Personal Selling and the Internet: Is the Trusted Advisor Role Obsolete?

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Introduction

The role of the sales representative in organizational buying behavior has been a subject of previous study since the mid-20th century. An unbiased information exchange between the buyer and seller is an integral part of a long-term customer relationship. Recent personal selling literature suggests that successful business-to-business (B2B) salespeople evolve their role to a business advisor to their customers (Thull, 2007). However, the internet represents an alternative source of product, industry and competitive information normally included in a seller-buyer relationship. Personal technology behaviors have spilled over into the business environment often replacing personal communications with customers and colleagues with impersonal electronic exchanges (Bulik, 2004). This paper examines the organizational buying environment, established expectations for the buyer-seller relationship, and whether growing use of the internet, has altered the buyer-seller exchange.

The remainder of this paper includes a review of the evolution of personal selling and the role of communication, information exchange, and personal interaction between buyer and seller representatives as well as salesperson relationship building behaviors. Salesperson trustworthiness and role of effective reciprocal communications in the relationship is also examined in the context of a "trusted advisor" role. Finally, a call for further research addresses the opening question; does growing use of the internet negatively impact the buyer-seller exchange?

Evolution of Personal Selling

Roles, tasks, and behaviors in personal selling have evolved reflecting differences in the periods of time, markets, and economic conditions. Four recent eras include production, sales, marketing and the human era. Subsequently, the sales roles for the respective eras were described as provider, persuader, prospector, problem-solver and procreator (Wotruba, 1991). Purchases with highly strategic importance, turbulent market conditions and uncertainty bring higher risk to organizational decision-making. Therefore, reliance on information from the seller's representatives has been a critical component in the decision process (Belonax, Newell & Plank, 2000.

Through each era, communication between buyer and seller evolved with increasing emphasis on understanding of the buyer's wants and needs and structuring a responsive offering (Seth, 1976). Sales methodologies also evolved to reflect the increased requirement for information exchange at all levels within the buying center. In order to address complex sales scenarios, team-selling (l970's) and solution-selling (1980's), were devised to provide technical competency and information specialization during the sales cycle while structuring an offering tailored to the customer's requirements (Miller, Heiman & Tuleja, 1987). The role of the sales representative also evolved from a solo endeavor to that of a conductor orchestrating the seller's interaction with the buyer throughout the cycle. However, in both cases, the sales methodology was based on an assumption of selling the company's offering for "best fit" to the buyer's identified need and requirements. Weitz and Bradford (1999) note the evolution of the sales representative's role in the exchange relationship to a "partner" reflecting an alignment of shared interests in the outcomes.

As a partner, a salesperson provides accurate information; assisting in problem determination, analyzing alternatives, developing of buying specifications, and formulating decision criteria. While similar activities were embedded in both team-selling and solution-selling methodologies, the focus was on pitching the seller's products and services. The procreator role described by Wotruba (1991) and partner role describe by Weitz and Bradford (1999) marks the evolution from team-selling and solution-selling to an interactive relationship where the sales representative is more proactive identifying problems, sharing information about potential alternatives, and creating ways of creating value for the customer.

Macintosh, Anglin, Szymanski and Gentry (1992) found that high performing salespeople focused on putting their prospect first in any information exchange. More effort was put into gaining information about the prospect, their needs, and perceptions. The result was the salesperson's ability to focus on sharing information with the prospect based on the prospect's concerns. Thull (2007) reinforced this viewpoint suggesting the effectiveness of solution-selling has been replaced by refocusing on a consultant role where information exchange is based on a more in-depth understanding of the buyer's organization and helping the buyer gain competitive advantage with its customers without necessarily requiring purchasing the seller's products or service.

Trusted Advisor.

In the sales realm "trusted advisor" is often used to describe the salesperson role model at the pinnacle of customer relationship based sales (Maister, Green & Galford, 2000a). The term first appeared in management and organization development as a role within an organization. Richard Armstrong (1981) provided one of the earliest applications describing the role of the public affairs officer as a trusted advisor to a CEO. The term also applied to professional roles such as banker, lawyer, or accountant. Numerous articles in the Journal of Accountancy and The CPA Journal began appearing in the mid-1980's referring to accountants and CPA as trusted advisors.

"Trusted advisor" made its appearance in sales training programs in the late l980's in the context of relationship marketing and increased management focus on long-term business relationships beyond a 'one-off" sales transaction. Maister, et al. (2000a) described a trust relationship based on both the breadth of issues and depth of the personal relationship. Four phases characterize development of the trusted advisor relationship starting with recognition of salesperson expertise and competence in one subject area. Because trust is personal and integral to a reciprocal relationship, the "trusted advisor" relationship develops as the scope of the issues expands and the personal relationship deepens (Maister et al., 2000b). Neu and Brown (2005) defined a "trusted advisor" as one that;

> "… develops an in-depth understanding of an individual customer's business; he or she collaborates with and provides unbiased recommendations to a customer on how to achieve desired outcomes from a complex system. A trusted adviser participates in both the formulation and the implementation of a solution to a customer's problem; not just the implementation of the customer's solution to his or her problem" (p. 9).

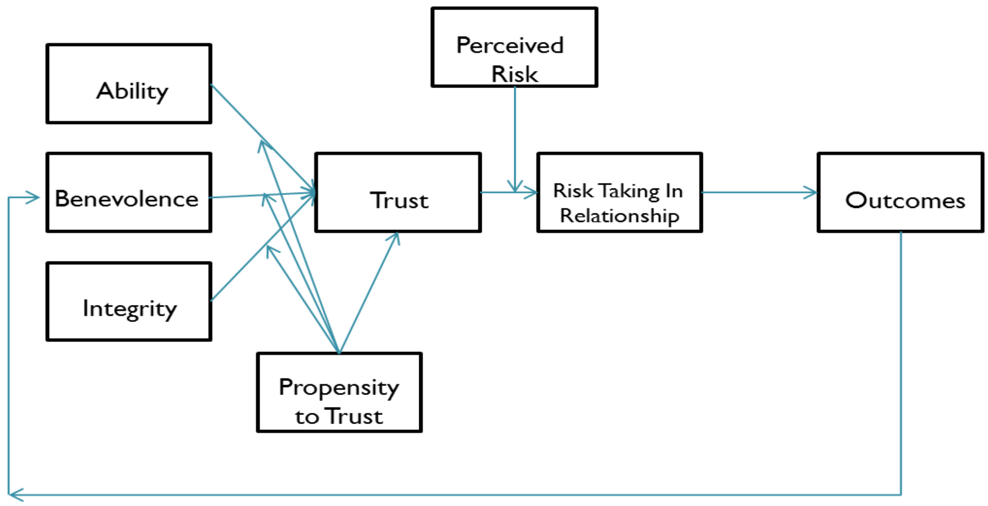
Trust as a Construct.

Using a definition and model of Mayer, Davis and Schoorman (1995), trust is defined as;

> "…the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party" (p. 712).

The reciprocal nature of the relationship is evident as the model can be applied to any number of dyadic relationships. As applied in this paper, it is the reciprocal relationship between a salesperson and a buyer / partner. Note that one of the antecedents is cognitive (ability) while the other two are emotional (feelings or perceptions of the intent of the other party).

Figure 1: Mayer, Davis and Schoorman Model of Trust



Source: Mayer, R.C., Davis, J.H., & Schoorman, F.D. (1995) An integration model of organizational trust. *Academy of Management Review*. 20(3), p. 709-734.

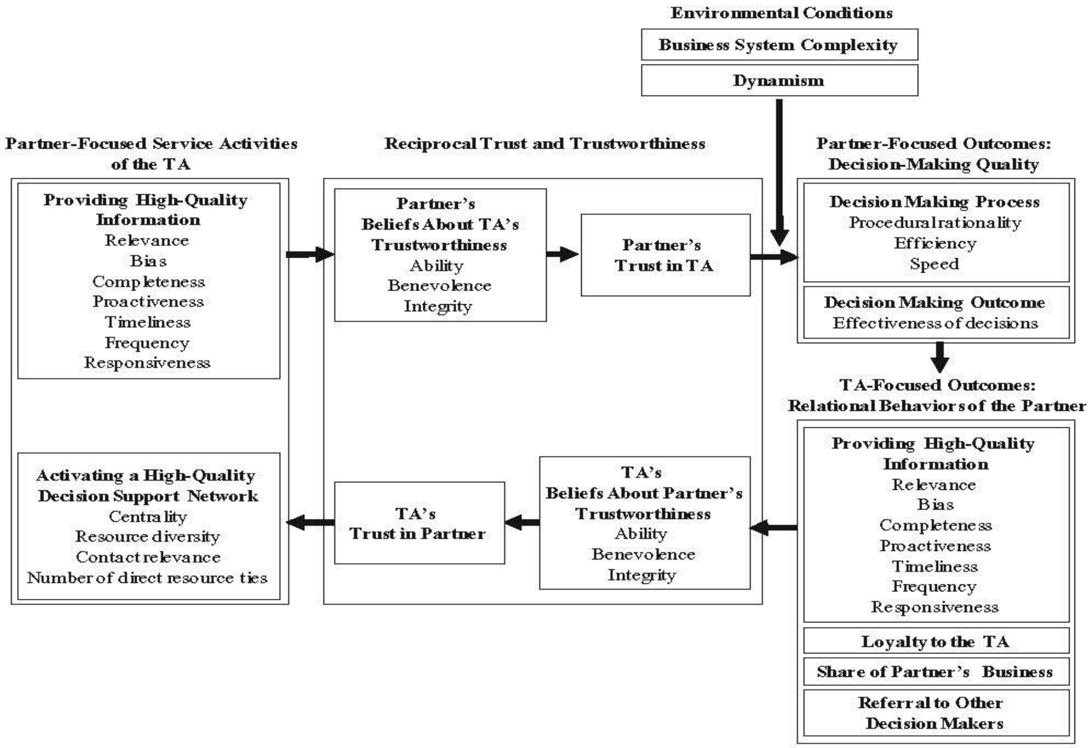
Trust in Personal Selling.

In personal selling literature, application of the trust construct deals with managing the sales process, intra-organizational relationships between sales managers and salespeople, and inter-organizational relationships with between the selling organization and members of the buyer's organization.

Plank, Reid and Pullins (1999) proposed a three component model for buyer trust in a business-to-business relationship; trust in salesperson, trust in company, and trust in the product or service offered. Given a complex sales environment, market turbulence, and incomplete information for effective decision-making, the salesperson serves as the primary conduit of information necessary to support a conclusion of trustworthiness of the company or the product / service to meet the buyer's needs.

The Mayer, Davis and Schoorman (1995) model is embedded in the reciprocal trust / trustworthiness component of trusted advisor–partner relationship model by Neu, Gonzalez, and Pass (2011). Effective communication of relevant unbiased information for decision-making is the critical flow of the mode

Figure 2: Trusted Advisor - Partner Relationship Model



Source: Neu, W.A., Gonzalez, G.R., & Pass, M.W. (2011) The trusted advisor in inter-firm interpersonal relationships. *Journal of Relationship Marketing.* 10. p. 247.

Trust Building Behaviors.

Trust in a salesperson is a critical building block for the seller-buyer relationship. Thus, sales representatives are encouraged to engage behaviors in order to build buyer trust as illustrated in the model proposed by Swan and Nolan (1985). They found buyer trust in the seller is the central mechanism for facilitating an exchange relationship. Conversely, lack of trust is an impediment to building a successful exchange relationship.

Buyer trust increases in importance as risk increases, buyer information is limited or incomplete and there is uncertainty in the decision-making process (Hawes, Mast & Swan, 1989). Rather than a binary decision to trust or not or a determination of how much trust the salesperson must earn, the authors found the controlling variable is the buyer's perception of risk associated with the situation and whether the buyer has sufficient trust in the salesperson as it relates to the situation.

Oakes (1990) examines trust as a necessary condition for sales process success. He extends Hawes et al. (1989) noting that trust is the result of imperfect information. Perceived trustworthiness of the salesperson's information offered through the relationship builds trust. Conditions for a successful exchange are completed by the buyer's assessment of the salesperson's sincerity. However, deliberate overt attempts by salespeople to create or mimic sincerity or create trust can undermine the conditions necessary for either to occur.

Trust from the Buyer Perspective.

Much of the trust research focuses on the buyer's trust of the sales person and the sales person's behaviors that build trust. In particular, trust is built on the foundations of information exchange including sales experience, domain knowledge, competence, and credibility.

The level of purchase importance influences the buyer perception of trust in both the sales representative and the company. Higher purchase importance is attributed to those purchases that have strategic implications, higher risk, and potentially negative effects on the buyer's organization. The counterintuitive finding was a higher perception of seller trustworthiness and credibility with purchases that had lower importance (Belonax, Newell & Plank, 2007).

Measuring Trust.

Measuring trust has been the focus of research across many disciplines within the behavioral sciences. Recent research in measuring buyer trust in sales representatives is represented in a meta-analysis of 32 studies that yields a 22 item model for predicting sales trust and trustworthiness (Wood, Boles, Johnston, & Bellenger, 2008). Model components related to the sales representative included expertise, credibility, compatibility and benevolence were factors influencing buyer perception of a sales representative's trustworthiness.

Communications in a Sales Setting

A general theory of communications between sender and receiver (Schramm, 1954) provides a model for explaining the social interaction necessary for effective communications. Sheth (1976) defined communications in the seller–buyer relationship in two dimensions; content of the message and the communicators style emphasizing compatibility in the seller – buyer interaction. Miles, Arnold and Nash (1990) extended the model by proposing three levels of communication style in the seller–buyer / influencer relationship. The seller's preferred communication style is dependent on the buyer's communication style and the particular phase of the relationship. Success requires the seller to "flex or adapt…communication style to the situation and requirements of the buying center" (p. 24).

Additional challenges influence the degree to which effective communication occurs between the salesperson and buyer / influencer. Jones, Brown, Zoltners and Weitz (2005) point out that the communication issues between seller and buyer transcend individual communications as salespeople are tasked with managing the overall organizational relationship. In a B2B environment, delivering creative customized solutions increases time and effort required for information gathering, communication and coordination across both organizations (Zoltners, Sinha, & Zoltners, 2001). "Salespeople need to become, in a sense, social scientists capable of analyzing lines of power and influence across blurring boundaries in order to sell in today's business environment" (Jones et al., 2005, p. 108).

Communication Behaviors.

Recent research (Newell, Belonax, McCardle & Plank, 2011) proposed that personal relationship and consultative behaviors work in tandem to impact the buyer's perceptions of salesperson trust, expertise and loyalty. Buyer perceptions of a salesperson's personal relationship behaviors have a positive impact on the buyer's trust of the salesperson as well as loyalty to the relationship. Consultative (fact-based) behaviors influence the buyer's perceptions of the salesperson's expertise and the salesperson's loyalty to the relationship.

As the point person for managing the communications in a complex sale, the practitioner world sought to redefine the salesperson's as a "trusted advisor". Maister et al. (2000b) describe evolution of the role of "trusted advisor" as a progressive transition of the scope of reciprocal communications between a salesperson and a buyer / partner regarding both business issues and personal relationship. On business issues, transitioning from an expert with professional credibility to a "deep generalist" with a broad perspective is a goal in altering the business content of the communications (Sheth & Sobel, 2000). Green (2006) advocates customer collaboration reflecting a level of intimacy in communication is an indicator of a high performance trust relationship. Sobel (2009) suggests ways in which a client relationship can be transitioned from a transactional level to a "trusted advisor" with a strategic level of interaction with the client.

Listening Behaviors.

While salesperson listening had been previously defined as a cognitive process of active sensing, interpreting, evaluating, and responding to the buyer, Ramsey and Sohi (1997) found statistical support for a three component model of the construct. Higher levels of listening behavior by the salesperson increases buyer perceptions of satisfaction with the salesperson, thereby increasing levels of trust and positive anticipation of future interactions with the salesperson.

Drollinger and Commer (2009) applied the concept of active empathetic listening (AEL) to the salesperson – buyer relationship. Active listening is defined as "an information gathering process in which the listener is fully engaged in the conversation" (p. 57) while AEL adds an overlay of empathy to the listening process. This view is consistent with Ramsey and Sohi (1997) that listening includes a dimension of sensing the feelings of the message sender through both verbal and non-verbal cues. Their study found support for a positive relationship between AEL, relationship quality communications and subsequent levels of trust. The authors advocate teaching active empathetic listening skills to salespeople.

Building on the work of Ramsey and Sohi (1997), Pryor, Malshe and Paradise (2013) studied salesperson cognitive and affective listening behaviors in buyer-seller dyads noting that salesperson listening behaviors change over time as the buyer-seller relationship matures. Buyers reported increased sensing, evaluating and responding behaviors reflecting an affective dimension of listening. This finding is consistent with research on affinity building showing that the relationship between a salesperson and buyer / partner is not necessarily linear but rather is based on a mutual recognition of the others contributions (Smith, 1998).

Technology Impact on Communications.

To illustrate its broad appeal, internet use in the United States has reached 84.2% of the population (Internet World Stats, 2016). Social media networks have risen to the dominate position of personal usage. Digital buyer penetration has grown to 53.4% of internet users representing 24.3% of population (Statista, 2016). While statistics were not available to breakdown the search data identifying searches for business versus personal purposes, Google holds a commanding lead with 78.58% of core internet searches (Statista, 2016). Proprietary and governmental databases are available for a significant number of industries and serve as portals for additional business focused information searches.

Increasingly members of the Gen Y and Millennial generations are rising to significant positions that place them in buyer or influencer roles in the organizational buyer center. These are the same individuals that grew up in the internet age with 24/7 access to a digital world. Will the reduce personalization of face-to-face communications have a negative impact on the buyer-seller relationship?

Bulik (2004) observes that sales and sales support staff drawn from Generation Y have a tendency to avoid personal contact with clients and prospects and will utilize technology as a replacement. This behavior includes using e-mail and texting instead of phone calls and face-to-face communications. The generational divide is evident in customer dissatisfaction when client representatives seeking contact and a response to a call or request for a meeting are treated to an impersonal digital response.

Goldenberg, Bajarin and Chan (2008) note the changing behaviors from the perspective of the client staff. Increasingly, Generation Y and Millennials are rising to responsible roles as buyers / influencers in organizations. As children, they grew up with technology (desktop computers, tablets, smartphones) and are comfortable using it for communications and information gathering. Preferences for impersonal / detached communications using technology have been showing up in the workplace as personal habits. On a personal level, this generation conducts its own presales research and validates the information through peer reviews on social media. As a result, we can expect changes in the nature of information sought in a salesperson - buyer / influencer relationship.

Personal selling literature notes the evolution of the seller – buyer relationship driven by rising customer expectations regarding sales representative "knowledge, speed of response, breadth and depth of communication, and customization of information and product/service offering" (Jones, Brown, Zoltners & Weitz, 2005). Comfort of both buyer and seller representatives in using technology for information exchanges may be a positive influence in meeting customer expectations as well as the seller's goals (Goldenberg et al., 2008).

According to Humphreys, McIvor and Cadden (2006), implementation of communications technology has provided the efficiencies that support single supplier-buyer relationships in supply chain management and other variants of B2B commerce. However, their research ignores the necessity for the level of personal selling relationship necessary to develop and sustain automated transactional activities.

Arnett, Macy, & Wilcox (2005) suggest a potential paradox as customer expectations and demandingness in a competitive environment is rising and placing additional demands on both the sales representative and the selling organization. Higher expectations and demands for information and solutions imply the necessity for a higher level of interaction between buyer and seller as well as higher levels of buyer trust.

Implications for Management

From a managerial perspective, the question is whether the use of internet based information resources by the Gen Y and Millennial employees in both the seller and buyer environments has the potential to be a disruptive factor in the sellers objectives to maintain a positive long-term client relationship. Concerns for management include;

1. Have personal communication habits of Gen Y and Millennial employees negatively changed business communications dynamics replacing personal contact and interaction with impersonal messaging.

2. As Gen Y and Millennial employees move into responsible seller or buyer roles, do their personal communication habits constitute a barrier to the development of exchanges where trustworthiness can be demonstrated and trust earned in a business relationship?

3. Are differences in communication expectations between different age groups placing strains on long-standing business relationships when new salespeople are assigned to accounts as previous representatives are promoted or retired?

While recruiting and selection processes will not be substantially altered by this generational development, there are implications for investments in training and career development assuming that achieving a long-term relationship between seller and buyer remains a desirable objective and that a trusted advisor role is desirable for some relationships within the client firm.

From a career development perspective, sales training programs should be matched to appropriate phases of the development of high-quality relationships using the four-level progression from subject matter expert to trusted advisor. Sales training programs should include appropriate content necessary for the salesperson to demonstrated credibility and support high-quality information exchanges (Maister et al., 2000a). Sales training programs should also include strategies and tactics to help new sales personnel to penetrate the veil of impersonal communications to gain insight into buyer wants and needs. These include techniques to develop better listening abilities and subsequently providing high-quality information and feedback to buyer contacts (Neu, et al., 2011).

Research clearly shows that robust reciprocal seller-buyer / partner relationships develop over time and are unique to the dyad. Sales managers should seek opportunities to place early career sales people in appropriate accounts that offer greater opportunities for role-modeling, coaching and development of interpersonal skills. On a related note, role definitions and use of compensation in motivating sales personnel should be examined to promote and reward long-term behaviors.

Proposed Further Research

Each new generation brings new expectations to the marketplace. Prior personal selling research provides insight based on a particular context. However, another major generational change is underway. Baby Boomers are retiring and leaving the workforce in record numbers. While not quite ready for retirement, Gen X salespeople have moved into senior management or consulting positions. Most of the published research focused on individuals representing Baby Boomer or Gen X generations.

This paper proposes updated research focused on salespeople and buyer / partners to determine whether generational change is bringing about a fundamental change in our understanding of the seller-buyer relationship.

Research Questions

Examining the impact of internet information access on the buyer–seller relationship in the context of a complex sales environment suggests several research questions.

1. Has buyer access to internet resources eliminated or altered the information exchange in the buyer-seller relationship when the sales representative had developed a trusted advisor role with a client organization?

2. If the information exchange component is eliminated, does the trusted advisor role continue to be a viable approach to nurturing and maintaining a long-term buyer-seller relationship?

3. If the role is still viewed as a valued approach, must the information exchange / communication component be substantially altered or replaced?

4. Does the trusted advisor role change? If so, how? What are its "new" characteristics?

Proposed Methodology

Because of the potential range of response to the proposed research, qualitative research should be conducted using a sample with a broad cross-section of outside salespeople representative of the Gen Y and Millennial generations that engaged in periodic face-to-face engagement with buyer representatives in a complex sales environment. Where possible, the sample should include corresponding dyads of their respective sales managers and selected buyer representatives. In order to meet basic criteria for qualitative research, standardized interview guides for consistency of topics and questions covered in interviews. A separate but related guide should be employed for each type of respondent. However, for richness in information gathering and additional perspective on the research questions, the interview guides should also allow open-ended discussion.

Three additional criteria should be employed in selecting or filtering the sample. These include; a.) the selling firm should be operating on a customer oriented / relationship based sales philosophy; b.) the salespersons selected should be responsible for developing and maintaining a long-term client / customer relationship and act beyond simple order taking / fulfillment tasks; and c.) client / customer needs should be representative of a complex sales requirements in a turbulent environment demanding decision-making with imperfect information.

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Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and Practitioners: This paper proposes research in the field of personal selling to determine whether generational differences in internet use changes the value of a trusted advisor relationship in B2B personal selling strategies.

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TRACK: Personal Selling