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Relationship management: A sales role, or a state of mind? An investigation of functions and attitudes across a business-to-business sales force

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ABSTRACT

Commentators suggest that the business-to-business sales role is changing and evolving into relationship management. Previous research indicates that a relationship management role is very different from 'traditional' sales, and that it may require a different attitude on the part of the relationship manager. This research explores attitudes towards various aspects of relationship management across an entire international business-to-business sales force in a service industry context. We find that attitudes towards relationship management do not in fact align with job role. A cluster analysis reveals three attitudinal types of sales persons: Self-Directed; Team Leaders; and Strategic Sellers. Our findings suggest that some individuals may have attitudes that are inappropriate to their roles, and that attitudes should be taken into account when selecting relationship managers.

1. Introduction and conceptual background

It is almost 30 years since David Ford suggested that, in managing long-term business-to-business relationships, there is a role for what he called a 'relationship manager' who is the major contact for the client company and who takes responsibility for the successful development of the relationship with the client. He argued that the relationship manager role should be fulfilled by someone of sufficient status to co-ordinate all aspects of the company's relationships with its major clients (Ford, 1980).

Recent research has called for a distinction between the activities of selling and ongoing relationship management (e.g. Blythe, 2005; McDonald & Woodburn, 2007; Ryals & McDonald, 2008). This paper explores the role of the relationship manager, and the increasing requirement for sales people to transition to relationship management. Following Weitz and Bradford (1999), we define 'relationship managers' as those individuals responsible, over the long term, for the end-to-end relationship with a business-to-business customer, including communication, sales, and after sales service, and who act as the primary point of contact for a customer. We use the term 'relationship manager' to differentiate our research from the field of customer relationship management (CRM) which is increasingly identified with business-to-consumer markets and technological systems for customer management (e.g. Ahn, Kim, & Han, 2003; Blattberg & Deighton, 1996; Brassington & Pettit, 2000; Ryals, Bruce, & McDonald, 2005; Ryals, Maklan, & Knox, 2005; Ryals & Payne, 2001).

Despite the growing tendency of sales people to become relationship managers (Biong & Selnes, 1996; McDonald, Millman, & Rogers, 1997; Piercy, Cravens, & Morgan, 1997, 1998; Weitz & Bradford, 1999; Wotruba, 1996), little research has been carried out on whether sales people have a predisposition to undertake these relational roles. This is an important gap because of the different requirements of these two roles (e.g. Ryals & McDonald, 2008). Moreover, previous typologies of sales people based on the type of roles sales people are fulfilling (McMurray, 1961; Moncrief, 1986; Moncrief, Marshall, & Lassk, 2006; Newton, 1973) have not yet been extended to the service sector. This study uses an instrument, developed from the literature and tested through intensive pilot interviews, to examine the attitudes of an entire service sector sales force in an effort to address the call of Moncrief et al. (2006) for a greater understanding of the sales and relationship manager role in the service sector.

1.1. Emergence of the relationship management role

The emergence of relationship marketing in the late 1980s led to a growing interest in getting *and keeping* customers through relationship management (e.g. Aijo, 1996; Christopher, Payne, & Ballantyne, 1991; Grönroos, 1994, 1997; Gummesson, 1997; Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1995). The idea of the relationship manager was extended and developed during the 1980s and 1990s, particularly in business-to-business markets where specialized forms of managing customers have gained increasing importance (Homburg, Workman, & Jensen,

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2000). Researchers have suggested that the relationship manager role has different variants for managing different types of customer account: national account managers (Dishman & Nitze, 1998; Shapiro & Moriarty, 1980, 1982, 1984a,b; Stevenson, 1980, 1981; Tutton, 1987; Weilbaker & Weeks, 1997; Wotruba, 1996); major account managers (Barrett, 1986; Colletti & Tubridy, 1987); and, more recently, to manage the most strategically important relationships of the business, key account managers (Holt, 2003; McDonald & Rogers, 1998; McDonald et al., 1997; Millman, 1996; Millman and Wilson, 1998; Millman & Wilson, 1995, 1996; Pardo, Salle, & Spencer, 1995; Wilson, 1993) or even global account managers (Holt, 2003; Millman, 1996; Millman & Wilson, 1999; Yip & Madsen, 1996).

1.2. Traditional sales role

Historically, personal selling has been viewed from a transaction orientation (Cespedes, 1994; Jackson, Tax, & Barnes, 1994), a mindset reinforced by reward systems that focus on revenue generation (Wotruba, 1996). The traditional role of sales has been defined as "To stimulate, rather than satisfy, demand for products. To persuade customers that they need a supplier's product, sales people in this role focus on achieving short-term results for their companies by using aggressive selling techniques to persuade customers to buy products" (Weitz & Bradford, 1999:243) through the use of "aggressive selling techniques" (Weitz & Bradford, 1999:243). This role is supported by five basic types of activity carried out by the sales person: contacting customers, selling the product or service, working with wholesalers, servicing the account, and managing information between the seller and buyer (Cespedes, 1994). So, traditionally, salespeople have considered their roles fulfilled when the sale is made (Corcoran, Petersen, Baitch, & Barrett, 1995).

However, this tactical view of sales activities is beginning to change, driven by the move from a transactional to a relational focus (Anderson, 1996; Jackson et al., 1994; Leigh & Marshall, 2001; Wotruba, 1996). In practice, in business-to-business markets, relationship marketing for the supplier organization is largely carried out through people in boundary roles, such as salespeople, area managers, account managers and key account managers. These people increasingly play a key role in the formation of long-term buyer–seller relationships (Biong & Selnes, 1995, 1996; Burger & Cann, 1995; Doney & Cannon, 1997; Piercy, 2006; Weitz & Bradford, 1999).

1.3. Impact of relationship marketing on sales

Relationship marketing is bringing a change to the practice of personal selling and sales management as a result of this increased attention on long-term, buyer–seller relationships (Biong & Selnes, 1996; McDonald et al., 1997; Piercy et al., 1997, 1998; Weitz & Bradford, 1999; Wotruba, 1996). The salesperson's role in long-term relationships is increasingly seen as crucial in creating value for customers as well as for their own organization (Weitz & Bradford, 1999).

The transition to relationship management (Marshall & Michaels, 2001; Piercy, 2006; Rackham & DeVincentis, 1999; Storbacka, Davies, Nenonen, & Ryals, 2009; Weitz & Bradford, 1999) means that the practice of sales increasingly involves longer-term strategic roles such as customer partner, buyer/seller team coordinator, customer service provider, buyer behavior expert, information gatherer, market analyst, planner, sales forecaster, market cost analyzer and technologist (Anderson, 1996; Marshall & Michaels, 2001; Piercy, 2006; Rackham & DeVincentis, 1999; Storbacka et al., 2009; Weitz & Bradford, 1999; Wilson, 1993). Consequently, it has been argued that not only the role but also the necessary attitudes, competences and skills required of modern sales people and relationship managers differ from those needed by traditional salespeople (McDonald et al., 1997; Millman & Wilson, 1998; Shapiro & Moriarty, 1984a; Weitz & Bradford, 1999). If so, a re-evaluation of sales typologies that pre-date these developments and were originally developed around more traditional selling is needed.

1.4. Sales typologies

Until Moncrief et al. (2006) revisited their earlier work (Moncrief, 1986), the traditional typologies for sales people (McMurray, 1961; Newton, 1973) had been developed around the traditional sales role. However, a number of authors have attempted to identify the attitudes, skills and behaviors required by salespeople in relational situations in business-to-business markets as opposed to transactional situations (Biong & Selnes, 1995; Boles & Johnston, 1999; Corcoran et al., 1995; Lagace, Dahlstrom, & Gassenheimer, 1991; Leuthesser, 1997; Rackham & DeVincentis, 1999; Weitz & Bradford, 1999; Wotruba, 1996) and in services markets (Crosby, Evans, & Cowles, 1990) which Moncrief et al. (2006) utilize to provide a contemporary taxonomy of sales roles. Moncrief et al. (2006) suggested the typological roles of Consultative Seller (a nurturing role with existing customer providing product support as well as promotional activities making up 34.2% of the work force) and Key Account Seller (a customer partner role involving high levels of support services, contact time, product delivery management, making up 8.3% of the sales force). These types were identified through a cluster analysis of the activities of sales people, which identifies what sales people do but not their attitudes to the relational roles they are increasingly being asked to fulfill.

1.5. Attitudes of sales people towards relationship management

Conceptually, the notion that sales people have different attitudinal predispositions forms the basis for sales models such as Blake and Mouton (1964; see also Sternberg & Soriano, 1984). In practice, many relationship managers manage more than one customer (Ryals, Bruce, et al., 2005; Ryals, Maklan, et al., 2005) and the preferred relationship management strategy for each may differ based on the type of customer and the supplier's strategy in relation to that customer (Gopalan, 2007; Johnson & Selnes, 2004a,b). Therefore, the attitudes of sales people and of relationship managers could be an important issue for organizations wanting to introduce relationship management practices, in order to 'match' them to customers where their particular attitudes and approach chimed with the organization's strategic stance towards that customer. It has even been suggested that sales people who are good at traditional selling may be ill-suited to relationship manager roles (Ryals & McDonald, 2008).

1.6. Transitioning services sales people into relationship manager roles

Managerially, whether good sales people make good relationship managers is an increasingly important question. As the demand for relationship managers grows (McDonald et al., 1997; Piercy, 2006), it is the successful sales person who is most likely to be appointed into a relationship manager role managing strategically important customers. However, the requirements of the relationship manager role are very different from those of the traditional sales role (Ryals & McDonald, 2008).

Furthermore, Moncrief et al. (2006) argue that there is a need to investigate the roles of sales people outside the manufacturing sector (where earlier typologies have mainly been developed) and examine the service sector, which previous research has indicated might have distinct sales and relationship management roles (Crosby et al., 1990; George & Kelly, 1983).

The research aim is to investigate whether the modern sales force is attitudinally adjusted to relationship selling roles. It extends previous research on sales typologies into the service context, comparing attitudes and job roles across a large international business-to-business sales force in a service organization that had recently committed itself to relationship management.