



## Interpersonal influence strategies in complex B2B sales and the socio-cognitive construction of relationship value



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### ABSTRACT

The investigation of how exactly salespeople create value at the individual level of interaction is still incomplete. While there have been lively debates on value creation and co-creation processes at the organizational level in the business marketing literature, researchers have paid much less attention to the fact that such processes almost always start at the interpersonal level of buyer-seller interactions. Through utilizing a symbolic interactionist perspective and the ethnographic research method of shadowing, the present study moves research insights into value creation in sales forward by depicting the detailed activities and tactics that influence customers' value perceptions during the sales encounter. We complement the sales influence literature with three additional tactics: disrupt, reassure and dedicate. We also expand the framework of value creation in sales interactions by identifying three value strategies that change, strengthen or expand customer value perceptions through different socio-cognitive mechanisms.

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### 1. Introduction

It has been a long-established fact that through day-to-day interactions with customers, the sales force represents a crucial vehicle for value creation in B2B relationships. The relational perspective of value developed over the last decade in the B2B marketing literature suggests an even greater role of salespeople in influencing buyers' perceptions of value through the sales interaction (Haas, Snehota, & Corsaro, 2012). While a number of researchers have recently dedicated their attention to this topic, insights into the granular activities which aim to create or indeed change perceived customer value in the sales encounter remain scarce (Blocker, Cannon, Panagopoulos, & Sager, 2012).

To help fill this gap, this paper brings together two separate bodies of knowledge, namely the B2B marketing literature on value creation in sales and the research on sales influence tactics. The former has received prominence through researchers re-thinking value creating processes and acknowledging that value creation has to be partly understood at the relational, individual level of interaction in a B2B relationship (Corsaro & Snehota, 2010; Edvardsson, Tronvoll, & Gruber, 2011; Grönroos, 2010; Haas et al., 2012). The latter has a long pedigree in social psychology and has recently seen an upsurge in interest from sales researchers (McFarland, Challagalla, & Shervani, 2006; Plouffe, Bolander, & Cote, 2014).

From these foundations this paper builds a framework to understand interpersonal influence strategies for changing customer value perceptions in B2B environments, which we also refer to as value strategies. Our conceptual point of departure is that the successful use of any influence tactic is dependent on buyer interpretations and reactions during the sales interaction (Prus, 1989). Consequently, we use a symbolic interactionist framework in order to understand the salesperson and the buyer as individuals in social dynamic interactions (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1938). Social interaction is a scene for interpretation and meaning creation; thus, this perspective allows us to study the micro-level of sales interactions and specifically how salespeople and buyers shape the directions and outcomes of their interactions throughout the encounter.

This paper enriches existing research on the role of sales in creating value in business interactions as follows. First we provide an empirically detailed picture of how salespeople shape buyers' value perceptions, identifying the three new influence tactics of *disrupt*, *reassure* and *dedicate*. Second, we expand the framework of value creation as interactive and interpretive process (Edvardsson et al., 2011; Haas et al., 2012; Helkkula, Kelleher, & Pihlström, 2012) by identifying three value strategies changing customer value perceptions through different socio-cognitive mechanisms. Our third contribution is methodological: we introduce the perspective of symbolic interactionism to B2B marketing and sales, which allows us to conceptualize value as negotiated in interaction. We do so through a grounded investigation based on shadowing thirteen salespeople over two consecutive work days each, analyzing in-depth a total number of 40 customer interactions.

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The remainder of this paper will first position our study within the discussions in the sales and marketing literature on value creation and influence strategies. Next, we will introduce the relevant concepts of symbolic interactionism that form our theoretical perspective. An explanation of our research methodology, the shadowing technique, precedes the data analysis, which we subsequently draw upon to formulate a conceptual framework. Managerial and theoretical contributions to value creation and influence strategies in sales conclude the article.

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. Value creation in sales interactions

Salespeople are considered crucial to creating business value as they are in a prominent position to understand the customer's value drivers, communicate value propositions, and provide customer insights to the own company (Blocker et al., 2012; Homburg, Wieseke, & Bornemann, 2009). Different contemporary approaches, such as solution, consultative, or value-based selling, have proposed models of how salespeople create value for their customers. While these approaches start from somewhat different premises, they conceptualize typical value creating activities: Identifying and solving problems, aligning and integrating resources and communicating value (propositions) (Anderson, Narus, & Narayandas, 2009; Terho, Haas, Eggert, & Ulaga, 2012; Tuli, Kohli, & Bharadwaj, 2007). The underlying assumption common to these approaches is that through activities that improve the efficiency or effectiveness of the customer, the salesperson ultimately creates (monetary) customer value.

In the B2B marketing literature, the concept of relationship value has been developed based on the argument that value is not just embodied in products or services transacted between buyers and sellers, but rather that it originates in relationships. Originally, relationship value was conceptualized in terms of the cost–benefit consequences of relationships between two parties (Ravald & Grönroos, 1996; Ulaga & Eggert, 2005; Walter, Ritter, & Gemünden, 2001). Recently, scholars have started to describe value within relationships as experimental, idiosyncratic, contextual and meaning-laden (Edvardsson et al., 2011; Vargo & Lusch, 2004; Woodruff & Flint, 2006) and as “ongoing, iterative circular process of individual and collective sense-making” (Helkkula et al., 2012). This research defines relationship value and its creation processes as constructed in every interaction and perceived through an individual's interpretation of how an interaction contributes to coping with their perceived problems and situation (Ford, 2011).

Few researchers have started to integrate this interpretive perspective on value and value creation into the sales context. Haas et al. (2012) conceptualize relationship value in sales to include four facets: jointness, balanced initiative, interacted value, and socio-cognitive construction. They identify high-level key sales tasks for each facet that provide an overview of the crucial role of sales in creating relationship value. Building on these authors' admonition that researchers need to understand the role of sales in the creation of interpretive value in business relationships, this paper sets out to shed further conceptual insights into how sales people can influence customer's value perceptions. In doing so, we particularly focus on the socio-cognitive construction of value as perceived by the interacting parties. We turn to two bodies of knowledge to help us shed further conceptual insights into these processes of social construction of value perceptions: the literature on (social) influence and symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969; Prus, 1989).

### 2.2. Influence and interpretation in interpersonal interactions: symbolic interactionism

The symbolic interactionist (SI) perspective conceptualizes human interactions as interpretive and social (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1938). It describes social interaction as people interpreting other individuals' acts and responding according to what these mean or symbolize for them (Charon, 2007). The central concept of joint action (Blumer,

1969) indicates that individuals make continuous adjustments to their actions and perceptions because they know that they are ultimately dependent on the other to reach their respective goals. From this perspective, an attempt to create value is a social and symbolic activity as individuals try to fit their actions towards each other based on their interpretations of their counterpart's (re)actions and perspective. Thus, during every interaction individuals make sense of their counterpart(s), objects, and the situation. This sense-making is situated but also always relates to the individuals' situation, past experiences, future plans and relevant others, such as managers, fellow employees or other customers (Charon, 2007).

If we conceptualize the sales encounter according to this framework, salespeople may engage in extensive preparations in their attempts to anticipate and direct customer encounters to create relationship value, but they “are ultimately dependent on buyer interpretations and cooperation” (Prus, 1989: 22). Salespeople will make assumptions of the customer's interpretation of their own situation and problem either by interpreting their actions or by adopting the customer's perspective (Charon, 2007). While these salesperson activities are mostly described as intentional, they do not have to be consciously planned; they can also be ad-hoc, reactive or routine. To give an example, a salesperson might offer a cost saving solution because he or she interpreted a preceding interaction to mean that the customer contact is under pressure to reduce costs. However, that salesperson could then encounter a negative reaction due to the customer ‘misinterpreting’ the solution as increased workload instead, and in that case would have to adapt to the evolving interaction.

As previously argued, the customer's value perception of an interaction with a salesperson is defined by the customer's interpretation of how this interaction contributes to them coping with the perceived problems and situation. Applying the symbolic interactionist perspective, the customer makes sense of their situation based on the interpretation of the salesperson's behaviours as well as past experiences, future plans and relevant others. Therefore, to fully grasp relationship value we have to assume that all salesperson activities can influence the customer's perception of a) the product or solution, b) the relationship with the salesperson and c) the salesperson him/herself. All these perceptions ultimately shape the customer's interpretation of the interaction as being valuable. To get a more concrete sense of what these influencing acts could be in the sales encounter, we will now turn to the body of literature on influence strategies.

### 2.3. Salesperson tactics to influence customer value perceptions

Traditionally, research on influence strategies has dealt with intra-organizational and inter-organizational relationships (e.g., Farrell & Schroeder, 1996; Venkatesh, Kohli, & Zaltman, 1995). McFarland et al. (2006: 104) have called for a third layer of research within influence strategies, namely the “inter-organizational, person-to-person relationship in which the unit of analysis is the individual relationship”. The researchers apply Frazier and Summer's (1984) widely established taxonomy of influence tactics as used in channel and other marketing research to the context of personal selling, and more specifically adaptive selling. While they find the tactics of information exchange, recommendations, promises and (less effectively) threats used in a sales context, requests and legalistic pleas do not seem to be employed. However, as Table 1 shows, they add ingratiation (e.g. Spiro & Perreault, 1979; Strutton, Pelton, & Tanner, 1996) and inspirational appeals (Yukl & Tracey, 1992) to salespeople's influence tactics.

Testing the above taxonomy, McFarland et al. (2006) find that while extant literature links the identified tactics to specific buying orientations such as task, self or interaction orientation, buyers seldom have one dominant orientation and consequently different tactics could work in different situations. Plouffe et al.'s (2014) study on selling styles and influence tactics also finds an element of contingency in a seller's choice of influence strategies: “it is the mix of ingredients and how they are used

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