer. In the course of communication process the transmitter presents their emotional attitude both to the transmitted information and the receiver. Thus, in the process of communication the relationship between the transmitter and receiver is constantly defined and redefined.

Communication has therefore an effect on the relationship itself and its development. Successful buyer-salesperson relationships involve firms which achieve a higher level of communication quality (Nunlee, 2005, 515-525). More complex communication leads to better results, stronger bond and better atmosphere, which in turn contribute to relationship development (Biggemann, Buttle 2009, 549–560). The benefits of long-term relationships to the firm are increased loyalty (Dwyer et al. 1987, 11-27) and satisfaction (Boles et al. 2001,

1-13) among customers. Communication within supplier-buyer relationship should be reflected in relationship key areas such as raising the level of recommending the enterprise to others or lowering the tendency to change the supplier (Bolton et al. 2000, 95-108; Narayandas 1998, 108-128, Reichheld, Sasser 1990, 105-111).

A synthesis model of buyer-salesperson relationship model of Wren and Simpson emphasises the importance of communication not only as the background for buyer-salesperson interactions, but also as the factor influencing its outcome: affective (co-operation, confidence, commitment, satisfaction) and behavioural (purchase amounts, final profit) results (Wren, Simpson, 1996, 63-79). On the other hand, in relationship model proposed by the IMP Group (Hakansson 1982) communication leads to satisfaction and trust.

To sum up the above deliberations, one needs to point out two options of perceiving communication in buyer-salesperson relations. From a narrow perspective, communication effects in business relations may be attributed to the success of a specific transaction. From this point of view, the highest position in the hierarchy of effects of the enterprise's communicating with the market is occupied by the purchase decision (Blythe 2005, 16). From a broader perspective, on the other hand, communication together with the processes of interacting and creating value is of primary importance for the success of relationship marketing (Grönroos, 2004, 99-113), because of its influence on trust (Mohr, Nevin 1990, 36-51; Anderson, Narus 1990, 42-58), satisfaction, willingness to recommend and commitment (Hakansson et al. 1976, 319-332), and through these variables on the channel of distribution effects (Mohr, Nevin, 1990, 36-51). In our deliberations we have focused on linking communication with areas of affective relational effects presented in the further part of the text: trust, satisfaction, commitment (affective and calculative) and recommendations.

#### TRUST (TR)

A construct closely related to meeting expectations is trust. Trust may be treated as an emotional state to be interpreted in the context of such notions as "certainty" (Garbarino, Johnson 1990, 70-87) or "expectation" (Gambetta 1988, 213-237). Trust comprises an element of credibility, that is a conviction that the other party will act in accordance with their promises (Iacobucci, Hibbard 1999, 23). It is also assumed that trust concerns also benevolence, that is a belief that the other party will take into consideration the interests of their co-operator (Wilson 1995, 337).

Communication is positively related to trust (Anderson, Narus 1990, 42-58; Anderson, Weitz 1992, 254-262) and trust leads to an increase in communication intensity (Dwyer et al. 1987, 11-27). Morgan and Hunt (1994, 20-38) in their model assumed that communication, next to common values and non-opportunistic behaviour, is the determinant of trust. However, in order to translate itself into confidence it should meet certain conditions, e.g. be helpful and useful, available on time and mean a minimal effort for the receiver.

#### SATISFACTION (SAT)

Satisfaction is an emotional construct, but its determinants can be both emotional or cognitive in character (Bennett, Rundle-Thiele 2004, 514-523). Most often it is assumed that customer's satisfaction is a function of meeting their expectations, and particularly an assessment of divergence between expectations (of the brand, product) and the received value.

Increasingly, customer satisfaction is viewed as a key determinant of organizational success. Customer satisfaction has been shown to positively influence repeat sales and/or repurchase intentions, and increase customer loyalty (Anderson et al., 1997, 129-145; Homburg, Rudolph 2001, 15-33). Studies on the effect of satisfaction on customer behaviour

showed the existence of its relation to, among other things, customer retention (Anderson, Sullivan 1993, 125-143; Bolton 1998 171-186; Mittal, Kamakura 2001, 131-142), share in the purchase category (Bowman, Narayandas 2001, 281-297; Keiningham et al. 2007, 361-384) or willingness to recommend (Kwiatek, Białowas 2008).

#### COMMITMENT (COA, COC)

For many authors it is commitment that reflects the quality of dyad relationship (O'Reilly, Chatman 1986, 492-499). It is assumed that the prerequisite of commitment's existence is the fact that it comprises both the affective (emotional commitment) and behavioural (continuation of cooperation) components (Allen, Meyer 1990, 1-18). The dual nature of commitment, as many authors indicate, translates into the existence of two kinds of commitment: affective, which is related to liking (COA) and calculative, which is related to willingness to retain the relationship and a sense of its profitability (COC) (Morgan, Hunt 1994, 20-38, Fullerton 2003, 333-344; Håvard et al. 2003, 356-368; Johnson et al. 2001, 217-245).

#### RECOMMENDATIONS (REC)

Verhoef et al. (2002, 202-216) quote the definition of recommendation as “oral personal communication between a non-commercial transmitter and receiver on the subject of a brand, product or service which can be purchased”. A lot of research in recent years has been devoted to the concept of customer recommendations (Kumar, Reinartz 2002, 86-97). This interest stems from the role which is attributed, especially in the sector of services, to positive word-of-mouth. Such recommendations are treated as a source of additional revenue for the company, as it is a way of gaining new customers (Kumar et al. 2007, 139-146).

#### CONFIDENCE IN THE SALESPERSON AS THE BUYER DIFFERING FACTOR

Uncertainty is one of the key dimensions of buyer-salesperson interactions and effective communication with the salesperson is a factor lowering the buyer's uncertainty (Duncan 1973, 273-291) as it reduces the number of doubts concerning the given supplier. Previous experiences lead buyers to the assumption that communication with the salesperson is a promise of what the co-operation with the company they represent will look like (Larson 1992, 76-104). Therefore, seeking information and analysing the collected data is among the main activities of buyers (Bunn 1993, 38- 56). The salesperson is treated by buyers as the second-best (after the Internet) source of information in the buying decision process (Thomas et al. 2007, 13) however, his or her role differs depending on the purchase situation. When the purchasing risk seems low to the buyers they tend to rely on impersonal sources of information and treat them as sufficient because they are concerned with a smooth purchase (Kennedy, Deeter-Schmelz 2001, 279-90; Gounaris 2005, 126-37). As uncertainty and risk increase so does the degree of effort put into searching for information, which is mainly reflected in the increase in the number of information sources (Robinson et al. 1976; Bunn 1994; Bienstock, Royne, 2007, 389-408) and a greater significance attributed to information from supplier representatives or other companies operating on the market (Kennedy, Deeter-Schmelz, 2001; Bunn, Liu 1996, 439-452; Woo, Ennew 2005, 1178-86; Rauyruen, Miller 2006, 21-31).

Differentiating between buyer behaviour depending on the situation does not exhaust all factors which influence the buyer. In the same purchase situation buyer behaviour may differ as a result of other factors, including the source of information and buyer experiences (Sheth 1976). Buyers seek information only to the point when costs of gaining the information do not exceed the benefits it offers (Bienstock, Royne 2007, 389-408). The

perception of these benefits and costs may be different depending on buyer's earlier experiences of receiving information from salespersons. This is why one may suspect that experiences and history of contacts with salespersons diversify the attitudes of buyers towards the salespersons as a source of information.

## HYPOTHESES

Communication is a plain of relations between buyers and salespersons. These relations may in turn give the co-operating partners specific results, among which we have included: satisfaction, confidence, commitment and recommendation. Since in the literature one may find research results indicating that communication is an important factor affecting development or strength of these effects, the main objective of this study is to investigate whether or not communication which is incompatible with what the buyer expects has an effect on their relations with the salesperson and how this varies among buyers with different levels of confidence in the salesperson as a source of information.

As research shows, companies operating on the institutional market find themselves in a constant process of adaptation, described in the literature as adaptive selling (Spiro, Weitz 1990, 61-69). It can occur in the offer as well as the service or management system processes (Brennan et al. 2003, 1636-1655). Adaptive activities may therefore take place on the level of the salesperson, when the scope of transmitted information and communication are adapted (Eckert 2006). While research indicating a positive effect of communication according to buyer expectations on the relations has been undertaken, knowledge about the effects of activities incompatible with buyer expectations is scarce. Some evidence suggests that satisfaction should not be treated as unidimensional construct and it is worth distinguishing between satisfaction and dissatisfaction (Mackoy, Spreng 1995, 53-58), therefore we have adopted a more infrequently used but cognitively more interesting approach where we examine the impact of not meeting communication expectations on buyer-salesperson relations.

Besides aiming to empirically verify the main thesis about the impact of mismatching communication on buyer-salesperson relations one may also expect a varied impact of the mismatch on various elements of communication on the relations. So far the conducted research indicates that the elements which affect communication quality are timeliness, suitable content (Mohr, Spekman 1994, p.138) as well as style (Webster, Sundaram 2009, 104-114), however, they do not describe the hierarchy of these elements. Based on the assumption about rationality of professional buyers' behaviours one may expect a confirmation of the following hypotheses:

*H1. Failing to meet buyer expectations of timeliness of communication has a greater effect on the relationship (in area of satisfaction, trust, commitment and recommendations) with the salesperson than other elements of communication.*

*H2. Failing to meet buyer expectations of the subject of communication has an greater effect on the relationship (in area of satisfaction, trust, commitment and recommendations) with the salesperson than not meeting the expectations concerning the style of communication.*

Claycomb and Frankwick operationalized buyer's experience and previous contacts with the salesperson through supplier's reputation described as "a perceptual representation of a company's past actions and future prospects that describes the firm's overall appeal", which embraces "trust" and "concern for customers". High reputation of the supplier has a positive effect on lowering uncertainty (Claycomb, Frankwick 2010, 259). Applying this approach on the level of buyer-salesperson relations we assume that buyer's reputation of the salesperson may moderate the effects of mutual communication. Thus relations with buyers who have confidence in salespersons as a source of information should have a weaker impact when

communication mismatches buyer's needs. At the same time, in the case of buyers who do not have confidence in the salesperson, incompatible communication may negatively affect the relations, due to their earlier negative experiences. In other words, among buyers having confidence in the salesperson the risk of deteriorating the relations by inadequate communication may be lesser than in the case of buyers who do not trust the salesperson. The H3 hypothesis has been formulated on the basis of the above deliberations:

*H3. The impact of not meeting buyer's communication expectations on their relationship (in area of satisfaction, trust, commitment and recommendations) with the salesperson is lesser among buyers with greater confidence in the salesperson as a source of information.*

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research focused on the buyer's perspective on communication with the salesperson and its influence on mutual relations. To achieve the set aims it was necessary to conduct empirical studies in two stages. At the first stage the research aimed at determining the needs of professional buyers in the field of communication with the salespersons. The obtained results let us design a questionnaire used at the second stage to verify the adopted hypotheses.

### RESEARCH ON BUYERS' EXPECTATIONS - METHODOLOGY

In order to identify buyer expectations towards communication with the salesperson as far as the previously described elements of communication are concerned a survey of professional buyers was developed. A structured questionnaire was used for this purpose, which consisted of 7 questions on elements of communication, based on a 5-point semantic scale:

- communication on time/ earlier or later,
- providing information expected by the buyer / also other information,
- availability of information only from the salesperson/ from other sources,
- communication in the form of a monologue / dialogue,
- communication frequency: as often as desired by the buyer / less often or more often,
- personal/impersonal communication,
- persuasive /non-persuasive communication.

### RESEARCH ON BUYERS' EXPECTATIONS - ORGANISATION

The research was narrowed down to the food industry as it is rapidly developing in Poland, which is connected with governmental programmes of modernisation of agriculture and food processing, co-financed with the European Union resources. New companies and so new salespersons are appearing on the food market. To define the market context of the research in-depth interviews were conducted with salespersons and buyers operating in the food industry in Poland. They claim that the industry is characterised by a strong tendency to co-operate in producer-distributor relations, but there is scarce co-operation with companies which are at the same level in the value chain. In the industry the relational approach is more common than transactional one. The dominating form in communication is the telephone and email. Personal contacts are not too frequent but trade fairs are highly significant. In sales confidence plays an important role, which results from high significance of a single transaction on the market. Recommendations are often used in the industry but they must come from a credible source.

The main difficulty in the case of studying the buyers was in reaching a large number of buyers while having limited resources. Due to the fact that purchase management is in the

development stage in Poland, there is a lack of organisations associating buyers (there are no databases), as well as meetings (e.g. specialist conferences), in which buyers from various industries could participate. In such a situation it was decided to reach buyers during a significant trade fair which guarantees participation of a large number of buyers.

In Poland trade fairs play a vital role in companies' activities, they can be treated as an event during which in one place there come together representatives of all groups functioning within the given industry (Black 1986). An argument for conducting research during a trade fair show is an opportunity to embrace at the same time and place a great part of companies and people from the given industry (Leszczyński, Zieliński 2007, 241-254).

With regard to the above mentioned context, the research on buyers was conducted at one of the biggest international trade fair shows in Poland – Polagra. The choice of a big and prestigious trade fair guarantees the presence of the right number of buyers. To ensure industry diversification it was decided to conduct the research in the course of a few thematic exhibitions.

The study of communication expectations of buyers was conducted on the first day of the trade fair as it is devoted exclusively to industry professionals. Based on the data on visitors to the selected exhibitions during the PolagraFood and PolagraTech 2009 trade fair a minimal sample for one day trade fair visitors was established at the level of 112 persons ( $p=0,9$ ,  $\alpha=95\%$ ,  $e=5,5\%$ ).

The interviews were conducted by specially trained pollsters. The research embraced every 10<sup>th</sup> person registering as a buyer at the trade fair. They were conducted on entering the trade fair so as to avoid the effect of current contacts with salespersons on the given answers. All in all 129 correctly filled questionnaires were collected which qualified for further analysis. In the groups of buyers the majority were men (82,3%). They could be called experienced. Just under 35% were persons working in the profession for less than 5 years, and more than a quarter of them worked 6-10 years. A longer work experience in purchase (11-15 years) was the case with 17,8% of respondents, and 20,9% had experience of more than 15 years.

#### RESEARCH ON BUYERS' EXPECTATIONS - RESULTS

Buyers expect that in communication salespersons will adapt to buyers' needs:

1. in terms of timing
  - a. A vast majority (83,7%) of buyers want the salesperson to communicate with them at the time specified by the buyer. Only 9,3% agree on the salespersons' determining the time of communication.
  - b. Nearly 80% of buyers want the communication frequency to be according to their expectations, and only 14,7% consent to the salesperson communicating with them more or less often than they expect.
2. in terms of direction of communication

Buyers do not want the communication to be in the form of a monologue – theirs or the salespersons' – three quarters expect the salesperson to have a dialogue with them. Most of the other buyers (17,1% of the total) chose a neutral value, between a dialogue and a monologue, which could be interpreted as preferring each of these forms depending on the situation.
3. in terms of information content

Two thirds of the buyers (65,9%) thought that salespersons should only give information they require and do not add anything else unless asked. At the same time, 17,8% of the buyers agreed on the salesperson deciding what information they provide and 16,3% of the buyers took a neutral stand in this matter.

In the opinion of half of the respondents (49,7%) the salesperson should be the main source of information about the company and its offer. One fourth of the respondents expect the information to be available also in sources independent of the salesperson. Another quarter of the respondents did not take a definitive stand on this issue, which may mean that, depending on the situation, they prefer receiving information exclusively from the salesperson or seek it also elsewhere. The research results indicate that half of the respondents focus on communication with the salesperson only, but the other half look for information independent of the salesperson – most likely when they do not need contact with the salesperson or when they need to verify the information given by the supplier.

A slight majority of buyers expect a personal contact with the salesperson, and only 5,4% do not see such a need. More than one third (35,7%) of the buyers did not take a definitive stand on this – possibly they expect personal contact, but it is not absolute and they allow situations when the contact will have a different form.

Most buyers do not oppose the idea of salespersons trying to change their beliefs – 30,2% of the buyers were neutral about this, and 29,3% actually expected salespersons to try to encourage them to change their beliefs or preferences. On the other hand, 40,4% of the respondents expect salespersons not to use persuasive communication.

The obtained results on buyer expectations in terms of salesperson communication were useful to determine the desirable communication behaviour of the salesperson, whose impact on relational effects was verified in the following study. It was established that if the salesperson wants to reflect preferences of the maximum group of buyers they should then be particular about giving all the information on time and as often as desired by the customer. Moreover, communication should be in the form of a direct dialogue and cover, above all, information desired by the buyer and be persuasive in character, and the salesperson should constitute the main source of information.

The conducted factor analysis showed the existence of three factors (Fig. 1.) which explained more than 60% of the observed phenomenon (Fig. 2.).

Fig. 1. Matrix of rotated components

communication	Component		
	COM1	COM2	COM3
Time			0,904
Accuracy	0,546		
Source		0,611	
Direction		0,602	
Frequency	0,832		
Medium		0,795	
Influence	0,658		

Fig. 2. Total explained variance

Component	Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of variance	% accumulated
COM1	1,822	26,025	26,025
COM2	1,376	19,651	45,676
COM3	1,096	15,654	61,330

Factor COM1 contains elements of communication connected with its content (obtaining information which is essential for the buyer, their (persuasive/informational) character and the information's validity. Factor COM2 is related to the way of obtaining information (source of information, its direction and medium). COM3, however, is related to the possibility of obtaining information on time.

RESEARCH ON COMMUNICATION IMPACT  
ON BUYER-SALESPERSON RELATIONS - METHODOLOGY

The basis for designing the questionnaire to study the impact of mismatching communication on buyer-salesperson relations were the behaviours that were opposite to the conclusions from the study on buyer expectations in the field of communication presented above. Thus following elements of communication were included in the questionnaire:

- providing also information not expected by the buyer (COM1) ,
- persuasive communication (COM1)
- communication less often or more often than desired by the buyer (COM1),
- the salesperson is the only source of information (COM2),
- impersonal communication (COM2),
- communication in the form of a monologue (COM2),
- communication not on time defined by the buyer (COM3).

The obtained in the study three elements of expectations towards communication (COM1, COM2, COM3) were collated with the areas of relations in order to determine the impact of failing to meet buyer's communication expectations on the areas of relations. This resulted in the following research plan presented in Fig 3., where every field (e.g. SAT\_COM1) signifies the impact of not matching an element of communication (e.g. COM1) to the buyer's needs on the area of relations (e.g. SAT).

Fig. 3. Research plan

elements of communications	COM1	COM2	COM3
areas of relation			
SAT	SAT_COM1	SAT_COM2	SAT_COM3
TR	TR_COM1	TR_COM2	TR_COM3
COC	COC_COM1	COC_COM2	COC_COM3
COA	COA_COM1	COA_COM2	COA_COM3
REC	REC_COM1	REC_COM2	REC_COM3

A questionnaire was developed consisting of questions on the elements of communication that buyers preferred in the study on expectations. The questions were concerned with the effect of not meeting the expectations on the relations with the salesperson. The relations were defined in terms of satisfaction, trust, commitment (affective and calculative) and willingness to recommend. In order to conduct a study on these aspects of relations on independent samples 5 questionnaires were prepared, each containing questions on one aspect of relations:

- SAT: satisfaction (e.g. “I'm dissatisfied with a salesperson who...”),
- TR: trust (e.g. “I have no confidence in a salesperson who...”),
- COC: calculative commitment (e.g. “It does not pay off to co-operate with a salesperson who...”),

- COA: affective commitment (e.g. "I dislike a salesperson who..."),
- REC: willingness to recommend (e.g. "I do not recommend to others a salesperson who...").

5 points Likert scale was used to measure the results.

With regard to the set hypotheses, buyer's confidence in the salesperson as a source of information was a separate construct. Information sources were divided here into personal: controlled by the supplier (salesperson/sales representative) and not controlled by the supplier (recommendations), and impersonal (all other sources). To determine the buyer's confidence in the salesperson it is necessary to look through the prism of purchase situations which were presented in two categories, each consisting of 2 subcategories: purchase from a new supplier (new product or familiar product) and purchase from a known supplier (new product or familiar product). A separate question was about work experience in purchase.

Due to the diversity of needs and behaviours of buyers and salespersons at different stages of the process, communication is of varied nature (Andersen, 2001, 167-182), which manifests itself for instance by who participates in it. In the early phase of the relationship, the communication is usually between the salesperson who represents the sales department (or other departments of the enterprise) and the buyer who represents a more or less formal buying centre, operating on behalf of the units which need a particular product or service (Weitz et al. 2007). Thus the study was concerned only with the early phases of relationship development where it is the buyer who runs the highest risk, there is the highest level of uncertainty on their side, and at the same time the buyer has the highest information needs. Therefore, communication with the salesperson is so important for the buyer although it should be emphasised that the salesperson does not remain the sole source of information.

## RESEARCH ON COMMUNICATION IMPACT

### ON BUYER-SALESPERSON RELATIONS - ORGANISATION

The study on the impact of salesperson communication on the relations was conducted on the second day of PolagraFood and PolgraTech 2009 trade fair. The group was estimated to be 266 persons ( $p=0,75$ ,  $\alpha=95\%$ ,  $e=5,0\%$ ), based on the number of visitors as revealed by the trade fair organiser and on research results indicating that 75% of the visitors intend to meet specific exhibitors. The study was conducted with the method of a direct interview. Every 10<sup>th</sup> person registering as a buyer was selected for the research. The interviews were conducted on entering the trade fair so that current contacts with salespersons would not affect the answers. The study was conducted by specially trained pollsters. In total, 275 questionnaires were collected representing the following structure:

- Study TR: The impact of communication on trust – 56 buyers,
- Study SAT: The impact of communication on satisfaction – 56 buyers,
- Study COA: The impact of communication on affective commitment – 54 buyers,
- Study COC: The impact of communication on calculative commitment – 56 buyers,
- Study REC: The impact of communication on willingness to recommend – 53 buyers

In terms of work experience in purchase there were no major differences between the respondent groups ( $\chi^2=3,31$ ,  $df=4$ ,  $p>0,05$ ). Most respondents (56,8%) had dealt with purchase for more than 10 years, others had less experience in the field (median=8 years, mean=9,8 years).

## RESULTS

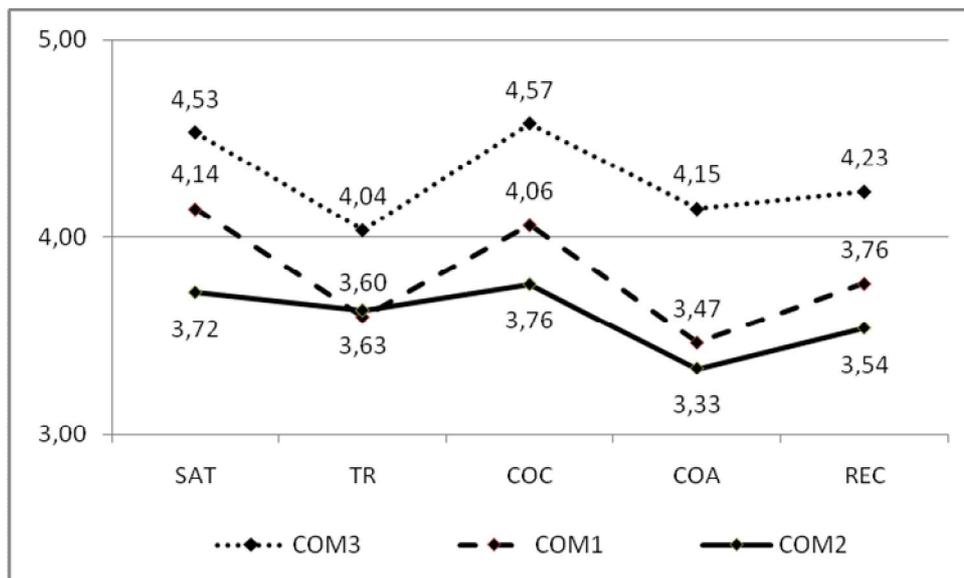
Hypotheses H1 and H2 assumed a varied effect of failing to meet buyers expectations in the particular areas of communication on their relationship with the salesperson. In order to

verify these hypotheses the averages of respondents' judgements concerning particular factors were established and next significance of differences between them was examined. Fig. 4 and 5 shows the received results. The results indicate that a mismatch between buyer expectations and an element of communication COM3, according to the respondents, has the biggest impact on their relationship with the salesperson across all areas of relations. The impact of COM1 was evaluated as smaller and COM2 as the smallest (effect on confidence is an exception).

Fig. 4. Mean and standard deviation

	COM1		COM2		COM3	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
SAT	4,14	1,09	3,72	1,33	4,53	,80
TR	3,60	1,34	3,63	1,35	4,04	1,07
COA	4,06	1,21	3,76	1,32	4,57	,69
COC	3,47	1,47	3,33	1,53	4,15	1,09
REC	3,76	1,41	3,54	1,46	4,23	1,11

Fig 5. The impact of failing to meet buyer expectations in communication areas on the relationship (Likert scale, 1- definitely do not agree, 5-definitely agree that inadequate communication has an effect on SAT, TR, COC, COA, REC)



Source: Direct interviews with buyers

H1 was tested by comparing pairs of average evaluations for the areas of relations: SAT, TR, COA, COC, REC and elements of communication: COM3 and COM2, assuming that  $\text{mean}(\text{COM3}) > \text{mean}(\text{COM2})$ , and then  $\text{mean}(\text{COM3}) > \text{mean}(\text{COM1})$ . In case of each pair differences were marked between average evaluations that are statistically significant (with  $p=0,01$ ), which lets us assume that H1 concerning punctuality is an element of communication in which failing to meet the needs has an adverse affect on the relations, stronger than other elements of communication.

Fig. 6. Test H1

Pairs for which differences of means were tested	Test t parameters		Pairs for which differences of means were tested	Test t parameters	
	t	p		t	p
SAT_COM3 > SAT_COM2	<b>7,071*</b>	0,000	SAT_COM3 > SAT_COM1	<b>4,056*</b>	0,000
TR_COM3 > TR_COM2	<b>3,453*</b>	0,001	TR_COM3 > TR_COM1	<b>3,731*</b>	0,000
COA_COM3 > COA_COM2	<b>7,915*</b>	0,000	COA_COM3 > COA_COM1	<b>5,127*</b>	0,000
COC_COM3 > COC_COM2	<b>6,078*</b>	0,000	COC_COM3 > COC_COM1	<b>6,074*</b>	0,000
REC_COM3 > REC_COM2	<b>5,233*</b>	0,000	REC_COM3 > REC_COM1	<b>3,514*</b>	0,001

\* p<0.01 (two-tailed)

H2 was tested similarly to H1 through comparing pairs of average evaluations for the areas of relations: SAT, TR, COA, COC, REC as well as the areas of communication: COM1 and COM2, assuming that mean(COM1)>mean(COM2). Statistically significant differences (with p=0,01) between the average evaluations were noted only for SAT, which means having to refute H2. This means that inadequate communication in terms of content and style influences trust, commitment and willingness to recommend the salesperson in a similar way. Only in the case of satisfaction one may talk of a stronger impact of a mismatch between the provided information and buyer expectations on a decrease in their satisfaction with cooperation with the salesperson than it is in case of a mismatch between the style of communication and expectations.

Fig. 7. Test H2

Pairs for which differences of means were tested	Test t parameters	
	t	p
SAT_COM1 > SAT_COM2	<b>3,446*</b>	0,001
TR_COM1 > TR_COM2	-0,242	0,809
COA_COM1 > COA_COM2	2,525	0,13
COC_COM1 > COC_COM2	1,011	0,314
REC_COM1 > REC_COM2	1,522	0,123

\* p<0.01 (two-tailed)

Buyers' trust in the salesperson as a source of information differed depending on the purchase situation. In the case of a purchase from a new supplier the average amounted to 3,58 (on a 10-point scale where the 10 points were divided among the salesperson and other sources of information), whereas in a situation where the buyer was familiar with the salesperson the average was 6,71. H3 concerning the influence of confidence in the salesperson as a source of information on the connection between failing to meet buyer's communication expectations and relational effects was verified on the basis of the obtained Pearson correlation coefficients (Fig 7.).

Fig.7. Test H3

Surveys	Elements of communication	Pearson Correlation		
		COM1	COM2	COM3

SAT	<b>-,159*</b>	,088	<b>-,233**</b>
TR	,001	,007	,003
COA	-,027	,123	<b>,253**</b>
COC	-,129	,073	<b>-,164*</b>
REC	-,086	,012	-,121

\*p<0.05 (two-tailed)

\*\*p<0.01 (two-tailed)

Confidence in the salesperson as a source of information merely in four cases moderated the examined phenomenon, where in 3 situations it was a reverse connections which would confirm the assumptions of H3. From among the examined factors timeliness of communications is the one which was most often moderated through the level of confidence. Analysing the obtained results through the prism of relational effects the biggest influence of confidence in the salesperson on the examined phenomena may be observed in the case of satisfaction. One needs to point out, however, that the identified interdependencies were not strong which is proven by low values of the obtained Pearson coefficients. Therefore, it seems that there are no grounds for supporting H3, which means that buyer's confidence in the salesperson as a source of information does not have an influence on how a mismatch between the communication and buyer expectations influences their relationship with the salesperson.

## DISCUSSION

The paper was based on an assumption that buyer-salesperson communication has an impact on their mutual relations. The literature indicates a positive effect of communication on business-to-business relations. The main characteristic of the presented research was a desire to determine how communication which does not meet buyers' expectations may influence buyer-salesperson relations.

At the first research stage the desired by the buyer shape of communication was determined and three elements of communication: timeliness, content and style, used in further research, were established. When interpreting the obtained results one needs to remember that the elements were chosen on the basis of a factor analysis, which explained 61% of all answer variance. One may have certain doubts concerning choosing such communication factors, especially since this approach diverges from scales used in other research projects (e.g. Mohr and Spekman in order to evaluate communication quality developed a scale comprising timeliness, accuracy and adequacy; Mohr, Spekman 1994, 135-152). On the other hand, testing the adopted approach in further research could expand the possibilities of conducting research on buyer-salesperson communication. In case of the majority of examined sets of opposite (based on semantic differential) expectations concerning communication, buyers were relatively unanimous in their choices. An exception were expectations related to the impact / lack of impact of supplier, where respondents gave a wide range of answers. Most buyers do not oppose the idea of salespersons trying to change their convictions, but two fifths expect the salesperson not to use persuasive communication. This means that possibly in business-to-business marketing the need to use communication focused on informing, gathering information and explaining and not only persuading (Duncan, Moriarty 1988, 1-13) is overly emphasised. On the other hand, informational communication helps to shape the salesperson's orientation towards the client rather than sales (Guenzi et al. 2007, 121-133), which is characterised by a lesser degree of relational attitude to the client (Wachner et al. 2009, 32).

The research confirmed a big influence of communication on buyer-salesperson relations. Buyers are sensitive about not meeting their communication expectations and declare that inadequate communication will negatively affect mainly their satisfaction with co-operation with the salesperson and calculative commitment, but also their confidence in the salesperson, affective commitment and willingness to recommend the salesperson to other buyers.

The strongest effect on the relationship was noted in terms of timeliness which is more important than content and style of communication (H1 was supported). Buyers must do their work and expect primarily to receive information on time, just when they need it. This is what salespersons should focus on. One ought to take care of timeliness of communication, even when the provided information is not entirely according to buyer's expectations or when the form of providing the information will not meet their expectations. Since if information is not delivered on time the adverse effect of the delay on the relations will be greater than when expectations concerning other elements of communication are not met. The importance of timeliness may be explained by the fact that communication leads to confidence as it lets resolve conflicts and adapt perception and expectations to the possibility of implementing them (Moorman et al. 1993, 83-101).

The importance of content and communication style turned out to be similar (H2 was not supported). One needs to bear in mind that respondents agreed with the statements which said that not meeting expectations as far as provided information is concerned will have a negative effect on all areas of relations. A confirmation of these findings is the worldwide survey of industrial buyers, that suggests that more than half of them perceive their sales contact as a business partner and expect to receive quality advice about products or services (Agnihotri et al. 2009, 474-486)

The style appeared to be the element of communication which, if not matched to the needs, according to the respondents, will have a weaker influence on the relationship than other elements of communication. This probably results from the professional character of the surveyed buyers, for whom it is more important what information they will receive and when rather than in what form. It is good to remember that other studies indicate that there is an impact of communication style on judgements about the quality of service (Wong, Tjosvold 1995, 189-205) or satisfaction (Webster, Sundaram, 2009, 103-113). Relationship develops when a buyer lowers their level of uncertainty which enables them to be more confident in the relations with the salesperson (Claycomb, Frankwick 2010, 253). This is why salespersons should be particular about communicating in accordance with buyers' expectations since otherwise – as research described in the paper proved – their relations with the buyers will deteriorate.

The level of buyer's confidence in the salesperson as a source of information at the beginning of their relationship does not moderate it how not meeting expectations affects the relations (H3 was not supported). This means that irrelevant of how the buyer seems to trust the salesperson, communication not according to buyer's expectations will have a negative effect on their relations. It is probably also a confirmation of great significance of communication for buyer-salesperson relations. If communication is important for the buyer then its inadequate use by the salesperson spoils their relations, regardless of whether the buyer uses other sources of information or not. In the situation of purchase from a new supplier, which the study concerned, a dissatisfied buyer may resort to other sources of information, often independent of the salesperson. Only after building relations does the credibility of the information provided by the salesperson increase.

#### LIMITATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The research, the results of which were presented in the paper, embraced more than 380 professional buyers. However, because of a desire to obtain data from independent samples, the groups concerned with a study on the impact of communication on particular areas of relations were relatively small. Our methodology was designed to overcome time and cost limitations, but further research needs to undertake a wider (greater sample from different industries) or longitudinal study to examine changes in buyers' expectations concerning communication and the effect of inadequate communication on the relations in the subsequent stages of the relationship. A model of communication dependency on the stage of relationship assumes a change in communication behaviours along with the relationship development on account of increasing mutual adaptation of the buyer and salesperson (Anderson 2000, 167-182).

As a rule, different members of a buying centre participate in long-term relationships with suppliers. Our research relied on purchasing professionals within buying-centre as respondents. Moreover, it concerned only a situation of purchase from a new supplier, in which the buyer is not familiar with the salesperson. Further research could include several members of the buying centre who interact with the salesperson. In addition, the research should embrace other purchase situations (modified and routine purchase). In our study we adopted buyer's confidence in the salesperson as a source of information as the factor influencing the given phenomenon. Meanwhile, the role of the salesperson is varied depending on the purchase situation. We did not include all possible moderator variables, which could be used in further research. For example, buyer experience or salesperson's reputation (Claycomb, Frankwick 2010, 251) could be considered as moderators. It would be also interesting to determine the impact of meeting communication expectations on the relations.

An additional limitation of this work is that the research was conducted only among Polish people from one industry. The obtained results must be therefore looked at also from a cultural perspective. Hall (1976) pointed to the role of communication in low and high context cultures, referring to the amount of implicit and explicit information contained in a message as compared to the cues specific to the context. Previous research suggests that actors' orientations towards adaptation and mutual problem solving differ across national cultures (Andersen et al. 2009, 814-824). Poland is among low context countries where interpersonal relations play a vital role, and so does direct interpersonal communication in business. This could affect the respondents' tendency to declare a strong negative effect of not meeting communication expectations on the relations with the salesperson.

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