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How buyer–seller relationship orientation affects adaptation of sales processes to the buying process

Paul Viio *, Christian Grönroos

Hanken School of Economics, Department of Marketing, CERS — Centre for Relationship Marketing and Service Management, PO Box 479, FIN-00101 Helsinki, Finland

A R T I C L E I N F O

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A B S T R A C T

Adaptation in sales is common in business relationships. The purpose of this study is to understand how the buyer–seller relationship affects sellers' sales process adaptation to customers' buying processes. The results reveal how the buyer–seller relationship orientation affects sales process adaptation and its effects. The main sources of information in this qualitative inquiry are in-depth, semi-structured interviews with key informants representing a buyer–seller relationship. This study helps to shed light on how the buyer–seller relationship orientation affects sales process adaptation. The findings reveal that both the buyer and the seller have an impact on sales process adaptation. Extant research has recognized adaptation as a central aspect in relationships, while largely neglecting sales process adaptation. Thus, this study focuses on the effects of buyer–seller relationship orientation on sales process adaptation.

1. Introduction

Initiating a business relationship may involve the seller having to adapt their sales process to the buyer's buying process. Some customers require more attention than others, necessitating sellers, particularly small companies working with large ones, to make adaptations. Although early sales research presented sales as a process (Cash & Crissy, 1964), it did not further develop the relationship between the buyer and the seller. Instead, it treated the seller's role as active and the buyer's as passive. In contrast, Spiro, Perreault, and Reynolds (1977), who focus on adaptation of the selling process at the individual level, argue that both the salesperson and the buyer influence the selling process. In contemporary business-to-business (B2B) selling, sales activities associated with distinct stages of the sales process occur separately from and others in cooperation with the buyer (Töytäri, Brashear-Alejandro, Parvinen, Ollila & Rosendahl, 2011).

Although the focus of the selling process in sales and sales management has traditionally been on transactional selling, along with the paradigmatic shift in marketing from transaction orientation to relationship orientation (e.g., Berry, 1983; Grönroos, 1979, 2006, 2008; Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2008), the paradigm in sales has shifted to a stronger focus on relationship selling (Long, Tellefsen & Lichtenthal, 2007; Viio, 2011) and value-based selling (Anderson, Kumar & Narus, 2008). However, whereas relationship orientation in marketing in general refers to developing long-term buyer–seller relationships, in practice it is not uncommon for salespersons to focus on relationships and adapt to the buyer in a way, which resembles short-term sales tactics, rather than taking a long-term perspective. This might partly explain why the sales process today is still mostly portrayed from the selling firm's point of view, focusing little on buyers and their purchasing process.

In marketing, adaptation is recognized as an important part of relationship orientation (Brennan, Turnbull & Wilson, 2003; Gadde & Håkansson, 1993; Hallén, Johansson & Seyed-Mohammed, 1991; Holma, 2009). In some cases, it is the buyer that invites the seller into business engagement (Agndal, 2006; Ellis, 2000; Liang & Parkhe, 1997; Overby & Servais, 2005). Nevertheless, when initiating a relationship, it is the seller that mostly adapts to the buyer (Edvardsson, Holmlund & Strandvik, 2008). However, despite the value engendered by relationship-oriented sales (Anderson et al., 2008; Guenzi, Georges & Pardo, 2009), sellers face the challenge of how to implement a relationship orientation. When adopting a relational approach, selling firms adapt their processes and operations to match those of their customers. To facilitate and improve relationship initiation with the buyer, sellers must understand both the sales and buying processes and have a structured approach to adaptation (Rackham & DeVincentis, 1999).

Despite the importance of the sales process in guiding sellers (e.g., Dubinsky, 1981; Moncrief & Marshall, 2005) in their relationship initiation with buyers (e.g., Robinson, Faris & Wind, 1967; Webster & Wind, 1972), scant research has examined sales process adaptation, especially how relationship orientation of both sellers and buyers affects sales process adaptation. In contrast, research has focused on adaptation aspects, such as its types (Schmidt, Tyler & Brennan, 2007) and effects over time (Schindehutte & Morris, 2001) and the use of influence tactics with different types of buyers (McFarland, Challagalla & Shervani, 2006). However, sales literature has recognized the need for

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: paul.viio@hanken.fi (P. Viio), christian.gronroos@hanken.fi (C. Grönroos).

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relationship orientation of the sales process (e.g., Moncrief & Marshall, 2005; Rackham & DeVincentis, 1999; Sheth & Sharma, 2008).

With the rapidly growing interest in value-based relationship-oriented sales and purchasing (e.g., Anderson & Wynstra, 2010; Blocker, Cannon, Panagopoulos & Sager, 2012; Haas, Snehota & Corsaro, 2012; Hohenschwert, 2012; Terho, Haas, Eggert & Ulaga, 2012; Töytäri et al., 2011), the notion of relationship-oriented adaptation in selling and the aspects affecting it are of relevance to both sales and purchasing researchers. We conducted this study as part of a broader study focusing on the area of value-based sales process adaptation (see Viio & Grönroos, 2014). In contrast with this broader study, which primarily focuses on whether different modes of adaptation are contingent on the type of product purchased, the current study extends current models to focus more in-depth on the connection between sales process adaptation and buyer–seller relationship orientation.

That is, this study aims to understand how relationship orientation affects sellers' sales process adaptation. More specifically, we examine how the type of buyer–seller relationship in a B2B context affects the seller's sales process adaptation to the buyer's buying process. The study is based on findings from a literature review and empirical data of both the seller and the buyer. Our chosen perspective is that of the seller in the sales process. The resulting framework is based on an in-depth review and analysis of theory and empirical findings to provide relevant implications for both sellers and buyers. The main contribution of this study is that strategic adaptation requires mutual efforts from the buyer and the seller. The study implies that the perspective on adaptation should be changed from focusing solely on the seller to considering the buyer–seller relationship, potentially resulting in improved allocation of sales resources.

In this study, we refer to "relationship orientation" as a process of engaging in or maintaining a mutually profitable and rewarding business relationship with a buyer through adaptation of key business processes, in particular the sales process (Viio, 2011). As such, relationship orientation constitutes a *mindset* toward the relationship. With "adaptation," sellers form the strategy and means that will optimally result in a satisfying business engagement between the parties (Viio & Grönroos, 2014). In addition, extant sales research and related literature have often used the terms "sales process" and "selling process" interchangeably (e.g., Cron & DeCarlo, 2006; Dubinsky, 1981; Jaramillo & Marshall, 2004; Moncrief & Marshall, 2005; Rackham & DeVincentis, 1999; Sheth & Sharma, 2008; Spiro & Perreault, 1979; Storbacka et al., 2009). In contrast, when referring to the seller's activities and actions when selling, we distinguish between the sales and selling processes. That is, we adopt a strategic and broader view of the sales process by including a sales force and managerial-level focus (see Cron & DeCarlo, 2006), whereas the selling process primarily refers to the process of conducting sales work at a salesperson level (Dubinsky, 1981; Moncrief & Marshall, 2005). Thus, the sales process comprises the selling process (Viio, 2011; Viio & Grönroos, 2014).

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. First, we discuss the existing literature on transactional versus relationship orientation, adaptation in sales and purchasing, as well as the buying process as a prerequisite for adapting the sales process. Next, the methodology and findings of the empirical case study are described. After this, the framework for relationship-oriented sales process adaptation is developed. Last, the paper discusses the conceptual contributions, limitations, and managerial implications of the study, and concludes with suggestions for further research.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Transactional versus relational orientation in marketing, purchasing, and sales

Business relationships in general are based on a process of matching (Grönroos & Helle, 2010, 2012) or aligning (Corsaro & Snehota, 2011) the operations between two companies. Thus, adaptation not only is of central meaning in buyer–seller relationships (Gadde & Håkansson, 1993) but also constitutes an important aspect of relationships between firms (Brennan et al., 2003; Hallén et al., 1991). Relationship orientation conveys a willingness and desire to engage in more than mere transactions or exchanges with the involved party. As Brennan et al. (2003) note, adopting a relationship focus means that at least one of the partners adapts to the other.

Although many purchasers have moved from transaction-oriented purchasing to relationship-oriented purchasing, some prefer focusing primarily on price and adopt the former approach (Axelsson & Wynstra, 2002) or adopt a mix of the different purchasing orientations (Lindgreen, Vanhamme, van Raaij & Johnston, 2013). Cousins and Spekman (2003) explain that pricing is an easily quantifiable and effective metric for measuring purchasing performance. A common objection to stable relationships has been that suppliers may become complacent and no longer commit themselves to doing their best (Axelsson & Wynstra, 2002). In addition, some buyers may lack the patience to invest in possible long-term gains and instead choose more certain short-term gains (Cousins & Spekman, 2003).

Some research has portrayed transactional and relational orientations as opposites of each other (e.g., Axelsson & Wynstra, 2002). Conversely, other research indicates that these approaches can co-exist and even be combined (e.g., Cox, 1996; Kraljic, 1983; Lindgreen et al., 2013; Van Weele, 2005). Buyers can develop different types of relationships with various suppliers; in some relationships, they may seek close cooperation, whereas in others, they may prefer to keep the supplier at an arm's length (Lindgreen et al., 2013). Different situations require different approaches: a company may be highly involved with only a limited number of suppliers and have a mix of relationships that provide different benefits (Cousins & Spekman, 2003; Gadde & Snehota, 2000). When both parties work toward a common goal, a long-term relationship-oriented approach seems logical. By contrast, if neither party is committed to a common goal, a short-term transaction-oriented approach is justified.

Not all selling and purchasing situations require or are even appropriate for long-term buyer–seller relationships, confirming the importance of context (e.g., Dwyer, Schurr & Oh, 1987; Kraljic, 1983; Lindgreen et al., 2013). The key to successful sales management is to find a strategic balance between a transactional and relational approach (e.g., Cron & DeCarlo, 2006). In the early days of value-based selling, Rackham and DeVincentis (1999) pointed out that for sellers to employ the most appropriate sales approach in each situation, they must consider their own strategies and both their and their buyers' respective approaches for customer prioritization.

2.2. Adaptation in relationship management, sales, and purchasing

Relationship management research has examined adaptation from seller, buyer, and buyer–seller perspectives (e.g., Brennan & Turnbull, 1999; Canning & Brennan, 2004; Ford, 1980; Håkansson, 1982), finding that investments required by adaptation are mostly non-transferrable to other relationships. Moreover, most adaptations have been found to be ad hoc and more often conducted by the seller than the buyer (Brennan & Turnbull, 1999; Brennan et al., 2003; Schmidt et al., 2007). Sometimes both parties adapt without the other party realizing it (see Brennan & Turnbull, 1999). However, more comprehensive adaptations often require that the parties share information (Canning & Brennan, 2004); yet research on adaptation has not clearly stated that adaptation requires *participation* from both parties. As noted by Brennan et al. (2003), however, for adaptation to succeed, at least some level of participation is required from both parties.

As Román and Iacobucci (2010) indicate, there is no best way to sell; rather, salespeople must adapt to the situation and the customer. According to Weitz, Sujan, and Sujan's (1986) seminal "adaptive selling" framework, salespeople must gather information and then tailor their sales presentation to fit each customer. Anglin, Stoltman, and Gentry