



## Target and position article

## Influence tactics, relational conditions, and key account managers' performance

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## ABSTRACT

Building on the adaptive application of influence tactics, this study explores the contingent nature of influence tactics in buyer-seller exchanges. Specifically, we examine the differential effectiveness of various influence tactics (i.e., promises, threats, recommendations, information exchange, ingratiation, and inspirational appeals) used by key account managers in driving sales performance under social (i.e., trust) and economic (i.e., switching costs) relational condition. We test the hypotheses with data collected from 250 matched dyads consisting of key account managers from transnational corporations and purchasing managers from the buyer firms in China. The results indicate that when the buyer trusts the seller, emotional tactics are the best; when the buyer has high switching costs, coercive tactics are the most effective; and when the buyer trusts the seller and has high switching costs, rational tactics are recommended. This study contributes to the literature on influence tactics by focusing on the fit between interpersonal influence tactics and interfirm relational condition.

## 1. Introduction

Influence tactics refer to the compliance-gaining strategies through which the seller influences and persuades the buyer in a buyer-seller interaction (Chang & Huang, 2012; McFarland, Challagalla, & Shervani, 2006). The use of influence tactics lies at the heart of buyer-seller relationships management (e.g., Frazier & Summers, 1984; Payan & McFarland, 2005) and personal selling (e.g., Evans, McFarland, Dietz, & Jaramillo, 2012; McFarland et al., 2006; Plouffe, Bolander, & Cote, 2014). Accordingly, examining the effectiveness of influence tactics has been a core research stream in both the marketing channel and the personal selling literatures (Evans et al., 2012; Hausman & Johnston, 2010; Plouffe et al., 2014; Weitz, 1981).

Despite the diverse and fruitful studies in the literature, research on influence tactics has three research gaps (see Table 1). First, influence tactics have been examined at both the interpersonal level (in personal selling literature) and the interfirm level (in marketing channel literature), as indicated in Table 1, yet none have attempted to integrate person-to-person influence tactics and firm-to-firm exchange relationships (Research Gap 1). Second, extant research on influence tactics has mainly focused on direct effects of influence tactics (e.g., Hausman & Johnston, 2010; Hohenschwert & Geiger, 2015). Although the common underlying tenet is that influence tactics need to be adapted to sales situations for maximal effectiveness (McFarland et al., 2006; Weitz,

1981), only a handful of studies have examined the contingency of influence tactics that is related to characteristics of salespersons and buyers (e.g., Chang & Huang, 2012; Evans et al., 2012; McFarland et al., 2006). Despite the fact that salespersons are subject to firm-to-firm relationships when they apply influence tactics in sales interactions, prior studies have not recognized firm-to-firm relational conditions as potential moderators (Research Gap 2). Third, although key account management has emerged as one of the most significant changes in selling (Ryals, 2012; Tzempelikos & Gounaris, 2015) and the key account manager (the KAM) plays a critical boundary-spanning role in managing buyer relationships and serving as the cornerstone for the success of sales strategies (Guenzi, Pardo, & Georges, 2007; Ivens & Pardo, 2007), there has been little research on the use of influence tactics (Research Gap 3) in key account management practices (Guesalaga & Johnston, 2010).

To address the above research gaps, this study scrutinizes the contingent nature of influence tactics that are adopted by the KAM in adapting to buyer-seller relational conditions, that is, the “fit” between person-to-person influence tactics and firm-to-firm relational conditions. We focus on the KAM because, as a key boundary spanner in buyer-seller exchanges, the KAM is responsible not just for selling products but also for managing customer relationships (Guenzi et al., 2007; Ryals, 2012). Thus, key account management affords an integration to study how the effectiveness of interpersonal influence

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**Table 1**

An overview of influence tactics in marketing channel, personal selling, and KAM research (Atuahene-Gima & Li, 2000; Brown, Lusch, & Muehling, 1983; El-Ansary & Stern, 1972; Frazier & Rody, 1991; Harris & Spiro, 1981; Hunt & Nevin, 1974; Joshi, 2010; Kale, 1986; Lusch, 1976; Spiro & Perreault Jr, 1979; Sun, Tai, & Tsai, 2009; Tellefsen & Eyuboglu, 2002).

Firm-to-Firm Level			Firm-to-Firm & Person-to-Person Level KAM	Person-to-Person Level		
Marketing Channel				Personal Selling		
Conceptualization	Outcomes	Moderators		Conceptualization	Outcomes	Moderators
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Power dimensions as influence (e.g., El-Ansary &amp; Stern, 1972; Hunt &amp; Nevin, 1974)</li><li>• Coercive and non-coercive influence tactics (e.g., Frazier &amp; Summers, 1984, 1986)</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Intra-channel conflict (e.g., Brown, Lusch, &amp; Muehling, 1983; Frazier &amp; Rody, 1991; Lusch, 1976)</li><li>• Channel member perceptions of influence (e.g., Kale, 1986)</li><li>• Joint action – cooperation and compliance (e.g., Hausman &amp; Johnston, 2010; Payan &amp; McFarland, 2005)</li><li>• Supplier delivery flexibility (e.g., Chang &amp; Huang, 2012)</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Social governance – trust and shared vision (e.g., Chang &amp; Huang, 2012)</li></ul>	<p><u>Research Gap 3</u> <u>Extension to KAMs</u></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Five-dimensional influence strategies (e.g., Spiro &amp; Perreault Jr., 1979)</li><li>• Intra-firm influence (e.g., Atuahene-Gima &amp; Li, 2000; Joshi, 2010)</li><li>• Refined seller influence tactics – threats, promises, recommendations, information exchange, ingratiation, inspirational appeal (e.g., McFarland, Challagalla, &amp; Shervani, 2006)</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Sales training (e.g., Harris &amp; Spiro, 1981)</li><li>• Sales performance (e.g., Plouffe, Bolander, &amp; Cote, 2014)</li><li>• Customer commitment (e.g., Tellefsen &amp; Eyuboglu, 2002)</li><li>• Customer susceptibility to IT (e.g., Sun, Tai, &amp; Tsai, 2009)</li><li>• Customer satisfaction (e.g., Román &amp; Iacobucci, 2010)</li><li>• Customer value perception (e.g., Hohenschwert &amp; Geiger, 2015)</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Salesperson-related characteristics (e.g., Joshi, 2010; Tellefsen &amp; Eyuboglu, 2002)</li><li>• Customer communication style (e.g., McFarland, Challagalla, &amp; Shervani, 2006)</li></ul>
			<p><u>Research Gap 1</u> <u>Integration of person-to-person influence tactics and firm-to-firm exchange relationships</u></p>	<p><u>Research Gap 2</u> <u>Social and economic exchange relational conditions as moderators</u></p>		

tactics may be affected by interfirm relationships. Specifically, we seek to answer: what influence tactics should the KAM use in order to achieve sales performance in different relational conditions? In answering this research question, our study makes three contributions: (1) we bridge influence tactics research on personal selling and marketing channels through the integration of person-to-person (i.e., the KAM's influence tactics) and firm-to-firm (i.e., buyer-seller relationships) perspectives; (2) we contribute to the personal selling literature by adding social and economic exchange relationships as necessary contingencies and by illuminating the importance of fitting influence tactics to relational conditions; and (3) we contribute to research on key account management by exploring the influence tactics used by the KAM. To the best of our knowledge, this study is the first to examine influence tactics used by the KAM. Thus, this study not only extends the theoretical perspective on the adaptive application of influence tactics, but also provides recommendations on the selection of influence tactics in key account management practices from a managerial standpoint.

## 2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

The notion of adaptive selling has been acknowledged in literature and researchers suggest that salespersons must choose influence tactics to “suit” the buyer (see McFarland et al., 2006; Román & Iacobucci, 2010; Weitz, 1981). As aforementioned, because key account management goes beyond merely selling, the KAM must take into consideration the specific firm-to-firm relationship in order to choose proper influence tactics. Therefore, we focus on the contingent nature of adaptive selling and maintain that the KAM must “fit” influence tactics to “suit” buyer-seller exchange relationships. Our proposed model (see Fig. 1) thus delineates how various influence tactics used by the KAM are moderated by different exchange relational conditions in driving sales performance.

In this study, we adopt the concept of influence tactics advanced by

McFarland et al. (2006). McFarland et al. (2006) refined the concept of influence tactics (see Plouffe, Bolander, Cote, & Hochstein, 2016 for a review of influence tactics) from previous studies and established a typology of six tactics in buyer-seller exchanges: promises, threats, recommendations, information exchange, ingratiation, and inspirational appeals. Evans et al. (2012) subsequently grouped these six influence tactics into three categories: (1) threats and promises are considered “coercive” because they focus on offering negative or positive influencer-controlled consequences to solicit a target's compliance (Venkatesh, Kohli, & Zaltman, 1995); (2) information exchange and recommendations are more “rational” or “persuasive” because they are designed to change a target's perceptions regarding the inherent desirability of the influencer's intended behavior (Frazier & Summers, 1984); and (3) ingratiation and inspirational appeals are “emotional” tactics because they “aim to satisfy a target's psychological needs by being attractive” (McFarland et al., 2006, p. 106). This taxonomy provides a theoretically sound framework to examine the KAM's influence tactics.

Building on Kelman's (1961) compliance, internalization, identification mechanism, McFarland et al. (2006) explain the operating processes of coercive, rational, and emotional tactics. According to McFarland et al. (2006), promises and threats (i.e., coercive tactics) work via “compliance” when the buyer is receptive to rewards and punishments; information exchange and recommendations (i.e., rational tactics) operate through “internalization” when the buyer deems the salesperson's actions as reasonable and in the buyer's best interest; and ingratiation and inspirational appeals (i.e., emotional tactics) function by “identification” when the buyer's particular psychological needs are fulfilled (McFarland et al., 2006). We adopt these influence mechanisms to compare the effectiveness of the KAM's influence tactics in different relational conditions.

Exchange theory focuses on two types of exchanges: social and economic (Blau, 1964). According to Granovetter (1985), exchange

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