

# Buyer-Seller Communications: Constructs and Measurement

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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. 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).

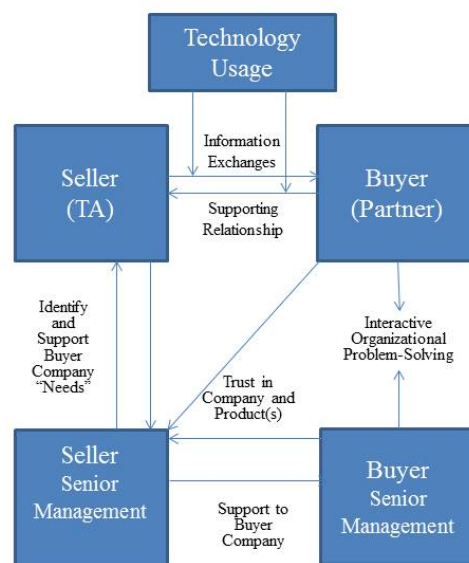
Each new generation brings new expectations to the marketplace. While prior research insight is based on a particular context, a major generational change is underway. Baby Boomers are retiring and leaving the workforce in record numbers. Gen X salespeople have moved into senior management or consulting positions, Millennial as well as Gen Y men and women are in sales roles in significant numbers. The challenge is to capture whether generational change is bringing about a fundamental change in our understanding of the buyer-seller communications and therefore, a change in the buyer-seller relationship (Carlson, 2016). The output of this exercise is to develop a measurement model that will achieve three purposes;

- Support assessing the communications practices and preferences between sales representatives and buyer representative,
- Identify the extent to which those practices contribute to a trust relationship between individuals and organizations, and
- Differentiate responses by generational group on each side of the buyer – seller relationship.

## A Conceptual Model

A conceptual model of the impact of technological change on the communication behaviors in the buyer-seller relationship and its impact on the “trusted advisor” role, shown in Figure 1, captures the characteristics of inter-firm interpersonal communications behaviors in the buyer-seller relationship, listening behaviors, trust, and perceptions regarding roles appropriate to the buyer-seller relationship.

**Figure 1: Conceptual Model**



Four dyadic relationships are incorporated in the conceptual model. First is the Sales Representative to Buyer / Champion and the reciprocal viewpoint of Buyer / Champion to Sales Representative. Next is the Senior Sales Manager to Sales Representative and, lastly, the Buyer's Senior Manager to the Buyer / Champion.

“Trusted advisor” literature posits that sales representatives achieving this designation must demonstrate trustworthiness, provide timely and unbiased information exchanges and demonstrate a willingness to invest in the success of their buyer / champion and their client company (Maister, Green & Galford, 2000). As the quality of communication, information exchange, and interpersonal relationship develops, the role of “trusted advisor” emerges. The Mayer, Davis and Schoorman (1995) trust model is central to the reciprocal trust / trustworthiness component of the trusted advisor–partner relationship model (Neu, Gonzalez, & Pass, 2011).

Our conceptual model is a derivative of the trusted advisor – partnership model (Neu, Gonzales & Pass, 2011) with the addition of the influence of technology usage as it may moderate information exchanges and supporting relationship behaviors. Effective communication of relevant unbiased information for decision-making is the critical flow of the model. When operationalizing this model, we addressed several scenarios that influence the potential outcome.

These include a setting where a “trusted advisor” role is established with a client organization and the “partner” is still in play;

- Has buyer access to internet resources eliminated or altered the information exchange in the buyer-seller relationship?
- If so, how has the relationship changed for the buyer? ...for the sales rep? ... for the selling company?

When a trusted advisor role is established and the “partner” is no longer in play opens additional questions;

- Does the new buyer view the “trusted advisor” as an important contributor to organizational problem solving?
- Does the selling company view the trusted advisor role as a viable approach to nurturing and maintaining a long-term buyer-seller relationship?
- Does the attitude of senior management influence the buyer's behaviors?

The playing field is significantly altered where both buyer and seller representatives have changed since the business-to-business relationship was established;

- What is the nature of the information exchange component between the players?
- How has the information exchange component been influenced by technology?

In a complex sales environment, given the generational / technology driven changes, has the information exchange component substantially been altered or replaced?

- Does the selling company view the trusted advisor role as a desirable goal for the relationship?
- Does the trusted advisor role change? If so, how? What are its “new” characteristics?

### **Development of a Measurement Model:**

There four parts of the measurement model tracking the four dyadic relationships outlined in the conceptual model. The following discussion presents each part of the model and the associated items and scales for measurement. Where possible, existing instruments and scales are employed and cited. In only one case, communication preferences, was a new set of items devised to reflect the use of traditional as well as technology driven communication methods.

The communications and role measurement model measures quality of information exchanges and supporting relationship behaviors in three dyadic relationships;

- Dyad 1: Sales representative (rep) to buyer / champion and the reciprocal buyer to sales representative.
- Dyad 2: Sales rep to senior sales manager and the reciprocal manager to sales rep relationship.

- Dyad 3: Buyer / champion to senior company manager and the reciprocal senior company manager to buyer / champion relationship.

**Figure 2: Communications and Role Measurement Model**



### Information Exchanges

Communications theory provides the foundation for questions regarding forms of communication, information exchange, and personal interaction between buyer and seller representatives. Two different scales are in the communication quality component of the model.

- **Communications Quality:** Inter-firm interpersonal communications are measured using 14 Likert items. The communication inventory focuses on the quality of information exchange with these constructs; relevance, bias, completeness, timeliness, frequency, and responsiveness (Neu, Gonzalez & Pass, 2011).
- **Listening Behaviors:** Effective communication also includes proactive listening behaviors. These are measured using 12 Likert items organized around three constructs; sensing, evaluating, and responding (Ramsey & Sohi, 1997)

Tables 1 and 2 contain a version of the 14 items for measuring sales rep / buyer communications (Neu, Gonzalez, & Pass, 2011) and 12 items for measuring sales representative listening skills (Ramsey & Sohi, 1997) reflecting the role of the respective party. When deploying as a questionnaire seeking responses from peers of the sales representative as well as senior managers within the respective buyer and seller organizations, the same item will appear with minor revision of the statements to reflect the respective respondent's role. However, the fundamental intent of the item remains.

### Supporting Relationship Behaviors

Supporting relationship behaviors incorporated in the measurement model include a scale for measurement of trust building behaviors and perceptions of role behaviors whether in-role or extra-role. An integrative trust model (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995) provides the basis for questions that measure four components of trust; ability, benevolence, integrity, and propensity to trust. A “trusted advisor” model (Maister, Green & Galford, 2000) serves as the framework for assessing the seller's effectiveness in meeting expectations in the buyer-seller relationship.

- **Trust Building Behaviors:** The inter-organizational interpersonal trust scale uses five to six Likert items

for each of the constructs within the Mayer, Davis and Schoorman trust model (1999). These include; ability, benevolence, integrity, and propensity to trust.

- **In-Role / Extra-Role Behaviors:** We have drawn from Maister, Green & Galford (2000) for 16 Likert items that describe the level and nature of the role of a sales representative. Constructs include; focus, energy, value received, and measures of success derived from the inter-firm interpersonal relationship.

The same process occurs in Tables 3 and 4 where 25 items used to measure the four components of the trust model reflect the viewpoint of the respondent to the person being assessed (sales representative or buyer contact / champion). Sales Representative Role items (Table 5) are presented with similar adjustments. This set of statements assess perceptions of the sales representative as he / she progresses from subject matter expert to trusted advisor in the relationship with the buyer (Maister, Green & Galford, 2000).

Communication preferences are solicited from both buyer and seller with eight items (Table 6) reflecting different situations that communication would be expected in any business-to-business complex sales environment.

**Table 1: Information Exchanges: Buyer Contact and Seller Representative**

	<b>Buyer Contact / Seller Rep</b>
<b>QUALITY</b>	<i>Think back about your experiences in communications with your rep. Tell us about the level and quality of communications with your rep. Respond by marking your level of agreement with the following statements</i>
Relevance 1	My rep provides information that I need to know to be more effective in my job.
2	My rep uses his / her resources and contacts to bring forth information that I need to know.
3	The information my rep thinks I need to know reflects his / her understanding of my needs.
Bias 4	My rep “tells it like it is”
5	My rep always remains impartial in the information provided
6	My rep shares information that some might consider too sensitive to share outside the firm
Complete 7	My rep shares information is sufficient in breadth and depth to meet the task at hand.
8	My rep shares information that helps me understand the whole picture.
Pro-active/ Timely 9	My rep provides information that I need to know before I even know what to ask.
10	My rep makes sure I always have the information needed for a task / decision
Frequency 11	My rep communicates on a frequency that is consistent with my needs and the tasks / decision at hand
12	My rep respects my time by not flooding me with trivial and irrelevant information
Responsive 13	My rep follows through with my requests on a timely basis
14	My rep is responsive to any request that I make
<b>LISTENING</b>	<i>Think back about your experiences in dealing with your rep. Tell us about the listening behaviors demonstrated by your rep. Respond by marking your level of agreement with the following statements</i>
Sensing 1	Focused only on me

	2	Kept eye contact
	3	Non-verbal gestures suggested he / she was listening to me
	4	Seemed bored*
Evaluating	5	Asked for more details
	6	Paraphrased my questions
	7	Didn't interrupt me
	8	Changed subject too frequently*
Responding	9	Used full sentences instead of saying yes or no
	10	Offered relevant information to the questions I asked
	11	Showed eagerness in his or her responses
* Reverse Coded	12	Answered at appropriate times

**Table 2: Information Exchanges: Seller Rep and Buyer Contact**

		Seller Representative (Sales Rep) / Buyer Contact or Champion
<b>QUALITY</b>		<i>Think back about your experiences in communications with your buyer contact or champion. Tell us about the level and quality of communications with your champion. Respond by marking your level of agreement with the following statements</i>
Relevance	1	My champion provides information that I need to know to be more effective in my job.
	2	My champion uses his / her resources and contacts to bring forth information that I need to know.
	3	The information my champion thinks I need to know reflects his / her understanding of my needs.
Bias	4	My champion "tells it like it is"
	5	My champion is always impartial in the information provided
	6	My champion shares information that some might consider too sensitive to share outside the firm
Complete	7	My champion shares information is sufficient in breadth and depth to meet the task at hand.
	8	My champion shares information that helps me to understand the whole picture.
Pro-active / Timely	9	My champion provides information that I need to know before I even know what to ask.
	10	My champion makes sure I always have the information needed for a task / decision
Frequency	11	My champion communicates on a frequency that is consistent with the tasks / decision at hand
	12	My champion respects my time by not flooding me with trivial and irrelevant information
Responsive	13	My champion follows through with my requests on a timely basis
	14	My champion is responsive to any request that I make

<b>LISTENING</b>	<i>Think back about your experiences in dealing with your champion. Tell us about the listening behaviors demonstrated by your champion. Respond by marking your level of agreement with the following statements</i>
Sensing 1	Focused only on me
2	Kept eye contact
3	Non-verbal gestures suggested he / she was listening to me
4	Seemed bored*
Evaluating 5	Asked for more details
6	Paraphrased my questions
7	Didn't interrupt me
8	Changed subject too frequently*
Responding 9	Used full sentences instead of saying yes or no
10	Offered relevant information to the questions I asked
11	Answered at appropriate times
*Reverse Coded 12	Offered relevant information to the questions I asked

**Table 3: Trust Building Behaviors: Buyer Contact and Sales Rep**

<b>Q.</b>	<b>Buyer Contact / Seller Representative (Sales Rep)</b>
Ability 1	My representative (rep) is very capable of performing his / her job
2	My rep is known to be successful at the things he / she tries to do
3	My rep has much knowledge about the work that needs done.
4	I feel very confident in my rep's skills
5	My rep has specialized capabilities that contributes to our performance
6	My rep is well qualified
Benevolence 7	My rep is very concerned about my welfare
8	My needs and desires are very important to my rep
9	My rep would not knowingly do anything to hurt me
10	My rep looks out for what is important to me and my organization
11	My rep will go out of his / her way to help me and my organization
Integrity 12	My rep has a strong sense of justice
13	I never wonder whether my rep will stick to his/her word
14	My rep tries hard to be fair in dealings with others
15	My rep's actions and behaviors are not very consistent*
16	I like my rep's values
17	Sound principles seem to guide my rep's behavior
Propensity 18	One should be very cautious with strangers
19	Most experts tell the truth about the limits of their knowledge
20	Most people can be counted on to do what they say they will do

21	These days, you must be alert or someone is likely to take advantage of you*
22	Most sales people are honest in describing their products.
23	Most repair people will not overcharge those who are ignorant of their specialty
24	Most people answer public opinion polls honestly
25	Most adults are competent at their jobs
* Reverse Coded	

**Table 4: Trust Building Behaviors: Sales Rep and Buyer Contact**

Q.	Seller Representative (Sales Rep) / Buyer Contact
Ability	1 My champion is very capable of performing his / her job
	2 My champion is known to be successful at the things he / she tries to do
	3 My champion has much knowledge about the work that needs done.
	4 I feel very confident in my champion's skills
	5 My champion has specialized capabilities that contributes to our performance
	6 My champion is well qualified
Benevolence	7 My champion is concerned about my welfare
	8 My needs and desires are very important to my champion
	9 My champion would not knowingly do anything to hurt me
	10 My champion looks out for what is important to me and my organization
	11 My champion will go out of his / her way to help me and my organization
Integrity	12 My champion has a strong sense of justice
	13 I never wonder whether my champion will stick to his/her word
	14 My champion tries hard to be fair in dealings with others
	15 My champion's actions and behaviors are not very consistent*
	16 I like my champion's values
	17 Sound principles seem to guide my champion's behavior
Propensity	18 One should be very cautious with strangers
	19 Most experts tell the truth about the limits of their knowledge
	20 Most people can be counted on to do what they say they will do
	21 These days, you must be alert or someone is likely to take advantage of you*
	22 Most sales people are honest in describing their products.
	23 Most repair people will not overcharge those who are ignorant of their specialty
	24 Most people answer public opinion polls honestly
	25 Most adults are competent at their jobs
* Reverse Coded	

**Table 5: Role Behaviors: Buyer Perspective of Sales Representative**

*As either a buyer contact or senior company manager, think about the overall role your selected representative has played over the time you have known him / her. Tell us the extent to which any of the following behaviors and outcomes characterizes the relationship with your rep.*

Not Applicable  
Strongly Disagree  
Disagree  
Neither Disagree  
Not Agree  
Agree  
Strongly Agree

	0	1	2	3	4	5
<b>My rep focuses on</b>	1 Answers, expertise, input					
	2 the business problem					
	3 Client / organization well-being					
	4 Enhancing our competitive advantage					
<b>My rep's energy is spent on</b>	5 Explaining how product / service works					
	6 Problem Solving					
	7 Providing Insights					
	8 Understanding the strategic issues					
<b>What we receive from our rep</b>	9 Information					
	10 Solutions					
	11 Ideas					
	12 Strategic analysis and alternatives					
<b>Indications of we view as success</b>	13 Timely, high quality information					
	14 Problems resolved					
	15 Long term business relationship					
	16 More effective strategic decision making					



**Table 6: Communication Preferences**

<p><i>Think about the overall role your representative has played over the time you have known him / her. Tell us the extent to which any of the following behaviors and outcomes characterizes the relationship with your rep. Check the box representing your preferred method of communication for each of the situations outlined below.</i></p>		Letter/Printed Material	Face-To-Face Meeting	Phone/Voice Mail	Text Message	e-Mail	Video Conference
<p><b>I prefer communications in the form of</b></p>							
1	When discussion recurring business requirements or purchases.						
2	When I want an update or status report on a task or deliverable.						
3	When discussing the nature of a business problem to solve						
4	When scheduling meetings and activities.						
5	If I need an immediate response from my counterpart.						
6	When discussing business requirements of a planned strategic purchase.						
7	When seeking updated information regarding the seller’s products and services.						
8	When seeking an explanation regarding the seller’s proposal.						

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