Relational selling: Past, present and future

Denni Arli, Carlos Bauer, Robert W. Palmatier

1. Introduction

Relationship selling is at the forefront of marketing practice and research (Palmatier, Houston, Dant, & Grewal, 2013), especially as new challenges—such as the rapid development of new technologies, growing expectations from buyers, and more administrative activities—hinder opportunities for relationship building (Dixon, Frewer, & Kent, 2011). As e-commerce has expanded, both business-to-business (B2B) and consumer transactions increasingly take place on digital platforms; by 2020, an estimated 85% of customer transactions will not require any salesperson involvement, implying a 33% potential reduction in the sales force (Baumgartner, Hatami, & Valdivieso, 2016). Yet B2B customers also confront increasingly complex service and solution offerings, which make trust and personal relationships critical (Nink, 2013; Vliet & Grönroos, 2014) and assign more strategic relationship management responsibilities to sales forces (Paasbrugge, Rangarajan, Sharma, Syam, & Jha, 2017; Sheth, Sharma, & Iyer, 2009). In this sense, relational selling is at a crossroads, such that some trends undermine strong, face-to-face relationships, but other trends demand such interactions.

In response, this study seeks to provide insights into the future of relational selling by undertaking a comprehensive review of research and practice that can reveal the impact of changing conditions, on the basis of three critical perspectives. By describing the evolution of relational selling from the 1970s to the present, Perspective 1 provides an important historical lens that reveals how relational selling has changed over time and thereby predicts how emerging changes may affect its future. In addition, this approach presents a multidimensional view of relational selling and provides insights to guide future research and practice. We also analyze key theories in Perspective 2, using these fundamental building blocks to assess current conditions and anticipate the future effectiveness of relational selling. Perspective 3 reveals key empirical insights from relational selling literature that indicate the most effective relational selling strategies, mediators, and moderators. With this approach, this study contributes to extant literature in four main ways. First, with Perspective 1, we identify four key approaches over time and thereby predict how emerging changes may affect the future of relational selling:

(1) **Individual selling.** The early roots of relational selling featured a traditional, one-to-one sales process, with a strong emphasis on the salesperson’s efforts (Borg & Young, 2014). Subsequently, it expanded to include both the salesperson’s and the buyer’s perspectives.

(2) **Buying center.** Buyer–seller exchanges soon emerged not as discrete events but as ongoing relationships. As a result of global competition, buyers and sellers increasingly engage in collaborative efforts...
to reduce costs while maintaining quality.

(3) **Adaptive selling.** This model of personal selling focuses on identifying customer’s needs and wants.

(4) **Customer orientation and solution selling.** In line with the shift to a service economy and increased focus on customers, the role of the salesperson has evolved from partner to value creator.

Understanding how such trends have altered relational selling suggests likely changes in the future. That is, we anticipate that B2B selling approaches will entail team efforts to maximize competitive advantages and develop, test, and apply new sales concepts and models. A frequency analysis of extant literature shows that team-based selling and solution selling approaches are likely to remain critical.

Second, we identify six key theories in Perspective 2 that underpin relational selling. The evolution of these theoretical mechanisms parallels the contextual trends; for example, the theoretical focus of relational selling research has moved from individual characteristics (e.g., seller, buyer) to dyadic and then to network perspectives, together with a shift from theories that suggest mutual dependence based on power and resources, to those that identify dependence based on trust and long-term commitment.

Third, Perspective 3 summarizes various empirical insights from prior relational selling literature. In settings marked by complex customers, changing environments, and technological advances, the seller’s behavioral adaptations and team selling offer sufficient flexibility to cope with customers’ demands. Cultural, social, and technological changes in business environments also imply the continued need for mutual trust and long-term commitment. Some relational selling strategies differ depending on the relational phase; efforts adopted at the wrong time can hinder the organization’s bottom line. With this review, we seek to specify not only what has been investigated already but also the direction in which research is likely to move.

Fourth, by combining the temporal, theoretical, and empirical insights from these three perspectives, we identify six key tenets for effective relational selling:

1. Increase the strategic role of inside sales organizations,
2. Gain customer insights related to e-commerce, privacy, and the legal environment,
3. Integrate relationship building across omnichannel interfaces,
4. Understanding the influence of technological applications across relational contexts,
5. Use big data for more effective relational selling, and
6. Leverage artificial intelligence for relational selling.

### 2. Perspective 1: evolution of relational selling approaches

To explore the evolution of relational selling approaches over five decades, we combine a literature review and keyword frequency analysis within a historical lens. As noted in Section 1, we identify four major approaches: **individual selling**, **buying center**, **adaptive selling**, and **customer orientation and solution selling**. The evolution across these approaches, along with key theories, selling modes, trends, disruptions, and insights, are summarized in Table 1.

#### 2.1. Individual selling approach

Relationship-oriented selling practices began in the pre-industrial era (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1995). In the early part of the last century, sales resulted from product availability or proximity to natural resources (e.g., water). During the production era (1870–1930), salespeople paid little attention to buyers’ needs and acted mainly as product suppliers (Powers, Koehler, & Martin, 1988), with the assumption that customers would buy whatever was produced (Bonomia, Bagozzi, & Zaltman, 1978). This traditional sales process relied on salespeople’s efforts or aspects of their personality to find prospective

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**Table 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theories</th>
<th>Sales model</th>
<th>Key trends and disruptions</th>
<th>Key insights</th>
<th>Illustrative papers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dyadic</td>
<td>Dyadic</td>
<td>High frequency of feedback and communication</td>
<td>Customer orientation and long-term relationship</td>
<td>Decker and Johnson (1993), Burt et al. (1995), Powel et al. (1997), Sheth and Krishnan (1990), Werneria (1994)</td>
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<tr>
<td>One-to-one</td>
<td>One-to-one</td>
<td>High frequency of customization and personalization</td>
<td>Customer orientation and long-term relationship</td>
<td>Decker and Johnson (1993), Burt et al. (1995), Powel et al. (1997), Sheth and Krishnan (1990), Werneria (1994)</td>
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