

Sales Opportunity Crafting: Explaining Diverse Selling Approaches

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Abstract

Salespeople play a critical boundary-spanning role in establishing productive relationships with their buyers. In doing so, they employ diverse selling approaches that resulting in a wide range of customer experiences—some that align well with the overall marketing strategies and some that conflict with the intent of the organization. Several theoretical explanations for the variations in selling approaches, but no singular theory provide us a lens to understand how salespeople approach various selling opportunities. The primary goal of this inquiry is to compile the extant theoretical knowledge from various disciplines in order to develop a conceptual framework for future empirical research work. The research suggests *sales opportunity crafting* allows salespeople to selectively employ pre-established routines or improvise a task by reconfiguring its boundaries—physically, cognitively, and relationally. This research posits that the improvisation levels used by salespeople are determined collectively by their cognitive assumptions about the customer's needs and their interaction levels with the customer.

Keywords: Job crafting, Improvisation, Routines, Customer-oriented solutions, Proactive behavior, Sales performance

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Introduction

As a result of 20+ years of dealing with business-to-business relationships, the lived experiences of this author indicate that buyer-seller relationships largely depend on the salespeople. Buyers' perception of relationships is a result of everyday decisions taken by salespeople, the quality of their interactions, and the exchange value salespeople create in the process. Salespeople are known to approach each selling opportunity in a manner that they deem appropriate. They may either conform to the popular marketing notion that buyer relationships have to be built on mutual benefits, or sometimes resort to opportunistic behaviors with a sole intent to meet their own personal objectives.

Additionally, real-world experience indicates that almost all of the significant sales opportunities in the business-to-business context require some level of tailoring that sellers do not anticipate. In other words, there is a gap between what a seller has to offer and what the buyer wants. The gap can vary depending on several factors, including environmental uncertainty, seller's market orientation, buyer's business situations, and individual expectations. In situations like these, salespeople play a key role in bridging the gap either by triggering a change in organizational capabilities or by positioning their capabilities in such a way that customers decide to adapt to the solutions provided by salespeople. Because of their proximity to the customers, salespeople are in best possible position to indicate how their organizational capabilities might be applicable and useful to the specific needs of the buyers.

Consequently, scripted sales approaches are considered ineffective in business-to-

business selling. A salesperson creates a unique value proposition to the buyer, by actively matching their organizational offerings to the business needs. This is especially so with seller organizations offering multiple products and services that can be sold in different configurations. Such organizations study the market demands periodically and combine their products and services into solution bundles that can be offered to meet the customers' typical needs. The internal processes and resources of the organization are structured in a way to sell and deliver these predefined bundles. The salespeople are trained to ascertain their customers' needs and position these bundles as part of the sales process.

The goal of this proposed research is to study how salespeople tailor their approaches to specific sales situations to achieve success in their sales efforts and to build lasting customer relationships. Such knowledge would be useful for organizations (i) to optimize their efforts in developing appropriate sales methodologies so they can be widely established throughout the organization (rather than remaining a individualized practice), (ii) to effectively coach and manage the selling capabilities that enable salespeople to achieve their performance objectives, and (iii) to develop approaches to create a unique value proposition that is hard for the competition to match.

Background

Selling in business-to-business arena is unique in the following aspects: (i) complexity factors involved in building these relationships, (ii) concept of "customer-oriented solutions" or bundles, (iii) importance of strategic, long-term relationships, and (iv) the possibility of conflicts in expectations between the salespeople and their buyers. In the

following section, the relevant theoretical background and literature associated with these aspects are presented.

Complexity factors

Buyer-seller relationships are more critical to the organizations in some environments than in others (Crobry, Evans, & Cowles, 1990). These situations include when (i) the service offered is complex, customized, and delivered through a continuous stream of transactions (Berry, 1983; Levitt, 1983; Lovelock, 1983), (ii) many buyers are relatively unsophisticated about the service (Ghinghold & Maier, 1986), and (iii) the environment is dynamic and uncertain in ways that affect the future needs (demands) and offerings (supply) (Zeithaml, 1981).

Customer-oriented solutions

Tuli, Kohli, and Bharadwaj (2005) pinpoint the importance of customer-oriented solutions for the complex situations mentioned above. They suggest that sellers can create sustainable differentiation that is hard for their competitors to mimic by offering solutions that solve buyers' business problems. This confirms the recent trend of sellers offering business solutions to customers rather than stand-alone products. The companies that provide a solution strategy bundle their products together and add software and services (Galbraith, 2002). Customer solutions embody the new service-dominant logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2004), represent a critical shift in product development (Srivastava, Shervani, & Fahey, 1999), and present new challenges for choice models (Dhar, Menon, & Maach, 2004).

“The winners will be those who deliver solutions from the users’ point of view. That is a big part of marketing’s job.” Jack Welch, former CEO, General Electric (Kumar, 2004).

Importance of long-term relationships

Both seller and buyer organizations vie for long-term relationships that afford practical benefits to both parties. Faced with unprecedented levels of international competition and technological change in industrial markets, they both seek to achieve competitive advantage and bring stability to their operations by forming strategic alliances (Millman & Wilson, 1995). From the seller’s perspective, it is not easy to acquire and maintain such relationships because buyers often apportion their supply base rationally to cooperate more closely with a limited number of preferred sellers (Dorsch, Swanson, & Kelley, 1998; Stump, 1995). In order to survive in the climate of such heightened competition and value erosion, a seller organization constantly needs to differentiate itself from other organizations. This continuous adaptation to the evolving demands of the environment is considered an advantage in today’s hypercompetitive environments (D’Aveni, 1994).

Potential conflicts between salespeople and the buyers’ expectations

The relationships salespeople hold with their buyers are considered in management theory to involve *agency problems* (See Eisenhardt, 1989) with potential conflicts between the desires of the principal (seller organization) and the agent (salesperson). Various individual and organizational factors such as motivations, bounded rationality, supervisory controls, etc. may cause salespeople to behave in a manner that is contrary to

the expectations of the buyers, and that of their own organizations. In addition to the agency problem, extant marketing literature also highlights the diverse nature of customer needs and varying levels of sellers' knowledge about their market demands. Buyers' and sellers' organizations have different perspectives and expectations. Tuli, Kohli, and Bharadwaj (2005) suggest that sellers tend to have a product-centric view of customer solutions while customers tend to have a relational process view of solutions across all phases of their association with the sellers, not just during the sales process. This gap in expectations makes it difficult for sellers to understand the business needs of buyers and to offer appropriate solutions.

Problem of practice

The choices salespeople make have an enormous impact on an organization's overall sales effectiveness and their ability to forge long-term strategic relationships. Such differences in sales approaches cannot be merely attributed to individual characteristics as the same salesperson may adopt a wide range of behaviors over a period of time. The psychological profiles may be helpful for identifying and recruiting, but seller organizations need better understanding of the contextual factors that influences the performance of their salespeople. The real is question is why do certain individuals (or even the same individual in different situations) manage the sales opportunity in a proactive manner to create that unique value proposition while others tend to operate within their organizational limitations?

Conceptual Framework

Existing theoretical explanations

In a general way, the organizational change theories attempt to explain the way in which organizations (or individuals) modify their behavior in response to environmental cues and/or purposeful intervention efforts over a period of time (Orlikowski, 2000; 1996; Weick, 1999). This research specifically focuses on individuals who actively and continuously initiate change in every day processes and who are not just passive subjects of change (Bandura, 1986; Bateman & Crant, 1993; Buss, 1987). The closest explanation for the problem of practice discussed above could be that salespeople practice adaptive selling by proactively altering their work processes within the context of their roles.

Adaptive selling behavior

Early marketing literature from the 1980s focus on personal selling scenarios and suggest that giving “canned presentations” to buyers may not be as effective as “adaptive selling.” Adaptive selling is a process by which a salesperson adopts a series of loops and feedbacks to alter their selling behavior to match the customer’s responsiveness (Jolson, 1975; Weitz, Sujan, & Sujan, 1986). The marketing concept of adaptive selling calls for an integrated, company-wide approach toward providing customer satisfaction and establishing mutually beneficial long-term relationships (Kotler, 1980; Kurtz, Dodge, & Klopemaker, 1976). Saxe and Weitz (1980) consider customer-oriented selling as practicing the marketing concept at the individual level. In their empirical study, they measured selling-oriented customer orientation (SOCO) using their SOCO scale. Two specific factors were studied: (i) the degree to which the customer-salesperson

relationship is long term and cooperative; and (ii) the salesperson's ability to help customers satisfy their needs as determined by the resources available for practicing adaptive selling.

However, adaptive selling theories are not without its limitations. First, it seems to confine its perspective to how well a salesperson adapts to a customer *within* the context of *a* selling situation. Second, the literature seems to be preoccupied with measuring the adaptive capability of salespeople without offering any explanations to the underlying mechanisms of these adaptations.

Job crafting

Organizational change theories provide us an alternative perspective to explain the adaptive capabilities of salespeople. In response to the environment, individuals in an organization attempt to redefine their ways of working if the established ways do not meet the purpose of the job. Job latitude allows individuals to induce change by adopting recursive “microprocesses of change” such as (i) cultivating opportunities for change, (ii) fitting a new role into prevailing systems, and (iii) proving the value of the new role (Reay, Golden-Biddle, & Germann, 2006). Work performance research in recent years has been commonly translated into cognitive conditions—mental processes that underlie the task activity. Staw and Boettger (1990) define the concept of “task revision” as the action taken to correct a faulty procedure, an inaccurate job description, or a role expectation that is dysfunctional for an organization. They also suggest that employees can create role innovation or task revision to overcome the shortcomings of an incorrectly specified role definition by doing something unexpected.

Extending this concept further, Wrzesniewski and Dutton (2001) suggest that employees actively perform “job crafting” by reconfiguring the task’s physical, cognitive, and relational boundaries. Their idea is based on the notion that an employee’s job consists of a set of task elements that are grouped under one job title and can be performed by an individual in a social context (Ilgen & Hollenbeck, 1992; Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). The physical boundaries are defined as the sequence, form, and number of activities one engages in while performing the task. The cognitive boundaries refer to how one perceives the task’s requirements. The relational boundaries describe how and with whom one interacts while doing the job.

Suggested concept: Sales opportunity crafting

The primary objective of this research is to explain how salespeople modify their approaches to handle various selling opportunities in business-to-business context. This study suggests that the concept of *sales opportunity crafting (SOC)* is an application of *job crafting* (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001) adopted to the marketing domain that helps explain the different ways salespeople respond to their customers’ needs (i.e., *adaptive selling*). This conceptual framework is depicted in Figure 1.

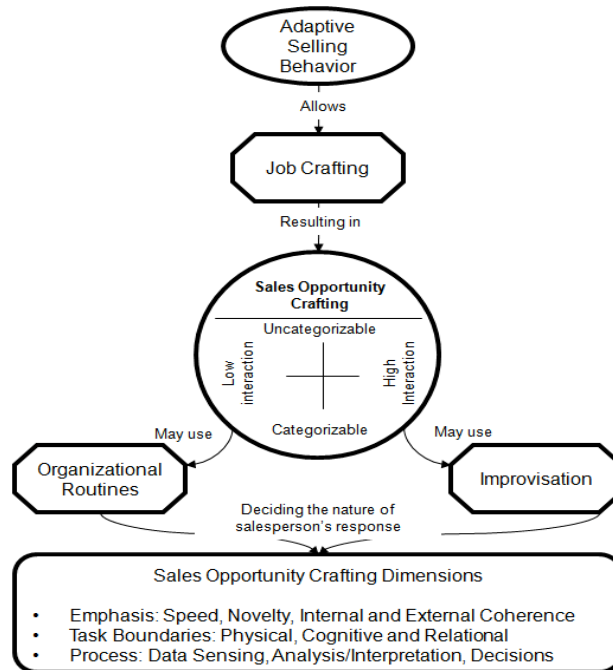


Figure 1: Base Conceptual Model

This approach allows salespeople to respond to opportunities that have predefined product and service configurations with established organizational routines or with a customized “solution” offered to the customer by improvising work processes.

SOC can be operationalized as a practice by a salesperson by

(i) considering the contextual factors, such as the salesperson’s cognitive assumption about the opportunity and the interaction levels with the customer,

(ii) deciding whether to employ pre-established routines or to improvise when the routines are deemed inappropriate for responding to a customer’s need,

(iii) varying task boundaries (i.e., physical, cognitive, or relational), emphasis (i.e., novelty, speed, internal and external coherence), and the process (i.e., data sensing, interpretation/analysis, and the action).

The following section presents the different theories available for explaining how salespeople view a potential opportunity, process the request, and respond to the customer.

Theoretical basis for the suggested concept

Because no single theory exists to comprehensively explain SOC, the proposed concept is based on a wide body of existing theoretical knowledge that contributes to the different components of this concept.

Sales performance and relational marketing

Salespeople occupy “special boundary roles” and help organizations understand market needs by assessing them and communicating information to the relevant internal sub units (Tushman, 1977). The relational marketing literature indicates, among other factors, the following antecedents for developing long-term business relationships with buyers: customer interaction levels and interfunctional coordination.

Customer interaction levels

Lived experience indicates that a long-term and cooperative relationship is made possible through interactions between a salesperson and their customers. Marketing literature suggests that the levels of interaction can be viewed in terms of intensity and stability. Interaction intensity is a result of finer-grained dimensions such as attentiveness,

perceptiveness, and responsiveness, which are all required in equal parts for a salesperson to be successful (Boles, Brashear, Bellenger, & Barksdale, Jr., 2000; Boroom, Goolsby, & Ramsey, 1998; Cegala, 1981). Customer-interactor stability refers to how long customer interactors (e.g., sales personnel, support staff) are assigned to a customer. The more stable the relationship, the better the customer interactor understands a customer's industry, operations, employees, departments, and their (potentially conflicting) requirements and is able to identify the recognized, unrecognized, and future needs of the customer (Kalwani & Narayandas, 1995; Tuli, Kohli, & Bharatwaj, 2005). This paper proposes that a higher interaction level is necessary for a salesperson to adequately understand the customer's requirements.

Interfunctional coordination

For a seller organization to be successful it needs to ensure interfunctional coordination (Narver & Slater, 1990). It is highly important in industrial contexts to coordinate activities meant to deliver superior value to buyers across the firm's departments because this is where solutions are customized for customers (Siguaw, Brown, & Widing II, 1994). Sales team members often work with representatives of engineering, research and development, and other departments where core knowledge resides. Likewise, members of various selling teams are often called upon to work with members in other divisions of the company to seek comprehensive solutions on behalf of the customer. Researchers suggest that this relational exchange process between the selling firm and the buying firm represents a strong opportunity for value creation for the firm (Jones, Dixon, Chonko, & Cannon, 2005).

Internal capabilities are equally important in maintaining relationships with customers. Serving a customer over a period of time requires the coordination of nonsales resources from different functional areas. The term “support-systems” refers to those individuals who play a part in handling the customer’s needs (Homburg, Workman, Jr., & Jensen, 2002; Shapiro & Moriarty, 1984).

Information processing and categorization

Decision theories show that human beings process information in a far simpler manner even when the environment operates at a considerably higher level of complexity and uncertainty. Rational choice is a concept that involves two guesses: a guess about uncertain future consequences and a guess about uncertain preferences (Savage, 1954; Thompson, 1967). As a refinement of this thinking, “bounded rationality” points out that human beings use simple search rules in an uncertain environment because of limited computational capabilities and utilization of memory (March, 1978; Simon, 1956).

Human beings make some assumptions about their environment and categorize them based on a cognitive structure made available through previous experience and learning. In psychology, this associative thought is described as “empirical thinking” and “trains of images suggested one by another” (James, 1890, 1950; Sloman, 1996). This similarity-based generalization is very basic human nature and can be used to study knowledge and the individual as information processor (Anderson 1990; Newell & Simon, 1972; Rosch, 1975).

This categorization is a key concept in sales management because it enables the “institutionalization” of knowledge. Organizations typically bundle products and services

into preconfigured “solutions” that can be offered to different categories of customer requirements. Training and sales methodologies in a seller organization typically focus on these bundles (Ingrasci, 1981; Merrill & Reid, 1981; Weitz, Sujan, & Sujan, 1986)

Organizational learning & improvisation

Routines constitute the primary means of how organizations accomplish much of what they do (March & Simon, 1958; Nelson & Winter, 1982; Pentland & Feldman, 2003) and gained acceptance as relevant to organizational theories when the concept was first introduced by Stene (1940). Organizational routines are helpful in “resourcing” or creating assets such as people, time, knowledge, and skills (Feldman, 2004). From a marketing perspective, these routines can be associated with “categories” or preconfigured solution bundles, which are used to help salespeople gain access to the required organizational resources necessary for effectively helping their customers. Performed correctly, categorization can help the salesperson cope with their complex selling environment (Weitz, Sujan, & Sujan, 1986). This link highlights the importance of a salesperson’s cognitive categorization of any given opportunity as they decide the appropriate response.

Although routines are helpful for standardizing behavior based on situational triggers, the choice of one routine from among many available ones is subject to a number of factors that can influence these choices at every level. A salesperson’s orientation, a buyer relationship, a sales manager’s influence, team dynamics, and the organizational culture—all of these factors are integral in choosing a routine. Organizational theory also warns that there are potentially negative side effects of the routines; they may lead to

inertia, inflexibility, blindness, complacency, and even simplemindedness under certain circumstances (Ashforth & Fried, 1988; Gersick & Hackman, 1990; Hannan & Freeman, 1983; Pentland & Feldman, 2003; Weiss & Ilgen, 1985). This is also referred to as a “competency trap” (Levitt & March, 1998).

Noncanonical routines and situated learning

Weick’s (1999) synthesis of organizational change theories opens up a whole new body of literature helpful in explaining the variations in a salesperson’s approach toward opportunities presented by their customers. Experiential learning is very important for individuals to adapt to different situations (Cyert & March, 1963; Day & Groves, 1975). Most adaptive models predict that if the world and preferences are stable and experience is prolonged enough, behavior will approach what would have been chosen rationally on the basis of perfect knowledge. This is partly explained by the tacit or situated learning involved in any job that is typically not formalized (Lave, 1993; Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Brown and Duguid (1991) observe that although typical sales trainings focus on products, services, processes, and other aspects of selling, details of practice are often omitted from these trainings. In any organization, there is a variance between the formal aspects of the organization (such as training, manuals, and job descriptions) and the actual practices of its members. These are termed as *noncanonical* practices. These practices are undocumented and exist as “workarounds” created by the members of the organization to achieve their daily tasks (Orr, 1990). The employees usually develop these practices to bridge the gulf between their organizations’ *canonical* or established work practices, which are laden with the dilemmas, inconsistencies, and unpredictability of everyday life.

Orr (1990) also emphasizes that these work processes are inherently collaborative and highly improvisational because they are meant to correct the established practices that do not meet the specific purpose of the work employees undertake.

Noncanonical practices may either be institutionalized or private knowledge that are confined to a group of certain individuals. New institutional practices may emerge from the noncanonical routines through a combination of agency and institutional factors (Creed, Scully, & Austin, 2002; DiMaggio, 1991; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Leblebici et al., 1991; Reay, Golden-Biddle, & Germann, 2006).

Social theory, which highlights the roles of work group settings and interactions in learning, offers another possible explanation for knowledge differences among individuals (Bourdieu, 1977; Garfinkel, 1963; Giddens, 1984). Learning also stems from an effective collaboration between two parties who jointly develop a set of behavioral interaction practices that draw on each other's knowledge (Weisinger & Salipante, 2000). This reciprocal learning (Zielstra, 2003) highlights the significance of a salesperson's interaction quality—either with customers or with other internal resources—which is required for understanding the sales opportunities. This reciprocity can also be an indicator of a salesperson's customer interaction levels.

Improvisation

The process of staying in step with the evolving market conditions forces organizations to undergo incessant, continuous change. These are accommodations to and experiments with the everyday contingencies, breakdowns, exceptions, opportunities, and unintended consequences of the evolving market. In the “Behavioral Theory of the Firm,”

organizational adaptation is viewed as a choice made from among the available routines (Cyert & Hedrick, 1972; Cyert & March, 1963; Nelson & Winter, 1982). The same theory also reasons that the routine most often used is likely to be employed again in the future. Minor (1990) points out employees usually modify the established “routines” when they deem the organizational situations to be ambiguous.

Improvisation is a concept—far term borrowed from jazz music that explains the *bricolage* or the “make as you go” approach determined by the mood of the audience. Most jazz audiences, especially those not frequently exposed to jazz, are able to enjoy swing jazz because although it is improvisational, it also conforms to the tonal language they are familiar with (Zack, 2000). Jazz improvisation can be considered a metaphor for the flexibility of human capital at individual and organizational levels (Lewin, 1998). Just as in music, improvisation can be sparked within organizations when discontinuity in the form of unusual harmonic structures is applied to standard norms. Improvisation is therefore grounded in forms and memory. Each improviser must determine to what extent they want to improvise—within those forms, with those forms, or outside those forms (Weick, 1998). Similarly, a salesperson must decide what variations in work processes are required to respond to a particular sales opportunity. Moorman and Miner (1998) studied organizational improvisation and their research highlights the temporal proximity between planning and execution, which reflects the “make as you go” approach. They suggest that this improvisation enhances organizational learning and memory. It changes an organization’s “response repertoire” (Orlikowski, 1996; Sitkin et al., 1998).

A concept map linking the above theoretical realms as a basis to the suggested conceptual model is shown in Figure 2.

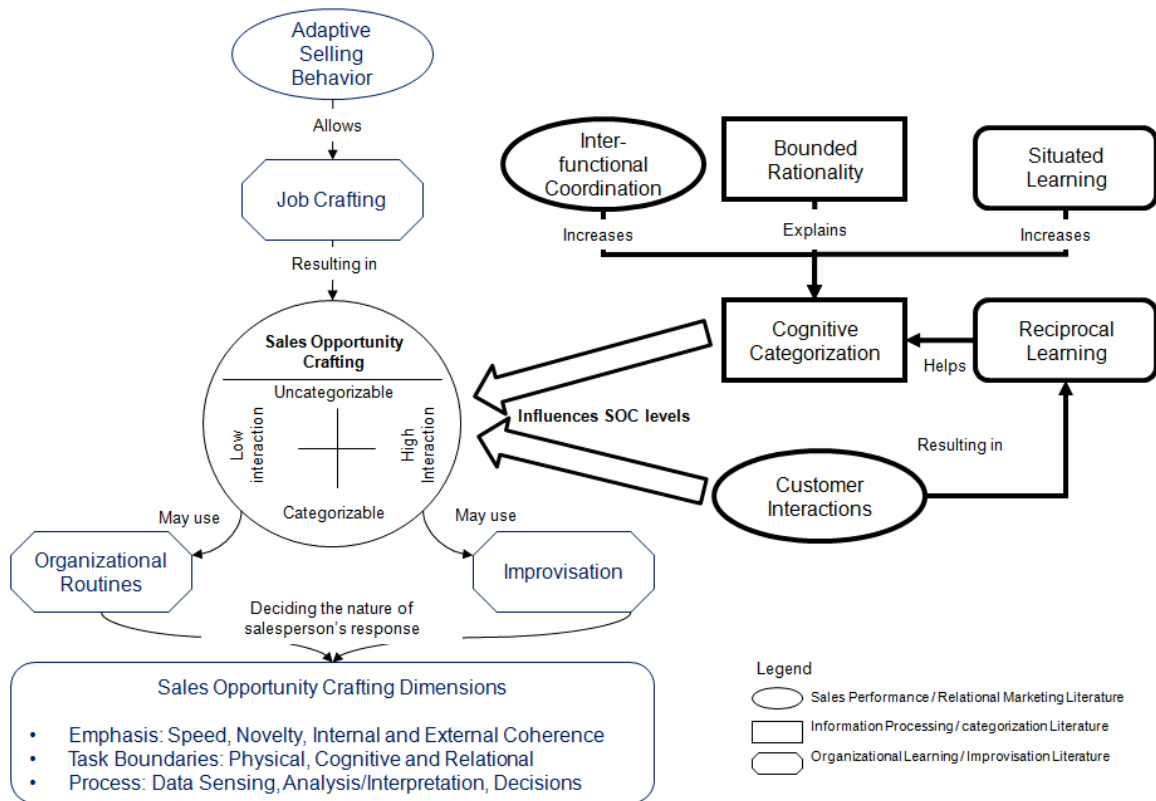


Figure 2: Extended Conceptual Model—Theoretical Basis for the Construct

Exploratory research results

In preparation for developing this research proposal five exploratory interviews were conducted with individuals from different organizations. The main objective was to confirm that the problem of practice raised in this paper is common among organizations and not just an isolated experience. The interviews were helpful in understanding the organizations' perspectives on how salespeople typically deal with the gap between organizational capabilities and customers' expectations. Despite their wide range of opinions on how to narrow this gap, these practitioners felt that it may be an individual salesperson's own initiative that ensures an organization is successful with its customers. The interviewees also pointed out salespeople rely on other resources inside the

organization—either during the sales proposal process or afterward—to maintain a positive relationship with the customers.

According to the interviewees, even though they are dealing with the same products and services, every sales opportunity needs to be handled differently. At a high level, the sales process might appear to proceed along predetermined phases of a highly abstracted sales methodology. But the granular tasks, such as customer interactions, internal meetings, and different crises that arise, are very different from one instance to the next. Few practitioners, especially the ones with business development responsibilities, mentioned that most tasks are not scripted and therefore cannot be generalized. They claimed their organization solves some of the resources problems for its select, top customers. The practitioners also suggested that the tenure and experience of salespeople help them respond better to customers' needs. To summarize, the interviewees' practices and opinions were diverse regarding how the salesperson approaches sales opportunities and works toward responding to customers.

The practitioners pointed out that their organizations expect institutionalized norms (i.e., solution bundles, associated routines) to be used most often. They observed that although organizations prepare their sales force by relying on recognized, established work practices, salespeople face situations in which they have to resort to varying the process in order to perform their jobs. However, these practitioners concurred that their organizations were committed to proactively developing organizational norms and to streamlining the sales process to increase its effectiveness. One can deduce from their comments that the gap between institutionalized categories and routines and the customer requirements is a challenge that these practitioners face in their lived world. In addition,

almost all of the participants mentioned that their organization prioritizes “key customers” by aligning key organizational resources to serve these accounts. These practices vary from organization to organization, ranging from structural adjustments to compensation alignment. From the practitioners’ comments, these organizational accommodations institutionalize the routines to a certain extent, but do not seem to eliminate the need for proactive efforts by the salespeople to overcome organizational hurdles. One participant observed that more than half the sales opportunities he deals with involve some level of variation in process during the proposal stage. The frequency of salespeople practicing noncanonical routines or improvisation seemed to be a factor of organizational capability levels. In addition to understanding how salespeople approach the opportunity when such a gap exists, it would be useful to understand the relationship between the amount of overlap between organizational and individual approaches to the overall sales effectiveness of the organization

Limitations of extant knowledge

Are the different approaches salespeople take primarily due to individual profiles and psychological traits? Sales and marketing literature are replete with studies emphasizing performance differences in terms of individual factors such as aptitude, motivation, skills levels, and role variables (Keillor, Parker, & Pettijohn, 2000; O’Hara, Boles, & Johnston, 1991; Walker, Jr., Churchill, & Ford, 1977). Do contextual factors (e.g., nature of the opportunity, organizational characteristics, the nature of the dyadic relationships) influence sales behavior as well? Practicing mediators from a wide variety of contexts have often described their work as an “art” and not a “science” (Picard, 2002). However, empirical studies have shown that cases and settings influence mediators to follow

predictable patterns in terms of roles, strategies, and relations with the disputing parties (Kolb, 1985). Similarly, could the opportunities (cases) and customer interactions (settings) affect the approach (roles, strategies, and relations) a salesperson takes?

Despite the recognized importance of customer satisfaction and its role in sustaining long-term profitable relationships, none of the literature discussed above directly addresses the nature of work processes, access to relevant internal resources, or the basis for individual actions in this specific research context. An examination of the problem using a combination of theories borrowed from various disciplines as discussed in the previous section may lead to a more complete view.

Sales performance literature offers a partial solution to the internal resources issue because it deals extensively with “key account management,” which combines structural configurations and special processes to provide differentiated levels of service to certain customers. This approach of selective relationship building with key customers has become a common strategy in business-to-business marketing (Ojasala, 2001; McDonald, Millman & Rogers, 1997; Millman, 1994; Spencer, 1999). Key account management will always be limited to a select number of customers considered as yesterday’s customers, today’s regular customers, today’s special, and tomorrow’s customers (Campbell & Cunningham, 1983; Millman & Wilson, 1995). However, this literature does not offer insight into why and how salespeople approach the task of developing a solution proposal differently.

The author’s experiential knowledge and the preliminary interviews suggest that the handling of sales opportunities in the business-to-business context is usually a loosely

defined process. As shown in Appendix 2, the extant knowledge explains various facets of this situation, but falls short of addressing them all directly. The exploratory study into everyday practices and the literature review highlight the theoretical lacuna that exists for explaining the problem of practice explored in this research. There is a need for additional research that considers the importance of sales opportunities in the business-to-business context.

Questions for further study

The purpose of this research is to explain the phenomena of difference in individual approaches to sales opportunities. Although there are many possible perspectives with which to examine this issue, a particular “lens” was chosen to approach the conceptual model. The sole intent of the proposed qualitative study is not just to test the validity of the proposed model, but also to gather additional viewpoints from practice for the purpose of building knowledge that can be generalized. The proposed model will be useful as a framework for data collection and analysis. It will also allow for the discovery of new insights not thought of previously. The inquiry of this study of SOC can be distilled into two broad research questions:

When does a salesperson use a routine or improvise the existing routines?

- What drives the need for the improvisation?
- What determines different levels of improvisation in different situations?

How does the salesperson improvise on the existing organizational routines?

- What are the different aspects of the sales process that are improvised?
- What is the resulting action based on the approach taken?

Suggested conceptual model

As mentioned earlier, SOC is an integrative concept that incorporates several of the theoretical frameworks discussed in previous sections. This framework suggests that the salesperson’s cognitive assumption of the opportunity and the customer interaction levels contribute to a salesperson’s decision on an appropriate response to the customer. The approach can vary along three dimensions—(i) task boundaries (i.e., physical, cognitive, or relational), (ii) emphasis (i.e., novelty, speed, internal and external coherence), and (iii) process (i.e., data sensing, interpretation/analysis, and the action). The suggested conceptual model is shown in the Figure 3.

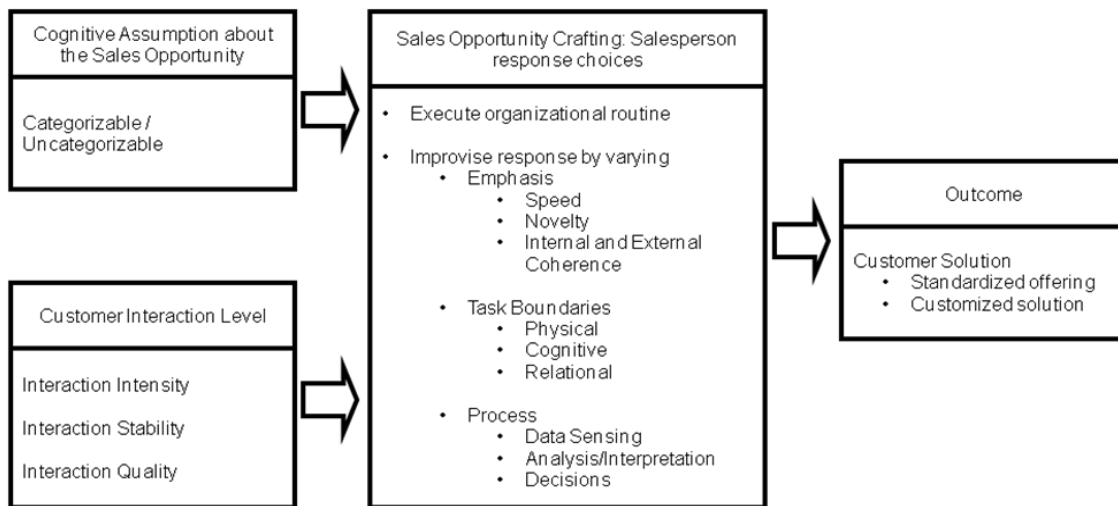


Figure 3: SOC—Suggested Conceptual Model

Even in highly proceduralized organizations salespeople usually enjoy higher job latitude than the rest of the organization. Job latitude affords salespeople some flexibility in their

approach to sales opportunities. Salespeople are considered to have “active jobs” that allow for higher decision latitude and higher learning opportunities, which results in higher confidence in their ability to manage change (Cunningham et al., 2002; Karasek, 1979; Spreitzer, 1995; Theorell & Karasek, 1996).

- Conjecture 1: Job latitude, as perceived by the salesperson, will positively relate to variance in their approaches to respond to the sales opportunities.

Extending Daft and Weick’s (1984) model of differences among organizations in their interpretation of uncertainties in their environments, a similar explanation can be adapted to the individual level, and more specifically, to explain the differences in approaches taken by the salesperson when responding to their customers’ needs.

- Conjecture 2: The SOC approach employed (i.e., whether to use the organizational routine or to improvise) by the salesperson will depend on their cognitive assumption (“categorization”) of the opportunity, as well as their customer interaction levels.

There could be different levels of improvisation with variations in degrees of novelty, speed, internal coherence, and external coherence (Chelariu, Johnston, & Young, 2002). In addition, task boundaries—physical, cognitive, and relational—can be adjusted depending on the needs as explained in the job-crafting literature (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Daft and Weick’s (1984) model also explains the differences in the process by which a situation is sensed, analyzed, or interpreted and an appropriate action is taken. In other words, the salesperson’s response process may differ along the same lines as well.

- Conjecture 3a: The SOC level employed by the salesperson will involve varying emphasis on novelty, speed, and internal and external coherence in the response process.
- Conjecture 3b: The SOC level employed will result in the salesperson shifting the task boundaries—physical, cognitive, or relational—if the existing processes are deemed to be inappropriate for responding to the customer opportunity.
- Conjecture 3c: The SOC level will also drive the exact nature of the process (i.e., data sensing, data analysis, or interpretation and decision) by which the salesperson approaches the opportunity.

Organizational routines provide codified procedures and knowledge that make organizations' resources readily available for individuals to perform their tasks. Executing well-made plans speeds up action by eliminating unnecessary steps, preventing time-consuming mistakes and midcourse changes, and building a common understanding that reduces coordination problems (Cooper & Kleinschmidt, 1986; Moorman & Miner, 1998). However, passive organizations readily accept whatever information the environment provides without actively engaging in trial and error (Daft & Weick, 1984). On the other hand, improvisation is an active process made possible only by drawing on available material and cognitive, affective, and social resources (Pina e Cunha, Vieira da Cunha, & Kamoche, 1999).

- Conjecture 4a: Lower customer interaction levels (i.e., passive approach) will result in a salesperson's higher emphasis on the speed of response.

- Conjecture 4b: Higher emphasis on the speed of response will be positively associated with the salesperson's choice of an organizational routine over any sort of improvisation.
- Conjecture 4c: The frequency of the salesperson's improvisation will be positively associated with the salesperson's own level of access to required resources.

Improvisation can generate learning and even produce an exceedingly unusual and novel product (Moorman & Miner, 1998). Improvisations lead to learning in three ways: (i) initially learning how to improvise, (ii) formalization/routinization of their improvisation, and (iii) learning more about their role in their "situated" environment (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Moorman & Miner, 1998; Pina e Cunha, Vieira da Cunha, & Kamoche, 1999).

- Conjecture 5a: Improvisation will be positively associated with developing a new "customer-oriented solution" that exceeds current organizational capabilities in order to meet customers' needs.
- Conjecture 5b: Improvisation will be positively associated with an individual's learning level.

Proposed research

Research methods

Following the initial, exploratory discussions with the practitioners that contributed to the development of this research proposal, the author plans to conduct formal qualitative research to gather data from practitioners on their real-world experiences.

Research setting

The salespeople employed by organizations that deliver customer-oriented solutions in business-to-business contexts will be considered by the researcher as the interview candidates. The proposed study focuses primarily on the sales approaches that result in a customer proposal. The study does not make any predictions about the eventual outcomes of such proposals either in terms of sales performance or customer satisfaction. Therefore, the research does not require any data to be gathered directly from their respective customers. Moreover, organizations treat their customer data with privacy and sensitivity, as required by governing regulations. The required customer-related data (e.g., salesperson's level of interaction) will be gathered during the interviews from the respective salespeople.

Interviewee selection process

The number of interviews planned will range from a minimum of fifteen to twenty people. The interviewee selection process will follow three steps. First, the study will be restricted to organizations in industries that have the complexity factors previously discussed. Industries such as (but not limited to) technology services,

telecommunications, large manufacturing companies, and consulting organizations fit this profile. Second, sales and business development executives from various organizations will be identified through professional and personal networks and referrals. Introductory e-mails or phone calls will be made to gauge interest levels for participate in this study. During the preliminary call, the following criteria will be used to determine interviewees' appropriateness for the study:

- Their organization offers multiple products and services that can be combined in various ways (i.e., solutions) to meet customers' business needs.
- The sale typically results in some form of annualized revenues as opposed to being transactional in nature. Therefore, there is also an emphasis on a continued satisfactory relationship with their clients.
- Their organization faces severe competition in a marketplace where the base products by themselves do not offer a value-selling proposition.
- Their organization is a medium- to large-sized enterprise with at least 250 employees and has customers and resources distributed in different locations.
- Their organization has a reasonable amount of marketing and sales process maturity as indicated by the number of preconfigured solutions, ease of customization, and established organizational practices to create access to the required resources.

- The individuals have a sales or business development role with a minimum of 3 years of experience in their organization or in the same industry.
- The individuals have had an opportunity to close a sale in past 6 months or are currently working on such an opportunity. This limit on the timeframe is to ascertain their memories are fresh regarding the details.

If the individuals meet the above criteria and also agree to participate in this study, they will be asked to provide a time and a location for the actual interview. No more than two individuals per organization will be interviewed in order to acquire a wide variety of practices across many organizations.

Interview protocol

The interviews will last approximately 1–1½ hours. They will be recorded and transcribed after the interview. The main objective is to gather qualitative data on the approaches used by these salespeople so a “grounded theory” can be generated by analyzing and codifying the appropriate techniques (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Each interview will begin with general questions so that the interviewer is acclimatized to the interviewee’s characteristics, environment, etc. After a quick discussion about the background, much of the interview time will be spent discussing no fewer than two sales opportunities that the salesperson has handled in the recent past. Interviewees will be prompted to discuss specific sales experiences such as “most innovative,” “most straightforward,” “most difficult to respond,” or even “most typical cases” will be offered. Based on the premise that variation in sales approaches are primarily triggered by some event during the sales process, salespeople will be encouraged to describe how

they handled the sales opportunity in a chronological, narrative manner. This method is based on the “critical incident technique,” which is a systematic, inductive, and open-ended procedure for eliciting verbal responses while “collecting direct observations of human behavior” (Boyatzis, 1998; Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Flannagan, 1954). Ideally, interviewees will talk about the “critical incidents” that forced them to make decisions about how to respond to specific sales opportunities. There may be more than one of these incidents during the sales process that helped evolve their final response in an iterative manner. For the purpose of ensuring some commonality and to facilitate comparisons between the cases, a set of probes will be available to use throughout the interview. Data will be tracked on a high-medium-low scale to measure the adequacy of the responses for each question, which will allow the conversation to be steered back to the topic if more information is required. An outline of the interview topics and the associated probes are shown in Appendix 2.

Significance of the proposed research

Trying to explain sales performance based on individual traits helps practitioners hire good talent and keep them motivated from the point of view of human resources management. The vital question being addressed in this research is how to explain the differences in approaches for meeting customer’s needs, even among highly capable salespeople. It only makes sense to consider this a significant problem in the business-to-business context because it takes tremendous organizational effort, in terms of time and money, to develop strategic partnerships with buyers. It is too important an issue to oversimplify it as something that is dependent on the characteristics of a salesperson.

The research questions—when and how SOC is practiced—should benefit practicing sales managers immensely. Understanding when salespeople follow routines and when they attempt improvisation might help organizations increase their own grasp of the environment and the extent to which they are prepared to meet the needs of their customers. Such knowledge might also help organizations assess the cognitive capacity and the processing capabilities of its salespeople. Organizations tend to evaluate salespeople using outcome-based measures while ignoring the impact of critical behaviors, which might harm organizations in the long run (Anderson & Oliver, 1987). On the other hand, understanding how salespeople operate can provide an opportunity to generalize the individual learning for the benefit of the rest of the organization. Individual learning without diffusion across the organization will not lead to improved performance (Baker & Sincula, 1999; Day, 1994; Yeung, Ulrich, Nason, & von Glinnow, 1999).

The knowledge developed in this research will be applicable across a broad spectrum of domains, and not necessarily limited to selling. The same conceptual model could be applied to describe the use of a mixture of organizational routines and improvisation in any organizational context.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Limitations of Extant Knowledge

| Theoretical Concept | Explanations Provided | Limitations |
|--|--|---|
| Sales performance—Adaptive selling, customer interaction levels and interfunctional coordination | Personal selling context, sales performance, need for resources internal to the organization. The response will be ‘adapted’ to customer needs using a series of ‘feedback loops.’ | How do salespeople approach different opportunities in business-to-business context? When do they modify their expected behavior? How do they overcome organizational shortcomings? Does the nature of opportunity and/or customer interaction levels have an impact? |
| Information processing | Human nature of categorization | Does categorization have an impact on how the salesperson handles the sales opportunities? How does a salesperson understand the customer requirement? |
| Organizational routines | Codification, institutionalization of knowledge. Incremental adaptation as a choice between different routines. | Does not provide context specific insights. There are no explicit links between categorization of knowledge and organizational routines in sales context. Prevalence of work practices that are not typically documented and recognized as organizational routines. |
| Noncanonical routines, situated learning | Explains work practices and situated knowledge. | Does not provide context-specific insights. How commonly do salespeople resort to noncanonical routines? How do they gain this learning? |
| Work improvisation | Purpose and nature of the work process deviations in terms of its temporal quality (decision of what to do immediately precedes the action). The improvisation is typically to access internal organizational resources. | Circumstances under which the salesperson will make the choice between organizational routines and the improvisation. What will the process of improvisation in sales context? |
| Job crafting | Job latitude results in reconfiguring the task boundaries, physical, cognitive and relational. | Does not provide context-specific insights. Circumstances under which salesperson will attempt to reconfigure these different boundaries are unclear. |

Appendix 2: Interview Topics

Interview Questions:

1. Please tell me a little about yourself? What are the highlights of your professional background? What sort of customers you handle?
2. Could you think of one or more significant sales opportunity that you have handled within the last six months?
3. Narrate how you approached this opportunity explaining the process of how you understood the customer needs, the sales opportunity, the appropriateness of the products and services you offer, developed the solution proposal, etc.
4. What were the results of the sales efforts?
5. Is there an overall approach or a technique that you have developed from your experience that has yielded successful results? What is your advice to someone who starts in your specific organization to be successful?

Associated Probes may include the following:

- *Experience, tenure in the organization etc.*
- *What is their approach to work?*
- *What do they find satisfactory?*
- *General fit of organizational products to market needs*
- *How is the organization structured to handle sales opportunities?*
- *Usual process followed and typical internal challenges*
- *How would you categorize this opportunity? Most innovative, Most difficult to respond, Most straightforward, Most typical case, In between, etc.*
- *How critical was this customer? Why?*
- *Who is your contact? How long? Nature of relationship?*
- *Are they a satisfied, loyal, strategic customer? Why?*
- *How often do you interact with them?*
- *Extent of reciprocity in the relationship?*
- *Are they rational, predictable in the relationship?*
- *What was the opportunity for?*
- *What value proposition was considered to be critical to close the sale? How critical was it competitively?*
- *In large scheme of things was this opportunity important to you? If so why?*
- *How did they develop their understanding of customer requirements? What process did you follow to understand the customer needs? Any deviations from the process followed in the past?*
- *Extent of match between (as-is) organizational capabilities (products, resources) to customer needs.*
- *What level of support did you have / access to internal resources to respond to the customers? Any deviations from the process followed in the past?*
- *What was the process to build the “solution” to meet the customer business needs? Any deviations from the process followed in the past?*
- *Why did you think the solution was the optimal answer to their business needs?*
- *Was this a “first” for the organization to deliver the product in such a way?*