

## **Critical Touchpoints in the B2B Buying Process:**

### **Impact on the Selling Process in the Digital Era**

Heidi Kock<sup>1</sup>, Pentti Korpela<sup>2</sup>, Liisa Kairisto-Mertanen<sup>3</sup>, Sirpa Hänti<sup>4</sup>

*Digitalization and the associated shift in buyer behavior have led to buyers approaching sellers at multiple touchpoints and sellers no longer being in control of the selling process. The aim of this qualitative study is to increase understanding of critical touchpoints in the early stages of the B2B buying process, which impact on selling in the digital age. The findings suggest that B2B buyers are utilizing two parallel buying processes: the sales encounter-driven and digitalization-driven. The managerial implications include: securing digital access to customers, adapting social media strategy to customers, and developing salespeople as experts, relationship builders, and value creators.*

### **Background on Evolving Buying and Selling Processes**

B2B selling has become more challenging for companies. Today's buyers have ready access to information regarding the supply situation, the offerings of several vendors, and even other customers' experiences, thus resulting in increasing buying power (Wiersema 2013).

Customer experience, with its touchpoints and journeys, is a hot topic among practitioners in B2B companies, and the creation of a strong customer experience is a leading management objective. (Lemon and Verhoef 2016) The aim of this paper is to increase understanding of critical touchpoints in the B2B buying process that impact the selling process in a digital age.

To solve the research problem, we formulate three research questions:

1. How does the digital age change the buying process in B2B markets?
2. What are the critical touchpoints/milestones whereby the buyer wants the support of the salesperson and the digital tools of the selling company?
3. How does the digital age change the selling process in B2B markets – i.e., how should the selling process be adapted to the new B2B customer behavior/buying process?

1 Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences, Ratapihantie 13, 00520 Helsinki, FINLAND, Tel. +358 40 4887543,

heidi.kock@haaga-helia.fi

2 Turku University of Applied Sciences, Sepänkatu 1, 20700 Turku, FINLAND, Tel. +358 40 3550801, pentti.korpela@turkuamk.fi

3 Turku University of Applied Sciences, Sepänkatu 1, 20700 Turku, FINLAND, Tel. +358 50 3854118, liisakairisto-mertanen@turkuamk.fi

4 Turku University of Applied Sciences, Sepänkatu 1, 20700 Turku, FINLAND, Tel. +358 50 5907720, sirpa.hanti@turkuamk.fi

A-28

The study proceeds as follows: first, we review the extant literature. Second, we deepen the theoretical understanding with an empirical investigation. Finally, we discuss the contributions, implications of our findings, as well as the limitations of the study.

### **The Buying Process**

The purchasing process can be approached from the step or process flow perspective. However, most processes consist of problem recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision, and post purchase evaluation (e.g., Tanner, Honeycutt, and Erffmeyer 2009, 90-91; van Weele 2010, 59-60).. A simple way to address the buying process is to divide it into three stages: awareness – a customer becomes aware of the problem or the need; consideration – a customer initiates an information search and an evaluation of alternatives; and purchase – a customer makes a purchase decision. Digitalization has impacted on all three stages. There is a need for in-depth understanding of changed buyer behavior, especially in the early stages of the buying process.

### **The Selling Process**

Dubinski's (1989/1981) traditional "seven steps of selling" has lost its power (cf. Dixon and Tanner 2012; Moncrief and Marshall 2005; Sheth and Sharma 2008), and the sequential selling process has evolved in the direction of the non-sequential selling process. (Moncrief and Marshall 2005). Moreover, digitalization has transformed B2B selling since customers research, evaluate, select, and share experiences about the product and the supplier more than ever before (Lingqvist, Plotkin, and Staley 2015).

### **Matching Selling and Buying Processes in the Digital Era**

The extant literature points to the integration and adaptation of the selling process and the buyer's buying process in increasing customer value creation and performance (cf. Autry, Williams, and Moncrief 2013; Esper et al. 2010; Viio and Grönroos 2014). Industrial buyers appreciate timely digital communications, especially in the early stages of the buying process, when seeking and gathering information on the market situation and on potential suppliers (Deeter Schmelz and Kennedy 2002).

### **Touchpoints of the Buyer's Journey**

Customer experience can be seen as the evolvement of a person's sensorial, affective, cognitive, relational, and behavioral responses to a firm or brand by living through a journey of touchpoints along pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase situations. (Homburg, Jozic, and Kuehnl 2015). A touchpoint is any verbal or nonverbal incident a person perceives and consciously relates to a given firm or brand (Duncan and Moriarty 2006). Touchpoints are a way of engaging customers,

and positive customer experience will further drive customer engagement (Islam and Rahman 2016). However, there is limited empirical work on customer experience and the customer's journey (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). Existing studies on customer journeys and online experience have mostly been conducted in B2C settings (Rose, Hair, and Clark 2011).

In this study we define the buyer's journey as the journey the buyer goes through in the awareness, consideration and decision stages, consisting of digital and physical touchpoints. The study includes both new task and modified buying situations (cf. van Weele 2010, 31).

### **Methodology**

Purposive sampling and semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions were used for the data collection (Patton 1988). Ten interviews were conducted among participants of the purchasing process in the buyer firms (shipbuilding, marketing, broadcasting, insurance and textile industries, machinery, printing, catering, environmental services, recycling industries) after having received interviewees' contact information from the seller firms. The seller firms represented security services, IT solutions and office/furniture solutions.

An interview guide was used for data collection. All interviews were taped and transcribed, and, first, coded independently by researchers. After having recognized preliminary themes, the researchers compared their findings and deepened mutual understanding and interpretations of the findings. The general inductive approach used for data analysis allowed the research findings to emerge from the important themes emerging from the data (Thomas 2006). ATLAS.ti program was used for analyzing and coding the data. Finally, the results were interpreted. (Spiggle 1994)

### **Empirical Findings**

We identified critical touchpoints in the early steps of the buying process that determine how the buyer's journey will unfold. Buyers become aware of their needs in several ways. If they have already recognized a need or problem, they proceed with an information search. However, it seems that digitalization and the ease of information exposure have led to buyers looking for ideas to develop their business without having recognized a need or problem. In the awareness phase, traditional channels, such as newsletters, recommendations, and sales persons' visits, are used to gain further knowledge about the available alternatives. The modern way of searching for information is via social media sites such as LinkedIn, Twitter, and blogs where buyers expect sellers to deliver valuable information (reference cases, ideas on how to develop their business, etc.).

In the consideration phase, buyers may either meet only one supplier if they think they have discovered something of interest in their information search, or they may compare several alternatives on their shortlist. Company websites seem to be one of the main sources of information to buyers. Buyers appreciate easy access to contact information, visibility, clarity, availability of planning and application tools, and even price information. The use of social media such as LinkedIn and Twitter seem to depend on the industry. Some buyers did not perceive the usability of social media in their buying process (cf. Keinänen and Kuivalainen 2015) while others use it for finding and sharing new ideas (Lingqvist, Plotkin, and Staley 2015). The following of blogs and white papers was mentioned by the interviewees while buyers highlighted face-to-face meetings at the evaluation stage. However, they expect to receive value from the meeting instead of the traditional sales pitch. Later on, when the relationship has been established, virtual meetings can also be used, leading to time and cost savings. The salesperson's activity is regarded as important.

### **Discussion**

Our findings suggest that B2B buyers follow two parallel buying processes, sometimes even simultaneously. The sales encounters-driven journey includes – awareness – information search – evaluation of alternatives, where buyers first recognize the need or problem then start searching for information, subsequently evaluating different alternatives and preferring discussions with the sales person. In the digitalization-driven journey, the buyer starts with an information search before the need or problem recognition, and depending on the information, a need may arise or an interest in evaluating the alternative could emerge. The findings indicate that the buyer's journey, whether the sales-encounter-driven or digitalization-driven, seems to be industry and company specific. Buyers' journey comprises different critical touchpoints that determine whether the journey proceeds. This new situation suggests that sellers should take into consideration customers' expectations in relation to critical touchpoints. The findings resonate with Lemon and Verhoef (2016), suggesting the adaptation of touchpoints and journeys. The study contributes to the sales literature from the buyer's perspective. The buyer's viewpoint on selling competencies have largely been neglected and the body of knowledge is based on the research conducted among salespeople (cf. Korpela 2015; Plouffe et al. 2008). The study increases the understanding of the expectations buyers have towards the sales and salespeople's behavior, thus increasing understanding on how to create value appreciated by the buyer. In addition, it increases understanding of the buying process and the buyer's journey (cf. Lemon and Verhoef 2016).

### **Managerial Implications**

Buyers appreciate easy digital access to solve their questions, such as reference case descriptions, product and contact information, especially in the early phases of the buying process (cf.

Deeter-Schmelz and Kennedy 2002). For this reason, seller firms should keep their websites up to-date and informative to meet buyers' expectations and to support their personal selling (cf. Karjaluoto, Mustonen, and Ulkuniemi 2015).

The appreciation for social media seem to be dependent on the industry and the product to be bought. However, seller firms shall create and implement social media strategy and adapt their use to customers. The digital age does not seem the decrease the central role of salespersons. Buyers appreciate the salesperson's role as an expert, a relationship builder, and a value creator.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

As the study continues, the plan is to interview a total of 120 purchasing decision-makers by March, 2017 and to analyze the data by the end of 2017.

### **References**

- Autry, Chad W., Michael R. Williams, and William C. Moncrief (2013), "Improving Professional Selling Effectiveness through the Alignment of Buyer and Seller Exchange Approaches", *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management*, 33 (2), 165-184.
- Deeter-Schmelz, Dawn R., and Karen Norman Kennedy (2002), "An Exploratory Study of the Internet as an Industrial Communication Tool: Examining Buyers' Perceptions", *Industrial Marketing Management*, 31 (2), 145-154.
- Dixon, Andrea, L., and John (Jeff) F. Tanner Jr. (2012), "Transforming Selling: Why It Is Time to Think Differently about Sales Research", *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management*, 9-13.
- Dubinsky, Alan, J. (1980/1981), "A Factor Analytic Study of the Personal Selling Process", *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management*, 1 (1), 26-33.
- Duncan, T., & Moriarty, S. (2006). How integrated marketing communication's "touchpoints" can operationalize the service-dominant logic. In R. F. Lusch & S. L. Vargo (Eds.), *The service dominant logic of marketing: Dialog, debate, and directions* (pp. 236–249). Armonk: M.E. Sharpe.
- Esper, Terry L., Alexander E. Ellinger, Theodore P. Stank, Daniel J. Flint, and Mark Moon (2010), "Demand and Supply Integration: A Conceptual Framework of Value Creation through Knowledge Management", *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 38 (1), 5-18.
- Homburg, Christian., Jozic, Danijel., and Kuehnl, Christina. (2015). Customer experience management : toward implementing an evolving marketing concept. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 1–25.
- Islam, Jamid U., and Rahman, Zillur. (2016). The transpiring journey of customer engagement research in marketing. *Management Decision*, 54(8), 2008–2034.
- Järvinen, Joel, and Heini Taiminen (2016), "Harnessing Marketing Automation for B2B Content Marketing", *Industrial Marketing Management*, 54, 164-175.
- Karjaluoto, Heikki, Nora Mustonen, and Pauliina Ulkuniemi (2015), "The Role of Digital Channels in Industrial Marketing Communications", *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, 30 (6), 703-710.