



Research paper

A process model of tacit knowledge transfer between sales and marketing

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ABSTRACT

Although an ability to generate and transfer tacit knowledge provides the basis for competitive differentiation, organizations face two primary issues when attempting to achieve this task. First, tacit knowledge, which differs from explicit knowledge in that it can only be gained through experiences, deep interactions, and learning by doing, is highly complex and therefore difficult to transfer. Second, as challenging as tacit knowledge transfer may be under the most ideal circumstances, the issue is exacerbated by the fact that sales and marketing professionals oftentimes have a dysfunctional relationship. Addressing these issues, we present and examine a theoretical model which captures the process through which tacit knowledge transfer occurs across the two functions. Study results, derived from a sample of 215 salespeople, highlight the important role interfunctional communication quality and the development of a mutual understanding play in this process. We discuss the theoretical and managerial implications arising from the study, and present opportunities for further research in the area.

1. Introduction

In an increasingly chaotic marketplace characterized by constant change and heightened customer demands, knowledge has come to the fore as a preeminent resource capable of providing organizations enduring positions of marketplace superiority (Hunt & Morgan, 1995). Organizations that are effective in acquiring and disseminating knowledge related to their customers and competitors outperform their rivals (Jaworski & Kohli, 1993; Slater & Narver, 1995), primarily because knowledge is a complex, higher-order resource that cannot be easily imitated (Hunt & Morgan, 1995). Recognizing this, organizations have invested significant resources to facilitate the dissemination of knowledge to ensure that all in the organization have access to it when making decisions. As an example, the global customer relationship management (CRM) software and support market is expected to grow to over \$40 billion dollars by 2023 (Liu, 2019). However, any technology is only as good as the knowledge contained within it, and not all knowledge is created equal. Many technologies are particularly effective at collecting and transferring explicit knowledge which, although valuable, does not provide a deeper level of understanding that is captured through more engaging activities. In contrast, tacit knowledge - knowledge that is “rooted in action, procedure, routines, commitment, ideals, values, and

emotions” (Nonaka & von Krogh, 2009, p. 636) - is difficult to disseminate and more pivotal in the delivery of customer value. In addition, as Polanyi (1966) suggests, tacit knowledge, important in its own regard, is also key to our understanding and application of explicit knowledge. Moreover, tacit knowledge improves a variety of business and marketing outcomes (Arnett & Wittmann, 2014; Cavusgil, Calantone, & Zhao, 2003; Ganguly, Talukdar, & Chatterjee, 2019; López-Cabarcos, Srinivasan, Götting-Oliveira-Monteiro, & Vázquez-Rodríguez, 2019; Wu & Lin, 2013). Yet, developing and sharing it is challenging even in the best of situations because it can only be gained through experiences, deep interactions, and learning by doing (Hirunyawipada, Beyerlein, & Blankson, 2010; Nonaka & von Krogh, 2009). It often relies significantly on social interaction. However, when those involved in knowledge sharing lack a cooperative relationship (e.g., marketing and sales), the results are less certain.

Though the topic of tacit knowledge has captured the attention of researchers in many disciplines, a thorough understanding of how it is transferred within organizations and in turn how to develop concrete strategies to enhance its acquisition and use is still elusive. Studies span a number of topics important to the firm, including tacit knowledge transfer within multinational corporations (Guo, Jasovska, Rammal, & Rose, 2020; Sheng, Hartmann, Chen, & Chen, 2015), joint ventures (e.g.,

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Park, Vertinsky, & Lee, 2012), strategic alliances (Becerra, Lunnan, & Huemer, 2008; Qiu & Haugland, 2019), and teams (Andrews & Smits, 2018; Kögl & Silvius, 2019). Much of the research examining tacit knowledge transfer focuses on factors that directly affect knowledge sharing (e.g., trust, conflict, and communication quality) (see e.g., Arnett & Wittmann, 2014; Becerra et al., 2008). In this study, we suggest that such factors have an indirect effect on tacit knowledge transfer, rather than a direct one. We propose that mutual understanding, an under researched concept in this area, mediates the relationship between such factors and tacit knowledge transfer. As Guzman and Wilson (2005) maintain, mutual understanding provides a relational foundation, which facilitates the sharing of tacit knowledge.

As challenging as tacit knowledge transfer may be under the most ideal circumstances, sales and marketing professionals oftentimes compound the process with their dysfunctional relationship. “Marketing blames the sales force for its poor execution of an otherwise brilliant rollout plan” while “sales departments tend to believe that marketers are out of touch with what’s really going on with customers” (Kotler, Rackham, & Krishnaswamy, 2006, p. 68). Conflict, disharmony, and distrust (Hughes, Le Bon, & Malshe, 2012; Kotler et al., 2006) create environments where individuals from both functions end up ignoring and antagonizing one another. Even though salespeople are ideally positioned to gather and share market-based information (Arnett & Badrinarayanan, 2005; Pass, Evans, & Schlacter, 2004), firms struggle with when the marketing and sales functions are not well aligned. As a result, tacit knowledge transfer between sales and marketing provides a crucial testing ground for examining the factors that affect tacit knowledge transfer.

By focusing on tacit knowledge exchange between the sales and marketing functions, we seek to improve our understanding tacit knowledge sharing within organizations by examining factors commonly associated with the marketing-sales relationship and quantifying their roles in either supporting or inhibiting tacit knowledge transfer. We present and test a theoretical model which captures a process through which tacit knowledge transfer occurs across the two functions. The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. In the section that follows, we provide an overview of our theoretical foundations and the rationale for our hypotheses. We then discuss our methods and corresponding results. We conclude with a general discussion that focuses on key theoretical and managerial implications.

2. Theoretical background and model

The notion that tacit knowledge transfer is a critical process allowing for the attainment of a sustainable competitive advantage is grounded in Resource-Advantage (R-A) theory (Hunt, 2000; Hunt & Morgan, 1995), a process theory of competition which explains the means by which some organizations are able to consistently outperform others. The theory holds that competitive prowess is a function of resources possessed, with certain resources being more valuable than others because they require processes that cannot be easily substituted for or imitated. The more valuable the resource, the more likely it is to require complex processes that are ambiguous and difficult to observe (Hunt & Morgan, 1995).

Tacit knowledge is a particularly important resource given how it differs from explicit knowledge. Nonaka (1994) distinguishes between the two, noting that as explicit knowledge is easily articulated and codified, organizations are better able to both collect and disseminate it across functions. Customer demographics, customer purchase history, and customer profitability are examples of explicit knowledge commonly contained within CRM systems. While this type of information is important, it does not provide the basis for a competitive advantage as it can be easily codified and disseminated. Tacit knowledge, in contrast, is more difficult to articulate and transfer. It requires learning by doing (Nonaka, 1994; Polanyi, 1966), and cannot be easily explained (Levin & Cross, 2004). For example, organizations that

provide complex solutions likely use multifaceted selling processes that take time and practice to learn. As a salesperson develops a customer relationship, the salesperson learns the intricacies of the buying organization and how the buying process works. The combination of relationships, buying processes, and individual personalities present creates a complex learning environment for the salesperson. While the salesperson will gather both explicit and tacit knowledge when interacting with the customer, the tacit knowledge will be much more difficult to explain and transfer to others within the organization.

The fact that tacit knowledge is not easily disseminated creates a challenge in that it is difficult, if not impossible, for salespeople to transfer tacit knowledge through a CRM system with confidence that the knowledge will be understood and appropriately acted upon by others within the organization. In this way, the transfer of tacit knowledge requires more than technology - it requires relationships. Because of this, organizations that are able to effectively transfer knowledge have a knowledge transfer competence that can serve as a source of competitive advantage (Reed & Defillippi, 1990). Arnett and Badrinarayanan (2005, p. 332) conceptualize this knowledge management competence as “a firm’s ability to develop, disseminate, and apply knowledge.” Building this competence requires the right mix of resources (e.g., informational, relational, organizational) that are blended together to create a complex resource that is unique and idiosyncratic to the firm (Grant, 1991; Maritan, 2001; Teece, Pisano, & Shuen, 1997; Zablah, Bellenger, & Johnston, 2004).

The complexity of this process is captured through our theoretical model, which is presented in Fig. 1. The model is consistent with the commitment-trust theory of relationship marketing (Morgan & Hunt, 1994), which holds that relational antecedents drive relational outcomes as mediated by attitudinal variables such as trust and commitment. The model highlights the importance of a mutual understanding, positioning the variable as the critical linchpin linking together relational antecedents and tacit knowledge transfer between the sales and marketing functions. We hypothesize that socialization efforts will drive the development of this mutual understanding, since these efforts enhance interfunctional communication quality and coworker trust, while also reducing the likelihood of interfunctional conflict. Understanding the important role management plays in integrating the two functions (e.g., Arnett & Wittmann, 2014; Le Meunier-FitzHugh, Massey, & Piercy, 2011), we also account for the effects of top management support.

The model is consistent with previous research conducted in other contexts. Two of the more prominent areas of focus in this research have examined the marketing-logistics interface and the marketing-R&D interface. With respect to the former, Ellinger, Keller, and Hansen (2006), based on their interviews with a combination of marketing and logistics managers, find that cross-functional collaboration antecedents across the two functions include inclusive communication, strong working relationships (characterized by trust and longevity), joint outcome accountability, and senior management involvement and support. In terms of the latter, Griffin and Hauser (1996), based on their review of literature on cross-functional integration in the marketing/R&D context, find that physical facilities design, personnel movement, informal social systems, organizational structures, incentives and rewards, and formal integrative management processes drive integration in the new product development process. Leenders and Wierenga (2002) similarly identify management practices, departmental physical proximity, incentives and rewards, information and communication technology, and organizational structure as important integration antecedents, while also finding that marketing and R&D integration had a significant and positive effect on new product performance. Taken in their totality, these studies highlight the fact that effective interfunctional collaboration requires a combination of interpersonal (e.g., communication, informal socialization, trust, etc.) and structural (e.g., senior-management involvement, organizational structure, etc.) factors. In the following section, we conceptualize model variables that exist at

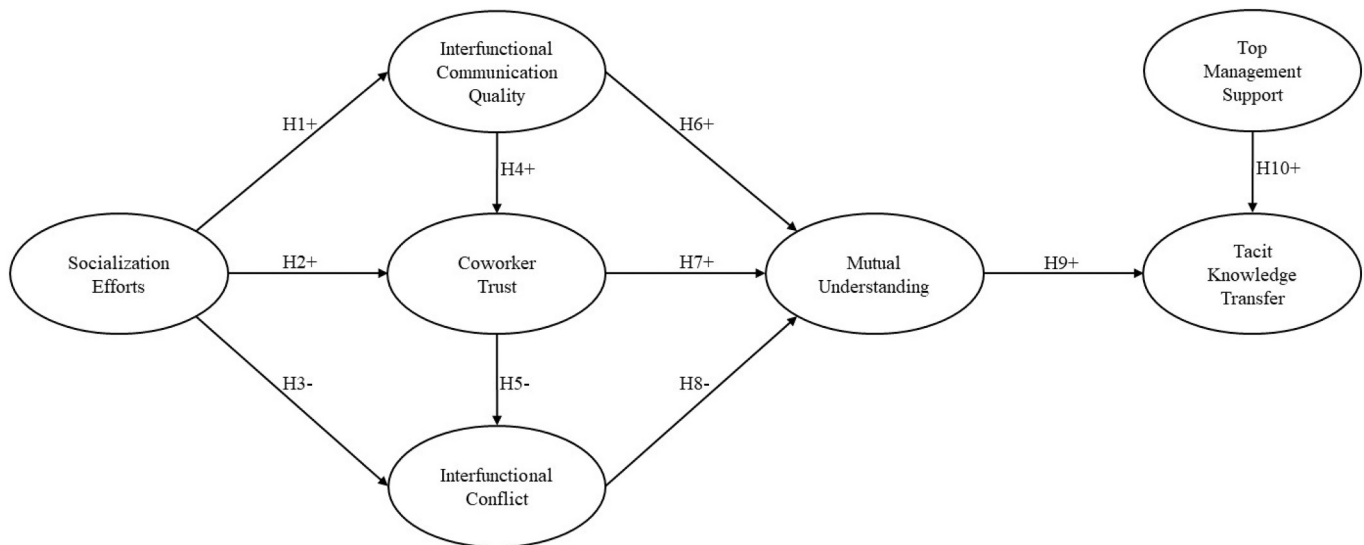


Fig. 1. Theoretical model.

each of these levels and provide support for our hypotheses.

2.1. Study hypotheses

Socialization efforts refer to those organizational mechanisms that build interpersonal familiarity, personal affinity, and convergence in cognitive maps among personnel from different functional areas (Gupta & Govindarajan, 2000). Examples of socialization efforts may include informal gatherings (e.g., company dinners), sales meetings that involve individuals from other functions, or opportunities to work together on projects, training programs, and cross-functional teams (Sinkovics, Sinkovics, Lew, Jedin, & Zagelmeyer, 2015). Socialization efforts specifically focused on the salesforce provide opportunities for individuals from different corporate functions to form social ties and improve communication with salespeople (Gupta & Govindarajan, 2000).

We hypothesize that socialization efforts between the sales and marketing functions will enhance interfunctional communication quality and coworker trust, while reducing interfunctional conflict. Interfunctional communication quality captures the extent to which cross-functional communication is perceived to be timely, accurate, adequate, and complete (Goldhaber & Krivonos, 1977; Johlke & Duhan, 2001). Consistent with Morgan and Hunt (1994), coworker trust exists to the extent that one party perceives another to be reliable and of high integrity. Thus, coworkers who trust one another believe that their colleagues will behave with integrity and can be relied upon to keep their word (Rotter, 1967). Interfunctional conflict refers to a range of unhealthy behaviors within an organization, such as distortion and the withholding of information, hostility and distrust during interactions, and the creation of obstacles to impede effective decision-making (de Wit, Greer, & Jehn, 2012; Menon, Bharadwaj, & Howell, 1996). When interfunctional conflict is high, interfunctional relationships are “characterized by tension and negative feelings” (Arnett & Wittmann, 2014, p. 327).

As sales success is predicated on the ability of salespeople to work with a variety of individuals within their own organization, managers will engage in socialization efforts aimed at bringing salespeople and these individuals together. These efforts should lead to improvements in relational perceptions and behaviors, including enhanced trust and communication (Goffin & Koners, 2011; Kulangara, Jackson, & Prater, 2016; Stephen & Coote, 2007). As salespeople spend time with marketers, they will come to not only understand the challenges marketers face but also the ways through which they can help overcome these challenges. Socialization efforts also provide salespeople an opportunity

to better educate marketers on the challenges they face in the field. Through this process, the barrier that exists across the functions will be removed as individuals from both functions develop empathy for the situations their coworkers confront. When this occurs, relational benefits should be realized in the form of enhanced communication quality and trust, and reduced interfunctional conflict. Moreover, as effective communication has long been cited as necessary for improving trust (Anderson & Narus, 1990; Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999; Morgan & Hunt, 1994), and extant research supports the role of trust in reducing conflict (Lee & Cavusgil, 2006; Palmatier, Dant, & Grewal, 2007), we hypothesize that interfunctional communication quality will be positively related to coworker trust, while coworker trust, in turn, will be negatively related to conflict between the sales and marketing functions.

H1. Socialization efforts are positively related to interfunctional communication quality.

H2. Socialization efforts are positively related to coworker trust.

H3. Socialization efforts are negatively related to interfunctional conflict.

H4. Interfunctional communication quality is positively related to coworker trust.

H5. Coworker trust is negatively related to interfunctional conflict.

We posit the development of a mutual understanding between the sales and marketing functions as the critical variable linking communication, trust, and conflict to tacit knowledge transfer. Extant research suggests that mutual understanding plays a key role in improving responses to customers, creating value, new product development activities, leveraging knowledge, and performance (Dewsnap & Jobber, 2000; Troilo, De Luca, & Guenzi, 2009). Drawing on relationship marketing literature, Money, Hillenbrand, Day, and Magnan (2010) posit that mutual understanding is an important characteristic related to partnership reputation and is characterized by the perception that each party understands the other. In the context of shared accounts, Cespedes (1992) identifies mutual understanding of others’ roles as a mechanism for encouraging coordination. Dewsnap and Jobber (2009) find that mutual understanding is important for sales and marketing to avoid misunderstandings. Brock and Zhou (2012) contend that a mutual understanding exists to the extent that relational parties comprehend one another on attributes critical to their relationship. This not only helps individuals from differing functions understand why things are done as a particular way, but also enables them to empathize with their cross-

functional coworkers. As mutual understanding increases, so do business units' abilities to work together in a synergistic manner (Brock & Zhou, 2012).

We hypothesize that interfunctional communication quality and coworker trust will facilitate a mutual understanding, while interfunctional conflict will detract from it. Communication plays a critical role in the development of a mutual understanding, as communication between parties better enables employees to work through problems and identify new opportunities. Through dialogue, employees are able to “reconcile what seems contrary between parties, making the reconciliation of meaning possible” (Ballantyne, 2004, pp. 116–117). Trust is similarly important, as it provides a foundation for individuals to develop closer relationships through consensus on areas that are important to the relationship. When two parties have trust, they are more likely to learn together and reach common agreement or mutual understanding (Ballantyne, 2004). In contrast, it is difficult for groups in conflict to reach a shared point of view because they often interpret situations and outcomes in their own way without regard to other parties' views (Erev, Wallsten, & Neal, 1991). Much as interfunctional conflict between sales and marketing has been shown to reduce collaboration (Le Meunier-FitzHugh & Piercy, 2007), interfere with the creation of customer value (Guenzi & Troilo, 2007), undermine effective strategy implementation (Malshe & Sohi, 2009), and impede integration when not managed constructively (Rouziès et al., 2005), we hypothesize that it will undermine the development of a mutual understanding between the functions.

H6. Interfunctional communication quality is positively related to the development of a mutual understanding.

H7. Coworker trust is positively related to the development of a mutual understanding.

H8. Interfunctional conflict is negatively related to the development of a mutual understanding.

We lastly hypothesize that tacit knowledge transfer between the sales and marketing functions will not only be driven by a mutual understanding, but also by top management support. Tacit knowledge transfer between functions captures the expectation that lessons learned within one function will be shared throughout the organization through knowledge sharing (Eng, 2006), while top management support refers to a commitment by senior management to promote knowledge sharing among employees (Lambe, Spekman, & Hunt, 2002). With respect to the former, the development of a mutual understanding is often rare across different functions (e.g., sales and marketing) because functional activities require different types of knowledge and capabilities (Postrel, 2002). For example, salespeople have deep knowledge concerning individual customers, while marketers may take a broader view and look at customer segments in their entirety. Thus, marketers may not understand the nuances of a customer's business and salespeople may have difficulty seeing the broader customer landscape. By improving the degree of mutual understanding among sales and marketing professionals, this form of functional myopia is reduced and the likelihood of tacit knowledge increases.

In terms of the latter, senior managers make decisions and set the direction for their organizations. They not only formulate strategy, but also influence how strategies will be implemented (Brower & Nath, 2018; Richey et al., 2008). Furthermore, top managers identify and invest in new and existing capabilities and practices that are believed to influence organizational success (Cepeda & Vera, 2007; Lambe et al., 2002). Consistent with previous research which demonstrates that top management support is instrumental in developing alliance competencies (Lambe et al., 2002), adopting sales force automation (Cascio, Mariadoss, & Mouri, 2010), and implementing a market orientation (Brower & Nath, 2018), we hypothesize that top management support is necessary for tacit knowledge transfer.

H9. The development of a mutual understanding is positively related to tacit knowledge transfer.

H10. Top management support is positively related to the development of a mutual understanding.

3. Method

3.1. Sample and procedure

A sample of business-to-business healthcare sales professionals was drawn from a nation-wide panel from the United States provided by a market research firm. Our decision to focus specifically on the healthcare sector was driven by two factors. First, as there are frequent disagreements between sales and marketing personnel in healthcare because of the regulations marketing employees must adhere to when creating collateral materials and salespeople must adhere to when describing market offerings, functional integration is particularly challenging. Second, in controlling for industry sector, we can account for contextual differences that may drive study findings when using a broader sample. Moreover, we decided to focus specifically on sales professionals given that the implementation of a market-driven strategy requires an outside-in approach to knowledge transfer. That is, firms seek to gather information from their external environment (e.g., on their customers, competitors, collaborators, etc.) and transfer that information back into the organization for dissemination across functions. This implies that the sales force is the initiator of the knowledge transfer process while the marketing group is the recipient of it. While we certainly understand that marketers should be aware of their external environment as well, salespeople are operating in this environment on a daily basis. In this way, they are the eyes and ears of the organization.

Our method in using panel respondents is consistent with current practice in business-to-business research (Herhausen, Miočević, Morgan, & Kleijnen, 2020; Seepana et al., 2020). Potential respondents were emailed an invitation to participate in the online survey. The invitation included a brief description of the study, a promise of anonymity, and a Web link to access the survey. A total of 261 respondents completed the survey; however, 46 respondents were dropped due to missing data concerns. Thus, the final sample consisted of 215 respondents. Of these, 120 (56%) are female, while 95 (44%) are male. The sample is well represented across a variety of age ranges: < 25 = 5%, 26–35 = 21%, 36–45 = 22%, 46–55 = 30%, > 55 = 22%. In terms of company size, 84 respondents (39%) work for companies employing fewer than 100 employees, 91 (42%) work for companies employing more than 500 employees, and the remaining 40 (19%) work for companies employing more than 100 but fewer than 500 employees. The majority of respondents (62%) have been employed by their current employer 10 years or less: < 1 = 16%, 1–10 = 46%, 11–20 = 22%, 21–30 = 14%, > 30 = 3%.

3.2. Measurement

3.2.1. Measures

All scale items were assessed on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree/7 = Strongly Agree). We adapted a three-item socialization efforts scale from Gupta and Govindarajan (2000). Interfunctional communication quality was measured via a three-item scale adapted from Frone and Major (1988). We utilized a three-item measure of coworker trust adapted from Morgan and Hunt (1994). Interfunctional conflict was measured via a three-item scale based on the combined works of Jaworski and Kohli (1993) and Morgan and Piercy (1998). We used a three-item scale for mutual understanding, which was a new scale drawn from Spralls III (2003) and others (Brock & Zhou, 2012; Kahn, 1996). It focuses on the extent to which employees from the two functions understand each other, know how their cross-functional

colleagues think, and can predict their decisions and anticipate their responses. Top management support was measured via a three-item scale adapted from Lambe et al. (2002), while tacit knowledge transfer was assessed via three items adapted from Eng (2006). All scale items are provided in the Appendix.

3.2.2. Measurement model analysis

Table 1 presents all intercorrelations, means, and standard deviations. Table 2 presents the results from our analysis of the measurement model, which we assessed through confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). Although the chi-square statistic is significant, results indicate a good fit between the measurement model and data per the standards advanced by Hu and Bentler (1999): $\chi^2_{(178)} = 343.05, p = .01$, comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.98, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.07. Convergent validity was assessed by examining individual item loadings, all of which are above recommended levels ($\beta > 0.70$) and significant ($p < .01$). Reliability was assessed for each construct by computing composite reliability and average variance extracted. Reliability is shown if the composite reliability statistic is greater than 0.60 and the average variance extracted statistic is greater than 0.50 (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988). All measures surpass these standards. Discriminant validity was assessed by examining whether the average variance extracted by each underlying construct was greater than the highest shared variance with all other latent constructs (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). This is the case for all measures. Thus, based on the totality of these results, the measures were deemed acceptable.

4. Results

4.1. Structural model analysis and hypothesis tests

Fig. 2 presents all significant standardized path coefficients and r-squared values from the structural model analysis. Fit statistics reveal a good fit between the model and data: $\chi^2_{(178)} = 343.05, RMSEA = 0.07, CFI = 0.98$. The model explains 63% of the variance in interfunctional communication quality and 50% of the variance in coworker trust, but only 12% of the variance in interfunctional conflict. In support of H1, socialization efforts are positively and significantly related to interfunctional communication quality ($\beta = 0.79, p < .01$). However, H2 is not supported as the relationship between socialization efforts and coworker trust is nonsignificant. Interestingly, and in contrast to what was predicted through H3, the relationship between socialization efforts and interfunctional conflict is significant, but in the opposite direction of what was predicted ($\beta = 0.19, p < .01$). In isolation, this finding suggests that interfunctional conflict between the sales and marketing functions increases as socialization efforts between the two functions also increase.

We shed additional light on these findings through our analysis of H4 and H5. In support of H4, we find a positive and significant relationship between interfunctional communication quality and coworker trust ($\beta = 0.63, p < .01$). Thus, while socialization efforts do not have a direct effect on coworker trust, they do impact trust through enhanced communication between employees representing the two functions. That is, socialization efforts facilitate heightened levels of trust because

Table 2
Properties of measurement model.

Item	Standardized Loading	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted
Socialization Efforts		0.95	0.85
SE1	0.88		
SE2	0.93		
SE3	0.96		
Interfunctional Communication Quality		0.96	0.89
ICQ1	0.94		
ICQ2	0.93		
ICQ3	0.96		
Coworker Trust		0.96	0.89
TRU1	0.92		
TRU2	0.96		
TRU3	0.95		
Interfunctional Conflict		0.89	0.76
IC1	0.82		
IC2	0.98		
IC3	0.75		
Mutual Understanding		0.95	0.86
MU1	0.94		
MU2	0.90		
MU3	0.94		
Top Management Support		0.94	0.83
TMS1	0.86		
TMS2	0.95		
TMS3	0.92		
Tacit Knowledge Transfer		0.90	0.75
TKT1	0.86		
TKT2	0.94		
TKT3	0.80		

$\chi^2 = 273.63, df = 168 (p < .01), RMSEA = 0.057, CFI = 0.99$. All loadings significant at the $p < .01$ level.

salespeople and marketers are more likely to communicate when socialization efforts are in place. The relationship between socialization efforts, coworker trust, and interfunctional conflict is similarly complex. In support of H5, coworker trust is negatively and significantly related to interfunctional communication quality ($\beta = -0.42, p < .01$). Thus, as one would expect, as coworker trust increases the likelihood of conflict decreases.

The fact that, as previously noted, the relationship between socialization efforts and interfunctional conflict is significant but positive may be partially explained through the web of relationships explored in H1-H5. Specifically, our results indicate that socialization efforts drive coworker trust because salespeople and marketers are more likely to communicate as a result of these efforts, and that coworker trust, in turn, significantly reduces interfunctional conflict. It stands to reason that this mediated path of significance accounts for the fact that the direct effects of socialization efforts onto coworker trust and interfunctional conflict are nonsignificant and counterintuitive, respectively. With respect to the nonsignificant result realized through our analysis of H2, socialization efforts do seem to affect coworker trust, but that effect flows through

Table 1
Intercorrelations, means, and standard deviations.

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Socialization Efforts	4.46	1.85	1.00						
2. Mutual Understanding	4.73	1.40	0.62*	1.00					
3. Interfunctional Communication Quality	4.67	1.60	0.78*	0.77*	1.00				
4. Interfunctional Trust	5.26	1.42	0.57*	0.66*	0.70*	1.00			
5. Interfunctional Conflict	3.63	1.59	-0.05	-0.29*	-0.19*	-0.31*	1.00		
6. Top Management Support	5.20	1.50	0.61*	0.62*	0.66*	0.73*	-0.21*	1.00	
7. Tacit Knowledge Transfer	4.73	1.41	0.66*	0.86*	0.82*	0.73*	-0.24*	0.75*	1.00

* $p < .05$.

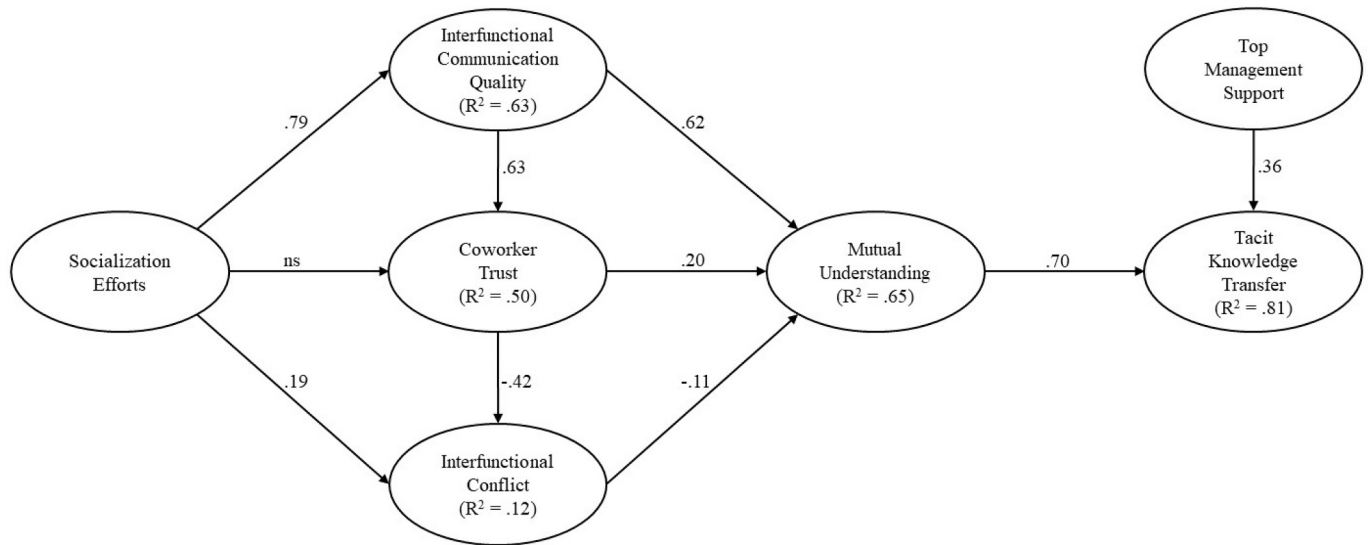


Fig. 2. Results.

interfunctional communication quality as opposed to flowing directly onto coworker trust. Similarly, and with respect to the counterintuitive result realized through our analysis of H3, socialization efforts do seem to affect interfunctional conflict, but that effect flows through interfunctional communication quality and coworker trust. Thus, this mediated path of significance is likely responsible for the negative direct path from socialization efforts to interfunctional conflict.

The model explains 73% of the variance in mutual understanding. In support of H6 and H7, interfunctional communication quality ($\beta = 0.62$, $p < .01$) and coworker trust ($\beta = 0.20$, $p < .01$) are both positively and significantly related to the development of a mutual understanding. In support of H8, interfunctional conflict has a negative and significant effect on a mutual understanding ($\beta = -0.11$, $p < .01$). While these paths are all significant, these results show that the effect of interfunctional communication quality on mutual understanding is three times greater than that of coworker trust, and six times greater than that of interfunctional conflict. Moreover, communication quality is not only important because of this direct effect, but also because it drives an increase in coworker trust, and ultimately, a decrease in interfunctional conflict. These findings highlight the importance of individuals from

both functions simply communicating for the development of a mutual understanding.

The model explains 81% of the variance in our ultimate dependent variable, tacit knowledge transfer. We find support for H9, as a mutual understanding between sales and marketing is significantly and positively related to the flow of tacit knowledge between the two functions ($\beta = 0.70$, $p < .01$). We similarly find support for H10, as top management support is shown to significantly and positively affect tacit knowledge transfer ($\beta = 0.36$, $p < .01$). While these findings highlight the importance of both antecedents, the effects emanating from a mutual understanding are twice as strong as those emanating from top management support.

4.2. Mediation test

Examining this further, a competing non-mediating model was examined. In constructing this model, we included direct affects from interfunctional communication quality, coworker trust, and interfunctional conflict to tacit knowledge transfer, while maintaining the hypothesized indirect paths through mutual understanding. Results from

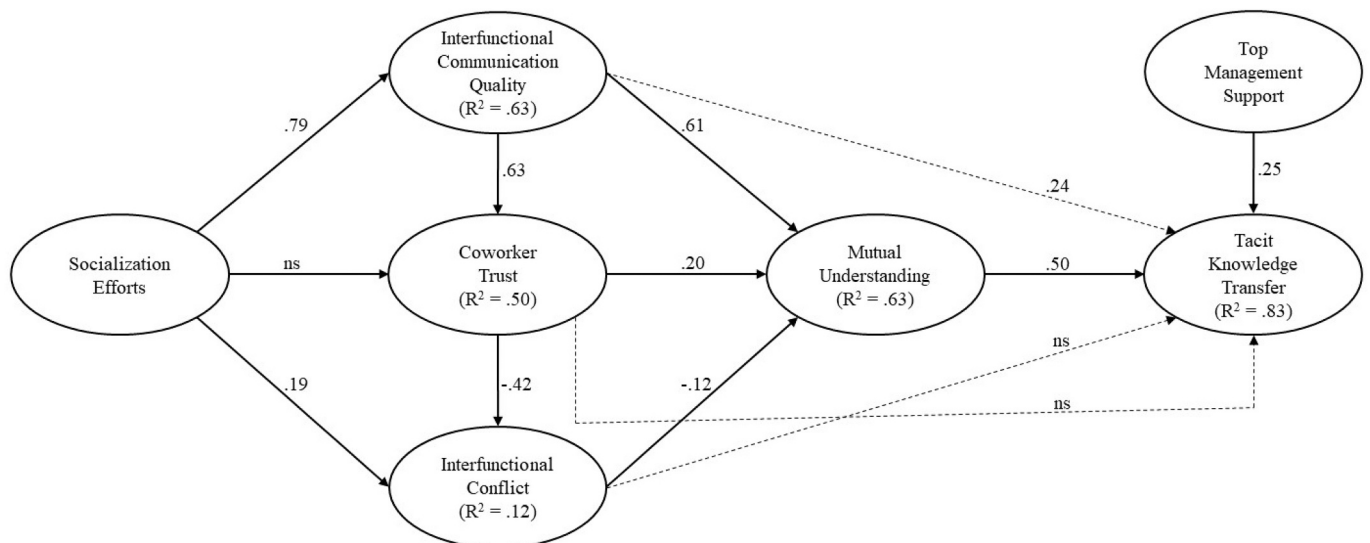


Fig. 3. Test for mediation.

our analysis of this model are shown in Fig. 3. The newly added direct paths from each of the antecedent variables are shown with dashed lines.

As three paths are added to this non-mediating model, three degrees of freedom are lost. Fit statistics reveal a corresponding decrease in the χ^2 statistic with the addition of these paths: $\chi^2_{(175)} = 327.63$, RMSEA = 0.07, CFI = 0.98. Further, the chi-square significance test indicates that the non-mediating model significantly improves model fit in relation to the mediating model: $\Delta\chi^2_{(3)} = 15.42$, $p < .01$. The non-mediating model would therefore appear to provide a better representation of reality. However, an examination of each of the three newly included paths shows that this is primarily a function of interfunctional communication quality. Even when accounting for the three indirect paths through which interfunctional communication quality affects tacit knowledge transfer [(1) interfunctional communication quality → mutual understanding → tacit knowledge transfer; (2) interfunctional communication quality → coworker trust → mutual understanding → tacit knowledge transfer; (3) interfunctional communication quality → coworker trust → interfunctional conflict → mutual understanding → tacit knowledge transfer] the direct relationship between the two variables is still positive and significant ($\beta = 0.24$, $p < .01$). The direct effects of coworker trust and interfunctional conflict onto tacit knowledge transfer are nonsignificant, suggesting that the two variables affect tacit knowledge transfer because they either enhance or detract from a mutual understanding.

Thus, in all, our comparison of the mediating model and non-mediating models reveals that, in the strictest sense, the non-mediating model provides a more accurate depiction of reality. This is shown through the significant decrease seen in chi-square statistics across the two models. However, this finding comes with a caveat, as it appears to be driven almost entirely by interfunctional communication quality. The variable is critically important as it simultaneously has a strong direct effect on tacit knowledge transfer, while also influencing tacit knowledge transfer through coworker trust, interfunctional conflict, and the development of a mutual understanding.

5. Discussion

In the following sections we discuss the theoretical and managerial implications arising from our results. In doing so, we consider the ways that our results both confirm and extend previous research on the issue. We conclude with a discussion on study limitations and areas for additional research.

5.1. Theoretical implications

The theoretical model we present posits that the transfer of tacit knowledge, an important resource (Arnett & Wittmann, 2014), is best facilitated when the exchange partners are able to achieve a level of mutual understanding. Specific to this study, we focus on the relationship between business-to-business healthcare sales and marketing relationships from the perspective of the salesperson. Following Morgan and Hunt (1994), we compare our model to a non-mediating model and conclude that while mutual understanding plays a key role in facilitating tacit knowledge transfer, interfunctional communication quality has a direct and indirect role in successful tacit knowledge transfer.

This research provides several important contributions to the extant marketing and sales literature. Morgan and Hunt's (1994) seminal article explicates commitment and trust as the building blocks upon which strong relationships are built. Although significant attention has been paid to the relationship that exists between the two variables (Garbarino & Johnson, 1999; Palmatier, Houston, Dant, & Grewal, 2013), some have suggested that researchers have focused on the antecedents of trust to the neglect of interactions that exist between trust and other relationship components (Geyskens, Steenkamp, & Kumar, 1998). They have noted a need for research examining other mediators in the relationship-building process (Palmatier, Dant, Grewal, & Evans,

2006; Sirdeshmukh, Singh, & Sabol, 2002).

Our findings address this call, as study results show a complicated web of relationships linking organizational socialization efforts to coworker trust and interfunctional conflict. While socialization efforts do positively affect interfunctional communication quality, they do not directly affect coworker trust. One explanation for these results is that trust, in this context, is driven by the quality of communication between sales and marketing professionals as opposed to employees from the two functions simply being in meetings, training, or arranged social settings. This suggests that trust cannot be built solely through socialization efforts but may be built on the outcomes which result from these socialization efforts. For example, it may be that socialization efforts allow for the formation of interpersonal friendships, which can then provide the foundation for deeper communications which build trust. In support of this, social penetration theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973) holds that relationships develop as the breadth and depth of communications between relational parties deepen. As this occurs, communications move “from superficial, nonintimate areas to more intimate, deeper layers of the selves” (Altman & Taylor, 1973, p. 10).

Contrary to the notion that increasing social interactions between sales and marketing professionals will reduce interfunctional conflict, our results suggest just the opposite. One explanation is that simply providing sales and marketing professionals with opportunities to socialize is simply not enough. Such efforts may allow for better communication, however, without a focus on a common purpose or goal, sales and marketing professionals are more likely to behave in ways that create additional conflict. Increased conflict between sales and marketing may be particularly acute because of the view that they have different goals (Lam, Van der Vegt, et al., 2010).

Contrary to the hypothesized model, we find that interfunctional communication quality has both an indirect and direct effect on tacit knowledge transfer. We specifically find that a competing, non-mediating model fits the data significantly better than does the mediating model we initially present. However, this finding is driven entirely by interfunctional communication quality. This is an important finding, as it highlights the fact that tacit knowledge transfer is inherently a communicative process. The finding makes sense when one considers the type of information being conveyed through tacit knowledge transfer. Deep insights into customers, their intricacies, and the processes required to serve them can only be conveyed through communications that are similarly deep. Much as teaching requires deep communications, so does tacit knowledge transfer in the sales and marketing context given the complexity of the knowledge being relayed.

Our results show that interfunctional communication quality provides a critical model connection, linking socialization efforts to coworker trust. While sociologists have noted the important role social bonds play in facilitating an interpersonal connection between relational parties (McFarland & Jurafsky, 2013), we find that sales and marketing professionals are more likely to trust one another not because of socialization efforts, but rather because these socialization efforts facilitate enhanced communications across the functions. Moreover, study results indicate that interfunctional communication quality, resulting from socialization efforts, reduces interfunctional conflict. This is due to the fact that communication drives trust, and trust, in turn, reduces conflict. In their totality, these results support the idea that our understanding of trust must go beyond simply identifying those variables that drive it. An equal focus should be placed on the interrelationships trust shares with other relationship components (Geyskens et al., 1998).

This study is one of the first to empirically examine mutual understanding in the context of relationship marketing. As referenced before, mutual understanding has been suggested as an important construct that plays an important strategic role and as critical for sales and marketing to avoid misunderstandings (Cespedes, 1992; Dewsnap & Jobber, 2000; Money et al., 2010; Troilo et al., 2009). Although we do not find that a mutual understanding fully mediates the effects of communication,

trust, and conflict, the variable is still important as it directly facilitates tacit knowledge transfer. When sales and marketing professionals communicate well, trust one another, and manage conflict, they are more likely to reach a shared or mutual understanding of how their cross-functional colleagues make decisions, think about issues, and react in various situations. Furthermore, when company executives set an expectation that sales and marketing professionals work together and share knowledge, they are more likely to effectively exchange tacit knowledge. However, when examining these two variables, our results indicate that a mutual understanding is far more impactful than top-management support. This finding suggests that tacit knowledge transfer is not something which can simply be imposed from the top; it must also be embraced by the individuals who actually work in the functions. By further examining the role of mutual understanding, we highlight the need for marketing and sales professionals (and others) to not assume that just because the relationship is good (i.e., strong trust and commitment) does not mean that those charged with executing strategy and seeking to share knowledge have a common, or mutual, understanding. More specifically to this study, mutual understanding plays a strategic role for effectively transferring tacit, difficult to communicate, knowledge.

In summary, this study contributes to extant theory with several theoretical contributions. The relationship between sales and marketing organizations continues to be an important topic in the marketing literature. This study advances our knowledge of how sales and marketing professionals can better transfer tacit knowledge, a key strategic resource. We empirically examine the role of mutual understanding in tacit knowledge transfer and establish to construct as having an important role in relationship marketing. We provide additional testing of the interrelationships among relational constructs including socialization efforts, interfunctional communication quality, interfunctional conflict, and trust. Finally, we provide additional support for the role of top managers in supporting the spread of tacit knowledge in organizations. Our results also suggest that top managers do not influence tacit knowledge transfer as much as mutual understanding. Thus, while manager influence is important, the relationship among sales and marketing professionals is more important.

5.2. Managerial implications

Researchers and practitioners alike have recognized the importance of sales and marketing practitioners being able to work together with the goal of delivering enhanced customer value. In an increasingly competitive and ever-changing marketplace, this importance is exacerbated by the fact that the sales function must relay critical information on the environment back into the organization. This is a requirement if the organization hopes to enact a market orientation. Hence, one might expect a high level of communication, trust, and mutual understanding across the functions as both are focused on the customer and actions that can be taken to deliver customer value. Despite this, unfortunately, sales and marketing organizations are all too often “sick” in the sense that they lack these things (Hughes et al., 2012). Although a number of researchers have proposed frameworks for integrating sales and marketing, we continue to see challenges across the units (Moncrief, 2017; Rouziès et al., 2005; Rouziès & Hulland, 2014).

This is particularly problematic given the importance of tacit knowledge transfer. When sales and marketing professionals are able to effectively exchange tacit knowledge, the organization is more likely to be efficient, effective, and innovative in its development of marketing programs (Arnett & Wittmann, 2014). Moreover, tacit knowledge sharing between the two functions is closely related to the ability of an organization to better serve its customers, improve its financial performance, and position itself against competitors. Because tacit knowledge is a critical organizational resource, it is important for managers to better understand how they can ensure it occurs. Our research provides several important insights on this topic.

First, the importance of interfunctional communication cannot be overemphasized. Communication drives trust, which in turn reduces the likelihood of interfunctional conflict. This begs the question - what can managers do to ensure an appropriate level of communication between the two functions? While this question seems somewhat simplistic, it is made more challenging by the fact that salespeople typically operate in the field while marketers operate within the organization. As boundary spanners, salespeople are interacting with customers while marketers are interacting with others in the organization. Our results highlight the importance of managers taking specific actions to bring the two functions together through varying types of activities. As we describe, socialization efforts can encompass a number of activities that tend to be more informal in nature. Managers should ask themselves the following questions: Are we doing enough to bring these two functions together? Are we organizing and promoting informal events through which employees from both functions can further develop their social bonds? These questions are important, as our results suggest that these bonds provide a foundation from which communication can flow.

Second, managers should examine the overall structure of their organizations and the means through which new salespeople and marketers are integrated into them. If the development of social bonds is the accelerant that allows for enhanced communication and trust, might there be ways through which managers can further facilitate the development of these bonds when employees first join the organization? For example, many organizations are now employing extended training programs that have a rotational element to them. Thus, even those who may ultimately work in the sales organization are exposed to other functional groups such as marketing and operations. As noted by Reh (2019), these programs are beneficial in that they improve employees' awareness of other roles and functions, while also strengthening customer support due to the development of more knowledgeable employees. Organizations are also relying more heavily on inside sales forces. In many instances, the inside sales force supports the outside group, identifying prospects and securing appointments while also assisting with post-sale service. As these salespeople operate inside the organization, they have greater exposure to employees from other functional units. Given that many inside salespeople are new to the organization (i.e., they start in inside sales before transferring into an outside role as performance dictates), using this time as a means through which they can gain exposure to their marketing counterparts will not only enhance their understanding of what marketing does, but also provide a platform from which interpersonal relationships can develop.

Third, on a related note, the inside sales group can be relied upon as a structural mechanism designed to assist with the transfer of tacit knowledge. As noted, one of the challenges of tacit knowledge transfer comes from the fact that this type of knowledge is not easily codified. As an example of this issue, deep insights into the intricacies present in a particular customer account are not easily captured through a CRM system, as these systems are more effective at transferring knowledge that is explicit in nature. However, as the outside sales force works closely with the inside sales force, and the inside sales force is in close physical proximity to the marketing organization, managers could utilize the inside group as a conduit to better ensure the transfer of tacit knowledge from the field to the marketing group. Given their knowledge of the outside sales force, the inside group could interpret information being provided by their external counterparts and relay this information in an understandable way.

Fourth, managers should consider the use of cross-functional work teams organized around customers. This not only provides a mechanism through which customer satisfaction can be better ensured, but should also help to facilitate communication among employees who play a pivotal role in ensuring this satisfaction. For example, when a team consists of salespeople (a combination of outside and inside salespeople, perhaps), marketers, and individuals from other functional units, a greater level of socialization and communication seems likely. Moreover, as these employees spend time together, they should come to

better understand and appreciate the challenges their colleagues face, thereby enhancing the level of mutual understanding that exists within the team.

Fifth, related to this last point, as study results suggest that the creation of a mutual understanding plays a pivotal role in the tacit knowledge transfer process, managers should evaluate the level of understanding that exists across the functions within their organization. When there is a disconnect, there are several actions that managers can take to improve the situation. Sales and marketing managers should first seek to identify how the breakdown in understanding occurred. Is it due to a lack of communication? Was there an event that damaged trust between the functions? Is conflict rising to a level that is dysfunctional? How long has it been since members of the organization have had the opportunity to work together or meet? Once the sources of the issues have been determined, managers can then take actions for improvement. These actions should not be limited to social gatherings. Rather, managers should identify specific projects or tasks where sales and marketing professionals can work closely together to achieve a common, specific goal. Such cooperation may reduce the tendency for sales and marketing to view their objectives as unrelated and in conflict with their strategic mission of providing value to customers. Furthermore, unless managers ensure that sales and marketing organizations share a common view of goals, objectives, values, and the logic for strategies and tactics, creation and transfer of tacit knowledge will be limited and hinder the firm's ability to achieve a competitive advantage.

5.3. Limitations and future research directions

Our study is subject to many of the limitations typically associated with cross-sectional research. First, study data were collected through a commercial provider of panel data. Though we were careful to screen respondents, there may be some concerns regarding this approach. Specifically, when using panel respondents there is the possibility that respondents may not be representative of the larger population due to their motivation to participate in the study. While we understand this concern, every attempt was made to ensure that the sample was in fact representative of salespeople in the healthcare sector.

Second, although we examine relationships between variables, we do not capture the longitudinal nature of these relationships. For example, while our arguments imply that enhanced communication comes from socialization efforts, verifying this sequence would require a longitudinal design wherein socialization efforts were increased and an accompanying change in communication was then examined. Although this seems less likely, one could argue that interfunctional communication instead drives an openness to socialization efforts, and that the relationship should therefore be reversed. Future research employing a longitudinal design could address this concern.

Third, we made the decision to limit our sample to a particular sector of the economy. While this allows us to control for industry influences that may affect study findings, it also limits the generalizability of our results. Given the importance of the issue, future research should examine it further in contexts beyond healthcare. Fourth, the study is conducted from the perspective of the salesperson. In any study of this type, where functional integration is the goal, use of a paired data collection approach that allows for the collection of data from both sides of the dyad is desirable, albeit challenging. Future research employing this approach could examine similarities and differences across the two groups of respondents to further advance our understanding of the issue.

Fifth, sales professionals commonly provide a direct link to business-to-business customers and therefore create significant tacit knowledge. One limitation of this research is that we do not explore relationships with other functions that are critical to organizational success (e.g., logistics, supply chain, and production). This is both a limitation and an opportunity for future research. Lastly, while we position tacit knowledge transfer as our ultimate dependent variable, future research should extend this with a focus on the customer- and organizational-level

outcomes realized through the knowledge transfer process. As an example, one would expect improvements in customer satisfaction assessments and customer value perceptions as the organization becomes adept at transferring tacit knowledge. With this, one would also expect that firm financial performance would be enhanced. Verifying these expectations and quantifying the true effects emanating from tacit knowledge transfer would assist managers in understanding the resources they should allocate to the issue.

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Appendix A. Appendix. Scale items

Socialization Efforts – Gupta and Govindarajan (2000).

SE1: When we have meetings, they often include people from marketing.

SE2: Members of marketing are easily accessible to people in sales.

SE3: We are given ample opportunities to get to know people from the marketing.

Interfunctional Communication Quality – Frone and Major (1988).

ICQ1: Communication that I have with marketing is accurate.

ICQ2: Communication that I have with marketing is adequate.

ICQ3: Communication that I have with marketing is complete.

Coworker Trust – Morgan and Hunt (1994).

In our firm, employees in marketing:

TRU1: ...are honest

TRU2: ...can be counted on to do what is right.

TRU3: ...have high integrity.

Interfunctional Conflict – Jaworski and Kohli (1993); Morgan and Piercy (1998).

IC1: Tensions frequently run high when members from sales and marketing work together.

IC2: People from sales and marketing dislike having to work together.

IC3: The objectives of sales and marketing are often incompatible with each other.

Mutual Understanding – drawn from Spralls (2003); Brock and Zhou (2012); Kahn (1996).

In my firm, sales and marketing:

MU1: ...know how each other thinks.

MU2: ...can predict how each other will react in a given situation.

MU3: ...anticipate each other's decisions.

Top Management Support – Lambe et al. (2002).

TMS1: Senior managers in our firm believe that the sharing of knowledge among employees plays a role in the future success of our firm.

TMS2: It is clear that senior managers in our firm want employees to share their knowledge.

TMS3: I feel that knowledge sharing is strongly supported by senior managers in our firm.

Tacit Knowledge Transfer – Eng (2006).

TKT1: Employees in sales and marketing teach each other the knowledge that they have learned.

TKT2: There is a good deal of conversation between sales and marketing that keeps alive lessons learned.

TKT3: Sales and marketing share lessons learned from unsuccessful organizational endeavors.

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