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Socializing behaviors in business-to-business selling: an exploratory study from the Republic of Ireland

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Abstract

For many salespeople in business-to-business industries, client entertainment is an integral part of their daily duties. Despite this anecdotal knowledge, few studies have so far attempted to examine the potential benefits and drawbacks of socializing with clients in a systematic manner. Presenting the results of a qualitative investigation, this paper shows that when approached strategically, socializing with clients can have positive effects on both the exchange as well as the relational aspects of the buyer–seller interaction. In particular, results indicate that some elements of a close buyer–seller relationship are formed as a result of the holistic experience with the other person and may only be established through interaction outside the office environment. The paper thus proposes that socializing strategies represent a unique tool in a salesperson's relationship selling toolkit—a tool that warrants increased attention in both sales practice and research.
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1. Introduction

In the last two decades, much effort has been devoted to the issue of relationship selling (Dubinsky, Chonko, Jones, & Roberts, 2003). One of the main findings in this stream of research is that in long-term buyer–seller relationships, economic exchange is complemented and often enhanced by social exchange (Dwyer, Schurr, & Oh, 1987). Surprisingly, despite the contention that social bonds are vital for a continuing and mutually beneficial buyer–seller relationship, few studies have shown how salespeople establish such bonds with their buyers (Claycomb & Martin, 2002). If part of a salesperson's skill set is to know how to initiate and nurture a strong relationship with a client (Rich & Smith, 2000), the sales literature should analyze what successful relationship sellers do with their clients in a social context and describe these activities in a manner that proves useful to sales practice and research.

This paper examines how successful salespeople in business-to-business selling use the social event to initiate, enhance and maintain a friendly and fruitful buyer relationship. It extends a concept formulated over 30 years ago, namely how salespeople 'cultivate' their client relationships through social interaction (Bigus, 1972). While sales research in the intervening years has referred to the positive effects of social bonding on the development and maintenance of buyer–seller relationships (Crosby, Evans, & Cowles, 1990; Jacobs, Hyman, & McQuitty, 2001; Jap, Manolis, & Weitz, 1999), it has failed to address such specific questions as the range of appropriate socializing behaviors, the mechanics of client social interaction, and the impact of such interaction on both relationship and sales outcomes. Presenting the results of a qualitative investigation of industrial salespeople involved in long-term buyer–seller relationships, this study elaborates on the inner workings of socializing behaviors and proposes a framework to assess both relational and sales outcomes of such

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behaviors. The article concludes by offering recommendations on how sales management can encourage staff to engage in productive cultivating activities with their clients.

2. Socializing behaviors in personal selling

Taking up Macneil's (1980) distinction between discrete and relational exchange, Dwyer et al. (1987) were the first marketing scholars to propose a framework on how buyer–seller relationships develop. Their discussion points to the fact that relationship maintenance activities such as 'courting and wooing' occur not only at the beginning of a relationship, but continue for the duration of the entire relationship cycle. This long-term perspective was highlighted by Crosby et al. (1990) who emphasize the value of contact intensity, that is, "simply staying in touch . . . and personal touches such as cards and gifts" (p. 76), for improving relationship quality. Social bonding between buyer and seller seems to enhance trust (Doney & Cannon, 1997), equity (Boles, Johnson, & Barksdale, 2000), communication (Boorom, Goolsby, & Ramsey, 1998), friendliness (Jap et al., 1999) and intimacy (Sharma, Tzokas, Saren, & Kyziridis, 1999). Personal satisfaction, commitment and sometimes even friendship are seen as personal benefits of intimate buyer–seller relationships (Butcher, Sparks, & O'Callaghan, 2002). Thus, social bonding between buyer and seller in a business context is an important antecedent of relationship quality; it increases the probability of continued exchange as well as the amount of personal satisfaction drawn from the interaction.

Despite this evidence, few studies have so far attempted to examine how sellers manage to create and maintain social bonds with their clients. While a number of studies investigated elements of social interaction in the sales call itself (Jacobs et al., 2001; Jap et al., 1999), none appears to systematically explore social bonding in the context of out-of-office client socializing. Sharma et al. (1999) note that client socializing can paradoxically both enhance and threaten relationships; they fail however to shed more precise light on how and under what circumstances the social event can be used to forge client relationships. In their study on the socializing behavior of purchasing agents, Brown, Boya, Humphreys, and Wielding (1993) identify two clusters of industrial buyers. The 'high socializers' tend to engage in after hour meetings and social chat during the sales call more so than 'low socializers'. 'High socializers' also tend to be younger and located in smaller purchasing departments than their 'low socializing' counterparts. While Brown et al. (1993) admonish salespeople to adapt to these different interaction styles, they elaborate neither the nature of social interaction nor the functional impact of socializing on the buyer–seller dyad itself.

For the purpose of this paper, we define socializing behaviors as client-related activities engaged in by industrial and services sales personnel that take place outside the normal business environment. Such behaviors can be initiated either by the salesperson himself, by the client or by the selling firm. They all involve a personal face-to-face interaction between salesperson and client and are set within the context of the strategic client relationship. An overview of the relevant selling and social psychological literatures in relation to this concept suggests four central themes, namely the issue of role enactment, contextual influences, self-disclosure, and power distribution. These will now be discussed in turn.

2.1. Socializing behaviors and role enactment

Bendapudi and Berry (1997) discuss social interaction in relation to customers' motivations for maintaining relationships with service providers. They differentiate between 'intra-role' social interaction that occurs within the exchange relationship, and 'extra-role' social interaction occurring outside the business relationship. They argue that extra-role social interaction may be more influential in increasing buyer–seller linkages than intra-role social bonding because the former provides a more diverse set of ties than the latter. Thus, by broadening the tapestry of enacted roles underpinning the buyer–seller relationship, extra-role social interaction can play a vital part in relationship maintenance and perceived customer dependence.

2.2. Socializing behaviors and contextual variables

From a social interactionist perspective, the setting in which a buyer–seller interaction occurs can be seen as an "interactive theatre" (Prus, 1989, p. 24), a stage on which players perform what they believe to be appropriate roles and where they in turn hold certain role expectations of other players. On this basis, a change of setting, from office to restaurant for instance, can be expected to translate into some alterations in the timbre of the relationship. Price and Arnould (1999) discuss the influence of setting on the development of social bonds between service provider and client. In their examination of hairdressers, it is in fact the servicescape that provides a 'sacred' space where the social relationship can be developed. Thus, one of the central issues in the function of client entertainment seems to be the impact of the setting in which such entertainment takes place. It can be argued that both salesperson and buyer may adapt their role behavior to the less structured environment in an out-of-office setting, allowing different aspects of their relationship to develop.

2.3. Socializing behaviors and self-disclosure

Encounters between buyer and seller in an out-of-office setting are likely to lead to qualitatively and quantitatively different exchanges from those occurring in the office environment. Such encounters might also be expected to

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