A Salesperson’s Value Creation Roles in Customer Interaction: 
An Empirical Study

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Competitive paper

ABSTRACT
Researchers have called for the need to investigate the salesperson’s role in customer value creation in the context of companies moving into service and solution businesses. Despite the indisputable importance of the sales function in the company’s customer relationships and in value creation for these customers, relevant literature has not yet answered the question of what salespeople actually do when they create value for the customer in business interactions. By answering this question, the paper aims to shed light on the individual salesperson’s role(s) in creating customer value. Based on an in-depth qualitative case study, shadowing salespeople of a full-service packaging provider during their work, four roles summarizing the different ways salespeople can create customer value have been identified: the advisor, the broker, the secretary and the friend. Theoretical contributions lie in the integration of an interaction perspective into selling, highlighting the disregarded complexity of industrial selling.

KEYWORDS
Industrial selling, Case study, Solution selling, Value creation, Interaction, Salesperson roles
INTRODUCTION

The importance of the sales function in the company’s customer relationships and in value creation for these customers is accepted and highlighted by academics and practitioners alike (e.g. Anderson, Kumar & Narus 2007, Haas, Snehota & Corsaro 2012, Rackham & DeVincentis 1999, Sheth & Sharma 2008, Terho, Haas, Eggert & Ulaga 2012). Along with manufacturing businesses moving into solution sales, the business marketing literature emphasizes the creation of customer value as necessary to build profitable relationships with satisfied and loyal customers (Anderson, Narus & Narayandas 2009, Grönroos 2011, Ulaga & Eggert 2006, Vargo & Lusch 2004). However, creating value for the customer, in this service-dominant context (Vargo & Lusch 2004), depends on the acquisition of in-depth customer knowledge and the ability to adapt and customize resources to the customer’s usage situation (Ballantyne 2006, Grönroos 2008, Sheth & Sharma 2008, Tuli, Kohli & Bharadwaj 2007). Hence, value creation is inherently dependent on the relational processes during the interaction that are on the individual-level between salesperson and customer. Against this background, researchers have called for research investigating the role of sales in value creation (Avlonitis & Panagopoulos 2010, Haas et al. 2012, Marshall & Michaels 2001).

The lack of academic investigation despite the announced relevance of the topic seems surprising, the reasons, however, might lie in the characteristics of the relevant literature. Firstly, the sales literature exploring individual salesperson behaviour embraces only aspects of customer value, such as customer satisfaction (Saxe & Weitz 1982, Spiro & Weitz 1990), information and advise (Liu, Leach & Crosby 2001, Rackham & DeVincentis 1999), profitable solutions (Sharma, Iyer & Evanschitzky 2008, Weitz & Bradford 1999), as well as a long-term relationship (Crosby, Evans & Cowles 1990, Jolson 1997). Additionally, these studies consider the salesperson behaviour as somewhat isolated from the interaction with the customer, not acknowledging the complex and interactive nature of sales (Plouffe, Williams & Wachner 2008, Williams & Plouffe 2007). Secondly, business marketing literature exploring customer value focuses mostly on the firm level rather than the individual salesperson level (Blocker, Cannon, Panagopoulos & Sager 2012). Also the literature investigating business interactions tends to miss out on the insights of value creation on the individual level (Brennan & Turnbull 2002, Ford 2011, Valla & Salle 1997). Recently, studies have discussed the importance of the salesperson’s role in value creation (Flaherty & Pappas 2009, Storbacka, Ryals, Davies & Nenonen 2009, Weitz & Bradford 1999) but research investigating what this role entails is very limited (e.g. Anderson et al. 2007, Haas et al. 2012, Rackham & DeVincentis 1999, Terho et al. 2012).

Hence, existing literature does not help us to understand what salespeople do in different interactions with different customers in order to create value. Not knowing about the individual-level aspects that matter for the business customer means that our understanding of value creation and value in business interactions is still limited. It is not only theoretically relevant to learn more about one of the most important topics in the marketing business research (Flint, Woodruff & Gardial 1997, Holbrook 1994, Slater 1997) but it is also from a practical perspective crucial for the company’s success. Finally, knowing how salespeople work in order to create customer value is essential for managers in order to support them in the best possible way.

Therefore, the objective of this paper is to shed light on the individual salesperson’s role(s) in creating customer value, by answering the question what salespeople do in their different interactions related to the customer. In order to achieve this, an individual-level interaction perspective is applied by investigating the actors, resources and activities in the

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1 From here onwards referred to as ‘he’.
salesperson’s interactions with customer contacts and internal colleagues (Håkansson & Johanson 1992). From a theoretical perspective, the paper aims to integrate the interaction perspective into selling, highlighting the disregarded complexity of B2B sales in a service-dominant context. Moreover it contributes with the revisiting of the individual-level of business interactions, which is necessary to understand any value creation between businesses. Finally, from a managerial perspective, the paper likes to provide insights of how a sales force can create value for customers, and therewith not only present the resources and activities used to create value but also give some empirical insights on customer value in B2B markets.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. First, the existing literature dealing with the salesperson’s role in B2B value creation is reviewed. Second, an interaction perspective is proposed to understand salesperson’s value creation. Third, the qualitative case study of the sales force in a manufacturing business that has moved into service and solution sales is presented. Through shadowing of salespeople’s working days, including interactions with customers, colleagues and third parties, different actors, resources and activities have been identified. Based on these four roles that describe the salesperson as value creator have been conceptualized.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Salesperson’s Value Creation

Traditionally, the selling has been considered to ‘to persuade customers that they need a supplier’s product, sales people in this role focus on achieving short-term results for their companies by using aggressive selling techniques to persuade customers to buy products’ (Weitz & Bradford 1999, 243).

In the course of the servitisation (Vandermerwe & Rada 1988) of business exchanges, the salesperson’s role has changed, away from being the communicator between the customer’s needs and the company’s products, to actively engaging in creating value for the customer using the company resources as support (Wotruba 1991).

The initial idea of the salesperson’s value creation is that he can add value for the customer by augmenting a product through services or by finding a solution to a product consisting of different products and services (Tanner, Fournier, Wise, Hollet & Poujol 2008). Hence, customer value is no longer considered to lie in the product itself (Levitt 1969, Miles 1961) but rather to be added by the salesperson by either increasing the customer’s benefits or decreasing the cost (Anderson et al. 2007, Rose 1991). More recently, the terminology of value added has been substituted by the concept of value selling, with the idea that the salesperson does not need a product or offering anymore but can create monetary value by making the customer’s business more efficient or effective (Anderson et al. 2007, Hanan 2004, Rackham & DeVincentis 1999). Selling value embraces apart from identifying the opportunities for monetary value creation, the drafting of value propositions, communicating the value and capturing it later on through a value-based price (Anderson et al. 2007, Kaario, Pennanen, Storbacke & Mäkinen 2004, Terho et al. 2012). In the same vein, consultative selling understands salespeople as advisors that integrate their knowledge in order to provide monetary value to customers through some form of improvement (Liu et al. 2001).

This notion of salesperson’s value creation that is mostly discussed in the sales practice literature focuses solely on the monetary aspect of customer value that is achieved either by increased benefits or decreased costs. The business marketing literature on customer value indicates however that there are other value dimensions than money (Khalifa 2004,
Ulaga 2001, Ulaga & Eggert 2005). Even though many dimensions could be categorized under the benefits or cost side and therefore translated in monetary value, aspects such as knowledge and personal interaction (Ulaga 2003) promise value aspects that cannot only be broken down to money. Whereas the value literature has not found much interest in the salesperson’s role, the sales literature has not gone further into elaborating customer value. The different sales approaches, such as adaptive selling (Franke & Park 2006, Spiro & Weitz 1990), customer-oriented selling (Homburg, Müller & Klarmann 2011, Saxe & Weitz 1982, Schwepker Jr. 2003) and agility selling (Jones, Dixon, Chonko & Cannon 2005) have all taken the starting point in salesperson’s behaviour in relation to his performance and only touched on value-related constructs, such as customer satisfaction (Terho et al. 2012).

Hence, the salesperson’s role in creating customer value has only been considered under the monetary aspect of value. The salesperson’s as relationship manager has also attracted much discussion, however rather in relation to changing work responsibilities. Even though these discussions have more implications for the salesperson’s role in the company, for example the strategic role of the salesperson (Ingram, LaForge & Leigh 2002, Leigh & Marshall 2001, Storbacka et al. 2009, Weitz & Bradford 1999), it gives some indications on how salespeople are supposed to create customer value.

The notion of a relationship manager that coordinates all linkages of a company’s relationship with a major customer has already been announced many years ago (Ford 1980). It has however been considered as somewhat separate from the ‘normal’ selling, requiring a higher position or status in the company, such as key or strategic account manager (Guenzi, Pardo & Georges 2007, McDonald, Millman & Rogers 1997, Ryals & McDonald 2008). In parallel, the sales literature has discussed relationship selling as new form of selling evolving from transactional selling. These relational selling behaviours (Wotruba 1996) have been described as focused on personalization and empathy (Jolson 1997), characterized by interaction intensity, cooperative intentions and mutual disclosure (Boles, Brashear, Bellenger & Barksdale 2000), communication and conflict handling (Crosby et al. 1990) as well as the demonstration of competence and use of low-pressure selling (Kennedy, Ferrell & LeClair 2000). Recently, the notion of the ‘normal’ salesperson as relationship manager, independent of the job position becomes more prevalent (Davies, Ryals & Holt 2010). Managing relationships as a way to create value for the customer is based on the idea of relationship value that is the value created through the interrelated activities of the buyer and supplier (Möller & Törrönen 2003). Relationship value does not only consider the benefit and cost trade-off but also embraces less tangible values such as trust (Eggert, Ulaga & Schultz 2006, Häkansson 1982, Lindgreen & Wynstra 2005, Möller 2006). Whereas the notion of the relationship manager is more open towards value dimensions beyond the monetary one, for example trust, there is very little knowledge on what the individual salesperson in this role actually does in the interaction with the customer and with internal colleagues.

Overall, this review aims to show that the content of the salesperson’s role in creating value for the customer is still unclear. This is linked to the lack of understanding of the customer value dimensions in the industrial context (Ulaga & Eggert 2005). One reason for why this question has not been answered within the sales research (Avlonitis & Panagopoulos 2010, Marshall & Michaels 2001) might be the minimal qualitative research efforts within the sales literature (Marshall & Michaels 2001, Plouffe et al. 2008, Williams & Plouffe 2007). This paper uses a qualitative approach to understand the salespeople’s role in customer value creation. It avoids the problem of having a fix preconception of possible customer value dimensions by simply asking what is happening in the different salesperson interactions.

An Interaction Perspective on Selling
The notion that the salesperson’s value creation can be understood by looking at his different interactions is based on two assumptions. The first one is in line with most research streams, stating that value is created in or through the interaction and is not inherent in the product or offering (Ballantyne & Varey 2006, Ford 2011, Grönroos & Ravald 2011, Håkansson & Johanson 1992, Lusch 2006, Ravald & Grönroos 1996). The second assumption is that the inherent purpose of a sales interaction is to create value. Even though the customer needs to perceive value in order for value to actually be created, one could argue that sales interactions are intended to create value, with the customer perceived value as success measure. Another way of arguing is to say that

‘all episodes of business interaction of whatever form (…) will have a particular meaning for all those involved and may contribute more or less to coping with particular problem’ (Ford 2011, 235) and therewith create value.

Hence, investigating the salesperson’s interactions is a way to understand value creation. This leaves us with the necessity to understand interactions. The actor, resource and activities (A-R-A) model (Håkansson & Johanson 1992) provides a conceptualization of interaction, that allows to apply the relational and interactive lens to selling that has been called for and takes interaction beyond the pure communication or negotiation (Håkansson & Snehota 1995).

‘Business interaction and exchange is not restricted to communication or negotiation: It is a substantive process that leads to the modification or transformation of the activities and resources of the actors and of the actors themselves’.

Even though the A-R-A model stems from the IMP tradition that considers both or any actor in an interaction equally (Håkansson 1982, IMPGroup 1982), it still allows to take one side’s perspective, in this case the salesperson, as the focal actor in different interactions with other actors, resources and activities. The same counts for value, as both parties will perceive some value from the interaction, the focus defined by the research question is however on customer value. Even though the A-R-A model is usually used for company-level interactions within a network context, it is equally important to conceptualize individual-level interactions of the salesperson as focal actor in a network of different actors such as internal colleagues, customers and third party actors. Despite the fact that the IMP tradition does not use the terminology of value or value creation, it is implied in the concept of interaction (Ford 2011) since resources are brought together through the activities, confronted and combined in order to create value (Håkansson & Waluszewski 2002).

The A-R-A model provides the possibility to answer the question of what salespeople are doing when they create value in interaction. It also enables the researcher to be open to different aspects of value, beyond the monetary one, as long as it is considered as inherent in the interaction or relationship rather than the product or offering. Finally, it provides the possibility to adopt an interactive perspective on industrial selling which is overdue considering the extensive discussions on value created in the interaction with the customer.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The research design of this study, a single case study (Eisenhardt 1989, Yin 2003), enables to grasp the depths and complexity of individual salespeople in their context with customers and within the own company. The case study design is one of the most popular formats within industrial marketing research as it allows to study real-life situations, or interactions, and to refer back to previous findings or theoretical assumptions. What makes case-study research attractive, also for this study, is the richness of material that it provides, that is at the same
time the figurehead of the case study quality (Beverland & Lindgreen 2010) and the requirement for a good story (Dyer & Wilkins 1991, Eisenhardt 1991).

Case Background
The case is the sales force of SCA Packaging, the (paper) packaging business unit of the Svenska Cellulosa Aktiebolaget\(^2\) that is the second largest packaging provider in Europe and fulfills the criteria of being critical, typical and longitudinal (Yin 2003). The paper packaging industry is fragmented, competitive industry with a few international payers and many smaller local manufacturers. With the production of paper packaging, of mainly corrugated conventional board (70%), and only a smaller part in the high-end consumer packaging (18%), SCAP came under pressure of decreasing margins and established their vision of the full-service provider in the year 2007. SCAP has a very decentralized structure with a European head quarters (HQ) and five autonomous regions (Germany/Switzerland, Nordic, West, South & Central Europe) that each consist of different country management.

The study has been conducted longitudinally with varying intensity during the years 2010 and 2011. It has focused on two countries Germany and Austria (region Central Europe) in order to have some variety in structure, leadership and market conditions. Whereas Germany, because of its market size is divided into 5 smaller sales regions that consist of about 10-15 salespeople reporting to one area sales manager and a country sales manager at the top, Austria has the same structure as one of those regions with about 10 salespeople and one sales manager. Germany has 19 production plants and Austria two but they work together with the German and Hungarian plants that are geographically close or with third party suppliers. Each of the plants has a product development center with technical designers for the specific plant and an internal sales force. As part of the change, the sales force that was initially employed by the different plants has been centralized into a sales organization and encouraged to use the different production possibilities of any plant.

Other structural changes has been the specialization of the different plants, with regards to different packaging sizes, gluing, prints as well as the creation of different experts positions in order to support salespeople with regards to packaging machines, displays, multi-material solutions and dangerous goods packaging. Apart from the structural changes many initiatives have been taken specifically within the sales organization. The sales force has received trainings since 2009 in value selling and cross selling with the focus on developing the notion for creating value for the customer and educating the salesperson on the wide product portfolio. Moreover, software has been introduced that serves as planning but also as feedback tool between salespeople and the company, including customer data and description of certain projects with customers.

Data Collection
For about two months, spread over one year, the author shadowed thirteen salespeople in their daily work, in their interactions with customers and third parties, their preparations and follow up work as well as the work internally with colleagues and their managers. Shadowing, hence following a research subject within its context (Czarniawska & Czarniawska-Joerges 2007), provides a good possibility to get insights on what the salesperson does, what resources he uses and who he interacts with. It would be very difficult to capture these things in interviews, as it requires the salesperson to remember everything and to talk about things that are usual job routines. By following the salesperson throughout the day, all different interactions could be captured, so that preparations and follow up of

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\(^2\) This information refers to the time the study has been conducted. Recently (01.2012), SCAP has been acquired by DS Smith, a British packaging company.
customer meetings can be included and interactions can be seen in context. In addition to the observations, the salesperson’s running commentary regarding events or actions, serves to explain the observations and helps to see them in relation to past and future happenings. Finally, each of the thirteen salespeople have been asked more targeted questions throughout the day (adding up to approximately one hour) aiming to understand the salesperson’s background, the perception of his work and of customer value (see appendix I for interview and observation guide).

Following the principles of theoretical sampling (Eisenhardt 1989, Glaser & Strauss 1967) salespeople have been selected with different backgrounds and responsibilities (account, key account, strategic account) in order to achieve maximum variation and contrast (Miles & Huberman 1994) (see appendix II for salesperson background). The material of one salesperson has been gathered during three days and consists of about 10 phone calls with customers, internal colleagues or salesperson colleagues, 2-4 meetings with internal colleagues and anywhere between 4-8 customer meetings. In addition, contextual knowledge has been gathered through 10 interviews with managers on corporate, country and regional level, through document studies on the industry and company and finally in two sales meetings and a sales training.

Analysis
The insights from shadowing and interviews have been either recorded and transcribed or written down as field notes. Analysis has started early in the process in an iteration process between theory and empirical findings. The analysis consists of three steps of coding. During the first step, the ‘open coding’ process (Strauss & Corbin 1990) the salesperson’s accounts are read separately and activities, resources and actors used in interaction with the customer as well as with the internal colleagues or other interactions are collected and divided into overall categories. In the second steps, similarities and differences between the use of activities and resources by the salespeople have been gathered. In the final stage, the ‘selective coding’ (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) different themes have been discovered across the activities, resources and actors that form the four salesperson roles presented in the following.

The collection of material, the writing-up of the cases (Miles & Huberman 1994) and the analysis have been overlapping and repeated at different points in time. Feedback loops with the practitioners and the combination of interviews and shadowing aimed to achieve correctness (Lincoln & Guba 1985) and credibility (Glaser & Strauss 1967). The empirical findings are only based on one in-depth case study; therefore the findings cannot be statistically generalized. Nevertheless, analytical generalization can be drawn from a small number of cases (Yin, 2009).

FINDINGS
Based on the salesperson’s interactions, entailing different actors, resources and activities, four roles have been identified that describe the ways in which the salesperson tries to help and support the customer in his or her work.

The Advisor
In many interactions between the salesperson and the customer, the salesperson engages with the customer in a technical discussion on packaging possibilities. Depending on the customer’s interests and knowledge, some dialogues appear like brainstorm sessions in which many creative ideas and technical details are discussed, in others, the salesperson explains the customer contact what he or she wants to understand in the design of a packaging. And finally in some situations the customer simply asks the salesperson for an advise on what to
do. In all these interactions the salesperson seems to be the expert and the customer seems to appreciate the salesperson’s help as advisor in their business problems.

The following excerpt exemplifies one of those meetings that embrace rather technically detailed, creative brainstorm discussions that do not seem to follow the schema of a stereotypical sales meeting. This meeting between Adam and the marketing manager of one of his customers takes about an hour. The marketing manager comes to the meeting with a little paper model of a display idea and presents directly, without any small talk, his idea and asks Adam if he thinks that this idea would be possible to design.

Adam: 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.
Marketing Manager: Ok, the material would need to be thinner to bend the stairs and then everything would become instable?
A: Before we had this display figure as support in the back so that it is stable, if you now want to have it next to it, then the display would bend, I think that is tricky.
(…)
MM: And how would it then look like with the support in the back if we need it for the round shape?
A: Ok, so if we could say we do the boxes in this format, then we have to see how round we can make this part technically. Here we cover up two third of the supporting back, so we could construct an arrest and only build this part with a support in the back, then we could also use an E-wave [thin type of corrugated material].
MM: That sounds good that would also have the advantage that one could even stand behind the display. I start liking the idea. (…)

These situations differ mostly depending on how far the customer is in the process of identifying and solving the own problem. Often the customer already knows the problem or has an idea for a packaging and needs help with the realization of this idea, in other situations, the customer needs more help in the actual identification of the causes of the problem. It seems mostly a matter of how much time and interest the customer has and how important the product is for the own business, often however the customer does not have the necessary knowledge to find an own solution. Hence, much of the salesperson’s efforts in the interaction with the customer aim to share necessary product and technical knowledge with the customer. Some salespeople say that it requires more time and effort from the salesperson if the contact person does not know much about packaging.

In some situations the salesperson shares the necessary knowledge with the customer without that it is directly related to a problem. Marcus for example meets a new contact that changed positions and became responsible for product development and packaging. Since he has no idea about corrugated packing he asked Marcus to come by and explain him the basics. Marcus says that it is helpful to speak ‘one language’ and that he knows it pays off next time when the customer needs help or has a new project:
‘There is no specific subject for the meeting, it is just about creating a good atmosphere, and it is of course good if the developer knows a lot, because then you can talk very different about projects since you talk the same language.’

Often the interactions in which the salesperson is not only the expert in the own field but also the advisor for the customer are with existing customers since the salesperson needs a considerable amount of customer specific knowledge in order to help. The relationship enables them to get the access to the important knowledge. Those salespeople that have a good relationship with their customers walk around in the company, can see the production
processes, know many different people and get the information that they need in order to understand potential problems and hence to improve the customer’s business. Interestingly, it is not only the general knowledge on the customer’s goals and processes but also the details of the different individual contacts that salespeople consider as very important. As David says:

‘If you do not know what these people affect, then you will never understand what happens in a year or half from now in a company, and if you are not there you will also not notice. (…) If the others open up towards you, you get a lot of information about their motives.’

The salesperson’s advisor role however does not end in the interaction with the customer but is also crucial in different forms in the internal interaction. Even though the salesperson is mostly autonomous in the interaction with the customer, he is not independent from the own company resources. For anything that goes beyond the conversation with the customer, the salesperson needs to rely on the internal colleagues. This requires the salesperson not only to use and rely on their knowledge, but also to share knowledge with them. Hence, the salesperson also has an internal role as advisor by helping the internal colleagues, such as designers and internal sales, to achieve the right outcome for the customer.

Also this internal interaction can take many different forms, some salespeople develop their own ideas during and after the meeting with the customer and meet the designer to communicate what the solution should be. The reason is that the salespeople are of the opinion that they know the customer better and the experience of working with the customer is not easily transferable to the internal colleagues. As David explains:

‘Often I do not have the idea the moment I leave the customer, but then I sit at home, I need to have a clear idea on what I want. If I do not know that before I forward it to the plant, the outcome will not be successful.’

Other salespeople try to transfer this customer knowledge to the designers since they simply do not consider that it belongs to their job. For others the involvement is also a means to motivate their internal colleagues and to get the internal support. They want the internal colleagues to better understand the customer and the challenges that the salesperson faces and therefore share their customer information and experience with them. Marcus explains:

‘If they get to know everything we can talk the same language. If you involve them, then they also see it as their baby and are not so resistant to new things. They see it with different eyes.’

The Broker

‘They don’t know what they want. The product developer is not in line with marketing and if you manage to bring them together, then the production manager is against it. We got a briefing when everything started, upon which I made the decision to take two people from the design centre with different product focus on board. We had four weeks to think about it, we made scribbles and involved an agency. (…) When we met again, they just said, “Well it all looks really good, but it does not solve our problem”. After I clarified the problem that we discussed last time, they said, “Yes that was all right back then, but now things are different”.

David talks about a display design project that has been running for over a year and the customer has not committed to any purchase yet. He thinks that the main challenge is to get the different customer internal parties to agree on one design. Besides being the boundary spanner between the customer company and the own company, salespeople often need to communicate with the different contacts within the customer company. The salesperson then has the job of a project manager, communicating between the different stakeholders and trying to align the different interests in order to push the project forward.
For example, Christian is not only the internal communicator between the departments, but he is also responsible for driving the projects forward internally by aligning all opinions and changes, and visiting the parties in the right order. In his work with the customer, a major confectionary business, he discusses every display with the advertising agency, the marketing department and with the packaging and handling department separately. In each interaction, the parties ask what the other party has commented with regards to the project development and possible changes. In these cases the salesperson helps the customer to bring along marketing or display projects, and the customers contacts do not need to invest the time and effort into managing their own internal politics.

In many interactions the salesperson also takes on the work of the broker in the more traditional sense of a boundary spanner that is to connect and integrate the customer’s needs and requirements with the company’s resources. Most salespeople have always had the ambition to help the customer with everything they could and often they use their network to coordinate those things that the own company cannot help them with. Marcus explains:

‘If he needs containers, I need to get them, or tape or anything. (…) I always have to see where I get it from, so it is more work. But these are the customer relationships that we want, that they can get everything from one hand.’

In the salesperson’s broker role internally, he needs to advocate the customer’s interests. Prices are a typical reason for major friction, but also for other reasons such as complaints or fast delivery the salesperson needs to defend and represent the customer in front of the internal colleagues. Many salespeople consider this internal selling as more challenging than the customer interaction. Often it is the difference in attitude towards the customer why salespeople feel they have to convince the internal colleagues of the importance of the customer. George says:

‘I always fight against these fronts even if I get a bloody nose, over and over again. I do it for me and my customers.’

The Secretary

‘It is not because they like me so much, but because they know that I do the work for them. That is something you need to do with a lot of discipline, they rely on that. You cannot say if not today then tomorrow.’

George’s comment exemplifies the impression gained from many salesperson customer interactions, that is that the salesperson often takes on small favours or parts of the customer’s work. Knowing that the company services, such as JIT delivery or storage become more common for every supplier, salespeople try to make a difference with the individual contact through these small favours and personal services. Generally, the impression is that the salesperson wants to help the customer by decreasing his or her workload and relax their increasing time constraints.

One example is David who takes on the careful reporting of every meeting with his customer. The customer uses his reports for their internal reporting. In several interactions, the customer contacts had the print out of David’s meeting report and used it to refer back to certain issues. David comments:

‘The least work you create for them the happier they are. Corrugated paper is only one part of their concept: they have primary and secondary packaging and all the logistic areas. If you manage to take on one product group then they are happy, humans are naturally lazy. They want someone that takes some of their workload and that they can rely on.’

There are many of these examples where the salesperson tries to make the customer’s life easier in ways that are not necessarily considered part of their job, or at least not expected from them. Another example is the postman job of driving the samples to the customer...
instead of letting them send by post. The reason is that the salesperson considers this to save time for the customer who does not need to deal with the incoming goods department and who gets to hear the different changes and issues around the packaging directly.

Hence, there are many such examples where the salesperson goes beyond the typical work responsibilities and takes on extra work in order to differentiate. However, often enough the salespeople use their own time. As Adam explains:

‘A customer gets the bum cleaned, they get the prices renewed, they get samples for free, they get their cake for birthday and their Christmas present. Everyone tries hard, but what every salesperson is lacking is time. So if you give salespeople the time to take care of the customer then you already achieved a great deal. The most important for the customer is time.’

The Friend

‘If the customer needs you, you drive there. Sometimes you cannot think too much about whether it is useful or not, sure you should not mess with the time, but you need the customer closeness.’

Boris points at an aspect that is very evident in most of the interactions that is the salesperson’s availability and flexibility to the customer. The role of the friend here describes two aspects, that are firstly, the salesperson is always there and helps when the customer has a problem, and the second is the personal dedication that the salesperson has for the customer. The salespeople say that through the relationship with the customer they often feel that the latter expects more that they feel more committed towards the customer. As Jacob says:

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

Adam said that his customers sometimes call him at ten in the evening or on a Sunday at eight in the morning and tell him that they sit at the computer and have a picture of a display construction where they want to know if it could work out. David also states that his work requires a lot of discipline,

‘Mr. Hautz from the technical department starts at six thirty, Marketing starts at ten, some are finished at five, others at ten 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, my son and my wife got used to it.’

Flexibility seems to become more important since the customer needs to be able to react more flexible to the own customers and changes in the environment or market. Not only do the salespeople plan their day more flexible, with only some definite appointments, which enables them to be available for the customer whenever it is necessary, but also their private time has to comply with the customer.

As mentioned before in order to help the customer in the best possible way, the salesperson is dependent on the internal colleagues and therefore also the relationship to the internal colleagues appears very important in the different salesperson interactions. Most salespeople are aware of the internal colleagues’ importance and try to establish a good working relationship with them, even more so because there is no formal hierarchy in the relationship with internal colleagues. Even though the salesperson needs to ask the internal colleagues for help and delegate tasks, he does not have the authority to tell them what to do. The salespeople often try to build up this relationship through frequent face-to-face contact. Since by nature the salespeople spend most of the time on the street or at the customer, and the salesperson is usually not necessarily geographically close to the plants, it is usually an
extra effort to meet the internal colleagues in person, instead of calling, mailing and documenting. Adam explains why he considers it as so important:

‘I will continue driving to the plant, talk to the people, because if everything gets automated and forced into documents so that we have more time to do even more documents, then a lot of the motivation will get lost.’

DISCUSSION

The presentation of the empirical material has shown that the salesperson’s activities during and outside the different sales interactions are versatile and can therefore not be described by one role. The analysis has identified four roles that embrace the different resources, activities and actors that are involved in the salesperson’s intention to create value for the customer. These different roles evolve mainly around a few distinct resources, and the correspondent activities, that seem to have great importance for the salesperson in helping their customer contacts in their day-to-day work situations (see table I for an overview). These resources are knowledge, network (or relationships), time, labour and dedication.

Knowledge has been an important and all-present resource in the salesperson’s interactions internally or externally. The ways in which the salesperson uses knowledge differs, firstly because of the difference in the resource itself. The knowledge can be either company or salesperson knowledge and it can be tacit or explicit knowledge (Cook & Brown 1999, Polanyi 1983) as well as cover different areas, such as technical, creative, commercial and social. Whereas in some situations the salesperson shares explicit knowledge with the customer in order to provide the basic technical knowledge, other interactions equal a learning dialogue (Ballantyne 2004) in which salesperson and customer contact brainstorm about ideas and problem solving. Secondly, not every customer seems to value the acquisition of knowledge; especially since paper packaging is often only a small part of the customer’s product. In this case, the customer seems to value the ability to rely on the advise from the salesperson as an expert. Hence, even though the general tendency seems to be that industrial customers become more knowledgeable it depends on the strategic importance of the supplier or the products for the customer. Knowledge has been discussed before as an important requirement for salespeople to be able to create value, however mostly as a means to find opportunities for creating monetary value (Anderson et al. 2007, Kaario et al. 2004, Rackham & DeVincentis 1999). The analysis has shown, that not only knowledge in form of the outcome, incorporated in a solution or solved problem, is valuable for the customer but also the knowledge itself and the related learning. One of the reasons seems to be that it prepares the customer contact for the work internally, for example in presenting projects or creating product designs, but also for the work with suppliers where they can better communicate their ideas and contribute.

The network has been mentioned before as important for managing a customer relationship (Davies et al. 2010, Moncrief & Marshall 2005). It is however often the network at the customer that is emphasized, mostly because it is important to have different contacts at a customer in case some contacts leave the company. Another reason for the salesperson to have different contacts at the customer is the breadth of knowledge that the salesperson needs in order to improve the customer’s business (Anderson et al. 2007, Kaario et al. 2004). Hence, when improving the integration of an offering into the customer’s business, the salesperson needs to have access to production managers and in order to help with new product designs he needs to be in touch with marketing managers. New, however, is the idea that in many situations the salesperson’s network saves the customer time and effort to deal with the internal communication. Once, the salesperson takes on a project, he often manages the entire
project within the customer company until finalization, that is for example a product launch. Besides saving the customer the efforts and time to coordinate projects internally, the salesperson often coordinates and organizes all other resources or contacts that his individual contact needs. Apart from the network within the customer company, the network that the salesperson builds within the own company but also within the industry or related industries seems to have great importance. Along with delivering services and solutions instead of products, salespeople need to be more knowledgeable and deal with problems that might not directly relate to their expertise. Hence, a network of experts in different fields is a valuable resource for a salesperson to have in order to create value for the customer.

Finally, time, labour and dedication seem to enable the salesperson to differentiate in front of the customer, since most aspects that a company sees as creating value, for example just in time delivery and quality, are taken for granted by customers. The fact that salespeople dedicate their private time for the extra availability and spend hours of their already long working week in order to take on some extra work for the customer shows that it seems to be appreciated by the customer. One reason is certainly that it saves the customer time and resources when the salesperson takes on small administrative tasks or extra favours as shown in the analysis. A reason for why the salespeople dedicate their private time and try to be flexible is because they want to give the customer the feeling that they are always ‘there’ when they need them. In that case the customer can rely on the salesperson not leaving them alone when they face trouble. The other, less obvious, aspect is that salespeople know the customer appreciates their time, hence they see time as a resource they can use to show the customer’s importance for the company, to give them the feeling of ‘being valued’.
### Table I: Salesperson’s Roles in Creating Customer Value

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actors in contact with salesperson</th>
<th>Advisor</th>
<th>Broker</th>
<th>Secretary</th>
<th>Friend</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Customer contacts</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Designer/Developer</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Third parties</td>
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<tr>
<td>Resources used by salesperson</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Explicit knowledge</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Tacit knowledge/experience</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Knowledge network</td>
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<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Customer relationship</td>
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<tr>
<td>Activities conducted by salesperson</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Identify the problem</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Engage in problem solving dialogue</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Educate customer</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Share customer knowledge internally</td>
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<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Integrate ideas/solutions internally</td>
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<tr>
<td>Customer value created by the salesperson</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Knowledge</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Advise</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Saved effort and time in internal coordination and access to resources</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Saved time and efforts</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Accessibility</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Reliability</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Feeling of being valued</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY**

This study originated in the surprise that sales research has not paid much attention to how salespeople try to create value when they cannot rely on the product or offering anymore as a consequence of the service shift (Avlonitis & Panagopoulos 2010, Sharma 2007, Sheth & Sharma 2008). The review of the existing literature on the salesperson’s role in creating customer value fuels the thought that there must be other ways for a salesperson to create value in the interaction with the customer than monetary improvements. The fact that we do not know about these ways leaves us with the impression that the theoretical understanding of value and value creation in business markets is still unsatisfactory. This paper has looked at industrial selling with an interaction perspective and therewith aimed to address two theoretical shortcomings that should enrich this understanding.

Firstly, industrial selling is interactive. Even though, hardly anyone would deny this, a strong impression from the sales literature is that most researchers do not seem to consider this fact in their research (Plouffe, Sridharan & Barclay 2010, Plouffe et al. 2008). The best example is the rarely discussed concept of customer value (Haas et al. 2012, Terho et al. 2012). Salesperson behaviour is mostly discussed under the aspect of company value, which is sales performance, measured objectively by quota or evaluated by managers or through
self-evaluation. It is the practitioner’s literature, addressing the creation of monetary value for
the customer, which still credits most complexity to the sales job. Looking at selling as an
interaction consisting of at least two individuals, different resources and activities encourages
the researcher to take both individuals equally into account. Moreover, an individual’s
activities and use of resources are somewhat dependent on the other individual’s activities
and use of resources. This means that the salesperson’s possibilities of creating value evolve
in the interaction with the customer. Hence, from the interactive perspective any sequential
sales process models on creating customer value are redundant.

Secondly, value creation happens in the individual level interaction. This does not
appear to be a radical statement either. However, while value creation is mostly discussed as
an interactive phenomena (Grönroos 2006, Grönroos 2008, Vargo & Lusch 2004), value
creation as well as interaction in the business marketing literature is mostly discussed on a
system level rather than an individual one (Brennan & Turnbull 2002, Ford 2011, Valla &
Salle 1997). The study elaborates and substantiates the role of the individual as value creator.
The identified crucial resources, knowledge, network, time, labour and dedication are the
salesperson’s individual resources and so are most of the customer values distinct for the
individual level, such as knowledge or advise, decreased workload and the feeling of being
valued. Looking at the actors, activities and resources in company-level interactions misses
out on the individual-level, social aspects. The paper however has tried to convince the reader
that these are the more crucial ones for value creation in interaction, in fact it seems that the
only meaningful way to research a concept as complex and context-dependent as value is the
individual level. Therewith, the paper hopes to encourage the revisiting of the individual level
of interactions that has become forgotten in the increasing desire to abstract on company and
network level.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

From a practical perspective, the roles including the different resources and activities,
provide managers of manufacturing companies, moving into services and solutions, insights
into what salespeople do and what resources they need in order to create value for their
customers. The study shows that there are evidently other ways than monetary improvement
and therefore more value dimensions than money.

As already indicated by some researchers, the tacit knowledge in the field in form of
work experience becomes very important when moving into solutions or more complex
products (Darr 2006). This knowledge enables the salespeople to be more interactive, to
directly relate to the customer’s problems and react to them. Hence, working experience in
the specific field, entailing the technical knowledge, should gain more importance over the
typical salesperson’s soft skills and characteristics. The profession of the salesperson might
be less suitable for an entry position as it requires experience and knowledge from many
different areas of the business. All this supports the necessity to change the profession’s
image since company’s do not get the necessary qualified people for the job (Avlonitis &
Panagopoulos 2010).

Secondly, it seems that doing the little bit extra work to help the customer with his or
her daily work and being flexible enough when the customer has urgent problems is
appreciated by the individual customer contacts. Hence, the salesperson should have the
possibility to plan the days flexible and encouraged to have less customer visits per day, since
that is what enables them to have the time and energy to fully support the customer. Generally,
a company that wants its sales force to create value for the customer, knowing that the
customer would appreciate it appropriately, needs to have a longer-term perspective with
its salespeople. That means that they need to provide them freedom to plan their days, as well as time for learning by doing, gaining experience in the field and building a network and relationships.

Finally, the study shows that the salesperson’s internal interactions are just as important as the customer interactions in order to create value for the customer. This highlights the importance of the salesperson-company interfaces and should draw the manager’s attention to the potential conflict of interests, difference in expertise and in motivations that need to be managed.

FUTURE RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES

As with every study design, also this one has limitations of which some offer fruitful avenues for future research. Even though the entering of services is similar within manufacturing companies, this is a case study of one industry and similar in-depth studies of the sales force in other companies entering the service-dominant context could strengthen or enrich the present sales roles. Generally, a qualitative study uncovers new phenomena that open up the possibility for further analysis. Hence, these salesperson roles could provide possibilities for further qualitative or quantitative research. Rather than trying to operationalize value and ask customers about perceptions, one potential opportunity could be to conduct a similar study following the customer in the work with different vendors in order to find out from the customer’s perspective on value-in-practice. Finally, looking at selling as a value creating function, and at the ways salespeople use resources, the variety of different value dimensions are an interesting endeavour for future research. Customer value is a popular concept in theoretical discussions and conceptualizations, empirically however it is still poorly researched (Ulaga & Eggert 2005).
REFERENCES


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APPENDIX I
Interview and Observation Guide

Salesperson

Observations & Salespeople’s account on his work

Background:
- How long have you worked in SCA?
- How have you worked in the industry?
- Have you worked in other professions?
- What is your typical customer?

About his work:
- What has changed the most in the sales job throughout the last years?
- What is important for you in your sales interaction?
- What challenges are you facing in the day-to-day work life?
- What is your trick to get access to the customer and his information?
- How do you make sure that the work is continued successfully when it forwarded internally?
- How much/What role does a personal relationship play in the customer interaction?
- How can you achieve a better price? Examples? What does it depend upon?

On Value:
- What is customer value for you?
- What is your role in creating the customer value?
- What customer expectations do you often encounter?
- How do you communicate the value to the customer?
- Under which circumstances appreciate the customer this value?
- Can you remember situations where you created value but the customer did not perceive so? Or the other way around?
- Situations where the value perception of the customer has changed? For what reason?

Company

Observations of individuals, resources and activities in the salesperson’s internal interactions

Salesperson’s account

- How can SCA contribute to your work for the customer?
- How are you supported in getting a better price from the customer?
- Which of the SCA provided tools help you in doing your work well?

Customer

Observations of individuals, resources and activities in the salesperson’s customer interactions

Observations of customer’s use of resources and activities

Salesperson’s account on relationship with customer
### APPENDIX II

**Background of Salespeople**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Salesperson</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Background</th>
<th>Research</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Adam        | Key account manager for two major German FMCG companies (2 year & ½ year relationships) | • SCAP since 2002
• 20 years in paper packaging industry
• Internal sales
• Project management
• External sales (3 years) | Germany, Region South-East (3 days) |
| Boris       | Account manager (geographic region, FMCGs) | • SCAP since 2002
• 25 years in paper packaging industry
• Internal sales
• Designer
• External sales (10 years) | Germany, Region North (2 days) |
| Christian   | Strategic account manager for four major German FMCGs (5-8 year relationships) | • SCAP since 2002
• 25 years in paper packaging industry
• Plant manager
• External sales (25 years) | Germany, region independent (2 days) |
| David       | Strategic customer for one global FMCG (8 year relationship) | • SCAP since 2002
• 18 years in paper packaging industry
• Internal sales
• Production
• External sales (13 years) | Germany, region independent (2 days) |
| Edward      | Account manager (geographic region, food & manufacturing industries) | • 2 years SCAP
• Packaging mechanic
• Designer
• External sales (10 years) | Germany, Region North (4 days) |
| Fred        | Account manager (geographical region, food & manufacturing industries) | • 4 years SCAP
• External sales in paper packaging (15 years) | Germany, Region North (3 days) |
| Oscar       | Account manager (geographic region, food & manufacturing industries) | • SCAP since 1993
• 30 years in paper packaging industry
• External sales | Germany, Region South-East (2 days) |
| George      | Key Account (fruit & vegetable) | • 10 years in SCAP
• 20 years paper packaging industry
• Purchasing
• Internal sales
• External sales (15 years) | Germany, Region North (3 days) |
| Hans        | Key Account (international accounts, manufacturing industries) | • SCAP since 1993
• 25 years in paper packaging industry
• Internal sales
• External sales (15 years) | Germany, Region South-East (3 days) |
| Jacob       | Account Manager | • 12 years in SCAP | Germany, |

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3 Acquisition of Stabernack by SCAP taking over most employees.
4 Acquisition of Zewawell by SCAP taking over most employees.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Geographic Region</th>
<th>Food Industry</th>
<th>Karl</th>
<th>Marcus</th>
<th>Nils</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>22 years paper packaging industry</td>
<td>22 years paper packaging industry</td>
<td>SCAP since 2006&lt;sup&gt;5&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>SCAP since 2006</td>
<td>4 months SCAP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External sales (32 years)</td>
<td>Purchasing</td>
<td>Designer</td>
<td>External sales (20 years)</td>
<td>Printing preparations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Region North (3 days)</td>
<td>External sales (20 years)</td>
<td>Austria (2 days)</td>
<td>Austria (3 days)</td>
<td>Austria (2 days)</td>
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<tr>
<td>25 years in paper packaging industry</td>
<td>10 years paper packaging industry</td>
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<tr>
<td>Karl Key Account Manager (FMCG)</td>
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</table>

<sup>5</sup> Acquisition of Welpa by SCAP taking over most employees.