Conceptualization, implementation, benefits and limitations of relationship selling

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Abstract
The negative image that salespeople have traditionally had is in direct contrast to the most actual role of the selling function in the company: relationship selling. Under this new approach, salespeople are focused not only on making the sale, but also on satisfying their customers and ultimately on the establishment of a mutually satisfactory relationship with them. In this article, the author provides a definition of relationship selling, analyzes its implementation in the company as well as its benefits and limitations. Finally, managerial implications are presented and future research guidelines suggested.

Key words: relationship selling, sales management, salespeople.

JEL code:
1. **Introduction**

“Willy (to her wife): -Because I feel extremely lonely, especially when I do not sell and I do not have anybody to talk to. All of a sudden, I have the impression that I won’t sell anymore, that I won’t be able to provide you with a decent life…”

Arthur Miller (1949)

The sales profession has traditionally been marginalized by society (Hawes et al., 2004). For instance, plays such as “Death of a salesman” show frustrated people who are obsessed with closing a sale despite buyer’s interests. Accordingly, it is very common that today in Spain the term “salesman” is avoided in favor of other terms that have the same meaning (Barroso and Cossio, 1998). This evidence is clear if you have a look at the job offers in the newspapers. You can hardly see the term salesman, yet it is easy to read other words such as: sales promoter, sales adviser or representative.

This situation can explain the fact that the area of personal selling and sales management as an academic discipline has received little attention from Spanish scholars, in comparison to other marketing topics (Román et al., 2002a). Furthermore, the negative image that salespeople have traditionally had is in direct contrast to the most actual role of the selling function in the company: relationship selling. Under this new approach, salespeople are focused not only on making the sale, but also on satisfying their customers and ultimately on the establishment of a mutually satisfactory relationship with them.

We do agree with Professors Torán and Bigné, who in the prologue of the recent book by Küster (2002), that deals with relationship selling, argue that: “Several excellent articles and books have been written dealing with relationship marketing…. [ ]. Nonetheless, it is quite difficult to find publications regarding relationship selling. Furthermore, most of them are anecdotal and suffering from a theoretical background”. Yet, in the international arena, it is easy to find a great number of academic publications dealing with relationship selling. Nevertheless, most of them build their
conceptual framework on the basis of relationship marketing, ignoring the specific characteristics of the relationship selling paradigm. Furthermore, there exists a lack of agreement and contradictory views regarding the conceptualization and implementation of relationship selling (e.g., Jolson, 1997; Weitz and Bradford, 1999; Wilson, 2000; Jones et al., 2005).

Consequently, the main objective of the present article is to conceptualize the construct of relationship selling, and to analyze its implementation in the company stressing both its benefits and limitations. In order to achieve such objective, first the evolution of the personal selling function is revised. Next, a brief discussion on relationship marketing is provided. A formal conceptualization of relationship selling is provided based on earlier literature. The latter leads us to show the main differences between relationship selling and a closely related construct: partnering selling. In what follows the implementation of relationship selling in the company, its benefits and limitations are analyzed. Finally, conclusions are presented, managerial implications discussed and future research proposed.

2. The evolutionary process in personal selling
In 1960 the American Marketing Association defined personal selling as an: “oral presentation that takes place between a salesman and one or more potential customers with the objective of closing the sale”. Yet, it is worth taking into account that the salesperson’s activities and responsibilities evolve at the time that companies react to competitive pressures (Wilson, 2000). More than forty years later of AMA’s definition, Jones’s (2005:4) contribution brings together the changes which took place in the personal selling function, “professional selling is the interpersonal communication process in which a seller uncovers and satisfies the needs and wants of a prospect to the mutual, long-term benefit of both parties”.

Based on both definitions is it plausible to realize that “selling as a profession and a function has evolved and dramatically changed over recent decades” (Moncrief and Marshall, 2005:21). In this sense, the AMA’s definition does not consider customers’ needs, and focuses on closing the sale.
While in recent contributions the customer gains relevance in that the salesperson has to make the sale but satisfying customer needs. In short, personal selling has evolved from a sales orientation—transactional oriented—to a relationship marketing orientation, where the salesperson is meant to create and maintain mutually beneficial relationships with customers based on the satisfaction of their needs (Wotruba, 1991; Anderson, 1996; Donaldson et al., 1997; Weitz and Bradford 1999; Futrell, 2002; Williams and Attaway, 2003; Ingram et al., 2004). Table 1 shows that the nature of personal selling, like marketing, has evolved through five orientations. The production orientation precedes the sales orientation. The former takes places in markets where demand is greater than supply. Consequently, selling is limited to accepting orders for the supplier’s available offering and conveying it to the buyer (Wotruba, 1991).

Table 1. The evolution in the salesperson role

| CHARACTERISTICS          | ROLE                        |
|--------------------------|                            |
|                          | Production | Sales | Marketing | Relationship marketing |
| Objective                | Making sales | Making sales | Satisfying customer needs | Building relationships |
| Orientation              | Short-term seller needs | Short-term seller needs | Seller and buyer needs | Long-term seller and buyer needs |
| Critical tasks of salespeople | Taking sales orders and deliver the products | Convince customers to buy the product | Adapt seller’s offer to customer’s needs | Manage the relationship with the customer |
| Activities of salespeople | Making sales calls and informing customers about the firm’s offering | Influencing customers using a hard-sell approach | Help customers to make decisions that satisfy their needs and solve their problems | Creating new alternatives by matching buyer needs with seller capabilities |
| Role of salespeople      | Provider | Persuader | Problem solver | Value creator |

On the contrary, supply is greater than demand in the sales, marketing, and relationship marketing orientations. A sales-oriented salesperson implements high-pressure selling techniques in order to persuade customers without considering their needs (Wotruba, 1991; Weitz et al., 1998; Weitz and Bradford, 1999). Consequently, such an approach is short-term oriented, whereas in the other two approaches the salesperson listens to the customer first, identifies customer and then offers the product that best matches their specific circumstances and needs (Weitz et al., 1998; Ingram et al., 2004). Salespeople in the relationship marketing orientation work with their customers and their companies to develop solutions that enhance the profits of both firms. In other words, they develop and maintain relational exchanges—exchanges in which the buyer and the seller devote their attention to “increasing the pie” rather than “dividing the pie.” In such a context, the salesperson becomes a key advisor for the buying company (Wotruba, 1991; Weitz and Bradford, 1999; Ingram et al, 2004).

In short, the most current approach to personal selling implies that the salesperson not only has to implement the traditional activities of the personal selling process (i.e., presentation, overcoming objections, closing), but also to identify customers’ needs, provide relevant information that solves their problems and provide an after-sales service that warrants customer relationship maintenance (Cravens, 1995; Weitz et al., 1998; Futrell, 2002; Ingram et al., 2004).

Nevertheless, it is important to consider that the evolution in the personal selling function is not only a matter of time evolution, but also in the activities carried out by salespeople, that vary depending on the type of industry, company and resources, as well as on the particular customers’ needs, characteristics of the competitors and the market (Wotruba 1991; Darmon, 1998). Marshall et al.’s (1999) study provides empirical evidence to the evolutionary process in personal selling. They found that salespeople carry out most of the activities implemented in the mid 80’s (see Moncrief, 1986), yet 49 new activities are identified.
3. **Theoretical foundations of relationship selling: relationship marketing**

One of the most recognized definitions of relationship marketing is that of Morgan and Hunt (1994:22), “relationship marketing refers to all marketing activities directed toward establishing, developing, and maintaining successful relational exchanges”. Under this perspective, relationship marketing involves not only exchanges with customers, but also with internal units in the company, suppliers and lateral organizations. More specifically, the selling company can have relational exchanges with suppliers of goods or services, governmental institutions, final consumers, intermediate customers, employees, several business units in the company, competitors and nonprofit organizations.

Morgan and Hunt’s (1994) article implies to adopt a wide perspective regarding the relationships that the company can establish, both inside and outside. Moreover, it is possible to distinguish between those relationships that are established with customers, from those established with other exchange partners. As for the former relationships, they achieve their greatest manifestation in the vertical integration between the seller and the buyer (Webster, 1992). On the contrary, discreet transactions take place when parties exchange money for products, with no continuation in the relationship. These two types of exchanges are the extremes of a continuum. Nevertheless, it is not only a company decision to establish in which point of the continuum wants to be. The selling company has to take into account the other party of the exchange, the customer (Jackson, 1985). The company needs to assess the predisposition of their customers in such a continuum, being possible that some of their customers want relational exchanges, whereas others transactional exchanges (Jackson, 1985; Berry, 1995; Holmlund, 2004).

Taken together, the above reveals how this new approach forces companies to abandon the traditional short-term focus –one sale– in favor of the creation of a long-term relationship –continuing sales– (Berry and Parasuraman, 1993). Furthermore, the company has to implement several
activities in order to effectively manage relationship marketing with their customers. For instance: “salespeople need to focus on more longer-term and customer-oriented selling strategies rather than selling techniques directed toward immediate sales transactions” (Williams and Attaway, 1996:34). In this sense, relationship selling implies the tactical aspects of the relationship marketing approach in order to strengthen the relationship (Jobber and Lancaster, 2000). For several companies, the responsibility of establishing and cultivating relationships with customers through trust and satisfaction lies in the salesforce (Futrell, 2002). Consequently, the success of the relationship strategy of the company with their customers is very much dependent on its salesforce in that they have a major influence on the customers (Harris et al., 2005).

4. Conceptualization of relationship selling and differences from partnering selling

Only recently, the relationship perspective in marketing has extended to the area of personal selling. Webster (1992:15) argues that: “the traditional role of the salesperson is evolving towards a broader definition of responsibilities where the salesperson is a relationship manager”. Accordingly, the salesperson is an advisor of the customer. Results from Macintosh et al. (1992) reveal that the most successful salespeople place special emphasis on establishing a relationship with the customer, rather than on closing the sale.

From the early 90’s several articles are published dealing with the relationship selling paradigm. Some of them are theoretical pieces, though they place special emphasis on industrial selling (Doyle and Roth, 1992; Jolson, 1997; Schultz et al., 1999; Weitz and Bradford, 1999; Wilson, 2000; Küster, 2002). As for the empirical studies, some are focused on the context of services (Crosby et al., 1990; Sharma et al., 1999; Boles et al., 2000a and 2000b; Frankwick et al., 2001; Román and Ruiz, 2005), industrial markets (Williams and Attaway, 1996; Williams, 1998; Keillor et al., 1999; Keillor et al., 2000; Beverland, 2001; Jap, 2001; Liu and Leach,
2001) or, recently, retailing (Beatty et al., 1996; Macintosh and Lockshin, 1997; Reynolds and Beatty, 1999; Reynolds and Arnold, 2000).

The studies related to the industrial markets are focused on the relationship between the buyer and the seller companies. In such a context, the role played by the salesperson is not sufficiently identified and valued (Doney and Cannon, 1997; Cannon and Homburg, 2001; Holmlund, 2004). On the contrary, the relationships between the individual salesperson and the buyer company have received little attention from scholars (Boles et al., 1997a). Despite the fact that in industrial markets, the salesforce becomes a key vehicle to develop and cultivate long-term relationships between the two companies (Macintosh et al., 1992).

Table 2 shows the most relevant definitions of relationship selling. Most of them refer to the development of a relationship between the individual salesperson and the customer, through a series of interactions that take place aimed at maintaining a regular contact with the customer (Crosby et al., 1990; Czepiel, 1990; Donaldson et al., 1997; Donaldson, 1998; Küster, 2002; Jones et al., 2005). These definitions are closely related to what Futrell (2002) has labeled consultative selling: “the process of helping the customer achieve strategic short and long-term goals through the use of the seller’s good and/or service” (p. 51).
### Table 2. Definitions of relationship selling

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Crosby et al. (1990)</td>
<td>Salesperson’s behavior focused on cultivate and develop the relationship with the customer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Czepiel (1990)</td>
<td>It takes place after a series of interactions between the salesperson and the customer leading to the parties to know each other.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doyle and Roth (1992)</td>
<td>It implies to get the position of preferential provider through the development of long-term trust in the key accounts of the seller.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donaldson et al. (1997) and Donaldson (1998)</td>
<td>Sales strategy based on the development of a long-term relationship with customers. Each sales interaction is perceived by the seller as a way to strengthen the relationship with the customer and achieve customer loyalty to the seller.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jolson (1997)</td>
<td>It refers to the development of trust between the seller and the buyer through the long-term delivery of high value benefits.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Williams (1998)</td>
<td>Degree to which the buyer trusts the salesforce and commits to maintain and develop the interdependency with the salesforce of the selling company.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jobber and Lancaster (2000)</td>
<td>It pursues to establish a long-term reliable relationship with the customer based on the consideration of all their needs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Küster (2002)</td>
<td>Sales process focused on the development of mutual trust between the buyer and the seller with the aim of offering anticipated high-value long-term benefits to the buyer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jones et al. (2005)</td>
<td>Relationship selling is a process that occurs over time and its main goal is to provide excellent long-term service to customers.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Own elaboration.

On the contrary, Doyle and Roth (1992), Jolson (1997), Ingram et al. (2004), and to a lesser extend Jobber and Lancaster (2000), restrict the application of relationship selling to industrial markets. Likewise, even
though Johnston and Marshall (2003) do not provide a formal definition of relationship selling, they confine its implementation between the buyer-seller relationship. Williams (1998) provides a broader applicability of relationship selling, though in industrial markets, but the role of the individual salesperson is highlighted.

Based on the definitions of relationship marketing and relationship selling by Morgan and Hunt (1994) and Crosby et al. (1990) respectively, we define relationship selling as: all selling activities directed toward establishing, developing, and maintaining successful relational exchanges between the salesperson and the customer—either an organization or an individual—and, in turn, between the selling and the buying companies. Also, this approach requires the ongoing satisfaction of the customer needs, both those related to the product as well as the interaction. Likewise, we agree with Küster (2002) in that trust is the key component of this concept. Yet, following Sharma et al. (1999) it is also necessary that both parties have a predisposition to engage in a relationship based on mutual interests, commitment and loyalty.

From the previous definition the difference with relationship marketing becomes evident. Relationship selling pursues to establish one relationship (not several) with the customer, and not with other relational agents. Moreover, the customer can be either an organization or the final consumer. Likewise, the selling process is emphasized in that the salesperson has to satisfy customer needs regarding both the product and the sales interaction. The latter is done, for example, by actively and empathetically listening (Román et al., 2005), and adapting the message and the call length (Keillor et al., 2000). To our understanding, relationship selling leads to a relationship between the buyer and the seller. In short, it implies to translate the relationship marketing construct, that takes place between organizations, to the individual relationship between the salesperson and the buyer, placing special emphasis on the activities implemented by the salesperson.

Relationship selling finds its maximum expression in what has been termed partnering selling. For instance, Jolson (1997) uses both terms indistinctly. On the contrary, we defend that they are different constructs.
Yet, the partnering selling approach requires that the salesperson previously engages in relationship selling. Weitz and Bradford (1999) argue that partnering selling is the emerging paradigm in personal selling. Accordingly, salespeople “work with their customers and their companies to develop solutions that enhance the profits of both firms […] the emphasis is on increasing the pie rather than dividing the pie, this involves for the partnering firms to make risky, idiosyncratic investments” (p. 243).

Jolson (1997) argues that partnering selling can be implemented in every context regardless of the size of the company, the type of product or the type of customers. However, a review of the relevant publications dealing with partnering selling, allows us to verify that this approach needs certain conditions to be successfully implemented:

1. As well as in relationship selling, there needs to be a favorable predisposition from the buyer to adopt such an approach. Otherwise the relationship will not occur (Jolson, 1997; Weitz and Bradford, 1999).
2. The activities and tasks of the salesperson transform towards the figure of relationship manager (Weitz and Bradford, 1999; Wilson, 2000) or marketing executive (Wotruba, 1991) adjusting all the marketing mix components to meet the needs of a target market in a competitively successful manner. In Weitz and Bradford’s (1999) words: “the salesperson needs a detailed knowledge of their firm’s capabilities and resources, and what the customer is going to demand in the future” (p. 249). Similarly, they have worked in various functional areas of the firm and have considerable experience with the buying firm, as well as its industry. Moreover, their skills and abilities must allow them to: suggest creative and innovative solutions to the complex problems of the buying firm, coordinate the relationship with the client, deal with different departments of the buying firm, manage the conflict with them, and generate trust (Doyle and Roth, 1992; Jolson, 1997; Weitz and Bradford, 1999). Even the salesperson or relationship manager needs to integrate in the buying firm’s culture (Schultz et al., 1999).
3. The salesperson needs to count with the help of a sales team with people from different departments of the selling company (Moon and Armstrong, 1994; Weitz and Bradford, 1999; Wilson, 2000). Likewise, several interactions are necessary to happen between both companies at different levels: sales, engineering, and production from the selling company and purchasing, finance, engineering and production from the buying company (Schultz et al., 1999).

4. Moreover, it is necessary for the selling company to get integrated in the production process of the buying company, and that both work together towards the same goals, being the selling company the only supplier of the selling company for a specific product (Wilson, 2000; Ingram et al., 2004).

5. The relationships develop in the partnering role can only take place between companies, there is no place for final consumers (Futrell, 2002).

In short, we do not see partnering selling as the new paradigm in personal selling, rather as the update of the activities, skills and knowledge of the traditionally known as the key account manager (Schultz and Evans, 2002), and now called relationship manager. They have to be leaders of a team with people belonging to different functions of the firm. Following Jobber and Lancaster (2000), and as it can be seen in several job offers in the newspapers, this type of selling has particular importance in high-tech industries, such as the software/hardware industry.
Table 3. Differences between relationship selling and partnering selling

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of selling</th>
<th>Relationship selling</th>
<th>Partnering selling</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Objective</td>
<td>Developed customer relationships through the satisfaction of their needs implementing behaviors that lead to trust</td>
<td>Develop customer relationships through the achievement of their strategic objectives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orientation</td>
<td>Seller and buyer needs.</td>
<td>Seller needs and strategic objectives of the customers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical tasks</td>
<td>Advice the customer and provide solutions that satisfy their needs</td>
<td>Creating new alternatives by matching buyer needs with seller capabilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activities</td>
<td>Maintaining and improving customer satisfaction both with the salesperson and the products he/she represents</td>
<td>Building and maintaining customer relationships through the organization and management of a sales team and the management of conflict with the customer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Context of implementation | All type of customers (organizations and final consumers)  
In the case of inter-organizational markets the integration of the selling company in the buying company is not necessary | Industrial markets, buyer-seller relationships where it is necessary the integration of the selling company in the buying company |
| Unit of analysis | Individual salesperson (supported by the organization)                               | Sales team.  
Salespeople or other personnel integrated in the buying company                      |

Source: Own elaboration.

5. Application, benefits and limitations of relationship selling

In the preceding section we have shown that partnering selling is a highly restricted concept when it comes to its implementation. It can only be implemented by a few salespeople. In this line, Weitz and Bradford (1999) and Wilson (2000) acknowledge that transactional operations involve most of the operations carry out by salespeople. Similarly, Johnston and Marshall (2003) argue that the selling company may not be able to adopt a relational approach with all its customers, rather only with its key accounts.
Table 3 reveals that relationship selling can be implemented in more contexts as opposed to partnering selling, for example: final consumers markets and business to business markets, and in this latter case it is not necessary for the selling company to integrate in the buying company. Likewise, a selling team is not necessary yet it is convenient for the salesperson to have the support of several departments in his/her company.

There are several benefits achieved through the implementation of relationship selling for the seller company and its salesforce: the price of the product loses importance in the sales negotiations, the learning process is fostered, the knowledge of the buyer company is facilitated, the salesperson’s credibility is improved, favorable word-of-mouth is promoted, and the likelihood of future purchases is increased (Crosby et al., 1990; Johnston and Withers, 1995; Boles et al., 1997a, 2000a and 2000b; Sharma et al., 1999). On the other hand, the buyer obtains higher levels of ongoing satisfaction, both with the product and with the sales interaction.

According to Johnston and Withers (1995:20): “in the relationship selling approach making profits is a result, not a cause”. We do not agree completely with this statement in that we reckon that the main goal of relationship selling is not to obtain short-term sales, but the development of a mutually beneficial relationship between the buyer and the seller, that in the mid-run will provide economical benefits, if not, the seller may consider to abandon the relationship. Accordingly, it is worth mentioning that it is not always convenient for the selling company and its salesforce to adopt a relationship selling approach in that relational customers are more difficult to satisfy, and the effective implementation of such an approach presents several difficulties. Consequently we agree with several researchers when they argue that this approach is more likely to be effective when the salesperson calls on a few highly profitable customers who are engaged in frequent purchases (Crosby et al., 1990; Boles et al., 2000a; Küster, 2002). In this sense, findings from DelVecchio et al. (2003) reveal that the higher the hierarchical position of the contact person in the
buying company, the better his/her evaluations of the relational efforts carried out by the salesperson.

In short, we understand that companies need to assess the degree to which they want its salesforce to adopt a relational approach. At first, it does not make too much sense that all salespeople practice relationship selling with all their customers, without having determined if profits can be made, and if resources, capabilities and skills are available. Even in one company, the salesforce may adopt different approaches with their customers. For example, those in charge of supplying the product to the customer may operate under a production orientation. On the contrary, those involve in creating new accounts may work under a relational approach, if the company wants to have long-term relationships with their customers. Nevertheless, in certain contexts relationship selling has very little application, as for example when selling low-involvement tangible goods to final consumers.

6. Conclusions, management recommendations and future research

The present article has conceptualized the construct of relationship selling, and established the differences from the concept of partnering selling. Likewise, we have shown the context where the practice of relationship selling becomes more appropriate, as well as its benefits and limitations. With this article we aimed to reduce the existing gap in the Spanish literature devoted to the field of personal selling and sales management by presenting the role of personal selling in the new millenium. Similarly, the conceptualization of relationship selling is necessary for the development of future research on this topic.

Several aspects need to be taken into account by the company when deciding the optimal level of relational approach in their salesforce. In particular, the present competitive environment characterized by world-wide deregulation, the emergence of new forms of technology, industry-wide consolidation, higher customer expectations, forces companies to differen-
tiate their offerings. The implications for management are that it is of increasing importance that new, non-price factors, such as relational behaviors of the salesforce be used as a means of differentiation, to achieve higher revenue growth and improved market share, through the establishment of mutually satisfied relationships with customers. Yet, an efficient implementation of relationship selling implies, for the selling company, to incur in higher costs in terms of sales training, supervision, evaluation and remuneration. Once the company has analyzed the aforementioned factors, if relationship selling is likely to bring profits to the company, several actions should be carried out to foster such approach among their salespeople.

a) In first place, company policies should try to influence salespeople’s attitude to practice relationship selling. This is because a customer orientation approach can not be imposed by management, and salespeople need to believe and value such orientation in order to effectively implement it (Siguaw et al., 1994). In this vein, it is of great importance that the sales supervisors act as an example to follow to the sales team.

b) In addition, training can be used to reinforce salespeople’s positive attitudes towards relationship selling, and prepare salespeople to effectively satisfy customer needs. Likewise, training should provide salespeople with the necessary knowledge in terms of products and competition (Román et al., 2002b). Product knowledge should emphasize the benefits and utilities offered to the customers. Competitor knowledge is to be used in a professional an ethical manner, and not to criticize competition without any objective reason.

c) Sales training should also provide salespeople with the necessary skills and abilities so that they are able to distinguish different types of customers, identify their buying motive, and effectively analyze their needs. All these skills could be taught through role-playing where the salesperson acts consecutively as the customer and as the salesperson. These exercises can be complemented with interactive
training assisted through computers. Finally, salespeople need to practice what they have learned through on-the-job training, since such methodology allows supervisors to evaluate and monitor salesperson’s behavior, with the chance to correct the mistakes made.

d) Nevertheless, besides the above, there has to be a commitment from management that short-term goals will not be pursued and that the satisfaction of long-term customer needs is a priority in the company (Anderson and Oliver, 1987). Accordingly, managers should implement a behavior-based control system, where the activities carried out by salespeople (e.g., through customers evaluations) are considered when evaluating their performance.

e) Moreover, managers should try to communicate with their salespeople, assisting and guiding them in accurately viewing their day-to-day sales activity from a relational perspective; then they should not reward them on a 100% commission based on the sales made, but evaluate their various activities, not just the outcomes achieved (sales volume). We do not imply that companies should avoid incentive programs, rather they could use a combination of base salary plus incentive pay in the form of commissions, bonuses or both based not only on the sales performance but on how well long-term objectives such as customer satisfaction have been achieved.

Overall, if the company wants their salespeople to adopt a relationship selling approach it is necessary to incur in an important inversion in terms of the policies and actions described above. Consequently, management should maximize the time that highly skilled and motivated salespeople spend calling on their customers, since these activities have a major impact on the customer. In this regard, it is convenient to distinguish between the actions that only the salesperson can carry out such as: preparing for the sales call, presenting the product, handling objections, closing the sale, providing a follow-up service, from other actions, less specialized and easy to
implement; prospecting potential customers, maintaining a customer dataset, management of the sales operation, implementing routinely after sales service. In this sense, recent findings from Johnson and Bharadwaj (2005) suggest to use new technologies (e.g., internet) as a way to implement several administrative tasks more efficiently and faster. In short, the profitable way of implementing a relational selling approach implies that salespeople do not carry out all selling activities, but only those where their skills are required and valued by the customers. Further, salespeople should need the support of a selling team both before and after the sales is made.

This research provides several directions for future research. First, once the concept of relationship selling has been rigorously delimited, we encourage future researchers to develop and validate a scale to measure relationship selling. In this vein, the work by Crosby et al. (1990) can be very useful in the items generation. Second, results from experimental and/or longitudinal designs may provide new insights into the changes in the relationship between seller and the buyer, and the role placed by the salesforce. In this regard, research by Frankwick et al. (2001) and Martín and Román (2003) may be used as a starting point. Finally, it can be argued that relationship selling represents just one of several approaches to personal selling. For instance, the benefits of the frequency of contact and communications may lead to the misperception that all organizational buyers prefer to be called on and checked up with a lot. In fact, some organizational buyers may not desire excessive contact (Liu and Leach, 2001). Future research should certainly address this issue.

7. References


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