VALUE-BASED SALES PROCESS ADAPTATION: A RELATIONSHIP MARKETING APPROACH

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to develop a framework for strategic value-based adaptation of the seller's sales process to match the buyer's buying process in a business context. The study is a qualitative one applying a retrospective case study, where the main sources of information are in-depth semi-structured interviews with key informants representing the counterparts at the seller and the buyer. The framework that emerges, in which linking mindset with strategy and means forms a central aspect, includes three layers: purchasing portfolio, seller-buyer relationship orientation, and strategic sales process adaptation. The study fills three research gaps: linking the relationship orientation mindset with adaptation as strategy; extending adaptation in sales from adaptation in selling to strategic adaptation of the sales process; and extending adaptation to include the facilitation of adaptation. Managerial implications demonstrated include how sellers through strategic sales process adaptation can avoid the 'trap' of ad-hoc adaptation, improve resource allocation, shorten the sales cycle, and strengthen the projected seller-buyer relationship. Although previous research has recognized adaptation as a central aspect in relationships, the adaptation of the sales process to the buying process has not received attention. This study focuses on adaptation of the sales process to strategically match it to the buyer's mindset and buying process.

Paper type Research paper

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INTRODUCTION

The focus of the selling process in sales and sales management has traditionally been on transactional selling. Along with the paradigmatic shift in marketing from transaction orientation to relationship orientation and the resulting change of focus from products and exchange to service and relationships that are well recognized in marketing (e.g. Grönroos, 1979, 2006, 2008; Berry, 1983; Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2008), the paradigm in sales has shifted to stronger focus on relationship selling (Long, Tellefsen & Lichtenthal, 2007, Viio, 2011). Despite presenting sales as a process (Cash & Crissy, 1964) early sales research did not develop the relationship between the buyer and seller further, but instead treated the buyer's role as passive. In contrast, focusing on adaptation of the selling process on an individual level, Spiro, Perreault Jr. and Reynolds (1977) describe that both the salesman and the buyer actively influence the sales process. However, whereas relationship orientation in marketing in general refers to developing long-term buyer-seller relationships, in relationship selling and adaptive selling 'relationship orientation' is often used in ways resembling short-term sales tactics, rather than a perspective, and the focus is primarily limited to 'closing the deal' (cf. Comer, 1991). Such behavior is not based on a relational mindset with the intention of achieving a 'win-win' situation.

In marketing, adaptation is one of the characteristic phenomena associated with relationships and relationship orientation (Hallén, Johansson & Seyed-Mohammed, 1991; Gadde & Håkansson 1993; Brennan, Turnbull & Wilson, 2003; Holma, 2009). Although it may be the buyer who invites the seller to participate in relationship initiation (Liang & Parkhe, 1997; Ellis, 2000; Overby & Servais, 2005; Agndal, 2006), it is usually the seller who has to accommodate the buyer (Edvardsson, Holmlund & Strandvik, 2008). Hence, in order to facilitate and improve relationship initiation between the seller and buyer, while simultaneously aiming at increasing sales performance, an understanding of both the sales and buying processes as well as having a concept for the adaptation is pivotal (Rackham & DeVincentis, 1998). Not having a concept for adaptation makes it difficult to adapt in a planned manner. As discovered in research, most adaptation conducted by the seller can be categorized as being ad-hoc or reactive (Schmidt, Tyler & Brennan, 2007). Despite understanding the value that relational sales enables (e.g. Anderson, Kumar & Narus, 2008; Guenzi, Georges & Pardo, 2009), the seller is left with the challenge of how to operationalize relationship orientation of sales. When a selling firm adopts a relational approach, this implies adapting the firm's processes and operations to match those of its customer.

It is surprising how little scientific research has been conducted on sales, especially with reference to the sales process, considering it is the process that guides the seller during relationship initiation with the buyer. Analogous to how sales is guided by the sales process (e.g. Dubinsky, 1980/81), buying is guided by the buying process (e.g. Robinson, Farris & Wind, 1967; Webster & Wind, 1972). In fact, research linked to the IMP (Industrial Marketing and Purchasing) group in contemporary marketing and purchasing clearly recognizes the importance of taking an interactive approach on marketing and purchasing (Coviello, Milley & Marcolin, 2001; Hingley, 2005; Gadde, Håkansson & Persson, 2010). With regard to the sales and buying processes, according to Comer (1991) they are: "'mirror-images' of the same marketing event" (p. 477). Despite that little research with reference the sales process has been conducted, the need for relationship orientation of the sales process has been recognized in sales literature (e.g. Rackham & DeVincentis 1998; Moncrief & Marshall 2005: Sheth & Sharma 2008).

The present study is timely and relevant; it is in line with contemporary research in sales and purchasing (e.g. Lindgreen, Vanhamme, Van Raaij & Johnston, 2013) and also current business practice. For sales and purchasing researchers alike the notion of relationship oriented selling is interesting and relevant because of the growing interest in value-based relationship-oriented sales and purchasing. This study extends current models about sales and purchasing from a transaction-focus to a relationship-focus and links the two together.

The purpose of this study is to develop a framework for strategic adaptation of the seller's sales process in order to match the buyer's buying process in a business-to-business context. The development of a framework for strategic adaptation of the sales process in a business-to-business context is conducted through findings from literature review and empirical data. Both the seller and the buyer are included in the level of analysis. The selected perspective in this study is that of the seller, and the level being focused on is that of the sales process. The framework presented is based on an in-depth review and analysis of theory supported by empirical findings. The research conducted provides implications relevant for sales in general.

'Sales' as understood in this study refers to the set of activities and events of selling, conducted by the seller's sales force, aiming at business engagement with the prospective buyer. 'Selling' refers to the concrete *action* of conducting sales: i.e. sales work. Furthermore, in this study, selling focuses on *personal selling* (Spiro et al., 1977; Cron & DeCarlo, 2006), as opposed to other types of selling. When referring to the process of activities and actions that the seller conducts when selling, the terms 'sales process' and 'selling process' are often used interchangeably in sales research and literature (cf. Spiro & Perreault, 1979; Dubinsky, 1980/81; Rackham & DeVincentis, 1998; Jaramillo & Marshall, 2004; Moncrief & Marshall, 2005; Cron & DeCarlo, 2006; Sheth & Sharma, 2008; Storbacka, Ryals, Davies & Nenonen, 2009). In this study, a distinction between the sales process and the selling process is proposed: sales process would adopt a strategic and broader view including a sales force and managerial level focus (cf. 'sales process activities and sales process models': Cron & DeCarlo, 2006), whereas the term selling process would be reserved primarily for the process of sales work at a salesperson level (e.g. Dubinsky, 1980/81; Moncrief & Marshall, 2005). Thus, being broader in scope, this would mean that the sales process includes the selling process.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. First, the paper presents the transition towards relationship orientation and adaptation in particular in sales and purchasing which is of significance to the current study. The methodology and findings of the empirical case studies are then described. Finally, the paper discusses the contributions, limitations, and implications of the study, together with suggestions for further research.

Towards relationship orientation via adaptation in sales and purchasing

The concept of relationship orientation can be understood to convey a willingness and desire for something more than merely transacting or conducting an exchange between the involved parties; it involves that at least one of the partners adapts to the specific needs of the other (Brennan et al., 2003). Consequently, adaptation is a concept of central concern in the study of the buyer-seller relationships. "Adaptation is one of the characteristic phenomena associated with relationships" (Gadde & Håkansson, 1993, p. 68). Since business relationships in general are based on a process of matching (cf. practice matching process; Grönroos & Helle, 2010, 2012) or aligning (e.g. Corsaro & Snehota, 2011) the operations between two companies, adaptations are important aspects of relationships between businesses (Hallén et al., 1991; Brennan et al., 2003). ‘Relationship orientation’ as is used in this study refers to “leaning towards business engagement through adaptation of business processes with the aim of a long-term and mutually profitable business relationship between a buyer and a seller” (Viio, 2011, p. 28). Moreover, *relationship orientation* can be understood as a *mindset* with the goal of a relationship. *Adaptation* on the other hand, can be regarded as the *strategy and means* that optimally lead to a relationship involving a business engagement between the parties (ibid.).

Adaptation in relationship management, sales and purchasing research

Adaptation has been studied from seller, buyer, and seller-buyer perspectives in relationship management (Ford, 1980; Håkansson, 1982; Brennan & Turnbull, 1999). The outcomes of research include the realization that adaptation is important, it provides benefits, and investments that adaptation requires are non-transferrable as such to other relationships. Furthermore, it is recognized that most adaptations are ad hoc, and more often conducted by the seller than the buyer (Brennan & Turnbull, 1999: Brennan et al., 2003; Schmidt et al., 2007). Although some research points out that adaptation is sometimes conducted without the other party realizing this (cf. ‘tacit adaptation’; Brennan & Turnbull, 1999), when adaptations are more complex, this may require information sharing between the seller and buyer (cf. Canning & Brennan, 2004). Yet, research concerning adaptation does not clearly state that adaptation requires *participation* from both parties. In order to succeed however, adaptation requires at least some level of participation of both of the parties involved.

For over thirty years, marketing research has been searching for an optimal way of selling. The basic concept is that there is no *single* best way to sell, and that therefore salespersons have to adapt to the situation and potential customer (Román & Iacobucci, 2010). According to the seminal research of Weitz, Sujan and Sujan (1986), their ‘adaptive selling’ framework showed that salespeople have the possibility to gather information and then develop and tailor their sales presentation to fit each customer. Salespersons can observe their customers’ reactions to the sales presentation and make instantaneous adjustments (Weitz et al., 1986; Anglin, Stoltman & Gentry, 1990). Instead of such adjustments being based on a relationship-oriented mindset, however, the focus is more on transaction orientation where adaptation is used as a tactical sales tool.

In many cases, studies related to adaptive selling study the characteristics of the salesperson–concentrating on their ability and motivation for adaptive selling–and sales performance or sales effectiveness (e.g. Weitz et al., 1986; Spiro & Weitz, 1990; Levy & Sharma, 1994; Sujan, Weitz & Kumar, 1994; Park & Holloway, 2003; Jaramillo, Locander, Spector & Harris, 2007). Surprisingly, adaptive selling research does not explicate adaptation of key processes between the seller and the buying organizations. Such key processes would include the sales process. If relationship-oriented adaptive selling behavior can increase sales performance and strengthen the relationship with the buyer when conducted on salesperson level (Giacobbe, Jackson Jr., Crosby & Bridges, 2006), it seems reasonable to assume that adapting the seller’s sales *process* to the buyer’s buying process would have a similar effect.

Compared to studies focusing on adaptation in marketing research in particular, but also in sales research (mostly in the form of adaptive selling), adaptation does not seem to play as important a role in purchasing and supply chain management research. In purchasing research, adaptation mostly relates to questions such as: standardization vs. customization of purchasing;

decentralization vs. centralization of purchasing; and management of risks in organizational purchasing (e.g. Munnukka & Järvi, 2008). It mainly refers to adaptation that occurs on a product, production process, delivery process, person, or firm level (e.g. Rozemeijer, Blonska & Wetzels, 2008), but not to adaptation of the purchasing process with the intention of improving the relationship orientation between a buyer and seller. In purchasing research, it is mostly expected that the seller should adapt their marketing program to the buyer (e.g. Leonidou, 2005). Consequently, rather than strategically adapting to sellers, buyers seem more interested in strategically *influencing sellers to adapt* (ibid.).

Adaptation towards the other party in a buying-selling situation can provide or create value (cf. Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2008) or (co-)create and enable value creation (e.g. Grönroos, 2008; Grönroos & Voima, 2013) to one or both parties, increase revenues or create dependence between the parties (Cannon, Perreault & Williams, 1999). Moreover, as pointed out in recent research, business relationships can result in value on different levels of abstraction (cf. Relationship Value Portfolio; Corsaro, Fiocca, Henneberg & Tunisi, 2013), which is why a portfolio approach to relationships and adaptation could be beneficial. Emphasising the pivotal role of not only the sales person (cf. Value merchant; Anderson, Kumar & Narus, 2008) but also sales more broadly in creating value in a business context, Haas, Snehota and Corsaro (2012) present value creation in business relationships as an integration process with four facets (or levels of integration). In practice, however, it may be difficult for both the seller and buyer to decide what aspects to adapt to, how to adapt, and to what extent (Boddy, MacBeth & Wagner, 2000; Stjernström & Bengtsson, 2004).

Relationship orientation through adaptation in sales process setting

Adaptation as referred to in this study focuses on relationship-oriented adaptation during relationship initiation (Edvardsson et al., 2008): adaptation that occurs during the selling and buying phase of a relationship that is about to be formed. In contrast to business-to-consumer contexts where adaptation may stronger refer to adjustments on a behavioral level, when moving towards business-to-business contexts the importance of adjustments on a process level become more significant. In order to study adaptation of the sales process as a whole, i.e. on a process level and involving (or at least reflecting on) the buying process, a more specific definition for adaptation is needed. Hence, in this study adaptation in the sales process setting is defined as "adjustments at business process level by one or both parties aiming at initiating business engagement between the buyer and seller" (Viio, 2011, p. 40).

Adaptation on sales process level not only requires that the process is adaptable, rather also that the seller knows what to adapt to (cf. Knoppen, Christiaanse & Huysman, 2010). Hence, adaptation of sales process includes both *adaptability* of the process and *knowledge* of what the process is adapted to. Adaptability of the sales process refers to the extent to which the process is adaptable. Adaptability extends beyond formality (cf. 'formality'; Brennan & Turnbull, 1999). A formal sales process can be rigid and inflexible, whereas a sales process with high adaptability, as understood in this study, implicitly requires structure and some level of formality, while also simultaneously allowing for flexibility: adaptability includes *formality* (used in the meaning of formalization) and *flexibility*. Furthermore, an informal sales process lacks formal structure, which makes modifying it on salesperson level easy. At a sales force level however, an informal sales process can be of limited use.

That there is an overlap between adaptation and learning has been noted in research (March, 1991; Håkansson, Havila & Pedersen, 1999). For the seller to be able to adapt, knowledge regarding what must be adapted is required (Knoppen et al., 2010). In order to adapt their sales process to the buyer's buying process, the seller benefits considerably from having knowledge of the buyer's buying process. In-depth knowledge is not only the outcome of professionalism on the seller's side; it is simultaneously affected by the buyer's involvement. When the seller has an in-depth knowledge of the buyer's buying process, this could indicate that the buyer's involvement and interest in relationship initiation and relationship orientation is also high (cf. motivational investment in relationship; Dwyer, Schurr & Oh, 1987). The higher the seller's knowledge of the buyer's buying process, the more accurate and effective the adaptation and matching of the sales process to the buying process can become.

Portfolio approach in purchasing and selling

Purchasing is undoubtedly undergoing a change from transaction-oriented purchasing towards relationship orientation. However, although there is a trend of moving towards relationship-oriented purchasing, many purchasers still primarily focus on pricing and adopt a transaction-oriented approach (Axelsson & Wynstra, 2002). Simply put, pricing is an easily quantifiable and effective metric for measuring performance (Cousins & Spekman, 2003). A common objection to stable relationships is that the suppliers may become complacent and no longer commit themselves to doing their best (Axelsson & Wynstra, 2002). Additionally, many buyers lack the patience and foresight to invest in the possible long-term gains and instead choose more certain short-term gains (Cousins & Spekman, 2003).

As presented in literature, transactional and relational orientations are usually portrayed as being opposites of one other (e.g. Axelsson & Wynstra, 2002). Categorically dividing the purchasing orientation into being either transactional or relational in nature may represent a somewhat over-simplified view. Depending on what a company is purchasing and whether the purchases are centrally related to its output, the company is faced with different categories of purchases. Hence, it becomes obvious that there is not a single correct approach in terms of transaction-oriented or relationship-oriented purchasing, but rather different approaches can co-exist and can even be combined (cf. Kraljic, 1983; Axelsson & Wynstra, 2002; Van Weele, 2005; Lindgreen et al., 2013). Companies can apply a portfolio approach to their purchases and adopt different purchasing approaches for their different categories of purchases (Kraljic, 1983). Buying companies can develop different types of relationships with various suppliers; some relationships rely on close co-operation, whereas in others the buyer may prefer to keep the supplier at an arm's length (Lindgreen et al., 2013). It seems justified for a buying company to develop different types of relationships with its suppliers, depending on the capabilities and resources that the suppliers provide the buying company (Gadde & Håkansson, 2001): the higher the value generated for the buyer, the closer the relationship with the supplier. There is no single best type of external relationship, which could lead to lower costs, improved quality and higher profitability (Cox, 1996). Instead, different situations may require different approaches: a company can be highly involved with only a limited number of suppliers and should have a variety of relationships that provide different benefits (Gadde & Snehota, 2000; Cousins & Spekman, 2003). When all parties involved are working for the common good, a long-term relationship-oriented approach is the right choice. Conversely, in case that neither of the parties is committed to the common good, a short-term transaction-oriented approach would appear to be justified.

Not all selling and purchasing situations are appropriate for, or even require the development of long-term buyer-seller relationships, which is why the question of context becomes important (e.g. Kraljic, 1983; Dwyer et al., 1987; Rackham & DeVincentis, 1998). The key to successful sales management is to find a strategic balance between transactional and relational selling (Cron & DeCarlo, 2006). In order for the seller to figure out which selling approach is most appropriate in each individual situation, they must take both the seller and buyer and their respective approaches for customer prioritization and supplier strategy into consideration (Rackham & DeVincentis, 1998).

Based on the literature review regarding relationship orientation in relationship marketing, sales and purchasing research, it seems that there may be a need for a strategic sales process adaptation framework in a business context. In order to develop such a framework and to find out how to adapt, the topic area of sales process adaptation will be explored further together with empirical data. The goal of studying adaptation is to understand how sales process adaptation could become more relationship oriented. In order to arrive at a more holistic view of sales process adaptation in a relational context, both the seller and buyer are studied. Additionally to adaptation, facilitating or enabling adaptation is explored. This is summarized in the following question: *How could adaptation of the sales process become strategic?* Studying this topic area by the means of empirical data results in guidance and implications for developing a framework for strategic sales process adaptation during relationship initiation in the business context, thereby improving relationship orientation and enhancing business performance.

METHOD

The epistemological perspective adopted in this study was one of constructivism. Hence, relationship initiation in this context was viewed as being constructed by and between the seller and the buyer, and guided by their respective processes. The study was a qualitative one where the main sources of information were in-depth interviews with key informants. Applying purposeful sampling, a typical information-rich case that was appropriate for being studied in-depth was selected. Of the several different strategies for purposeful sampling (Patton, 1990; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Silverman, 2005), the strategy chosen for case selection is closely related to the one of intensity sampling (cf. 'intensity sampling'; Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 28). The case study method applied is one of case study in retrospective (Gummesson, 2000) and the data collection was relying on data collected from key informants (Kumar, Stern & Anderson, 1993). Through applying what can be regarded as a nested strategy for within-case sampling (Miles & Huberman, 1994), persons within the companies that were directly involved in and representatives of their respective companies in the selling-buying process during relationship initiation were selected.

Conducting a single-case study had its strengths and weaknesses. Strengths include being able to focus on the studied topics, gathering in-dept data from several informants involved in the case and more accurate triangulation of that data. Weaknesses include the risk of studying a particular case that has not bearing in a wider context. However, when selecting the case emphasis was placed on the case being a typical one where a small company offering a solution seeks to enter into cooperation with a large one.

The empirical research carried out for this study was conducted in the software and telecommunications industries. As the situation presented in the case where a small company is selling to a large one seems typical, the findings can be expected to have relevance in a larger context than the case studied, also in different industries. Data gathering was conducted through semi-structured interviews from the counterparts at the seller and the buyer. The relationship initiation that was studied occurred between a selling firm, a small-to-medium-sized company in the software development industry, and a buying firm, a very large international mobile operator in the telecommunications industry. The persons who represent the seller in the selected case had the following functions and roles within the firm (listed according to interview order): VP of sales (vice president of sales), Chairman (of the board), Sales engineer, President, and Product manager. The persons that represent the buyer in the selected case had the following functions within the firm (listed according to interview order): Product manager 1, Product and proposition manger, Purchasing manager, and Product manager 2. All key informants from the selling and buying companies were deeply involved in the case. Triangulation of data was applied throughout the data gathering process by interviewing each key member of the selling and the buying teams.

The approach applied in the study was that of systematic combining (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). Thus, knowledge was developed through a series of hermeneutic circles by combining data gathering, analysis, and reflection (cf. Wolcott, 1994; Dubois & Gadde, 2002). In order to enable the reader to participate in the analysis, the key empirical findings are presented through excerpts. The unit of analysis is defined being the case (cf. Miles & Huberman, 1994; Dubois & Gadde, 1999).

EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

In order to develop a framework for relationship orientation of the sales process, the *adaptation* of the sales and buying processes was explored. Firstly, the seller's view regarding adaptation of sales process was studied. This included studying if (and to what extent) adaptation occurred as well as how the sales process can be adapted. In addition to this, some prerequisites for sales process adaptation were discovered. Secondly, the buyer's view of the seller's sales process adaptation was studied.

The seller's view of adaptation of the sales process

Adapting the sales process to the buying process is something that the seller considers to be important; both the selling company's VP of sales and the Chairman (of the board) stated that the company did adapt, and they believe that this is a crucial attitude for any small vendor who wishes to sell to a large buyer. As pointed out by the Chairman, if the seller has to adapt to several buying processes simultaneously, adaptation becomes demanding.

> "[…] I think that as a small company you are always in the hands of a large buyer. There is no [other] way than to adapt to their process." (Seller, VP of sales)

> "[…] You simply have to adapt to the customer, and before you have fully understood what is most important for them, you adapt to several different things, which makes it difficult and increases the workload. […] Especially if you have three, four customers at the same time and you have to adapt to all of them." (Seller, Chairman)

The buyer was criticized for not letting the seller know how the buying process was constructed. It is only towards the end of the buying process (when the seller has already been selected) that the buyer shares such information. The seller seemed to be aware of the advantages that more openness could contribute to the situation, but the buyer does not seem to fully have realized and understood the importance (and benefits) of this openness. In fact, the buyer seems to keep the seller at a distance.

> "Until the agreement it is actually the buyer who sets up the rules. […] If they explain a little of the process, it is usually at the end of the process, i.e. when you have already been selected." (Seller, VP of sales)

Unlike the VP of sales and the Chairman, the rest of the sales team did not consider that the sales process was adapted to the buying process. According to the President and the Product manager, the sales process was not adapted. The Product manager's response is revealing.

> "Yes, I think that we adapted the sales work to the buyer's buying process." (Seller, Product manager)

Unlike the Product manager, it seems that neither the VP of sales nor the Chairman made a distinction between the sales process and sales work. Hence, when commenting on adaptation of the sales process, they were actually referring to *sales work* and the adaptation that took place in that work, i.e. adaptation on an *individual level*.

According to the Chairman, the President and the Product manager, the adaptation of the sales process is a strategic decision. Furthermore, in order to adapt the process, a mechanism for adaptation is needed. As hinted at by the Chairman, in order to adapt to several customers' processes simultaneously, a flexible or modular sales process is required.

In reference to how the sales process could be adapted to the buying process, the Chairman stated that in order to know to what one should adapt, one could simply ask the buyer. This would be followed by internal work at the selling company in order to appoint responsibilities and tasks to make the sales process fit with the buying process.

> "[…] You sit down with the customer and asks how their buying process looks like. Thereby also explaining to the buyer that the purpose is to meet their requirements in a flexible way as possible, and then simply assign tasks within the company, so that it fits their [the buyer's] buying process." (Seller, Chairman)

According to the seller, adaptation also demands some requirements of the buyer. When considering statements made by the VP of sales, the Chairman, the President and the Sales engineer, adaptation also requires knowledge (about the target). As a consequence, before adaptation can take place, more openness from the buyer is needed.

> "The perfect thing would be if there was a buyer who could communicate to their supplier in an open manner." (Seller, VP of sales)

The VP of sales states that some buyers deliberately avoid discussing the buying process with sellers and that in order to procure better terms and conditions, with some buyers playing off the sellers against each other.

> "[…] I think that many buyers are scared since they want to have as many as possible to believe that they are in the process [i.e. in the buyer's selection group] so that they [the buyer] can sort of squeeze the prices in the end." (Seller, VP of sales)

Based on informant statements, the seller is clearly in favor of adapting the sales process to the buying process. This shows that adaptation should not only occur on an individual level, as carried out by the members of the sales team, but that the process that guides the sales team as a whole could also be adapted to the buying process. However, adaptation also demands some requirements of the buyer; therefore the buyer should show more openness towards the seller and provide information regarding the buying process.

Buyer's view of seller's sales process adaptation

Although the buyer did not pay much attention to the sales process of the seller and did little to help the seller, the buying company still considers it advisable for the seller to adapt their sales process and sales work to the buying process. According to all informants at the buyer company, the seller did actually adapt their sales process to the buyer's buying process. However, the buyer did not regard the adaptation to be planned or managed approach by the seller, but instead considered the seller as having no other choice. As stated by the buyer, if the seller wanted to pursue a business engagement scenario with the buyer, they had no other choice than to adapt:

> "It [adaptation] was done because there was no other way. I simply think that when we have certain requirements, the seller cannot get around it, but has to adapt." (Buyer, Purchasing manager)

The buyer was aware that the adaptation was conducted because the seller had no alternative; the buyer dictated the process and the seller complied. The buyer was practically forcing the seller to follow their buying process. All members of the buying team regard it important that the seller adapts and that the buyer facilitates this by providing information to the seller regarding the buying process and how it operates:

> "I think that the points that have to be cleared with the supplier during the buying process, i.e. decision making points, time schedules, these have to be communicated [to the seller] as far as possible. […]" (Buyer, Product manager 1)

> "[…] When aiming to build a partnership, it is beneficial to adapt ones processes." (Buyer, Purchasing manager)

> "It is always advantageous for the buying process that you get through it fairly smooth." (Buyer, Product manager 2)

As Product manager 1 points out, even if all events during the buying process cannot be estimated (e.g. because they are too far in the future), the buyer can, at least on a general level, explain the steps of the process to the seller. In spite all the members of the buying team being in favor of transparency with regards to the buying process, buyers rarely describe the steps of the buying process to the seller. Nevertheless, the buyer views it as advisable and important that the seller adapts their selling process to match the buying process wherever possible. The buying process should be the 'master' process:

> "The buying process is the master, and all other processes [including the adapted sales process] are arranged according to it [the buying process]." (Buyer, Product manager 2)

Despite the ultimatum-like recommendation that the sales process should be adapted to the buying process, the buyer also provides words of caution to the seller. The seller should not be 'too eager' or act in desperation, since this could be regarded negatively by the buyer. Likewise, the seller should not refrain from adapting their process.

> " […] You [i.e. the seller] should convey a coordinated approach but enough flexibility so that you [as a seller] don't block [i.e. say 'no' to] the other one [i.e. the buyer]." (Buyer, Product manager 2)

To summarize, the findings suggest that in this case the buyer took advantage of the situation. The buying company knew that they were forcing the seller to follow their buying process, and in spite of realizing the benefits of being open, they did not communicate their buying process to the seller. Although the seller can be understood to have acted in a relationship-oriented manner, the seller's adaptation was influenced and to a certain extent inhibited by the buyer. The buyer's relationship orientation can be understood to have been low rather than high.

Optimally, the seller and the buyer would find a balanced approach for their co-operation that would result in a good match between the processes. As shown by the means of the data collected, this kind of approach requires honesty, openness, transparency, and foremost, the willingness of the two parties to achieve a win-win solution.

Results of sales process adaptation

According to the data gathered for this study, the adaptation of the seller's sales process to the buyer's buying process creates several advantages not only for the seller, but also for the buyer, and to relationship initiation in general. The advantages of adaptation as regarded by the seller are presented in Table A.1 (Appendix A) and buyer in Table B.1 (Appendix B), which follow Wolcott's (1994) D-A-I (Description, Analysis, and Interpretation) structure. The first column of the table indicates the informant's position in the company. In the second column, the advantages are described as stated by the informant. In the third column the statements are analysed, based on the context in which the advantages were stated. In the fourth column, an interpretation of the description and the analysis thereof is provided.

Advantages for the seller include: *more efficient resource allocation, an improved relationship with the buyer, and an enhanced sales process*. More efficient resource planning in this scenario refers to the more timely and accurate allocation of resources when and where they are needed instead of keeping resources on standby in case the buyer needs them, as often is the case when applying an ad-hoc approach to conducting sales work. An improved relationship with the buyer refers to those factors that increase the quality, satisfaction, and efficiency of the co-operation, which result from the seller and buyer being aware of what should occur and when. In addition to improving resource allocation, these factors have a strengthening effect on the relationship between the parties. An enhanced sales process is linked to an increased success rate in signing customers using the same amount of resources. The cost of signing a customer, one of the most significant figures for a seller, is likely to decrease through adaptation of the sales process. Simultaneously, the expected return in the form of sales revenues is likely to increase due to the seller being able to serve additional buyers without increasing their resources.

Advantages for the buyer include: *improved resource allocation, and improved relationship initiation*. Improved resource allocation includes improved planning, shorter lead times, and enhanced project management; all of which contribute to an improved ROI for the purchase. Improved relationship initiation includes advantages that strengthen the relationship (initiation) between the parties. Despite the advantages of adaptation seen, it cannot be assumed that the outcome of relationship initiation would (or even should) always lead to a business engagement and a contract between the parties. Instead, adaptation of the sales process could be regarded as a 'facilitator' and as a strategic approach that enables the parties and relationship initiation to progress in a more effective and positive manner.

Summary of key findings from empirical data

Both the seller and the buyer regard the adaptation of the sales process to the buyer's buying process as being important and beneficial for both parties. The seller's statements show that they are very much in favor of adapting their sales process, and they even consider it crucial in the case that a small vendor wants to sell to a large buyer. In this case however, instead of conducting adaptation on process level, it was restricted to ad-hoc adaptation on person level. The sales work was adapted to the buyer's requirements, whereas on a sales process level no adaptation took place. This shows that the selling company's (management) involvement in relationship orientation through adaptation was low: the company had not deployed an adaptable sales process, which resulted in the sales persons discarding the 'official' sales process. Lacking a strategic approach and a process for conducting sales, adaptation was mostly carried out on person level. Nevertheless, should the seller have known how the buyers buying process operated, they would have adapted to it. However, the buyer was reluctant to provide such information to the seller.

Despite the advantages that adaptation of the sales process to the buying process can generate, some buyers do not want the seller to become aware of their buying process, but rather prefer to keep the seller at arm's length, something that in this case the buyer admits. As a consequence, the buyer prefers both parties to follow the buying process, i.e. it should be the 'master' process that guides the purchasing and sales during relationship initiation. At the same time however, the buyer points out that the seller should not become 'too flexible' and agree to everything, since this could be interpreted as 'despair'.

Regardless of their willingness to adapt, the seller regards it difficult to simultaneously adapt to several buying processes. However, this is a necessity for most sellers; few companies have the luxury of selling to one buyer at a time. Most companies are engaged in relationship initiation with several buyers simultaneously, and they each have their own buying processes. Should the seller simply adapt to several buying processes simultaneously without having a structure for their work, the adaptation will again be an ad-hoc adaptation of sales work on person level that can become extremely resource demanding. For the seller to be able to adapt to several buying processes simultaneously not only requires a strategic decision, but also a mechanism, a framework for adaptation.

FRAMEWORK DEVELOPMENT

When combining findings from the literature review and empirical data, this reveals difficulties in operationalizing the relational mindset. Based on the review of the literature (marketing, sales and purchasing literature) on one hand, and on the findings through empirical data (the seller and the buyer) on the other hand, it seems that the advantages of relationships are widely recognized. There is a common understanding that aiming at long-term relationships is the 'right thing to do'; pursuing long-term relationships can result in a win-win situation for both the seller and the buyer. However, when analyzing to what extent relationship orientation is regarded as mindset that takes both the seller and buyer into consideration (thereby affecting the seller's and buyer's overall view of sales and buying), only marketing literature – and relationship marketing literature in particular – adopts this view. Although the sales and purchasing literature reviewed as well as findings through empirical data gathered recognize the value of relationships, relationship orientation is not presented or adopted as mindset. When categorizing mindset as being either relational or transactional, the sales and purchasing literature and the findings through empirical data show that a transactional mindset still prevails.

In the case studied, the seller's view corresponds well with the view of the reviewed sales literature, whereas the buyer's view corresponds well with that of the studied purchasing literature. The seller views adaptation as necessary during relationship initiation, and unsurprisingly it is mostly conducted in an unstructured manner by salespersons and members of the selling team. The buyer likewise considers it necessary for the seller to adapt to the buyer: the seller has no choice other than to adapt to the buyer's requirements. In summary, the seller and the buyer view adaptation as a necessity, rather than viewing it as strategy that is linked to a relationship-oriented mindset. Taking into consideration that the seller's adaptation is mostly of an ad-hoc nature or is conducted as a reaction to the buyer's requirements, reveals the missing link between mindset and strategy; the *adaptation is not strategic and connected to a relationship-oriented mindset, rather it is conducted in an unplanned and uncontrolled fashion*. Although marketing literature recognizes a connection between a relationship-oriented mindset and strategic adaptation, both sales and purchasing literature and the seller and buyer fail to make this connection. The result is somewhat of a paradox: *the seller and buyer are aiming at relationship orientation, at the same time adopting a transactional approach, and behaving in an adaptive manner*. There seems to be a need for a framework for adaptation of the sales process that is connected to the selected approach, taking both the seller and buyer into consideration.

Framework for strategic adaptation of the sales process

Based on the review of research in the areas of relationship marketing, sales and purchasing, and on findings from empirical data that was gathered for this study, a framework for strategic adaptation of the sales process to the buying process has been developed. This framework is comprised of three parts: adaptation of the sales process, seller-buyer relationship orientation, and understanding the buyer's purchasing portfolio. The first part, *adaptation of sales process*, focuses on adaptation alternatives and possible outcomes. It constitutes a synthesis of findings from previous theory and through empirical data inspired by the marketing literature regarding adaptation, by Brennan and Turnbull (1999) in particular, and enriched by the findings of this study's empirical data. The second part, *seller-buyer relationship orientation*, consists of the seller and buyer's relationship orientation: the mindset that the seller and buyer adopt. A source of inspiration for this part is the model 'hypothesized realm of buyer-seller relationships' by Dwyer, Schurr and Oh (1987, p. 15) to which various elements have been added. In contrast to their original model, which mainly focused on the seller and buyer's motivation in a relationship, the second part of the proposed framework focuses on the seller and buyer's relationship orientation, which to a certain degree is reflected in the sales and buying approaches. The third part, the *purchasing portfolio* model, was originally developed from the perspective of the buyer (Kraljic, 1983). As presented in this framework, however, the purchasing portfolio is used as a 'lens' through which to view and understand purchasing and the purchase from a relationship perspective. The three parts are viewed as forming the layers of the framework, which could prove to be a *valuable tool to the seller by which they can understanding how the seller-buyer relationship orientation, as well as the buyer's purchasing situation and the seller's possible positioning as viewed by the buyer, can affect adaptation*.

The strategic sales process adaptation framework, as illustrated in Figure 1, consists of the three layers: Adaptation of (the) sales process; Relationship orientation; and Purchasing portfolio. When the three layers (and the models that the layers are based on) are viewed separately – and from the perspective of the seller or the buyer alone – they capture one aspect of relationship orientation; *it is the combination of the layers that enables (and contributes to) relationship orientation*. Together, the layers form a conceptual and dynamic framework for relationship orientation of the sales process through adaptation, thereby linking relationship orientation as mindset and adaptation as strategy.

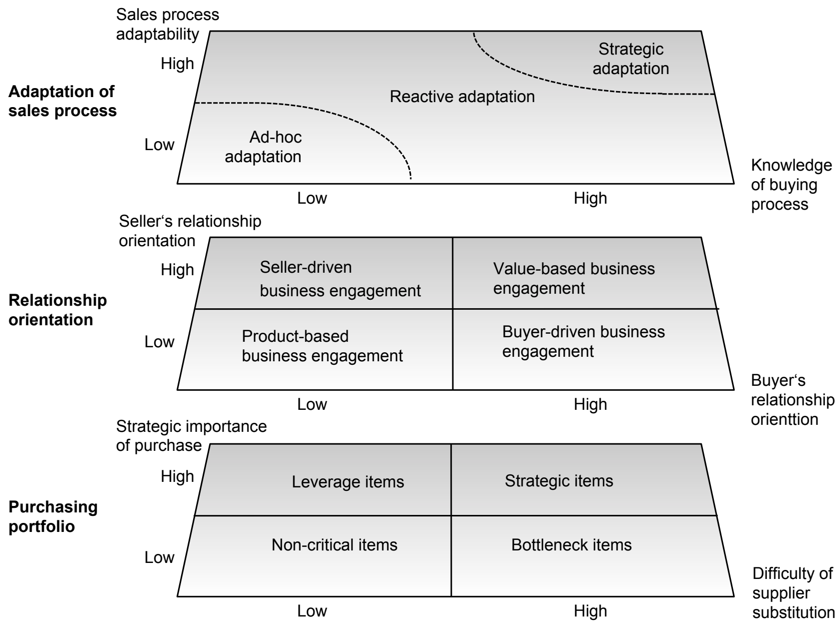

Figure 1. Framework for strategic sales process adaptation

Description of the three layers

The first layer, *adaptation of the sales process*, presents how sales process adaptation can based on the dimension *sales process adaptability* and *knowledge of buying process* be divided into three categories: ad-hoc, reactive, and strategic adaptation. *Ad-hoc adaptation* refers to unplanned adaptation that is generally conducted on an individual level, rather than being planned and supported by the organization and its processes. *Reactive adaptation* occurs when sales process adaptability is high but the knowledge of the buyer's buying process is low and when sales process adaptability is low but knowledge of the buyer's buying process is high. *Strategic adaptation* refers to planned adaptation that is supported by the firm and its processes. This type of adaptation is typical when both sales process adaptability and knowledge of the buyer's buying process are high.

The second layer, *relationship orientation*, divides business engagement (based on low or high seller-buyer relationship orientation) into four categories: product-based, seller-driven, buyer-driven, and value-based business engagement. In *product-oriented business engagement* both of the parties adopt a short-term focus and concentrate on the sale and purchase, thereby ignoring the possibility of significantly higher value-creation in the long-term. *Seller-driven business engagement* refers to a situation where the seller's relationship orientation is high and the buyer's is low; the seller would be the driving force in the buyer-seller business engagement during relationship initiation. In the event that the seller's relationship orientation is low and buyer's is high, a *buyer-driven business engagement* may result. Instead of being seller-driven, this type of business engagement is mainly driven by the buyer. When combining the seller and buyer's high relationship orientations, this optimally results in a *value-based business engagement* (i.e. of high strategic value for both the seller and the buyer). This is the opposite scenario to a product-based business engagement: both the seller and buyer's mindsets are relational. Hence, instead of focusing on the sale and purchase, the parties focus on value: i.e. the seller and the buyer focus on expected long-term gains.

The third layer, *purchasing portfolio*, illustrates how buyers generally divide purchases into four categories based on being of low or high strategic importance and being of low or high difficulty in terms of substitution (of the purchase and/or supplier). The categories are *non-critical, leverage, bottleneck*, and *strategic items* (cf. Kraljic, 1983: Rackham & DeVincentis, 1998).

Linkage of the layers

The first one of the three layers, adaptation of sales process, forms both the strategy and means, and is linked (connected) to the second layer 'seller-buyer relationship orientation', which is linked in turn to the third layer 'purchasing portfolio' (i.e. the purchase as viewed by the buyer and understood by the seller). Based on the adaptability of the sales process and the seller's knowledge of buyer's buying process, which are linked to layer two (relationship orientation) and layer three (purchasing portfolio) in the figure, sales process adaptation can take various forms. In the event that the seller-buyer relationship orientation (layer two) is categorized as 'product-based' (referring to that neither the seller nor the buyer have a high relationship orientation), and the buyer's categorization of the purchase (layer three) is 'non-critical', this can result in *ad-hoc adaptation* of the sales – or rather the selling – process. Involving little planning or preparation, ad-hoc adaptation is often related to low levels of company involvement. Should the seller-buyer relationship orientation (layer two) be categorized as being 'seller-driven' (i.e. the seller's relationship orientation is high whereas the buyer's is low) or 'buyer-driven' (i.e. the buyer's relationship orientation is high whereas the seller's is low), and the buyer's categorization of the purchase (layer three) be 'leverage' or 'bottleneck', this could result in – or require – *reactive adaptation*. Reactive adaptation involves some planning and company involvement, whilst being simultaneously constrained by both the selling and buying firms, which to some extent may hinder adaptation. In the event that the seller-buyer relationship orientation (layer two) is categorized as 'value-based' (i.e. both the seller's and buyer's relationship orientations are high), and the buyer's categorization of the purchase in the third layer is 'strategic', this may enable and result in *strategic adaptation* of the sales process. Strategic adaptation often arises as a result of high levels of company involvement: both the seller and the buyer recognize, understand and support the value of a relationship-oriented mindset.

Purchasing categorization as an indicator of relationship orientation

The buyer positions the purchase into one of the four categories of the purchasing portfolio, and this affects the buyer's focus and purchasing strategy. Simultaneously (as shown in the case study), the way in which the buyer regards the purchase affects the buyer's relationship orientation towards the seller. In the event that the buyer considers the purchase as being *non-critical* or *leverage* only, this is likely to result in a low relationship orientation towards the seller. In contrast, should the buyer consider the purchase as a *bottleneck* or a *strategic* purchase, it is probable that this would result in a high relationship orientation towards the seller. When adopting the seller's perspective, <u>should the seller see that the buyer regards the purchase as</u>

being ‘non-critical’ or ‘bottleneck’, the seller may not consider it worthwhile to engage in a relationship with the buyer, which would result in low buyer-seller relationship orientation. After all, a relational approach is likely to require more resources, resulting in higher (selling) costs when compared to when adopting a transactional approach. Conversely, in the event that the seller thinks that the buyer regards the purchase as ‘leverage’ or ‘strategic’, the seller could justify the adoption of a relational mindset, which could result in a high buyer-seller relationship orientation. The higher costs, which often result from operating based on a relational approach, are expected to be outweighed by future profits. The underlying assumption here is that value for the buyer drives the positioning of the purchase in the purchasing portfolio, which affects the buyer’s relationship orientation.

Recognizing and understanding the linkage between mindset and strategy through the different layers in the framework helps the seller to adapt in a way that corresponds to their current situation. Simultaneously, the seller–as well as the buyer–should recognize that the situation could change: changes in adaptation strategy can have an effect on seller-buyer relationship orientation, thereby affecting the buyer’s categorization of the purchase in the purchasing portfolio. Moreover, *the buyer’s categorization of the purchase in the purchasing portfolio can change; and both the seller and buyer’s relationship orientations can change.* As a consequence, *this can affect adaptation–or the possibilities for adapting–on different levels: individual, process, and company-wide*.

The dynamic nature of the framework

In the interconnected and dynamic framework presented, impulses that can trigger changes, which are able in turn to affect all three layers, can occur on any of the discussed layers. *A change on any of the layers can affect all layers, which has important implications for both parties and the relationship initiation overall.* For the seller, implications include the need to focus on the buyer to understand the buyer’s purchasing portfolio and how the buyer would position the offered service (enabled by the seller’s product, services or solution) and the seller.1 This should provide the seller with an indication of how they are positioned in the buyer’s purchasing portfolio, which could affect the buyer’s relationship orientation mindset towards the seller. As the findings of the empirical data show, when introducing innovative solutions (that the buyer is not familiar with), which enable services that are new to the buyer and its customers2, the buyer often by default categorizes these as being ‘non-critical’. As the markets for these services develop, the categorization of the purchase may become re-evaluated by the buyer. Based on the findings of the empirical data, it can be anticipated that buyers would re-categorize an innovative, ‘non-critical’ purchase into a ‘leverage’ one, rather than re-categorizing it into a ‘bottleneck’ purchase. The logic behind this is the following: In spite of that this purchase might enable the buyer to offer its customers a new service, since the market for the possible service is in its infancy (i.e. in a very early stage of its life cycle), there is little reason for a buyer to regard such an purchase as being ‘bottleneck’ or ‘strategic’. In the event that the seller is the only possible provider of the purchase (service), it might by the buyer become re-

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[1] Although it usually is more important to the buyer what the seller has to offer rather than who the seller is per se, the buyer is likely to take the selling firm overall (supplier) into consideration when evaluating the purchase.

[2] Examples of latent markets or markets that did not exist prior to the service that was enabled by a seller’s solution include: text messaging, multi-media messaging, and mobile broadband services.

categorized as being ‘bottleneck’. Once the value of the service exceeds a certain threshold, the purchase might become re-categorized as being ‘strategic’.

Implications for the seller and buyer’s resource allocation

The buyer’s categorization of a purchase is likely to have an effect on the their relationship orientation. Once understanding this logic, the seller may adjust its relationship orientation accordingly. In the case of a product-based business engagement, the relationship orientation of both parties tends to be low. In this scenario both parties try to constrain the amount of resources that they allocate during the relationship initiation. In contrast, in the event that the seller adopts a relationship-oriented approach while the buyer adopts a transactional one, this can result in excessive resource allocation and difficulties to reach a business agreement as the case study revealed. In the case of a seller-driven business engagement, the seller may have to make considerable investments in terms of resource allocation for a (potential) buyer during the relationship initiation phase. In the (rare) cases of buyer-driven business engagement however, the seller might become tempted to allocate fewer than required resources and could face difficulties reaching an agreement (provided that the buyer has other options to choose from). When both the seller and buyer are highly relationship oriented, this generally has positive effects for each of them in terms of a more efficient resource allocation, an accelerated relationship initiation process, an improved ROI, and a stronger future relationship.

Strategic sales process adaptation

Recognizing and understanding the linkage between a relationship-oriented mindset and adaptation helps the seller to view the sales and the sales process in a more holistic fashion (as compared to previous research in the area of sales and business practices related to sales and selling). This will help the seller develop a sales process that is relationship oriented. An adaptable sales process can be simultaneously formal and flexible. In order to adapt the process, knowledge of the buyer’s buying process is required. A change from ‘low’ to ‘high’ in the sales process adaptability or knowledge of buyer’s buying process dimension can result in the changing from being ‘ad-hoc’ to ‘reactive’. Thus, an increase in sales process adaptability dimension (through a stronger relationship orientation by the seller) is key to moving beyond ‘ad-hoc’ adaptation. *Moving away from ‘ad-hoc’ towards ‘reactive’ adaptation* (cf. ‘leverage’ item and seller-driven business engagement*) is primarily up to the seller; the seller can achieve this even without the involvement of the buyer.* The seller can by adopting a relationship-oriented approach and by increasing the adaptability of the sales process progress on the vertical axis in the figure from ‘ad-hoc’ to ‘reactive’ adaptation. However, progressing on the horizontal axis from ‘ad-hoc’ to ‘reactive’ adaptation (cf. ‘bottleneck’ item and buyer-driven business engagement), involves increasing the seller’s level of knowledge of the buyer’s buying process from ‘low’ to ‘high’. This usually requires the involvement of the buyer (cf. relationship orientation of buyer). The seller needs not necessarily to wait for the buyer to become more supportive; the seller can actively seek to influence such change in mindset and behavior. In order for the buyer to adopt a relationship-oriented approach, the seller may to some extent have to educate the buyer in relationship orientation and how adopting a relationship-oriented approach can result in increased value for both the buyer and seller (cf. Grönroos & Helle, 2010). In order to progress from ‘ad-hoc’ or ‘reactive’ to ‘strategic’ adaptation (cf. ‘strategic’ item and value-based business engagement), an increase in both dimensions is required. *Strategic sales process adaptation requires adaptability of the sales process, and knowledge of the buyer’s buying process.*

In summary, the framework for strategic sales process adaptation is a conceptual one that to a certain extent draws from previous models, such as the purchasing portfolio, buyer-seller relationship orientation, and adaptation. Based on the findings of the literature review and the empirical data, relevant models or certain elements of the models have been combined in order to arrive at a more holistic view of relationship orientation of the sales process. Simply viewing the underlying models in the way that they were originally intended and for the purposes that they were originally developed does not result in relationship orientation, rather this would result in a seller- or buyer-oriented view of the aspect being observed. However, when combining the elements or layers of the framework, and simultaneously linking the seller and buyer's mindsets and strategies, this results in a view that takes both the seller and buyer into consideration. Furthermore, it is through linking the mindset and strategy, together with combining the layers that results in relationship orientation. Moreover, the presented framework highlights the seller and buyer's areas of contribution (responsibility) to relationship orientation, thereby emphasizing the importance of the seller's role and of strategic sales process adaptation to relationship orientation.

DISCUSSION

Adaptation in a sales process setting as understood in the context of this study is defined as adjustments linked to relationship orientation at a business process level by one or both parties with the aim of initiating business engagement between the buyer and seller. Sales process adaptation is linked to relationship orientation and the buyer's purchasing process, and can be categorized as ad-hoc, reactive or strategic adaptation. The goal of exploring adaptation was to understand how the sales process could become more relationship oriented in a strategic manner. The main question asked was: How could adaptation of the sales process become strategic? Supported by findings from the literature review, findings of the empirical data show that *it is regarded mainly as the seller's responsibility to adapt to the buyer*, rather than vice versa. However, since current sales processes – as presented in theory and as understood by the seller and buyer – do not support adaptation, it mainly occurs at a salesperson level. *Lacking company involvement, adaptation that is conducted on the level of the salesperson generally results in uncoordinated adaptation of sales work and actions, rather than in a coordinated adaptation of the sales process and sales activities*. Although it is mainly the seller that is expected to adapt to the buyer, it was discovered that *adaptation involves both parties*. In other words, adaptation in buyer-seller context is constituted of a joint effort conducted by both the seller and the buyer. Important contributions made by the buyer could involve *facilitating* (aiding) the seller in gathering knowledge of the buyer's buying process. In conclusion, a certain level of buyer involvement in adaptation is required. When the buyer recognizes the value potential of the purchase, this is likely to affect their involvement in facilitating adaptation.

Conceptual contributions

This research has integrated theories and concepts from three different fields of research: relationship marketing, sales and sales management, and purchasing and supply chain management. Primarily, this research contributes to research in sales and sales management with reference to relationship orientation and strategic sales process adaptation. The main theoretical contributions of this research involve targeting a new area in the crossroads of relationship marketing, sales and sales management, and purchasing by studying adaptation in a business-to-business context from a new perspective. With this research, we have aimed at filling in three gaps in present research. Firstly, we have linked the relationship orientation mindset with adaptation as strategy. Secondly, we have extended adaptation in sales from adaptation in selling to strategic adaptation of the sales process. Thirdly, we have extended adaptation to include the facilitation of adaptation.

This study provides a framework for strategic adaptation of the sales process to the buying process during relationship initiation in a business-to-business context. Instead of constituting a static model, the framework presented is dynamic in nature. Combining three 'layers', the framework combines mindset and strategy, constantly monitoring the possible re-positioning of the purchase in the buyer's purchasing portfolio, which may affect relationship orientation, thereby possibly affecting sales process adaptation. Realizing and understanding the connection between purchasing, strategy and relationship orientation is pivotal, both for the buyer and seller. This helps the parties to understand how they can contribute to increasing the total value of sales and purchasing during relationship initiation.

Each of the three layers forms an integral part of the framework: when used separately, the parts, or layers, only show an aspect of the whole. Thus, as suggested in this study, in order to arrive at a relationship-oriented view, the combination of the parts to form a whole is required. This is one of the conceptual contributions of this study. Furthermore, this study recognizes and understands the dynamic nature of sales and purchasing. As suggested in this study and in the framework, due to the dynamics involved in sales and buying, the parties are encouraged to monitor possible changes in any of the layers, because a change in one layer is believed to affect the overall relationship orientation.

Although previous research has recognized adaptation as a central aspect in relationships (Hallén et al., 1991; Gadde & Håkansson, 1993; Brennan et al., 2003; Holma, 2009), the adaptation of the sales process to the buying process has not been studied. In sales and sales management research, adaptation has generally been studied with reference to personal selling. Adaptive selling refers to adjusting the salesperson's sales work to the customer, and mostly focuses on behavioral aspects such as modifying the sales presentation or sales pitch to the customer (Spiro et al., 1977; Weitz et al., 1986; Spiro & Weitz, 1990; Román & Iacobucci, 2010). In this study, the focus is on adaptation of the sales process – including the selling process – to strategically match it to the buyer's mindset and buying process. In contrast to previous research in sales and sales management, which usually views the selling process as consisting of a set of predefined stages (Dubinsky, 1980/81), which may be rearranged (Moncrief & Marshall, 2005), this study adds two further aspects. Firstly, the level of analysis is expanded from salesperson level to involve the sales force and company. Secondly, it proposes including adaptation in the sales process in a way that connects mindset and strategy. Furthermore, previous research regards adaptation as being conducted for example by a single party or being reciprocal, uni-dimensional or bi-dimensional, dyadic or triadic. In this study however, adaptation is extended and viewed as including the seller and buyer and providing them roles; the seller's role is primarily to adapt, whereas the buyer's role is primarily to facilitate and to a certain extent support the seller's adaptation.

Limitations

The selection of the literature and empirical data that were reviewed was based on the context in which the phenomenon of relationship orientation of the sales process was studied. In order to conduct this study, a qualitative research approach and method were chosen. Data was gathered through semi-structured in-depth interviews with key informants. The case and informants were purposefully selected. Hence, the case study does not allow generalization in a statistical sense; rather the focus is on the extrapolation of findings and results to other similar settings. Although the scope and impact of adaptation can vary between one case and another, it may be assumed that the general outcomes of this study would largely still apply (i.e. that adopting a relationship-oriented mindset and adaptation can result in considerable advantages and benefits for the parties involved). With regard to credibility of the study the aim has been transparency; the rich use of excerpts is to enable the reader to draw his/her own conclusions and compare with the results presented. In order to ensure the construct validity of the research, several informants were interviewed for this study and triangulation was applied.

The decision to study relationship orientation through adaptation, which is a central aspect of relationships and relationship orientation, constitutes an intentional limitation. The reason for choosing adaptation as a focal point is that it represents a process of changing something already existing into something else, and that it mentally connects to relationship orientation as a mindset. In contrast to sales literature in general, which usually focuses on adaptation as behavioral changes that are conducted by a salesperson, this study focuses on the adaptation of the sales process itself, thereby linking adaptation to a mindset. The sales process, as understood in this study, likewise constitutes a limitation. Instead of focusing on the actions that a salesperson conducts in the stages of the selling process, this study focuses on a higher level of abstraction: the sales process is regarded as a system of elements and stages or activities (including actions). Thus, the sales process as viewed in this study constitutes a holistic process. Although the sales process is viewed from the seller's perspective, its process and view take the buyer's buying process into consideration. By focusing on a business-to-business context, a limitation that was made included studying the phenomenon of strategic sales process adaptation as conducted by and between selling and buying companies. It could be assumed that instead of arriving at contradictory results by choosing another context, this could instead result in more detailed nuances of adaptation.

Managerial implications

As a result of this study, it is suggested that the seller commences relationship initiation by focusing on the buyer. The importance of focusing on the buyer and its needs is not a new concept in sales. This study however provides some tools that can help the seller operationalize relationship orientation: focusing on the buyer's purchasing portfolio. This serves two purposes. Firstly, the seller can use the purchasing portfolio in order to understand how the buyer views the seller and its solution. Based on this input, the seller would discover their position in the buyer's portfolio, which could help them in navigating towards the position that they are aiming at. Secondly, the seller could use the purchasing portfolio in an inverse fashion: as a tool for categorizing potential customers, i.e. segmenting the targeted buyers based on the purchasing portfolio. In contrast to adaptive selling, this study focuses on adaptation of the sales process and proposes that adaptation be strategic – combining both mindset and strategy. In contrast to viewing adaptation as an activity or process that remains within the seller's domain, this study also involves the buyer in adaptation.

In general, as recognized also in literature, most adaptation conducted by the seller can be categorized as being ad-hoc or reactive (cf. Schmidt et al., 2007). This research provides implications for the seller concerning how to avoid the trap of ad-hoc adaptations.

By informing the seller how they categorize the purchase, and thereby the seller and the seller's offering, the buyer can to some extent affect the seller's adaptation during the relationship initiation. The findings of the empirical data emphasize that more openness from the buyer to the seller could benefit both parties. Hence, this study recommends that the buyer facilitate the seller's sales process adaptation by the means of supporting the seller in developing their knowledge of the buyer's buying process.

As the findings of the empirical data have shown, relationship orientation can result in considerable advantages for both parties. Relationship orientation conducted by the means of strategic adaptation of the sales process to the buying process can shorten sales cycles, improve resource allocation, result in a faster ROI, and strengthen the projected relationship. Moreover, improvements in resource allocation, planning and higher efficiency in sales and buying can produce positive *environmental implications*. An improved resource allocation can result in a more careful planning in terms of production and manufacturing, which can result in less waste and a more efficient utilization of raw materials, energy, and other resources.

Research implications

Providing a 'snapshot' of a relationship initiation on which data were collected in retrospective, this study may not properly capture all of the dynamics that the strategic adaptation of the sales process involves. In order to focus on the dynamics, rather than conducting a case study in retrospect, a longitudinal study of strategic sales process adaptation may be more appropriate.

The framework for strategic sales process adaptation resulting from this research builds on findings from literature and through empirical data gathered from the telecommunications industry. Thus, the framework and resulting knowledge could be tested in other buyer-seller settings in other industries as well. This could, for example, provide more in-depth knowledge and enable a closer examination of the area of reactive adaptation in strategic sales process adaptation.

This study underpins the importance of the adaptability of the sales process as a central aspect of strategic adaptation of the sales process. In this study it is pointed out that an adaptable sales process should simultaneously be formalized, without restricting flexibility, which adaptation requires. Further research is needed in order to design and develop such a sales process. Thus, constructing an adaptable sales process could be a subject for further study. Furthermore, strategic sales process adaptation is influenced by the seller's knowledge of the buyer's buying process. At least two topics could be studied more in depth: what type of information and from whom does the seller need to obtain this in order to optimally adapt; and how could the buyer optimally support the seller in the process of adaptation, without the buyer actually conducting the work for the seller.

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APPENDIX A

Table A.1 Advantages of adaptation (seller's view)

	Description	Analysis	Interpretation
VP of sales	Improved efficiency in process: More accurate info from seller -> knowledge transfer	Improved communication and product quality, less misunderstandings	Quicker ROI for project/ deal and stronger relationship
	'Teamgeist'	Shared view and commitment to mutual project	Stronger relationship
	Improved product quality	Less testing required, less errors	Quicker ROI for project/ deal
	Less testing needed	Less resources required for testing	Quicker ROI for project/ deal
	Less resources needed	Lower project costs	Quicker ROI for project/ deal
	Quicker legal negotiations	Shorter sales cycle	Accelerated revenue generation
	Shorter testing process	Fewer resources required, shorter sales cycle	Quicker ROI, accelerated revenue stream
	Lower personnel costs	Fewer resource investments needed	Quicker ROI for project/ deal
Chairman	More contracts for seller (due to higher efficiency)	Improved efficiency and resource allocation	Quicker ROI, increased total revenue stream
	Quicker response times	Improved efficiency and resource allocation	Quicker ROI for project/ deal
	Better feedback	More accurate mutual understanding	Time savings and resource allocation
	More structured working	Improved resource allocation	Quicker ROI for project/ deal
	Resource allocation	Cost savings	Quicker ROI for project/ deal
	Mutual understanding	Improved communication and product quality, less misunderstandings	Quicker ROI for project/ deal and stronger relationship
	Resource allocation	Cost savings	Quicker ROI for project/ deal
	For buyer:		
	Quicker responses	Improved efficiency and resource allocation	Quicker ROI for project/ deal
	Fewer misunderstandings	Improved communication and less stress	Quicker ROI for project/ deal and stronger relationship
	Improved customer service	Higher satisfaction	Stronger customer

			relationship
	Less frustration	Higher satisfaction	Stronger customer relationship
	Better deliveries	Less testing and other resources required	Quicker ROI for project/ deal and stronger relationship
Sales engineer	Better steering	Improved communication and less stress	Stronger customer relationship
	Resource allocation	Less costs	Quicker ROI for project/ deal
	Simplification of work	Less resources required, time savings	Quicker ROI for project/ deal, improved quality
	Financial savings	Less costs	Quicker ROI for project/ deal
	Less frustration	Higher satisfaction	Stronger customer relationship
	Lowers risk of burnout	Improved efficiency and satisfaction	Quicker ROI for project/ deal and stronger relationship
President	Better navigation	Improved and more accurate resource allocation	Quicker ROI, faster access to revenue
	Shortens sales cycle	Time savings, improved resource allocation	Quicker ROI, faster access to revenue
	Shortens sales cycle	Time savings, improved resource allocation	Quicker ROI, faster access to revenue
	Resource allocation	Monetary savings	Quicker ROI for project/ deal
	Opportunity cost and prioritisation of customer case	Time savings (e.g. through discarding non-promising cases), efficiency	Quicker ROI for project/ deal
Product manager	Increased trust	More efficiency in co-operation	Stronger relationship
	Faster closure	Time and resource savings	Quicker ROI and increased total revenue
	Shorter sales cycle	Time and resource savings	Quicker ROI and increased total revenue
	More efficient resource allocation	Cost savings in terms of resource allocation/ signed customer	Quicker ROI for project/ deal

APPENDIX B

Table B.1 Advantages of the adaption of the sales process (buyer's view)

	Description	Analysis	Interpretation
Product manager 1	Better planning (for both parties)	Improved efficiency, developing trust	Improving buyer-seller relationship
	Improved co-operation (through better planning)	Improved communication and efficiency	Securing ROI and launch
	Openness in communication	Honest and direct communication	Stronger relationship
Product and proposition manager	Testing seller's flexibility	Sign of seller's customer-orientation	Relationship indicator
	Seller entering 'considered' status	Adaptation, prerequisite for becoming supplier	Improving seller-buyer relationship
Purchasing manager	Consensus	Mutual understanding and commitment	Relationship indicator
	Resource allocation	Efficiency in resource allocation	Quicker ROI for project
	Faster closure (for seller)	Time and resource savings	Quicker ROI and launch
	Incoming cash flow (for seller)	Seller avoids risk of running out of money	Improving supplier-buyer relationship
	Improved mutual resource planning	Meeting project time schedule and resource savings	Securing ROI and launch
Product manager 2	Smoother process (better steering)	Improved and more accurate resource planning	Securing ROI and launch
	Increased satisfaction (at buyer)	Developing mutual trust	Improving supplier-buyer relationship
	Less work	Higher efficiency	Quicker ROI
	Less stress	Mutual understanding	Improving buyer-supplier relationship
	Prognosis for future co-operation	Developing mutual trust	Improving buyer-supplier relationship
	Developing trust	Mutual commitment	Improving buyer-supplier relationship
	Improves seller's chances to become shortlisted	Sign of interest and commitment from supplier	Improving supplier-buyer relationship
	Reduces stress	Standardised buying process lowers risk for ad-hoc interventions	Improving buyer-supplier relationship

Improves process handling	Improved resource planning	Quicker ROI and launch
More efficient resource planning	Reduce risk of exaggerating resource allocation	Quicker ROI
Smooth progress throughout process	Keeping up the positive momentum and speed	Faster ROI and improved relationship