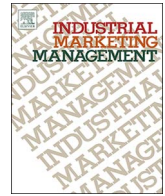


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Editorial

Sales and customer development: An agenda for inquiry

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A B S T R A C T

The impetus for this special issue of *Industrial Marketing Management* is the increasing importance of customer development in business-to-business markets and the unique role that the sales function plays in customer development. The objective of the special issue is to integrate conceptual and empirical research in the area of sales and customer development. The issue sought research that looked beyond the current thinking in business-to-business marketing.

1. Introduction

With increased competition, customer fragmentation, emerging technologies, and customer needs for closer relationships, the future of the sales function is being questioned (Moncrief, 2017; Sharma & Sheth, 2010). Customers and service personnel now increasingly do many of the activities previously carried out by salespeople, leaving salespeople to perform only customer development activities (Rapp et al., 2017). Most customer development activities require a deep understanding of the customer's specific business and the customer's industry. In addition, salespeople are more frequently required to sell customized, high value added solutions that calls for a deep level of engagement with customers to understand their needs and businesses (Sharma & Iyer, 2011). Therefore, increasingly in business-to-business markets salespeople need to not only understand their customers but also their customer's customers. These shifts are moving salespeople away from persuasion experts to customer experts (Sheth & Sharma, 2008).

Customers directly using call centers or the selling firm's website now increasingly order standard products and services that were previously handled by salespeople. We are also witnessing the growth and of the inside salesforce. The inside salesforce was traditionally used to handle routine products and services requests, but are increasingly tasked to perform selling activities. To determine the shift in the role of salespeople, Colter, Guan, Mahdavian, Razzaq, and Schneider (2018) surveyed more than 1000 large organizations across industries and four continents and asked business-to-business buyers when it was helpful to speak to a salesperson. They found that 76% of buyers found salespeople helpful when buyers were researching a new product or service; 52% found salespeople useful for repeat purchases of products with new or different specifications; 15% found salespeople helpful when

repurchasing exactly the same product or service; and, 4% never wanted to talk to a salesperson. Clearly, buyers are seeing a decline in the utility of salespeople and the role of salespeople is changing.

2. The special issue

Based on the shift in the roles of salespeople and the sales function, the purpose of this special issue was to bring together high quality contemporary research on the sales function and customer development in business-to-business environments. The papers in this special issue provide theoretical and managerially relevant implications and outline avenues for future research. In examining the issues of sales and customer development, research can address the issues at three levels — the macro level that encapsulates shifts in environments and emerging trends; the firm level that primarily focuses on firm strategy, sales strategy and the management of salespeople; and, at the individual salesperson-customer dyad level. Although broadly classified, the research does overlap. As an example, in examining the impact of technology on customer development trends, there will be implications at the firm and salesperson level. Our conceptual view of the overlapping research is presented in Fig. 1. We have three articles at each level — macro, firm-level and salesperson-customer level.

The first three articles address the implications of macro environment trends on sales and customer development. The first article that addresses the issue of macro trends is “Waiting for a Sales Renaissance in the Fourth Industrial Revolution: Machine Learning and Artificial Intelligence in Sales Research and Practice,” written by the co-editors of the special issue.

The article proposes that the next few decades will herald the fourth industrial revolution. They suggest that the fourth industrial revolution

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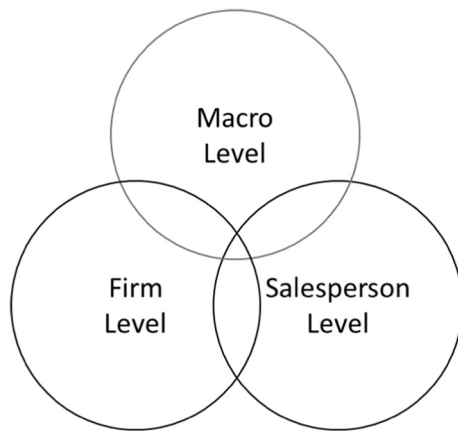


Fig. 1. Research topic areas in sales and customer development.

will be powered by digitization, information and communications technology, machine learning, robotics and artificial intelligence; and will shift more decision-making from humans to machines. They focus on machine learning, artificial intelligence and big data and their impact on personal selling and sales management based on the seven steps of the selling process. The second article “A Strategic Framework for a Profitable Business Model in the Sharing Economy” by V. Kumar, Avishek Lahiri and Orhan Bahadir Dogan examines the impact of the sharing economy on customer development and the sales function. They take a balanced two-sided customer relationship approach toward understanding the dynamics of the sharing economy business model (service enabler – service provider – customer). They propose a conceptual strategic framework and suggest that the proposed double-sided customer relationship framework will help firms take appropriate measures to keep all the actors involved in the process satisfied, loyal, and profitable in the long run. The final article that addresses macro trends is “The Transformation of Professional Selling: Implications for Leading the Modern Sales Organization” by Javier Marcos. He suggests that the nature of professional selling has transformed profoundly over the last few decades resulting in a fundamental redefinition of the role of the sales force. He finds three key drivers for change — the composition of the offer that suppliers bring to customers, the nature of the relationships between suppliers and customers, and the configuration of sales organizations and the role of sales people. The paper outlines the tensions that underpin the management of both transactional and strategic selling, suggesting the adoption of ambidexterity and paradoxical leadership in the management of modern sales organizations.

The special issue has three articles that address the topic of sales and customer development at a firm level (strategy, sales strategy or sales management). The first article focused at the firm level is authored by Wolfgang Ulaga and Ajay Kohli and titled “The Role of a Solutions Salesperson: Reducing Uncertainty and Fostering Adaptiveness.” They draw on extant literature in organizational buying behavior, industrial marketing and project marketing, as well as the distinctive nature of customer solutions, to delineate three overarching types of uncertainties among customers and suppliers: (1) need uncertainty, (2) process uncertainty and (3) outcome uncertainty. They suggest that the nature of these uncertainties changes as a solution evolves from one stage to the next (requirements definition, customization and integration, deployment, and post-deployment support). They derive implications for practice, and suggest directions for further research based on their model. The second article is titled “Relational Selling: Past, Present and Future” and is authored by Denni Arli, Carlos Bauer and Robert Palmatier. They suggest that emerging trends have put relational selling at a crossroad. They assess relational selling from three perspectives. Perspective 1 reflects the evolution of relational selling, to delineate how it has changed over time; perspective 2 encompasses the key theories that provide a theoretical underpinning of relational

selling; and, perspective 3 identifies which relationship strategies are most effective and under what conditions. They combine the three perspectives to derive six key tenets to guide managerial practice and research in relational selling. The final article at firm level is authored by Sash Vaid and Michael Ahearne and is titled “When Does CEO Endorsement of Sales & Marketing Leaders Help Firms? The Role of Heavy Marketing Emphasis.” The paper examines the impact of CEO endorsement of sales and marketing leaders on firm performance. They find that CEO endorsement of sales and marketing appointment announcements at firms with a heavy marketing emphasis hurts firm in both the immediate and year-end horizons. The paper develops a field at the intersection of research related to sales and marketing managerial succession, endorsements and corporate announcements. Sales and marketing functions are at the heart of customer development.

The final three articles address sales and customer development at the salesperson-customer dyad. The first article “Cooperation in B2B Relationships: Factors that Influence Customers' Perceptions of Salesperson Cooperation” authored by Bruno Lussier and Zach Hall examines perceptions of salespeople's cooperation. They find that customers do not always perceive salespeople's cooperation (e.g., efforts, behaviors) and salesperson and relationship characteristics can also influence perceived cooperation. Their findings help in understanding the dynamics of customer development and salesperson expertise and behaviors. Next, Mehdi Hossain and Lawrence Chonko examine how facets of communication influence customer loyalty in their paper titled “Relational Communication and Illusory Loyalty: Moderating Role of Self-Construal.” They find that greater bidirectional flow of communication enhances both salesperson owned loyalty and customers' loyalty to firm. However, greater frequency of communication enhances only salesperson owned loyalty. They also find an interesting moderation effect of these relationships by customers' self-construal. Finally, Timo Kaski, Jarkko Niemi and Ellen Pullins author a paper titled “Rapport Building in Authentic B2B Sales Interaction” in which they examine the skill of rapport building in establishing new customer relationships. Using in-depth qualitative interviews, authentic video-recorded initial sales meetings and conversation analysis, and customers' follow-up interviews, they find that salesperson-initiated actions have little influence on rapport building. They suggest a set of collaborative actions and related skills may be needed to successfully build rapport and firms need to develop their salespeople's rapport-building skills.

In conclusion, we feel that the articles provide a broad look at the academic research in the area of business-to-business sales and customer development. The articles in this special issue address sales and customer development research at the macro level, firm level and at the individual level. The articles make an important contribution to sales and customer development thinking in the domain of business-to-business markets. The research is both useful to managers and serves as an impetus to future research in this area. We hope that you find the articles as exciting and interesting as we have.

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