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FOCUS ON TRUST IN SALES

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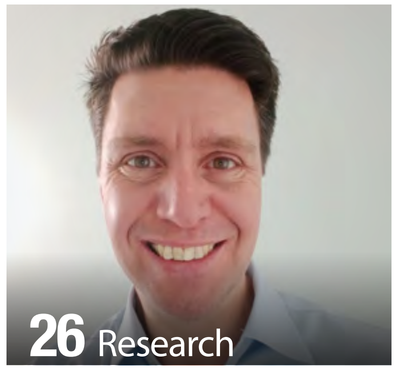
On the cover:
Focus on trust in sales

How important is trust in sales? Trust between buyer and seller would seem fundamental to a productive and enduring relationship; it is not only ethical but also crucial for sustainable growth. Thus, in most circumstances, trust would be considered essential in sales. However, advocates of the Challenger theory might deem it less so, given that the methodology effectively made traditional relationship selling redundant, with other factors taking precedence over a two-way relationship between individual buyers and sellers. Yet trust remains important at the both the organisational and individual level – see the research on page 26. Trust between leader and team members is also vital if an organisation is to maximise performance. From a leadership perspective, this boils down to competence, character and caring – see page 7 for five essential elements for establishing trust with your sales team.



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Is sales training dead?

Is sales training dead? I recall reading a blog about the issue on LinkedIn back in 2016. Of course, it sought to refute this premise. That was then, but what of today?

Well, the sales landscape has undoubtedly moved on, driven by evolving business practice, technology, and the advance of relatively new disciplines such as sales enablement. Firstly, the traditional "all-purpose" salesperson role is being squeezed out, with transactional sales increasingly self-serve and complex sales requiring high-level business skills. At the same time, training associated with the sales profession has been evolving.

In addition to their all-important product and market training, at the top end we are increasingly seeing salespeople with post-graduate degrees at Master's and even doctorate level. At entry level, there are specialised apprenticeship programmes and degree courses.

Forgetting Curve

Importantly, over the past two decades, we have repeatedly been told that "sheep-dip training" (standardized training administered to multiple employees in batches) is no longer appropriate. Yes, it's relatively cheap and quick to administer, but this type of learning frequently lacks the necessary reinforcement to keep the content front of mind – in general, people tend to forget 90% of what they've learned within the first month after training.

German psychologist Hermann Ebbinghaus's Forgetting Curve tells us that memories fade over time – actually, very quickly – with the biggest drop in retention hours after attending a class, seminar or workshop. Of course, other factors are in play too: for example, stress, tiredness, and how engaging and logical the delivery is all affect our ability to retain knowledge – the same information can be made more or less memorable, depending on how well it's delivered.

Today, best practice focuses on continuous development and creating personalized learning paths, with approaches targeted to different generations at work. This doesn't just involve passively receiving information; participants also need time for active reflection to assimilate it.

On top of this, the business landscape has been changed fundamentally by technology – and continues to change at pace. Since the turn of the century, many aspects of business have gone digital. More recently, the pandemic hit, and interaction went virtual. A couple of years later and AI broke through: are communications even human anymore?

So, with various new educational routes into the profession, sales enablement pretty much embedded in company systems, and AI assisting salespeople during calls (and potentially even able to open the conversation), the focus is moving towards lifelong learning delivered in innovative and user-friendly ways to enhance and refresh a constantly changing skill set.

Traditional sales training is dead. Long live continuous professional education!

Education inspectorate grades Consalia programme outstanding

Consalia's Senior Sales Leadership apprenticeship programme has been graded outstanding by UK education inspectorate Ofsted, the sales business school announced recently.

The inspection took place over three days in February. Questionnaires were sent in advance to employers and apprentices and the government inspectors also conducted detailed interviews with Consalia's Academy Team, apprentices, employers, and delivery partners Middlesex University and Runway Training.

A spokesperson said: "Consalia has been graded 'outstanding' by Ofsted in every aspect of its provision for our Level 7 Senior Sales Leadership Apprenticeship Programme, which also delivers a Postgraduate Diploma Professional Practice in Senior Sales Leadership."

Academy Director Dr Louise Sutton told the *Journal*: "Delivering a superb learner experience and high-quality teaching has always been at the core of our programmes, and to have this validated externally is fantastic. This is especially meaningful as we are a niche provider of sales education and sales degree apprenticeships. Our mission is to raise the profile of sales as a contemporary profession people will aspire to enter, and we hope this award will encourage more people to do just that, knowing the right programme is there to support them."

Louise Sutton: Academy

In brief

The Institute of Sales Professionals has announced that two training organisations have joined the ranks of its endorsed training organisations.

Competitive Edge is an award-winning trainer that helps to develop high-performing sales teams and leaders. Meanwhile, Alate Business Growth specialises in business-to-business sales training for technology companies, across IT, telecoms, and software as a service (SaaS) in diverse global and UK markets.

Competitive Edge director and co-founder Ian Wearne said: "We are delighted to have been recognised by the ISP and endorsed for our unique approach and bespoke training programmes."

Boston-based global sales training company RAIN Group has launched its Sales Skills Self-Assessment, a free resource for sellers in any role or industry. Sellers complete an online ten-minute questionnaire and then receive a 30-page analysis detailing how they stack up against RAIN Group's database of top performers, identifying skills that need strengthening, and providing links to free resources to support their growth in those areas.

Meanwhile the firm has also announced its latest sales training program, Selling to Senior Executives. In the course, sellers are introduced to the nuances of executive-level sales and learn how to adjust their sales approach, capture attention, and build trust.

ESTABLISHING TRUST WITH YOUR SALES TEAM

SALES MANAGERS NEED TO BOTH TRUST AND BE TRUSTED BY THEIR SALES TEAM. HERE ARE A FEW OF THE MOST IMPORTANT WAYS IN WHICH THIS CAN BE ESTABLISHED:

1: BEING RESPECTED IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN BEING LIKED – NO SALES MANAGER CAN EXPECT TO SUCCEED IF THEY ARE UNIVERSALLY DISLIKED BY THEIR SALES TEAM, BUT BEING LIKED SHOULD NEVER BE THEIR TOP PRIORITY: IT IS FAR MORE IMPORTANT TO EARN THEIR SALESPEOPLE'S RESPECT, BECAUSE THIS WILL LEAD TO BEING LIKED, BUT FOR THE RIGHT REASONS.

2: LEAD BY EXAMPLE – SALES MANAGERS MUST ALWAYS REFLECT AND EMBODY THE BEHAVIOURS THEY EXPECT FROM THEIR TEAM. THEY MUST ESTABLISH CLEAR STANDARDS AND EXPECTATIONS, AND DEMONSTRATE HONESTY, INTEGRITY, AND TRANSPARENCY IN EVERY ASPECT OF THOUGHTS, ACTIONS, AND COMMUNICATIONS.

3: REWARD TRUTH-TELLING – SALES MANAGERS MUST INSIST ON TELLING AND BEING TOLD THE TRUTH: SALESPEOPLE MUST BE ENCOURAGED AND REWARDED FOR TRUTH-TELLING, EVEN WHEN THE FACTS ARE UNCOMFORTABLE. IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO RUN AN EFFECTIVE TEAM WHEN REALITY IS IGNORED OR "SWEPT UNDER THE CARPET".

4: DEAL WITH ISSUES AS THEY ARISE – SIGNIFICANT ISSUES MUST BE DEALT WITH AS SOON AS POSSIBLE AFTER THEY ARISE, RATHER THAN IGNORED OR PUT OFF UNTIL LATER. SALESPEOPLE NEED TO BELIEVE THAT THEIR MANAGER IS ON THEIR SIDE, HAS THEIR BEST INTERESTS AT HEART, AND WILL DEAL WITH ANY ISSUES THAT MIGHT BE HOLDING THEM BACK.

5: REFUSE TO TOLERATE BAD BEHAVIOUR – IF SALESPEOPLE SEE OTHERS GETTING AWAY WITH INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIOUR, THEY WILL QUESTION THE NEED TO COMPLY THEMSELVES. IF ANY INDIVIDUAL SALESPERSON CONSISTENTLY REFUSES TO COMPLY WITH ESTABLISHED GUIDELINES OR PROCESSES, THEY MUST EITHER BE BROUGHT IN LINE OR REMOVED FROM THE ORGANISATION.

The role of trust in sales

Bob Apollo

If we expect our customers to trust us, we need to develop both an internal and an external culture of trust.

Trust is an essential foundational element in any sales environment, and it can (and must) take many forms. Perhaps the most obvious manifestation lies in the relationship between the salesperson (and the vendor they represent) and the customer's decision-making group (and the organisation they represent).

But trust must also be established in the relationships that exist within the vendor's organisation, between the vendor and their commercial partners and between the vendor and all the other influential members of the ecosystem – such as the press, analysts, consultants and all the other observers, commentators, and participants.

In my experience, this network of trust cannot be established unless the sales organisation itself works on the basis of internal trustworthiness, honest communications and mutual respect. Where these elements are lacking internally, they make it hard to establish a culture that is capable of developing trusted relationships with prospects, customers and the people and organisations that influence them.

The foundations of trust must be built internally

Management has a critical role to play in establishing this culture of trust, and I believe that the foundation must be built upon candid and honest conversations. I've observed far too many examples of organisations where salespeople, under the encouragement of management, have developed the habit of telling management what they think management wants to hear, rather than what management needs to know.

This is most commonly seen in pipeline management and forecasting. Salespeople are often pressured to be overly optimistic in their forecasting of close dates and probabilities, even when the realities of the opportunity (assuming those are actually understood) would indicate that there is no credible chance of closing the deal in the current period.

Self-awareness, self-honesty and candid conversation are the essential foundations of a trustworthy internal sales culture: without a trustworthy internal sales culture, it's going to be hard for salespeople to establish a trustworthy relationship with their prospects and customers. If members of the organisation are willing to fool each other, they are probably going to be willing to try and fool the customer – and that never ends well!

> *"Trust cannot be established unless the sales organisation itself works on the basis of internal trustworthiness, honest communications and mutual respect.*

Trust has never been more important

Trust was always a critical element of the vendor-customer relationship. But the exponential growth in as-a-service (as opposed to outright purchase) commercial models has made delivering on promises and establishing and maintaining trustworthy relationships even more important. It's no longer enough for the salesperson to be seen as a trusted adviser. The commitments the salesperson makes during the sales process must actually be delivered by their colleagues in service, support and customer success throughout the lifetime of the customer relationship.

This requires that commitments (whether explicit or implied) are thoughtfully made, with due regard for the consequences, and that these commitments are understood by the wider organisation. This in turn requires that commitments are made with the collective knowledge and acceptance of the functions responsible for delivering them. Needless to say, any salesperson who makes commitments they know (or ought to know) cannot be honoured must be terminated.

How can salespeople establish trust?

I've already identified self-awareness, self-honesty and the commitment to candid conversation as some of the key foundations of trustworthiness. It should be obvious that in the absence of personal integrity, there can be no basis for trust. And I'm pleased to say that these are qualities I see in the vast majority of sales professionals (even if there is sometimes scope for further development).

Assuming salespeople have what let's call a "trustworthy mindset" as a foundation, let's now explore how salespeople can establish themselves as trusted advisers in their relationship with existing and potential customers. Here are a few of the behaviours I've observed in effective sales professionals:

- **They demonstrate empathy.** Effective salespeople put themselves in their customer's shoes. They seek to understand how the world looks from their prospect's perspective. They empathise with the prospect's situation. They share relevant experiences. They communicate at a human level and avoid jargon or cliché. They realise that most decisions are made emotionally, and justified rationally.
- **They develop capabilities that are valuable to their customers**. And no, I don't mean that they are experts in the products or services they are hoping to sell. That seems to me to be a necessary but far from sufficient condition.

  If they are to establish trust, salespeople need to become experts in the issues their prospective customers are trying to fix, avoid or achieve, and how the organisation they represent has helped other similar people in comparable customer organisations to deal with them. They need to be able to share compelling stories and experiences that their prospective customers can relate to. At all times, they need to describe the capabilities of their "solution" in the context of what the customer is seeking to accomplish.
- **They demonstrate genuine thought leadership.** "Thought leadership" must be one of the most overused and misapplied terms in the sales and marketing vocabulary. All too often, it is no more than a mildly warmed-over rehashing of facts or opinions that the prospect – if they chose to listen – could hear from dozens or hundreds of other sources.

  Genuine thought leadership causes the prospective customer to think differently, to see things from a fresh and unexpected perspective. It reflects a distinctive point of view that is unique and valuable, and because of that it is far more likely to be appreciated and trusted by the prospect.

  Trust-building thought leadership addresses issues, implications, and consequences the prospect may have been previously unaware of or had undervalued. It offers a point of view. It makes the customer feel smarter as a result of having participated in the conversation. And it makes it far more likely that they will want to learn more.
- **They behave at all times in an ethical way.** Effective salespeople do the right thing at all times. They demonstrate through their actions that they have the best interests of the customer at heart in every decision they make. This may mean turning away business, suggesting better alternative solutions or challenging a customer's misconceptions rather than brushing them under the carpet. They act for the long-term, rather than the short-term. And they follow up on their commitments.

Establishing a trustworthy sales culture

Trustworthy sales cultures cannot be developed overnight. Publishing a "code of conduct" isn't enough; it requires principled focus over an extended period of time. And if the foundations are fragile, they can be destroyed overnight by a single inconsistent action on the part of the organisation's leadership.

Managers need to walk the talk. It's my experience that deeds are far more important than words in this regard: the culture of trust needs to start at the very top and be echoed at every level of management. Organisations, even if they are sympathetic to other forms of weaknesses, cannot afford to tolerate untrustworthy behaviour at any level.

If we expect our customers to trust us, we need to develop both an internal and an external culture of trust. We need to set high expectations and coach our people to achieve them. We need to treat everyone with honesty and respect. We need to expect the same from our partners and customers.

And on the (hopefully) very rare occasions when our trust is not reciprocated by a prospect or customer, we surely need to very carefully consider whether we ought to be doing business with them.

About the author

Bob Apollo is the founder of Inflexion-Point Strategy Partners, the outcome-centric selling experts. Following a successful career spanning start-ups, scaleups and corporates, Bob now spends his time as a coach, adviser, and trainer to growth-phase technology-based businesses, equipping them to adopt the principles of Outcome-Centric Selling®.

The Trust Dividend

Dr Mark Hollyoake, Dr Melanie Ashleigh and Professor Malcolm Higgs

The strategic implications of trust building in B2B client relationships and the way towards enhancing them to create mutual economic value.

Abstract

There is a noticeable lack of clarity around the construct of trust in the business to business (B2B) context. The thesis on which this article is based considers how trust building antecedents operate dynamically within a B2B relationship, and how they can be used proactively to help develop trusting relationships.

It deployed grounded theory qualitative research undertaken through a focus group, feedback workshops and 37 semi-structured interviews utilising critical incidents as units of analysis. The interviews were multi-level (inter-organisational, inter-team and interpersonal) between dyads.

The findings evidenced cognitive and affective dissonance occurring when relational intentions failed to meet expectations, engagement and experience that both sides intentionally set out. The thesis also evidenced B2B relationships being strategically driven from an organisational level through relational intent and the establishment of mutual relational benefits. Finally, the thesis addressed where trust resides in B2B relationships between both sides and levels. At organisational level, trust resides in the moral bonds that have achieved a cultural quality.

This thesis, therefore, contributes to the body of literature and theory in B2B trust between two organisations in a relational context in the following areas:

- Firstly, it contributes to understanding the importance of relationship intentions, as opposed to commitment, at an organisational level, highlighting the strategic mediating effect of the cross-dyad role through the relationship intentions. Additionally, the thesis highlights both commitment and communication as important antecedents of B2B relational trust at group/team and interpersonal level, as intention moves from intangible to tangible action between both sides of the relationship.
- Second, the study confirms the proposition made by social exchange theory that emotions and feelings play a role in business relationships, which involve social exchanges as evidenced in the role of affective trust expansionist/reductionist antecedents between both sides of the relational dyad. The theory of dissonance and consonance that incorporate two different groups of characteristics (affective/emotional and cognitive/rational) with a reductionist and/or expansionist effect on B2B relational trust is also developed.
- The third contribution identifies trust residing at organisational level, manifested through: moral bonds (cultural), action and behavioural conceptualisation, shaped through the development and signalling of relationship intentions. At an operations, group, team and interpersonal level, the contribution builds on structuration theory, demonstrating that trust resides at these levels as a manifestation of artefacts (relationship charter/mission/vision) standard norms (contracts, processes, systems and ways of working) and cognitive social stuff in the effective memories of the relationship agents/actors.
- Finally, a model of B2B relationship trust development contributes to academic research and new knowledge. It does this by developing an intention-ability-credibility-interdependence-mutual value outcomes–time framework that works across all organisational levels and between dyads. It builds on the definition of B2B trust and sheds light on how both sides of the relationship can work proactively to use trust to enhance the relationship.

Trust is recognised as a central concept in relationship marketing (Blois 1999) and this may be attributed to the significant impact on many outcomes in this area (Seppanen, Blomquist and Sundquist (2007).

This paper considers the strategic implications of trust building in B2B client relationships, the way trust-building antecedents operate dynamically within B2B relationship and how they can be used proactively to help develop trusting relationships between two businesses to co-create mutual economic value. It sets out and answers the research question: **What are the mechanics and dynamics of trust building within B2B client relationships, and how can this understanding be applied proactively to enhance client relationships and create mutual economic value?**

The key research objective is to determine the dynamics of trust building in B2B customer relationships at interpersonal, inter-team/group and inter-organisational levels and, through this understanding, identify how to apply the dynamics and how they enhance customer relationships. This overall objective then frames the more specific objectives outlined in this section. When viewed graphically (**Figure 1**), trust is placed first, which influences the relationship affecting the performance.

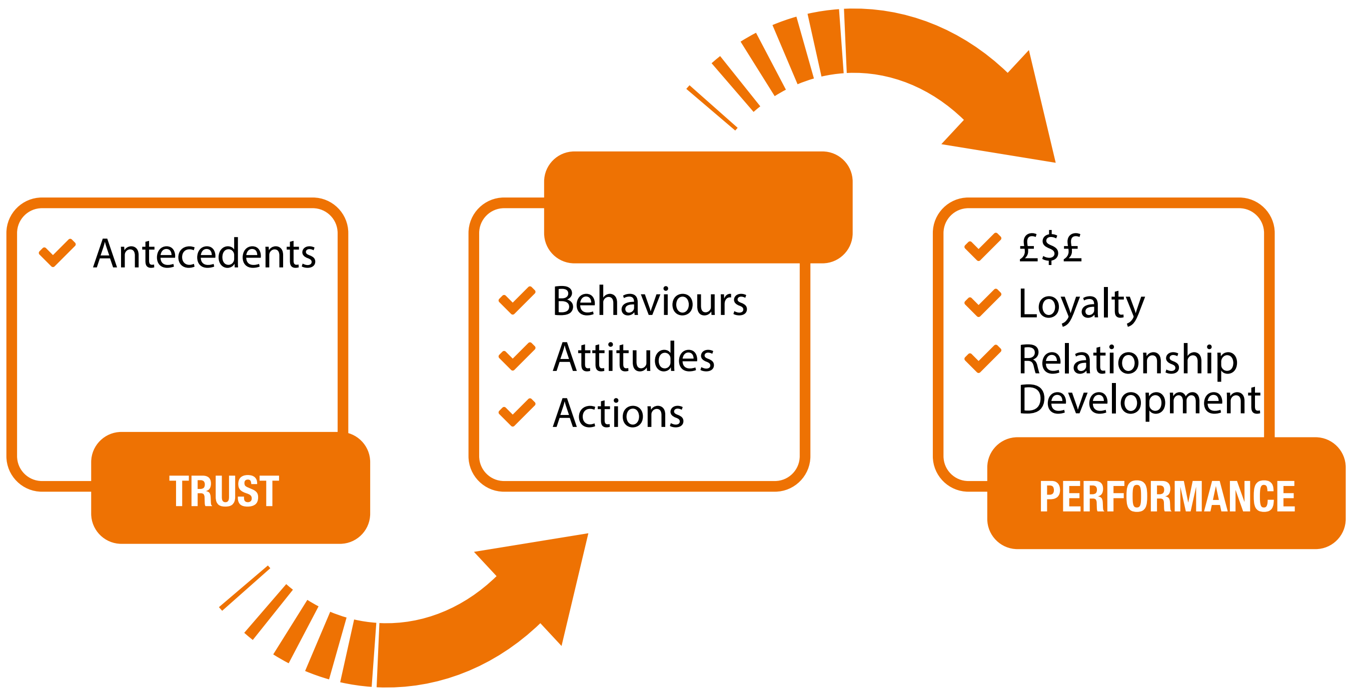

Figure 1: Trust, relationship, performance framework.

Research methodology

Trust research employs a diversity of methods, disciplines and traditions (Lyon et al, 2012b). Lyon et al (2012) proposed that, as research on trust matures, this creates an opportunity to consider the innovative developments by trust researchers into the methods they have used in order to examine this concept. These have been taken into consideration, discussed and evaluated prior to identifying and selecting the grounded theory (GT) method and critical incident technique (CIT) approach in the thesis to collect, codify, analyse and generate insight. The methodology developed and deployed involved firstly a focus group and then qualitative interviews.

Treatment of qualitative data

In this study, the unit of analysis is the level of an organisation between both sides of the relational dyad. Specifically, this represents the relationship between one company (supplying company) at a defined level (ie, interpersonal, inter-team/group, inter-organisation) and another company at a defined level, which in the case of this research is an actual customer of the supplying company. This aligns with the research aim, objectives, questions and purpose of this study that focuses on understanding B2B relational trust and its role between the dyad at multiple levels.

This study focuses on the identification of critical incidents in the relationship(s) (Flanagan, 1954) between both sides of the relational dyad at multiple levels developed through the application of CIT. This is developed through the deployment of grounded theory and semi- structured interviews as a way to unlock the incidents to develop initial codes for analysis (first-cycle codes). In this study, the respondents (the unit of measurement of the critical incidents) represent the three levels of the organisation(s) being researched:

1. Informants from organisational/leadership level who are knowledgeable about the relationship the two organisations have at an organisation-to-organisation level, and how the other levels interact with the leadership/organisational level.
2. Informants from the team/group level who are knowledgeable about the relationship between the two organisations at this level, as well as their relationship with the other levels.
3. Informants from the staff/personal level who are knowledgeable about their one-to- one relationship with the other organisation and the other levels.

This provided the research with respondents and informants covering the three levels of the relational dyad on both sides of the organisation. Previously, many studies into business relationships have focused on the supplier side of the relational dyad (Barnes et al, 2007; Joshi, 2009). In other instances, data were collected from informants with a more functional responsibility (Rindfleisch and Heide, 1997). These include sales managers (Anderson, 1985; 1988; John and Weitz, 1988; 1989), purchasing managers (Heide and John, 1990; Noordewier et al, 1990), or agents' intermediaries (Anderson and Narus, 1992). This research extends the reach of the informants in the relationship between two organisations used previously, to include project managers, customer services, administration, finance, information technology, operations and respondents from three levels in each organisation (personal, group/team, and leadership/organisational).

Focus group participants and recruitment

The participants were selected using purposive sampling (Hair et al, 2009) on the basis that they occupy or have occupied a senior position within a B2B organisation within a customer-facing role. They represent a diverse number of sectors: outsource services, pharmaceuticals, wines, beers and spirits, fast-moving consumer goods, and information technology services.

The seniority of the participants helped to achieve a multi-level view of trust within B2B relationships. Zaheer et al (1998) argued that the leadership team can reflect the action conceptualisation of trust through their intentions, actions, behaviours, attitudes, reality of the actions and the effect they have both internally and externally. Furthermore, the experience and roles of the group also offer the potential to provide insights into the group/team and interpersonal levels of trust in B2B relationships.

Qualitative interviews

The sample drawn upon consisted of 37 interviews: 18 interviews with representatives from selling-side organisations and 19 interviews with representatives from buying-side organisations. The respondents represented organisations from the following sectors: financial services, fast moving consumer goods, outsourced information technology services, utilities, pharmaceuticals, and retail. Each organisation and key contacts were known to the researcher through longstanding professional relationships. They were approached in the initial thesis concept stage (research proposal), where the research aims and objectives were shared and potential organisational insights for relational improvement discussed.

FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

	ROLE	COMPANY/ORGANISATION
1.	Client Director	Information Technology Services
2.	International Markets Director	FMCG
3.	Commercial Excellence Manager	Pharmaceuticals
4.	Commercial Director, Grocery	WBS
5.	Business Account Manager	WBS
6.	MD	Outsource Services
7.	Commercial Director	FMCG
8.	Sales Development Director	Information Technology services
9.	MD	Outsource services
	Lead researcher/ facilitator	
	Support researcher/ notes	
	Support researcher/ sound	

Relationships explored during trust research

- **Relationship 1. *Financial services organisation to a key intermediary:*** the relationship has existed for over five years, is mature, and the exchanges represent a combination of channel marketing and distribution.
- **Relationship 2. *Pharmaceutical organisation to a key wholesale/retail/hospital organisation:*** the relationship has existed for over ten years, is mature, and the exchanges represent a combination of supply chain, channel partner and specialist service provision.
- **Relationship 3. *Fast-moving consumer goods organisation to a multiple retail grocery company:*** the relationship has existed for over 15 years, is mature, and the exchanges are across multiple categories, facia formats and locations at a shopper/consumer level.
- **Relationship 4. *Outsourced technology, information and data organisation to a key utility provider:*** the relationship has existed for over five years, is maturing, and the exchanges represent the provision of contracted services across multiple functions, departments and sites.

Research participant procedure

All the interviews took place face to face, and extensive notes were taken during each interview. All of the interviews were audio taped and transcribed verbatim. Only four interviews were not recorded, due to internal security procedures and regulations. In this instance the handwritten notes were transcribed. Each side of the relationship was represented and had respondents from all three levels of organisational structure: leadership level – inter-organisational, management level – inter-group/team, and operational/activation level – interpersonal. The interviews followed a semi-structured approach, in each instance of the fieldwork.

Working with the data corpus

The data were coded in two separate stages in order to demonstrate the objectivity of both the approach and development of the first-cycle and second-cycle codes. This provides the objective platform for emergent theory development. The data were collected from two primary sources: focus group and research partner interviews.

The first stage involved transcribing the focus group session from a recording of the entire event conducted with eight respondents into a Word document. This provided the researcher with the opportunity to listen to and compare the transcript to the notation taken in parallel as the fall-back plan to check for validity. During this process the narrative was coded to each participant in a way to ensure anonymity yet allow analysis of the respondent's answers within the focus group session. The second step involved loading the transcript into NVivo.

An initial word-frequency query provided insight at a high level and a cross-check against the focus group common themes that emerged from the session. This allowed the first-code generation. At this step, the focus group transcript and themes were shared with two independent observers to verify the initial themes and a less than 10% divergence was observed, validating the approach. The third step involved transcribing the 37 digitally recorded interviews into individual Word documents. These were individually coded to allow respondent analysis – ie, by level, by supplier/customer – while retaining individual and organisational anonymity.

Developing the initial codes

Systematic interrogation of each transcript of the interviews was undertaken to identify themes that related to the focus group and critical incidents that surfaced in the interview. Specific coding approaches were selected and developed based on "fit" to the subject and qualitative nature of the research. Three methods were deployed at this stage: initial coding, invivo coding, and process coding.

The next stage involved searching for themes across 175 codes in two discreet steps, one of which offers a new methodological approach to qualitative research.

To explore the total data corpus for code frequencies for qualities (Saldana 2016), the data corpus was split into the two sides of the relationship – buyer/suppliers – and code frequency was once again used to explore the data for qualities within and between the two datasets.

The next step was reframing the data corpus to reflect the level of respondent. The research was organised and conducted to reflect the different levels/structure in both sides of the relationship: leadership – inter-organisational level, management – inter-team/group level, and staff – interpersonal level. At this level, the analysis focused on variance between levels and across the dyad, "what's working" and "what's not working" at each level, highlighting and captured as code charting (Harding, 2013). This led to the identification of 14 trust-building themes and 16 trust-diluting themes.

Reviewing the initial themes

Focused coding: This searches for the most frequent or significant codes to develop the most salient categories in the data corpus. Focused coding is seen as appropriate for virtually all qualitative studies, but particularly for grounded theory methodology, and the development of major categories of themes from data. Using the lens of focused coding in conjunction with theoretical coding applied to the 30 themes emanating from the bridging process led to amalgamation of the 30 themes into:

1. **Four core themes** – cognitive dissonance, affective dissonance, cognitive consonance, and affective consonance.
2. **Five supporting themes** – relational intention, relational ability, relational credibility, relational interdependence, and relational mutual benefit.
3. **Two linking themes** – relational commitment and relational communication.

Findings and discussion

Overall, this thesis supports and evinces the role of trust as a key concept for relationship development or dilution, so influencing B2B relationships at multiple levels is supported.

This confirms the findings of previous studies, which show the effect of trust on relationship outcomes – ie, strategic information sharing, cooperative behaviour and relationship benefit (Hammervol and Toften, 2013; Ashnai, 2014; Dowell, 2015) – and develops further by showing the role of dissonance (cognitive/affective) and consonance (cognitive/affective) on relationship trust development and its mediating effect (**Figure 2**).

The strategic nature of relationship development through the relationship intention is evident as a vision and mutual value opportunity. This leads to positive mutual change outcomes that motivate the relationship at an organisational level. The role of commitment in this instance has a secondary/supporting role aligned with mutual value, relational intent and understanding each other. The role of commitment in relational development and trust building was found to be counter to the work of Morgan and Hunt (1994), Palmatier et al (2007a), and Ashnai (2014), who found commitment as having a central role in determining relationship outcomes. This is an organisation-level specific finding from this study that adds to and builds on organisation-level trust-building.

The distinctions between cognitive and affective trust were confirmed, in line with previous studies, (Dowell, 2015; Akrout, 2017) by showing and discussing their different impacts, roles and outcome constructs in B2B relationships. However, this thesis goes further by exploring cognitive and affective trust as the foundational elements of B2B relationships and how it affects performance negatively through dissonance and positively through consonance. This develops and contributes to B2B relationship theory in trust development, through the demonstration of the expansionist effect of affective and cognitive antecedents when applied in consonance and the reductionist effect of affective and cognitive antecedents when applied in dissonance.

The relationship establishes intention as the initial B2B relational trust trigger at organisational level. It operates between both sides, setting out intangible trust expectation "vulnerability" and the engagement required to turn the intangible trust into tangible trust. This is the first stage in the model presented in **Figure 3**. Relational intentions can be attributed to a new relationship or to the continuation of an established relationship.

When operating in an interlinked nature, the six elements depicted in **Figure 3** contain the potential to positively build relational trust through an expansionist effect or to negatively dilute trust through a reductionist approach. Ashnai (2014) posited a relationship framework of attitude-behaviour-outcome in business relationships. This thesis goes further in establishing intention – ability/credibility – interdependence and mutual benefit as a relational framework for business relationships. Furthermore, the role of relational intention has a strategic mediating effect at inter-organisational level. Anderson and Weitz (1992) contended that a business partner may undertake an action that demonstrates good faith and binds the channel members to the relationship, affecting the perception of the other party. In this case, Anderson and Weitz (1992) discussed the actualisation of a relational intention that moves from intangible to tangible (Mollering, 2002).

However, in a later work, reference is made to relationship intention: *"Businesses send signals that they intend to work together with channel members over the long run." "These signals help build the level of mutual trust in a dyad."* (Anderson and Weitz, 1989, pp. 314,315) Relational intention was also found to have a mediating effect at the inter-group level in framing the joint working, co-creation and ways of working to turn the intention into reality. At interpersonal level, the relationship intention operates on an affective level reflecting the attitude, commitment and expected effect (mutual value) from interpersonal interaction between the dyad.

The thesis demonstrates that inter-organisation, inter-team/operations and interpersonal trust are three distinct constructs through showing how they interact between the dyad at the three levels. Doney and Cannon (1997), Fang et al (2008), Jiang et al (2011), and Ashnai (2014) have also researched and explored multi-level trust, providing evidence for discriminant validity between inter-organisational and interpersonal aspects of trust. This thesis establishes the third level of inter-team/operations.

At the initial stage of the relationship, the intention enacted has the potential to create dissonance if the intention enacted falls short of the expectations established at the intangible stage. The intention shortfall could be on a cognitive or affective level or a combination of both (Dowell, 2015; Akrout, 2017). This thesis established the potential for dissonance occurring at the team/operations and interpersonal level between the dyad, as one side of the dyad failed to live up to the intentions established at organisational strategic level.

Methodological contributions

Through the use of multi-level research across both sides of the relationship dyad and multiple research partners, this thesis addresses gaps in B2B trust research methodology. It also contributes an understanding of how trust can be proactively developed (intention, ability, credibility, interdependence, mutual value benefit), the roles of cognitive and affective trust, and where these reside at organisation, group/team and interpersonal levels.

Therefore, this thesis extends our understanding of different aspects of trust by applying a research methodology that negates misspecification, making a methodological contribution to B2B research through the use of three methods in triangulation. Furthermore, the qualitative research approach is enhanced through the introduction of a bridging process between first- and second-cycle coding, independently validating, informing and contributing to theory development. This adds to the limited number of studies that have attempted to do so (Zaheer et al, 1998; Currell and Inkpen, 2002; Fang, 2008; Ashnai, 2014; Dowell, 2015; Nikolova, 2015; Stevens et al, 2015; Saunders, 2016; Akrout, 2017).

Managerial Implications

This thesis makes a practical contribution to the body of literature and theory in B2B trust between two organisations in a relational context in the following areas:

1. It differentiates from previous studies investigating the importance of commitment in the development of trust in B2B organisational relationships (Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Mouzaz et al, 2007; Ashnai 2014). As this thesis contributes to an understanding through highlighting the importance of relationship intentions, as opposed to commitment at an organisational level, it builds on intentionality in the trust-building process (Doney & Cannon 1997) as the strategic mediating effect cross dyad through the relationship intentions both sides have towards the relationship. **Therefore, managers need to be clear about the relational intentions they set in terms of customer or supplier expectations and the organisation's ability to meet them. Managers need to ensure relationship measures reflect the true role of commitment in trust development.** This has implications on the use of net promoter score (NPS) and how customer relationship quality (CRQ) is established in a B2B relational context. Additionally, the thesis highlights both commitment and communication as important linking antecedents of B2B

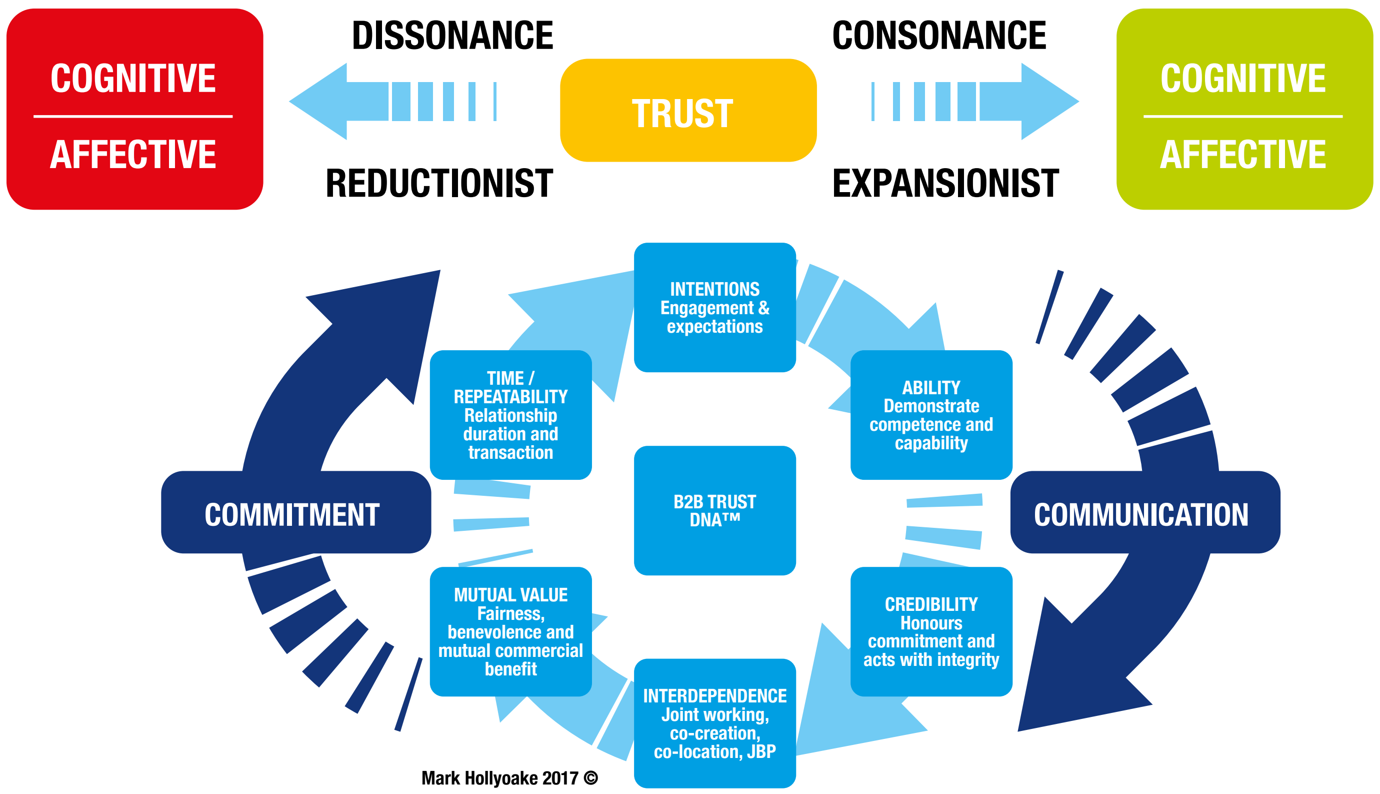

Figure 2: Training, Mentoring and Coaching cycle.

relational trust at operations/team and interpersonal level, as intention moves from intangible to tangible action between both sides of the relationship. This **offers managers the potential to track and measure implementation at these levels** through the commitment and communication being undertaken between the dyad and within the organisations and the delivery of the relational intent.
2. Social exchange theory assumes that the role of social interactions and interpersonal relationships are critical in exchanges such as business relationships, (Blau 1964; Emerson 1981). Both social and structural characteristics are considered as influential factors when examining business relationships, (Wilson 1995; Blois 1999; Ashnai 2014). This thesis confirms the proposition made by social exchange theory that emotions and feelings play a role in business relationships, which involve social exchanges (Thibaut and Kelley 1959; Ashnai 2014) as was evidenced in the role of affective trust expansionist/reductionist antecedents between both sides of the relational dyad.
Relationship consonance occurring through cognitive, affective antecedents and/or combination has an expansionist effect on trust development. In this context, **managers/leaders need to match resources for the optimum effect in the early relationship effective stage. Care needs to be taken that the relationship doesn't get stuck at this stage and smoothly transitions into the cognitive stage.** Careful selection of the boundary spanners and commensurate development is required in order to effectively manage this transition.
The resource-based view, highlights implementation strategies that enable firms to gain competitive advantages, accessing and managing resources productively, and profitably (Wernerflet 1984; Barney 1986; Ashnai 2014). This thesis contributes to this perspective by developing the theory of dissonance and consonance that incorporates two different groups of characteristics, affective/emotional and cognitive/rational, which have a reductionist and/or expansionist effect on B2B relational trust development between both sides of a relational dyad, operating as a supporting link. It is therefore vital that managers/leaders regularly and objectively survey both sides of the relational dyad. Doing so, would determine the affective/cognitive balance and nature of trust development, enabling corrective action to be taken if required.
3. The relationship boundary spanners have a mitigating effect on the movement from relational intent (intangible) to relational action (tangible), reducing vulnerability and leap of faith, which supports the earlier work of Naslund (2012 p.23), suggesting that: *"interpretation and expectation are largely based on cognition, while the leap of faith relies more on the affective aspects"*. The thesis uncovered the role of the boundary spanners and affective trust as having a positive impact on the move from intangible trust as organisational intention towards the activation and into tangible trust. **An additional role of relationship trust developer needs to be considered for the boundary spanners and closely related relationship stakeholders**, as they take on the responsibility for risk mitigation through relationship trust development. This would require systematic development of capability and competency in this relationship development for the boundary spanners and connected stakeholders – in essence, holding the hand of one side of the relational dyad as they make the step (rather than the leap of faith) (Mollering 2002) to mitigate the risk and ameliorate the vulnerability.
4. The thesis identified trust residing at organisational level manifested through moral bonds (cultural), action and behavioural conceptualisation. Trust has been argued to

pass into the collective entity over time, (Clark 2010) and is seen to live in a state beyond the collective individuals, confirming and supporting (Fleetwood 2018) conceptual structuration theory. It also posits an answer to the academic conundrum of where does trust reside in an organisation, which in turn contributes to social exchange theory (Szomptka P 2016), and supports the conceptualisation of an organisation's actions as a characteristic of trust (Stevens et al 2015).

It also **confirms the strategic importance of the leadership team** (Legood et al 2016) **in shaping organisational trust through the development and signalling of relationship intentions**. The implications are significant for leaders as they have responsibility not only for the strategic intent, but also the development of the organisation's moral bonds. These emanate from the organisational leadership's actions and behaviours, passing into organisational culture over time. At an operations, team and interpersonal level, the contribution builds on structuration theory. **The implications for leaders in the creation of organisational trust is ensuring the relational intent manifests in the artefacts at operations/interpersonal level, this is communicated effectively, and then checked for understanding, relevance and appropriateness at inter-operations and interpersonal levels: ways of working, actions and behaviours are briefed effectively, trained, embedded and rewarded; undertaken until they become organisational muscle memory, overwriting the historic ways of working**. This thesis demonstrates trust residing at these levels as a manifestation of artefacts (relationship charter/mission/vision) standard norms (contracts, processes, systems and ways of working) and cognitive social stuff as the effective memories of the relationship agents.

Figure 3: Model for B2B trust DNA.

5. The practical contribution to theory and literature of B2B customer management, marketing, partnerships, sales and purchasing is made by introducing a model of B2B relationship trust building. The model (see **Figure 3**) contributes by developing an: intention-ability-credibility-interdependence-mutual value outcomes–time framework that works across all organisational levels and between dyads. In essence, **this provides managers/leaders with a B2B relational trust development blueprint, the "how to guide"**. This starts and emanates from organisational level as strategic intent, turned into relationship reality at operations level and then into the effect seen through the creation of mutual value. It builds on the definition of B2B trust, and sheds light on how both sides of the relationship can work proactively to use trust to develop the relationship. It provides a sense check as the framework, if applied from an opportunistic/coercive behavioural perspective, has the potential to develop dissonance and a reductionist effect on the relationship. The application of the trust DNA model has a positive impact on trust development in a B2B relationship and can be proactively planned and applied.

Additionally, the thesis bridges two perspectives into the study of business relationships (ie, social exchange theory and resource-based view), as they both play a role in shaping this model/framework, particularly due to the emphasis on outcome(s) from the relationship in the form of mutual value outcomes and the role of ability and credibility antecedent resource allocation to achieve them. The application of the trust DNA model and its reductionist/expansionist potential impact on the relationship contribute to the understanding of **trust as being dynamic in nature through constant updating and/or recalibration of trust between both sides** (Stevens et al 2017).

Research limitations

The research was conducted with organisations all of which operated the relationship researched in the **United Kingdom**. This means the findings of this thesis may not have validity in other regions or geographies. The regional variations in terms of business ethics and business culture would need to be considered.

The organisations researched all operate across a number of distribution channels, with the internet and online business being a key element. However, the **online channel** was not explicitly researched and therefore may need further consideration and/or exploration.

This thesis and research explored B2B trust across dyads and at three different organisational levels: inter-organisational, inter-team/operations and interpersonal. In total, 37 people were interviewed. When matching respondents to organisational level, the research cohort at **staff/interpersonal level** would have benefited from additional respondents to balance with the organisational and inter-team/operations/managerial level.

The qualitative research reached saturation before the total number of respondents (37) were interviewed; however, it could have benefited from more respondents from the **fast-moving goods and financial sectors** research partners. When broken down between the **supplier/customer sides of the dyad**, the number of respondents became somewhat diluted, and could have benefited from additional respondents from both sides.

The research focused on the private sector and one quasi-private/public sector organisation and thus may be subject to issues of generalisability beyond the sectors researched, ie the third sector, industrials/auto/manufacturing).This thesis is predicated on the research gathered from organisations representing the fast-moving consumer goods, grocery retail, healthcare distribution and retailing, pharmaceutical, utilities and outsourced services sectors. As such, it may **not reflect the relational and trust dynamics in the third sector, public sector and other business sectors not covered in this thesis**.

Areas for further research

Other regions – Scholars focusing on researching B2B trust using a cross dyad by organisational-level methodology would benefit from building on this thesis to explore additional areas for further research, extending the research to encompass other regions could offer a comparative analysis on the differences among other regions when researching B2B relational trust. Exploring a specific market or country may also add richness to the current research and build on the findings.

Third sector – The development of the research into the third sector would provide an interesting build on the findings. It could also allow comparative analysis by level and cross dyad. The public sector also holds significant opportunity as significant relationships exist between the public sector and business. Research into this sector could provide further insight into mutual value benefit from a not-for-profit relational perspective.

Zero-sum game – An interesting area for potential further research exploration, which surfaced during the initial research phase, is the use of trust in a zero-sum game scenario. This could in some way be linked to calculative trust (Williamson, 1975; Lewicki and Bunker, 1985); however, it actually appears to go beyond this as it relates to relationships where failure is too great to contemplate. In this instance, the trust is based on an unknown or known fear of what the consequences could be if one side cannot trust the other.

References

Unfortunately, we do not have space for the extensive list of references supplied. Please contact the author for further information about the literature.

About the author

Mark Hollyoake is an associate lecturer at the University of the West of England, faculty of Business and Law. He is also the founder and director of Customer Attuned ltd, a Customer Management consultancy; mark.hollyoake@customerattuned.com.

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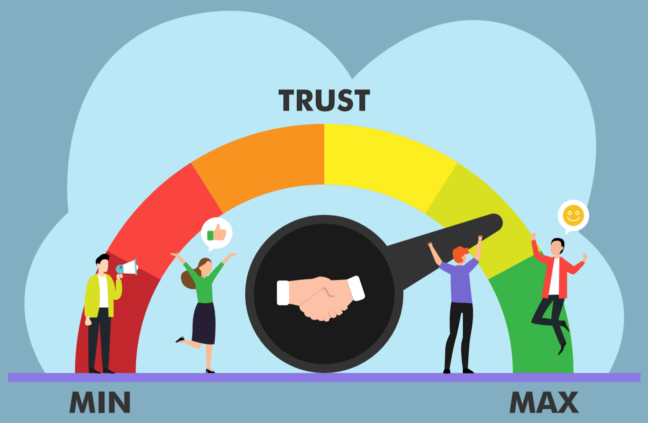
HOW TO ESTABLISH TRUST WITH CUSTOMERS

TRUST PLAYS A MAJOR ROLE IN OUR PROSPECTIVE CUSTOMER'S DECISION-MAKING. HERE ARE A FEW OF THE MOST IMPORTANT WAYS IN WHICH SALESPEOPLE CAN ESTABLISH TRUST:

1: TELL THEM WHAT THEY NEED TO HEAR, NOT WHAT WE HOPE THEY WANT TO HEAR – WEAK SALESPEOPLE OFTEN FALL INTO THE TRAP OF TELLING THE CUSTOMER WHAT THEY HOPE THEY WANT TO HEAR, BUT THIS STRATEGY DOES NOTHING TO ESTABLISH LONG-TERM TRUST, AND ALMOST ALWAYS REBOUNDS IN A BAD WAY SOONER OR LATER. WE MUST ALWAYS HONESTLY COMMUNICATE WHAT THE CUSTOMER NEEDS TO HEAR, EVEN IF THIS IS INITIALLY UNCOMFORTABLE.

2: BE HONEST ABOUT THE CHALLENGES OF CHANGE – IF WE ARE TRYING TO PERSUADE OUR CUSTOMERS TO CHANGE, WE DO OURSELVES NO FAVOURS IF WE SUGGEST THAT THE JOURNEY WILL BE SMOOTHER THAN IT ACTUALLY IS. CUSTOMERS HAVE LEARNED THROUGH BITTER EXPERIENCE TO BE CYNICAL ABOUT SUGAR-COATED STORIES OF FRICTION-FREE CHANGE AND WILL DISTRUST SALESPEOPLE WHO SUGGEST THE PROCESS IS GOING TO BE UNFEASIBLY EASY.



3: ALWAYS DELIVER ON OUR COMMITMENTS, NO MATTER HOW SMALL – HOW WE BEHAVE DURING THE PRE-SALES PROCESS GIVES OUR PROSPECTIVE CUSTOMER A CLEAR INDICATION OF WHAT IT WILL BE LIKE TO DEAL WITH OUR ORGANISATION AFTER THEY HAVE PLACED THEIR ORDER. WE MUST ALWAYS DO WHAT WE SAY WE ARE GOING TO DO, WHEN WE SAY WE ARE GOING TO DO IT, AND ENSURE THAT OUR COLLEAGUES DO THE SAME.

4: LEAVE THEM FEELING SMARTER – IN EVERY CONVERSATION, OUR GOAL SHOULD BE TO ENSURE THAT OUR CUSTOMER GOES AWAY HAVING LEARNED SOMETHING INTERESTING, UNEXPECTED, AND USEFUL THAT IS HELPFUL TO THEM. IF OUR CUSTOMER BELIEVES THAT THE CONVERSATION WAS A GOOD USE OF THEIR TIME, THEY ARE MORE LIKELY TO WANT TO CONTINUE THE DISCUSSION.

5: ENCOURAGE FEEDBACK – WE MUST RESIST THE "ITCH TO PITCH" AND ALWAYS SEEK TO FOSTER AN HONEST, TWO-WAY CONVERSATION IN WHICH EVERYONE INVOLVED FEELS THAT THEY HAVE BEEN GIVEN THE OPPORTUNITY TO MAKE THEIR POINT, AND THAT THEIR INPUTS HAVE BEEN RESPECTED.

5 ESSENTIAL STEPS FOR TARGETING CUSTOMERS

RESEARCHING PROSPECTS CAN BE A TIME-CONSUMING ACTIVITY BUT IS **ESSENTIAL TO SUCCESS**. USED JUDICIOUSLY, **AI** CAN HELP **STREAMLINE THE PROCESS.**

1

IDENTIFY YOUR IDEAL CUSTOMER PROFILE. WHAT DO YOUR EXISTING CUSTOMERS HAVE IN COMMON? WHAT ISSUES HAVE YOU HELPED THEM SOLVE? HOW DID YOU HELP THE CLIENT HELP THEIR CUSTOMERS? THERE ARE MANY OTHER FACTORS SUCH AS COMPANY SIZE, FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE, GEOGRAPHY, PRODUCT LINE, AND SO ON TO CONSIDER.

2

RESEARCH THE ORGANISATION, ITS AMBITIONS, STRATEGIES, INITIATIVES AND GOALS. MULTIPLE SOURCES ARE AVAILABLE, INCLUDING ANNUAL REPORTS, BLOGS, CONFERENCES AND EXHIBITIONS, COMPANY WEBSITES, INDUSTRY PUBLICATIONS, PRESS RELEASES AND SOCIAL MEDIA CHANNELS.

3

RESEARCH THE LEAD CONTACT AND POTENTIAL INFLUENCER ROLES. ALONGSIDE ANNUAL REPORTS AND COMPANY WEBSITES, SOCIAL MEDIA CHANNELS CAN BE INVALUABLE SOURCES OF INFORMATION, ESPECIALLY FOR IDEAS ON HOW TO ENGAGE. GOOD OLD TELEMARKETING RESEARCH MAY ALSO BE USEFUL.

4

RESEARCH "PAIN POINTS" AND CHALLENGES. MATCH THESE TO YOUR IDEAL CUSTOMER PROFILE. USE YOUR INDUSTRY AND WIDER BUSINESS KNOWLEDGE TO IDENTIFY SOME (CREDIBLE) CHALLENGES ON THE HORIZON THAT THE PROSPECT MAY NOT BE AWARE OF OR KNOW HOW TO SOLVE. BLOGS, INDUSTRY EVENTS, SPECIALIST PUBLICATIONS, THE WIDER BUSINESS MEDIA, AND SOCIAL ARE USEFUL FOR THIS.

5

IDENTIFY AND MONITOR "TRIGGER EVENTS". WHAT ARE THE INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL TRIGGER EVENTS THAT HAVE CAUSED OTHER SIMILAR IDEAL CUSTOMERS TO START THEIR SEARCH FOR A SOLUTION? INTERNAL EVENTS INCLUDE NEW SENIOR APPOINTMENTS, NEW STRATEGIES. EXTERNAL EVENTS INCLUDE NEW LEGISLATION, COMPETITIVE ACTIVITY AND SO ON. SET UP ALERTS TO MONITOR THESE CHANGES.

THEN IT'S TIME TO MAKE CONTACT...

SEE SALES TIPS 101 "OPENING A CONVERSATION"

Leap of faith

Dr Mark Hollyoake

B2B trust research: what's next?

Abstract

New academic research on trust will build on insights generated through Mark Hollyoake's 2020 doctoral thesis (see previous article). They aim to dig deeper into the role of the "Boundary Spanner in relational trust development", based on eight years of academic research through the University of Southampton.


The original research

Boundary spanners: What are they? What do they do? Why are they important? And what exactly do we mean by a boundary spanner? On a very simple level they are actors on both sides of a relationship that span the boundary between one and the other for relational management or development. According to Möllering (2002), boundary spanners manage the "leap of faith", responsible for managing and mitigating risk, as is evident in **Figure 1**.

Relationship boundary spanners have a mitigating effect on the movement from relational intent (intangible) to relational action (tangible), reducing vulnerability, and the magnitude of the "leap of faith" required. This supports the earlier work of Naslund (2012 p23), suggesting that: "Interpretation and expectation are largely based on cognition, while the leap of faith relies more on the affective aspects".

So, what type of role may typically be considered and understood as boundary spanners? Traditionally, these would be the salesperson, client director, and account manager in the supplier organisation; in the buying organisation, this would typically be the buyer, procurement manager, category buying manager, or supplier manager.

However, the dynamics in B2B relationships have now changed given increased complexity, with the involvement of additional contacts and actors. The roles within category management, customer marketing, trade marketing, supply chain and IT (to name but a few) are now inherently involved in the relationship and could be seen as boundary spanners. The same also holds true for the commercially focused elements of leadership teams, both at Head Office and group level, as they become increasingly involved in B2B relationship development and trust building.

Positive impact

My thesis uncovered the role of the boundary spanners and affective trust as having a positive impact on the move from intangible trust as organisational intention towards activation and into tangible trust. An additional role of the relationship trust developer (boundary spanner) needs to be considered and closely related to the relationship stakeholders, as they take on the responsibility for risk mitigation of the leap of faith through relationship trust development. This would require systematic capability and competency development of relationship development for the boundary spanners and connected stakeholders. In essence, enabling the boundary spanners to effectively hold the hand of one side of the relational dyad as they make the step (rather than the leap of faith) (Möllering 2002) mitigate the risk and ameliorate the vulnerability.

The boundary spanner role is not simply a set of rules that are followed to the letter (Perrone V, Zaheer A, McEvily 2003). The role is often open to interpretation and frequently subject to multiple, complex and conflicting pressures (Kahn at al 1964). Therefore, we cannot predict the development of trust merely based on the formal role definition, and must look beyond this to understand the subtleties of how roles influence the level of trust that is placed upon them.

In their research into boundary spanners Neal J W, Neal Z, and Brutzman, B (2022) uncovered a number of definitions related to the role of boundary spanner: "We define the practice of boundary spanning as work to enable the exchange between the production and use of knowledge to support evidence-informed decision-making in a specific context and boundary spanners as individuals or organisations that specifically and actively facilitate this process." Bednarek et al (2018) define boundary spanning as, "work to enable exchange between the production and use of knowledge to support evidence-informed decision-making in a specific context", while Posner and Cvitanovic (2019) define boundary spanners as the "individuals or organisations that specifically and actively facilitate this process".

And here lies the paradox. While the theory seems straightforward, the application is quite different.

The work I initially covered in my doctoral thesis focused on B2B relational trust, offering significant insights into the dynamic nature of trust, how it operates, the impact it has on B2B relationships, and how to proactively develop it in B2B. From this research I developed a B2B trust DNA™ Model (**Figure 2**).

The model provides a systemic approach to trust building, starting at the intention stage which is intangible trust. It then moves into active trust through the reality of ability, credibility, and the interdependence within the relationship. If applied proactively and positively by both sides, it results in the development of mutual value. Relational commitment and communication act as the oil to the central DNA, enabling them to work effectively in the pursuit of mutual value creation.

However, from working on projects with various organisations over the last 15 years, it's become increasingly clear that more research is needed into the role of boundary spanners in developing relational trust as they navigate the relationship from intangible trust into tangible trust, (as can be seen in **Figure 1**.)

What is next? Boundary spanners' trust-building potential

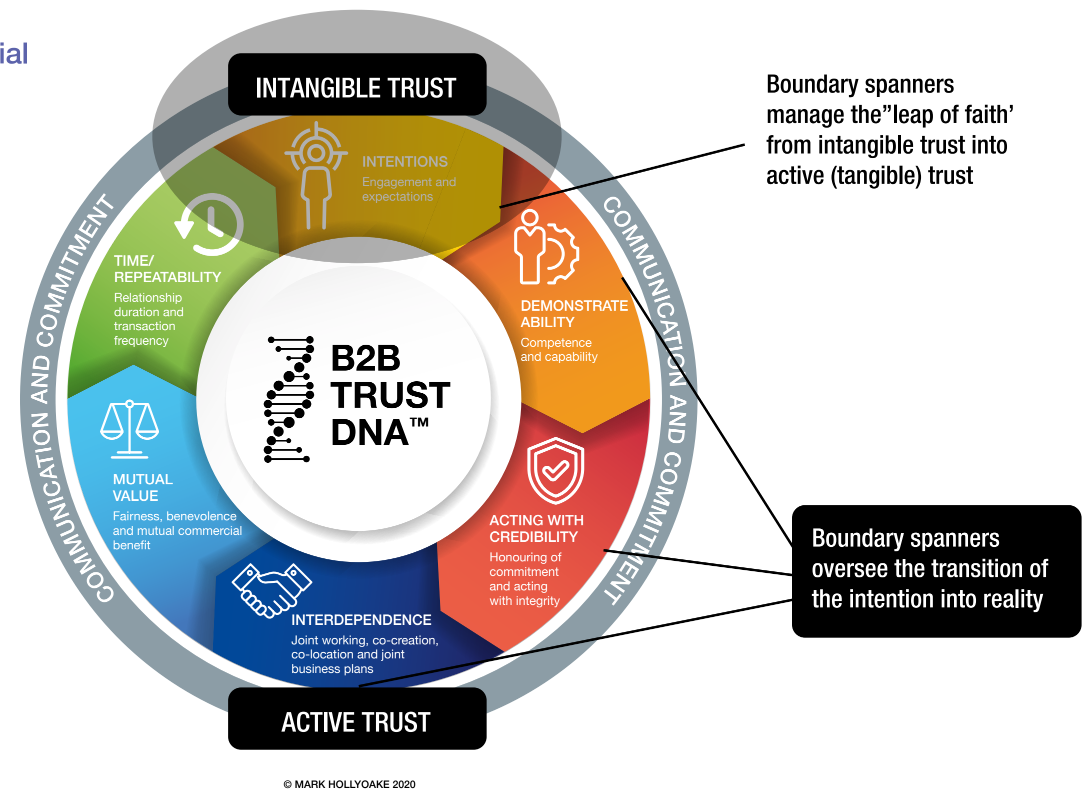
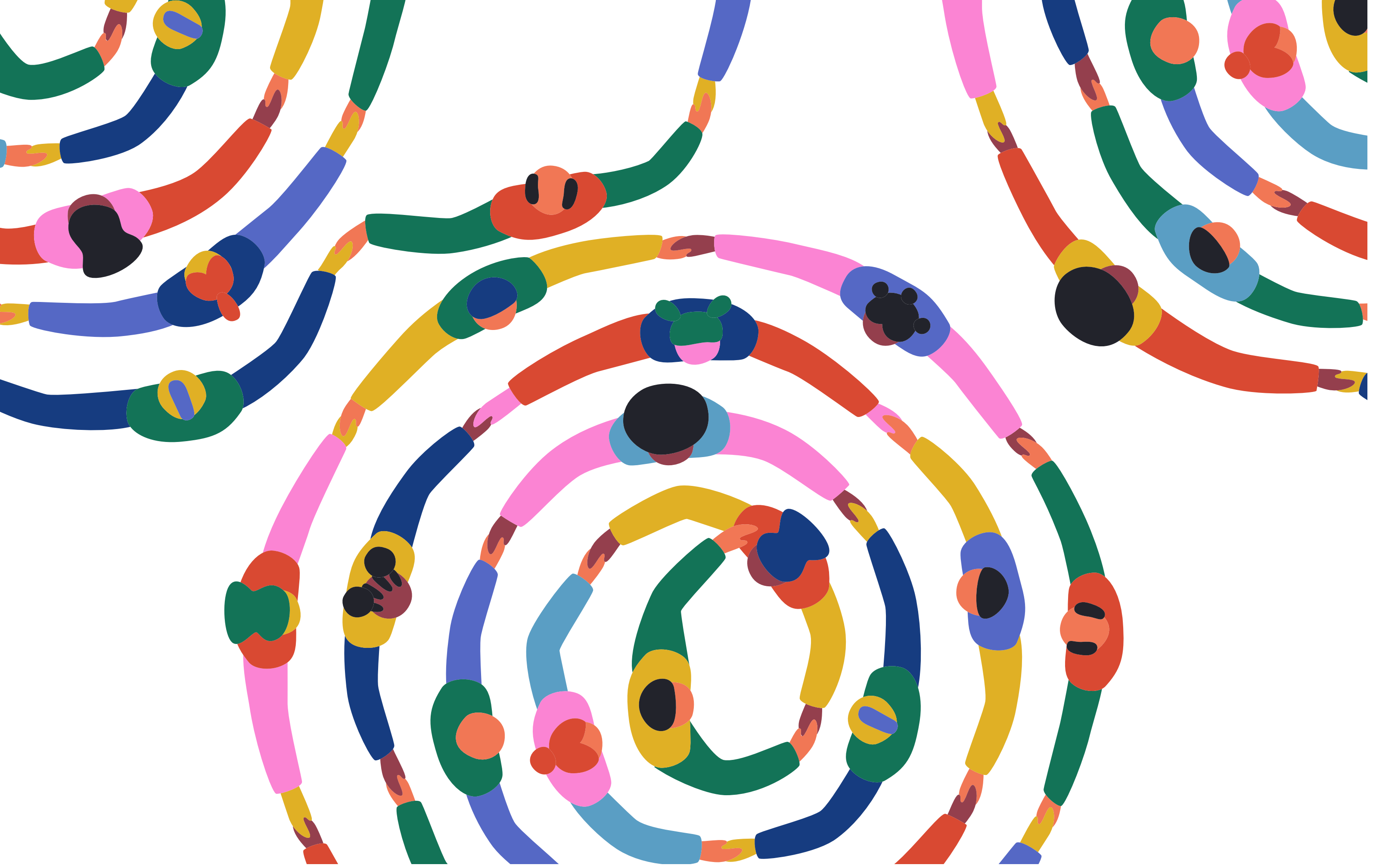


Figure 1: Boundary spanner role: transition from intention into reality.

Figure 2: Trust DNA™ Model.



What will additional research do?

The extant literature reviewed to date points towards the key responsibilities and activities related to the role of the boundary spanners in two key areas:

1. The activities and roles the boundary spanner undertakes as the relationship moves from intangible trust to tangible trust (active) trust (Giddens 1954) as both sides undertake what Möllering (2002) refers to as a "leap of faith". In this context, and at this point in the relationship's development, the role is focused on *the mitigation of the risk both sides perceive in the move from intention, intangible trust and into the reality, activation of the intention and tangible trust development* (Akkermans H, Ou C, Van-Oppen W, and Vos B (2020), as can be seen in the following:

i. Establishing the expectations and engagement frameworks across both sides of the relational dyad (Hollyoake, M. 2020).

ii. The development and demonstration of the expected value opportunities the relationship is expected to create for both sides, and the timeline for that development (Hollyoake M 2020). This could be viewed as the boundary spanner being a mutual value creator. (Akkermans H, Ou C, Van-Oppen W, and Vos B (2020); (Hollyoake M 2020); Akrout H, La Rocca A 2019).

iii. Hayam Alnakhli, Aniefre Eddie Inyang, and Omar S Itani (2021) argue that salespeople need to effectively listen to their customers to provide needed solutions by jointly working with them to co-create value.

iv. Similarly, a salesperson's communication and adaptive selling skills have collective impacts that positively contribute to the value co-creation process. Results supplement previous findings in the literature by showing value co-creation holds a positive effect on sales performance at the micro salesperson level. The results offer additional support to the ongoing dialogue on the role of a salesperson as value co-creator. Hayam Alnakhli, Aniefre Eddie Inyang, and Omar S Itani (2021) go on to identify several variables that engender successful cocreation by salespeople in B2B sales contexts. Their findings demonstrate that salespeople who can adapt their selling approach are good listeners, and who can effectively communicate with customers, can engender the value co-creation process with customers. The findings serve as a base to create professional guidelines about the skills and capabilities salespeople need to successfully execute a value co-creation process (Hayam Alnakhli, Aniefre Eddie Inyang, and Omar S Itani 2021).

2. The development of the intention into a reality as the relationship moves into active trust (Giddens 1954) development (Singh J, Marinova D, and Brown S, 2011) points to a number of boundary-spanning activities undertaken as relationship and trust builders – see **Figure 3**.

Boundary-spanning activities

Bridger	Acting as the "bridger" between the relationship boundaries. Every relationship starts with either distinct/formal or indistinct/informal demarcation lines. In this instance, the boundary spanners start not only to establish where the boundaries exists, but also provide the bridge across and between them.	Singh J, Marinova D, Brown S (2011)
Blurring	Working across the relational dyad and developing links, networks, stakeholder relationships, and contacts that start to blur the boundaries and develop a shared approach.	Singh J, Marinova D, Brown S (2011)
Buffering	Where the boundary spanners act as a buffer and conduit for information requests, challenges or issues relating to the relationship and the business conducted between both sides. Making sense of them and delivering them into the organisation in a digestible and actionable form.	Singh J, Marinova D, Brown S (2011)
Maintaining	Maintaining the relationship, once it has achieved its optimum position, then the boundary spanner role is not only focused on relationship development. It is also around being mindful that they hold onto what has already been achieved and maintaining the relationship through the potential ups and downs. Ensuring that dissonance doesn't start to develop and mis-trust creep in, which starts to undermine the relational benefits.	Singh J, Marinova D, Brown S (2011) (Hollyoake, M. 2020)
Knowledge generators	The boundary spanners' role as generators of customer or supplier knowledge. Using the access opportunities, the role provides opportunity to ask big questions, explore and find out information – then applying their experience and understanding to develop it into knowledge. Coupled to this is a potentially more straightforward role and responsibility, that of relational problem solver. Using the relationship knowledge and contacts to resolve and solve problems either before they occur, as they occur, or in the implementation of lessons learnt from past problem rectification. This is an essential element of relationship and trust development. (Hollyoake M, 2020). The movement of a relationship into identification-based trust, relies on the development of second-order learning to deal with, solve and rectify problems, before the other side identified them as an issue and vice versa (Lewicki R, Brinsfirld C, 2009).	Singh J, Marinova D, Brown S (2011)
Innovators	Utilising the position within the relationship, access to strategic insights to inform and play a role in the innovation process.	Woisetschlieger D, et al (2015)
Collaborators	Collaboration through service redesign, development of joint SMART objectives and collaborative KPIs are key components of the role and intrinsic to relationship development.	Akkermans, H. Ou, C, Van-Oppen, W, Vos, B. (2020)
Shielding	Shielding identifies the impact of relationship turbulence on relational trust, when functional boundary spanners undertake trust-building and trust-diluting activities. When boundary spanners undertake activities to shield the relationship actors in operations and frontline delivery. They ensure potentially disruptive short-term elements of the relationship at a different level or function do not have a relationship-wide impact.	Brattstrom, A. Faems, D, Mahring, Magnus. (2019)

Figure 3 illustrates the areas within B2B that the literature review addresses.

To date, there has been significant research into the way boundary spanners work, but the majority of the literature revolves around role diversity, role stress, inter-role behaviour, role stress theory and role behaviour.

The literature also demonstrates how boundary spanners without role clarity can create ambiguity that leads to role stress and early burnout. The boundary spanner can be torn between the needs of their own organisation and the needs/business drivers of the customer, as due to their unique location in the organisation spanning both sides, they are simultaneously exposed to competing expectations from their own and also from the partner organisation (Khan at al 1964, Strauss 1962, Spekman 1979).

Dissonance and consonance

In essence, in their paper Brattstrom A, Faems D, and Mahring, Magnus (2019) discuss relationship dissonance and consonance in relational trust building triggered through domain and functionally specific activities. The focus is on convergence and divergence: what causes it. This is echoed in a more holistic research approach (Hollyoake M, 2020) that identified trust dissonance and consonance across both cognitive and affective trust, through the application or misapplication of a B2B model for trust development (**Figure 4**).

Exploring dissonance starts to identify some of the pitfalls that boundary spanners could avoid and relational techniques they could deploy to ensure relation trust is maintained and developed. Although, the paper of Brattstrom A, Faems D, and Mahring, Magnus (2019) is not focused on the boundary spanners per se, the activity of shielding could be an effective element of the boundary spanner's role. Ensuring potentially disruptive short-term elements of the relationship at a different level or function do not have a relationship-wide impact.

It is not unusual to encounter boundary spanners working tactically outside of the required role, despite having clear descriptors developed through a capability and competency framework. The strategic element of the role gets lost among daily firefighting short-term tactical issues. This can be seen when boundary spanners experience role ambiguity on a personal level, the internal organisational level, or externally. The pursuit of firefighting and resolution of short-term issues, as well as challenges in the business and relationship, means taking on this responsibility could be attributed to:

- Justification and role protection – need to be seen to be active within the relationship.
- Covering shortfalls in operations and the organisation's customer-centric culture.
- Lack of clarity and understanding of what the role encompasses.
- Insufficient role training and development.
- Profile building internally/externally.

Any of these can lead to relational downsides and turbulence, as the short-term focus comes at a cost, reducing relationship management, resilience, and development. Unless addressed over time, the relationship descends into short-termism, with an erosion of the overall relational intent.

Emerging themes

The literature addresses some aspects related to the role that boundary spanners undertake in managing the migration of the relationship as it moves from intangible to tangible and its ongoing trust development. When we consider the ways that trust develops and how this potentially links to the Trust DNA™ model (**Figure 2**) several themes start to emerge:

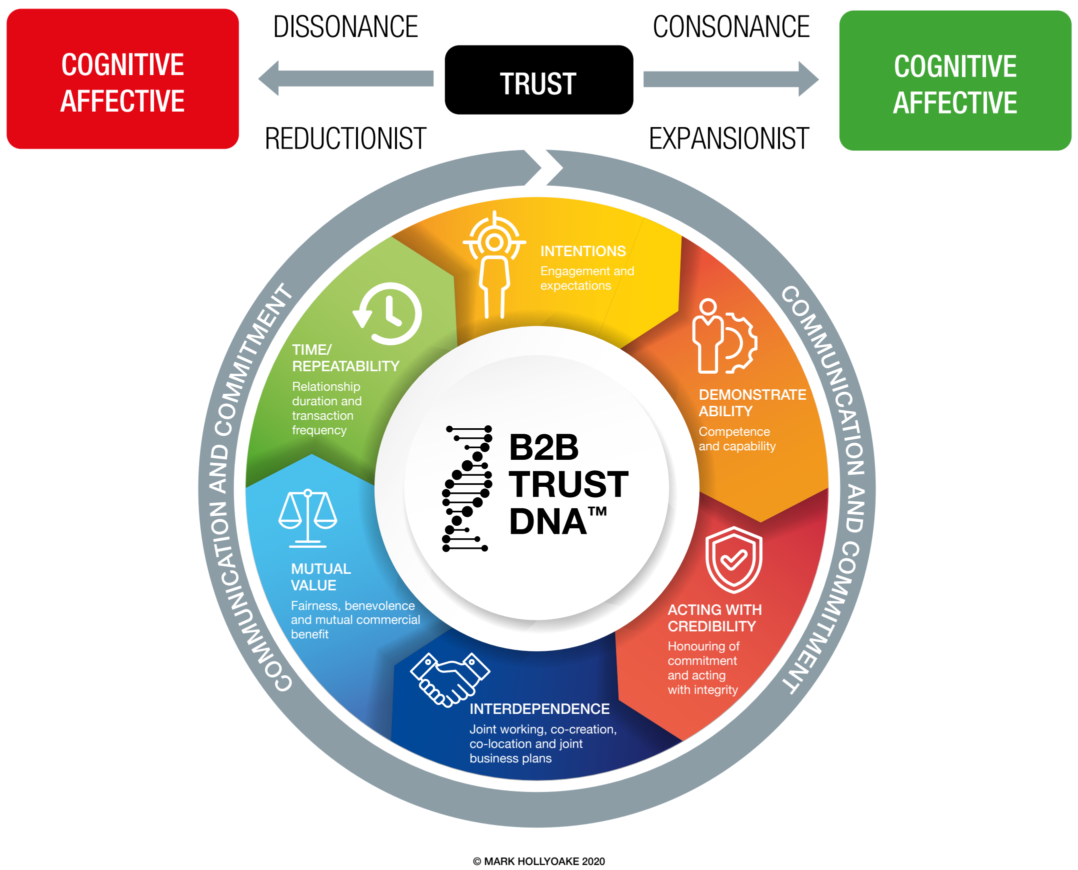


Figure 4: Boundary spanner role: transition from intention into reality.

"From working on projects with various organisations over the last 15 years, it's become increasingly clear that more research is needed into the role of boundary spanners in developing relational trust as they navigate the relationship from intangible trust into tangible trust.

- The activities boundary spanners undertake to mitigate the relationship or perceived risk in moving from intangible to tangible trust, and those involved in making it happen.
- The elements of the boundary-spanner roles (customer and supplier) that are undertaken to develop a trust-based relationship.
- The translation of the relational intent into implementation plans that are briefed, socialised, and agreed by both sides.
- Value opportunity broken out into elements of initial value across the (CHARM) value model, and how value will be realised with an appropriate measurement framework.
- Sharing learnings and knowledge to build ability within the relationship.
- Leading cross-functional joint working, setting the objectives, ways of working and measurement framework.
- Developing and implementing communication plans; the who, the how often, the medium used, style and messaging; the provision of one voice for the relationship across all levels, functions and both sides.
- Demonstrating, monitoring, and creating relationship commitment.
- Agreeing the relationship performance dashboard, monitoring, and sharing relationship development versus plan, re-calibrating where necessary.

Getting involved

All the above, offer significant opportunity to understand the intricacies of the boundary spanner role and how it could be deployed for relationship improvement and trust building. Understanding this can inform capability and competency development, role specifications and development programme for those already in role or in early-career-stage development.

The research I propose represents the next stage in the exploration of relationship trust building. If you would like to know more, or get actively involved as the research enters the field stage, and keep up to date with the insights it generates, please get in touch: mark.hollyoake@uwe.ac.uk

For more information on my original research in developing the Trust DNA Model, click on [Research into B2B Trust]

About the author

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Do you need trust to challenge?

Scott Waugh

In this dissertation from an MA SALES MANAGEMENT programme in 2017-18, the author explores the extent to which trust is important when applying the Challenger Selling approach.

Abstract

Challenger Selling was a new sales approach that was popularised in a 2008 *Harvard Business Review* article by Matthew Dixon and Brett Adamson. They published the *Challenger Sale* book in 2011, and this sales model was widely adopted as a business-to-business (B2B) selling practice by many organisations looking for a new selling advantage.

However, this paper suggests that the Challenger sales approach disregards "trust" or relationship. Here, the author draws on semi-structured telephone interviews of 20 relevant participants disclosing their experiential reflections and opinions of trust in selling phenomena. Interpretation of the findings deduce that the interdependence of trust and relationships in selling both aligns and contests the central premise of the Challenger sales approach.

This research provides commentary to the Challenger selling approach of Dixon and Adamson (2011) in that, where it may be agreed that a pre-existing relationship or trust are not essential to influence a transaction, rather a salesperson's knowledge, credibility and organisational reputation are offered as fundamental pre-requisites in positive vendor selection.

By contrast, this research also found that trusted relationships are deemed necessary to sustain longer-term repeat purchases from the same customer; however, it may be viewed a customer's prerogative to forge a dyadic relationship primarily based on their perceived value and commitment of the salesperson and competitive advantage obtainable from the supplier organisation's appetite to meet the customer's needs.

The *Challenger Sale* (hereafter Challenger) is a self-considered advancement in value-based selling (Dixon and Adamson, 2011). The approach caught the critical attention of the selling profession and academia (Rapp, Bachrach, Panagopoulos, and Ogilvie, 2014), primarily in its bold assertion that traditional Relationship Selling is redundant, in favour of a knowledge-based selling approach centred upon three main behavioural constructs: "Teach for Difference, Tailor for Resonance and Take Control" (M Dixon and Adamson, 2011, p. 26).

Dixon and Adamson (2011) position Challenger as a knowledge-based selling approach advancing Solution Selling and reason that the buyer-seller dyadic relationship as the de facto measure of customer satisfaction is over-emphasised (Meehan and Wright, 2013). They contend that organisations that had adopted relationship-based selling programmes have failed to deliver as expected, resulting in programmes producing "passive sellers" who avoid conflict – wrongly assuming it will damage the customer relationship, reducing customer satisfaction and sales performance (Zboja, Clark, and Haytko, 2016).

Instead, the supposed empirical research [not obtainable for reference] of the Challenger approach by Dixon and Adamson (2011), centres upon the main argument that a dyadic relationship is not required to generate value. Rather, such relationships are "a reward" (Foreword by Rackham, N M; Dixon and Adamson, 2011) achieved by improving the customer's business through knowledge exchange based on convincing insights that promise wholesale business improvement, wherein the failure to inspire is a failure to add value (M Dixon and Adamson, 2011).

Transactional sales

In agreement with transaction cost economic theory (Williamson, 1993) and Rackham (1999), the buyer's intrinsic value driver from a product or service is in efficiently securing the best market price and not in the salesperson's direct involvement (Rackham and De Vincentis, 1999, p 88), reinforcing Dixon's (2011) central theme in Challenger that not all customers require a relationship with suppliers (Moncrief, 2017; Palmatier, Scheer, Evans, and Arnold, 2008) – a logic that may fit transactional purchases, where buyers segment vendors into commodity categories judged on risk to buyer or supply scarcity (Kraljic, 1983). The salesperson's contribution is in communicating the extrinsic value embedded in the brand that defines offer boundaries and irrespective of the need for individual dyadic relationships (M Dixon and Adamson, 2011; Moncrief, 2017; Tescari and Ledur Brito, 2016).

In further support of Dixon and Adamson's (2011) view that the buyer-seller dyadic relationship is unimportant (Meehan and Wright, 2013), research shows that transactional buyers depend on competitive market pressures to drive innovations and choice (Ganesan, 1994), using objective purchase evaluation to negate perceived losses (Doney and Cannon, 1997) and extending institutional trust to the supplier's organisational brand and their ability to deliver the product/service at a sufficient quality to perform its required function (Vargo and Lusch, 2004).

Compared with prior selling methods, the Challenger approach provides adopters with a fresh perspective and long view of the validity and credibility of the sales profession in a marketing period of uncertainty. Although, where trust and commitment are considered the foundations of relationships (L Ryals and Davies, 2013; Spekman and Carraway, 2006), Morgan and Hunt (1994) recommend that commitment and trust form relationships. As such it may be considered that where there is trust or commitment, there is – by proxy – a relationship. Insofar as Dixon and Adamson (2011) claim a relationship is not required for the Challenger approach to be applicable, by definition, they declare that *trust* is equally non-essential.

While the research literature on trust in selling are well explained, there is seemingly minimal – if any – empirical evidence reporting the extent to which trusted relationships or organisational brand loyalty are required for the Challenger technique to be a viable selling approach. This suggests an exploration of experienced sales and procurement professionals could disclose new perspectives in this area.

Research aims and objectives

By addressing these research questions, the aim of this study is to explore the role of Trust in the Challenger Selling approach and its viability as a selling method:

- RQ1: Explore to what extent is trust important when applying the Challenger approach.
- RQ2: Explore the applicability of the Challenger approach when pre-existing corporate reputation is present.
- RQ3: Explore the customer's perception of trust of known and unknown salespeople attempting to apply the Challenger approach.

Literature review summary

It would appear Challenger is diametric to the field-proven results of solution-selling, axing the necessity for relationship in favour of knowledge exchange as being sufficient to instrument wholesale organisational change (M Dixon and Adamson, 2011; Rapp et al, 2014).

Challenger positions that loyalty is earned from successful knowledge sharing (M Dixon and Adamson, 2011). However, Gambetta (1988) articulates that loyalty is akin to maintaining trust – applicable to an individual, a group or an organisation – suggesting that the use of the term provides a convenient supposition for trust.

Trust is an iterative process over repeated selling interactions (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Trust and commitment develop customers' confidence in and their opinion of the salesperson, thus reinforcing credibility and unlocking information sharing; argument central to the Challenger knowledge-based selling approach for joint value co-creation (Gounaris and Tzempelikos, 2014; Smith and Barclay, 1997).

Insofar as Dixon and Adamson (2011) claim a relationship is not required for the Challenger approach to be applicable, by definition, they declare that trust is not required.

It seems that literature is split in whether or not trust is mandatory for Challenger to be theoretically applicable (Goad and Jaramillo, 2014; Rackham and De Vincentis, 1999; Rapp et al, 2014). This study aims to identify whether the trust constructs presented in the literature support the notion that Challenger can be applied without a pre-existing relationship, and whether there is any behavioural and cognitively suitable salesperson type that can successfully apply Challenger.

Research methodology

> *"This study shows that customer confidence builds trust over time, which develops into a relationship that provides a competitive advantage for both customer and salesperson.*

The researcher employed qualitative assessment of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with a non-probability, self-selected cross-sectional sample population of 20 "relevant persons" from a selection of UK multinational corporations with sector experience in any of the Standard Industrial Classification categories (GOV.UK, 2007).

Data was collected using telephone interviews adopting an inductive exploratory questioning method that produced non-numerical data from which systematic thematic analysis was employed to deduce empirical reflections on the trust in selling phenomenon (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Cresswell, 2009; Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Isaeva, Bachmann, Bristow, and Saunders, 2015).

To improve validity, all interviews were recorded electronically, transcribed verbatim and an interview memo was sent to all participants for review and comment, ensuring a thorough and accurate record of the findings was disclosed from participant interviews. This rigour reinforced the authenticity, credibility and reliability of the study phenomena being presented (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2010; Guba and Lincoln, 1994).

Sample population

A sample frame was elected as four relevant purchasing-persons [Procurement Director, Managing Director, Finance Director, Operations Director] and three relevant selling-persons [Sales Director, Key Account Manager, Business Development Manager] with a minimum ten years' experience.

A relevant person is in the sample frame and either experienced in B2B selling or in purchasing decision-making having had direct exposure to trust in selling situations from which to personally reflect. Participants displayed professionalism when sharing their experiential insights rather than their "personal attitudes" (Pardo, Missirilian, Portier, and Salle, 2011 citing Kumar, Stern and Anderson, 1993, p1634), adding validity to the data (Cresswell, 2009).

Data collection method

Self-selected relevant persons were invited by direct email to participate in a telephone interview. Aside decreased cost and flexibility in location and privacy, telephone interviewing was selected as this provided convenience and privacy of location that further safeguarded participant anonymity. This also aimed to relax the participant and improve interviewer-to-participant rapport by removing visual prejudices that may influence the data interpretation.

Ethical considerations

Telephone interviewing afforded the participants anonymity and privacy with the opportunity to speak freely on essentially sensitive – or emotive – matters of trust, ethics and business conducts that some participants may not have contributed as fully in another interview method (Mealer and Jones, 2014).

Findings and discussion

Participants were asked to describe the purpose and value of the salesperson and offered a combination of 12 common opinions. Interestingly, both participant groups agreed that salesperson knowledge, building relationships and trust, adding value or providing the customer a competitive advantage, to increase business volume and provide a point of contact or business interface for customers to access the supplier organisation.

Synthesising the interviews with NVIVO thematic analysis software produced the initial thematic map (**Figure 1**) that describes the trust construct in a dyadic, buyer-seller relationship – and identifies components that diminish trust – disclosing the underlying purpose of both parties achieving a trust-mutual, customer-oriented, value-adding, relational condition that promotes customer sponsorship and achieves customer loyalty evidenced through repeat purchases.

Discussion on the relevant findings to each of these main themes follows:

Salesperson knowledge – When asked, all participants considered the main purpose and value of the salesperson is their need to be knowledgeable to gain credibility and develop customer relationships. This includes tacit knowledge of their own organisation, being empathetic of their customer's business challenges and having extensive understanding of the industry they compete in. Complementing other research, customers value salespeople who take time to understand their business challenges and can intelligently listen and assimilate their needs into solutions. Drawing upon their industry expertise and experience to finesse information exchange, adapt their value proposition, and align relevant products and services can help develop their business and bring them a competitive advantage (Bateman and Valentine, 2015; Friend et al, 2018; Guenzi et al, 2016).

Knowledge of the customer organisation – There is agreement that, where a trusted salesperson uses

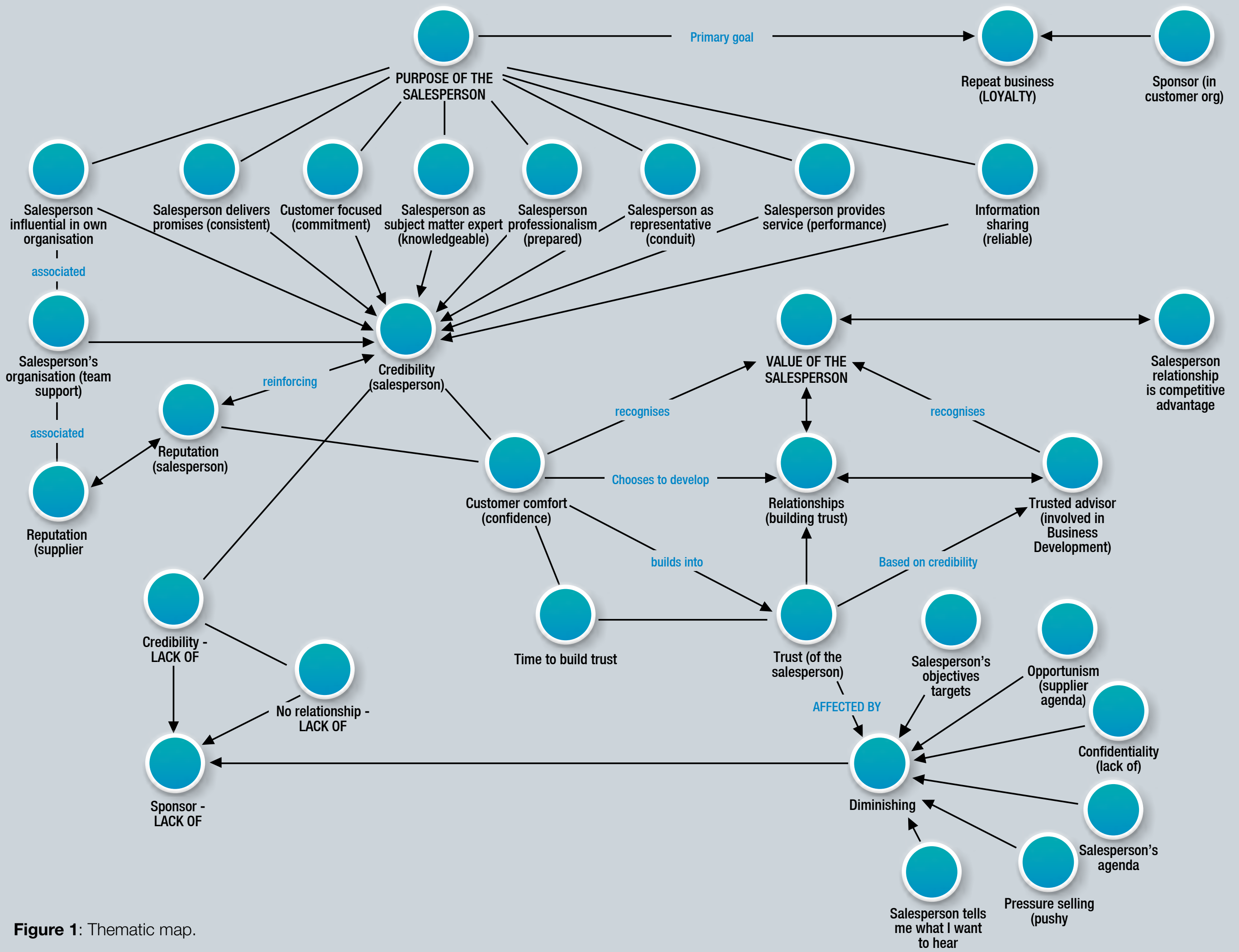

Figure 1: Thematic map.

their relationship to expand their network in a customer organisation, the cross-department knowledge they collect from inter-company leakage (1105MD) can be useful in helping their "corporate sponsor" to navigate their own organisation internally.

Seller-oriented behaviours are considered unethical when the customer's need is not the central motivation. Reducing the customer's unnecessary purchase duplication or identifying poor business practices enhances the customer's ethical perception of the salesperson, so increasing their confidence and trust in the dyadic relationship (Bateman and Valentine, 2015; Crosby et al, 1990).

Knowledge of industry sector – Customers are largely self-sufficient in collecting publicly available information and forming decisions. To remain relevant, salespeople must bring new knowledge and discrete insights to customers to gain their attention and be regarded as an intelligent "thought leader" in their industry.

Participants commented that salespeople could build credibility by empathetically sharing insightful conversations of industry trends and answering the customer's challenges. Customers consider this valuable external source of rich information a competitive advantage, which Hughes, et al (2011), reference as "competitive intelligence" (p 91) that requires strong intellect, a solid relationship and adaptive skills to assimilate, utilise and gain advantage from declarative knowledge (Hughes et al, 2013).

Lack of credibility – Participants commented that customers may perceive a lack of credibility where the salesperson does not demonstrate their knowledge and expertise and, especially where they make no effort to understand the customer's business, the customer will unlikely consider the investment in time to develop a salesperson relationship as there is no perceived value created (Wood, Boles, Johnston, et al, 2008).

Salesperson credibility may be disadvantaged through opportunistic behaviours in the relationship, such as assuming to gain an influence by approaching higher authorities in the customer's organisation, only to be redirected to the original customer contact. This lack of professional etiquette can test the customer's confidence and stress the relationship; a perspective identified by Smith and Barclay (1997) wherein a temperate, measured, patient salesperson can be considered more trustworthy in the relationship.

Salesperson's reputation – Participants reflected that skilled, customer-focused salespeople who are well regarded can sufficiently make up for the organisation's poor performance and maintain the organisation's credibility – agreeing with a similar view of Doney and Cannon (1997) and Ganesan (1994) that, should the salesperson's reputation be impinged, they will likely seek to represent an organisation better fitting their professional reputation, consequently attracting their customers to extend their loyalty to the salesperson and follow (Kumar, Sunder, and Leone, 2014; Palmatier, Scheer, and Steenkamp, 2007).

Organisational reputation – Participants offered that where the salesperson is unknown to the customer, the supplier organisation's reputation – or brand trust (Rousseau et al, 1998) – can be extended to reinforce the salesperson's credibility through reference examples of other customers gaining from the supplier's core competences, such as access to technical expertise, insightful industry knowledge and project-management capabilities.

Parallel to other research, it is agreed there may be a competitive advantage in customers having a relationship with an innovative organisation – irrespective of the organisation's size – in accessing new technologies, knowledge, processes and technical expertise that complements their operations (Tzempelikos and Gounaris, 2015).

Reliability in communication – When asked, participants offered that other intrinsic behaviours such as customer focus (commitment), reliability in communication, delivers promises (consistency), and professionalism (preparedness) are contributors to building the customer's holistic perception of value in a salesperson and their ongoing relationship.

Both participant groups aligned that salesperson honesty, openness and ethicality were conditional behaviours for reinforcing customer confidence – important traits demonstrated largely through communication effectiveness, including delivering "bad news".

Listening and adapting the value proposition to the customer's needs and the ability to communicate the value of commercial offerings in an empathetic, unforced conversational style are considered good communication that increases the customer's confidence in choosing to listen to the salesperson.

> *"Sales and Procurement both consider that the advantages of having a dyadic relationship are in open communications, knowledge exchange and delivering a consistent service; however, the relationship is not the central component in guaranteeing a purchase.*

Such is the pace of innovation and its impact on customer competitiveness, there is increasing demand from customers for suppliers to communicate complex information accurately and expediently. Salespeople require the cognitive aptitude to listen for and assimilate customer procedural knowledge during discussions and adapt to the customer's evolving needs, thereby reinforcing the customer's perception of salesperson value and commitment of time to forge a dyadic relationship with the salesperson (M Dixon and Adamson, 2011; Grönroos, 2008; Haas et al, 2012; Hakanen, 2014; Jelinek, 2017; B A Weitz et al, 1986).

Building trusted relationships – The adage "people buy from people" was mentioned several times by participants; this view may reflect how people naturally strive for a relationship and building trust over time is necessary to safeguard each other in their interactions, wherein the humanistic nature is that people are predisposed to help each other achieve success (Kang and Jindal, 2015; Nooteboom et al, 1997).

In contrast, when events occur that stress or compromise the customer's trust perception, it is commented that the salesperson can rely on their strong trust-based customer relationship to "weather the storm" of organisational poor performance and may even strengthen the customer's perceived trust through their adaptive skill and customer-focused approach (1106SG, personal communication, May 11, 2018).

Otherwise, it is suggested that prolonging the customer's stress diminishes trust and salesperson confidence, a view that resonates with lack of credibility and subsequent loss of customer sponsorship for repeat business.

Interestingly, participant 2904AB specifically described the necessity for a "deep and meaningful relationship" (2904AB, personal communication, April 29, 2018) as unnecessary for commodity purchases; similarly Meehan and Wright (2013) report that customers do not differentiate the trust dynamics between strategic-partner relationships and transaction-specific relationships, perhaps reasoning that it is the delivering of professional customer service – from a professional organisation – that fundamentally cements a salesperson's credibility and stimulates the repeat purchase, regardless of age or experience.

Controversially, the comments of the most experienced participant, 3105JD – supported by 2505AW – suggested there is limited understanding among salespeople as to why build customer relationships at all and questioning whether it is the relationship that guarantees a sale. This view strongly echoes the main theme of Challenger (Dixon, Adamson, 2011) – and supported by (Hohenschwert and Geiger, 2015) – that relationship selling is not effective in todays' globally competitive marketplace.

S**upplier dependency** – Participant 1405IA describes the necessity to build a relationship especially where the customer is dependent on a supplier's technology to safeguard exploitation and mutually manage the lifecycle of that technology installation. Interestingly, the findings of (Sako and Helper, 1998, p 407) reflect on the supplier's ability to control customer opportunism through dependency and consequent loss of power in the relationship, possibly explaining the customer's motivation for supply chain independence.

> *"Trust is diminished by unethical, pressuring, seller-oriented behaviours.*

Trust takes time – There is little consideration of the length of time it takes to build trust in a relationship; participants simply reference that "trust is built over time" based on the salesperson' reputation, bolstered by their commitment to the customer's success, which develops into a trusted relationship. Interestingly, other research deduces that both trust and relationships take time to build and can substitute one another for time, so it may be accepted that trust can be formed quickly (Bejou et al, 1998; T. A. Kaski et al, 2017; McKnight and Chervany, 1998).

Brand reputation as trust – Brand reputation and salesperson credibility can be considered reflective, though not identical Corporate values described in policies and governance. The are manifested in the attitudes, behaviours and ethical approach of the salesperson as the representative of the brand and will act accordingly (Román and Juan Martín, 2014 citing Schwepker and Good (2011)).

As well as a salesperson's established reputation based on their credible behaviours, moral values and ethical conduct reflect positively to their organisation's brand.

Furthermore, participants also suggested that, while smaller organisations may be more flexible in delivering the customer's immediate needs, and may have an interesting technology, it may be preferable to contract with larger organisations that are perceived to be more secure – evidenced in their market longevity – and have the resources to continuously innovate and offer bespoke services.

Both participant groups emphasised the ability to exchange knowledge irrespective of supplier organisation size. In as much as larger organisations may be better resourced to deliver the promised outcome of an insightful conversation, a smaller organisation with specialist capabilities can also compete based on their tacit knowledge and exemplary reputation (Doney and Cannon, 1997).

Confidentiality – All participants were asked about the impact of trust on confidentiality. Participants agreed that confidentiality is fundamental in protecting organisational intellectual property and a demonstrable behaviour in developing and maintaining customer trust.

Breaches of trust are suggested as basal precursors to diminishing trust (Nooteboom et al, 1997), wherein the customer will start to withdraw information and knowledge that the salesperson previously found insightful and valuable in its extended use internally in the supplier organisation. As the salesperson loses credibility, it is suggested the relationship erodes.

Likewise, the reciprocal expectation is that confidential information that salespeople share with customers is also respected also (1106SG).

Rapport – Rapport makes it easier for the customer and salesperson to connect, reinforcing the relationship communication and positively affecting repeat purchase likelihood (Paul et al, 2009). Aligning with research by Paul et al (2009) which reasons that there are several customer behaviours for repeat purchase, this research finding offers strong emphasis on the emotional aspects of vendor selection aside decision-making being only a calculative process (Newell et al, 2011). According to Kaski (2017), salespeople need to develop empathetic customer focus when building rapport, which is demanding on the senses, energy consuming and intellectually challenging, which suggests a high degree of emotional intelligence is required to be effective (T Kaski, 2017).

Trusted advisor – With knowledge-based credibility, a reputation of consistency and benevolent customer motivation demonstrated through their trusted relationship, a salesperson may be considered a "trusted advisor" who is invited to consult with and contest the customer's business perspectives by educating and helping the customer develop new profitable business.

Comments made by participant 1105AS parallels with findings of Hakanen (2014), which consider that Purchasing Departments may not have the skill to understand creative commercial business proposals and would need to depend on the trusted supplier to guide them through the value proposition in an ethical manner.

Salesperson demographic – When questioned, participants' responses were mixed with respect to the age difference between a young graduate salesperson approaching a mature Executive customer. That said, there is confidence that, with thorough preparation and professional attitude, there is no reason that demographic differences should be an issue – even it is reported that Millennials may find the intergenerational divide an opportunity to impress themselves and their skill to the customer (Pullins, Mallin, Buehrer, and Jones, 2011). Other than where human biases or prejudices are present – or "first impressions" – the human predisposition is to trust another regardless (Friend et al, 2018; Gulati, 1995; Wood, Boles, and Babin, 2008).

Diminishing trust – Trust is diminished by unethical, pressuring, seller-oriented behaviours, where financial incentives and Sales Management target-driven behaviour is perhaps causal in salespeople demonstrating overtly pushy or opportunistic selling attitudes.

This perception of the selfish salesperson "out for a sale" also reasons that zero procurement participants considered the salesperson purpose to be an Influencer, since not showing primary consideration for the customer's business insists lack of credibility and trustworthiness (Doney and Cannon, 1997).

Paltering – Participants aligned that paltering (the active use of selective truthful statements to mislead) was intolerable to trust building, which can have an immediate and irreparably negative effect on relationships. Quantitative research by Rogers, et al (2017) reports paltering to be an immoral form of deception that absolutely echoes selfish behaviour, wherein the organisation may have policies to safeguard damage to their brand reputation from this irresponsible salesperson behaviour (Rogers, Zeckhauser, Gino, Norton, and Schweitzer, 2017).

Salesperson's professionalism – Salespeople represent their organisation through their professional attitudes – or "doing the basics" – and in motivating the supplier organisation to perform is very much considered a salesperson's core value to the customer. Both participant groups agreed that "delivering promises" was an important salesperson deliverable required for cementing credibility and building customer confidence.

Intrinsic value is described as a benefit derived from resources belonging to one party that can be captured by another party even if a relationship is "non-collaborative" (Tescari and Ledur Brito, 2016, p 485). That value can be considered to be anything the customer chooses; it is in delivering this perceived value that the customer builds confidence in the salesperson – a precursor to trust (Román and Iacobucci, 2010).

Increase business volume through repeat business – Sales participants identified that a core aim of the salesperson is to generate profitable business through their relationships. Ideally, repeat business may be a measure of success where the salesperson builds their reputation through the continued consistent delivery of service and value to their customer.

While the salesperson's aim is for repeat customer purchase, extending the relationship may fundamentally remain the customer's decision in their recognising value in the salesperson and the supplier organisation essentially as a "means to an end" in gaining a market competitive advantage (Gutman, 1982; Paul et al, 2009).

Salespeople sell – Participant (2205JHa) supports this notion that salespeople must remember it is "honest and authentic" sales practice to "sell" to a customer with a need. Two experienced procurement participants – 1005MB and 1506FO – echoed this in their acceptance for salespeople to drive the purchase process, since this demonstrates passion and confidence in bringing the customer the prescribed advantage. Where a dyadic relationship has mutual appreciation of each other's needs, trust may develop into loyalty and dependency, gracing salespeople with the opportunity to "sell" to a willing customer open to engage in influencing dialogue (Meehan and Wright, 2013).

The attractiveness to collaborate in joint sponsorship increases to drive sustainable repeat business and value-add services, governed by a combined entrepreneurial purpose that generates mutual competitive advantages to both organisations (Aminoff and Tanskanen, 2013; Pulles, Schiele, Veldman, and Hüttinger, 2016; Wilson and Millman, 2003).

Internal sponsor – Interestingly, procurement participants felt it valuable to have the salesperson as a trusted point of contact who is skilful in navigating and motivating their own organisation to deliver consistently, such that both salesperson and supplier organisation reputations are reinforced. Participant 1105AS speaks of salesperson "pedigree" and describes that a level of seniority is expected in the account team who can support younger sales members. A position aligned with Cuevas, et al (2015), outlining that before organisational partnership can be considered, it is essential to establish individual-level boundary-spanning relationships that mobilise vertical decision-makers across the organisations to agree mutual business development strategies. This highlights the role of the experienced KAM as a potentially successful Challenger Sponsor (Gounaris and Tzempelikos, 2014), having greater customer empathy and being more culturally cognisant than other sales functions (Davies and Ryals, 2013).

Theoretical contribution

Giving due consideration to the findings, the salesperson's main aim is to achieve repeat purchases from existing customers by delivering consistent performance that provides customers a reason to continue to engage the salesperson and supplier organisation.

The customer's objective is to continue to receive perceived value from reliable, trusted salespeople.

There would appear to be three inter-related constructs to support this notion:

1. Value can be identified as anything the customer perceives to be valuable – an independent, temporal variable to Sponsorship (Cresswell, 2009).
2. Sponsorship may be where dyadic individuals establish trusted relationships and collaboratively sponsor mutually agreed business aims and personal goals – a dependent variable on Value moderated by Trust.
3. Trust is a phenomenon, the magnitude of which may moderate Value to Sponsorship. Annette Baier (Baier, 1986) elegantly describes the nuance of trust and distrust, insisting on the phenomenological importance of trust in influencing relational outcomes, confronting the Challenger premise further (M Dixon and Adamson, 2011).

The volume of trust directly impacts the sustainability of sponsorship in that, if trust – or loyalty – is not diligently maintained, it is unlikely a customer will extend their vulnerability or reputation to support the salesperson relationship, dissolving the relationship and potential for repeat purchase.

Responding to Vanneste (2016) – though perhaps ambitious – this research may contribute to advancing the notion that dyadic corporate "sponsorship" as a construct may align with Pillai (2003) and provide extension to the Enterprise Selling premise (Rackham and DeVincentis, 1999) in evolving the sales relationship process in elevating the mutual achievement of each organisation's goals through collaboration by ultimately grounding the customer's loyalty through perfection in salesperson service and organisational innovation (Vanneste, 2016).

The conceptual model in **Figure 2** presents a parsimonious approach to theoretically explain the dynamic, omnipotent nature of trust in selling, proposing a continuation of this study combining a quantitative evaluation in a mixed-methods analysis.

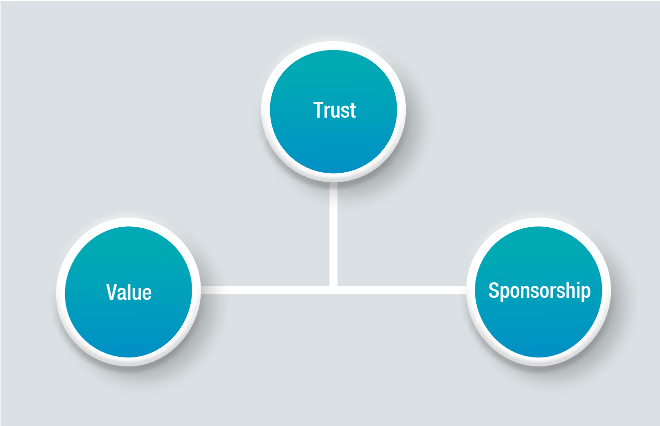

Figure 2: Conceptual model.

Conclusion

This research aims to generate greater understanding of the social construction of trust phenomena in B2B selling. It shines a light on the Challenger Selling approach and its validity as a robust selling method, exploring whether the trust constructs presented in the literature support the notion that Challenger can be applied without a pre-existing relationship or dyadic trust and whether the supplier organisation's brand reputation influences the applicability of the Challenger approach.

The thematic map shown in **Figures 3** illustrates the flow of trust in a dyadic relationship defined from the initial thematic map and supports the following conclusions:

Both participant groups – Sales and Procurement – consider that the advantages of having a dyadic relationship are reputation of consistently delivering performance over time, which forms trust. This finding contributes to the Challenger Selling approach (M Dixon and Adamson, 2011) in that, while knowledge is agreed to be important in establishing the salesperson's credibility, it also reinforces that the formalised relationship is not required initially to gain the customer's attention and advance a conversation.

Lack of trustworthy behaviour

Irrespective of the relationship, participants aligned that untrustworthy behaviours can cause relationships to break down at any time, potentially reducing the opportunity for repeat purchases. Likewise, unethical purchasing practices may cause the salesperson to reconsider their customer relationship and withdraw insightful knowledge sharing that previously

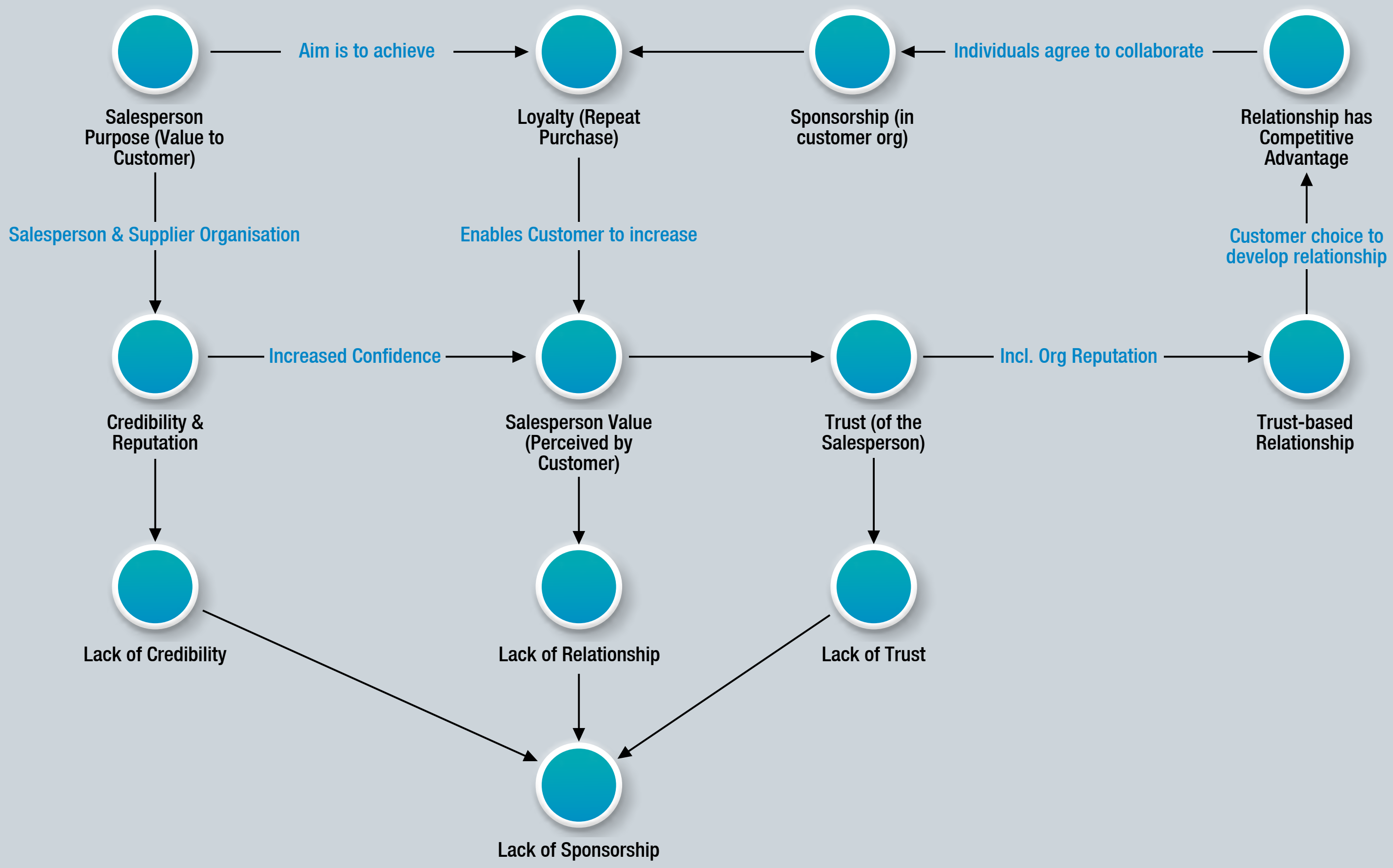

Figure 3: Defined themes.

in open communications, knowledge exchange and delivering a consistent service. However, the relationship is not the central component in guaranteeing a purchase, agreeing with the position proposed by the Challenger Selling approach (M Dixon and Adamson, 2011) and supported by participant 3105JD (3105JD, personal communication, May 31, 2018).

Interestingly, participants collectively separate knowledge and relationship. Knowledge can be a component that contributes to salesperson credibility and consequently customer confidence, whereas relationship may be considered a construct that is mutually decided based on credibility and provided the customer a recognisable competitive advantage (Hughes et al, 2013).

Relationships simultaneously increase dependency between both parties, so to protect their vulnerability (Gao et al, 2005; Gundlach and Cannon, 2010) the customer may base this decision on their perception of the salesperson's commitment plus evidence of the supplier organisation's customer priority, which collectively act as antecedents to trust and, over the long-term, develop into a trust-based advocacy or sponsorship.

Contrarily, this research found that trusted relationships are deemed necessary to (Aarikka-Stenroos and Jaakkola, 2012; Grönroos, 2008) sustain longer-term repeat purchases from the same customer, though it may be the customer's choice to initiate a dyadic relationship due primarily to the perceived consequential competitive advantage, aligning with prior KIBS (knowledge-intensive business services) research wherein knowledge-sharing may be advantageous for relationship building, and further supporting the main premise of the Challenger approach (M Dixon and Adamson, 2011).

The data suggest that trust is formed over time based on the customer's perception of the salesperson's value – identified as anything the customer chooses to be valuable – and their long-term loyalty in contributing to the customer's business aims and personal goals. Reflectively, the salesperson's objective from a relationship is to achieve long-term repeat business through the tailoring of business solutions that complement the supplier organisation's core competencies (Grönroos, 2008; Vargo and Lusch, 2004; Verbeke et al, 2011) and which may ultimately reduce operational costs of sales (Tzempelikos and Gounaris, 2015).

A "value saturation" point may occur for customers if supplier innovation slows, making repeat purchases transactional over time. Nevertheless, with an established relationship manifest as dyadic loyalty – or "super trust" (1105IA) akin to a loyal marriage – there is value in even transactional relationships where the dyad operates to answer each other's needs naturally, making repeat purchases seamless and repetitive (Palmatier et al, 2007; Pulles et al, 2016).

Finally, this research provides commentary to the Challenger selling approach of Dixon and Adamson (2011) in that, where it may be agreed that a pre-existing relationship or trust is not essential to influence a transaction, rather that salesperson's knowledge, credibility and organisational reputation are offered as "fundamental prerequisites" in positive vendor selection.

Managerial implications

This research offers that customers expect to work with ethical, reputable organisations and salespeople, so choose to invest time in building relationships with likeminded salespeople with whom they find rapport and can exchange knowledge to mutually advance business goals with the security of organisational governance.

This study shows that customer confidence builds trust over time, which develops into a relationship that provides a competitive advantage for both customer and salesperson. To this, there is value and a tangibility in trust such that customers who perceive the salesperson – or the supplier organisation – to behave opportunistically shall diminish their potential to build the customer's confidence and consequent trust.

It is further suggested that sales managers recognise the currency and value of trustworthiness and act as role models for their salespeople, emulating ethical business conduct to reinforce the organisational brand values that customers largely identify with.

There is empirical evidence to suggest that different behaviours, skills and competences exist between the key account management function and the atypical salesperson role (Guenzi, Pardo, and Georges, 2007) and, where the Challenger approach may better pertain to the KAM skillset, such identification may be of interest for sales management in redefining sales incentivisation to reduce the pressure burden of having to "make a sale" – which can increase customer stress to the detriment of potential sponsorship and repeat purchases. Suggestions may include aligning "Customer Team" targets with organisational objectives and achievements and increasing the professionalism and ethical conduct of customer-facing representatives.

Future research

Though several participants commented that relationships require time to build primarily to develop dyadic knowledge and motivations with which to judge trustworthiness (McKnight and Chervany, 1998), this study does not measure the time-frame required for salespeople to establish either trust or a relationship. It may be that a longitudinal study could provide causal insight to how trust is formed and add clarity to this under-developed phenomenon.

Further, there would appear to be scant empirical research on the role of gender and trust in selling, to which this study may form a basis from which to expand this area of knowledge.

This research studied large, multinational organisations, which may further contribute to recent research on inter-organisational trust (Ekici, 2013).

The theoretical model offered in Figure 1 provides a thematic distillation of the research findings that may be assessed with quantitative analysis methods, perhaps adopting and adapting scales and measures from similar extant studies (Doney and Cannon, 1997; Gounaris and Tzempelikos, 2014; Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Toon, Robson, and Morgan, 2012; Tzempelikos and Gounaris, 2015)

About the author

At the time of writing, the author was the Global Account Manager for Siemens AG, managing the GlaxoSmithKline global strategic key account relationship. Presently, the author is Head of Sales and Account Management for the Cyber Digital Solutions consultancy business of the Thales Group.

What's on

Conferences and exhibitions

Eighth Biennial Enhancing Sales Force Productivity Conference
Hosted by Tampere University, Tampere, Finland
20-22 May 2024
https://events.tuni.fi/salesforceproductivity/

Canadian Sales Educators' Symposium 2024
Hosted by Algonquin College, Ottawa, Ontario
5-7 June 2024
https://www.csesymposium.com

GSSI - Global Sales Science Institute, Montpellier, France
7-10 June 2024
https://gssi.world/next-conference/

SEA2024 – 13th Annual Sales Educators' Academy Conference, Aston University, Birmingham, UK
19-21 June 2024
https://store.aston.ac.uk/conferences-and-events/aston-business-school/aston-business-school-events/sales-educators-academy-conference-2024-sea24

National Sales Conference 2024
London – 27 June 2024
Birmingham – 14 November
https://nsconference.co.uk

Cranfield KAM Forum
Details of webinars are available from: Hayley Brown, KAM Forum Administrator, Centre for Strategic Marketing & Sales, Cranfield School of Management.
h.brown@cranfield.ac.uk, www.cranfield.ac.uk/som/kambpforum

ISP events

Details of upcoming events can be found at the Institute of Sales Professionals website. https://www.the-isp.org/events

Mentor Moments: Resilience with Phil Jones
In the last video in our current Mentor Moments series, Phil Jones, managing director of Brother UK, looks at the importance of resilience to tackle the adversity, challenges and problems we can all face in our professional and personal lives.
Tuesday 30 April 2024, 12.00–12.30

Hybrid selling – managing a virtual and in-person sales process
As a result of joining this event, you will know how to run more effective virtual meetings, which will enable you to improve sales performance and results.
Thursday 2 May 2024, 9.00–10.00 am

Meta-analysis on what drives sales performance
As a result of joining this event, your will know the relative impact on sales performance of a set of 19 determinants which will enable you to better develop, measure and reward the real drivers of salesperson performance and business growth.
Tuesday 7 May 2024, 2.00–3.00 pm

From frustration to partnership: How to get the most out of your marketing team
As a result of joining this event, you will learn how to get the most out of your marketing team, which will enable you to move from frustration to partnership and improved business performance.
Thursday 9 May 2024, 9.00–10.00 am

Social selling Part 2: Sales Leader Round Table
This round table is for Fellows and Sales Leaders.
Wednesday 15 May 2024, 9.00–10.00 am

The secrets of building and managing a winning sales team
As a result of joining this event, you'll learn how to build and manage a best-in-class sales team with a selling method to drive consistent performance and a winning formula for managing salespeople effectively.
Thursday 16 May 2024, 9.00–10.00 am

Shortening the length of the sales cycle
As a result of joining this event, your will know how to shorten your sales cycle, which will enable you to increase your win rate.
Tuesday 21 May 2024, 9.00–10.00 am

How to get the most out of your marketing team: Sales Leader Round Table
As a result of joining this event, you will learn how to get the most out of your marketing team, which will enable you to move from frustration to partnership and improved business performance.
Thursday 13 June 2024, 9.00–10.00 am

Crafting compelling, customer-specific, value propositions
As a result of joining this event, you will learn how to craft compelling customer-specific value propositions for every important sales opportunity, enabling you to significantly shorten your closing cycles and dramatically increase your win rates.
Thursday 5 September 2024, 9.00–10.00 am

Sales competitions

European Sales Competition 2024, Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences, Helsinki, Finland
22-24 May 2024
https://www.europeansalescompetition.com

Please update the Journal with details of your forthcoming events by emailing editor@journalofsalestransformation.com