



Cooperation in B2B relationships: Factors that influence customers' perceptions of salesperson cooperation

Bruno Lussier^{a,*}, Zachary R. Hall^{b,1}

^a HEC Montréal, 3000, chemin de la Côte-Sainte-Catherine, Montréal, Québec H3T 2A7, Canada

^b Neeley School of Business, Texas Christian University, 2900 Lubbock Avenue, Fort Worth, TX 76109, USA

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ABSTRACT

A wealth of research indicates that cooperation is vital to the outcomes of relationships, particularly in B2B selling. Drawing from social exchange theory and research on social perception, we explore cooperation in B2B relationships from a dyadic perspective. Analyzing the responses of both salespeople and their customers, we demonstrate that customers do not always perceive salespeople's cooperation (e.g., efforts, behaviors); rather, salesperson and relationship characteristics can also influence perceived cooperation. Specifically, perceived cooperation is increased (e.g., higher regardless of actual cooperation) when a salesperson possesses a customer orientation or in a long-term salesperson-customer relationship. Conversely, perceived cooperation is decreased (e.g., lower regardless of actual cooperation) when a salesperson possesses high levels of self-efficacy. Furthermore, perceived cooperation's positive influence on relationship outcomes is enhanced when customers also perceive the salesperson as an expert.

1. Introduction

In business-to-business (B2B) selling, salespeople are entrusted with acquiring and managing one of the organization's most important assets, customers, with the purpose of building and maintaining long-term, profitable relationships (Palmatier, Scheer, & Steenkamp, 2007). To accomplish this, organizations have invested significant amount of time and resources as > 3.6 million salespeople in the U.S. are involved in B2B selling (Zoltners, Sinha, & Lorimer, 2008) which accounts for approximately \$22.7 trillion in 2016 (Skousen, 2016), more than the U.S. gross domestic product (~\$18.2 trillion).

Consequently, researchers have also been increasingly attentive to the B2B selling context, mainly to understand the underlying mechanisms and processes to build and maintain business relationships (Palmatier, Dant, & Grewal, 2007). An important factor in the B2B selling research stream is *cooperation*—[defined as the coordinated and complementary actions between the partners in an exchange to achieve mutual goals (Palmatier, Dant, Grewal, & Evans, 2006, p. 139)—given its central role in building strong business relationships (Anderson & Narus, 1990; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Yen & Barnes, 2011). Considering its importance to the practice and the literature, our research investigates B2B relationships from the perspective of cooperation between salespeople and their customers in order to better

understanding the process through which salesperson cooperation influences business relationships.

Research on salesperson-customer cooperation indicates that cooperation is a critical, if not the most important, factor for success in relationships (Palmatier et al., 2006). This is significant because cooperation can complement each firm's weaknesses and enhance its strengths (Jap, 1999), thereby providing both firms with increased efficiency and performance (Kim, Kim, Pae, & Yip, 2013). In fact, cooperation leads to mutual outcomes (with expected reciprocation over time) that exceed what one would achieve if each firm acted solely on its own (Anderson & Narus, 1990). This is at least partially because a cooperative salesperson—with his or her collaborative-focused approach—can use complementary actions with his or her customers to achieve mutual outcomes, with expected reciprocation over time.

In spite of the importance and promise of cooperation in B2B relationships, empirical research in this area has lacked consistency. Specifically, findings of results from salesperson-customer cooperation on positive relationship outcomes have varied greatly, with effect sizes ranging from 0.24 to 0.73. The lack of consistency in findings creates a problem for managers to assess the true importance of how cooperation impacts relationship outcomes. A possible cause for this lack of consistency is that cooperation has been investigated from one side of the relationship or the other, from customers or salespeople, but not from

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: bruno.lussier@hec.ca (B. Lussier), z.hall@tcu.edu (Z.R. Hall).

¹ All authors contributed equally to the article.

both (with one exception, [Anderson & Narus, 1990](#)). Even though cooperation involves both parties, a dyadic perspective has also been mostly overlooked in the literature. A dyadic approach will provide insight on why and when cooperation reported by a salesperson or perceived by the customer translates to positive outcomes. In our research, we aim to address the inconsistent findings in prior literature by disentangling views of cooperation from both the salesperson and customer. In doing so, we explore why and when cooperation in B2B selling impacts relationship outcomes.

To investigate cooperation in B2B relationships, we take a dyadic view of cooperation, particularly looking at how customers perceive salespeople's cooperation, which we term *perceived cooperation*. We developed an integrative framework that examines both the antecedents of the extent to which perceived cooperation and the consequences of perceived or actual salesperson cooperation. For antecedents, we draw from perceptual accuracy research in psychology ([Ickes, 1983](#)) and marketing ([Mullins, Ahearne, Lam, Hall, & Boichuk, 2014](#)) to uncover salesperson and relationship characteristics that can influence perceived cooperation. For consequences, we draw from social exchange theory (SET) ([Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005](#)), particularly reciprocity, to understand how a customer's perception of salesperson cooperation translates into relationship outcomes.

Operationally, our framework highlights the process (i.e., mediation and moderation) through which salesperson cooperation may impact business relationships by influencing customers' perceptions. In doing so, we aim to uncover salesperson and relationship characteristics that influence perceived cooperation. Then, we are able to provide guidance to the literature and practice on whether salesperson cooperation and/or perceived cooperation impacts relationship outcomes. We conduct our study with survey data collected from 175 B2B salesperson-customer dyads, with responses from salespeople about their cooperation efforts with a particular customer and responses from customers about their perceptions of the level of salesperson cooperation. This research makes three unique contributions to the literature.

First, it demonstrates that salesperson cooperation does not always translate into positive relationship outcomes. We find that salesperson cooperation leads to positive relationship outcomes only when the customer perceives it. In addition to being an important theoretical contribution, this offers important implications to sales managers and organizations as perceptions are more important (e.g. diagnostic) than the truth of actions ([Alavi, Wieseke, & Guba, 2016](#); [Mullins et al., 2014](#)). This is highlighted in our data—the correlation of perceptions with actual salesperson cooperation was only 0.61. Stated differently, only 37% of the variance in perceived cooperation is explained by the salesperson's actual cooperation. Furthermore, when perceived cooperation is included with salesperson cooperation, salesperson cooperation no longer influences relationship outcomes. This result strongly suggests that perceptions (e.g., perceived cooperation) are fundamental in examining business relationships. Second, individual characteristics of salespeople and the stage of the salesperson-customer relationship can also influence perceived cooperation. Perceived cooperation is increased (e.g., higher, regardless of actual cooperation) when a salesperson possesses high levels of customer orientation or in long-term salesperson-customer relationships. In contrast, perceived cooperation is reduced (e.g., lower, regardless of actual cooperation) when salespeople possess high levels of self-efficacy. This is important because we offer new insight into different drivers of business relationships that can be applied by both organizations and academia to increase sales force effectiveness and to develop more comprehensive research models ([Kumar, Venkatesan, & Reinartz, 2008](#)). Third, even when customers perceive salesperson cooperation, they do not always reciprocate with positive relationship outcomes. We find that customers reciprocate to perceived cooperation when they view the salesperson as an expert. Using SET as a backdrop, we provide evidence that when a salesperson explicitly invests in cooperating with a customer, the customer will not necessarily respond in kind unless the salesperson is

perceived as competent. Hence, we offer insight to sales organizations in (maintaining) investing in value-based selling to increase customer-perceived product-related and relationship value ([Terho, Haas, Eggert, & Ulaga, 2012](#)). These key findings shed light on the large variance in prior empirical research on the effect of salesperson cooperation on positive relationship outcomes.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Salesperson cooperation

For simplicity, we use the general term cooperation also to encompass cooperation efforts, behaviors, investments, etc. Cooperation is central in the relationship marketing literature ([Anderson & Narus, 1990](#); [Morgan & Hunt, 1994](#)). Research in this domain has consistently shown that cooperation results in business success, including customer relationship quality, trust, satisfaction, and commitment ([Palmatier et al., 2006](#); [Payan, Hair, Svensson, Andersson, & Awuah, 2016](#); [Yen & Barnes, 2011](#)). In fact, [Palmatier et al.'s \(2006\)](#) meta-analysis indicates that cooperation may be the most critical success factor for relationship marketing efforts in salesperson-customer encounters.

On the basis of this premise, we explore salesperson cooperation in the context of B2B selling to examine why and when customers respond to salesperson cooperation (see [Figure 1](#)). In the next two sub-sections, we draw from SET to theorize the relationship outcomes of a salesperson's cooperation ([H1 and H5](#)). Then, we conclude our theoretical background by introducing perceptual accuracy research from social psychology to explain why customers may or may not perceive salesperson cooperation ([H1](#)) and other factors that influence perceived cooperation ([H2–H4](#)).

2.2. SET

Social exchange theory (SET)—which explains cases in which two actors are involved and one of which has something that the other party values ([Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005](#); [Homans, 1958](#))—suggests that the salesperson-customer interaction is a process whereby resources are mutually exchanged through the various activities of the involved parties ([Anderson & Narus, 1990](#); [Dwyer, Schurr, & Oh, 1987](#)). Thus, SET may be useful for examining how customers respond to salesperson cooperation in repeated encounters, such as B2B sales. Prior relationship marketing research has used SET to provide insights into the development and maintenance of relationships over time in salesperson-customer exchanges ([Anderson & Narus, 1990](#); [Dwyer et al., 1987](#); [Morgan & Hunt, 1994](#)).

A fundamental premise of SET is reciprocity, which dictates that when “a person supplies a benefit, the receiving party should respond in kind” ([Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005](#), p. 876). In other words, reciprocity refers to the rule of returning favors ([Yen & Barnes, 2011](#)). As one party often receives its portion of the value earlier (e.g., salesperson making a sale), the other party (e.g., the customer) is indebted and thus will desire to return the value. Thus, when interacting with a cooperative salesperson who provides coordinated and complementary efforts to his or her customers to achieve a mutual goal, a customer is likely to reciprocate in the product or service offered by the salesperson ([Yen & Barnes, 2011](#)), mainly because the customer perceives he or she received product-related and relationship value ([Terho et al., 2012](#)). We contend that when a salesperson explicitly invests in cooperating with a customer, the customer will respond in kind, leading to positive relationship outcomes.

2.3. Perceived salesperson cooperation

Although research clearly shows that salesperson cooperation leads to positive relationship outcomes ([Morgan & Hunt, 1994](#); [Palmatier et al., 2006](#); [Payan et al., 2016](#)), the effect of salesperson cooperation on

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