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Interpersonal interaction in sales meetings

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Abstract: The paper focuses on interpersonal interaction between buyers and sellers. In b-to-b marketing, personal relations play a significant role and the success of many firm-level activities is actually facilitated or hindered by interpersonal interaction. A sales meeting between boundary spanners represents an important forum for such interaction. In this paper we ask what is known of interpersonal interaction and, in particular, of its outcomes in industrial buyer-seller dyads. A systematic literature review is conducted to provide an overview of the extant body of knowledge and to propose avenues for future research. The study reveals that research has focused on negotiation as the main form of interaction and identifies a variety of outcomes that emerge from sales interaction.

Keywords: interpersonal interaction, outcomes, boundary spanners, buyer-seller dyads, industrial marketing.

Introduction

This paper focuses on interpersonal interaction between buyers and sellers as boundary spanners. Interaction at the level of activities and its outcomes as they occur in a business meeting are of particular interest. In business-to-business marketing, personal relations play a significant role and the success of many firm-level activities is actually facilitated or hindered by interpersonal interaction (Andersen and Kumar 2006). From the viewpoint of customer orientation, the process by which buyers and sellers interact, potentially enhances customer satisfaction, optimizes customer value and influences positively the achievement of competitive advantage (Humphreys and Williams 1996). Contacts and interactions between boundary spanners may be strategically used as a source of added customer value.

Considering the vital role of buyer-seller interaction for company-level success, it is surprising how little researchers have paid attention to the dyadic, individual-level interaction between buyers and sellers (see e.g. Cronin, 1994). As the study of buyer-seller dyads is full of conceptual and methodological difficulties, not much is known of e.g. salesperson in action. According to Haytko (2004), interpersonal connections that unite the partnering organizations, is a neglected topic in marketing research. This is echoed by Celuch, Bantham and Kasouf (2006) who underline the importance of exploring buyer-seller relationships at the level of individuals in order to tap on unfound relational, communicational, social and emotional elements.

Inspired by these insights, this paper concentrates on the micro-level of interaction and elaborates on a sales meeting as a forum for interpersonal interaction and important outcomes. The paper aims to give an answer to the following research question: What is known of interpersonal interaction and in particular, of the outcomes of interpersonal interaction in industrial buyer-seller dyads? A systematic literature review will be used as a method of collecting information and finding out what is currently known about the topic (Fink 2005). The paper combines the perspectives of industrial marketing and purchasing (IMP), relationship marketing and sales management in order to provide a state-of-the-art analysis of contemporary knowledge about interpersonal interaction between buyers and sellers in industrial markets.

The following sections describe in more detail the domain of the review and its relevance for the sales and marketing research. Next we will describe the methodological choices related to the literature review and provide a synthesis of the current research knowledge of interpersonal interaction and its outcomes. To conclude, we identify a number of research gaps and avenues for future research.

Interpersonal interaction in buyer-seller dyads

Although firms are linked in various ways and at various levels – buying firms with selling firms, buying firms with sales personnel, selling firms with buying people – relational linkages only form between persons in every-day interaction. In marketing research, buying and selling have long been viewed as dyadic interaction between buying persons and salesmen (Evans, 1963; Sheth, 1976; Cunningham & Turnbull, 1982). Interaction has been regarded as a flow of reciprocal, two-way communication and influence (Bonoma and Johnston 1978; Sheth, 1976), an exchange process (Bagozzi, 1979; Wilson 1977) or negotiation (Spiro, Perreault and Reynolds 1977).

In a seminal article Wilson (1976) perceived selling as exchange of items of value in the context of a buyer-seller interaction process. From this viewpoint, a dyadic interaction process was offered which comprises of five overlapping stages: source legitimization, information exchange and

problem identification, attribute delineation, attribute value negotiation and relationship maintenance. A sale within the dyadic interaction process is a product of the interacting pair (Evans 1963). However, the interacting individuals ‘produce’ more than a sale. For instance, in a study investigating task and social disclosure and their reciprocity within a sales interaction, Jacobs, Evans, Kleine and Landry (2001) found that certain combinations of buyer-seller disclosure and reciprocity enhanced both the formation of interaction quality and business relationship potential.

Combining the service management and the IMP Group’s interaction view, Holmlund (1996) puts forth a categorization of interactions. The categorization contains five different aggregation levels of interactions between two parties: a particular firm has a *partner base* which is constituted of several *relationships*. These relationships each contain *sequences* (e.g. campaigns, projects) which are made up of *episodes* (e.g. shipment process, negotiation process). The most detailed type – and smallest unit – of interaction is *action* (e.g. phone call, a plant visit, daily activities) (Holmlund 1996; Holmlund 2004).

Although the focus point of this paper is the interaction between individuals at the action level (cf. Holmlund 1996), the dyad is not considered to exist in an isolated vacuum (cf. Möller and Wilson 1995, 1). On the contrary, the dyad is embedded in a complex web of relationships. Interpersonal interactions are viewed in the context of ongoing business and personal relationships, which are embedded in a continuum of history and future, experiences and expectations. In this fashion, interactions in sales meetings are not considered as discrete, isolated transactions. Quite the opposite, they are seen as relational exchanges with unique history and anticipated future (Dwyer, Schurr and Oh 1987).

Sales meeting within a sales process

Selling has traditionally been described as a process of seven steps: locating and prospecting for customers, pre-approaching, approaching, sales presentation, handling objections/sales resistance, closing, and post sale/follow-up (Dubinsky 1980/1981). In more recent sales research the viability of the presented stepwise progress of the sales process has, however, been questioned (Flaherty and Pappas 2009; Marshall, Moncrief and Lassk 1999; Moncrief and Marshall 2005). Various transformative factors in the marketing environment like internationalization of markets, advances in technology, increased level of customer knowledge and sophistication, the expanding role of sales within organizations and team-based approaches to selling, have challenged the validity of the seven-step process. As there is concurrently a shift towards consultative selling models where the product is not pre-defined but instead co-created with the customer, the traditional sales process is not that efficient anymore (Storbacka et al. 2009).

What has remained unchallenged through times, however, is that in industrial settings salespeople and customers interact several times before they arrive at a mutually satisfying closure. Prior to making a sale, a salesperson and a customer interact repeatedly and through various channels. Face-to-face meetings, exchange of e-mails, teleconferencing, and conversations over the phone are examples of the interaction channels which may be used during the sales process.

In this study we consider the sales meeting as a platform for all kinds of interpersonal interactions irrespective of the channel of communication. A sales meeting is defined as business-related interaction between buyer and seller representatives in the course of a sales process.

Interaction between boundary spanners

A buyer and a seller as individuals can be considered as boundary spanners between two organizations, which endows them with a broader role in interaction than just closing a deal. The boundary spanners act for their respective organizations and represent their firms contractually in order to achieve certain goals. Boundary personnel mediates interfirm exchange, such as purchasing and sales (Campbell 1997) and coordinate work and ensure proper communication between the respective companies (Andersen and Kumar 2006). In so doing they have an important role in consummating exchange, in implementing market orientation and in building business relationships.

The crucial role of buyers and sellers as boundary spanners is manifested in the implementation of the marketing concept, namely market orientation of a company. Buyers and sellers are obviously key actors in *“the organization wide generation, dissemination, and responsiveness to market intelligence”* (Kohli and Jaworski 1990). Interpersonal interactions offer both detailed and versatile knowledge of the customer, the customer’s end customers, the surrounding network, competitors and the market as a whole.

In a study of firm-to-firm exchange relationships between an advertising agency and industrial customers, Haytko (2004) found that the informants in boundary spanner roles were unable to describe the interfirm relationship as such, at an abstract level. The participants analyzed the interfirm relationship through their daily interactions with individuals at the customer’s side and experienced the relationship based on the processes and outcomes of these interpersonal exchanges. This is in line with Wren and Simpson (1996) who consider the outcomes of a business relationship to be determined in the interaction between individuals.

From a managerial perspective, Bhagat (2009) advises buyers and sellers to take each and every contact seriously. Studying the dynamics of relationship development Bhagat (2009) found that trust and commitment may develop fast, even after a few interpersonal interactions influencing the outcomes of negotiations (see also Huang, Gattiker and Schwarz, 2008).

In sum, interaction and its outcomes between the buyer and seller representatives are critical to understand. The various daily actions between boundary spanners each have a specific content and produce an outcome, perhaps minor but an outcome which nevertheless affects future interactions between the buyer and the seller at various levels.

Systematic literature review

A systematic literature review was conducted in order to build an overview of marketing research that focus on interpersonal interaction between buyers and sellers in industrial markets. The review followed the guidelines set by Fink (2005, 3) for a research literature review as *“a systematic, explicit, and reproducible method for identifying, evaluating, and synthesizing the existing body of work”*. The review aimed to locate, select and evaluate existing body of research (Denyer and Tranfield 2009) on interpersonal interaction and in particular, of the outcomes of interpersonal interaction in industrial buyer-seller dyads.

Two electronic databases were used in search for the articles in scholarly journals: ABI/Proquest and Business Source EBSCO. Two sets of search word combinations within abstracts were applied: 1) *“interaction and buyer and seller and (dyad* or interpersonal) not consumer”*; and 2) *“relation* and buyer and seller and (dyad* or interpersonal) not consumer”*. The first combination returned 39 articles from EBSCO and 19 from ABI. The second combination returned 70 articles from EBSCO

and 66 from ABI. After first excluding duplicates and articles which concentrated solely on interactions via electrical appliances, 82 articles were left for closer examination.

The following three criteria were used to select an article to the final evaluation. The article needed to:

1. include or exclusively focus on interpersonal interaction (individual(s)-to-individual(s));
2. include or exclusively focus on interaction at the action level; and
3. carry the context of industrial markets.

17 of the 82 articles met the eligibility criteria. The 17 articles have been published in the year span of 1972 and 2009 – four in the 1970's, two in 1980's, seven in the 1990's and five in the 2000's. Four of the articles have been published in *The Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management*, three in *The Journal of Business Research*, two in *The Journal of Applied Psychology* and the rest in various journals within the domain of marketing.

The excluded articles dealt with interaction and the participants of the interaction in an aggregate manner. A majority of the excluded articles analyzed interaction at the firm-to-firm level instead of individual-to-individual. The interaction was also considered from the perspective of relationships instead of staying at the level of actions.

As a general notion related to all articles, it was often difficult to distinguish, whether the terms 'buyer' and 'seller' were meant to refer to companies or to individuals within those companies. 'Interaction' was usually not clearly defined and it was used interchangeably referring to interaction between individuals within a particular meeting, and/or to interaction as an ongoing process consisting of several interactions via various channels. Finally, it was however possible to identify the set of 17 relevant articles.

Findings

Five of the articles built on literature reviews and offered conceptual analysis of buyer-seller interaction (see Table 1). All the articles offer a conceptual model which may be applied at the level of interpersonal interaction between boundary spanners. For analytical purposes the studies were evaluated in terms of three interdependent elements of interaction process: antecedents, interpersonal interaction itself and its outcomes. Three of the articles take a communication perspective to interaction (Miles et al. 1990, Williams et al. 1990, and Kale and Barnes 1992), one focus on perceptions of participants at various interaction levels (Holmlund and Strandvik 1999) and the earliest article on buyer-seller interaction in industrial marketing in a broader sense (Bonoma and Johnston 1978).

Table 1. Conceptual articles: their focus and studied elements of interaction process.

Author(s)	Focus and key concepts	<i>I n t e r a c t i o n p r o c e s s</i>		
		<i>Antecedents</i>	<i>Interpersonal interaction</i>	<i>Outcomes</i>
Bonoma and Johnston (1978)	Dyadic and systems view	Mutuality of interests	Information & help, problem solving; Credit for the "sale"	Friendship, trust, cooperation
Holmlund and Strandvik (1999)	Perception configurations; Processes and outcomes on different interaction levels; configuration map as a tool	-	-	-
Miles, Arnold, and Nash (1990)	Interpersonal style, communication style	Relationship phase (Awareness, exploration, expansion commitment, dissolution): Buyer's and seller's communication style (task, self, or interaction-oriented)	-	-
Williams, Spiro and Fine (1990)	An interaction/ communication model	-	Content, code, rules and style	Sales effectiveness
Kale and Barnes (1992)	Communication	National characters, organizational culture, personality factors	Product utilities desired and emphasized; Preferred interaction style --> Level of buyer-seller compatibility	Outcome of sales interaction (satisfaction with interaction, degree of relationship building, closure.

Twelve of the analyzed articles contained an empirical study (see Table 2). Eleven of the empirical studies were quantitative in nature, ten of which used a laboratory simulation (e.g. on negotiation, trading, auction game, or prisoner's dilemma) and business students for research purposes. One exception is the study conducted by Celuch, Bantham and Kasouf (2006) in which qualitative field interviews from participants of both sides of a business dyad were used as data.

The focus of the empirical articles ranged from perceived similarity, expectations and goals to cooperative and conflict behaviors, influence tactics and bargaining toughness, and finally to appraisal processes, commitment, dependence and trust. The majority conceives interaction as negotiation or bargaining, the rest as communication and the few most recent studies viewed it as formation of interpersonal bonds. In general studies view interpersonal interaction as a two-way reciprocal process.

The review confirmed that in studying buyer-seller interaction the unit of analysis may be either the dyad, an individual (as part of the dyad) or both (see also Cronin 1994, Huber and Neale 1987, Roering 1977). For instance, some indicators of bargaining behavior were treated as nonseparable and were thus studied from a dyadic perspective. Some others were considered as separable and the individual bargainer was respectively used as the unit of analysis. The review also showed that a bargaining session may have both joint and individual bargaining outcomes and it may be analyzed in terms of individual as well as dyadic performance.

A more careful analysis of the studied interaction outcomes revealed that they can materialize at various levels and forms. Outcomes can be divided into *interpersonal outcomes* (friendship, trust, cooperation, degree of relationship building), *business outcomes* (sales effectiveness, closure) and *relationship related outcomes* (degree of relationship building). Following the view of dyadic and individual levels of analysis, the outcomes of interpersonal interactions may be categorized in a similar fashion: interpersonal outcomes as mutuality at the dyadic level and perception of

Table 2. Empirical articles: their focus and studied elements of interaction process

Author(s) and year	Key concepts	---→ <i>Interaction process</i> ---→		
		Antecedents	Interpersonal interaction	Outcomes: (During or) after the interaction
Mathews, Wilson and Monoky Jr. (1972)	Co-operative and conflict behavior; Perceived similarity	Perceived similarity	-	<u>During</u> : Type of response (cooperative/non-cooperative)
Roering, Slusher and Schooler (1975)	Commitment	Commitment level to future interaction	Initial bids	Profit level
Roering (1977)	Distribution channels; dependence	Expectation level of future bargaining, dependence level	Initial offers, offers, concessions.	<u>During</u> : Mutuality, cooperativeness. <u>After</u> : Agreement (yes/no)
Schurr and Ozanne (1985)	Trustworthiness, bargaining toughness	Preconceptions of seller's bargaining toughness and trustworthiness	Integrative interaction (cooperative behavior), distributive interaction (competitive behavior) in terms of message-sending behavior, concession-making behavior	Level of agreement, perception of bargaining toughness, perception of loyalty
Huber and Neale (1987)	Goals	Type of goal of the negotiator	-	Profitability (in monetary terms) of the dyad and the individual
Fine and Gardial (1990)	Similarity; self-monitoring	Perceived similarity; Self-monitoring level	Level of inference generation; level of inference usage (trait and relationship – related)	Short term: Ability to make a sale; The perceived potential for the sale; The ease of making the sale. Long term: Developing the relationship Success or failure
Cronin (1994)	Social Relations Model; salesperson's communication competence and performance	Competence in communication; salesperson effect and customer effect (individual level) and dyadic-level effect	Two-way, reciprocal communication, mutual influence	
Neu and Graham (1994)	Influence tactics	Gender; Power relationship; Problem-solving approach (behavior)	Verbal content (questions, self-disclosures, admonitions, commitments, prescriptions), linguistic structure and paralanguage	Sellers' profits; Buyers' satisfaction
Celuch, Bantham and Kasouf (2006)	Marriage metaphor; expectations, communication behavior, appraisal processes	Business outcomes-related expectations, communications-related expectations	Communication behavior: nondefensive listening, active listening, disclosure, editing. Mutual influence through communication behavior	Business outcomes and evaluation of relational process which gradually affect the formation of satisfaction, investments (financial; trust, social bonding) and commitments. (buyer's decision making)
McFarland, Challagalla and Shervani (2006)	Influence tactics	Buyer orientation: task-focus, engagement focus, self-focus-with balance	Seller influence tactics: information exchange, recommendation, threats, promises, ingratiation, inspirational appeal	
Huang, Gattiker and Schwarz (2008)	Trust; communication channels	Level of procurement complexity, communication medium (face-to-face, email, reverse auction)	-	<u>During</u> : Honesty trust formation, benevolence trust formation
Bhagat (2009)	Commitment, trust	Subjective norms, attitudinal trust	-	Relationship strength, commitment, , behavioral intention

bargaining toughness at the individual level; business outcomes as profitability of the dyad and seller's profits at the individual level; and relationship-related outcomes as relationship strength at the dyadic level and willingness to develop the relationship at the individual level.

Interestingly, all kinds of outcomes seem to be generated during the course of a sales process, whether or not the sales process itself eventually ends up in a successful sale. As Kale and Barnes (1992, 123) point out, "*regardless of the outcome, every encounter adds to the seller's repertoire of experiences, skills, strategies, and alternative transmission approaches*".

It is also noteworthy what Mathews et al. (1972), Roering (1977) and Huang et al. (2008) implicitly express that outcomes may be generated within the minutes of the business meeting or as an end result of a particular meeting. The outcomes that come into effect already during the interaction will potentially influence the rest of the interaction and its eventual outcomes. Cooperative and non-cooperative responses (Mathews et al. 1972), mutuality and cooperativeness (Roering 1977) and trust formation (Huang et al. 2008) may thus be considered as micro-outcomes within the course of the business meeting between the salesperson and the customer. These micro-outcomes may have an effect on the final outcomes of the specific business meeting, for instance, on reaching an agreement (Roering 1977). As a business meeting may be regarded as a process with an outcome, the meeting itself contains many sub-processes and sub-outcomes. (cf. Holmlund 1997, 2004).

Discussion and conclusions

By conducting a systematic literature review, this paper aimed to synthesize what is known of interpersonal interaction and in particular, of the outcomes of interpersonal interaction in industrial buyer-seller dyads. A set of 17 identified articles were analysed in terms of topic, key concepts, empirical method and the way they conceived interaction process and its key elements: the antecedents, the interaction itself and its outcomes.

On the basis of the results we may conclude that research knowledge of interpersonal interaction in buyer-seller dyads is mainly based on quantitative evidence gathered from business students in laboratory settings and that it concentrates on the negotiation phase within the sales process. Overall, the number of studies addressing interpersonal interaction at the level of action has been surprisingly small. However, the analyzed articles indicate that there are numerous possibilities and perspectives from which to study interaction between boundary spanners in more depth.

The review and the subsequent analysis bring forward opportunities for future research. With respect to methodological choices research has been unnecessarily one-sided. In order to gain a richer understanding of the phenomenon, future studies would benefit from using qualitative methods and data from real business situations, particularly from sales meetings. The subjective views of business representatives on specific interaction elements and their outcomes *in action* would help to advance our knowledge of interaction at the level of individual buyers and sellers.

Our results suggest that interaction outcomes may be generated already during the interaction but also as an end result of the interaction, they may benefit the dyad or the individual party of the dyad, and they may be related to interpersonal, business or relationship factors. Future research should take a broad view on interaction outcomes and study them in more detail. Such research would assist in investigating the role of buyer-seller interaction in the implementation of various business goals and in revealing even further dimensions related to outcomes, for instance, the differences between outcomes that are necessary but go unnoticed and outcomes that are critical and valuable in one way or another to the buyer or seller persons or the dyad as a whole.

In an attempt to build a richer understanding of interaction between boundary spanners, more research is also needed on the perceptions of *both* boundary spanners. Following Haytko's (2004) recommendations for further research in interpersonal interaction, an ideal study should examine both sides of the dyad and match them to see how well the perceptions of the dyadic partners fit with each other (see also Moon and Bonney 2007; Rajamma, Zolfagharian and Pelton, 2011). This line of future research is also recognized by Avlonitis and Panagopoulos (2010) in the field of selling and sales management: by studying both the customer and the salesperson side may contribute to (a) understanding how sales – as such – add value to a firm's offering and how sales personnel can co-create value with customers and (b) how the optimization of the sales process may result in increasing the ROI of the overall sales effort.

It is important to note that the paper reports findings from an ongoing study and certain limitations need be taken into account while interpreting the results. The review was restricted to scholarly journals, thus other publication types need to be considered more thoroughly in future work. Most importantly the choice of search word combinations has affected the resulting set of articles. By using a wider set of search words, the understanding of the extant body of knowledge would cover the phenomenon more thoroughly. At this phase the search concentrated on *buyer-seller interaction* but could, on the basis of our current knowledge, be extended to cover *communication, exchange and negotiation* as well as *customer* and *salesperson* (in place of buyer and seller) as search terms. A preliminary analysis of 13 articles found with these search words shows that only three of them are empirical and quantitative including two laboratory investigations and one survey. The new articles add to the variety of topics and concepts covered as half of them focus on emotional issues related to interaction, e.g. on social and self-conscious emotions, embarrassment, emotional contagion and atmospherics of the interaction, together with disclosure and its reciprocity. We will thus continue the review work with complementary searches.

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