

Salespeople's Value Creation in Customer Interaction An Empirical Study

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ABSTRACT

Manufacturing businesses that try to escape from commoditization and price pressure by becoming service providers or solution suppliers try to take the opportunity to create customer value through activities that go beyond the provision of resources to a given usage process. If the supplier aims to get involved in activities beyond the pure delivery of a product, a more cooperative and interactive business exchange seems necessary. The service and industrial marketing literatures acknowledge this interactive, relational and more intangible exchange of businesses, this study argues however, that the knowledge about the individual level processes of value creation in these business interactions is not sufficient. In order to understand these individual processes, consultative salespeople in the paper packaging industry are observed in their work and interaction with their customers. The study explores the ways the salesperson uses certain activities and resources in the interaction with the customer in order to facilitate and create value. Five different types of value co-creation processes have been identified problem co-creation, problem solving dialogue, solution integration, and value-in-use facilitation and creating value-in-use experience.

KEYWORDS

Industrial salespeople, value creation, individual level, problem solving, micro perspective

INTRODUCTION

More and more manufacturing businesses struggle with the price pressure of their increasingly commoditized products and need to take on customer orders that only cover marginal costs in order to prevent costs deriving from unused capacity. These businesses try to create more value for their customers by providing full-service or solutions and therewith gain a margin on the sale (Forsyth et al. 2000; Windahl & Lakemond 2006; Gebauer et al. 2005). Even though customers' value perceptions are individual to their needs and requirements, the prices in many manufacturing industries reveal that the pure delivery of for example a paper box as packaging for a product is not perceived a 'value' anymore. Even those customers that do not seem to ask for anything beyond a simple paper box for their business processes, do not reward this supplier performance in their payment. This might be because of the product's substitutability caused by the number of suppliers and the low degree of customization or specialization but also, because the product is often not an essential part of the customer's business and accordingly not perceived as important.

Hence, the main problematic is that the value perceived by the customers does not meet suppliers' efforts and costs, since they struggle to gain any margin on the sale of such commodities. The lack of differentiation possibilities that these products offer has encouraged manufacturers to look for new ways of differentiation and value creation. In other words, the *supplier needs to create value* to the customer through other means than the product itself, hence in the individual interaction between seller and buyer. In more specific terms this means for example that the seller provides the buyer with additional services in order to ease the buying interaction for the customer, or even with a holistic solution that saves the customer any other efforts (Bosworth 1995; Azimont et al. 1998; Eades 2004). Another option that has been discussed in this context is the approach to advise or consult the customer and thereby differentiate and create value in the interaction (Rackham & DeVincentis 1999). Finally, is relationship selling, though not discussed in this context might be another way for the supplier to create value beyond the product (Jolson 1997; Boles et al. 2000; Williams & Everett 2009).

Generally, if the supplier aims to get involved in activities beyond the pure delivery of a product, the problem solution becomes more complex and usually more individualized which influences the exchange with the customer (Axelsson & Wynstra 2002). Hence, the nature of business exchanges that has been researched as more *relational, interactive and intangible* (Hunt et al. 2006; Turnbull & Ford 1996) can be considered a cause or consequence of the supplier trying to create value in the described commodity situation (Ballantyne 2006; Grönroos 2011). How the supplier creates value in the interaction with the buyer and how the supplier's activities in this very interaction as well as internally within the own company influence the customer's value perception is still rather intransparent (Lindgreen & Wynstra 2005; Vargo 2008). Thus, the processes of problem solving or value creation in the interaction between seller and buyer, as well as the interactions in the wider network, stay relatively unexplored (Hu & Tsai 2007; Håkansson et al. 2009; Lindgreen & Wynstra 2005; Woodruff & Flint 2006).

Moreover, the work argues that in these business interactions where standardized approaches give way for interactions in which physical products play a minor role, the unit of analysis needs to shift from company level interaction to *individual level interaction*. A company level analysis would have a hard time to capture the relational and contextual aspects that are conditioned through the more intangible and interactive exchange. Hence, the micro perspective on the supplier enables to grasp the complexity and variety of value creation by

considering the individual salesperson's use of resources in the interaction, the type of resources and complexity of resource integration as well as the actor's perception in the interaction with the customer. This also means that apart from market conditions and company positions, also contextual factors on the individual level caused by resource imbalance and other social aspects are considered.

This approach promises the potential for a theoretical endeavour and empirical relevance through studying value creation between two business parties on the individual level. Hence, the purpose of this work is *to increase the understanding of the ways industrial salespeople interact with the own company and the customer in order to create value for the customer*. The emphasis is here on *ways*, highlighting the contextual and phenomenological nature of the study of a complex phenomenon that is influenced by several actors, their different activities and resources, as well as the context. The focus on the supplier in this work enables an in-depth study of the actor in 'backward' and 'forward' interaction, i.e. at the intersections with the own company and the customer. This would have hardly been possible in a study that focuses equally on both parties.

In order to satisfy the purpose, the study integrates the interaction notion of the IMP perspective with ideas from the service (dominant) logic on value creation. The Service-dominant Logic (SDL) (Vargo & Lusch 2004) and Service Logic (SL) (Grönroos 2006) as well as the IMP research encourage the picture of business interactions resembling a social interdependent process, however it seems that the microlevel lens considered necessary to observe this process is rarely applied to the research practice. Even though the IMP research has acknowledged the social aspects in its first interaction models (IMP Group 1982), the level of analysis is usually not the one of the socialized individual but of the company, which is seen as a part of a bigger picture, a 'part of a group of interacting units' (Ford 1990: 8). The little research that aims to understand the work of the individuals underlying the company's navigation in different relationships leaves open what happens in the interaction on individual level between companies (Ford 2011; Valla & Salle 1997; Brennan & Turnbull 2002; Håkansson & Snehota 1995). Apart from creating this integrated framework that cross fertilizes IMP literature and S-D logic, which has already been considered as fruitful by other authors (Gummesson 2006; Jacob & Ulaga 2008); the study provides insights on the actors, resources and activities of value creation as well as the contextual complexities on the individual level interactions that are the basis for B2B value creation.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Interactions

Both IMP and the service marketing research streams have turned away from the idea that value is embedded in the exchanged product but instead in the *interaction* itself. In fact, the Service-dominant Logic (SDL) and the Service Logic (SL) two streams within the service literature describes the exchange between buyer and seller as an interaction in order to highlight the involvement of both actors in the value creation, or for that matter value co-creation. The literatures argue that the customer is the main value creator as he/she needs to implement the advise, solution or product in order for the value creation to be fulfilled. In fact, the interaction is a necessary pre-condition for the supplier to create any value, i.e. in order to be a co-creator, the supplier needs to encourage interaction with the customer (Grönroos & Helle 2010).

Within the IMP literature the term interaction is first of all meant to build the contrast to transaction, which means that exchanges take place within the frame of exchange

relationships or sequence of exchanges. The interaction is considered the arena for each party to address their own particular problem. Since, in the IMP perspective concepts such as money, goods, service or immediate value cannot describe interactions as such, the term value is not used much (Ford 2011). Hence, it does not talk about how value is created in interaction between the actors but the idea is that interaction as such creates value, since both parties get closer to their problem solving through *'a substantive process that leads to the modification or transformation of the activities and resources of the actors and of the actors themselves'* (Håkansson & Snehota 1995). Without this interaction no actor would be able to provide a solution to the problem of another, since the exchange enables a better utilization and matching of resources (Snehota 1990).

This actor, resource, activity (A-R-A) model has originally been developed within the network notion, where the dyadic relationship between businesses is only a part of the interaction portfolio that the companies' hold (Håkansson & Snehota 1995). In this case, this model has been used for an interaction dyad as it provides an analytic framework that can be translated onto the individual level. Hence, the actor layer is represented by the perceptions and interpretations of the salesperson and the resource layer entails tangible and intangible resources (operand and operant resources) of the company or the salesperson. The resources are brought together through the activities, confronted and combined by the salesperson in order to create value for the customer (Håkansson & Waluszewski 2002). This model, embraces the underlying assumptions of IMP, that business are interdependent actors, because of their bounded knowledge, which leads to the necessity to interact in order to exchange heterogeneous resources and to improve the own utilization of resource elements for the problems solving (Snehota 1990).

Value Concept

As the introduction already indicates, studying value creation between two actors is difficult and complex. One reason is that the term value often has different meanings and there are different definitions even within marketing, another reason is the term's intangible nature. Looking at different early definitions of customer value (e.g. Zeithaml 1988, Monroe 1990), Woodruff (1997) recognizes three similarities: Firstly, value is somewhat related to (the use of) a product which delimits it from personal values.

'Value traditionally refers to a preferential judgment like an interactive, relativistic preference experience, whereas values refer to the criteria by which such preferential judgments are made, thus more deeply rooted, underlying beliefs' (Holbrook 1994).

Secondly, the customer value is something perceived by the customer, it therefore differs from the value of a customer for the supplier, i.e. the profitability or economic worth of the customer for the supplier (Walter et al. 2001; Morgan & Hunt 1994; Möller & Törrönen 2003; Grönroos & Helle 2010). Thirdly, it involves some kind of trade-off where the value is defined as the customer's perceived economic worth of the supplier's offering (Holbrook 1994), within B2B this could be an evaluation of the offering's impact on the customer's processes. For example Anderson and Narus (1998: 54) see value as *'the worth in monetary terms of the technical, economic, service, and social benefits a customer company receives in exchange for the price it pays for a market offering'*. This latter conceptualization of a trade-off between benefits and sacrifices is the most common one within B2B Literature as it also allows for more than only economic aspects in the evaluation of the value (Flint et al. 1997; Ulaga 2001; Zeithaml et al. 2003; Ulaga & Eggert 2005). Nevertheless, these similarities of

the early definitions of value still leave room for diverging interpretations and understandings especially with regards to the objectivity vs. subjectivity of value as well as the static vs. process nature of it.

The first aspect of objectivity vs. subjectivity derives from the fact that in some definitions value is understood as inherent in the product or service as in the concept of value-added (Kotler 2000) and in others it can only be perceived subjectively by the customer, as in the '*relativistic preference experience*' (Holbrook 1994). It is this latter perception where the Service-dominant Logic positions and develops its understanding of customer value. The SDL emphasizes that customer value is created through service experiences and relationships that it is shaped through the exchange of resources, such as knowledge (Flint 2006). Thus as opposed to the value-added concept, this latter notion entails that the value does not reside in the product but in the usage process of it. This is expressed by the 10th Service-dominant premise that '*value is always uniquely and phenomenological determined by the beneficiary*' (Vargo & Lusch 2008). Whereas, the value discussion has always been subject of the '*unresolved duality between objectivist and relativist ontological positions*' (Ballantyne et al. 2011: 180), the point taken in SDL and SL is clear, because if the supplier cannot uniquely create value for the customer, no value can be entailed in the product itself.

Also the IMP perspective on value is that each party evaluates the interaction through the interpretation of the own problem (Ford 2011). The main difference is that it considers the value for both parties in the interaction, but also the effect that the interaction or relationship has itself on the value perception (Möller 2006). Thus relational value refers to the value that is created through the interrelated activities of the buyer and supplier. In other words, the value is conceived through the relationship itself. The relationship value concepts within the B2B literature considers the interaction idea but it also goes beyond the direct value of increased benefit or decreased cost and takes also the indirect less tangible value, e.g. trust into the equation (Håkansson 1982; Ravald & Grönroos 1996; Ramírez 1999). Thus, with the concept of relationship value, the literature acknowledges the fact that it is not only the resources that are added to the customer's resource assortment but also other benefits attainable through the interaction (Snehota 1990). Several studies have conceptualized the relationship value for each party, the supplier (Walter et al. 2001) and the customer (Ulaga 2003). These studies have however not considered the value as interactively formed in a process.

This leads to the second aspect that is the perspective of value as an outcome or an end result of value creating activities and therewith considered a static assessment or a process (Möller 2006; Grönroos 2011b). The notion of Flint et al. (2002) that there are two judgments on value by the customer, one is about the desired value and the other about the received value experience from actual use show a first approach to value creation and value perception as a process. The idea is that the customer's value perception might change throughout the process for example from the idea to post-purchase experience. However, the limitations are still that the focus lies only on the buyer's perception in isolation from the supplier and therewith this definition is silent about the influences on value perception through the interaction of buyer and seller in value creation (Möller 2006). Even though, many discussions are dedicated on the concept of value it is exactly this value as process that has been neglected in research (Vargo et al. 2008). This process perspective on value is described by the premise that '*value is always uniquely and phenomenological determined by the beneficiary*' (Vargo & Lusch 2008) or in words '*the value exists in the exchange of resources*' (Ravald & Grönroos 1996; Grönroos 2000a). The concepts of value-in-use and

value-in-context highlight the idiosyncratic, experiential, contextual and meaning-laden nature of value (Deighton & Grayson 1995; Flint 2006; Vargo & Lusch 2008; Edvardsson et al. 2010).

Both literatures, service marketing and IMP, would agree that each interaction is unique, and hence the value, phenomenological since it is shaped by each actor's perception and interpretation of the other. In the S-D logic this is described by the concept of value-in-use, it entails that value comes into existence in the exchange of resources and depends on value rendered by the resources once they are embedded into the customer's structure (Vargo & Lusch 2006). Thus, if the customer evaluates the supplier's resource integration in relation to the own processes, the supplier's activities need to be dedicated to the *effectiveness and efficiency* of the resource integration. Supporting the customer in a value creating way means thus that the customer needs to be supported technically in an efficient and effective way (Håkansson & Ford 2002). Or as Grönroos & Helle (2010) put it:

‘Efficient support means, for example, that the production process or cost control, can be handled smoothly, whereas effective support means that the way these processes can be operated with the support provided by the supplier has a positive monetary effect on the customer's business process.’ (569).

The value creation is thus an

‘interactive process consisting of several sub-processes and resources supporting corresponding customer practices in a way that helps the customer create value in all its practices (operational efficiency), and through this ultimately has a value-creating impact on the customer's business process (business effectiveness).’ (Grönroos 2011: 2).

The general idea is that the simple support to one of the customer's key practices, i.e. the provision of a machine for the production process, is not enough to create value. Firstly, it does not affect either the efficiency or effectiveness of the customer's process and therewith also does not have any monetary outcome. Secondly, through the little involvement of the supplier in the customer's process, the latter would most likely not increase the *value perceived from the interactions (here called interaction benefits), i.e. trust*. Thus according to Grönroos and Helle (2010) the customer either perceives value through the improvement of objective monetary effects such as cost saving or through improved perceptual effects (e.g. trust, commitment), that are here referred to as interaction benefits (since also the monetary improvement is a matter of perception). *Generally, one could say that the customer's evaluation is influenced by the way the supplier integrates resources in the interaction.*

Salesperson as Value Creator

Translating the above ideas onto the microlevel, one can say that the customer's value perception is increased when the supplier manages to reduce the customer's own efforts and resource integration. The selling of solutions would have the same effect since the individual buyer would save the time and effort to pick and choose the different components. Moreover, the integration of supplier's knowledge, the advising support, increases the effect of the buyer's project internally. Thus one could say that the knowledge that the buyer gains from the supplier can be used internally for further projects and creates value because the individual can work more effectively also in the long run. Relating this to the interaction

benefits, one could say that they either signify as such a value for the customer or that they influence the monetary value. For example the competence that comes across in the knowledge integration influences the buyer's trust, and that can again be valuable for the buyer because it could make the processes smoother and encourage the engagement in an innovative product development, which would improve monetary value.

The IMP literature states that: *'it is the actor that ultimately links, combines and organizes resources and activities, in an interaction perspective'* (Håkansson et al. 2009). Despite the importance of the actors as the ones that actually acquire knowledge about resource combinations and links, they are only indirectly addressed within the IMP research on interaction (Håkansson et al. 2009). A first most important premise for the individual level would be that the salesperson is not an independent actor, he/she is not considered to be able to fully control an interaction and needs to accept the leadership or initiative of the other actor rather than only following its own interest (Håkansson & Ford 2002). The individual's success is dependent on how he/she related to specific other actors and how he/she is seen by these to fit with their operations, ambitions, behaviours and problems (Håkansson et al. 2009). This interactive salesperson is also dependent in the development of the own resources, for example the competences are just as much an input to the different interactions as they are a product of it. One discussion within the IMP on actors is on their roles in the market, since the literature considers the terms producer and consumer as too narrow descriptions for seller and buyer. The business actors could easily take on different role sets depending on the interaction, i.e. a seller can take on the role of a producer or consumer (Snehota 1990). The IMP would mostly describe the business actors as sellers and buyers or 'resource holders' and 'resource users' within the different exchange relationships, whereas the service marketing literature would prefer to see both actors as resource integrators (Grönroos 2008).

SDL and SL see the customer as the ultimate value creator because goods and services purchased by customers are, together with other necessary resources available to them, integrated into the own processes (Grönroos 2008). Therefore, the supplier that only provides a set of resources as an offering to the customer, and where the customer integrates this offering into the own value-creating processes, the supplier is considered a value facilitator (Grönroos & Ravald 2009). If however, the supplier manages to engage in interaction he/she can actively take part in the customer's value generating processes and therewith become a co-creator. This also means that the supplier has more opportunities of value creation when he/she manages to build up an interactive platform, since the customer's processes do not run in parallel only, but merge into one interactive process (Grönroos & Helle 2010). Thus from an SD or SDL perspective it is up to the supplier to decide over which time span of the interaction the supplier wants to integrate resources and how much he/she wants to be prime resource integrator (Lusch et al. 2007; Grönroos 2011a).

Following the argument of bounded knowledge from before, exchange interaction is valuable because the actors have access and can use other actor's resources in order to improve the own resource situation. This means also, that some kind of disequilibrium in the resource situation of the actors need to exist in order for the exchange to be valuable (Snehota 1990). This however is given by the fact that no actor is considered as having perfect information and knowledge. Since each individual actor has only bounded knowledge, the situations that the actor has to decide in are complex and hence ambiguous (Snehota 1990). In order to cope with the complexity that stems from the interdependency, the actor interprets the other actor's

activities. Hence, the interpretation or perception is the main basis for certain behaviour within the interaction.

The interdependency and complexity could however also mean that it restricts, the actor in its activities, as he/she is uncertain. This uncertainty can have to do with different issues, this is where not only the actor's bounded knowledge plays in but also the context as such, that means the interactions the player has with others. One could say that '*the context is part of the actor; it gives the actor the identity of an actor*' (Snehota 1990, p.146). Hence, the context is not given as such but perceived by the actors. An actor could for example become more or less uncertain about the own need or problem when interacting with suppliers (Håkansson & Johanson 1977). When the supplier identifies certain problems that the buying actor might not have considered before, the latter's uncertainty might increase or decrease depending on the situation. The market uncertainty is influenced by competition, i.e. it represents the uncertainty that is created by the choice between different relationship partners. And finally, also transaction uncertainty exists that describes the uncertainty about the actual purchase of the product, where it could be purchased, etc. The uncertainty could lead to actor's inability to decide on a course of action, and it would influence the perception of value. One example would be that the salesperson could both share knowledge with the customer and thus decrease information imbalance and uncertainty or he/she could create need uncertainty by presenting a product or solution, which creates uncertainty of the customer about the own problem. Complexity or ambiguity can never be totally eliminated considering the actor's bounded knowledge, however, the feeling of uncertainty could, for example through establishing trust.

Apart from uncertainty, also dependency and power is one of the main consequences of resource imbalance and influences the interaction (IMP Group, 1982; Håkansson & Östberg 1975; Håkansson & Johanson, 1977). The power is simply understood as the '*ability to affect the other participant's outcomes from the relationship*' (Anderson & Narus 1984, p. 63). Also, power is context dependent. The power of one party A consists of two aspects, firstly, the other party's (B) perception on the relative resource position, such as expertise, access to information and the referent value and secondly, the B's relative dependence on the relationship with A (this is conditioned by the market situation) (IMP Group 1982). Through power, one party A can influence uncertainties of the other party B by changing certain variables in the exchange, for example about the product's complexity or the quantity and by changing the B's perception on the abilities of A (Håkansson & Östberg 1975). These concepts however influence each other; the uncertainties of one party can make the other party more powerful. Generally, the assumption here is that the salesperson's power derives from the uniqueness in performance. Thus, the difference in which the actor is linking the activities and resources in the interaction will lead to different outcomes in efficiency or effectiveness for the customer and therewith, different value perceptions. This might however, also be slightly different, when a customer feels dependent on a supplier, here the perceived value might be less.

Salesperson's Value Creating Resources

The fact that the physical product as such becomes only a minor part of the value creation in the interaction also means that the entity of exchange is the resources rather than a product. One could also argue that from a user perspective, the supplier's product is a resource that needs to be integrated into the production processes. Resources may consist of physical facilities, components, operating systems and finance as well as less intangible ones such as

human knowledge (Itami & Roehl 1987). A further differentiation has been made by Amit & Schoemaker (1993) that divides these resources into resources and capabilities, where resources are tradable and non-specific to the firm and capabilities are firm specific and are used to engage the resources within the firm (see also Makadok 2001). In the terms of S-D logic, these resources are operand and operant (Constantin & Lusch 1994). Whereas the operand resources are those that need to be acted upon in order to produce an effect, the operant resources are those that produce an effect on its own and can be employed to act on operand resources. Relating these terms to more common conceptualizations, one can say that operand resources are typically tangible resources whereas operant resources are usually intangible ones such as human, organizational, informational and relational (Hunt & Madhavaram 2006). Taking the resource of knowledge as example one can say it is tangible and intangible. There is tacit knowledge that is knowhow and competences gained through experiences and there is explicit knowledge that is what can be digitalized and duplicated (Nonaka & Takeuchi 1995). The first is an operant resource and the second is operand (Ballantyne 2006). The solving of a problem depends on how different resources are combined and changed to increase their applicability as solution (Håkansson & Waluszewski 2002). The interconnectedness of actors in industrial markets means with regards to the resources that the availability of the resources outside the own company is just as important than the ones inside (Ford 2011). Hence, the possession of resources is not as important as the availability. Because the resources are heterogeneous, interaction linkages with other parties that make other resources available create value (Snehota 1990).

Relating the discussion above to the individual level, one could say that the company resources entail knowledge in explicit forms such as market information, knowledge about certain production facilities and materials etc. Company operand resources would be products and production facilities (Håkansson & Waluszewski 2002). When the salesperson uses support for example from other business units this can also be considered a company operant resource. The salesperson's own operand resource is for example a customer relationship and operant resources are knowledge in tacit form, thus the way he/she deals with the customer, understands his/her problem and connects it to the own company's possibilities. The S-D literature sees operant resources, which are often competences, as the primary resources of a customer exchange (Madhavaram & Hunt 2007; Vargo & Lusch 2004). The most relevant competence with regards to the individual salesperson, thus the own operant resource, is the combination of activities and resources in order to deal with the own and the counterpart's problem (Ford 2011). This ability also includes the ability to learn, and therewith to do it better every time. The recombination and adaptation of resources can be learned through own experimentation, through learning from others or through joint learning (Håkansson et al. 2009).

Salesperson's Value Creating Activities

In a business relationship activity links are considered the main substance, since the definition of an actor through its activity patterns recognizes the social embeddedness (Snehota 1990). These technical, administrative, commercial and other activities can be connected in different ways to other companies (Håkansson et al. 2009). The principle in the interaction approach is that the execution and the outcome of activities depend on the other activities, as they get adjusted to each other for example with regards to time (Håkansson & Snehota 1995). The main intention is to achieve a differentiation with regards to the other available alternatives through a different way of resource usage for the customer and/or the supplier, which leads to the before mentioned value in the form of effectiveness, efficiency or

other interaction benefits. In the service marketing literature any exchange content between two businesses would be described as service.

A service is a process consisting of more or less intangible activities that normally but not necessarily always take place in interactions between the customer and service employees and/or physical resources or goods and/or systems of the service provider which are provide as solutions to customer problems (Grönroos 2000b, p.46)

This service, is however to be differentiated from the services, that are understood as value adding services, as it is understood as an umbrella term for the value creating interaction. One could also refer to service as *resource integration* in general (Grönroos 2008). This resource integration of the actors in interaction could take on different forms. Ballantyne (2006) has created a first categorization of concrete value creating activities, such as knowing through knowledge renewal (knowledge generation and application), relating through relationship development, and communicating through dialogue and other forms of communicative interaction. These activities support the idea that exchange is viewed as interactive process across time and place (Ballantyne 2004). Finally, with the aspect of knowing Ballantyne supports the idea of S-D logic that knowledge sharing and application is a 'hidden' source of competitive advantage, he claims that it is not the tacit knowledge alone but the triangulation of relating, communicating and knowing that renews knowledge. Another possible categorization is to categorize higher-level value creating activities, such as advising or problem solving, solution creation and service provision.

Advising and Problem Solving

The selling party could take on an advising role and help the customer with problems that he/she realized which could indirectly render the customer a more effective or efficient resource integration. As mentioned before the term problem solving used within IMP parallels the S-D discussions on service and value. In the IMP perspective the actors are interacting for self-serving purposes that make them get involved in attempts to cope with problems of counterparts. The rationale is that each party will perceive the value of the interaction related to their problem. The concept of problem also stands in relation to uncertainty discussed before. The three uncertainties are not only the customer's but could also exemplify the decisions that the salesperson needs to make when solving the customer's problem, he needs to find the most appropriate way to solve the problem, he needs to decide which relationships to use and what will it cost to solve the problem. Thus, one could say the salesperson needs to decide about the effectiveness, the efficiency and the resources used when solving the counterpart's problem. The B2B sales literature, specifically the consultative selling concept, discusses the idea of problem solving. The concept entails the idea of telling the customer the problem first, quantifying it and propose a solution along with a profit improvement (Hanan 2004). The concept of consultative selling is not new it got however new relevance today because of the above discussed commoditization and price squeeze in manufacturing markets. The general task of the sales person is to create value by understanding the customer's problem, considering his/her micro and macro environment, and creating a solution to the problem (Grewal & Sharma 1991; Sharma 2001; Sheth & Sharma 2008; Bonney & Williams 2009; Rackham & DeVincentis 1999). Evident is that the demand on the salesperson's cognitive, communicative and managerial abilities increases (Liu & Leach 2001) when he/she needs to find or create a problem and put a monetary value to it, let alone to already find a rough idea of a solution to judge a monetary improvement. The salesperson needs the product knowledge, but also the market knowledge in order to

better understand the customer's problems; he/she must have the social skills to communicate externally and internally (Liu & Leach 2001; Tyler 1990).

Unfortunately there is not much discussion on the activities of finding, creating or solving the problem itself or discussing in how far the salespeople use own resources as in knowledge and abilities and support from the own company. Because ultimately, consultative selling could mean that salespeople do not only involve the companies' own products anymore, but might even combine different products/services (Sharma 2007; Sheth & Sharma 2008; Sawhney 2006). Relating the ideas of problem solving back to the value creation discussion, the notion of consultative selling is a practice example of value co-creation through dialogue. There does not need to be a physical solution provided to the customer. It is rather about the act of consulting, thus the sharing of knowledge, in operand or operand form.

Creating and Selling Solutions

The salesperson could integrate products and services into one solution and therewith decrease the complexity for the customer and take over more work that used to be the customer's one before. By creating a total system the supplier aims to save the customer the effort to combine products, spare parts and support services in the most efficient and appropriate way. Thus, one could argue that the exchange complexity for the customer decreases. The provision of solutions requires a focus shift from production to use, from output to input in the customer value creating processes and from past to future (Windahl & Lakemond 2006). The process entails the initial problem recognition that requires a very in-depth knowledge of the customer's processes and business (Windahl & Lakemond 2006) and the finding of an appropriate solution (Tuli et al. 2007). With regards to the creation of this solution, the individual supplier needs to align resources from the customer's organization with those of the own company (Tuli et al. 2007). Thus, the provision or creation of a solution for the customer could be considered as a set of relational processes comprising, customer requirements definition, customization and integration of goods and/or services and their deployment, and post-deployment customer support (Tuli et al. 2007). The interaction process is influenced by both actors' attitudes and business structures. The in-depth knowledge that the salesperson needs in order to find problem and solution, requires not only close work together with the customer and therewith a customer centric orientation but also a good cooperation between the salesperson and the back-end personnel (Tuli et al. 2007). Solution selling requires the individual to manage different resources and interfaces and integrate them into one concept in the end that solves the customer's idiosyncratic customer problem (Oliva & Kallenberg 2003). Finally, one could even say that in this case the implicit knowledge is not shared but a solution is sold where the customer received a possibility to fix his/her problem, but did not learn about the way to do so.

Providing Services

A third option for the supplier to create value in the interaction is the general decrease of the customer's use of resources (costs) through the provision of services, such as delivery services, user training and education, and maintenance. However, in the service marketing literature, the concept of service has connotations beyond the usual definition of service as an activity (Grönroos 2008) and rather describes the entire value co-creation process as mentioned above (Edvardsson et al. 2005). However, delivery, storage, maintenance and documentation can not only be seen as 'value-adding services' but also as processes that support customer's practices achieve efficiency and thus influence the customer's value perception (Grönroos 2008). The understanding of service is thus the one of a process where specialized competences are applied (Vargo & Lusch 2004) or the customer is assisted by

goods, physical resources and infrastructures (Grönroos 2008: 300). The perception here is, that it requires a resource integrating process to be considered a service, in order not to only see it as a ‘better product’. Hence, service can either be provided directly or indirectly via a product as the application of competences for the benefit of another party.

Framework for Individual Level B2B Value Co-Creation

The discussion aimed to lay the theoretical foundations to the subject of research and the perspective taken in this work that aims *to increase the understanding of the ways industrial salespeople interact with the own company and the customer in order to (co) create value for the customer*. In other words, the work investigates the salesperson’s part as economic and social actor, his/her activities and the resources used in the interaction with the customer in order to create value for the latter. The theoretical framework integrates the IMP concept of interaction with the notions of value co-creation (SDL and SL) and translates it onto an individual seller-buyer level.



Figure 1: Preliminary Framework for Individual Level B2B Value Co-Creation

RESEARCH METHOD

The focus of this study lies on the salesperson’s activities and use of resources in the interaction with the customer as well as the perceptions the individual has on the work. It is thus not the relationship dyad that is the focus of investigation but the activities and interactions of the individual salesperson during and for the interaction with the customer. Since one of the main arguments of this study is the individual level of analysis, this evidently has methodological consequences. The approach needs to be able to grasp complex phenomena in their context and the dynamics of social interaction in real life situations but at the same time some comparison basis is needed between different practices and interaction of salespeople. The case study approach appeared as a feasible platform for this undertaking. The case studies enable to somewhat order and grasp the two levels of actors: individuals and the company. The individual salespeople can be considered as multiple cases that are embedded in one (here single) case company. In order to put the salesperson cases into context, I considered it as necessary to understand their managers, other colleagues and the structure of the company, as well as its history, initiatives and objectives. After about 10 interviews with marketing and sales managers on corporate and country level and readings about the industry as well as the company itself in the company’s intranet, I started studying the individual salespeople through interviews and shadowing at work during a period of three ‘normal’ workdays each (Czarniawska & Czarniawska-Joerges 2007).

Each of the 13 individual salespeople is considered as a case. As mentioned before this individual salesperson could easily be seen as network in itself thanks to his/her different interactions within the own company, with the customer and third parties. Hence the salesperson case embraces these interactions with different actors, the activities and the resources that are used. These resources can stem from the salesperson or from the parties that he/she interacts with, and they also evolve and change throughout these different interactions. Through shadowing each case for three days, the material about one salesperson consists easily of 10 phone calls with customers, internal colleagues or salesperson colleagues, 2-4 meetings with internal colleagues and anywhere between 4-8 customer meetings, plus the interviews and talks with the salespeople. Thus one could say that the salesperson case in its entirety alone consists of up to 15 face-to-face interactions. Together with the study of the salespeople I also included their direct environment by participating in a sales training and an area sales meeting that each lasted two days. This also gave me the chance to interview several salespeople about their work, that I have not necessarily studied in-depths through shadowing. The reasoning that lay behind my methodological choices as well as further elaboration on the research process and procedures are given in the following.

Research Context

The thirteen salespeople have been chosen according to maximum variation and contrast (Miles and Huberman 1994) within the German market of SCA Packaging. The case company is SCA Packaging, the (paper) packaging business unit of the Svenska Cellulosa Aktiebolaget, that is the second largest packaging provider in Europe. The company has 175 production sites within Europe with which it had 3.37 billion net sales in 2010. It grew within Europe historically through acquisitions, which is the reason for the very decentralized structure, of a European head quarters (HQ), and quite autonomous five regions (Nordic, Germany & Switzerland, Southern, Middle and Central Europe). The company legacy is a heavy manufacturing base but in order to escape the commodity trap and become world-class, the HQ launched in 2007 five European wide transformation themes, that should make the organization a market-oriented full-service packaging provider (e.g. world class marketing & sales, lean, innovation). The premises are to differentiate the offering, to create increasing value to the customer and to form long and lasting partnerships with strategic customers. This way, SCA Packaging aims to increase their margin in a very fragmented commodity market.

Hence, the case fulfils the requirement of a single case study to be relevant, as it is critical because of current changes that the company underwent in order to satisfy its vision, it is typical for manufacturing businesses that increasingly try to find a way to counteract their diminishing margins and it is researched longitudinally over two years (Yin 2003). Semi-structured interviews with management and company documents served the understanding of the company context in which the salespeople work. The German market has been chosen for several reasons; firstly, it is one of only two markets within SCAP that have a centralized sales organization, independent from plants, which is considered crucial to be able to sell solutions. Secondly, it embraces a wide product portfolio with regards to production facilities, design competence and extra services. Moreover, the size of the German market allows for a big sales force of 60 salespeople that provides a wide variety for a theoretical sample. Finally, in a research that is considerably relying on observations, the language is crucial, hence, the German language as other tongue has been an additional motivator.

Within- and Cross-Case Analysis

In order to satisfy the requirements of interpretations to be contextual and reiterative (Alvesson 2003), I have chosen to do a within- and cross-case analysis for both the different salespeople and the interactions with their customers (Van Maanen 1979). In the within-case analysis each case including the customer interactions has been scrutinized separately to get familiar with each one of them and find unique patterns (Eisenhardt 1989). *Each salesperson is considered in his approach to create value and each interaction is scrutinized in its indicators of a value creation process.* I have used conceptually ordered displays (Miles & Huberman 1994) and thus structured the material according to the framework that is, as mentioned before, partially conceptual and partially empirical. The material has been structured within the framework's fairly high-level categories, such as company resources, own resources (operant & operand), activities and salesperson perception. This case ordered matrix enables to read across the different concepts that describe one case, one salesperson, and how these relate to each other (Miles & Huberman 1994).

The same matrix can also be read *across cases* in order to make comparisons or contrasts and therewith serve the second step, the cross-case analysis. The cross-comparison tries to go beyond initial impressions and encourages the probability to find novel findings (Eisenhardt 1989). The content analytic summary table serves in the first place a descriptive purpose to understand how the different salespeople work (Miles & Huberman 1994). But it could also provide an indication for more or less successful ways of value co-creation. With an evaluation of value created the above matrix can be slightly adapted, sorting the cases according to the degree of the main effect/result/outcome (Miles & Huberman 1994) in order to compare across. A second cross-case analysis aims to understand and analyze the different value creation interactions and hence cross-compares the interactions across different customer and salespeople. This cross-case analysis takes the shift away from specific salespeople as such and focuses on different types of value co-creation. It also enables to narrow down the complexity and focus on the interaction between salesperson and customer with less focus on the salesperson's activities as a whole and the interaction with the own company.

ANALYSIS

The descriptions above have shown that the interactions with the customers and the work resulting from them is not only different between the individuals but also from customer to customer, which makes the interactions non-routine, non-conventional, interactive and fast-moving conversations that require ad-hoc answers and decision-making. This section aims to investigate (and compare) these interactions with regards to the activities and resources that the salesperson brings into the interaction in order to co-create value. *Five different types of value co-creation processes* have been identified in which the salesperson integrates resources into the customer's processes, and therewith, objectively spoken, co-creates potential value for the latter.¹

Problem Co-Creation

The following interaction shows the very beginning of a value creation process, namely the identification or creation of a problem. Even though, sales literature argues that the salesperson should make the customer aware of a problem that he was not aware of before (Rackham & DeVincentis 1999), the observations show that the customer usually does not

¹ Because of the page limit, in each process only one interaction is exemplified. Still, it was important to me to include a part of the analysis, since input on this part during the workshop would be very valuable for me.

meet with a supplier unless he/she has some notion of a problem, which is why he/she seeks the help of the supplier. However, it could be observed that not in all situations the problem that the customer perceives in the beginning of the interaction is the one that is in the focus of the entire interaction and that will be set out to solve. The reason is that the salesperson seems to often be actively involved in the creation of the customer problem.

In the first interaction with the purchasing manager of company A, a privately owned dairy business, the salesperson Michael co-creates the problem, by sharing the knowledge about a new improvement of a Bag-in-box packaging. The knowledge that Michael integrates in this interaction can be considered as explicit company knowledge, and therewith a company operand resource, since it is an idea that has already been transformed into a physical sample product and is therewith tangible and transferable. Further, he has used this improved packaging before for another customer that he considered as potentially interested and is currently running tests with this customer. In the following conversation, it becomes apparent that the customer does not see or has not considered the improvement of the packaging quality as priority before, because he had other points of action on his agenda. And if there were something about the packaging that he would have liked to change it would have been a decrease in costs. In this case however, Michael tries to bring across, that the customer's customer would be interested in a better quality packaging, and that the improvement of the packaging is more 'valuable' than the decrease in costs.

Michael: This means away from the tubular bag, it becomes angular, so you can easily see it does not have the long seam here so that it can break or burst and adjusts perfectly into the box.

Hans: Is it the format we had before? I mean for the 10 litters?

M: Yes, these are samples, so because it adjust better we need less static that means we could reduce the quality of the box material.

H: Yes that would be good if we could save there. How much does this liner cost?

M: 50-55 Percent.

H: That is twice as much as the current one.

M: Yes, one could have suspected but if you can save in that quality and a better visual appearance for the packaging and we get plus minus zero then we have won something. You cannot compare only the liner prices.

H: No sure, we cannot compare it one on one, we have to see the whole picture.

M: So if we agree that the bag in box at the moment is in terms of quality...

H: ...at the borderline, yes.

M: If we get plus minus zero and they stand properly on the palette and are not borderline anymore than we made a good deal.

(Followed by more specific questions about the liner)

M: But it would not be that we can say we use this liner and save 30%, that is not the aim, the aim is to optimize in the whole package, it is not only you that has the problem, that the packaging is at the borderline and that the palletizing is done with one level less.

H: Sure, if we can improve it that would be good.

M: We need to get the status that the costs are neutral but that the advantage towards your customers is that it looks better. We can try that together, if it works price wise then we should do an experiment that we order 2000-3000 for try out.

H: We just have to dry out 1-2 palettes once and put them in our storage.

Even though the customer might be aware of the poor quality of the packaging for the end consumer, he has not addressed this problem on his own initiative. With the salesperson sharing the knowledge about the problem, he first seems to hope to get a cost improvement on the packaging but later on in the conversation he seems to agree with the problems that the poor quality of the bag-in-box packaging causes. In the end, he actively agrees and

formulates the problem. The way that the salesperson integrates the company resource, the explicit knowledge about the product features, can be described as knowledge sharing, since he transmits the knowledge that he got internally in the own company to the customer and does not seem to modify or 'customize' it in any way. Further, one could argue that he uses his resource, the customer relationship to make this problem co-creation work. If there was no previous business relationship between the two actors or a decent chemistry between both, it would not be very likely that the customer had the trust and willingness to agree on the test and therewith bring in the own resources, such as time and money, that are required to run the test.

In this case, the salesperson could manage to create value in the very beginning of the value creation process with the customer because he made the customer aware of a problem that could lead the customer to reach an improvement in the own processes. Therewith, the value rationale is not based on the actual integration of the improved product, which increases the effectiveness of the solution by improving the usage experience of the customer's customer, but on value co-creation in the form of a change in mind set that opened up for the possibility of the actual integration.

This description exemplifies the idea of IMP that perceptions and goals of the parties are changed and influenced throughout the interaction. In the IMP perspective however, any interaction is considered as valuable because it brings the parties closer to having their problems solved (Ford 2011). Relating this to the management of uncertainty, one could argue here that the salesperson increases the need or in other words problem uncertainty, by expressing knowledge or a problem that the customer has previously not considered (Håkansson & Johanson 1977). In the next section, throughout the problem solving process, the interaction shows a situation where the salesperson rather tends to decrease the uncertainty since he provides more knowledge about the problem itself and the solution possibilities.

Problem Solving Dialogue

Just as in the interaction above, the final goal is to transform the problems and ideas into a physical solution for the customer, but the value creation itself is considered to be the integration of knowledge that brings the customer one step further in the own problem solving process. Hence, the interaction discussed in this section, is similar to the one above, in that they still relate to the beginning of a value creation process without any integration of physical or operand resources. It could therefore be related to the concept of dialogical interaction (Ballantyne 2006). The situations however differ since the customer is at least clear and conscious about its problem and is not challenged in this perception by the salesperson. Nevertheless, the customer is uncertain about the solving of the problem. In the following an interaction that resembles a brainstorm session is described: a meeting between Stefan and a marketing manager of Company B.

Peter: I had an idea here (shows a little paper display of round stairs). I know it is pretty hard, but if you change this part is it then easier?

Stefan: I see one problem, we get the round shapes but the material we use for your displays is pretty thin and it does not have the resistance needed.

P: Hmm, ok the material would need to be thinner and then everything would get instable.

S: Before we had this as support in the back so that it is stabile, if you now want to have it on next to it, then the display would bend, I think that it is tricky. And if, to at least get that visual effect, do every step by itself, but then it is not completely round.

P: Yes that is maybe not such a big problem. The next thing would be to make it out of one piece?

S: That would be problematic because of the sheet size but two pieces could work. We did something like that already where we basically had 4 separate pieces that are linked into each other. Then you could still use E-corrugated material, the problem is just that it could bend when it stands around in the shop window in the sun.

In the interaction above, the salesperson can contribute to value creation by using his knowledge in the interaction with the customer. In other words, the customer's problem-uncertainty of the customer is decreased, either through the education of the customer or through the alignment of different parties within the customer. The salesperson thus helps and facilitates the customer's processes throughout the value proposition without that the customer necessarily integrates the solution of the problem. The customer here uses the knowledge for internal communicating and alignment and therewith has the resource integration also an indirect effect on the facilitation of the customer's processes. Further, the education of the customer enables him to use it at any other time for the improvement of the own value creating processes.

Solution Integration

Even though, in this presentation, the different value creation processes are seen as separate incidents, they could often be considered as different stages in an interaction or a project with a customer. Thus, the first two processes take place rather in the beginning, which are mostly based on operand (intangible) resources and majorly on the salesperson's own resources. The following processes entail more operand resources and integration of company resources. Hence, interdependencies between the actors become more significant in the following processes that are either the later stage of a project or also often later interactions in an entire supplier-customer relationship. Thus, the major difference in this value co-creation process is the increasing integration of company resources. This interaction takes the internal value creation for the customer on step further, since the salesperson draws upon his own (company external) network as resource in order to integrate the resources needed for value co-creation. *In a conversation with a packaging designer from a SCAP plant Marco finds out that the internal employees used a printing grid that is too rough and does not satisfy the printing quality that Marco imagines for Company C. The designer tells Marco that this was agreed on with their printing experts. Marco calls the repro company, a third party, that works with the colour combinations for SCA. The employee also explains him that the printing expert announced it even though he himself was a bit surprised about the quality, too. In the conversation Marco discusses further material possibilities and asks the employee for his opinion on the grids. Marco asks him when the printing experts are back and tells him that he wants to talk to them before he accepts the print.*

This conversation happened after the creation of the solution with the customer. The result that Marco wants to achieve is the better quality for the customer. In this case the salesperson assumes that his perception is also the customer's and negotiates the value proposition internally without interacting with the customer. In the discussion about alternatives, he brings in the knowledge about the customer processes. Company C has so far only used this particular material in their erecting machines; therefore, he considers it as too risky to try out another material even if it could result in a higher quality printing result. This is an example of the seller's part of the value co-creation that happens mostly internally without the direct customer interaction. In this case the main resource that has been integrated is again the salesperson's relationship, however in this case in the wider sense of his network, since it goes beyond SCAP internal resources:

‘This is how, year after year, you build your network, and you get to know machine engineers. In the end of the day you need to know about everyone who is in contact with your customer, you have to do with someone that does the glue, the ones that do the folding box, the repro people and the co-packers.’ (Marco)

The interaction above shows that a major part of the value co-creation process when it comes to the implementation or the integration of the solution into the customer, happens within the supplier’s own company between the salesperson and the company resources. Still, however, these internal interactions serve the management of the customer interaction and the facilitation of the processes that lead to value co-creation.

Value-in-Use Facilitation

A different way that salespeople seem to co-create value is through ‘forward integration’ of their work responsibilities into the ones of their customers. These aspects can only be seen in the wider context of the customer interaction itself. Several activities that could be observed are within the area of administrative support for the customer. This affects the value creation as it relaxes the customer’s time constraint in the own working processes. A good example is Marco who takes on the careful reporting of every meeting with Company C, not as much for the own company but for Company C. They are using his reports for their internal reporting and thus save their own resources. It is of course also partly his own tool to monitor his and other people’s tasks and responsibilities, but he is quite aware of the fact that he minimizes the customer’s workload. In several interactions with Company C the customer also had the print out of his meeting report and used it to refer back to certain discussed issues. This is also why Marco has changed the usual report mask to a more customer friendly one.

Another value co-creating contribution is the salesperson’s activity as customer internal boundary spanner that communicates internally in the customer company between different parties, and tries to align them in order to funnel them towards a common successful goal achievement. The work of Bernd within Company D is one very explicit example of it. Bernd takes on the task to create and discuss every display with the advertising agency, the marketing department and with the packaging and handling department separately that are located in different cities across Germany. In each interaction with one of the parties, they ask what the other party has commented with regards to the project development and possible changes. Bernd is therefore not only the internal communicator between the departments, but also responsible for driving the projects forward internally by aligning all opinions and changes, and visiting the parties in the right order. In the observed occasion, he shifted dates around and decided to already get the OK from the packaging department even if there were still some changes to be done at the display that he considered as not that major, in order to speed up the project process.

A third observed activity that could be called forward integration is when Jürgen conducts a market research project for the customer Company D. The customer did not ask for it when the project for a new design of a specific product line started. Since the salesperson did not know much about the company or the products, he visited stores in order to see how the products are currently packaged, how they are presented in the stores and how other competitor products are packaged. He even went as far as interviewing different store managers about the brand and it’s products, what they think about it and how they would like it to be presented in their stores. On the basis of the gathered information he came up with the idea, which he thought through together with the design centre. In the next meeting with the

customer he presented the results, shared the market research knowledge that he acquired and presented the samples. This example shows that the salesperson takes on work for the customer that would usually be conducted by the customer, i.e. it's marketing department. It might also be the case that the customer already had some of that knowledge but since it has not been shared in the meeting with the salesperson, he used other sources of information, and most likely acquired valuable information for the customer since the customer was so satisfied that they wanted to order the solution straight away.

This section entails the observation that a salesperson can co-create value by using the own resource of labour and time. These situations or interactions are different from the ones before where the value is actually co-created during either the dialogue with the customer or for the customer internally in the supplier company, as this value has not been negotiated or proposed but perceived as such by the salesperson. However, apart from the labour and time as operand salesperson resources, the operant resource related to these operand resources is personal dedication, a concept that can only be found on individual level is discussed in the next section.

Creating Value-in-Use Experience

Supporting the customer's value creation does not only seem to be done by the operand resources of labour and time, thus through work as such but also through the operant resource of the individual salesperson, the personal dedication. There are two ways that personal dedication has been observed, constant availability and extra efforts that are outside the responsibilities of a salesperson. This availability and effort can serve as value creation since they facilitate and support the customer's value creating processes. Customers have mentioned as crucial the fact that someone comes who sees the problems, and also deals with them, someone who the customer can rely on.

There are several occasions where salespeople change their plans in order to react to the urgent needs of the customer. For example Michael, changes his plans from one day to the next and cancels less important meetings in order to drive to Holland to a customer that got urgent news from ALDI about the printing changes for the season. This situation could have meant for the customer that he would have needed to stop parts of the production and it would have meant huge costs. The salesperson mentions afterwards that the meeting might have not appeared that important, but that it was really important for the customer to meet and to discuss the steps to create the least costs and what can be saved. Another situation has been with Company A. The customer had to stop the production as the glue of the packaging did not hold and the content spread out in the production plant. Almost every day employees from the closest SCAP plant had to come to sort out packaging, Michael has been at the plant three times a week for nearly two months to support and help the claim management. Further he states:

‘When I am on holiday, that one day I am at a printing poof, it has the advantage that it is in Holland and I am there in my holidays anyway, and then I hope that the result is what the customer imagined. The customer relies on that. My customer's know that they can reach me in the middle of the night if they need to.’

Marco also states that his work requires a lot of discipline, you can not just push delivery times back when you don't manage, ‘you have to work your ... off’, because the customers rely on the results:

‘Mr. Hautz from the technical department starts at 6.30, Marketing starts at 10, Some are finished at 5 others at 10pm in the evening, they don’t care when you get up, they want to get a hold of you. That means that this little mobile is always with me, at dinner, my son and my wife got used to it.’

These value co-creation activities exemplify that salespeople can with their personal resource of time, labour and personal dedication facilitate the value creation for the customer. The customers can either take quicker decisions thanks to the information from the salesperson or fix problems and processes much quicker in order to create value again. This is also where the concept of trust comes in that has been discussed as a value of long-term relationships (Morgan & Hunt 1994). In this context trust does not need to be considered to have value as such, but rather as a facilitator for the customer to create value-in-use. The customer could for example react quicker in the own decisions and speed up the own processes. In contrast to the first section, where the salesperson seemed to have created uncertainty about a certain problem, the activities within the last two sections aim to support the customer in his/her processes and therewith build trust.

PRELIMINARY CONTRIBUTIONS

Firstly, the study aims to contribute to the individual level knowledge of the value creating mechanisms underlying business-to-business interactions with descriptive knowledge. It extends the sparse research on resource and activities in value interactions of IMP and Service-dominant logic (Håkansson & Waluszewski 2002; Arnould et al. 2006; Baron & Harris 2008; Ballantyne 2006) with more individual-level activities such as forward integration into work responsibilities, personal dedication, the internal boundary spanning and the internal management within the own company, to just name a few.

Apart from the descriptive knowledge on activities and resources, another aim is to shed light on the value co-creation as such in business settings. Based on the observations it is fair to argue that the value co-creation does not always live up to its name, as the balance of resource integration of the two parties varies throughout the process. Whereas Service logic argues that the supplier often only takes on the role of a value facilitator if he/she does not manage to get involved in the value creating processes (Grönroos 2008), the observations here show that in a business context also the supplier can be the main co-creator of value. This as been the case especially in the beginning of a value co-creation process when the selling party integrates operant resources in form of knowledge, in a dialogical interaction (Ballantyne 2006). Through the integration of operant resources, the customer does not need to integrate much own resources anymore. The knowledge further influences the processes of the customer, for example the design of certain products, but even if it is not at that point integrated into value creating processes, one can say that value is created by simply conveying competence to the customer. In the case of solution integration, some interactions showed increased resource efforts from the customer’s side. One could, however, still argue that through the company internal resources that the salesperson has to manage in order to provide a solution with a decreased complexity for the customer, he might still be a main co-creator also during the customer’s value creation process. Finally, in the case of forward integration, where the selling part takes over administrative or other work for the customer, he facilitates the customer’s value creation process throughout, and can thus stay a major player in the value co-creation. In the light of the above rationale, it is questionable that the supplier should only be considered as value facilitator in the context of business-to-business interaction, the supplier might take on a major role in the value co-creation.

The third rationale relates back to the interaction concept, which is considered as crucial for value co-creation. According to Service logic it is up to the supplier to manage the interaction with the customer in order to create value co-creation possibilities (Grönroos 2006). The observations show the different ways in which the salesperson tries to manage the interaction, which seems dependent on the customer's situation. In most situations, the customer has defined the own problem and states it explicitly, in order to still keep up the interaction and not only to react, some salespeople try to get involved in the co-creation of this problem by influencing the problem perception. Another strategy is to achieve more interaction in the solving of this problem, through brainstorming and knowledge sharing, trying to involve the customer. In other situations the customer states the problem together with the solution. Even though it would be easy in this occasion to not only react and fulfil the explicitly stated need, the salesperson tries to maintain the interaction, through the integration of more operand resources from the own company's side or through the forward integration of work responsibilities which both create some level of interdependence.

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