



Relational selling: Past, present and future[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Relational selling is at a crossroads: Some trends undermine salespeople's ability to build strong relationships (e-commerce, buying norms), but others emphasize the importance of such links (services, solutions). To anticipate the future of relational selling, this comprehensive review of research and practice seeks to clarify the impact of the changing conditions. Specifically, this study assesses relational selling from three perspectives. Perspective 1 is a temporal lens that reflects the evolution of relational selling, to delineate how it has changed over time. Perspective 2, a theoretical lens, then encompasses the key theories that provide a theoretical underpinning of relational selling and that can be refocused on emerging conditions to understand its future effectiveness. Finally, with an empirical lens in Perspective 3, this study identifies which relationship strategies are most effective and in what conditions. By combining these perspectives, this article derives six key tenets to guide managerial practice and research in relational selling.

1. Introduction

Relationship selling is at the forefront of marketing practice and research (Palmatier, Houston, Dant, & Grewal, 2013), especially as new challenges—such as the rapid development of new technologies, growing expectations from buyers, and more administrative activities—hinder opportunities for relationship building (Dixon, Frewer, & Kent, 2011). As e-commerce has expanded, both business-to-business (B2B) and consumer transactions increasingly take place on digital platforms; by 2020, an estimated 85% of customer transactions will not require any salesperson involvement, implying a 33% potential reduction in the sales force (Baumgartner, Hatami, & Valdivieso, 2016). Yet B2B customers also confront increasingly complex service and solution offerings, which make trust and personal relationships critical (Nink, 2013; Viio & Grönroos, 2014) and assign more strategic relationship management responsibilities to sales forces (Paesbrughe, Rangarajan, Sharma, Syam, & Jha, 2017; Sheth, Sharma, & Iyer, 2009). In this sense, relational selling is at a crossroads, such that some trends undermine strong, face-to-face relationships, but other trends demand such interactions.

In response, this study seeks to provide insights into the future of relational selling by undertaking a comprehensive review of research and practice that can reveal the impact of changing conditions, on the

basis of three critical perspectives. By describing the *evolution of relational selling* from the 1970s to the present, Perspective 1 provides an important historical lens that reveals how relational selling has changed over time and thereby predicts how emerging changes may affect its future. In addition, this approach presents a multidimensional view of relational selling and provides insights to guide future research and practice. We also analyze *key theories* in Perspective 2, using these fundamental building blocks to assess current conditions and anticipate the future effectiveness of relational selling. Perspective 3 reveals key *empirical insights* from relational selling literature that indicate the most effective relational selling strategies, mediators, and moderators. With this approach, this study contributes to extant literature in four main ways. First, with Perspective 1, we identify four key approaches over the evolution of relational selling:

- (1) *Individual selling*. The early roots of relational selling featured a traditional, one-to-one sales process, with a strong emphasis on the salesperson's efforts (Borg & Young, 2014). Subsequently, it expanded to include both the salesperson's and the buyer's perspectives.
- (2) *Buying center*. Buyer–seller exchanges soon emerged not as discrete events but as ongoing relationships. As a result of global competition, buyers and sellers increasingly engage in collaborative efforts

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to reduce costs while maintaining quality.

- (3) *Adaptive selling*. This model of personal selling focuses on identifying customer's needs and wants.
- (4) *Customer orientation and solution selling*. In line with the shift to a service economy and increased focus on customers, the role of the salesperson has evolved from partner to value creator.

Understanding how such trends have altered relational selling suggests likely changes in the future. That is, we anticipate that B2B selling approaches will entail team efforts to maximize competitive advantages and develop, test, and apply new sales concepts and models. A frequency analysis of extant literature shows that team-based selling and solution selling approaches are likely to remain critical.

Second, we identify six *key theories* in Perspective 2 that underpin relational selling. The evolution of these theoretical mechanisms parallels the contextual trends; for example, the theoretical focus of relational selling research has moved from individual characteristics (e.g., seller, buyer) to dyadic and then to network perspectives, together with a shift from theories that suggest mutual dependence based on power and resources, to those that identify dependence based on trust and long-term commitment.

Third, Perspective 3 summarizes various *empirical insights* from prior relational selling literature. In settings marked by complex customers, changing environments, and technological advances, the seller's behavioral adaptations and team selling offer sufficient flexibility to cope with customers' demands. Cultural, social, and technological changes in business environments also imply the continued need for mutual trust and long-term commitment. Some relational selling strategies differ depending on the relational phase; efforts adopted at the wrong time can hinder the organization's bottom line. With this review, we seek to specify not only what has been investigated already but also the direction in which research is likely to move.

Fourth, by combining the temporal, theoretical, and empirical insights from these three perspectives, we identify six key tenets for effective relational selling:

- (1) Increase the strategic role of inside sales organizations,
- (2) Gain customer insights related to e-commerce, privacy, and the legal environment,
- (3) Integrate relationship building across omnichannel interfaces,
- (4) Understanding the influence of technological applications across relational contexts,
- (5) Use big data for more effective relational selling, and
- (6) Leverage artificial intelligence for relational selling.

2. Perspective 1: evolution of relational selling approaches

To explore the evolution of relational selling approaches over five decades, we combine a literature review and keyword frequency analysis within a historical lens. As noted in [Section 1](#), we identify four major approaches: *individual selling*, *buying center*, *adaptive selling*, and *customer orientation and solution selling*. The evolution across these approaches, along with key theories, selling modes, trends, disruptions, and insights, are summarized in [Table 1](#).

2.1. Individual selling approach

Relationship-oriented selling practices began in the pre-industrial era ([Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1995](#)). In the early part of the last century, sales resulted from product availability or proximity to natural resources (e.g., water). During the production era (1870–1930), salespeople paid little attention to buyers' needs and acted mainly as product suppliers ([Powers, Koehler, & Martin, 1988](#)), with the assumption that customers would buy whatever was produced ([Bonoma, Bagozzi, & Zaltman, 1978](#)). This traditional sales process relied on salespeople's efforts or aspects of their personality to find prospective

Table 1
Evolution of relational selling approach.

Theories	Individual selling approach (early roots of relational selling)				Customer orientation and solution selling approach		
	Pre-1970s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	2010s	
Sales mode	Exchange theory	Power and dependence theory	Social exchange theory	Commitment-trust relationship	Commitment-trust relationship; resource-based view	Commitment-trust relationship; resource-based view; network theories	
Key trends and disruptions	One-to-one	Dyadic	One-to-one; dyadic; organizational	Organization-to-organization selling	Team-based approach to selling	Team-based, value-based selling approach and solution-based selling	
Key insights	Individual-oriented	Customer centric; buyer-seller relationship	Integrated marketing communication; Internet	Online retailer; customer retention/loyalty	E-commerce; mobile transaction; social media	Mobile shopping; social media; omnichannel; virtual reality	
Illustrative papers	Individual selling approach focused on the salesperson	Adaptive individual selling; focus on buyers and sellers	Mass customization; individual selling approach; inclusion of buying center	Team-based selling/sales team approach; focus on long-term orientation and retention	Team-based selling approach; focus on long-term relationships supported by technologies	Team-based selling approach to create value through in-depth understanding of the customer's business model	
	Evans (1963)	Bonoma et al. (1978), Reeves and Barksdale (1984)	Anderson and Narus (1990), Hutt et al. (1985), Dwyer et al. (1987), Sheth and Parvatiyar (1995)	DeCormier and Jobber (1993), Schurr (1987), Metcalfe, Frear, and Krishnan (1992), Wotruba (1991)	Moncrief and Marshall (2005), Möller and Halinen (2000)	Borg and Freytag (2012), Haas et al. (2012)	

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