Initial Encounters: The Lived Experiences of Buyers

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Introduction

The initial encounter between a buyer and a seller has received much attention among practitioners. The first time a buyer interacts with a seller is thought to be highly influential. The premise is that buyers form an opinion during this first encounter, or even the first minutes of this encounter. Furthermore these first impressions tend to stay consistent over time (Tapp, 1999). Therefore the practitioner's literature suggests that sellers should create the best first impression possible: by matching and mirroring buyer behaviour (Boe, 2011a), using nonverbal communication (Goman, 2011) and aligning it with verbal communication (Ramsey, 2003), being groomed (Dumont, 2011), timeliness (Lemons, 2011) and adjusting the handshake (Boe, 2011b).

Although academic research has also indicated that initial encounters are an important first hurdle (Dwyer et al., 1987), a holistic view on an initial encounter between a buyer and a seller in line with practice is still missing. Research shows that initial encounters contain a first impression (Bergeron et al., 2008) that impacts on trustworthiness (Geigenmüller and Greschuchna, 2011). Other constructs researched are perceived similarity (Lichtenthal and Tellefsen, 2001), expertise (Crosby et al., 1990), organisational and personal trustworthiness (Geigenmüller and Greschuchna, 2011). Although research provided an insight into specific causal relationships, a framework indicating the relative importance of these relationships is not available. Therefore a qualitative approach is developed to provide such a holistic description, as experienced by buyers.

The methodology chosen is a phenomenological study. As research in industrial marketing in this form is rare, specific advantages of this type of research are currently underused (Wagner et al., 2010). Therefore providing a research project using this approach is a contribution on its own account. Practitioners will be able to use the outcomes as a means to reflect on their understanding of initial encounters. The outcomes can serve as a stimulus for evaluating current working methods and training. The purpose of this phenomenological study is to describe the essence (Moustakas, 1994) of the initial encounter between a buyer and a seller as experienced by buyers. The initial encounter between a buyer and a seller is defined as the first time a representative of an organisation who is responsible for the procurement, meets a representative responsible for the selling function of another organisation face-to-face. The central question of this research is; *what is a buyer's essence of a lived experience of an initial encounter with a seller?*

First a short literature review is presented, this outlines the main issues addressed in current research regarding initial encounters in a business-to-business context. Secondly the methodology will be addressed. Next the data collected will be presented in the form of textural and structural themes. In the discussion composite textural description, composite structural descriptions and essence of the initial encounter as experienced by buyers are provided. Furthermore the limitations of the research, future research and managerial implications are discussed.

Literature review

In order for exchange to take place, trust has to be established (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). This can be accomplished by enhancing the relationship quality (Crosby et al., 1990) and this process starts during the initial encounter (Dwyer et al., 1987). The prevailing metaphor in describing the interaction between buyers and sellers is that of the relationship, though it has been argued that this depiction is at least partly false (Blocker et al., 2012) and that a connection metaphor could be more accurate. Thus, trustworthiness might be replaced by more instrumental and opportunistic constructs. Furthermore, it has been observed that the way encounters are ended has so far been given too little research attention (Bergeron et al., 2008) as research indicates that the manner in which an encounter is ended is more strongly related to future interaction intentions than the preceding part of the encounter.

A priori trustworthiness

During the initial encounter, trustworthiness is not yet backed up by any measurable or assessable outcomes. Therefore, some research indicates that buyers make up their minds by means of cues (Wood, 2004) that foreshadow trustworthiness and expertise. In this approach no pre-initial encounter trustworthiness is presumed. However, it has been suggested that the perceived trustworthiness during an initial encounter builds on an *a priori* impression. The forming of a first impression is seen as ill-structured problem solving, described as a categorisation process with a "fuzzy set" orientation (Evans et al., 2000) that allows a priori encounter preference to be present.

Personal and institutional trustworthiness

The goal of the buyer during the initial encounter is to decide whether or not to pursue future interaction (Geigenmüller and Greschuchna, 2011). This decision is based on the trustworthiness of both the salesperson and the seller firm. Furthermore, there is an interactive influence between personal and institutional trustworthiness (Sirdeshmukh et al., 2002).

Personal trustworthiness

Research on initial encounters suggests that there are three different explanations of the development of personal trust in sellers (Wood et al., 2008). The first explanation is that trust in a salesperson during an initial encounter is based on cues (physical appearance, verbal and non-verbal cues), which the buyer believes to indicate future seller behaviour. Secondly, in the absence of information regarding the trustworthiness of a newly acquainted seller, trust is based on previous experiences with similar situations and people. The third explanation is the cognitive calculative process. If the costs to the seller, of cheating by the seller, are perceived by the buyer to exceed the possible seller-benefits of cheating, the seller can be trusted.

Trust can be earned by being honest, benevolent and by having expertise (Hawes, 1994). In a study on reciprocal disclosure between sellers and buyers (Jacobs et al., 2001) it was noted that disclosure related to task specific information had an impact on trust, especially when it was mutual. This supports the claim that providing cues (Wood, 2004) related to expertise is beneficial. Social disclosure perceived by the buyer as a cue for honesty appeared to be unrelated to trust. Other research concerned with the effect of benevolence, suggests that it is the lack of benevolence displayed by the seller that has a negative impact on trustworthiness (Sirdeshmukh et al., 2002). Sellers that were over-benevolent were not trusted more. Moreover, a problem-solving orientation was positively related to trustworthiness and this is in line with later findings (Newell et al., 2011) which revealed that task related behaviour had a more significant impact on trustworthiness than relationship behaviours. Therefore it appears that expertise is more important in establishing trustworthiness than building rapport. Other research (Crosby et al., 1990, Jacobs et al., 2001, Wood et al., 2008) also provides evidence for this conclusion.

Institutional trustworthiness

The nature of the industry context and the added value delivered, influences the way buyers form their perceptions (Sirdeshmukh et al., 2002). The antecedents of reputation and service communications were positively related to institutional trustworthiness (Geigenmüller and Greschuchna, 2011). Perceived similarity proved to enhance personal trustworthiness in initial encounters (Henthorne et al., 1992) although a meta-analysis (Lichtenthal and Tellefsen, 2001) indicated that research findings concerning perceived similarity were not consistent.

Although multiple studies (Wood et al., 2008, Sirdeshmukh et al., 2002, Geigenmüller and Greschuchna, 2011) reported that institutional trustworthiness is key in the decision of buyers to engage in further interactions, this construct is far less researched than the role of personal trustworthiness in initial encounters. Furthermore the relationship between personal trustworthiness and intended future interactions was strongly mediated by institutional trustworthiness. A link between these two constructs was also found in an earlier research project (Sirdeshmukh et al., 2002).

Conclusion

In summary, there is no generally accepted view of what occurs during an initial encounter and the role played by first impressions and trustworthiness. Building rapport, cueing expertise, and perceived similarity are indicated to influence the trustworthiness of the seller; though expertise stands out as the most influential factor. However, the assessment of the seller is not the only antecedent of future interactions resulting from the initial encounter, as there is evidence of an a priori impression. Institutional trustworthiness is stated to be a key influential driver in this. Research also indicates that institutional trustworthiness is of greater importance than personal trustworthiness in enhancing the likelihood of future interactions during initial encounters between sellers and buyers.

Research method

The rationale for our approach is based on the recognition that the majority of current research of early stages buyer-seller relationships is reductionist in nature (Blocker et al., 2012), as there is no generally accepted description of what happens during an initial encounter. The nature of our research question lent itself to an interpretive approach, so we chose individual interviews as our method. This phenomenological approach captures the lived experiences of respondents (Creswell, 2007) and is especially useful in a discovery-oriented project such as this (Thompson et al., 1989). The assumption of this methodology is that we gain knowledge through experiencing phenomena and that it is therefore possible to describe and interpret these experiences in order to know (Shrivastava and Kale, 2003). The difficulty for phenomenological researchers is with being able to understand the descriptions of phenomena by others, without polluting these descriptions with the conceptualisations of the phenomena by the researchers themselves (Creswell, 2007). The solution according to the Husserlian transcendental phenomenology is to try to bracket all thinking, reflecting and conceptualising. The aim is to become able to receive all information concerning the lived experiences as they are. This state is called epoch (Moustakas, 1994). Existentialist phenomenological researchers try to accomplish this challenge by being aware of how languages can be used to pass on lived experiences, but at the same time can be abused by researchers to manipulate the wording of others to arrive at the desired conclusions. Avoiding the latter is the existentialist way to deal with the difficulties of capturing the experiences of others (Macann, 1993). To avoid getting lost in phenomenology as a philosophy (LeVasseur, 2003) it was suggested that researchers should translate this concern by staying open-minded, inquisitive, and follow accepted procedures (Thompson et al., 1989, Moustakas, 1994).

Though phenomenology has been discussed more than executed (Beekman and Mulderij, 1977, Sokolowski, 2000), there is a constant, but small flow of publications utilising phenomenology in consumer marketing (Shrivastava and Kale, 2003, Carrigan et al., 2004, Chronis, 2005, Thomas and Peters, 2006, Cherrier, 2006, Dant, 2008, Thomas and Peters, 2009, Denegri-Knott and Molesworth, 2009, Stone, 2009, Ardley, 2011). In industrial marketing phenomenology is rare (Blocker et al., 2012), although there are several occasions where phenomenology is promoted as a valuable addition to currently used methodologies (Goulding, 2005, Wagner et al., 2010, Javalgi et al., 2011) specifically in industrial marketing.

The first reason given for this peripheral existence is that the methodology is closely linked to the philosophies transcendental and existential phenomenology (Goulding, 2005), which results in the unreadable ruminating of stances instead of furthering the way in which phenomenological research itself is carried out (Sokolowski, 2000). Secondly there have been many misconceptions regarding phenomenology (Goulding, 2005). However, phenomenological research offers a holistic view and is suited for discovery-oriented research projects. If the underpinning principles are understood and the accepted procedures are followed, it delivers rigorous and relevant research (Creswell, 2007). Blocker et al. (2012) convincingly posed that researching buyer-seller relationships in a Cartesian, componential manner (Thompson et al., 1989) without combining this with a holistic, thematic understanding might halt a rigorous explanation of what happens in social reality. A methodology suited to provide us with such a holistic description is phenomenology (Creswell, 2007). Phenomenology aims at deriving at a description of the lived experience of a phenomenon (Macann, 1993), in this case the initial encounter between a buyer and a seller as experienced by the buyer.

Sample

For a phenomenological study a criterion sample (Creswell, 2007) comprising of at least three respondents is required (Beekman and Mulderij, 1977, Woodruffe-Burton, 1998, Giorgi, 2009, Englander, 2012). The sample criterion was employment as a buyer in the Netherlands, and having experienced initial encounters with sellers. The prospective respondents were contacted by phone to explain the research project, then this was followed by an e-mail to those that stated they might be interested in cooperating. The e-mail provided a short outline of what phenomenological research entails and what would be expected of the respondents. It also explained that the interview would be recorded, how the data would be treated, and also that they could withdraw at any time to ensure an informed consent. Twenty-five buyers were initially contacted. Six of the initial respondents were sent the e-mail.

As soon as the threshold level of three buyers was reached the interviews were planned and executed. One of the three remaining buyers withdrew. The last two buyers had not decided yet when the first three interviews had been transcribed. At this point, they were thanked for considering participation. No other prospect respondents were contacted, as the minimum was met.

Procedure and data analysis

Phenomenological data management and analysis procedures are well-documented by Thompson, et al. (1989), Moustakas (1994), and Creswell (2007). The interview protocol was informed by the assistance provided by Thompson, et al. (1989), specifically refraining from “why”. Explaining why a phenomenon is experienced is not an objective of a phenomenological research. Hands-on information was provided in order to prevent this from happening during an interview which consisted of two open general questions (Creswell, 2007, P. 61): “What have you experienced in terms of the phenomenon and what contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected your experiences of the phenomenon?” The interviews were recorded and transcribed as a verbatim account. Subsequently Nvivo9 was used to filter out all significant statements. Each significant statement was then marked as being part of either the textural or the structural description of the experiences. Following the data analysis procedure described by Moustakas (1994) this procedure was executed separately for each respondent. The textural descriptions depicted what the respondents experienced, and the structural description outlined the influences of the different contexts and settings (Creswell, 2007). After that all six descriptions were themed separately. This resulted in a thematically organised textural and structural description per respondent. Subsequently the individual textural descriptions were sublimated into one composite description. A similar procedure was followed to arrive at a composite structural description. Finally these two composite descriptions were converted into one description, referred to as the essence of the phenomenon.

Results

The participants are detailed in table 1 and followed by a thematic analysis of the significant textural statements and the significant structural statements derived from the individual descriptions. The textural description captures the invariant part of the experience, those themes that define the experience. The structural description describes the context or conditions and situations that influence the experience (Creswell et al., 2007).

Table 1 Participants

	Function	Organisation	Responsibility
Buyer 1	Technical Superintendent	Non-profit institute	Telecoms and technical installation contracts
Buyer 2	Head of Purchasing (previously sales)	World-wide consumer products manufacturer	Ensuring adequate manufacturing resources
Buyer 3	Purchaser	B2B Products and services	Purchasing products and services

Textural themes: invariant experiences

Initiating contact: initial encounters are set by buyers if the organisation has identified a need, to stay informed, or there has been a change of liaison. Sellers initiate contact to get acquainted in order to develop future interaction or if they are new account managers. Sellers that are not approached by a buyer have to be able to convince the buyer that it might be worthwhile.

> "*Most of the time [when the seller initiated contact] I only make an appointment with someone when I think: this seems appealing to me somehow." B3*

A priori encounter image: before the initial encounter has taken place the buyer already construes an image of the seller. All cues available are used to inform this image of the seller (e.g. e-mail, phone and third-party information of the seller or the organisation represented). During this phase sellers are categorised, for instance in terms of age, provenance, or organisational culture.

"That already gave a positive impression. Yes, it makes a difference, if you have already had interactions with that organisation." B3

"Of course we have a track record of that organisation, because the firm has proven itself already, so I already had that knowledge in my head." B2

A third-party based a priori encounter image of the seller could for instance be based on information provided by colleagues that have already been in contact with the seller, or earlier cooperation with the represented organisation in question. The fullness of this a priori encounter image is a result of the information available. But even when a contact is completely virgin, the buyer will still build a preliminary image inside his head.

"You have either prior knowledge or you don't, but you will always have an image of a firm. There is no escaping that. Because you know [for instance that] a Japanese person is coming, then you will not expect a blond guy stepping in." B2

Relational assessment: the moment the buyer sees the seller the initial assessment starts. This first assessment concentrates on the relational competences of the seller. The handshake, clothing, nonverbal communication (e.g. sweating, blinking of the eyes), whether someone is in a cheerful mood or not, are all variables at this stage. This trying to fathom the other is, at least partly, a conscious process which is accepted as a natural step during this initial encounter, but at the same time the outcome is judged to be of little importance.

"Sometimes you're right and sometimes you're completely off. I mean… just try to start the meeting as open-minded as possible. Because you can't know if you're right or not." B3

During this stage the a priori encounter image is verified using the observations made and information given during the start of the encounter. Most times, this a priori encounter image needs substantial adjusting, as this earlier image is seldom perceived to be accurate. It is accepted by buyers that a first impression is built, but at the same time it is considered to be dangerous to overstate the importance of the outcomes of this phase. It is even considered to be unprofessional. Professional behaviour is felt to be going past these interpersonal emotions and trying to find out if there is sufficient added value in a cooperation of the two organisations (regardless of the pawns involved in making the exchange possible).

> *"Unconsciously you're doing it… It has nothing to do with it [the products or services the organisation of the seller] and you shouldn't hold it against them… It's not to judge them or anything, it's just… I think it is just building a relationship." B1*

> *"We try to deliver detached professional procurement… … there is this first impression when shaking hands. I am already thinking: is it a wimpy handshake or a firm handshake… But this is also culturally defined, so you have to be careful to attach importance to first impressions." B2*

This first impression of the salesperson has to be deemed "normal." The buyer believes that the first impression has to be within certain boundaries. These boundaries are hard to explicit and sellers rarely exceed them, but when they do cross these lines further cooperation is unlikely.

> *"I find it important that somebody is normal. … Normal in my book is quite a broad definition... So if someone makes a too-good-to-be-true impression, I get suspicious… If someone is very quiet and only confirms what you are saying, that isn't what you want either." B1*

> *"… what it boils down to, I think, is that you just shouldn't feel annoyed." B2*

Assessing expertise: the next part of the initial encounter is used to judge whether this person is a suitable business partner based on expertise. There is no predefined list of boxes to be ticked, but possible cooperation is the main topic of discussion. Buyers do state that they experience themselves to be appraising these competencies (knowledge, skills and attitudes).

• ***Knowledge*****:** sellers are expected to have a deep understanding of the products and services they deliver as well as the organisation and the business of the buyer. Knowledge is considered a prerequisite. Not passing the bar in this respect will diminish chances of future interaction.

> *"…if the seller blunders content wise, there is no need to return." B2*

> *"Yeah, if the seller has no clue [about the buyer's market and organisation]… I also give up quickly. If the seller doesn't know anything about our organisation, this influences my overall evaluation." B3*

• ***Skills*****:** two skills sets are emphasised in particular: *adaptability* and *consultative skills. Adaptability* is experienced as sellers adjusting their behaviour and content according to contingencies in circumstances and buyer behaviour.

> *"…he should understand and sense, I should get on with it, that man is pressed for time" B2*

> *"…and if it doesn't seem to work, the click, then you [the seller] should try it another way." B1*

Consultative behaviour is viewed as the seller trying to understand the specific situation of the buyer's organisation so added value through consultancy can be expected as an outcome and listening skills.

> *"Suppliers do have to probe and add to the solution. Because we don't know everything, so they have to keep asking the right questions…" B1*

> *"… again somebody who doesn't listen… someone who is constantly talking and disabling you to do your job… but [also] not somebody that has no opinion at all, because then you feel hoaxed." B2*

> *"Thinking along with me… You don't have to look at the world through my glasses, but I do appreciate the seller to also look at the interests of my organisation. Don't just have your own business in mind." B3*

• ***Attitude:*** if sellers are conveyed to have the right attitude, this enhances their chances of future interactions. When sellers are perceived to be transparent, professional buyers indicate that this influences trustworthiness positively. Perceived attitudes are interpreted as cues for future behaviour.

> *"…and if somebody doesn't write down anything, doesn't do anything… then you already know. … Some people take notes of everything, that is great to work with." B1*

> **"***Openness, honesty, transparency… those are things that make me trust something directly. If it cannot be presented clearly and you dig somewhat deeper and still the seller keeps his cards close to the chest, then I will not trust what I'm told." B3*

Deciding on future interaction: at the end of the initial encounter, or shortly after, the buyer will decide whether it is useful and practical to further the relationship. The initial encounter is therefore a defining step to start a buyer-seller relationship. Although the seller is used as an important source of information, this is not the most important part of the equation. The decision is based on a combination of personal trustworthiness, institutional trustworthiness and the possible added value provided.

> *"The product comes first, then the organisation, and third the seller." B3*

> *"If the person is [more or less pleasant to work with]… that makes life easier or more difficult. But if the substance [the added value] is good, it's good. And if the substance is bad, it's bad." B2*

> *"In the end it has to have added value… What's in it for us… Let's put it this way: can we work either more efficiently or effectively… Will it unburden us, are things made easier, or will it earn us money?" B3*

The initial encounter is experienced as a possible starting point for a business relationship. Furthermore the main question is whether this salesperson representing a specific organisation and specific added value is worth trusting and investing resources in.

> *"So, during this initial encounter you want to make up your mind whether to trust this person to have an effect on your business." B2*

> *"Often it [an initial encounter] is just an anacrusis. A first step…" B3*

Structural themes: organisations and context

A clear link between the buyer and the seller: generally the buyer is antagonistic towards sellers that try to elicit an initial encounter, although exceptions may be made if the seller is able to establish a clear link between the people or the organisations involved.

Power and dependency: the buyer very consciously considers the dependency of, or any power over the supplier before the meeting starts. After a clear analysis using the Kraljic Matrix it is decided how the supplier will be approached. If a seller is representing a supplier that is deemed as a bottleneck supplier or a strategic supplier, far less is demanded of the communication skills and capabilities of the supplier.

> "*If a seller is very arrogant and he is in a quadrant that we can afford it [suppliers of leverage products and routine products], we'll be more blunt." B2*

Future involvement of the seller: When the seller plays a crucial part in the services provided, this changes the manner the buyer interprets the first encounter. If repetitive communication between buyer and seller will occur after a buy, the seller in a sense becomes part of the product and therefore becomes far more important.

> *"[If the seller] has a crucial role in the service provided. This is included much more [in my judgment]." B3*

Procurement regulations: if the buyer is forced to start multiple procedures in order to collect a number of quotes just to comply with rules or regulations, this is certain to influence the mode of operation. Sellers are asked to provide proposals out of the blue. This situation is to be expected when an organisation has to comply with European public procurement regulations.

Involvement and role of the buyer : if the buyer feels responsible and in the lead, he will be more aware of his task to actively decide whether the salesperson, products or services, and organisation that are presented are the ones that will get the job done.

Time: a factor clearly influencing the course of events of an initial encounter is time. There is a huge difference, if the buyer has ample time or is already thinking about the next meeting. Also the time available before reaching a decision changes the dynamics of the meeting.

> *"How much do you have on your mind, to what extent are you really present during that initial encounter." B2*

Mental state: buyers acknowledge that "things happen" and that he as well as the seller are not machines. They will inform the seller if there are issues that might influence the initial encounter. Buyers expect the seller to be able to deal with those types of situations and they also expect the seller to do likewise if something like that materialised on their side.

"We're all human. We all have our off-days. Some days our resilience is higher than others." B2

Cross Cultural Differences: a buyer understands that his expectations of sellers are culturally defined. When the seller you are going to meet has another cultural background, it is important to adjust your expectation in accordance with the customs and values underpinning the cultural background of the seller.

> *"…[when the seller is an Asian of origin] I bear this in mind and will be more modest, show less emotions, and be somewhat less direct." B2*

Stakes involved: the stakes (financially or implications for the organisation) of the procurement project define the way the buyer and the seller will interact during the initial encounter.

> *"… in that specific case the stakes weren't that high, no lives at stake or anything, so therefore I was easy-going." B3*

Problems to be addressed: when difficulties arise in the exchange between two organisations, there is the tendency to bring in new players (a replacement-seller or manager, or the supervisor of the buyer). This type of initial encounter has a very specific atmosphere.

> *"… beforehand they already knew that we wouldn't be too happy and that is something you immediately notice… nervous, flushed face, repeating things." B3*

Personalities: the personalities of the people involved also define the way an initial encounter develops. When for instance, buyers have the tendency to press the seller hard, this will result in different encounters to when buyers try to put people at ease.

> *"[A colleague] is quite another type. …it sometimes even gets really unpleasant." B3*

Discussion

In phenomenological research the central question is addressed by presenting a composite textural description and a composite structural description, followed by the essence of the experience (Moustakas, 1994, Creswell, 2007). After depicting initial buyer-seller encounters experienced by buyers the limitations and suggestions for future research are discussed, followed by the managerial implications.

Composite textural description: invariant experiences

An appointment is set and when an unacquainted seller initiates this, the buyer will comply if he feels this seems somehow interesting. A priori cues of the trustworthiness of the products or services, the organisation, and the seller are looked for and used. The second the buyer meets the seller he starts “sizing up” the seller. He assesses clothing, the handshake, posture, being relaxed or tense, etc.. Buyers are aware that this categorising comes with the territory. You can’t help it and therefore you have to accept it, although the outcomes are unreliable. Buyers feel it to be their responsibility to discover if an organisation can provide added value and therefore consciously try to minimise the effects of these personal impressions. So buyers simply evaluate if sellers are “normal” enough to do business with. Only the “too-good-to-be-true-sellers” and the blatantly incapable do not pass this bar.

Buyers get down to business as soon as possible. They try to find out whether the entirety of products and/or services, the seller’s organisation, and the seller will improve efficiency of effectiveness of the organisation. Buyers appreciate sellers that exhibit consultative task behaviour, are transparent, present expertise, cue reliability and adaptability. During the meeting, or shortly after, the buyer decides if he will invest more effort in the buying process or not. These initial meetings are experienced as a starting point.

Composite structural description: organisations and context

All buyers indicate that the buyer as well as the seller can have a bad day due to for example time constraints and that this will definitely influence the encounter. Another important factor regarding communication is related to the personalities involved, and the way that they differ or match. Furthermore, the balance of the power and the importance of the purchase are essential. This is consciously assessed, the larger the power distance, the tougher the encounter. The presence or absence of organisational, or governmental regulations also affect initial encounters, as can cultural differences.

A possible mediating factor is the extent to which the seller is perceived to be an integral part of the product. Is the seller a part (can he be separated without consequences) of what is sold, or is he considered to be a moment (does the item sold no longer exist if you take out the seller)? If the seller is seen as a moment of the added value presented, then the seller becomes much more important in the decision making process.

The essence of an initial encounter

Based on organisational needs, new contacts or a hunch that a seller might be able to offer added value, an appointment is set. The buyer construes an a priori image of the seller's organisation, products and services, and the seller. Also the importance of the purchase and the balance of power are assessed upfront. The a priori image is adjusted as soon as the encounter starts. Although considered unprofessional, buyers realise that they pass judgement based on first impressions. The way they do this is influenced by the moods of the participants, possible cultural differences, and who has the upper hand in the relationship. Only really deviant sellers are turned away. The essential activity of the initial encounter is to determine if the seller has enough added value to offer. A buyer is more positive if he clearly understands the presentation of added value. The products or services offered, the organisation providing them and the seller (in that order) have to be functional and trustworthy. The trustworthiness of the seller becomes more important if the seller is perceived to be an integral part of the added value offered. Certain behaviours of the seller are experienced as being useful and appealing: consultative behaviour, transparency, adaptability, and cueing relevant knowledge.

Limitations and future research

The sample consisted only of male respondents from the Netherlands. This could be a bias in this study. The Dutch culture and language of the participants and the interviewer will have influenced the outcomes, as culture proved to influence the person perception process (Albright et al., 1997) as well as the formation of trust in initial business encounters (Shaffer and O'Hara, 1995). Furthermore the translations could be a weakness in this research. The respondents represented larger organisations, thus neglecting the possible specifics of smaller organisations. Further phenomenological research will compensate for these possible weaknesses, focusing on respondents from different cultures, speaking different languages, gender diversity, and respondents from smaller organisations. This would add to the generalisability of the outcomes as well as furthering the acceptance of this holistic, non-reductionist methodology in industrial marketing. Another useful avenue for future research is focussing on the lived experiences of sellers, thus adding to the research of Jacobs et al. (2001).

Phenomenology addresses lived experiences, providing an explanation through intentionality (Moustakas, 1994). Focusing on conscious observations of a phenomenon, it is less suited to uncover unconscious processes. Therefore we should be careful to conclude that unconscious processes are not in action during initial encounters based on these findings. Further research focussing on the unconscious processes involved in initial encounters is called for.

This research points at the possible mediating or moderating factor of the perceived importance of the seller in realising the added value, influencing the relationship between relational behaviour and task behaviour (Newell et al., 2011), and the decision of buyers concerning future interactions.

Finally the outcomes of this research support the critique of Blocker et al. (2012) concerning the use of the relationship metaphor, as utilitarian arguments prevail over any need to build up a relationship. Again future research would add to the generalisability of this tenacious view on buyer-seller interaction.

Managerial implications

This research indicates that during initial encounters buyers look for trustworthiness of the seller, the organisation represented, and the added value of the products and services involved. The seller is the least important factor, except when the seller is perceived to be an integral part of the added value presented. As buyers accept that they form first impressions, they purposely force themselves to not let any impressions on a personal level stand in the way of possible future interactions; with the exception of those sellers that deviate too much. As this is two-tailed deviation, sellers that are making too good an impression will also reduce their changes of harvesting future interactions. The assessment of the expertise of the seller is experienced more to be related to the added value foreshadowed. The practical implications of these findings, if proven to be generalisable by future research, is that sellers, sales managers and sales training should focus on cueing expertise, rather than enhancing relational skills. Furthermore focussing on improving the trustworthiness of the organisation presented and the added value that can be delivered is more efficient and effective. Although this research project does not provide the answers as such, practitioners should look for selling techniques that are geared towards institutional trustworthiness and enhancing the trust in the value proposition offered.

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