

# **Coexisting perspectives on the selling process when delivering complex solutions**

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### **Abstract**

Selling processes on B2B markets are complex endeavors characterized by increased collaboration among both several actors on both the selling and the buying side of the deal. Also, the solutions being offered are often based on advanced technology and service concepts that are difficult to define beforehand. The concept of sales culture in extant literature seems to be limited to grasp complex selling processes on B2B markets since, in such processes, many actors collaborate and many different perspectives and values are interacting. This study aims at determining the extent to which different actors look upon the different stages in a selling process in a different way. Results indicate that there are different perspectives on the different stages in the selling process in terms of artifacts and patterns of behavior, values and beliefs and, finally, assumptions regarding the selling process. Managerial application of these differences are also discussed.

Keywords: sales culture, complex selling, business-to-business, organizational culture

## **Introduction**

The process of selling is an inherently complex phenomenon because it is ultimately dependent on solving problems in the context of personal human interactions (Leigh and McGraw 1989; Weitz, Sujan, and Sujan 1986). As Weitz, Sujan, and Sujan (1986, p. 178) observed: “Salespeople, like other experts in problem solving situations, operate in an extremely complex domain”. This already complex endeavour has become even more complicated as a result of several developments in business-to-business (B2B) markets in recent decades:

- \* First, in a contemporary B2B selling negotiation, both sides of the deal (buying and selling) typically involve multiple actors (Weitz and Bradford 1999; Wortruba 1991).
- \* Secondly, because the offerings of many manufacturing firms now include service elements, which are often variable and difficult to specify, an extra dimension of complexity has been added to traditional B2B selling (Windal 2007; Neu and Brown 2005; Wise and Baumgartner 1999).
- \* Thirdly, an increasing emphasis on the establishment of collaborative relationships between sellers and buyers (in which final solutions are developed gradually) has complicated the traditional transaction-based selling process (which typically involved brief interactions and ‘ready-made’ solutions) (Hunter and Perreault 2007; DelVecchio et al. 2004; Keillor, Parker, and Pettijohn 2000; Weitz and Bradford 1999; Crosby, Evans, and Cowels 1990).

Internal collaboration as well as collaboration between customers and supplier is gaining in importance when delivering complex solutions (Thuli, Kohli and Bharadwaj, 2007, Spekman and Carraway, 2006, Ulaga and Eggert, 2006). This emphasize on internal collaboration makes team work and team based selling crucial which requires a change in strategy, systems, structure and culture (Ingram et. al 2005).

This article is based on a notion that more research is needed in order to examine the specific challenges present when people from different divisions or organizational units come together to collaborate in order to deliver complex solutions. As argued by Storbacka, Polsa and Sääksjärvi (2011, p. 36), “more research is also needed with regard to the challenges pertaining to interfaces between sales and other functions”. The reason for not examining the challenges of internal collaboration in sales is request is perhaps as argued by Geiger and Guenzi (2009, p 876) “based on methodological difficulties in investigating broader cooperative processes in firms”.

Thus, this article focus on the way different shared values upheld by different actors are coexisting in a complex selling process. More specifically, the aim of this article is to examine to what extent different actors view crucial stages in the selling processes differently. The differences found are described in the cultural framework of Schein (1985) in terms of artifacts and patterns of behaviour, values and beliefs and, finally, assumptions regarding the selling process. Managerial applications of these differences are also discussed.

This article disposition is as follows. First the concept of culture is discussed within the sales literature. Secondly, a model is chosen that describes the different stages in a contemporary selling process which also is used as a framework for identifying the actors perspective on these stages. Thirdly, three empirical cases are examined and the different perspectives within the selling organization are discussed. Finally, managerial applications of these findings are presented.

## **The culture concept in the sales literature**

Even though the literature regarding sales force culture is sparse (Jacksson, Tax and Barnes, 1994), there are some definitions. For example, sales force culture is defined by Jacksson, Tax and Barnes (1994) as shared values that are reinforced into symbolic elements such as rituals and ceremonies constituting a 'glue' that holds the salesforce together. This definition is based on the works of Schein (1981) and the framework provided by Ott (1989) in which three levels of culture is discussed. On the first level there are visible artefacts of culture such a symbols and ceremonies, at the second level there are less visible values and beliefs that defined what a sales person has to do to be successful. Finally, at the third level, there are unconscious assumptions and ideologies ingrained in the beliefs held by the salesforce which are more difficult to uncover. Following this definition, Jacksson et al (2006), Jacksson and Tax (1995), Jacksson, Tax and Barnes (1994) examines the sales force culture in relation to sales management variables such as performance, role conflict, ambiguity, motivation and communication.

Another definition is presented by Ridnour, Lassak and Sheppard (2001, p 248) and according to this description a sales culture is defined as:

*The growth oriented facet of the marketing oriented firm. In keeping with the other elements of the market orientation, this growth comes through a customer focus in which relationships are built through the creation of value for new and existing customers*

Thus, as argued by Ridnour, Lassak and Sheppard (2001, p. 248), in this definition the sales culture is a growth oriented facet presupposing that all employees are expected to the creation of values for customers by "actively participating in the selling process". Similar to this definition, Shemwell and Yavas (1998, p. 294) is arguing that "a sales culture is an extension of the service culture concept" in which "everyone must be a salesperson".

There are also articles which are discussing a single aspect of sales culture, for example the sales force socialization (Pascale, 1985, Dubinsky et al. 1986), customer orientation

(SinguaW et al. 1994, Flaherty, Dahlstrom and Skinner, 1999) the issue of value congruence (Apasu, Ichikawa and Graham, 1987, Futrell, 1982), the use of rituals and rewards (Thalenberg, 1985, Tempelton, 1985, Kelly, 1986), or using sales meetings in a sales organization (Englander, 1988).

In the functionalist view of Jacksson et. al (2006), Tax and Barnes (1994) and Jacksson and Tax (1995) the sales force culture is a variable to be managed effectively. More specifically, Jacksson, Tax and Barnes (1994) and Jacksson and Tax (1995) define a well managed sales force culture as one that has both strength and direction. Regarding strength, Jacksson, Tax and Barnes (1994) describe that there are three aspects of a sales force culture that define its strength. That is (1) thickness, that is, how many important shared values there are, (2) extent of sharing, how widely these values are shared in the sales force and, finally, (3) clarity of ordering, how clear it is that some values are more important than others. The direction of a sales force culture is defined as its valence, that is, the extent to which the values and beliefs that constitute the sales force culture is appropriate for the environmental context in which the sales force exist. Following this definition, Jacksson et al (2006) measure culture strength and explore its relationship to value congruity and role stress, organizational commitment and job satisfaction.

However, this study argues that viewing sales culture as being a subculture that is to be managed effectively might be beneficial in some settings but this perspective is not adequate when complex solutions are designed and delivered. This is stemming from the fact that contemporary B2B selling processes are characterized by relational processes (Tuli, Kohli and Bharadwaj, 2007, Moncrief and Marshall 2005) and crossfunctional internal collaboration (Storbacka, Polsa and Sääkisjärvi 2011, Spekman and Carraway 2006, Ulaga and Eggert 2006). Such changes towards a more collective and collaborative culture puts the sales culture in a position where it cannot be regarded as a subculture isolated from the rest of the

organization. Also, considering that the sales organizations of today is becoming increasingly accountable for a wider range of desired outcomes (Ingram, 2005), the perspective of viewing the sales function as being isolated from the rest of the organization becomes a hindrance to really understanding the role of different shared values upheld by different actors who interacts in complex B2B selling processes.

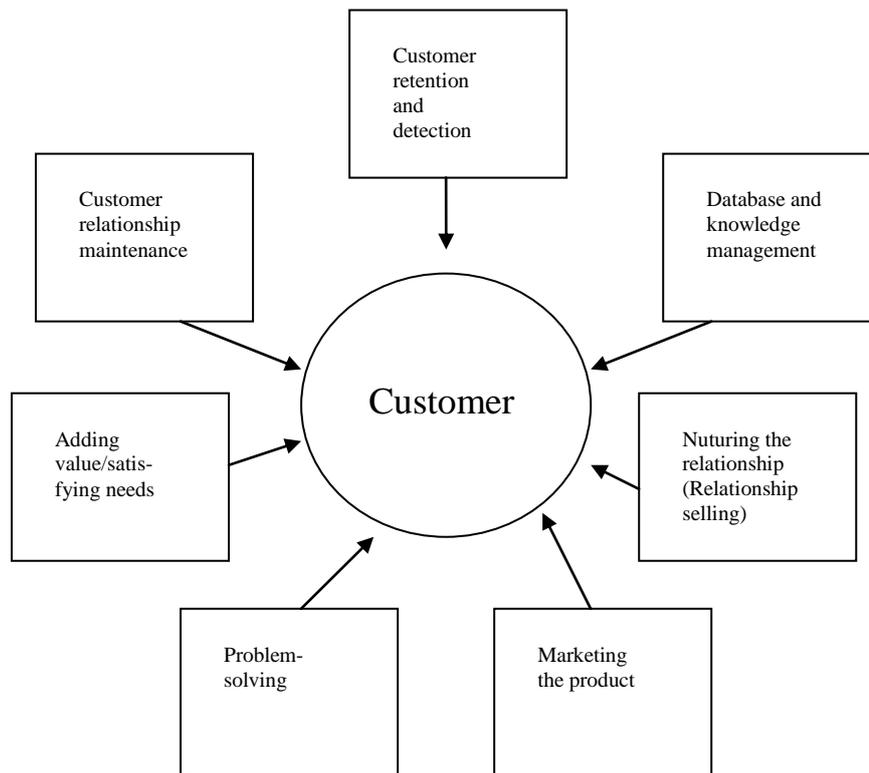
Based on these insights regarding the importance of internal collaboration and the changing role of the sales function, this study aims at contributing to the extant literature by examining the extent to which different actors in the selling organization view different stages in the selling process differently.

### ***A contemporary selling process***

The most well known description of the different staged in the selling process is the so-called ‘seven steps of selling’, that have been utilised as the basis of many traditional models of selling. These ‘seven steps’, which were first articulated in the 1920s (Moncrief and Marshall, 2005), traditionally consist of the following sequential stages: (i) prospecting; (ii) pre-approach; (iii) approach; (iv) presentation; (v) overcoming objections; (vi) close; and (vii) follow-up. This model has been modified by adding the relationship dimension (Shapiro and Possner, 1976), the organizational environment (Plank and Dempsey, 1980), trust (Ingram et. al 2008, Green 2006)

The driving forces behind these efforts to modify the traditional ‘seven steps of selling’ by including elements that reflect the complex and recursive nature of selling were identified by Moncrief and Marshall (2005, p 16) as:“... technology, the expanding strategic role of selling within organisations, team-based approaches to selling, increased buyer knowledge and sophistication, and others.” Other authors (Ingram et al., 2008; Shapiro and Posner, 1976) have also nominated technological advances and long-term relationships with customers as driving forces behind attempts to develop new perspectives on selling.

Among the most recent efforts to update ‘the seven steps of selling’ was presented by Moncrief and Marshall (2005), who proposed a non-sequential model called the ‘evolved selling process’, which was a development of the original ‘seven steps of selling’. Their model is illustrated in Figure 2.2.



*Figure 2.2 Evolved selling process (Moncrief and Marshall 2005)*

In this model, the relationship dimension, which was mentioned in the models of Wilson (1975), Shapiro and Posner (1976), and Persson (1999), is at the very centre of the conceptualisation. The model thus emphasises: (i) customer relationships; and (ii) the non-sequential nature of the selling process. The

evolved selling process an the way certain transformative factor has

Traditional seven steps of selling	Transformative factors	Evolved selling process
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transformed the steps in the 'seven steps of selling' is according to Moncrief and Marshall (2005) as follows:

(1) Prospecting	Telemarketing, Internet selling Organizational prospecting	(1) Customer retention and deletion
(2) Preapproach	Laptop account data Support staff	(2) Database and knowledge management
(3) Approach	Build a foundation	(3) Nurturing the relationship (relationship selling)
(4) Presentation	PowerPoint/multimedia Listening Team selling Multiple calls Value-added Buying centers	(4) Marketing the product
(5) Overcoming objections	Predetermining needs	(5) Problem solving
(6) Close	Identifying mutual goals	(6) Adding value/satisfying needs
(7) Follow up	Increased effectiveness of communication through technology	(7) Customer relationship maintenance

## Methodology

This article is an exploratory study examining the different values that exist when selling complex solutions. In this study the repertory grid technique is used. The repertory grid technique is based on the Personal Construct Theory (Kelly, 1955) and one of the basic assumptions is that reality and what we make of that is built of contrast rather than absolutes. Such contrasting elements is called 'constructs' and according to Kelly (1955) a persons construct system is composed by a number of dichotomous constructs. Kelly (1955) developed the repertory grid technique as a method for exploring personal construct systems. The repertory grid technique has been used in marketing (see for example, Mick and Buhl 1992, Zinkham and Biswas 1988, Gutman 1982, Sampson 1972) and with regards to industrial selling (for example, Lichtenthal and Goodwin 2006). According to Plank and Greene (1996, p. 25) the Personal Construct Theory is a especially apt theoretical perspective to analyse selling processes since it deals "with perceptions of the environment and responses to and within that environment" .

According to Jancowicz (2004) a 'grid' is actually a term for a number of simple rating scale procedures which are used for arriving at a description of how a person views the world. A grid consists of four components, namely, topic, elements, constructs and ratings.

Topic: A grid is always about a particular topic and, according to Jancowicz (2004), has the intention of eliciting just those constructs that person uses to make sense of that "particular realm of experiences".

Element: and element is an example of, exemplar of, instance of, sampling of, or occurrences within, a particular topic.

Constructs: This is the basic unit in a grid analysis since to construe is to make sense of something or to have a personal understanding of something. Jancowicz (2004) argues that if you want to find out how a person views the world you have to find out that person's personal constructs.

Ratings: Each element is rated on each construct to provide an exact picture of that persons view on each element within the topic.

In this study the topic is the process by which complex solutions are being sold and delivered. The qualifying phrase (Jancowicz, 2004) is to study such selling process 'in terms of the different activities importance to the success of a selling process'. The different activities are the ones described by the evolved selling process by Moncrief and Marshall (2005).

In order to choose the respondents, three cases are chosen and the different participants in each selling process are subjected to the repertory grid interview technique. By such approach, there is an opportunity to get hold of the differences in perspective from these participants with regards to the different activities present in a selling process.

A grid is constructed for each respondent and the Honey's (1979) technique for analysing and comparing a number of grids by aggregating constructs across a sample. In accordance to this analysis, a supplied 'overall' construct is added to those elicited from each interviews. This overall construct is about each elements importance for the 'success of the selling

process'. Finally, an analysis is conducted to see whether the different actors view the different components in the selling process differently.

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