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Exploring Key Elements and Effective Strategies for Establishing Long-Term B2B Customer- and Partner Relationships

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ABSTRACT:

What is the role of long-term successful customer and partner relationships in business and how are they formed? What is the role of salesperson in creating long-term relationships and what do they do in practice?

This research shows the importance of building long-term relationships with customers and partners. Successful customer and partner relationships are vital in the modern-day business environment. Companies are seeking competitive advantage continuously and having loyal customers and partners who are committed to mutual success is vital for companies. This is why it is necessary to understand the factors, which are the key in the relationship building process. Salespeople are in the forefront of customer and partner relationship building and that is why the way they act stands out strongly and plays a significant role in successful relationships.

The goal of this research was to identify the key elements in the activities and character of sellers that allow long-term relationships to be established. The objectives of this research were to increase awareness in the business how the relationships are created and what kind of strategies salespeople use in the creation process.

The method used in this research was qualitative method. To this research salespeople from the case organization was interviewed. Interview questions were created based on the research goal and objectives.

The research findings support previous research findings around this topic. Salespeople are in the critical role in relationship building. Individual characteristics and strategies they use in relationship building have major role how successful the relationship eventually is. This is why it is also important to focus on training and supporting salespeople especially during the relationship building phase.

KEYWORDS: Relationship building, Sales, Key Account Management

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TIIVISTELMÄ:

Mikä on pitkäaikaisten onnistuneiden asiakas- ja kumppanisuhteiden rooli liiketoiminnassa ja miten ne muodostuvat? Mikä on myyjän rooli pitkäaikaisten suhteiden luomisessa ja mitä he tekevät käytännössä?

Tämä tutkimus osoittaa pitkäaikaisten asiakas- ja kumppanisuhteiden rakentamisen tärkeyden. Onnistuneet asiakas- ja kumppanisuhteet ovat elintärkeitä nykypäivän liiketoimintaympäristössä. Yritykset etsivät jatkuvasti kilpailuetua, ja uskolliset asiakkaat ja kumppanit, jotka ovat sitoutuneet yhteiseen menestykseen, ovat yrityksille elintärkeitä. Siksi on välttämätöntä ymmärtää tekijät, jotka ovat avainasemassa suhteen rakentamisprosessissa. Myyjät ovat eturintamassa asiakas- ja kumppanisuhteiden rakentamisessa, ja siksi heidän toimintatapansa korostuvat ja näyttelevät merkittävää roolia onnistuneissa suhteissa.

Tutkimuksen tavoitteena oli tunnistaa keskeiset tekijät myyjien toiminnassa ja luonteessa, jotka mahdollistavat pitkäaikaisten suhteiden luomisen. Tutkimuksen tavoitteena oli lisätä tietoisuutta liiketoiminnassa siitä, miten suhteet luodaan ja millaisia strategioita myyjät käyttävät luomisprosessissa.

Tutkimuksessa käytettiin laadullista menetelmää. Tutkimusta varten haastateltiin tapausorganisaation myyjiä. Haastattelukysymykset luotiin tutkimuksen tavoitteen ja tavoitteiden pohjalta.

Tutkimustulokset tukevat aiempia tutkimustuloksia tästä aiheesta. Myyjät ovat kriittisessä roolissa suhteiden rakentamisessa. Yksilölliset ominaisuudet ja strategiat, joita he käyttävät suhteiden rakentamisessa, vaikuttavat merkittävästi siihen, kuinka onnistunut suhde lopulta on. Siksi on myös tärkeää keskittyä myyjien koulutukseen ja tukemiseen erityisesti suhteen rakentamisvaiheessa.

AVAINSANAT: Relationship building, Sales, Key Account Management

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1 Introduction

This chapter provides deep dive into thesis topic: Exploring Key Elements and Strategies for Establishing Long-Term B2B Customer- and Partner Relationships. The introduction chapter consists of paragraphs which give comprehensive overview to topic. First, in the research background the context of this thesis is described. Then the research approach is presented, and the research questions stated. Finally, the structure of this thesis is introduced for readers.

1.1 Research Background

Contemporary markets are connected increasingly to each other and actors within the markets are not seen any more as a part of linear value chains. It is seen as a network of actors who are interacting, collaborating, and sharing experience together (Brodie, Hollebeek, & Conduit, 2016). Today's fast-paced and competitive environment creates a demand for companies to be able to keep their customers and fulfill the customers' expectations. Companies are trying to differentiate themselves from competitors by providing value-adding services, which goes beyond the product offering. With the help of these value-adding services, company can gain significant competitive advantage in the markets (Graca, 2021).

Companies are more and more focusing on building sustainable long-term relationships with suppliers, channel members and customers. By developing and maintaining close relationship with key players, company seeks to gain competitive advantage from the markets or increase in sales. This approach has led companies to invest considerably in personal selling where selling company salespeople are at the forefront of executing personal selling activities. It creates a need for sales managers consistently to develop new strategies and tactics how they will approach key targeted customers (Weitz & Bradford, 1999).

At the organizational markets close relationships are necessary as technology develops and competition increases. Managing customer relationships has become more and more important over the years and customer relationship management software is unavoidable for bigger companies. In addition to that more and more companies have reorganized their sales forces and focused to manage key customer relationships effectively (Sharland, 2001).

Often companies have a need for certain tool or method for succeeding in long-term customer relationships. However, to succeed in customer relationships, it takes individuals effort and abilities and requires knowledge and deep understanding of sales and marketing (Cruceru & Moise, 2014). Salespeople are strategically important for companies, not just in bringing money to company, but creating long-term relationships with customers which secures future growth. Salespeople are usually the ones who are also implementing strategic initiatives with customers and play pivotal role for companies (ELSamen & Akroush, 2018).

Relationship tie and the effectiveness and strength of relationships are usually built from mutual trust and reciprocity that ease the transactions between the companies. Strong relationships are working as a mechanism, which are providing value to customers and mutual cooperation can create new solutions and eventually increase salespersons economic performance (Panagopoulos, Rapp, & Ogilvie, 2017).

How are the salespeople then creating these long-term customer relationships and what effective strategies they use in that process? What is the role of trust, collaboration or salespeople individual characteristics and what other factors support in creating long-term customer relationships. What effective strategies they use in this building and sustaining process? And what kind of support can the seller organization provide to seller to success in relationship building?

1.2 Research approach and structure

The literature review of this study examines the characteristics of long-term customer- and partner relationships. What is the typical structure of customer relationship phases and what are these phases typically like. The core of the research focuses on the characteristics of sellers and ways to create long-term customer- and partner relationships. Especially the role of trust and how to create trust is highlighted in this research paper. The goal of this research is also to examine what kind of effective strategies salespeople use in building long-term customer- and partner relationships. What are the steps from prospect to long-term customer and what are the salespeople's actions along the way?

In the first part of this research, this paper deep dives into customer relationships and partnerships. What are the partnerships in business and how to select the right partner or customers for long-term relationship building. After that, the research focuses on building and sustaining long-term customer or partner relationships. What are the relationship cycles and what is the role of B2B customer engagement is also examined.

Then the research examines topics like personal selling, customer loyalty, relationship quality to be able to gather bigger picture of the characteristics which have an effect to relationship. Then after that the research focuses on salespeople and their characteristics, like building trust, conflict handling, communication and customer orientation, political skills and knowledge.

The literature utilized in this study includes various academic papers and research from the field of this research topic. Those include papers which examine salespeople actions and characteristics as well as customer- and partner relationship models and the factors affecting those relationships.

After the academic background for this thesis is placed, we move on to the actual research where the interviewees were B2B salespeople who, in their job roles, are actively in contact with both customers and the organization's partners. From the results obtained from the interviews, we proceed to their review, after which the discussion section will go through the research results and answer the set research questions.

1.3 Research questions and objectives

This research tries to discover what kind of elements make B2B partnership long lasting and how the sales units are contributing to partnership building. To help to answer to research objective the question is approached with three research questions:

1. What are the key elements of building long-term customer- and partner relationships in B2B business?
2. What is important from the perspective of the sales unit, and what is done in practice?
3. What kind of support salespeople need to be able to create long-term customer and partner relationships?

2 Strategic Advantage of B2B Relationships

Companies have been racing to utilize and adopt new advanced technologies in recent years. Especially studies show that business-to-business (B2B) enterprises who uses the momentum of digital transformation can drive shareholder returns by 8% and fivefold increase their revenue growth when compared to their rivals (Caitlin, Harrison, Plotkin, & Stanley, 2016). At the same time, B2B marketing researchers have paid more attention to studying relationships between companies (Casidy & Nyadzayo, 2019). This is due to a fact that relationships between companies such as, buyer-supplier relationships are deeply linked to company performance (Kingshott, Sharma, Sima, & Wong, 2020). Digital technologies can act important role when relationships develop. Utilizing technologies company can provide highly personalized experience for their customers and ease the buyer-supplier information exchange. Eventually improving trust among customers (Parise, Guinan, & Kafka, 2016). In fact, digital transformation is said to be the B2B customer experience of the future, due to the fact that we will be able to offer better and more advanced customer experiences using digital tools in the future and thus deepen the customer relationship (Morgan B. , 2020).

It's not surprise that there is already understanding that the management of buyer-supplier activities can give firms great opportunity to gain strategical advantage and reach increasing financial performance. There are many examples of this. Baxter Healthcare for instance, stores and distributes their supplies from partner hospitals premises. From this arrangement, hospitals gain operating costs and reduced inventory investments while Baxter gains increased revenue, increasing their market share and improving customer loyalty. Baxter Healthcare Corporation wasn't the only one utilizing their customers in their operations. In 1986, Xerox worked closely with their suppliers to reduce their manufacturing costs. When Xerox was able to reduce their manufacturing costs, suppliers gained sales and volume guarantees as well as better understanding of their mutual customers. The Bose Corporation gives their suppliers access to work on-site, manage their own stock inventories and place orders when needed. It has reduced significantly unnecessary inventories and reduced different kind of operational costs. For suppliers the significant benefit is gaining information and ultimately improved their business operations (Jap, 1999).

Collaborative culture between buyer and supplier where parties are gaining mutual benefits has own term called “pie expansion”, which is established by business press. This collaborative attitude “pie expansion” is designed to expand buyers and suppliers’ mutual benefits and gain shares from mutual “pie”. When parties are committed to joint benefits, they start working together for a larger “pie”. These returns are the outcome from collaborative actions of the specific partners (Jap, 1999). At the same time, close collaboration and information sharing can bring significant risks (Harrigan, 1985). The process of trying to reach strategic advantage with partner requires sharing cost and process information. This inevitably leads to losing the advantage in bargaining and increase exposure to opportunism. This is why, the predominant question is when and in what point these relationships are effective enough to benefit both sides. Do the companies in these relationships experience the value from the relationship or are they seeking short-term payoffs? Additionally, if strategic relationships are worthy, what are the conditions and terms for successful collaboration and “pie expansion”? (Jap, 1999).

2.1 Definitions of partnership, customer relationship and partner relationship

Partnerships are business relationships where the partner shares together mutual risks and rewards and share information to business performance to be greater. Partnerships are created because partners want to develop their business performance and that wouldn’t be possible if companies operated individually (Zsidisin & Ellram, 2001). In other definition, partnerships are seen as a cross-sector collaboration where organizations work together in a transparent, equitable and mutually beneficial way towards shared sustainable goals where they share the risks and commit resources as well as the benefits from the partnership (Serafin, 2010).

According to Wucherer (2005) partnerships are about taking fair account of partners interests and potential as well as committing to shared goals and strengthening each other's by long-term expansion of win-win situation (Wucherer, 2006). Wucherer (2006) introduces partnerships by using Siemens as an example. Business partnering is crucial strategy for improving and securing their market position. Companies don't restrict their business partnering to cooperation with just selected partners, they are using it as an internalized attitude to strategic alliances to daily customers (Wucherer, 2006).

Managing customer relationships, with several different stakeholders, have always considered to be important for business success. The role of customer has evolved and enriched over the years and in the service delivery usually there is a need for customer and employee interaction. End users need training and be informed for creating benefits to both sides. In summary, customer relationship must be well managed in order to create positive outcomes. If the relationship is not well managed, it is disappointing for both parties. Well managed customer relationships are vital resource for companies. As said, the main objective for companies is to sustain well managed customer relationships (Angelini, 2018).

Partner relationships refer to "mutually committed relationships between enterprises and their partners" in a supply chain (Hsin Chang;Tsai;& Hsu, 2013). Collaboration and division of work between partners are the most important thing behind building partner relationships, which are supposed to have positive impacts, like leveraging skills of each partner (Agarwal;Singh;& Agariya, 2017) and profitability enhancement (Agarwal et al., 2017; Alatawi et al., 2024). Relationship management is important in optimization of supply chain performance in business-to-business marketing (El-Ansary, 2005).

2.2 B2B relationships and value co-creation

All companies are operating in the ecosystem, where partners, competitors, and customers are included. In the ecosystem, customer needs and companies will, to fulfill them as well as possible are combined. Business ecosystems have developed over the years. During the time of the first industrial revolution, T-Ford manufacturing ecosystems were straightforward. The strategic goal of Ford was to dominate the markets simply by owning the whole supply chain. In the modern operational environment this kind of thinking is no longer sustainable. Supply chains nowadays are seen as a network of multiple operators. The world has become more complex and networked than ever since (Keskinen & Lipiäinen , 2013).

Today, companies are engaging more and more with their customers and suppliers creating relationships between them. With the successful relationship, both parties are seeking mutual benefits in competitive environment. (Ryssel, Ritter, & Gemunden, 2004). These kind of alliances and relationships are evaluated with relationship value, which is fundamental concept in marketing. As Morgan and Hunt (1999) stated, intangibility and uniqueness are the main characteristics in relationships, and these make them successful and meaningful. Effective management of relationships has risen to an important position, companies are trying continuously find ways to redeem and continue these relationships and keeping customers and partners satisfied (Palmatier, Dant, Grewal, & Evans, 2006).

In company-supplier relationship, successful partnerships between them include complementary resources and capabilities and shared goals (Campbell, Papania, Parent, & Cyr, 2008). Selecting the right partner can be time consuming and difficult. Every company wants to choose the right partner in first try, because the benefits from selecting a suitable partner are significant as can be the losses when selecting the wrong partner. Significant benefits from selecting right partner can appear by getting the access to new markets, market share increases, resource gaps fills, and achieving operational efficiency (Argyle, 1990) (Wittmann, Hunt, & Arnett, 2008). B2B relationships are traditionally classified by continuum, some B2B partnerships are just transactional, meaning that it is executed according to a contract, starting and ending when the product is received by company. Transactional relationships have usually low dependency level. Integrated partnership kind of relationships are longer, cooperative and continuous.

Integrated partnerships drives the performance of both parties. Lot of researchers have focused to study especially integrated relationships, because these relationships are the fundamental key to develop two-way sustainable and successful partnership which creates competitive advantage for both (Wong, Tjosvold, & Zhang, 2005).

Strategic partnerships highlight that the relationship between the two is crucial for survival and that's why they should have a deeper relationship. Selecting the wrong partner can be fatal mistake for each party's brand (Shocker, Srivastava, & Ruekert, 1994). (Campbell, Papania, Parent, & Cyr, 2008) (Argyle, 1990) (Wittmann, Hunt, & Arnett, 2008) (Shocker, Srivastava, & Ruekert, 1994).

Sales organizations require deep interorganizational partnerships and collaborations to be able to perform successfully. In the business-to-business partnerships between the buyer and seller, require long-term collaboration so that the partnership would be fulfilling for both parties. In the B2B relationships it has been confirmed that satisfaction is the driver which measures the success or failure of collaboration. In the relational marketing literature, it is commonly agreed that there are two types of satisfaction, economic and social. In the functional and successful partnership both economic satisfaction and social satisfaction are achieved. In the managerial level all the practitioners need to understand and focus on joint actions and joint interest as they complete each other's economic and non-economic satisfaction of a business relationship (Guan , Lee, Otero-Neira, Svensson, & Hogevold, 2022).

The goal in creating partnerships is to seek satisfactory and long-term relationship for both businesses, this eventually implies inter-firm collaboration and a fulfilling satisfaction (Palmatier, Dant, Grewal, & Evans, 2006). Satisfaction is the outcome of effective collaboration and when the collaboration brings accomplishment of mutual goals the deep relationships are formed as a result (Morgan & Hunt, 1994).

Value co-creation is seen as the fundamental factor in the B2B relationships (Sales-Vivo, Gil-Saura, & Gallarza, 2020). Customers want to share their ideas, and they often demand to be listened to (Tierney, Karpen, & Westberg, 2016). They want increasingly to be a part of company via interacting with them and provide their feedback for supporting development (Galvagno & Dalli, 2014). Customers are no more passive players; they are active part for companies. This means that customers pretty much define what company is and is not. Companies no more have the whole control of marketing (Leeflang, 2011).

Because customers want increasingly to play bigger role in the company, the concept of value co-creation has raised to everyone's interest (Laud & Oswald, 2017). Co-creation can be seen as a process of value creation where customer and company share their knowledge and information together for building successful experiences between them. Customers are creating actions that aim for involvement, sharing ideas to companies for improving company's products and services (Orcik, Tekic, & Anisic, 2013). For instance, Microsoft wanted to improve their call center performance, so they collaborated closely with customers and call center employees to together redesign the call center process making customer experience better and more personal (Cambra-Fierro, Melero-Polo, & Sese, 2018).

Companies can co-create with the stakeholders by marking their expertise and experiences (Ramaswamy & Gouillart, 2010). Recent studies have highlighted the fact that value emerges via interactions. Interactions are the situations where both parties company and customer are involved in each other's practices. The key in interacting and creating value is creating contact with the other party. Contact can be created by physical, virtual or mental interactions. The idea of creating contact is to get the opportunity to get to know for instance, customers experiences and practices where the company could learn (Grönroos & Voima, 2013).

2.3 Relationship quality and loyalty

Relationship quality links together several factors such as, relationship profitability, relationship strength, longevity of the relationship, service quality and customer satisfaction (Storbacka , Strandvik, & Grönroos, 1994). Relationship quality describes the overall depth and climate of the relationship (Johnson, 1999). It also refers to customer view about how the relationship fulfills the expectations, goals, desires and predictions towards whole relationship (Jarvelin & Lehtinen, 1996). In previous studies, it has been established that customer relationship quality has a positive impact on customer recommendation, continuous buying behavior and not seeking alternative vendors. It supports profitability of the company, and it is not only linked to customer behavior. It is also linked to company performance. Some studies have showed that customer relationship quality improves company profitability. Additionally, some quality metrics such as ISO require measuring customer satisfaction, which is one of the building blocks in customer relationship quality. Elements of the customer relationship quality can vary a lot. For instance, elements can differ in different market areas, industries and customer segments. In consumer markets these elements can be trust, commitment and satisfaction, and in B2B in addition to previous elements can come customer knowledge, participation and cooperation (De Wulf, Odekerken-Schröder, & Iacobucci, 2001).

Customer relationship quality contains the whole impression that customer has towards the relationship. Also, Bejou et al. (1996) concluded that customer-salesperson relationship is crucial for long-term customer relationship (Bejou, Wray, & Ingram, 1996). Relationship quality doesn’t have clear consensus, but many researchers have highlighted the importance of satisfaction, trust and commitment and their effect on relationship quality. Relationship quality clearly occurs as a willingness to continue the relationship with the supplier (Henning-Thurau, Gwinner, & Gremler, 2002).

Customer relationship strategy is all about creating long-term, collaborative customer relationships. In this, usually the customer relationship is measured by the level of trust and commitment, customer satisfaction, perceived quality, loyalty. However, customer relationship quality is seen as a one of the most important factors for measuring customer relationships (Crosby, Kenneth, & Cowles, 1990).

Customers loyalty is deep commitment towards the seller. It means that customer is willing to re-buy and re-use sellers' product or service also in the future despite there are outside influence or competitors marketing which have usually effect of switching the seller. Researchers have argued that in order to having loyal customers, they need to invest in relationship building so that the customer feels that their loyalty is earned. Building relationship and investing to it strengthens customer loyalty (Ndubisi, Chan, & Chukwunonso, 2004). Loyalty has been recognized to be a significant factor, which has effect on wins, marketing costs, customer retention and word of mouth recommendations. Customer loyalty is strategic goal for leaders in organizations. It is intangible strategic feature which improves organization performance (Goncalves & Sampaio, 2012).

Customer loyalty can be divided to three approaches. 1. attitudinal, 2. behavioral and 3. composed. Attitudinal loyalty refers to psychological and emotional factors like bond between the customer and supplier, and overall feelings of loyalty, trust and commitment. These factors cannot be considered in behavioral loyalty (Bowen & Chen, 2001). Development of additional loyalty is easier to measure than behavioral loyalty because they capture development of the loyalty better (Gupta & Zethaml, 2006). Behavioral loyalty builds its characteristics from continuous purchasing or likelihood to repurchase. Loyal customers are like money to companies. Their loyalty to repurchase provides revenue to the future. Customer loyalty consists of two critical components, customer share and customer commitment. Customer share is the behavioral action where customer spends money buying goods and services. Companies are trying to win customer shares, because high customer share leads to loyalty and loyalty eventually leads to revenue. Customer commitment is described more deeper in the following chapter. But simply put, customer commitment can be described as a bond between the company and customer that builds up over time (Hair, Anderson, Mehta, & Babin, 2009).

3 Building and sustaining B2B long-term customer- and partner relationships

All sales and marketing functions must adopt relationship-building approach in their marketing and when managing other external networks (Grönroos, From Marketing Mix to Relationship Marketing: Towards a Paradigm Shift in Marketing, 1994). According to Blois (1998), organizations are not able to operate without forming some kind of relationship to their customers (Blois, 1998). It is less expensive to keep old customers than seek new ones. That is why building and retaining customer relationship is important for the company (Henning-Thurau, Gwinner, & Gremler, 2002).

It is commonly agreed that relationships between companies evolve over time and relationships are dynamic. Many studies describe relationships as a static relational construct level (Pamatier, Houston, Dant, & Grewal, 2013). Morgan and Hunt (1994) focused their research to central relational variables, such as trust and engagement, but they used only customers perceived levels of these variables to capture current state (Morgan & Hunt, The Commitment - Trust Theory and Relationship Marketing, 1994). This kind of static view have lots of possible shortages and like Grayson and Ambler (1999, p.139) say, “the length of the relationship changes the nature of the associations between relational constructs,” and “the exact nature of these relational dynamics remains elusive” (Grayson & Ambler, 1999).

3.1 Customer relationship cycles

Ford (1980) established that relationships have their own life cycles. He examined relationship life cycle through several variables such as, if partners have previous experience dealing with each other, are there uncertainties in the relationship, differences in the companies and commitment of both parties. Ford established five different stages in relationship life cycle: 1. pre-relationship stage, 2. the early stage, 3. the development stage, 4. the long-term stage, 5. the final stage (Brennan, Canning, & McDowell, 2011).

In the pre-relationship stage, there are no signs of relationship yet. In this stage the need is recognized. For instance, a company might seek a new supplier to create a more secure supply chain. Customer is taking a leading role in this stage and evaluating opportunities to fulfill their needs (Brennan, Canning, & McDowell, 2011).

The early stage is the one where a possible partner has been found, but there is no previous experience in working together. There are many uncertainties which need to be discussed and solved. The social distance might be significant because companies have not worked together previously. This needs a big effort from the management. They need to take time to go through uncertainties and make it clear what is the value for both parties. There might also be cultural and technological distances which are affecting relationships (Brennan, Canning, & McDowell, 2011).

There are no significant signs of commitment in these previous stages. The next stage, the development stage shows first time signs of it. In this stage both parties have cleared the uncertainties and now start seeing the benefits of the relationship. They are collaborating and creating relationship (Brennan, Canning, & McDowell, 2011).

The long-term stage is about deep collaboration. In this stage companies are working closely together and social, cultural, and technological gaps between are filled. When this kind of collaboration between companies have become a norm, the final stage has been reached. In the final stage, both parties are seeing relationship as a unique entity, which has become a common practice (Brennan, Canning, & McDowell, 2011).

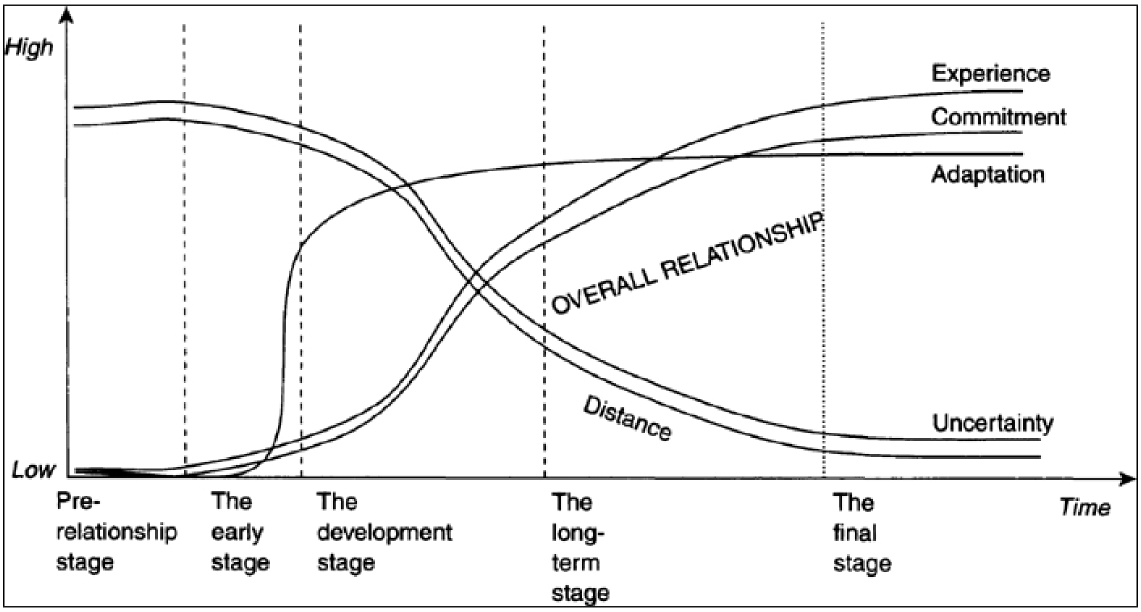

Figure 1: Ford's (1980) relationship life-cycle stages (Brennan, Canning, & McDowell, 2011)

Dwyer et al. (1987), studied the relationship development process. According to research, the relationship process can be divided into five phases 1. awareness, 2. exploration, 3. expansion, 4. commitment, 5. dissolution. Each of these phases represent the major transitions how other party sees one another (Dwyer, Schurr, & Oh, 1987). As can be seen in figure 1, Ford's (1980) approach and Dwyer et al. (1987) life-cycle models contain similarities.

The first phase awareness is the phase where party A sees that party B is feasible exchange partner. Situational closeness makes the awareness phase easier. Just like family knows more likely the neighbours than family down the street. Brands try to get into awareness phase by different methods, like marketing in frequently viewed media.

After awareness phase comes the exploration phase. Exploration in relationship building refers to search and testing phase of the relationship. In this, potential partners are evaluating the benefits, consider the obligations and possible burdens from partnership. Exploration phase can take time or also can be very brief. Time consuming part of the exploration phase is if other party wants to examine and test extended period. Exploration phase is very fragile, if something goes wrong the other party might retreat from the building process. This phase can be divided into five subprocesses 1. attraction, 2. communication and bargaining, 3. development and exercise of power, 4. norm development and 5. expectation development. Attraction is built through the buyer-seller first interactions where the economic and social rewards act big role. If partners feel like they share same beliefs, values and personality they are more engaged to relationship. In addition to these social rewards, economic rewards are important factor as well. Resources, money, information, services and status are affecting in this subprocess phase (Dwyer, Schurr, & Oh, 1987).

Communication and bargaining are the second subprocess where parties rearrange their mutual operative actions, beliefs, burdens and benefits. Even the willingness to negotiate shows that partners are willing to see if relationship could be built. During this phase, first, partners might be careful what information they share to each other. Through questions and answers they develop interaction process. Later, when partners start to plan their mutual future the strict reciprocity of asking questions and finding answers is not so important, because the future provides opportunities to balance things. Although, communication and bargaining are typical in transactional business, it's not characteristic to all consumer transactions. It is normal especially in the field of high expensive products and complex service providers. It should be also recognized that negotiation by itself, doesn't lead to relationship (Dwyer, Schurr, & Oh, 1987).

Development and exercise of power is the third subprocess of the exploration phase. Power is seen as an ability to achieve intended outcomes and goals. According to Dahl (1957), power is extent where social actor A can get another social actor B to do something what B wouldn't have done without A's influence. Power in a whole, is important factor for interorganizational and interpersonal relationships. After power comes the norm development, which is the fourth subprocess in the exploration phase. Norms and standards are created during the exploration phase. Norms provide guidance how to act in relationship. Norms and standards set the ground rules for future exchange partners. According to Leigh & Rethan (1984), typical norms in buying process were that first, sales representative arrives to buyers' office. Second, they shake hands and do small talk. Third, buyer starts negotiation on price. Fourth, sales representative response and last exchange of parting comments. Expectations development is the last subprocess in the exploration phase. Relational expectations can enhance or decrease contractual solidarity. Trust to partner is crucial factor in understanding expectations for cooperation. Trust and desire to coordinate are closely related to each other. All these five subprocesses are important entities of exploration phase. Subprocesses give opportunity to parties evaluate and measure how their goals align and are they perfect match for cooperation (Dwyer, Schurr, & Oh, 1987).

When partners have evaluated and concluded that they want to be partners, they move from exploration to expansion. Expansion phase is about increasing benefits obtained from partnership and increasing interdependence. Five subprocesses are also present during the expansion phase. Moving from exploration to expansion is the result of trust and satisfaction towards cooperation and rewards gained from partnering. Exploration phase works as a test to see that is the other party willing to deliver satisfaction in the relationship. When the satisfaction is fulfilled the attractiveness towards other party increases. Because of this, also the motivation to maintain the relationship increases, especially because high-level outcomes reduce the number of partner changes. Cooperation and shared goals lead to interactions beyond those which where earlier strictly set. Product development and gaining market share are depended on the success of expansion phase (Dwyer, Schurr, & Oh, 1987).

Next phase in the relationship building process is commitment. Commitment means a promise of continuity in the relationship between exchange partners. Exchange partners are satisfied with the exchange process, which excludes other options. They are aware of other options without the need for constant testing. The concept of commitment is linked to solidarity and cohesion and involves three measurable criteria: contributions, sustainability, and coherence. Inputs are resources given to the relationship, sustainability refers to the longevity of the relationship and management. Many things can destabilize the relationship. Increased costs, or easier collaboration when changing to another partner, change personal and organizational needs. That is why gained commitment is also important to sustain and keep in mind in every action with partner (Dwyer, Schurr, & Oh, 1987).

Dissolution, the last phase of the relationship development process. Possibility to withdraw from the relationship is always present. Not all relationships move from exploration to expansion. It is crucial to understand what actions lead to dissolution. Was there something where other could perform better? Dissolution is not easy, there might be personal relationships which have been created during the relationship. Termination of these personal relationships can be stressful. There are probably many routes to dissolution of the relationship and the risk is that we oversimplify it. Dissolution usually starts when other party evaluates unsatisfaction in the relationship and towards partner. Then partners negotiate the terms of dissolution. It is necessary to be straight forward and take other into account during the whole dissolution process (Dwyer, Schurr, & Oh, 1987).

3.2 Partner selection

As already stated, alliances and partnerships between organizations are nowadays crucial for company success. Partnerships success is depended by clever partner selection. Partner selection is not just selecting the partner with the best skills and resources, it is also about considering the suitable of partner to specific need. Although two or more partners can negotiate together creating a partnership, the decision about starting partnership is usually made by one company or organization (Wuyts, Verhoef, & Prins, 2009).

When private companies create partnerships and if the companies have collaborated previously, they are more likely to have developed collaborative habits that brings functional collaboration in the future. It is essential to evaluate partnership from many perspectives. In order to a successful partnership, organizations need to fit together. Organizational structure, the speed of decision-making process, layers of bureaucracy in decision making, ownership structure and previous collaboration and experiences from that are crucial to evaluate when the partnerships are created (Greve, Rowley, Rowley, Shipilov, & Shipilov, 2014)

Business-to-business marketing researchers have studied expansion issues and relationship continuance. Issues with relationship continuance and business expansion can be due to selecting the wrong partner (Wuyts, Verhoef, & Prins, 2009). It is commonly agreed in the field of strategic alliances and open innovation that selecting a partner in business is very critical aspect (Gattringer, Wiener, & Strehl, 2017). For instance, according to Shah and Swaminathan (2008), “While multiple factors may affect alliance success, partner selection emerges as one of the most influential.”. There are four central factors which affect partners attractiveness and selection, 1. trust, 2. value and economical benefit, 3. commitment, and 4. complementarity (Shah & Swaminathan, 2008).

	Process manageability: Low (difficult)	Process manageability: High (easy)
Outcome interpretability: Low (difficult to interpret)	Most critical: Trust	Most critical: Complementarity
Outcome interpretability: High (easy to interpret)	Most critical: Commitment	Most critical: Financial payoff

Table 1. A contingency model of partner selection and attractiveness (Shah & Swaminathan, 2008)

In table 1, Process manageability signifies five underlying components for measuring 1. management time invested by partners to partnership creation, 2. specific personnel involved, 3. individual energy, 4. emotional stress, and 5. amount of communication.

Outcome interpretability refers to difficulty analyzing or understand specific projects exact outcomes (Shah & Swaminathan, 2008).

Lot less research have been made to analyze the affecting characteristics and the importance of those to partner selection (Wilkinson, Young, & Freytag, 2005). Some research highlights that often companies select the partner who are familiar to them and with whom they have worked previously (Li & Rowley, 2002). Companies like selecting partners who are like them rather than are a lot different from each other's (Wilkinson, Young, & Freytag, 2005).

3.3 B2B Customer engagement

In the 1990s and beginning of 2000s, companies understood that the customers need more than just a transaction with the company, this changed companies view from transaction marketing to relationship marketing. This led firms to focus on building customer commitment, trust and loyalty. Activities for that were loyalty programs, better products and services. When the social media platforms provided the opportunities for companies to execute their marketing in the platform, they understood that it is not only important to measure how long the customer stays in the firm but also understand the ways they can contribute to the firm in other ways than purchasing products. This basically led to rise of the term Customer Engagement in marketing (Pansari & Kumar, 2017).

To fully understand customer engagement, it is necessary to define it first. Customer Engagement (CE) is customers value added to company either through direct or indirect contribution. Customer engagement is a very crucial area of marketing, because it connects to customers active relationship with the company and its products and services. Fundamentally customer engagement has a positive effect to customer behavior, number of transactions and recommendations to other (Pansari & Kumar, 2017).

Customer engagement is based on theory of relationship marketing, where customer satisfaction and emotional relationship to company are in key position. CE differs from other customer relationship management concepts such as, customer experience, customer involvement, customer satisfaction and customer commitment which are either customers answer to company's actions or customers motivation or attitude towards product or service (Verhoef , Reinartz , & Krafft, 2010). CE can be measured in different ways. Customer lifetime value, customer participation rate and customer social capital. Customer engagement management requires strategic approach from the companies, where customer needs, expectations and preferences are acknowledged and creating long-term customer relationships (Pansari & Kumar, 2017).

Customer engagement has an impact on company's performance, and it has been studied widely all over the world. Kumar and Pansari (2017) have empirically validated that argument in their study where they used sample group of 120 companies. These companies where from manufacturing and service sectors B2B and B2C providers. Their study showed that after the company implemented customer engagement strategies the company's revenue increased. In addition to revenue increases, customer engagement also improved company internal performance such as employee engagement and improved salespeople performance. Customer engagement impacts on employee engagement which effects on company performance. When customer encounters positive customer engagement it improves customers loyalty towards the company, where negative customer engagement can escalate to dysfunctional customers which are harmful to company (Pansari & Kumar, 2017).

In the business environment customer engagement has been considered as a strategy, investment, emotional connection, and interaction with the company. According to Pansari and Kumar (2017) customer engagement can be defined as "the mechanics of a customer's value addition to the firm, either through direct or/and indirect contribution.". This means that it can be said that customer is engaged with the company when they are satisfied and have emotional attachment (Pansari & Kumar, 2017).

It has been established that positive purchase process creates willingness to repeat the purchase, and the positive experience leads to positive emotions. The theory of customer engagement says that the customer is engaged with the firm and shows it by purchasing, feedback and influencing if the customer’s experience with the firm has been positive. Satisfaction in the relationship between the firm creates direct contributions and emotional attachment creates indirect contributions. However, these are depended on various factors such as the type of firm (B2B or B2C), brand value, level of involvement and type of industry. For instance, service or product influences purchase. However, the satisfaction and the impact of it is higher in service than product offering. Recovering from bad service is faster when the customer expectations aren’t fulfilled but in product industry the recovery is lower because the changes to product cannot be made to existing ones and the customer must wait until the next production cycle. In addition, if the company is B2B the satisfaction of the company is even more valuable. This is because in B2B relationships, the product or service has been approved inside the company in many levels (Palmatier, Kumar, & Harmeling, 2017).

3.4 Personal Selling

Research argues that personal selling has gone through four transformation phases production, sales, marketing and partnering. Each of these phases have differences compared to other for example on skills and abilities which are needed. When the personal selling skills and abilities changes, at the same time changes the nature of sales management (Weitz & Bradford, 1999).

Production role refers to salespeople concern to fulfill customer short-term needs. Their key activities are to inform customer about product availabilities and order taking. Being effective in this kind of role is more about the effort rather than individuals’ abilities. In the sales phase, the role is to stimulate customer to buy rather than fulfill their needs or satisfy. Persuasion acts big role in this, because with persuasive attitude salesperson can convince customer that they need certain product or service. Usually, this phase involves aggressive sales techniques. Marketing phase emphasizes the role of marketing in sales process. Salespeople who are operating in this kind of role are interested on customer needs and company needs at the same time when planning sales strategies. Even though this kind of marketing role is considered to be problem solving role where customer satisfaction is key, the main objective is to make the sale and not increase customer profitability (Weitz & Bradford, 1999).

Salespeople in partnering roles are working towards mutual success, where they develop together solutions that profits both companies. The main objective in this role is to develop long-term relationship with the customer. The major difference in partnering role if compared to other roles, is the focus on interpersonal communications and managing conflicts, building long-term relationship with customer instead of just gaining short-term wins and usually the salespeople is working alone instead of full unit of salespeople (Weitz & Bradford, 1999).

In table 2, Weitz and Bradford (1999), showed the different roles and approaches of salespeople in personal selling. Table shows the evolvement from short-term deal making to long-term strategic customer relationships. Salespeople roles are divided to provider, persuader, problem solver and value creator. Each of these roles have different focus. For instance, short-term approach focuses on making sales and landing specific deal in short period where long-term approach focuses on building long-term relationship with the customer and which brings long-term value to seller organization (Weitz & Bradford, 1999).

Phase / Role	Production	Sales	Marketing	Partnering
Sales force objective	Making sales	Making sales	Satisfying customer needs	Building relationships
Sales force orientation	Short-term sellers needs	Short-term sellers needs	Short-term customer and buyer needs	Long-term customer and seller needs
Critical tasks of salespeople	Taking orders, delivering goods	Convincing buyers to buy products	Matching available offerings to buyer needs	Creating new alternatives by matching buyer needs with seller capabilities
Activities of salespeople	Making sales calls and informing customers about the company offering	Influencing customers using a hard-sell approach	Influencing customers by practicing adaptive selling	Building and maintaining customer relationships Organizing and leading a sales team Managing conflicts
Role of salespeople	Provider	Persuader	Problem solver	Value creator
Focus of sales management (selection, training, motivation, evaluation and compensation)	Individual salespeople Emphasis on efficient resource allocation and motivating salespeople to work harder	Individual salespeople Emphasis on efficient resource allocation and motivating salespeople to work harder	Individual salespeople Emphasis on selection and training to improve ability and motivating salespeople to work harder	Sales teams and leaders of sales teams Emphasis on the selection and motivation of teams and developing leadership and conflict management skills in account managers

Table 2. Roles of the salespeople (Weitz & Bradford, 1999)

3.5 Effective strategies on building and sustaining long-term customer relationships

Companies all over the world are trying different strategies and initiatives to engage customers and build successful and profitable customer relationships (Mandal P. C., 2021). Every company must have customer relationship management practices in place, to successfully care and engage crucial customer relationships. Overall process of building, maintaining customer relationships is called customer relationship management (CRM). The goal of CRM is to provide maximum value to customers by delivering great satisfaction and value to customers. CRM works in every stage of the relationship, from acquiring to building and growing these relationships (Frow & Payne, 2009).

In the paper from (Zeithmal, 1988), concepts of customer perceived value, price, and quality were first introduced. Zeithmal (1998), introduced that customers are experiencing value in four ways. First, value is low price. Second, value is the quality of the product. Third, value is what the customer wants in the product, and fourth, value is what customer gets for what it gives. Perceived value is the total thought of the situation, and it is based on perception of what is received for what is given (Zeithmal, 1988).

In addition to deep rooted trust between the business partners, value co-creation is one of the key elements of profitable business relationships and usually it is created through salespeople. Customer experiences value through offers which are coming from the other party's sales function (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). Simply, the customer values the product more than invested money on it, otherwise the customer wouldn't make the purchase. Company, the selling party, values money more than the product. That is why it is ready to sell. Many business transactions are like this (Brennan, Canning, & McDowell, 2011). Customers experienced value can come from different types of elements such as, delivery times, quality, brand, and warrantees (Woodruff & Flint, 2006). Value is experienced in personal level by the customer and company. Value can have different meanings for each party. For the customer, it can be listed elements above and for the seller value can be for instance, customer’s flexible payment capacity.

Customers won’t commit and buy products or services if they don’t receive value or they are not satisfied to offering (Silitonga, Sukwadi, Jou, & Alamsyah, 2021). Building relationships is not possible if the company is not able to provide the value or satisfaction which customer requires (Ridwan, Nur, & Mariah, 2021). Eventually satisfied customers turn into loyal customers which affects positively to market share. It is acknowledged that companies feel that it is hard to attract and retain new and old customers (Bakator, Đorđević, Ćoćkalo, Ćeha, & Bogetić, 2021). Companies provide different products and services from which customer can select the most suitable to their needs. Customer evaluates from which product or service they gain most value. They evaluate costs and benefits in this selection process (Ferm & Thaichon, 2021). The perceived value differs in each customer. Some customers value low prices and some customers feel if they invest more, they get higher value (Sharmelly & Klarin, 2021).

For instance, some may think that Steinway piano is pricy, but for others it brings high value (Messeni, Natalicchio, & Albino, 2020). Customer satisfaction depends on how the product or service has fulfilled customer expectations. If offering doesn’t fulfill customer expectations they are dissatisfied and when offering fulfills the expectations, customer is satisfied. Successful companies understand the importance of keeping customers satisfied. Many studies have showed that customer satisfaction leads to customer loyalty and that leads eventually to greater performance (Hohenberg & Taylor , 2022). When customers are delighted about the offering that companies provide, they start repurchasing and become customer evangelists who are spreading good word of mouth and their experiences of the company to others. The willingness to provide exceptional customer centered service which delights customer should be the focus in every company and glued to company culture (Racbhini, Wulandjani, Thalib, Setiyowati, & Sasmito, 2021). Companies which are delivering exceptional customer centric service want to deliver high customer satisfaction, but they are not trying to maximize it. There is no ending to improve customer satisfaction for example by lowering prices. However, this creates problems to company profitability. This is why companies must find the balance between customer experienced value without affecting to customer satisfaction (Mandal P. C., 2023).

There are different relationship levels what companies can create between them and customer. In extreme situation, it is possible to create low-margin and low-volume cost relationship where company doesn’t need to be in contact with the customer but rather put their efforts to marketing, brand-building, websites and social media. In the other hand, in high-margin markets there are less customers and companies are trying to create deep partnerships with the customer to ensure customer satisfaction and felt value (Mandal P. C., 2023).

As already stated, customer facing units are the key actors who are involved and responsible for building and maintaining customer relationships (Panagopoulos, Rapp, & Ogilvie, 2017). In B2B customer relationships, self-disclosure is truly the central factor which can shift the relationship between the buyer and seller. Self-disclosure is simply telling others about themselves. The depth of self-disclosure depends on information they share, and breadth of self-disclosure depends on the amount of personal information they share. The development of self-disclosure can be demonstrated by onion model where the surface layer is seen as general information about oneself, like height or gender. On the next layer more information is shared. This information is still general information what person could share almost in every situation. This usually includes name, educational background and occupation. After that layer comes the intermediate layer which includes information that can be shared only rarely. The core layer contains the information which is shared only with caution and very rarely like feelings, values, and inner thoughts (Bylund, Peterson, & Cameron, 2012).

The relationship can deepen if the self-disclosure and the whole relationship is rewarding to partners. Altman and Taylor (1973) also stated that in the customer relationship the norm of reciprocity is key when personal relationships develop.

Koponen and Julkunen (2020), illustrated long-term B2B customer relationship development and how phases in this kind of relationship evolve. According to Koponen and Julkunen (2020), long-term B2B customer relationship phases can be divided to three categories. Business partners, collaborative partners and collaborative and personal partners. In the study Julkunen and Koponen interviewed sellers about these three phases and how they felt what kind of characteristics these three phases had. In the business partners phase, sellers though that collaboration were made closely in shared project. For sellers, it was important to make sure that the collaboration was profitable in present moment and in the future. Communication in this phase was described to be polite, efficient and superficial. Disclosure emerged as a general self-disclosure and business disclosure. Transition to next phase was possible if seller was interested about the customer and wanted to know them better. This evaluation was made fast when sellers evaluated if the customer could fit to colleague/friend model (Koponen & Julkunen, 2020).

Collaborative partners phase reflected to seller and customers long time collaboration where they had multiple shared projects and did share interest together, such as hobbies. For sellers the benefits from this phase were clear. They reported that benefits associated in this phase were with common goals, conflict management, trust, commitment and socializing. They were willing to spend their time with customers also outside of work and disclosure emerged as a personal self-disclosure and strategic business-related disclosure. Communication between seller and customer became more intimate and broader. Moving to third phase was considered to be possible if salesperson was willing to share personal information and if they had possibility to discuss also in personal level (Koponen & Julkunen, 2020).

Third phase collaborative and personal partners reflected working together in several projects, having same interests and even feeling like the seller and customer were friends. Sellers identified benefits to be in time saving, cost-efficiency and in customers confidence in the seller’s abilities and commitment to doing their sales tasks. They identified mutual trust, commitment, conflict management, socializing and social bonds to be key benefits from this kind of relationship with customer. Disclosure emerged as synergistic business-related and private self- disclosure. communication was in the deepest level in this phase (Koponen & Julkunen, 2020).

4 Salespeople driving partnership building and sustaining

Salespeople act critical role in providing value to customers. Value can be described as a “individual’s selective perception of the worth of some activity, object or idea”. The customer creates the feeling of value by weighing monetary and non-monetary costs. Providing value to customers provides value to the company at the same time. According to (Hair, Anderson, Mehta, & Babin, 2009), salespeople have four important goals which helps creating value to customer: 1. Gather information and data about the customer and markets where the company is operating, 2. Identify data needs which gives the customer better service, 3. Provide input on how the CRM system should utilize customer data in order to create value and 4. take care and manage the relationship between the company and customer (Hair, Anderson, Mehta, & Babin, 2009)

Salespeople are the force for the companies through which creating and maintaining relationship comes. Communication, collecting and sharing information are important factors on building relationships and usually those responsibilities are on the hands of salespeople. According to Koponen and Julkunen (2020), B2B relationships deepen through multi-channel communication, but face-to-face meetings remain important to enable the sharing of the most sensitive information and social interaction (Koponen & Julkunen, 2020).

Salespeople face continuously difficult situations where sales targets and long-term relationship building collide with each other. According to Sridhar and Lyngdoh (2019), when salespeople are in mental flow state, it is also driver for ethical selling and information sharing. In a flow state salespeople focus more on relational selling behavior and increase overall sales performance. Relationship building competence avoids salespeople from doing unethical actions in a sales situation. Also, it has been acknowledged that salespeople who do ethical decisions are more customer oriented and reach higher sales targets and customer satisfaction.

In fact, customer-oriented salespeople increase customers' perception and improves customer satisfaction. When salespeople understand deeply their customers' needs, they have high motivation and beliefs on selling more products or services to customer. They are also exceptionally good in communicating their product value and benefits to potential customer (Mullins, Ahearne, Lam, Boichuk, & Hall, 2014).

Salespeople in customer relationship management roles needs to have certain skills and abilities. Those can be for example, creative problem-solving skills, innovativeness, good interaction skills with different units and levels in buying and selling organization, conflict handling and trust building abilities which includes being empathetic, reliable and ethical. Many of these skills can be different to salespeople who are in traditional selling roles. However, some of these skills are similar which is required from entrepreneurs. Gaining support from own organization and from buying organization is present in daily work for those salespeople who are working in partner environment. (Weitz & Bradford, 1999).

Research to relational competency brings clearness to these unique skills and abilities which are required from salespeople in these roles. The definition to relational competency by Hansson et al. (1984) says that relational competency can be defined as "characteristics of the individual that facilitate the acquisition development, and maintenance of mutually satisfying (interpersonal) relationships" (Hansson, Jones, & Carpenter, 1984).

4.1 Trust and commitment

Trust and commitment are often studied more when it comes to research done to customer relationships. Trust can be described as a "confidence in an exchange partner's reliability and integrity" and customer commitment "represents the bonding, or affective attachment, between a customer and salespeople" (Hair, Anderson, Mehta, & Babin, 2009). Trust is the willingness to rely on a partner in whom one has confidence (Moorman, Zaltman, & Deshpande, 1992).

The important part of this definition is to understand that trust can be seen as a belief, a sentiment or expectations about the exchange partner which is due to partners expertise, trustworthiness, and intentionality. Trust is individuals' expectations that others word can be trusted. Literature made about concept of trust highlights that trust is born from partner with the firm belief that the other party is trustworthy and shows integrity. Honesty, responsible, helpful, competent, and consistent are features that are usually associated with trust (Genesan, 1994). Trust enhances customer satisfaction, makes business transactions easier, and creates innovative, knowledge sharing environment (Ullah & Narain, 2012).

Trust can be created between people and individuals, from this kind of trust researchers use the term interpersonal trust. And when the trust is created between organizations the term used is interorganizational trust. Interpersonal trust can be divided into cognition-based trust and affect-based trust. Cognition-based trust is the belief that partner is bringing skills or knowledge and therefore fulfill others' expectations. Cognition-based trust is based on relying on that other party is performing well and is helpful to relationship. Affect-based trust is based on feelings, where the individual is relying on the other person. These relationships usually take time to form, but at the same time when they are formed, it is very strong and effective relationship (McAllister D. J., 1995).

Interorganizational trust, the trust between two business partners, can make relationships between both parties deeper and better functioning. Communication and cooperation can become more effective (Möllering, 2006). There are three types of interorganizational trust that have been identified so far, competence-based trust, contractual trust and goodwill-based trust (Sako, 2002). These interorganizational trust types are strongly linked to interpersonal types of trust. The difference comes from the belief that the other party is fulfilling others' contractual needs. Also, interorganizational trust does not mean necessary that organizations are trusting each other's, but that employees have created trust towards the other person (Mouzas, Henneberg, & Naude, 2007).

According to Morgan and Hunt (1994), commitment is a key mediating variable for relationships. Organizational commitment is very traditional and one of the most studied topics in the organizational relationship literature. Commitment comes from the belief that the relationship is so valued and functional that the committed partner is willing to do needed for sustaining that relationship (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Commitment and willingness to sustain valued relationship is also presented in the definition of Moorman (1992): “an enduring desire to maintain a valued relationship” (Moorman, Zaltman, & Deshpande, 1992). In addition to these definitions Anderson and Weitz (1992) presented that in any type of relationship, interorganizational, intraorganizational or interpersonal, stability and sacrifice play the key roles. The desire for the stable relationship and the willingness to make short-term sacrifices is sometimes necessary for sustaining key relationships (Anderson & Weitz, 1992).

In 1994, Morgan and Hunt introduced commitment-trust theory. According to them commitment and trust are the key in the field of relationship marketing. Commitment and trust together engage in efforts to maintain the value of relationship investments by collaborating with partners in exchange. It also resists the will to gain benefits from short-term, while the long-term benefits from the partnership are still under creation. Additionally, commitment and trust combined can effect on viewing potentially risky actions being reasonable because of the belief that partner is not thinking as an opportunist. Commitment and trust together are the drivers of efficiency, productivity and effectiveness and in short-term they drive to work together towards shared destination (Morgan & Hunt, 1994).

It is good to acknowledge that salespeople and customers are establishing personal relationships and that those relationships have an impact on how the customer acts and makes decisions, and for salespeople it impacts on what customers they want to spend their time. Social relationships can impact on positive way to level of communication, trust, satisfaction and overall increase the whole quality of the relationship (Geiger & Turley, 2005).

4.2 Political skills and knowledge

Sometimes salespeople have negative stereotypes around them. Those stereotypes usually are things like being manipulative, self-serving, phony or untrustworthy. These stereotypes actually are quite similar that politicians have, idea of making deals in secret and on golf courses (Rucker & Leonning, 2020). Because salespeople and politicians both operate in uncertain environment, the skills that politicians use might be similar to those salespeople who are trying to manipulate buyers to make investment decisions. Salespeople with political skills are often better creating customer relationships than salespeople who lack these skills. Political Skills (PS) is compilation of different social skills that are related to internal marketing dynamics. PS has the potential to have an effect to customers decisions when used externally by salespeople. Although, we often hear about “dirty politicians”, political skills don’t necessarily mean negative skills. For instance, imagine salespeople who is influential, who is authentic, well connected and aware of others. That is good example of salesperson with political skills. Political skills, when ethically used, can be great tool for building relationships with customers. PS has the ability to bring people together from the different function who share common goal and usually people under same organization. Recognizing the unethical way how salespeople use political skills is crucial to whole salesforce (Schwepker & Good, 2021).

The entity of political skills is built from four social competencies, apparent sincerity, interpersonal influence, social astuteness and ability to network. Apparent sincerity refers to how others perceive you, people who have high apparent sincerity are seen as authentic and honest. Those people are easier to trust on, and it brings confidence to relationship. Interpersonal influence is the skill how people are able to convince others and change their minds on something. Great observing skills and situational interpreting skills indicate an individual's social astuteness, where individual is self-aware and have an ability to comprehend social interactions. People with great networking skills can build social alliances and they are good to create relationships with others. They know how to manage negotiations and conflicts and where to find needed resources (Schwepker & Good, 2021).

Salespeople who develop political skills have an opportunity to develop their customer relationships and avoid unethical behavior in sales (Rucker & Leonning, 2020). In addition, salespeople who concentrate on building customer relationships are more skillful recognizing possible harm in sales behavior and are unlikely to be accused from unethical behavior, such as misrepresentation and coercion. Schwepker & Good (2021), also found out that salespeople who use neutralization techniques (excuses) to justify their unethical behavior are more likely to be aware of the moral dilemma and ignore the potential negative consequences of unethical behavior. They also noticed that punishment reduces the risks this kind of behavior. Political skills in general, are sales tools which are effective, affordable and easy to teach. It is also useful in sales research as it sheds light on factors that influence the causes and consequences of deviant behavior (Schwepker & Good, 2021).

Salespeople who are building and sustaining customer relationships need to have knowledge about customers strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. Also, they need to be aware what are the strategies to developing competitive advantage. With this knowledge, salespeople are able to define opportunities for them to establish customer value and create it. Salespeople in B2B relationship roles need strategic knowledge rather than tactical knowledge. Knowledge of the products, services, customer benefits is of course needed but this knowledge is more relevant for people in marketing roles. Salespeople who are working in relationships needs a good knowledge about what the seller company can do and what the buyer wants to do in the future. Most of the knowledge which salespeople for relationship management role needs is gained from experience and on the job learning. It is good to have experience from various roles in seller organization and ideally have experience and knowledge from customer industry.

4.3 Communication & Customer Orientation

Salespeople act key role in communicating between two companies. Usually, salespeople are the customers source of information. Several studies have shown that communication is crucial in industrial selling and relational selling. Increase in information sharing also increases the trust between two partners. Also, the frequency of communications has found to be strong factor for relationship quality and increases trust significantly as well (Denize & Young, 2007). Communication has an impact on trust and trust drives commitment. And as Hunt et al. (2006) stated, "Consumers desire relationship partners that they can trust. They do so because a trusted partner reduces the risks associated with relational exchange, because trust is associated with a partner's reliability, integrity, and competence" (Hunt, Arnett, & Madhavaram, 2006). Social interactions and communication and customer orientation are significant factors to trust and those reduce uncertainties and increase understanding (Doney, Barry, & Abratt, 2007).

Quality of the service cannot be good without communication. It is the lifeblood of sustaining good service. Open and two-way communication is important in B2B customer relationships. There are lots of different methods what salespeople uses to communicate. Communication coordination is important because every employee who is in contact with customer adds to that customer's experience. Challenge in this is that how company ensures consistency in the behavior of salespeople and that customer doesn't receive mixed information (Brennan, Canning, & McDowell, 2011).

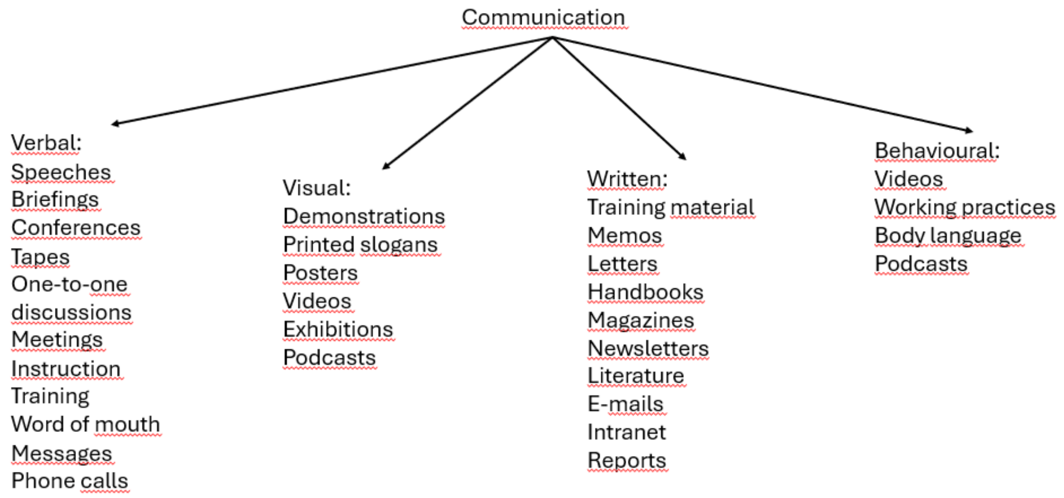

Figure 2. Some examples of verbal and non-verbal communication (Cook, 2011)

In figure 2, there are listed several ways of communicating with others. Those methods have been divided to four categories verbal, visual, written and behavioural. All these methods are effective to certain situation and the combination of these methods is powerful for impacting to customers and people behind the customer organisation (Cook, 2011). Customer orientation strengthen the relationship between seller and buyer. Kara et al. (2013) examined that customer orientation was significant factor to improved sales performance, adaptive selling and satisfaction. Salespeople who internalize customer-oriented approach usually enjoy discovering new business opportunities. They like to put their sales skills to test and learn. Because salespeople goal is to create and sustain long-term relationships with customers and deliver value, the more these skills are acquired, the better is the salespeople performance. Also, customers nowadays require salespeople to understand their needs and include actions around them. Customer oriented salespeople are better in communicating their products or services value to customer and their beliefs about their skills drive them to better performance (ELSamen & Akroush, 2018).

Customer oriented salespeople perform better and are better in building and sustaining long-term customer relationships. In addition, salespeople who are able to adapt their business strategies to customer standards and needs, their customer orientation increases and that has a positive effect on performance (ELSamen & Akroush, 2018).

4.4 Conflict handling

Building and maintaining long-term customer relationship comes with several benefits not without difficulties and hardships. Customers are many times sensitive and hard to serve satisfactorily. They are also price concessions and might seek short-term relationship level price but expect supplier to commit to relationship to long-term orientation. This might bring conflicts, which are affecting to relationship negatively (Jackson, 1985). In the buyer-supplier relationship conflicts are the outcome from varying views on shared goals and roles. They can be as common and predictable as misunderstanding and delivery mistakes. This is why it is essential for both parties to communicate as effective as they can to avoid conflicts (Dwyer, Schurr, & Oh, 1987). Conflicts can result friction, bitterness and hostility between partners. At the same time if relationships don't have conflicts at all, it can lose its vitality and stop relationship development. Cooperation and influence have significant effect on functionality of conflict. Salespeople should be trained to handle conflicts and solve these difficult situations before they reach their peak state (Anderson & Narus, 1990).

Conflict handling has identified to be major skill in relational selling. When partners tighten the relationship and start making more transactions with each other, also the possibility to conflicts increases (Reve & Stern, 1986). In the conflict, customer who isn't dependent from the relationship might choose leaving instead of solving the conflict (Dwyer, Schurr, & Oh, 1987). In this case, high dependency can courage customer to trying to solve the problem, instead of just dissolve. Blake and Mouton (1965) introduced five different styles how people are handling conflicts. These were integrating, obliging, dominating, avoiding and compromising. Also, Thomas (1976, 1979, 1994) introduced five conflict management approaches avoidance, accommodation, confrontation, compromise and collaboration. Avoidance approach is about denying the conflict between parties. Accommodative conflict handling approach is where seller knows there is conflict and gives in to the concerns. Confrontation is about emphasizing own perspective about the conflict, while compromise is defined by seller and buyer reaching an agreement where both parties are making concessions to other. The last approach of the conflict handling is collaboration. In this both parties are working together for solving the conflict (Thomas, 1976).

5 Methodology

In this chapter of the research the case organization is introduced, and the methodology of this research is explained.

5.1 Case Organization X

In this master thesis the research material for this study is collected from the Case organization. For ethical reasons in the study, the case organization is referred to as Case Organization X. Thesis and the interviews are held for the one unit inside of the case organization who are working in a close collaboration with customers and partners.

Case Organization X is global organization which deliveries their innovative technology solutions for their customers. People who were participated to this study were salespeople and this study only investigated people who are based in Finland.

5.2 Research method and execution

To be able to answer research questions, this research required real-life experiences from salespeople perspective. To be able to answer what are the key elements and effective strategies for the building long-term customer- and partner relationships, it is needed to have people experiences from customer relationship building. And as stated earlier, salespeople are the ones who are usually in the forefront of building successful customer and partner relationships. This is why the interviews for this thesis were conducted to case organizations salespeople.

The approach for this research topic is qualitative and utilized method for research questions is semi-structured interviews. A semi-structured interviews was conducted so that the findings obtained from salespeople own perspective would come out and the approach was most suitable for this research. The interview questions were properly designed to give valuable field information from the salespeople daily work.

Interviews were analyzed by dividing interviewees to three categories. Sales manager, salespeople working closely with customers and salespeople working closely with partners. This was important because all these categories had different approach for the interview questions. All interviews were recorded so that after the interview it was possible to list the findings to Excel template under the asked question. Once all the results had been placed to the excel template, it was important to analyze the similarities in which themes were repeated in the responses. After that, it was easy to put the themes that emerged from the interview to the results section of the work.

The Interview questions were:

1. Throughout your career, choose a partnership/customer relationship that you think is successful, where doing things together is successful and that you could categorize as a long-term partnership/customer relationship. Describe this relationship, why do you think it has been successful?
2. In your opinion, what is the importance of trust in this particular relationship?
3. In your opinion, what factors have strengthened trust in the customer/partnership relationship?
4. What factors do you think can decrease trust?
5. Where do you think you have succeeded in building partnerships/customer relationships? Where are you strongest?
6. What kind of effective strategies do you use when building a new customer relationship? How do you get the customer to engage and ultimately buy?
7. What support can the organization offer to sellers to build long-term customer/partnership relationships?

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During the research process 5 people were interviewed. These people worked closely with customers and partners. The roles of these people and interview time can be seen below.

Interview 1	B2B salesperson	55 min
Interview 2	B2B salesperson	37 min
Interview 3	B2B salesperson	56 min
Interview 4	B2B sales manager	47 min
Interview 5	B2B salesperson	57 min

6 Results

6.1 Salespeople view on successful customer/partner relationships and trust

Every interview started with the same first question where the interviewees were asked to select one customer or partner which they consider to be long-term and successful customer or partner relationship. After they had selected their customer or partner, they started describing key elements which have transformed the relationship to be successful and long-term.

Building trust

One of the key elements which were highlighted several times during the interviews was building trust. Trust building was seen as a cornerstone for successful relationships. One of the interviewees highlighted the importance of face-to-face interactions. He said that during Covid-19 building trust was much harder and needed repetition because of the lack of face-to-face interaction. Eventually trust was mainly built by doing the agreed things. Bradford (2021) highlighted that traditionally trust is built via personal relationships, which were created most of the time by face-to-face interactions. Covid-19 made companies rely on digital trust building by using the tools and systems in the trust building process.

Also, many of the interviewees pointed out the importance of person-to-person interactions and face the customer genuinely. According to (Arslan, Golgeci, Khan, Ahokangas, & Haapanen, 2022), face-to-face interactions have fundamental role in building trustworthy relationships in the B2B relationships. They noted in their research to three Finnish high-tech companies that every company highlighted the importance of face-to-face meetings and personal interactions. All the companies thought that there is a need for really close collaboration and face-to-face meetings. The lack of physical meetings was seen to be problem for personal trust creation with customers.

One of the research companies CEO said that “I assume that you cannot close big deals without trust and trust creation requires a face-to-face meeting “.

The importance of trust building and face-to-face meetings were also highlighted by this research case company employees.

“All of the successful relationships lasts even though employers might change along the way, because customer is met in person to person and the trust relationship has been successfully created earlier”

Personal relationships build social bonds between customer and company. Eventually this can potentially lead of sharing tacit knowledge. Sharing tacit knowledge is also more likely to happen during the physical meetings (Arslan, Golgeci, Khan, Ahokangas, & Haapanen, 2022). Trust is the key on sharing the information. According to (Chang, Tsai, Chen, Huang, & Tseng, 2015), trust allows information and knowledge sharing by all the exchange parties involved.

During the interviews one of the interviewees pointed out case where after creating trust the customer was willing to share tacit knowledge with them. In this case, one of the customers’ employees had been mainly silent during the monthly meetings and the employee had been timid on sharing the tacit knowledge which the employee had. After a while, the employee thought that they are willing to share the information and asked to keep it only between the employee and the sales representative.

In this case, if the seller had shared this information, it would have been noticed both in the seller's organization and in the buyer's organization. Interviewee kept the tacit knowledge and noticed that suddenly the employee started sharing other beneficial information, which in the long term were much more beneficial than the earlier shared knowledge. The interviewee thought that after the customers employee had seen that the interviewee didn’t share the information the customer employee started trusting the interviewee. Even if sharing the tacit knowledge to organization might have brought short-term benefits.

One of the interviewees also mentioned that they strive to form personal relationships with the customer organization in every sales situation. In creating a personal relationship, it is sometimes important to share non-work-related matters as well. This makes it easier to build that relationship. The interviewee said that this is not always successful, but it is important to recognize what kind of person is on the other side. After identifying the person's character, it is easier to form a relationship because the seller then knows how and with what matters to approach the person.

Previous study shows that for Finnish managers one of the key ethical values is honesty (Kujala , 2004). Honesty was introduced at the interviews when the interviewees were asked about factors which are creating trust between business partners. One of the interviewees said that one of the basic characteristics which every sales representative needs to have been being honest. He also mentioned that if in the beginning of the relationship there is too much hypocrisy or negligence it is very difficult to reroute the direction of the relationship.

When asked about other factors which could decrease the trust between the business partners, the interviewee highlighted the importance of acting and keeping the relationship as it would be a long-term business relationship. They said that if the customer sees that you are seeking short-term wins, they are not doing business with you after they have completed the current transaction with a high probability. Customers typically want to see the relationship as a long-term cooperation and often when the company takes a long-term view of the relationship the benefits will outweigh the costs in time and the relationship becomes much more valuable compared to short-term relationship (Chang, Tsai, Chen, Huang, & Tseng, 2015).

One interviewee highlighted the impact of resources and changes in resources on trust between partners. To demonstrate this, the interviewee talked about an example situation. "Let’s say that we have built a relationship of trust with the customer. We have met them face-to-face, and connections have been made between the people. The customer has shared with us his state of will and his long-term goals. Now, if resources were reduced, response times would increase, participation in joint events would decrease and we would slowly distance ourselves from the partnership and the relationship would transform from long-term to short-term.”

One of the interviewed sellers highlighted systematic communication and contact with customers. According to him, there should be continuous meeting routines with customers, for example every two weeks. In these meetings, current issues would be discussed, and long-term and confidential customer relationships would be created. According to the interviewee, a big factor in the building of trust is how well the seller handles the tasks that came from these meetings.

Also, these meetings were the place where sales representatives could influence customers’ decisions. According to (Razmak, Pitzel, Belanger, & Farhan, 2023), sales representatives need to have communication skills and they have to be able to communicate with customers in a manner that not only creates ideas but also influences them to do things that the sales representative needs for moving into next phase of the sales process (Razmak, Pitzel, Belanger, & Farhan, 2023).

Factors that decrease trust

During the interviews, the interviewees were also asked about factors that weaken trust in long-term customer relationships. One of the interviewees highlighted quick profits. In his opinion, sellers often waste long-term customer relationships at the expense of quick profits, sometimes unknowingly and sometimes on purpose. According to him, sellers often go too fast after individual quick profits and thereby also weaken the customer's trust. According to him, it is good for sellers to focus on repatriating quick profits and creating a long-term customer relationship, which in the longer term may be more profitable and bring more money to both the company and the seller. By focusing on customer satisfaction and to the long-term collaboration, company can ensure the customer relationship longevity and eventually that leads to profits (Arli, Bauer, & Palmatier, 2018).

6.2 Top Skills Identified by Interviews for Effective Customer Relationship Building

After the interviewees were asked about factors which make customer relationships successful, they were asked about their best abilities for building long-term customer relationships. They were asked very openly to praise oneself and highlight their own skills where they thought to be good at.

Build good relationship with customers employees

Person-to-person interactions are a vital part in the business exchange. Through these relationships salespeople can build trust between the buyer and supplier companies. These relationships are the key for sharing tacit information and for long-term mutual success. (Mainela & Ulkuniemi, 2012).

One of the interviewees said that they had received good feedback about their ability to create good relationships with the people in the customer organization. According to the interviewee, certain character traits contribute to the creation of human relationships with the client's people, and in fact these human relationships are born very naturally, and you don't need to put extra energy into it. One important characteristic is the ability to see a person in the customer's end as a person. This person might be an entrepreneur, or he might be a family seller who doesn't want to lose a certain case. It is important to recognize what are the things behind the transaction, what things are affecting the situation. According to the interviewee, the best customer relationships are those where the other party might as well be your colleague. Of course, getting to this point has required years of work.

According to the interviewee, one important characteristic is also the ability to recognize the customer's temperament and regulate one's own behavior accordingly. If the customer is, for example, an engineer, the salesperson must think about how he will approach the customer. According to the interviewee, one good example was a situation where the customer's entrepreneur had sold his company and then founded a new company in the same field. The interviewee had approached the entrepreneur person to person and discussed everything else except the business itself, he had left the agenda-like approach aside and recognized that the entrepreneur is also in a new situation.

Understanding the big picture and long-term strategic work

One interviewee said that they were good at understanding the big picture, including customers' perspective in the sales situation and long-term strategic sales, which is aiming for long-term success instead of quick profits. Interviewee said that they often feel that they understand the client's business and what could be good for them. Often, instead of collecting quick profits, small pieces should be put in place for the customer, so that in the future the customer relationship can bear fruit for both parties and that the cooperation is smooth and comfortable.

Other interviewees highlighted also the importance of managing the big picture and seeing also revenue perspective in their daily work. He said that in the limited company world that is eventually what really matters. According to this salesperson, when the seller understands the whole picture and what the customer wants, it is easier for sales to serve the customer, and you also know how to use internal resources to your advantage.

6.3 Effective strategies on building long-term customer relationship building

The next topic in this research and interview is identifying effective strategies for building long-term customer relationships. In the interviews, a question was asked where the interviewees had to identify effective strategies with which they can or have already built long-term customer relationships. Identifying these strategies is important for research, in which case the research result can be used, for example, in training new salespeople.

Identify the customer’s professional expertise

One of the interviewees said that if the situation allows, it is sometimes good to express to the customer that they are better than the sales organization in a certain matter. If there is an expert on the other side and the seller expresses to him that he is better, for example, in using the seller's products or services, it brings certainty to the customer that they have chosen the right product or service for their business and that the know-how can already be found in-house.

Customers’ evaluative criteria changes when they have mor expertise on the product or service. The customer has then previous experience of the product or service and then knows what they need from those. Decision making process might also be easier for that reason. On the other hand, when a customer has low expertise from the product or service, they are more likely to evaluate their decision much longer. When customers have expertise in the sales organization's products or services, they also have the technical expertise to examine the product or service in more detail if necessary. When the customer accumulates this kind of expertise, other factors affecting the customer relationship, such as friendliness, or the salesperson's ability to empathize become less important. Overall, the customer's loyalty towards the sales organization increases (Bell, Auh, & Smalley , 2005).

Understand who the customer’s customers are

One interviewee highlighted the importance of knowing who the end users are and identifying the customers’ customers. It is important for the salesperson to understand who the customer's customers are, as it helps the salesperson to tackle emerging challenges in building a relationship and achieving sales. In this situation, the interviewee also brought up the point where it is good to mention the customer's know-how and the fact that they do know who their customers are.

As Johnston and Marshall say (2016), it is important to train salespeople to identify not just the immediate customers but also customers’ customers. This broader understanding makes it easier for salespeople what are the customer needs and present a more holistic value proposition during joint meetings (Johnston & Marshall, 2016).

Visibility and being present

The power of visibility was also highlighted during the interviews. The interviewee said that visibility is really a good strategy whenever they establish new customer relationships. The interviewee said that usually at some point the salesperson needs to do a small sacrifice and attend to joint event with the customer and partner. This way when the salesperson has first done a favor to a customer, it is easier to continue with the actual sales process. The important factor in this is the feeling which the customer receives that the salesperson is willing to help the customer and is trustworthy.

Every interviewee emphasized the importance of presence and face-to-face meetings with customers and partners. According to the interviewees, the significance of presence is often crucial for closing a deal. They mentioned that face-to-face meetings are extremely important in the early stages of a customer or partnership relationship. They believe that trust is easier to build when the parties can discuss matters in person. This

also allows for conversations beyond just work-related topics, which in turn helps in forming trust.
One of the interviewees provided a concrete example: "We were competing with three other competitors for the same customer. I went to meet the customer at their office, and we went through what the customer wanted from us. As a result, after a few stages, the customer ended up choosing us and thanked us for coming to meet them face-to-face."

Interviewee also told that “Additionally, when meeting a customer face-to-face, you arrive earlier before the actual meeting and might have a conversation with the customer before the meeting, as well as after the meeting when you are leaving. Overall, you spend more time with the customer compared to virtual meetings, where a one-hour meeting is just a one-hour meeting”.

Identifying focus customers

One interviewee said that key for salesperson is to ability to identify potential customers, and not just potential but also customers that are motivated to do business. The person said that when they have identified potential customers, the person schedules a low-threshold meeting with the customer, where the purpose of the salesperson is to find out if the customer is really motivated to cooperate. According to the interviewee, many customers have said that they want to cooperate, but the pace may be slow, and the right things are not happening. If, after this low-threshold meeting, the salesperson thinks the customer is motivated and has shown that the salesperson should spend their time with the customer, the next step is to schedule a meeting where systematic practices will be implemented.

Salesperson should evaluate if the customer is willing to resolve their problem. It is good to salesperson to understand that not all buying decisions come at the same time. Think about for example the situation where companies need to update their laptops for new ones so that their salespeople can do better job in more enjoyable way and at the same time there are couple manufacturing machines which have to be fixed first. In this case, often manufacturing machines are more important to fix instead of laptop updates. Salesperson should identify that they should focus on another account for a while, then call again to this customer after the manufacturing machines are fixed (Le Bon, Herman, & Herman , 2015).

6.4 What support salespeople need from organization to succeed in building customer relationships

The last question that was asked to the interviewees concerned the support of the vendor organization. The interviews asked what support the salespeople felt they needed from their own organization so that they could build long-term customer relationships.

Sales support functions

Salespeople often feel they use too much time for non-productive activities like technical support, paperwork and internal meetings (Barber & Tietje, 2008). Many interviewees highlighted the importance of sales support. In an ideal situation, the seller would be able to focus completely on the sale itself and would not have to do time-consuming, not-so-relevant sales tasks. One of the interviewees said: “in an ideal situation, the organization's sales support functions would be in order, so that the seller would not have to do everything himself”.

Salesforce is usually organized to frontline and back-office pillars, where frontline is directly communicating with the customer and back office provides support to frontline salespeople so that they are able to close the deal (Bakator, Đorđević, Ćoćkalo, Ćeha, & Bogetić, 2021). In many companies however, salespeople are expected to take all the activities which are necessary for sales to happen. Adam Smith pointed two centuries ago that by assigning each activity to specialist and not just to salesperson, it can increase efficiency. This makes it easy for everybody included in the sales to concentrate just to their specified task and develop to be proficient in that task (Johnston & Marshall, 2016).

Mentoring model

One of the interviewees mentioned the importance of the sales mentoring program. In the seller's opinion, the importance of mentoring plays an extremely large role in the seller's support.

Salespeople are working between customers and their organization. It can sometimes create negative feelings of isolation. The role of salespeople and various boundary spanners may cause stress in salespeople. Due to these factors, it is good that the seller has a mentor at his disposal who supports the seller in carrying out the work (Brashear-Alejandro, Barksdale, Bellenger, Boles, & James, 2019).

Training and development of salespeople is an important, but expensive part of the sales organization's success. Salespeople need to develop their sales skills and be able to integrate into their organization. Mentoring has a great effect on this, which can influence both goals. Mentoring can be described as an important relationship in adult development by supporting, giving knowledge that mentor has protégé. Having a mentor can increase organizational commitment (Brashear-Alejandro, Barksdale, Bellenger, Boles, & James, 2019).

Sales tools, resources and continuous training

Salespeople are dependent on sales tools and necessary resources. Training and providing the right tools for salespeople are necessary for building strong customer relationships and adding value to customers.

Training is the strong component which should not be moved from company budget. Sales training should also be continuous so that the salespeople are ready to tackle changing markets. Unfortunately, many organizations give only the basic starting training to their new sales staff. In the best case, company gives the basic starting training and after that never stops training. This is possible when the management is committed and are willing to make the necessary resources available. For instance, fast technology changes require continuous training for the sales staff. In the sales situation the salespeople are the source of information to customer, that is why it is vital to train them continuously to update their knowledge (Marks, 2007).

Setting targets

Many interviewees highlighted the importance of setting goals. In their opinion, sufficiently challenging, easily measurable and clear goals motivate them in their own work. Clear and motivating goals make them perform better and keep the work interesting.

Setting achievable and motivating goals in sales jobs help align employees to company' mission. Setting goals also helps salespeople to understand what their contribution to company success is and what value do they bring to company. By setting goals, which are achievable, clear and motivating, you can create engaged, productive and satisfied salespeople. The importance of also align goals in changing environment cannot be excluded. By aligning goals in changing environment, the company can ensure that salespeople continue to be motivated and committed to company' success (Smith, 2024). (Alatawi;Singh;Alomar;& Balakrishnan, 2004)

Support network

One interviewee highlighted the importance of support network. Interviewee said that the responsibility for creating network is in the hand of salesperson. Some salespeople who are open and social this network creation might be easier than for others. By developing wide network, the salespeople can find access to resources and support they might need in their work.

7 Conclusion and discussion

7.1 Conclusion

The objectives of this research were to find out what were the key elements which make customer and partner relationships long lasting and what is the salespeople role in this process. In this research we stated three research questions which we tried to answer in this research paper. These research questions were:

1. What are the key elements of building long-term customer relationships and partnerships in B2B business?
2. What is important from the perspective of the sales unit, and what is done in practice?
3. What kind of sales unit activities best support the construction of a long-term partnership in B2B business?

What are the key elements of building long-term customer relationships and partnerships in B2B business?

In this question the goal was to find key elements which are affecting to customer and partner relationships. During the literature review, it was found that there are many factors behind long-term customer and partner relationships. Whether it is the interaction of the seller or trust, each of these factors has an impact on the formation of long-term partnerships and customer relationships.

In this study, the aim was to address both customer relationships and partnership relationships. This is because the interviewees were from different functions of the case company, and they primarily worked either directly with the customer or directly with the partner. Although the relationships may be of different types, where the partnership relationship involves more collaboration and joint sales to end customers, while in the customer relationship, the goal is to directly influence the purchase decision.

The literature review explored the key characteristics of long-term customer and partner relationships, the typical structure of the relationship phases the core characteristics of the sellers and the ways they create long-term customer- and partner relationships. Literature review also highlighted the key strategies salespeople can use to engage customers and partners for making these relationships long lasting.

Close relationships with the suppliers, channel members and customers are a necessity in a modern day business environment to gain market advantages and eventually increase sales (Weitz & Bradford, 1999). Companies sales function is important not just bringing the money to company but creating long-term relationships with their customers and partners in a long run (ELSamen & Akroush, 2018).

In the literature review trust was highlighted several times as being the significant factor for customer- and partner relationship creation. As stated, in the literature review, personal relationship with the people in the opposite side increase trust between two organizations. When personal relationship is successful it enables sharing tacit knowledge what is not maybe discussed during the meetings between two companies (Arslan, Golgeci, Khan, Ahokangas, & Haapanen, 2022).

Long-term customer and partner relationships all start from trust. As said during the interviews building trust can eventually open the door for the knowledge which customer wasn't willing to share before. This was shown in one of the interviews where the interviewee shared that after customer trusted the salesperson, they shared valuable tacit knowledge to seller.

What is important from the perspective of the sales unit, and what is done in practice?

What does the organization's sales team practically do to form long-term customer- and partner relationships? As noted, trust is one of the most important elements in customer and partnership relationships. The literature review highlighted that trust can be built in many different ways, such as through personal relationships with the customer- and partner organization and by doing agreed-upon things on time, being honest and open. It is also important to see the customer's/partner's perspective so that the salesperson knows what things are important to the other party (Mainela & Ulkuniemi, 2012) (Ahearne, Mathieu, & Rapp, 2005) (Arli, Bauer, & Palmatier, 2018).

In the interview, several points emerged about what the case company's salespeople practically did to improve and facilitate the building of customer- and partner relationships. The same practices apply to both types of relationships. In the interviews, one salesperson highlighted that often in a new customer- and partner relationship where trust is to be built, they start the relationship by doing a small favor for the other party. According to them, this small gesture positively influenced the other party's attitude towards the salesperson and demonstrated that they are working together and want both parties to succeed.

Another employee from the case organization highlighted the importance of recognizing the personality types of the other party. When a salesperson can identify the type of person they are dealing with, it becomes easier to adjust their approach to suit the other person's style. According to the interviewee, some people see things in numbers and are very analytical in their approach, while others prefer to discuss matters and value good communication with the sales organization.

Systematic communication with the customer or partner organization was also considered important, and this was highlighted by all the interviewees. There are many ways to maintain communication, and varying these methods was also deemed important. Sometimes just exchanging pleasantries over the phone is enough, as it gives the other party a sense of importance and shows that the salesperson has not forgotten them, even if the realization of deals is not currently relevant. One interviewee described systematic approach with the customers. Interviewee said that it is important to have common goals and shared path for collaboration. If the possibility for successful deal can be seen, it is very important to have systematic meeting routine with the customer and communicate in different ways as described earlier.

The importance of presence cannot be overlooked, its significance in customer relationships is inevitable. It is self-evident that the development of a customer relationship is different when comparing face-to-face communication to purely virtual communication. One interviewee mentioned that trust forms significantly faster between the customer and the salesperson when communication is done face-to-face. According to them, it is not always necessary to see the customer in person, but in some situations, it is essential, such as at the beginning of the customer relationship during the first meeting. They gave an example of a situation where a customer was about to reject the salesperson's offer. The deal was important to the company and had to be realized. They went to meet the customer face-to-face immediately and returned with a completed deal. According to them, this would not have been possible without their face-to-face presence.

Salespeople need to have good social skills to be able to create wide support network. Salespeople who are good with social networking can have easier access to social support and different resources which helps in their daily work. This is why it is important to have a wide network and start creating this network from start of a new job (Xiaoyong , 2022).

What kind of sales unit activities best support the construction of a long-term partnership in B2B business?

It has been now clear that salespeople are the critical resource for customer and partner relationships building. But what role has the organization behind the salespeople? This question was answered during the interviews. Themes which were being raised in these interviews were, sales mentoring model, support tools and resources for sales process, support network and target setting.

Mentoring model was highlighted several times. Interviewees said that in highly competitive sales environment were the job can be stressful, it is important to have someone who is experienced and to whom seller can lean when needed and seek guidance. Mentoring salespeople is important, especially when learning new processes and ways of working. Mentoring also serves to increase the sense of inclusiveness. It has become a management tool for organizations to address both areas (Brashear-Alejandro, Barksdale, Bellenger, Boles, & James, 2019).

Salespeople need sales support functions so that they can focus on the actual sales work. In many interviews, the importance of support tools was highlighted. Salespeople felt that sales support tools are one of the most important forms of support that an organization can offer. According to them, it is essential that they can concentrate on what they are good at, rather than spending the day figuring out all the other issues related to the sales case. Also setting clear and achievable goals for salespeople is one of the key things how organization can support their sellers. This gives them motivation as shown from the interviews.

7.2 Discussion

This research wanted to examine both customer relationships and partner relationships. In the case company, both customer relationships and partnerships are seen as important for the company. The same principles apply to both types of relationships, from their formation to their maintenance. The difference between these types of relationships is that partnerships can generally be longer-term and different in nature. A partnership may often be deeper because the collaboration lasts longer. Customer relationships in the case organization can be shorter as customer representatives may change after the company's fiscal year.

For future research, it would be beneficial to focus on just one type of relationship and also interview the employees on the other side. For example, what has been crucial for a long-term customer relationship from the customer's perspective? What does the customer think the salesperson has done to form such a relationship, and what salesperson traits best support this?

The results from this study can be only partially generalized, because of the nature of the study. Five people were interviewed, so overall number of respondents was small. Additionally, this was case study for one case company, meaning the study cannot be generalized to all organizations. Different ways of working and the unique characteristics of the company itself can affect to interview responses.

Additionally, the research could be expanded by examining the factors that influence customer organizations of different sizes. Small and large customers may have different influencing factors that affect the quality and formation of the relationship.

The research method enabled open discussions during the interviews, allowing the interviewees to share their own thoughts on the interview questions. The interviewees long work experience in sales positions in different organizations gave a lot of depth to the answers. Also, this research approach gave certain freedom to share thoughts which might be obvious in everyday work, but to analyze the way salespeople work every day gave them whole picture on what things they are doing well in sales process and in customer- or partner relationship building. On the other hand, a broader picture of the entire case company could have been obtained by interviewing all business areas.

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