

# **Alignment, Misalignment and the Orientation of Sales Managers: a confrontation between Poland and Italy**

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## **Abstract**

In sales management literature different orientations of sales managers have been explored: hard selling, up-selling, consultative selling, relationship selling, customer-oriented selling, adaptive selling, among others. All of them share the idea that salesmen should act in order to satisfactorily meet and match the customer expectations and desires. However an in depth understanding of how sales managers interpret and frame this “matching” with customers’ needs/requirements is still missing. For such a reason, in this paper we will integrate the concepts of alignment and misalignment in sales management literature, in order to investigate if and how sales managers’ interpretations of alignment and misalignment toward customers affect their orientation.

This integration seems to be relevant, for a series of reasons. The first is that there is a growing body of literature in business to business marketing which asserts that managers’ interpretations are relevant and strongly interlinked with their behaviors. Second, recent research is affirming that alignment and misalignment states may have an impact on the relationship development. Third, some scholars, even if indirectly, have started to implement the concept of alignment in the context of business relationships. In this paper we want to move the attention from how sales managers behave (their orientation), to how they think and interpret their relationships with customers.

In this study we will adopt a multi-methods multi-stages approach. First of all we analyzed written narratives by 60 sales managers operating in Poland in order to investigate the meaning of alignment and misalignment, their objects (content), the effects as in the sales managers’ perspectives and their dynamicity. This exploratory phase has addressed a second one, during which we interviewed 30 sales managers operating in Poland and in Italy, 15 for each Country.

Our findings show that alignment and misalignment are multidimensional concepts, their effects are interpreted differently according to the different situations and that how managers frame them impact their orientation toward customers. In particular important differences emerge by comparing Polish and Italian sales managers' views. The study also confirm that misalignment can be positive for the relationship development.

Keywords: alignment, misalignment, sales orientation, customer, supplier.

## **1. Introduction**

This study is aimed at exploring the role of alignment and misalignment for the orientation of sales managers in their customer relationships.

In the last years different selling approach have been studied: hard selling (e.g., Chu, Gerstner, and Hess 1995), up-selling (e.g., Wilkie, Mela, and Gundlach 1998), consultative selling (e.g., Liu and Leach 2001), relationship selling (e.g., Frankwick, Porter, and Crosby 2001), customer-oriented selling (e.g., Saxe and Weitz 1982; Stock and Hoyer 2005), adaptive selling (e.g., McFarland, Challagalla, and Shervani 2006; Spiro and Weitz 1990), among others. Independently from their contents, all of them have in common the idea that sales management should address the company' offering in order to meet the customer needs and requirements. Even if with different approaches, they have been mainly concerned with exploring how salesmen should meet effectively the customer expectations and desires; however, an in depth understanding of how sales managers frame this "matching" with the customers' needs is still missing. In this paper we want to move the attention from how sales managers behave (their orientation), to how they think and interpret their relationships with customers.

For such a reason, in this paper we integrate literature on sales managers' customer orientation with the concepts of alignment and misalignment in business relationships, which has been recently renewed by Corsaro and Snehota (2011). This integration seems to be relevant, for a series of reasons. The first is that there is a growing body of literature in business to business marketing which asserts that managers' interpretations are relevant and strongly interlinked with their behaviors (Ford et al. 2003; Corsaro et al. 2011; Ramos and Ford, 2010). Second, recent research (Corsaro and Snehota, 2011) is affirming that alignment and misalignment states may have an impact on the relationship development. Third, some scholars (Cox et al. 2004), even if indirectly, have started to implement the concept of alignment in the context of business relationships. By exploring the account management and buying function views, Cox et al. 2004 study alignment and misalignment in operational and commercial value capture drivers for buyers and suppliers' transactions, and highlight that positive outcomes can be reach even if there are dysfunctional operational and commercial aims between the customer and the supplier.

More in general, we notice that an in depth investigation of 'if' and 'how' thinking in terms of alignment and misalignment relate to the orientation of sales managers. To develop this research area, in this study we will adopt a multi-methods multi-stages approach. First of all

we analyzed written narratives by 60 sales managers operating in Poland and belonging to different industries in order to investigate the meaning of alignment and misalignment, their objects (content) and effects as in the sales managers' perspectives. This exploratory phase has addressed a second one, during which we interviewed sales managers operating in Poland and in Italy. Based on the same interview scheme, we thus carried out 30 interviews, 15 in each Country. Compared to Corsaro and Snehota (2011)' study, we are not interested in applying certain criteria and assess alignment and misalignment in business relationships, but rather we want to explore how managers frame and interpret alignment and misalignment and to which extent these interpretations affect their behaviors toward customers.

Our paper is divided in the following sections. In section 2 we will review the literature on sales orientation; in section 3 we will discuss the concepts of alignment and misalignment in business relationships; in section 4 we will describe the methodology of the study. Findings, conclusions and implications for research and practice will follow in section 5 and 6.

## **2. The orientation of sales managers in customer relationships**

In the sales management literature much attention has been devoted to the different orientations of the sales function and the consequences they generate.

It has been established in marketing and management literature that the sales function is aimed at understanding customers' needs and fulfilling them with the bundle of goods and services fitting these needs (e.g., Weitz & Bradford, 1999; Jones et al., 2005)..

The necessity of meeting customer's needs in sales activities and strategy has been stressed for almost last hundred years. Strong in 1925, it has been pointed out that companies cannot focus solely on completing purchase orders, but also on customer satisfaction (Singh, Koshy, 2011). In 1980s the focus of researchers moved inside the selling organization and began to examine the market orientation of the sales force referring to salespeople's direct contact with customers (Cross et al. 2007). Further considerations of that issue led to Saxe and Weitz (1982) fundamental proposal to distinguish sales orientated to customer needs form selling more volumes to customers. They operationalized this conceptualization by introducing the 24-item SOCO scale which is widely used to measure that approach. The salespersons' customer orientation focuses on helping customers to make satisfactory purchase decisions (contrary to selling orientation) thus its goal is to achieve alignment.

The concept of customer orientated sales illustrates the salespeople attitude to selling. It remains central to modern sales theory but is was approached in most papers as a dichotomy

(customer or selling orientation). Customer orientation has been widely recognized as a positive determinant of relationships development (Beverland, 2001; Frankwick, Porter, & Crosby, 2000; Schultz & Good, 2000; Wachner, Plouffe, Grégoire, 2009; Singh & Koshy 2011), and thus of customer loyalty (Dwyer, Schurr, & Oh, 1987), satisfaction (Boles et al., 2001; Goff et al., 1997) and in turn a better salesperson performance (Swenson and Herche 1994; Dunlap et al., 1988; Boles et al. 2001; Reinartz & Kumar, 2000). Salespeople play a vital role in building mutually beneficial customer relationships through customer-oriented selling strategies because they operate as boundary spanners (Beverland 2001). Research in this field shows that salespeople may take numerous actions to align to customer expectations (Schwepker 2003). However most of the papers focus on selling process and has operational character (e.g. Leigh & McGraw, 1989). Some scholars have also highlighted the criticality for people involved in sales when they do not directly perceived their orientation to impact their individual performance (Wachner, Plouffe, Grégoire, 2009).

Similarly to the orientations previously described, adaptive selling means matching the supplier and its salespeople to the preferences of buyer behavior (Eckert 2006). By aligning to expectations of the buyer salespeople increase the effectiveness of their actions. Adaptive selling at the individual level includes the ability to modify salespeople behavior on the sales situation and interaction with customer. However, at the organizational level adaptive selling is perceived as a match to customer needs and customization of offers (Guenzi, Pardo, Georges, 2007). Also, the literature on the effect of adaptive selling behavior on performance seems to present mixed results (Guenzi et al., 2011; Romàn & Iacobucci 2010).

This role is further emphasized following a relational selling approach according to which salespeople play even a greater role than their firms in sustaining customer relationships (Palmatier et al., 2006). In this view, salespeople are often called relationship managers (Singh & Koshy, 2011) as they are the main point of contact between supplier and customer (Homburg & Stock 2004), and are responsible for maintaining and developing relationships with customers (Wilson & Jantrania, 1995). More in general it can be asserted that salespeople are actors who support, deliver and reinforces their organizations customer focus. They play an unique role in identifying customer needs and matching the offer to them. This concept is based on the principle that salespeople must understand a customer's needs and wants in order to generate customer perceived value in sales interactions (Cross, 2007).

From the literature review on sales orientation we can derive two main considerations which are critical for our study. The first is that aspects related to 'matching' issues, especially with respect to customers' needs, are always present. The second is that the attention in the

literature has been however mainly addressed to how salespeople behave and which orientations they express through their behavior. In this study we instead want to move the attention from how managers behave, to how manager think and frame the idea of ‘matching’. In particular, as we will better explain in the next section, to this purpose we apply the concepts of alignment and misalignment.

### **3. Alignment and misalignment in business relationships**

Both in strategy and in marketing literature the concepts of alignment and misalignment have been used to express a certain ‘fit’ between elements; in the last year they have been also applied to business relationships, raising a growing interest by marketing scholars (Cox, 2004; Kragh and Andersen, 2010; Medlin, 2004; Sheerpereel, 2006). On that, Corsaro and Snehota (2011) have highlighted some research gaps in this literature; in particularly they underline the vagueness around which are the objects (content) to be observed in order to determine alignment and misalignment states, as well as their effects.

With respect to the objects to be aligned or misaligned, some scholars have considered alignment/misalignment in cognitive representations (Storbacka and Nenonen, 2010; Kragh and Andersen, 2009), in parties’ goals (Saxton, 1997), in business practices (Snow et al. 1986; Gronroos, 2010), with respect to the other actors in the supply chain (Kehoe et al., 2007), and also in customer and supplier’s ideas of problems and solutions (Corsaro and Snehota, 2011). With reference to their effects, some scholars have been more concerned to consider alignment as generating positive outcomes, such as in terms of knowledge transfer (Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998), communication effectiveness (Kim et al., 2006) and complexity reduction (Gosselin and Bauwen, 2006). Other researchers, on the contrary, have asserted that it is misalignment positive by promoting flexibility, change (Kragh and Andersen, 2009; Colville and Pye, 2007) and value creation (Cox et al. 2004). On that, Corsaro and Snehota (2010) adopt an intermediate position and demonstrate that misalignment can be positive, but under certain conditions: both parties should realize the existence of the misalignment, effective communication flows should characterize the relationship and there should be no external constraints to the natural movement of the relationship from one state to another. When these conditions are present, the effort for aligning practices produce positive consequences, even when misalignment persists.

More in general, when applied to parties in a business relationship, the concepts of alignment and misalignment are intuitively appealing, but analytically in need of clearer definition. There are differences in opinion about both their content and their consequences.

Coming back to the literature on sales orientation, we already noticed that notwithstanding the stress that literature pose toward gaining customer satisfaction and marching customer needs, an in depth exploration of the sales' managers idea of this 'match' is still missing. A first indirect attempt in this direction has been made by Cox et al. (2004), who identify a robust and rigorous specification of the conditions under which exchange partners define business transactions and address alignment and misalignment in business relationships on three key variables - the operational way of working, the power circumstance and the commercial value appropriation-. The authors come up with six ideal types of buyer and supplier relationship circumstances that fall into an aligned, misaligned/suboptimal, or misaligned with dysfunctional conflict situations. Cox et al. (2004) found that it is essential that buyer and supplier are aligned appropriately for the relationship to work effectively, while also affirming that relationships can be aligned even when there is a lack of equity and conflict between the buyer and the seller. Further, they found that a "win-lose" situation can sometimes be accepted in an exchange and preferred to the "win-win". By doing this they take into consideration both the buying perspective and the key account one but, nevertheless, they do not explore the sales' idea of alignment and misalignment, they just apply to their study certain pre-defined dimensions; furthermore, they do not provide implications from their study for the orientation of sales managers. Also, previous studies did not clarify whether alignment is a mean for developing relationships.

Given these considerations, in this paper we will explore how manager frame the idea of alignment and misalignment and the extent to which it affects their behaviors in the relationship with business customers.

## **4. Method**

### **4.1 Research approach**

The research on alignment and misalignment in business relationships and networks is still in its infancy. Thus, there are no consolidated methods for carrying out such explorations. To overcome this difficulty and to increase the study's internal and external validity, a multi-methods/multi-stages approach is applied. With respect to the first aspect (multi-method), it will enable a triangulation, which involves integrating multiple data sources in a multi-method design—as recommended by Jick (1979). Multi-method approaches can provide richer sources of data and explanations of observed phenomena, and

more robust theoretical understandings (Jack, 2010). More in general, the use of multiple methods to investigate the same phenomenon can produce robust findings that are “far more compelling than single method outcomes” (Stewart, 2009: 382).

As for the multi stages aspect, following Davis et al. (2011)’s classification, a ‘development’ approach will be applied: “When equally weighted methods are implemented sequentially, the second method is used for the development of findings from the first method. The researcher’s intent is to use the results obtained from the first method to inform a subsequent study, thereby expanding the insights generated about the research problem. Results are reported separately for each phase of the study, followed by a general discussion that ties them together by comparing and contrasting findings.” (Davis et al., 2011: 468). In the case of the proposed research this means combining two different qualitative approaches. The first step of the research has been preliminary and aimed at developing the interview scheme that will be later used during the second phase of research, which, in fact, consisted in a set of semi structured in depth interviews with 15 sales managers operating in Poland and 15 in Italy.

## **5. The preliminary study**

We asked sales managers to write essays on alignment and misalignment in their relationships with customers. Some of the findings are included in Table 1 in the appendix. We give participants few instructions indicating topics that should be addressed in their essays. The subject of this analysis was the role of alignment and misalignment in the orientation of sales managers in the relationship with their customers. We asked first about the episodes in the relationship which could have been related to the idea of alignment or misalignment and then we asked to express their perception of alignment and misalignment, effects and outcomes of alignment and misalignment and factors affecting those effects. We thus tried to combine their assertions with practical example. Analyzing written narratives has enabled to capture people's experiences and also affective and empathizing elements. During the analysis of narratives, the paradigmatic cognition was used and the data were classified in categories deductively or inductively. The double check analysis of essays was also applied: one reviewer analyzed the data and the other verified their consistency. It was assumed that this reaction can be positive or negative, and be influenced by internal (related to business supplier or customer) or external factors.

The narratives were collected from 60 sales managers working on polish market., belonging to different industries: (banking, insurance, machinery rental, logistics and maintenance of power equipment), manufacturers (small household appliances, cheese, paper, industrial automation, laminates, solid fuels, doors, sanitary ware) and retail companies (food, gateways, tires, coatings, machinery for gardening and forestry, flowers). These companies are diversified in terms of employment (from a few dozen to thousands of people), size of the market (from regional to international), capital (from family companies to joint-stock companies) (see appendix for details). This has allowed us in this exploratory phase to get a broader view of the phenomenon under investigation.

Findings from this phase of research have shown us that the argument of study was relevant and deserved further attention. We thus decided to carried out a second step research, by interviewing salespeople on some specific issue.

### **5.1 Findings from the preliminary study**

The results have provided a unique material that lets us look at the issue of alignment and misalignment from different angles. Managers perceived alignment and misalignment as a state in which the company meets the expectations of the customer or as a process of adjusting to customer needs treated as a standard. The attitude to the idea of being aligned or misaligned was relatively homogenous. However, opinions on the substance that fills the idea were heterogeneous in aspects of the subject and object of alignment and misalignment.

Managers from service and retail companies claimed that their companies are striving to meet customer expectations. They often used the terms "*adjustment*", "*match*", "*fit*". A bank representative wrote about "*...an offer modified in the process of negotiations with customer to match to his needs*", another wrote that: "*...when the information on customer needs are analyzed the insurance product can be tailored to those needs, which will be understood, will not induce panic in him and will be served according to an insurance scheme*". These opinions show an insight into alignment through the prism of individual transactions and serving customer needs during the selling process.

Sales managers working in manufacturing companies believed that the idea of alignment is related to reciprocity match and meeting the expectations of both parties involved in business relationships. Manufacturer of specialist fire and acoustic doors, which are produced only on a specification provided by the customer said that "*...the alignment means consulting customer expectations and technical capabilities of the manufacturer, and - more broadly -*

*mutual understanding of the needs and expectations." This group of respondents referred to alignment as "mutual adjustment", "cooperation", "support", "consensus". Process approach was evident in the opinion of the manufacturer of laminates for the automotive sector: "Alignment of suppliers and customers means that after a certain period of cooperation our company proposes a specific way of orders. Our experiences and suggestions from the customer are taken into account. Together, we develop procedures for our cooperation. "*

In several cases, survey participants paid particular attention to cooperation with retail chains, when one cannot talk about alignment, but only about a dichotomous situation of fitting or not the conditions dictated by merchants. A company offering niche food products to large retail chains, which carries a limited alignment in the area of assortment offered is an interesting example: *"...there is no way to meet standard buyer expectations, because large retail buyers have accustomed to mass products and their requirements on the conditions leading to listing of a product are highly placed. Matching their expectations would lead to much more than a zero profit, it would lead us to a loss growing at an alarming rate, culminating in the reimbursement of the products. The reason for this situation is translation of the terms of purchase used with high rotating products to the premium niche products with a completely different sales."* This company leads matching process based on knowledge on ways of purchase, elements of the bureaucracy in the work of buyer, vocabulary of trade used by buyer etc. Thus alignment means overtaking of the buyer activities in this case.

None of the participants did not consider alignment or misalignment extremely - as a full match or total mismatch. They pointed out that the essence of this issue is its object. Generally speaking sales managers looked at the object of alignment and misalignment in a complex way, indicating a diverse set of elements (mainly of the offered product and customer service) which they are trying to adjust to the customer needs. Surprisingly the issue of price appeared rarely in this context - was raised mainly by the managers of collaborating with retail chains.

*"The whole process of handling the contract must be at the highest level: very good quality of service, on time delivery, solving immediately problems that arose, consulting and good installation, which is one of the most important elements of implementation."* This opinion of managers who sale services of renting the construction equipment reflects how service companies try to align to customers. They do by shaping the quality of service offered (terms of transaction, knowledge, qualifications of staff, availability and mobility, speed of service and flexible response to special needs), and the quality of collaborations (marketing and sales

support, assistance in emergency situations and loyalty systems). In turn, in retail companies object of alignment or misalignment was often linked with wide availability of products offered, the process of the buy-sell activities, with communication (understanding of customer problems and understanding of his market), and support (technical support, sales support, duration of workday, handling complaints and returned products). Managers' attention was also paid to the boundaries of alignment, so as to protect the interests of the supplier. This is evident in the narrative of the sales manager of flowers wholesaler: *"Alignment in particular relies on effective communication, based on empathy and listening to customer needs and fast flow of information. I, as a vendor, always try to look at the transaction through the eyes of the customer and respond quickly to emerging needs and suggestions. However, I do not forget the justified interests of my company so I try to balance the expectations of both sides to get the best value"*.

Manufacturers combined alignment with matching of production (flexibility of assortment and volume, matching technical parameters of a product) and with supporting customer's technical and sales processes. Special treatment of all or key customers was also mentioned in sales manager narratives (better terms of trade or selling rare products only to them). *"Given the choice to provide goods to new customers or strategic ones, we plan the partition of stocks, so that both one and the other did not feel in any way neglected. You do not always succeed, because the key customers come first. These aspects are independent of us but may be the reason for the perception of our actions as a misalignment."*

The results of the study indicate respondents conviction about the positive effects of the alignment understood as the fulfillment of customer expectations. It leads to the development of relationships, positive word-of-mouth and a good exchange of information between partners. This approach is reflected in opinion of the representative of the medium size company offering services in the energy market: *"The result is, inter alia, the experience, ability to work with more service users. Through adaptation to the situation the company has won additional orders and expanded the scope of its activities, and employees have gained additional experience and skills."*

In turn, good communication can result in even better fit to customer by recognizing his needs. However, a good fit between the supplier and the customer or a stable relationship in the long run may reduce the sensitivity to new solutions and expose this relationship to competitors attack. Distributor of sanitary ceramics, wrote that: *"... a better fit influences on better development of relationships. It seems that every customer wants to have his expectations fulfilled by suppliers who matched to his needs. You could say that in case of*

*better fit we have less conflict, less problems to solve, less reason to be dissatisfied. But on the other hand, there is less reason to dialogue and thus less opportunity to know the client; [...] where there is a high degree of matching, the situation is more static. More static situation does not force changes and new solutions."*

The mismatch leads to deterioration of the relationship or even to its completion. For example, in essay written by a market leader in heavy machinery rental for construction industry it was stated that *"The market is so competitive and demanding that even a small mismatch results in termination of cooperation."* However, there is also a positive impact of misalignment on relations. Failure to meet customer expectations can be a factor stimulating innovation. Some respondents argued that the mismatch forces to develop new solutions for customers, by the exploration of new ideas. An opinion of a manager working in logistics operator is an example of this approach: *"Sometimes the mismatch factor can be very desirable. This situation forces one side or all actors to improve their processes and thereby improves quality of product or services. Working with an external entity such as the storage customer can sometimes force the logistics provider to expand the range of services or to obtain certificates that are evidence of high level of service. Mismatch, which at first glance may seem undesirable, in the longer term, however, may improve the position of the company, as well as reduce costs or optimize processes on both sides. Therefore, it seems that the mismatch is conducive to investment and competitiveness in the market."*

In the part of narratives an issue of awareness of mismatch was referred. Representatives of banks and financial institutions pointed out that due to their CRM systems a mismatch resulting in loss of customers forces them to work on improvements or new solutions. The Polish market leader in e-commerce sales of wheels and tires claimed that, *"... no direct contact with customers leads to the fact that only a claim by a client informs about misalignment. Therefore an ability to diagnose mismatches is an important competence of the company operating in business-to-business e-commerce market "*.

The largest variation of responses appeared in the matter of conditions of alignment. It shows that the understanding of this issue is related to the size of the company, type of products and bargaining power. It is clearly reflected by the sales manager of niche products importer of Mediterranean cuisine in her opinion on cooperation with retail chains: *"The idea of matching the expectations of the customer is not always a satisfactory solution for him and also for the supplier. This statement appears to be in denial of an obvious pro-customer marketing posture. However it is important to realize that to a large extent the level and quality of the alignment depends rather on the size and format of the purchasing company, the type of*

*attitudes to suppliers imposed on employees and the nature of the product sold unless on the type of personality of employee representing a customer." At the same time the opinion of a leader of paper market shows that the market position affects the perception of the match: "... leadership of the domestic market allows us to go in the direction not necessarily consistent with the expectations of our customers."*

Positive effects of relationship atmosphere on alignment were mostly emphasized among the factors influencing alignment of business partners. Good atmosphere allows good communication, which allows specifying the client's expectations, which in turn allows better adaptation.

## 6. The second study

The second phase of research has consisted in a set of 30 in depth interviews to sales managers, 15 in Poland and 15 in Italy.

The interview scheme has been divided into three main phases. The first was aimed at exploring the sales manager's idea of alignment and misalignment with respect to its main customer (turnover). We chosen to anchor the sales manager responses to a specific customer in order to facilitate them and avoid too general considerations; also this approach is used when exploring perceived relationship value (see for instance Ulaga and Eggert, 2006). In particular it has been asked to assign a score from 1 (no relevance) to 7 (extremely relevant) with respect to the issues mentioned below and which represent different contents that can be associated to alignment and misalignment. These statements have been derived from theory and then enriched thanks to findings emerged from the preliminary study.

Table 1: Scale development

<b>Type of alignment and misalignment considered</b>	<b>Source in the literature</b>
...having the same view of the market, the environment our companies operate.	Storbacka and Nenonen, 2010; Ramos and Ford, 2010; Leek and Mason, 2009
... having the same goals.	Heide, 1995
...having the same picture of the history of our relationships, i.e. interpreting critical events in the same way.	Elo, Halinen, and Tornroos, 2010; Corsaro and Snehota, 2010

...having the same communication capabilities	From the preliminary study
...having the same perspective on a problem that should be solved	Scherpereel, 2006; Corsaro and Snehota, 2011
...having the same idea of the solution that should be delivered to solve a problem.	Corsaro and Snehota, 2011
...having a balanced power between us.	Cox, 2001; Cox et al. 2004
...having the same competences	From the preliminary study
...to agree on the operational mode of working.	Cox et al. 2004; Snow et al. 1986, Grootenboer, 2011
...thinking to the terms of transaction the same way (price, payment terms, delivery terms).	From the preliminary study
...that the two companies are similar (in terms of size, in terms of location, etc.).	From the preliminary study
...collaborating on the same level of organizational structure.	From the preliminary study
...feeling the same satisfaction from the cooperation.	From the preliminary study

We also asked respondents about the positive/negative effects of alignment and misalignment and how these have influenced their behaviors. To complete data, respondents provided concrete examples of episodes that can be related to these situations.

Descriptive data in terms of characteristics of the customer company and of the relationship (company size; duration, number of interactions per week, type of interlocutors, etc.) have been finally collected.

The Polish sample consist of 15 managers: sales executives, key account managers or regional sales managers. They worked in service (5), trade (2) or manufactory (8) companies (Table, Appendix). Most of the companies were rather young – only 2 of 15 were established before 1989 when the economic transformation in Poland began. All of those companies operated on business-to-business market, but in case of few manufacturers (chees, snacks, meat) the most important group of customers were retailers (networks and individual). Consequently the number of customers served in 2010 varied from 50 to 300.000 (median 325) and the number of salespeople from 8 to 500 (median 38). The size of companies ranged from 46 employees and 1200 thousands euro of income in 2010 to 2500 employees and 750 000 thousands euro of income.

The Italian sample also includes 15 managers: sales executives, key account managers or regional sales managers. They worked in service (6), ICT (Information and Communication Technology) (4), consultancy (1), distributor (1) and manufactory (3) (See Table 4, Appendix). They are all medium-large sized companies operating in business to business.

## **6.2 Findings from the second study**

### ***6.2.1. Objects of alignment and misalignment***

As a result from our in depth interviews, we will now present findings organized around objects of alignment and misalignment, where also comments on their effects and how sales managers dealt with them are provided.

#### **Alignment in power**

Balanced power between both parties was key object of alignment. From sales managers perspective it was important to cooperate with customers who have similar market position to their companies. Take for example, the following situations:

*“Our customer is smaller than we are, but he has important market position because of his knowledge about Russian market.” (Polish sales manager).*

*“We are powerful on our market and so is our key customer on his market - that is important. They have the right feeling of meeting as mighty leader as they are, although financially they are much weaker, they also have less employees.” (Polish sales manager).*

*“Alignment relates to relationships with the customer , because as it comes to the product , we care about our profit and that's the reason why we cannot meet the client's expectations. I feel that we have to be the one who cares, and the client should be receptive to cooperation. We cannot always adjust the offer the customer's expectations, but we try to adjust to customer's processes.” (Polish sales manager).*

In the perspective of the Italian sales managers, instead:

*“I always give this customer the perception that it is the most powerful in the relationship, even if at the end as supplier we try to pull its choices in the directions we want” (Italian sales manager).*

*“That’s not relevant to have alignment in power in the relationship, this is a game, sometime the customer drives more the relationship than the supplier, and sometimes the contrary” (Italian sales manager).*

### **Alignment in Competences**

Italian managers think that misalignment in competences, for instance, is positive for the relationship development as it increases the bargaining power of the supplier toward the customer:

*“Compared to then years ago, now customers think to be extremely competent and well prepared, even if many times they acquired knowledge only through internet. This makes them very arrogant; thus the more they perceive the gap in their competences compared to the ones of the supplier, the more it is easier for the supplier to work, as the customer tend to interfere less.” (Italian sales manager).*

According to Polish sales managers, instead, the misalignment in competences is not positive as it could also happen that third parties, intermediaries, enter the value chain in order to fill in.

### **Alignment in goals**

In general terms sales managers, both Italian and Polish, have not assigned high score to alignment in goals, as they both recognized that customer and supplier, being actor of different nature, they have different aims.

*“Alignment is important, but mutual understanding has to be equal with accepting the same goals that refer to the market. However alignment is important at the relationship level, but not at transactional level. As it comes to transactions, both side's interests are crucial.” (Polish sales manager).*

In both cases sales managers have mentioned an element which seems to be particularly important for orienting their behavior: this is that apart from the declared goals by the customers, there could be hidden lateral goals which the customer is pursuing too and which he obviously would not make evident to the supplier. In this case it is ability of the sales managers to catch all weak signals and also develop a in depth knowledge of the surrounding network of the customer, so as to be able to discover also these hidden aspects.

### **Alignment in communication**

For most of Polish respondents being aligned with this key customer first of all means having the same communication capabilities, i.e. easy exchange of information but also flexibility of time for calls or meetings of all people involved in cooperation. There was only one sales manager among our respondents who contacted only buyers at customer side. The rest of respondents is communicating with range of actors from executive to operational level, mostly several times a month, least once a month.

Being aligned in communication, and especially in technical languages used, is important for Italian sales managers too. Misalignment in languages could be positive only in case the customer relate it to its lack of knowledge and competence, which increases the role of the sales managers. This alignment is very costly to be reach for companies and this is why, for instance, when they have a new solution to propose to the market, they prefer to start presenting them to existing customers rather than to new ones, as its more likely that the first will understand the messages delivered.

### **Alignment in the pictures of the surrounding, of the story of the relationship and of the interpretations of critical events**

During the interviews having the same picture of the history of relationship was mentioned as significant objects of alignment with key customers. Based on the answers we received, it became evident that sales managers perceive the history as the base for trust and the process of mutual learning and aligning. The following are excerpts from some responses:

*“Long-term relationship with our key customer led to very good relationships between both companies' directors and even a friendship between owners of companies. It was build against many market threats what helped to strengthen mutual trust.” (Polish sales manager).*

*“Both companies must choose the same path of development, so the alignment can occur as a natural consequence of cooperation. Any important change in one of the parties destroy the alignment.” (Polish sales manager).*

*“Having the same picture with the customer is very important; for instance it happens when a buyer from an important customer company had to talk with the general manager in order to convince him to give in outsourcing its logistic services to us; we thought to be completely aligned with this person but the first interaction with the general manager has been not positive. This person asserted that there were no problems and the problems would be 100% solved; thus he went back to the general manager with more information and this one*

*decided to cut the project completely. In that case we had not understood that our interlocutor was not able to deal with this task, his picture was completely different from our.” (Italian sales manager).*

For interviewees managing sales operations in distributors the issue of the view of the market was important object of alignment or misalignment. Take for example, the following:

*“If we are the sole representative of manufacturer or we are perceived so, then the customer is constrained to buy from us and he is dependant. But if our competitors offer the same or similar products the customer approach to the market is totally different. In such situation we treat customer complaints as a priority and we try to remove any defect as soon as possible.” (Polish sales manager).*

*“Both us and the customer thought that the entrance of new Israeli vendors of ICT Security in the Italian market was extremely positive, we can earn by implementing these solution in the customer’ technological infrastructures, and the customer could benefit from an high level of security (Italian sales manager).*

### **Alignment in ideas of the problems and solution**

Products and solutions belonged to objects strongly associated with alignment in Polish interviews. Having the same perspective on a problem that should be solved was pointed out by most sales managers as crucial. In contrast, having the same idea of the solution that should be delivered to solve a problem was not perceived as the “core” of alignment. It was explained by different aims of supplier and customer:

*“Goals are different, because we want to sell as expensive as we can, and customer wants to buy as cheap as it is possible.” (Polish sales manager).*

In Italy instead sales managers seem to have a more heterogeneous idea of the problem and solution as a critical elements for alignment. As for the first element, it could in fact happen that the customer and the supplier are aligned with the general idea of the problem, but then the customer is not able to formulate specific requests related to this problem, and thus while there is alignment on macro level, there is not on the micro one. It in fact appears that this level of alignment is related to the complexity of the solution: for basic products and services being aligned matters, rather for complex ones it is normal to be in a misaligned state, as it could be very difficult for the customer to perceive the usefulness of the solution; in this case

the sales manager should work more on other aspects, like trust, as it can happen that an alignment state in the idea of the solution would never be reach.

In addition to this, an Italian sales manager also asserted:

*“ Customer have sometimes very strange behaviors, it also happened that they bought some technological components from use, while never implementing them, because it was too problematic. But at least, in terms of image they had a positive effect” (Italian sales manager).*

### **Alignment of interlocutors' position in the companies**

Another difference between Poland and Italy emerged when analyzing the relevance of being aligned with the customer in terms of position occupied by interlocutors in the organizations. Polish managers think that it is better to interact with people on the same level of the organizational structure (average score 5.9), because this facilitate communications and reciprocal understanding. For Italian ones, instead, this aspect is not so critical (3.2), and in some cases misalignment could be even better. For instance some respondents mentioned the positive effect of dealing directly with the general management, as this facilitate and make quicker decision making processes, even if obviously it is also more costly in the perspective of the sales manager (more effort put in the relationship).

### **Alignment in the operational modes of working**

Sales managers who referred to relationships with customers with high share in their sales indicated matching operational mode of working of both companies as important object of alignment. Their customers know their dominant position and want suppliers to align to their purchasing, production, logistics and selling processes.

*“My customer isn't one of the few largest meat wholesalers in Poland. I maintain good relationships with purchase department, but those with sales department, which is responsible for selling our products, remain poor. It is such an important client, that our salespeople started to support his transactions with retailers.” (Polish sales manager).*

For the Italian sales managers this aspect is not particularly relevant. It can however have negative effects in case of multinational companies:

*“When customers are big companies, part of multinational groups, they could apply specific procedures, international practices that make more difficult to work with them”.* (Italian sales managers).

To overcome this difficulty the customer tends to acquire in advance knowledge on this international practices and procedures; in this way he will also show the customer that he spent time to know its environment and will be also facilitated in case of problems emerging on that side.

### ***6.2.2. Impact of alignment/misalignment in the relationship with key customers***

A common theme across subjects was misalignment which was understood as state contrary to alignment. All of the sales managers underlined that alignment is better for the long-term relationship with customers. However they reserved that alignment should be limited because they have to balance the advantages of good relationship and disadvantages of costs generated by alignment in their selling organization or other departments. This excerpt reflect the common approach of our respondents:

*“Alignment is better than misalignment, but we cannot afford matching our customers’ expectations fully, because in our case, it is connected to high costs of maintaining stock.” (Polish sales manager).*

As alignment caused only positive connotations, sales managers were divided in perceiving misalignment. Almost half of them perceived misalignment as the way to lose the customer to the competitors. They explained that their market is very competitive and buying decisions are not complex thus it is easy to change the supplier. For example:

*“There is rather no situation, in which misalignment brings positive effects, because even very good relationships on meat market are not equal to loyalty, understood as a will of repeated purchase. All our main competitors have similarly good relations with customers, similar prices, so the smallest misalignment can affect decrease of sales volume.” (Polish sales manager).*

*“We often lose our clients because we cannot meet their expectations of maturity. Deadlines expected by customer are not acceptable for company which insures our payments so we have to refuse to their needs. Then they buy from another supplier even if our relationships are very good.” (Italian sales manager).*

Some others sales managers perceived misalignment in long-term perspective as a starting point to the process of aligning with customer. It gives an opportunity to see the problem from a new point of view, requires development, seeking new solutions and undertaking new activities. Misalignment conduces creative activities: limits stagnation and usage of schemes

by salespeople and others departments, but also by customer. Based on the answers we received, it became evident that those sales managers treat misalignment as factor mobilizing to seek for new solutions that later might be offered to other customers, because it influences not only the sales department but the inside of company, especially production and research and development departments. We obtained several examples of new solutions introduced as a result of misalignment. It can be seen in those statements:

*“Misalignment occurs mainly when we cooperate with customer that is bigger and consequently often more developed than our company. It forces us to accept their point of view, requirements, expectations. We have to develop a new approach to the customer's service. Finally it improves our standards.” (Polish sales manager).*

*“If our offer doesn't fit, we ask our headquarter to work out new one, or to establish other procedures of customer service. Generally we set up an individual offer and procedures for our key customers. Later that offer is introduced as a regular, for all our clients.” (Italian sales manager).*

*“Changes in company's operations are being made, for instance we extended working hours for the customer, delegated one person to look after key customers. We also undertook financial risk to create new products for which initially we have to make huge investments to show it to the customer. Customer pays only if he likes those solutions.” (Polish sales manager).*

Financial aspect of misalignment was raised during several interviews. Sales managers said that because the misalignment causes increasing investments for company to evolve and meet the customer's expectations sometimes misalignment (losing the customer) causes lower financial losses than alignment.

There was also the case of a relationship that deteriorated, but is still important for both parties. It is convenient for the company to maintain it even if in a very misaligned situation.

*“With our key customer we've been working for several years. We used to have very good relations, because we are the largest Polish manufacturer of glass packaging and the client is the largest vodka producer in Poland. Two years ago that company was sold to an investment fund who implemented many changes in managerial staff, so relationships deteriorated. Customer's attitude is very transactional now, building relationships is limited to a minimum. His employees cannot meet with our salespeople outside of their company, are not involved*

*in our trainings, shows or events organized for our clients. Level of satisfaction with cooperation is low at both sides, but we dispose an unique technology, and the customer places large orders.” (Polish sales manager).*

### **6.2.3 Dynamicity of alignment and misalignment**

According to discussion about lack of evidence of salespeople approach to long-term relationships with customers we asked our interviewees about stability of alignment in time. The results show that in most cases alignment is never stable. It should be perceived rather as a process of aligning then a state of alignment. As far as sales managers reported that alignment is crucial for long-term relationships they emphasized that it needs their constant short-term attention. The main threat for alignment is linked with personal relationships of salespeople with customer representatives - any change in staff on both sides may spoil the alignment. That opinion reflects the role of salespeople and buyers as boundary spanners between supplier and customer:

*“Alignment is changeable, everything depends on staff. If it changes frequently, there can be more visions and ideas of prosperity, so alignment and misalignment can also change.” (Polish sales manager).*

Many different factors also causes that instability: market conditions, changes in personnel, competitors’ activities, needs of customer’s customers, product or service defects, strategic changes on both sides of relationship. The following are excerpts from our respondents responses:

*“Alignments must be done every day, as well as verifying the situation on the market. I do it every time during the meetings with customers . Some suppliers have no survival instinct, and believe that once achieved customer will stay with them forever. Afterwards we often overtake their customers.” (Polish sales manager).*

*“In our case there can't be a situation of stable alignment, it is a continuous process, affected by competition , our customer's clients, but also by our offers.” (Polish sales manager).*

*“Adjustment requires huge investments and mutual trust, therefore if we finally achieve it, it is in most cases stable, and leads to developing new products jointly. Nevertheless, everything depends on the client and the decision-makers : some of the clients break off further cooperation after the first complaint.” (Polish sales manager).*

*“We evolve quicker than all our distributors , who are also our customers. So from the transactional point of view, we become less adjusted, but we try to keep the adaptation at the relationship level.” (Polish sales manager).*

*“It depends on the stage of cooperation's development; at the beginning alignment is important, for there is a need to show to the customer that we care about him, and show him our capabilities; later too much of alignment can cause higher costs or reduction of constructive solutions, there are no alternatives being sought, and as a result turnover decreases.” (Polish sales manager).*

The idea of the polish sales managers is quite similar to the one of Italian ones:

*“Even in the relationship with the main customer there is a continuous alternation of alignment and misalignment” (Italian sales manager).*

*“External elements, like it has been for us the economic crisis and thus the reduction of the customers' budget, could strongly impact the equilibrium in the relationship” (Italian sales manager).*

*“Companies are continues subjected to mergers and acquisitions operations, obviously in these case the interlocutors change, the strategies change, etc. what was considered as aligned can rapidly become totally misaligned” (Italian sales manager).*

We can also notice that in certain time situation, even in the same relationship, alignment is seen as positive, while in other situations it can produce negative consequences. For instance:

*“Our company has developed its own method of packaging bathtubs, which was due to meet the expectations of a network of retailers. One of our important distributors (did not belong to that network) transported the bathtubs for long distances because of its huge territorial range. In the course of transporting a lot of bathtubs was subject to physical damage. This situation has caused a big friction in our cooperation, because the cost of such damage was a dispute, and neither party felt responsible for the situation. After analyzing the packing tubs of competitors we have changed the method of packaging to the one that resulted in fewer*

*damages. In this situation the mismatch was the engine of development and a source of change.” (Italian sales manager).*

## **6. Conclusions and implications for research and practice**

In this study we integrate the concept of alignment and misalignment in the stream of literature on the orientation of salesmen in their relationships with business customers. The sales personnel plays a key role in building and developing relation with customers in business market (Bendapudi, Leone, 2002; Homburg, Stock, 2004), and this is why exploring the concepts of alignment and misalignment in business relationships is particularly relevant with respect to sales people.

Starting points of our research are that research on sales orientation has often focused on the behavior of sales managers leaving out what drives their behaviors, i.e. salespeople interpretations. By taking as unit of analysis individual actors, we have been in particularly interested at exploring if and how sales managers think in terms of alignment and misalignment when dealing with customers and to which extent these interpretations affect their behavior. The issue of alignment and misalignment is coherent both with respect to recent attention to this topic (see Corsaro and Snehota, 2011) and with the fact that issues related to matching customers’ needs are common in the literature on sales. We think that this idea of ‘matching’ needs to be further investigated. To accomplish the purpose of this study we first carried out a two steps research, based on a preliminary study and a set of semi-structured interviews to sales managers in Poland and in Italy.

Sales managers represent a critical component of the sales force so they seemed ideal to be studied in the attempt to understand alignment and misalignment in sales orientation to business customers. Thus sales managers working with business customers were chosen as target respondent in this study.

The first consideration from our study is that sales managers have different conceptions of alignment and misalignment, which mainly refer to alignments in products or services with customers’ needs, alignment in procedures, alignment in languages, alignment in practices some other refer to alignment in communication capabilities, etc. Thus, the concept of alignment/misalignment emerges as multidimensional: no one unique interpretation of alignment and misalignment exists, rather their content is subjectively defined by each respondent with respect to the context in which he operates. It follows that different actors

assign relevance to different elements of alignment and misalignment. No a unique object of alignment and misalignment exists without a subject interpreting them.

In that sense some similarities and differences emerge when we compare findings from Italy and Poland. First of all it is interesting to notice that in both cases managers assign a strong importance to be aligned with customers in terms of representations of the surrounding business network, of the past history of the relationship and of the critical events occurred in the relationship. This finding confirms that recent research on network pictures and cognitive related issue could be really of use also to better understand sales manager orientation toward customers. They also agree that alignment in power among customer and supplier is something they do not look for, as very difficult to be reach, as well as alignment in goals, because parties necessarily have divergent goals. Finally Polish and Italian sales managers both share the idea that alignment and misalignment are unstable concepts in continue change, and also that they are context dependent, in some case the same situation of alignment generates positive effects while in another it does not. But some divergences emerge too. For instance, while being aligned on the idea of the solution is not very important for Polish sales managers, in some specific situations it is important for Italian ones.

As for the effect of alignment and misalignment, Italian sales managers highlight misalignment in parties' competences as possibly generating positive effects, while this is not for Polish. Furthermore while in Poland interacting on the same level of the organizational structure is particularly positive, it is not in Italy, where sales managers see many opportunities in dealing on different levels. More in general our study further confirm and develop the idea by Corsaro and Snehota (2011) that there are conditions under which misalignment is preferred to alignment, and these preferences as we shown in this study address the behavior of sales managers, i.e. the activities they carried out in order to fulfill their idea of alignment and misalignment.

As for further research in the field, our propositions appear to be preliminary and in need of a further exploration and testing. In particular we think that the cultural variable should be included in further theoretical model in order to understand the extent to which it impacts sales managers orientation in relationships with customers.

The main limitation of the study is that we used sales managers coming from different industries; however at the same time this could give indication if industry is an element that affects how sales managers think in terms of alignment and misalignment.

Managerial implications arising from the study are also relevant. First sales managers should not only act based on their idea of reaching an aligned (or misaligned) state, but they should

also confront their idea with the customer in order not to create investment in resources whose combination could be not effective for the parties involved, or even for only one of them. Both customers and suppliers should invest in communication practices aimed at creating a certain understanding between parties and thus make their interaction more fluent.

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## Appendix

Table 1. Categorization of data obtained from essays (S1-7 - service companies, T1-T6 trade companies, M1-8 manufacturers)

No.	Company	Meaning of alignment/misalignment	Object of alignment/misalignment	Effects of alignment	Effects of misalignment	Factors affecting alignment/misalignment
S1	bank, external sales department (400 dealers)	1. matching customer needs and expectations of the tender offered by different banks 2. speed of service	1. credit offer 2. information system, marketing support, commission 3. loyalty systems 4. sales support	customer tendency to return to the broker office	at the beginning customer chooses other bank's offer, at long turn we lose the broker	The possibility of conducting workshops with a group of 15-20 brokers to collect data on their needs
S2	investment insurance, the market leader	1. match the product to the customer's expectations, but also to the customer experience in the financial market 2. offering a product that will be comprehensible to the customer	1. usefulness of the product 2. matching of the risk handled by the customer	Customer loyalty: stays for years, is resistant to competitors offers, asks for help new needs appear	negative WOM	positioning of a products depending on the vendor and the customer experience
S3	bank, SME sales department	1. meeting customer needs 2. conditioning procedures offered solutions are flexible enough to modify them, but did not significantly change	1. specific terms of the transaction (transaction security, price, additional conditions, obligations of the parties) 2. approach to relationships	1. for the bank: reducing the risk of cooperation, development of relationship 2. for the customer: satisfactory conditions, self-esteem 3. for both sides: the catalyst of customized approach to unusual solutions	1. innovation and new approaches to the problem indicated by the client (in the institutions of high elasticity) 2. loss of customer, but also development of solutions for new customers	Determination in promoting changes in all levels of decision-making
S4	bank, one of the largest financial institutions in Poland, over 500 branches	supplier is trying to adjust to customer needs	1. market knowledge 2. qualifications of staff 3. having sufficient knowledge to have appropriate licenses and licenses.	1. a transaction 2. recommendations	1. end of relationship 2. negative WOM 3. but the end of relations with customer can affect the work on new products	in the case of very profitable products or key customers we have a greater opportunity to negotiate
S5	services in the energy industry, trade of recyclable materials, 50 people	meet specific customer requirements and standards for services	1. availability 2. mobility counseling innovative approach to the problems raised 3. assistance in emergency situations	1. experience in interaction with customers 2. additional orders 3. expanding the scope of business	1. if a mismatch leads to a crisis - the end of the relationship 2. if time is conducive it leads to innovation	emotions occurring on both the supplier and customer side

					and new courses of action	
S6	market leader in heavy machinery rental for construction industry	Customization	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. ensuring the right products</li> <li>2. speed of service response</li> <li>3. quick response to customer's special needs</li> <li>4. opportunity to broaden the offer in a specific order</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. the possibility of extending supplier's offer due to a customer specific order</li> <li>2. unfortunately matching is interpersonal and does not protect against the effects of mismatch of other employees with the customer</li> </ol>	break of collaboration	policy coherence across the entire supplier enterprise
S7	logistics provider (transport, forwarding, warehousing, order handling and invoicing)	understanding the needs of the client by the provider and vice versa	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. providing the proper means of transport</li> <li>2. storage of customer goods in proper conditions</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. assessment of the security of customer production plans, inventory, etc.</li> <li>2. customer cares about his supplier</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. mismatch forces on one side or on all partners the improvement of processes, product quality and service</li> <li>2. in the longer term it can improve the company's position as well as reduce costs, optimize processes on both sides</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. the involvement of partners</li> <li>2. trust</li> </ol>
T1	FMCG, an importer of food (Mediterranean cuisine).	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. the fit of supplier to customer needs</li> <li>2. desire / need to adjust is feature of the attitude of the supplier only, never customer (retail network)</li> <li>3. a search for optimum mismatch of customer needs in term of product, and the match in term of service</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. above all, adequate customer service</li> <li>2. offering niche product proposals other than syndicates</li> <li>3. knowledge and ways of purchase</li> <li>4. elements of the bureaucracy in the work of buyer</li> <li>5. operating the same vocabulary of trade than buyer</li> <li>6. knowledge of the names of files completed by buyer</li> <li>7. knowledge of the collaborators on the project</li> <li>8. prepare properly completed</li> </ol>	<p>Partial matching:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. broadening the range of ordered products</li> <li>2. trust "loan"</li> <li>3. awareness of working with "sound business" in the eyes of a buyer</li> </ol> <p>Full matching: financial loss resulting from the returns of products</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. lack of cooperation</li> <li>2. a demanding attitude of niche suppliers</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. size and format of customer</li> <li>2. type of employee attitudes imposed on the supply side</li> <li>3. nature of the product sold</li> <li>4. atmosphere of cooperation</li> <li>5. trade imbalance of forces on the two sides</li> </ol>

			product for a purchase card 9. acting as a "reminder" to the exclusion of evidence of impudence			
T2	The international trading company in the construction market (gateways)	1. mutual benefit 2. the customer should know what to expect from the supplier, which will benefit from cooperation with the supplier	1. understanding of the customer market 2. aid for the sale 3. technical support 4. assistance in case of financial problems	company as a market leader imposes solutions to customers so it is difficult to talk about the results of alignment	1. lack of market knowledge 2. decline in customer loyalty	1. size and scale of a customer 2. In that company there is a tendency to adjust to a less significant customers and it does not match to the key customer
T3	market leader in e-commerce sales of wheels and tires in Poland	adjusting to customer needs	1. handling time and the order 2. wide availability of products 3. functionality and ergonomics of web pages 4. duration of workday of the service department 5. cooperation with a network of partner service stations 6. handling returns and complaints	1. loyalty 2. ability to recommend 3. increase brand awareness	1. customer complaints are a true inspiration to work 2. signals are used to match the demarcation of the purpose of adaptation to the customer	seasonality of demand (alignment is hard in high season)
T4	sales of automotive and industrial coatings, trade company (15 people)	meeting customer expectations	1. matching products 2. providing continuous technical support 3. responding to problems 4. offering a cutting edge solutions	1. innovation 2. competition, limited access to customer 3. joint implementation of promotional campaigns on trade fairs 4. creation of know-how	customers' employees form their belief that there are better suppliers on the market	1. honesty 2. close cooperation with the customer 3. bilateral involvement
T5	sale and service of machinery for gardening and forestry (8 people)	meeting customer needs	1. collecting information about customer needs 2. price 3. date of receipt of the product 4. honesty, sympathy, trust, 5. knowledge 6. wide range of products offered 7. mobile service	1. business security 2. recommendations 3. development of the relationship 4. growth requirements - pressure to increase operating flexibility thus contributes to increased costs	limits development of relation	commitment of employees responsible for contacts with customer

				5. new ideas and solutions		
T6	flowers wholesale (20 people)	matching the offer and the customer's needs	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. empathy and listening to customer needs</li> <li>2. flow of information</li> <li>3. execution of contracts in accordance with the specifications</li> <li>4. quality assurance</li> <li>5. preferential price</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. mutual loyalty (continuity of transactions, timely payment of obligations, mutual trust and dependability pages)</li> <li>2. extending the range of purchased products</li> <li>3. willingness to accept the goods which is a kind of "novelty" in the market</li> <li>4. development of innovation in both companies</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. the need to accede to the customer suggestions</li> <li>2. relaxation of trade relations or their rupture</li> </ol>	atmosphere prevailing at the supplier and customer
M1	The market leader of small household appliances (kettles, hair dryers, etc)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. creating a transparent trade policy</li> <li>2. focus on relationships rather than single transactions</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. helping wholesalers to float the residual product and promoting the leading product categories</li> <li>2. sales support</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. dealers are not afraid to trade the expensive equipment</li> <li>2. confidence</li> <li>3. change in relation to the product</li> <li>4. agent becomes a brand ambassador</li> <li>5. quick launching of new products</li> <li>6. new business proposals</li> </ol>	partners have transactional approach to supplier	marketing and channels management horizon
M2	FMCG, cheese (12% market share), Key Account Manager (retail chains), 1000 employees.	meeting some of customer needs	merchants in retail chains expect a haven for their conditions, is of major importance and price range	sales is the effect of alignment but it is sensitive to price rather than alignment	innovative ideas (such as the creation of a dedicated product)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. nature of the client - building relationships with retail chains on a large scale is impossible</li> <li>2. do the customer needs lay within the scope of supplier organizational and financial capabilities?</li> </ol>
M3	One of the five major producers of paper in Europe (1000 employees)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. anticipating the mutual expectations</li> <li>2. matching to the extent that determines the development of</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. production flexibility (producing different assortments frequently)</li> <li>2. meeting current customer</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. clients are stable</li> <li>2. the level of their purchases rises</li> <li>3. opportunity to build</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. departure of customers</li> <li>2. loss of the titer of flexible supplier</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. market leader position allows the company to go in the direction not necessarily consistent with</li> </ol>

		cooperation with the customer 3. bilateral matching of needs and solutions.	expectations 3. technical support 4. knowledge sharing 5. help of an expert in the optimization of machines on the client side and the search for new solutions that allow customers to get the products manufactured by the best parameters 6. approximate the supplier to the customer in terms of geographical, cultural, linguistic and mental, by maintaining sales offices in major European countries	lasting relationships and trust 4. opinion in professional organizations and the media 5. recommendations	3. mismatch can affect the search for new ideas and innovation	the expectations of customers 3. deep relationship and consumer confidence in the supplier and vice versa will allow for greater willingness of both parties to the nudging of new solutions
M4	industrial automation, representing a German manufacturer (14 people)	1. meeting customer expectations 2. a mutual fit is the key to success	special treatment of key customers	1. mutual satisfaction 2. for the customer: solid certainty of information, professional sales and after sales service, technical support and a positive answer to the complaint 3. for the supplier: certainty of payment timing and customer loyalty	1. unpunctual supplies 2. reduction in the quality of cooperation limiting opportunities for the introduction of new solutions	1. stage of relationship development 2. mutual trust 3. competitors
M5	manufacturer of polyester-glass laminates for the automotive sector (200 persons)	after a period of collaboration has proposed joint development of the cooperation procedure	1. technical adjustment 2. internal procedures 3. way of keeping records 4. way to formulating queries 5. possession of stocks of goods strategic to the customer 6. searching for new products to the customer	1. ties and deepen the relationship 2. conducting a satisfactory customer service through effective use of information on customer 3. better communication 4. tendency to transfer the information on the competition	1. in the first phase of cooperation, the mismatch promotes innovative solutions 2. in the later stages: loss of confidence, loss of customers, loss of confidence in the market	1. ability to organize to create new solutions 2. atmosphere of openness and trust on supplier and customer side
M6	manufacturer of solid fuels and an importer of Vattenfall, a subsidiary of coal	1. adaptation to customer expectations 2. mutual adjustment allows for efficient customer support	1. service 2. matching production to sales and customer logistics 3. friendly relations	1. sales to a client with good cooperation in the first instance 2. the possibility of sales	negates the chances of new ideas, solutions and innovation	1. good atmosphere and trust 2. market factors and market participants,

	mines (22 people)		4. simplifying procedures for sales 5. reliable information about prices	planning 3. assistance in the development of a network of clients 4. ensures customer solvency		especially competition
M7	production of specialist customized fire and acoustic doors (50 people)	1. Consulting customer expectations and technical capabilities of the manufacturer 2. mutual understanding of the needs and expectations	1. project 2. solving of existing problems 3. Advice	1. information on competition 2. excessive supplier deference may be used by the client	controlled adjustment fosters cooperation, but it can fall asleep vigilance of the supplier, which for many years provides a similar product.	1. forcing competitors to seek new solutions 2. the bigger is the competition the worse the cooperation with the customer
M8	world leader in sanitary ware industry, the regional representative	coming to consensus	1. mainly terms of delivery 2. to a lesser extent, discount terms and conditions of payment	1. development of the relationship 2. less conflict 3. less reason for dialogue and thus the opportunity to know the customer, to track its development and monitoring changes 4. big match leads to static relations	1. decrease in sales 2. forcing the parties to seek a better solution	1. market situation 2. activities of competitors 3. the atmosphere within each entity 4. phase of the relationship (the further the better fit but the greater stability)

## Appendix

Table3. Characteristics of interviewed companies – Polish sample

No.	company scope	established	Number of			Sales (euro, Poland)
			customers	employees	salespeople	
1.	Logistics	2008	450	2500	170	n/a
2.	IT solutions provider	2000	100	47	6	1,2 mln
3.	Construction	1995	100	150	35	27 mln

4.	distributor of office products	2000	200	700	320	n/a
5.	manufacturer of wooden fire doors	1991	100	46	5	1,2 mln
6.	manufacturer of industrial automatic	2001	1400	14	3	n/a
7.	manufacturer of cheese	1995	n/a	987	Regular 20, outsourcing 100	150 mln
8.	IT solutions provider	1991	100	250	About 12	25 mln
9.	manufacturer of snacks	1990	300.000	1200	400	97 mln
10.	manufacturer of glass packages (bottles)	1924	50	400	5	45 mln
11.	manufacturer of poultry meat and processed goods	1993	100	1000	50	188 mln
12.	manufacturer of polyurethane products - foams, adhesives, polyurethane mass	1983	700	70	8	9 mln
13.	distributor of ceramic tiles, fixtures, construction chemicals, stone	1989	500	115	70 (15 for B2B cust.)	17,5 mln (B2B 6 mln)
14.	manufacturer of chemical products for automotive and construction industries	1978	400	400	40	50 mln
15.	financial services (leasing)	1991	15000	700	500	750 mln

Table3. Characteristics of interviewed companies – Italian sample

No.	company scope	established	Number of			Sales (euro, Poland)
			customers	employees	salespeople	
1	Outsourcing of administrative service	2000	130	50	12	5 mln
2.	Strategic consultancy	1980	85	150	13	15 mln
3.	Construction	2005	2.000	400	20	30 mln
4.	Transportation	2000	400	120	15	n/a
5.	System integrator	2001	300	46	6	1,8 mln
6.	Manufacturing of accelerators of velocity	1993	350	80	5	13 mln
7.	Financial services (leasing)	1994	800	1000	200	160 mln
8.	IT solutions provider	2006	90	130	15	n/a
9.	Manufacturing of office equipment	1995	2000	1200	300	80 mln
10.	Bank	1994	30000	1500	300	400 mln
11.	Manufacturing of special tools	1999	700	700	25	n/a
12.	Distributor of ICT security solutions	2001	200	120	12	12 mln
13.	Telecommunication company	2001	500	600	50	23 mln
14.	Manufacturing of self services machines	1989	450	400	20	n/a
15.	Logistics	1998	350	700	60	26 mln

## APPENDIX B

### *Features of the relationship with the main customer*

*“For this client we've been implementing a large IT system since 2009, now we're maintaining it and adding smaller mechanisms.” (Polish sales manager).*

*“We are subsidiary of German company operating worldwide. Our main customer buys most of our products, is very important because provides almost half of our sales. Relation is quite good and stable. However our goals are different because we try not to be dependent only on one key customer.” (Polish sales manager).*

*“Our client is a wholesaler in Russia. We started collaboration more than 10 years ago, nowadays we are united through the capital and personal relationships. Once we were on the same level, but our company has grown faster than the client. We're always looking for development opportunities, and the customer is satisfied with the current situation. [...] Collaboration is difficult due to regulations in Russia. Thanks to him we feel safer in the Russian market. We could not achieve so many profits prospering there alone.” (Polish sales manager).*

*“We produce cheese, we're the biggest manufacturer in Poland. Our main customer is one of the biggest chain of supermarkets. Relationships have rather transactional character. Two years ago we've changed our client's profile- from retailer to wholesaler. There are some large meat wholesalers in Poland, one of them is my client. It is such an important client, that our salesmen support his transactions with retailers. I maintain good relationships with purchase department, but those with sales department, which is responsible for selling our products, remain poor.” (Polish sales manager).*

*“Our key customer is a manufacturer of shower trays, who has been buying a polyurethane mass from my company for 5 years. Once the company has not used the polyurethane (resin was used), but because of legislation's changes and faster time of production,*

*they became interested in polyurethane. We've found out about that, but we did not have a product that would meet their needs. So we've been selling petty products and working on the recipe. We have prepared the system and done the test. Now we also sell foams and glues.” (Polish sales manager).*

*“A key client is the largest general contractor for construction in our region. We provide him full range of our products. This company carries out the largest and prestigious buildings in the region. Our products appeared in the same building sites, we together sponsored one sports team, together sponsored football tournaments for the biggest players of our branch ( he always had his own team) and that is how our cooperation began. Our seller maintains a very good relationships with the president and the construction managers of this company. In addition, we had good prices on the Italian piles which they desired.” (Polish sales manager).*

A customer-oriented approach is important for the development of long-term customer relationships. Salespeople play a vital role in building mutually beneficial customer relationships through customer-oriented selling strategies because they operate as boundary spanners (Beverland 2001). The adoption of a customer-oriented approach is positively correlated with salespeople efficiency, it has been viewed as necessary to sustain and achieve a good market position (Naumann and Shannon 1992).

Customer-oriented sales are activities included in the marketing orientation, which aim to help the customer's purchasing decision to satisfy his needs (Saxe, Weitz 1982). Customer-oriented salespeople take actions to improve long-term customer satisfaction and simultaneously avoid behaviors that could lead to dissatisfied buyer. Brooksbank (1995) stressed in particular the unique role of identifying customer needs and then matching the offer to them. With the large effort in these stages closing stages of selling should be easier.

Adaptive selling means the matching of the supplier and its salespeople to the preferences of buyer behavior (Eckert 2006). By meeting the expectations of the buyer in area of providing information and solutions, customization of communication and the entire process to the buyer salespeople increase the effectiveness of their actions. Adaptive selling at the individual level includes the ability to modify salespeople behavior on the sales situation and interaction with customer. However, at the organizational level adaptive selling is perceived as a match to customer needs and customization of offers (Guenzi, Pardo, Georges (2007).

Areas of adaptive selling:

- Information – matching the information provided by buyer
- The solution - to offer solutions tailored to the needs and current situation of the buyer
- Communication - an adaptation of two-way communication process
- The process - matching the sales process and the resources used in preference to a buyer (Eckert 2006)

Studies on the sales-oriented marketing revealed that salespeople perceive themselves as more oriented to the needs of their customers than in assessment of those customers (Schwepker 2003). Salespeople using a customer-oriented sales tend to build longer lasting relationships (Schwepker 2003).

We hypothesize that the view of sales managers at customer orientation is much more wider than it is covered by SOCO scale. The scale used to assess the sales orientation at the firm level leads to inconclusive or weak results (Schwepker 2003). Recognition of managers' framing is relevant as most of papers on customer/selling orientated sales refers to salespeople not sales managers.

The positive association between customer orientation, and relationship development is a dominant understanding in the literature (Beverland, 2001; Frankwick, Porter, & Crosby, 2000; Schultz & Good, 2000; Wachner, Plouffe, Grégoire, 2009; Singh & Koshy 2011). The benefits of long-term relationships to the supplier are increased customer loyalty (Dwyer, Schurr, & Oh, 1987) and satisfaction (Boles et al., 2001; Goff et al., 1997) what can lead to better salesperson performance (Swenson and Herche 1994; Dunlap et al., 1988; Boles et al. 2001; Reinartz & Kumar, 2000). However Guenzi et al. (2011) notice that “the literature on the effect of adaptive selling behaviour on performance seems to present mixed results” (see also Román & Iacobucci 2010).

Focusing on long-term outcomes of customer orientated sales is in a way risky for salespeople and their managers because it may postpone the positive selling effects of current efforts. Researchers agree that companies see the value of a customer orientation for profitable relationships

with their customers. However there is a doubt if people involved in sales see the value of a customer orientation and aligning to their needs because it may not directly impact their individual performance (Wachner, Plouffe, Grégoire, 2009). The extant research on sales orientation mainly used short-term consequences such (e.g. sales performance) but it has unnoticed the impact on long-term relationship effects. Therefore we aim to overcome that gap by identifying the salespeople perception of outcomes generated by alignment and misalignment in relationships with business customers.

Sales processes are at the core of the sales function; they uncover the needs of the customers and to produce solutions to maximize long-term satisfaction of customer and seller. It has been established that the sales function in marketing and management literature is aimed at understanding customers' and/or sellers' needs and fulfilling them with the bundle of goods and services fitting to these needs (e.g., Weitz & Bradford, 1999; Jones et al., 2005).

Customer-oriented selling and adaptive selling are among the most developed orientations when thinking in terms of sales role (Franke and Park 2006; Park and Holloway 2004; Schwepker 2003: 152). Customer-oriented sales are activities included in the marketing orientation, which aim is to help the customer's purchasing decision to satisfy his needs (Saxe, Weitz 1982; Brooksbank, 1995). Salespeople play a vital role in building mutually beneficial customer relationships through customer-oriented selling strategies because they operate as boundary spanners (Beverland 2001). 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).

Customer-oriented salespeople take actions to improve long-term customer satisfaction and simultaneously avoid behaviors that could lead to dissatisfied buyer. A customer-oriented approach is important for the development of long-term customer relationships as salespeople, adopting a customer-orientation, tend to build longer lasting relationships (Schwepker 2003: 152) and “work with their customers and their companies to develop solutions that enhance the profits of both firms” (Weitz and Bradford, 1999: 243). The adoption of a customer-oriented approach is positively correlated with salespeople efficiency and it has been viewed as necessary to sustain and achieve a good market position (Naumann and Shannon 1992). Summing up, according to customer-oriented selling sales managers play a unique role in identifying customer needs and matching the offer to them.

Similarly, adaptive selling means the matching of the supplier and its salespeople to the preferences of buyer behavior (Eckert 2006). By meeting the expectations of the buyer in area of providing information and solutions, customization of communication and the entire process to the buyer, salespeople increase the effectiveness of their actions. Adaptive selling at the individual level includes the ability to modify salespeople behavior on the sales situation and interaction with customer. However, at the organizational level adaptive selling is perceived as a match to customer needs and customization of offers (Guenzi, Pardo, Georges, 2007).

Areas of adaptive selling include information (i.e. matching the information provided by buyer), solution (i.e. solutions tailored to the needs and current situation of the buyer), communication (i.e. an adaptation of two-way communication process), and process (i.e. matching the sales process and the resources used in preference to a buyer) (Eckert 2006: 36).

Notwithstanding the stress that literature on sales pose toward customer satisfaction, complying with customer needs and generate profits and value for both parties, an in depth exploration of the sales' managers idea of this match is still missing.

A first indirect attempt in this sense has been made by Cox et al. (2004), who identify a robust and rigorous specification of the conditions under which exchange partners define business transactions and address alignment and misalignment in business relationships on three key variables (the operational way of working, the power circumstance and the commercial value appropriation). The authors come up with six ideal types of buyer and supplier relationship circumstances that fall into an aligned, misaligned/suboptimal, or misaligned with dysfunctional conflict situations. Cox et al. (2004) found that it is essential that buyer and supplier are aligned appropriately for the relationship to work effectively, while also affirming that relationships can be aligned even when there is a lack of equity and conflict between the buyer and the seller. Further, they found that a "win-lose" situation can sometimes be accepted in an exchange and preferred to the "win-win". By doing this they take into consideration both the buying perspective and the key account one but, nevertheless, they do not explore the salespeople' idea of alignment and misalignment but they just apply a set of pre-defined dimensions; furthermore, they do not provide implications from their study for the orientation of sales managers. Also, previous studies did not show from the perspective of sales management, whether alignment is an objective in relations with customers or a mean of developing relationships.

Due to gaps in the literature we decided to look for empirical response to a question about the nature of alignment and misalignment in sales. Purpose of this study is primarily to determine the substance of alignment and misalignment in business-to-business relationships. Since the idea of alignment as a multidimensional concept seems to be rather unexplored, we are interested to define if there are some specific dimensions of alignment and misalignment that are linked to sales orientation.

Determining the research approach, we assumed that the alignment or misalignment is not a general category, but it manifests itself in certain aspects of the supplier cooperation with customers. We assumed also that the alignment or misalignment is a specific approach to selling and sales management, which shapes the supplier interactions and relationships with the customers.

The issue of alignment and misalignment in business relations seems to be sensitive and difficult to capture thus it requires freedom of speech of the respondents.

#### **FINDINGS I: THE PRELIMINARY STUDY**

The second part of the interview has been instead dedicated at exploring the general idea that actors have of alignment and misalignment and their effects on their behaviors. In particular, specific issues investigated have been:

- sales' managers perception of the effects associated to alignment and misalignment in the relationship with the business customer;

- even if the sales managers expressed a preference toward alignment or misalignment we also asked if there were conditions under which the option not chosen could generate positive effects too;
- finally we asked to which extent they think alignment and misalignment are stable or changing state and what determine their change.

- **Multidimensionalità**

- Our interviews confirm the assessment taken in the first part of that paper saying that it is impossible to close the issue of alignment in one dimension. According to various objects of alignment identified in our literature review sales managers pointed out also other objects of that phenomena: having the same view of the market and the environment, the same goals, interpreting critical events in the same way, collaborating on the same level of organizational structure, to agree on the operational mode of working or thinking to the terms of transaction the same way. But in most cases they were not estimated as crucial. However some exceptions were noted.

- **Dinamicità**

- **Gap verificato e percepito**

- **Perchè conta come pensano e impatto sull orient**

- **Diff Polonia e Italia**

When then we look at the effects of alignment and misalignment as in the sales management perspective, the situation appears to be again quite heterogeneous. Some respondents see alignment as positive, while a few instead interpret it in more negative way. Also, the literature has shown that relationships pass through different states of alignment and misalignment (Corsaro and Snehota, 2010). Our study further develops this research direction and shows that the effects of alignment and misalignment as interpreted by actors can change over time and space.

Compared to previous literature, this insight confirms us not only that alignment and misalignment are evolutionary concepts (see Corsaro and

Snehota, 2010), but also that in different time moments and contexts their consequences can be interpreted in divergent ways. Again this finding reinforces our previous idea of the consequences arising from alignment and misalignment being relationship specific, context dependent and subjective. Thus we can derive that:

*Proposition 2: Misalignment with customers can be positive for sales managers. The effects of alignment/misalignment can be interpreted differently, even by the same sales manager, according to the specific time moment and space context.*

A further element arising from our texts analysis, even if we have not included it in the initial design of the study, there is the tendency of some sales managers to frame alignment as something that they can reach (if interested) purposefully, i.e. implementing their sales strategy and following their aims, while other sales managers tend to frame them including also the customer role in the process; in other words, whether some respondents appear to include a sort of jointness with the customer in how they think in terms of alignment and misalignment, others are more inward looking. Indeed, we can assert that:

*Proposition 3: The orientation of sales managers change according to the extent they see alignment/misalignment as something they can reach purposefully following their aims, rather than they see it as more dependent from the jointness with the customer.*

More in general, our study shows that exploring sales' managers ideas of alignment and misalignment, whatever desired or effective, influence their customer orientation; in different of the cases analyzed, in fact, it seems to emerge a certain connection, even if preliminary, between how they interpret alignment and misalignment and how they act into the relationships, or were intentioned to act. That is relevant because it means that how actors think in terms of alignment/misalignment can contribute at addressing sales behaviors and thus how the supplier will arrange its resources and combine with the customers' ones.

For instance this can be observed in the relationship between a service company operating in energy industry and its customers who "... *appreciated the fact that during the flood we tried to adapted the business to the situation: we provided customers with consulting, extended the due date and helped in solving problems. We even changed our business profile in part to help our customers. However, after the resolution of the flood it was really difficult to come back to the level of cooperation with customers that we had before the crisis, because their situation and expectations have changed, also under the impact of our activities.* "

Our next proposition sums up this consideration:

*Proposition 4: Ideas of alignment and misalignment affect the orientation of sales managers, thus influencing how they organize their resources with respect to the counterpart's resources.*

