



Target and position article

The role of a solutions salesperson: Reducing uncertainty and fostering adaptiveness

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ABSTRACT

Suppliers in business-to-business markets increasingly are seeking growth by providing end-to-end solutions to customers. Customers, on their part, see solutions and accompanying performance-based vendor contracts as ways to assure themselves of performance outcomes they need. This article draws on extant literature in organizational buying behavior, industrial marketing and project marketing, as well as the distinctive nature of customer solutions, to delineate three overarching types of uncertainties among customers and suppliers: (1) need uncertainty, (2) process uncertainty and (3) outcome uncertainty. Each of these types of uncertainties is present across the four stages of a solution process (requirements definition, customization and integration, deployment, and post-deployment support). However, the nature of these uncertainties changes as a solution evolves from one stage to the next. Based on this, we delineate a solution salesperson's role as one of reducing specific uncertainties across the solution process by providing pertinent information to key stakeholders within the customer- and supplier organizations, and encouraging adaptive behavior of the parties involved. We discuss implications for practice, and suggest directions for further research.

1. Introduction

A growing number of companies seek to grow their revenues and profits by providing customers with end-to-end solutions rather than stand-alone goods or services. Many see solutions as a means to differentiation in business-to-business (B2B) markets facing rampant commoditization (Eggert, Hogreve, Ulaga, & Munkhoff, 2014; Kowalkowski, Gebauer, & Oliva, 2017; Kowalkowski & Ulaga, 2017; Ostrom, Parasuraman, Bowen, Patrício, & Voss, 2015; Worm, Bharadwaj, Ulaga, & Reinartz, 2017; Sawhney, Balasubramanian, & Krishnan, 2004; Ulaga & Reinartz, 2011). Unlike stand-alone goods and services, customer solutions require a supplier to have deeper customer insights and distinctive resources and competencies, which are more difficult for competitors to imitate (Ulaga & Reinartz, 2011). For this reason, many consider a supplier's ability to provide solutions as a source of sustainable competitive advantage in industrial markets (Shankar, Berry, & Dotzel, 2009).

Mirroring this trend among suppliers, business customers are also increasingly asking vendors to provide total solutions, rather than stand-alone goods or services. The interest in sourcing solutions illustrates the growing professionalization of the procurement function in

many customer organizations, and the fundamental shift from a focus on quality and price to an emphasis on *total cost of ownership* (TCO) and *sourcing value* through performance-based contracts with suppliers (Monczka, Handfield, Giunipero, & Patterson, 2016; Sheth, Sharma, & Iyer, 2009; Snelgrove & Stensson, 2017; Vitasek, 2017a, 2017b). In line with this evolution, customers increasingly are focusing on performance outcomes gained from procuring end-to-end solutions with customized and integrated goods and services (Eggert et al., 2014; Macdonald, Kleinaltenkamp, & Wilson, 2016).

As B2B customers shift towards buying solutions, new demands are being placed on suppliers' salespeople (Evans, McFarland, Dietz, & Jaramillo, 2012). A supplier's salesforce is critical for implementing the strategic move towards customer solutions. As boundary spanners, solution salespeople take on a pivotal role at the organizational frontline between solution suppliers and their customers (Johnson, Barksdale, & Boles, 2001; Rapp et al. 2017; Singh, Brady, Arnold, & Brown, 2017). Extant research suggests that a solution sales process is substantially different from the traditional goods-centric sales process in business markets (Tuli, Kohli, & Bharadwaj, 2007; Ulaga & Loveland, 2014). There is evidence that many salespeople are unable or unwilling to meet these new demands (Ulaga & Reinartz, 2011). Indeed, the role

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that a salesperson should play in the enactment of customer solutions itself is not particularly well defined (Blocker, Cannon, Panagopoulas, & Sager, 2012; De Jong, Verbeke, & Nussen, 2014; Williams & Plouffe, 2007). This may well account for some of the failures of suppliers to generate profits from customer solutions documented in the literature (Worm et al., 2017).

Despite general agreement about the strategic imperative of achieving growth through customer solutions in business markets, extant research provides little insight into specific competencies salespeople must master for excelling in providing solutions. Sales researchers have called for further research on salespeople's roles, responsibilities and skills required when transitioning from product-centric to solution-centric sales (Blocker et al., 2012; De Jong et al., 2014; Evans et al., 2012; Plouffe, Williams, & Wachner, 2008; Williams & Plouffe, 2007).

Against this backdrop, we make two primary contributions in this article. First, drawing on extant literature in organizational buying behavior, industrial marketing and project marketing, as well as the distinctive nature of customer solutions in business-to-business markets, we delineate three overarching uncertainties among customers and suppliers: need uncertainty, process uncertainty and outcome uncertainty. These uncertainties are present across all four stages of a solution process discussed by Tuli et al. (2007)—requirements definition, customization and integration, deployment, and post-deployment support. In addition, we discuss how the nature of these uncertainties changes as a solution evolves from one stage to the next.

Second, based on our analysis of the various uncertainties among customers and suppliers, we delineate a solution salesperson's role as one of reducing these uncertainties across the solution process by providing pertinent information to key employees of customers as well as suppliers, and encouraging adaptive behavior on part of the parties involved. We develop implications for practice, and discuss avenues for further research.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. In Section 2 we describe the changing landscape of organizational buying, the growing interest in customer solutions and the heightened demands placed on solution salespeople. In Section 3, we identify three overarching uncertainties faced by suppliers and customers, and discuss the nature of each across the four stages of the solution process. This analysis results in the delineation of the role and responsibilities of a solution salesperson. In Section 4, we conclude with a discussion of our contributions, implications for practice, and future research directions.

2. The changing landscape of organizational buying

There is widespread agreement among both academics and practitioners that the sales function is undergoing a major transformation (Adamson, Dixon, & Toman, 2012; Dixon & Tanner, 2012; Jones, Chonko, Jones, & Stevens, 2012). Across the board, business customers' sourcing strategies and buying behavior have evolved substantially. This has led suppliers to transform their sales organizations and re-define how they interact with customers (Jones, Brown, Zoltners, & Weitz, 2005; Lassk, Ingram, Kraus, & Di Mascio, 2012; Piercy, Cravens, & Lane, 2010; Terho, Eggert, Haas, & Ulaga, 2015; Thull, 2010).

A number of major trends have changed the way *how* customers buy products and services in today's business markets and *what* they ultimately expect from suppliers and their sales organizations. First, the shift to a more strategic role of purchasing and supply chain management in many firms has led to a growing sophistication of purchasing organizations and an increased professionalization of procurement professionals (Monczka et al., 2016; Sheth & Sharma, 2008; Trkman, Mertens, Viaene, & Gemmel, 2015). New approaches to strategic sourcing and the adoption of concepts such as Total Cost of Ownership (TCO) have shaped customers' expectations from suppliers (Monczka et al., 2016; Vitasek, 2017a). This trend has been further fueled by buyers' growing power emanating from information ubiquity and

increasing market place transparency (Rapp, Bachrach, Panagopoulos, & Ogilvie, 2014).

A second major shift relates to *what* business customers actually want to buy. With a growing emphasis on sourcing value, business customers have learned to become more demanding in terms of outcomes or end-results they expect from industrial vendors (Snelgrove & Stensson, 2017; Vitasek, 2017a). Customers in many markets today seek end-results and often ask for performance commitments and guarantees from their vendors (Vitasek, 2017b). Interestingly, this evolution has been shaped in part by suppliers' ongoing efforts to educate customers as to what they should expect from suppliers (Reinartz & Ulaga, 2008).

For example, Xerox taught business customers many years ago to “pay-per-click” for photocopies, instead of buying photocopy machines (Kowalkowski & Ulaga, 2017). Over time, this pricing model became an industry standard and competitors had to follow suit. Likewise, in healthcare, hospitals learned to lease medical scanners, instead of buying them, a model largely promoted by GE in the early days. Later, hospital procurement professionals learned to focus on asset efficiency improvements and patient flow optimization, driven in part by the guidance of GE, Siemens, and Toshiba (Reinartz & Ulaga, 2008). Similarly, airlines around the globe increasingly pay for multi-million-dollar jet engines by “hours flown” instead of purchasing engines outright (Ulaga & Reinartz, 2011). Prodded by tire manufacturers such as Michelin, operators of large truck fleets have come to ask suppliers to take on fleet tire management, paying for miles rolled instead of tires bought (Kowalkowski & Ulaga, 2017). Finally, more recently, large farmers have begun to discuss with Syngenta and Dupont's Pioneer issues of yield optimization and cash-back guarantees tied to farmland output, rather than buying tons of seed. These changes have disrupted established buying patterns and led to more complex buying practices and processes (Dixon & Adamson, 2011; Jones et al., 2005; Rapp et al., 2014).

2.1. Growing interest in customer solutions

The growing focus on achieving better business outcomes, both from a customer and a supplier perspective has led to a widespread interest in end-to-end customer solutions (Eggert et al., 2014; Macdonald et al., 2016). The topic of customer solutions has been investigated from multiple perspectives. For example, some scholars investigate the processes by which firms transition from being goods-centric to solution providers (Davies, Brady, & Hobday, 2006; Matthyssens & Vandenbempt, 2008). Others have studied unique characteristics of customer solutions (e.g., Penttinen & Palmer, 2007), and explored key success factors needed for designing and delivering solutions, both on the supplier and the customer side (Galbraith, 2002; Storbacka, 2011; Ulaga & Reinartz, 2011).

There is emerging consensus that solutions should be viewed as more than just bundles of customized and integrated sets of goods and services (see Macdonald et al., 2016). The literature suggests it is instructive to define solutions as joint supplier-customer processes for solving customer issues/problems. Tuli et al. (2007) suggest that these joint processes are comprised of four relatively discrete stages—(1) customer requirements definition, (2) customization and integration of products, (3) deployment of products, and (4) post-deployment support. In the remainder of this article, we adopt this four-stage characterization of the solution co-creation process.

2.2. New demands placed on solutions salespeople

Extant research points out that selling customer solutions places new and varied demands on salespeople (Evans et al., 2012; Storbacka, Ryals, Davies, & Nenonen, 2009). Yet, knowledge of the specific nature of these demands and how they relate to the solution sales process is still in its infancy. This is because despite a significant body of

knowledge on the *why* and *what* of service- and solution-growth strategies in business markets (Kowalkowski & Ulaga, 2017), scholars have yet to fully address the challenges of *how* such strategies can be successfully implemented. More research on executing service- and solution growth strategies at different functional levels is needed. In particular, the role of the sales function and that of the individual salesperson in solution selling have received very little attention (Sheth & Sharma, 2008; Ulaga & Loveland, 2014). This paucity is noteworthy because sales organizations and salespeople play pivotal roles in successfully implementing new strategic initiatives (Noble & Mokwa, 1999; Sarin, Challagalla, & Kohli, 2012).

Within the emerging literature specifically dedicated to services and solution sales, scholars have identified a manufacturer's sales force as a major hurdle in the path towards a more service- and solution-centric business model (Kowalkowski & Ulaga, 2017). Companies frequently experience strong resistance to change from within sales organizations, and high levels of churn in the transformation process (Reinartz & Ulaga, 2008). When making the transition from selling goods to selling complex services/solutions, Ulaga and Reinartz (2011) find that only about a third of industrial salespeople are able to make the transition easily; the vast majority require substantial training to master the challenges, or prefer to be reassigned to their traditional roles of selling goods.

Ulaga and Loveland (2014) investigate differences between selling goods and selling services in business markets and identify specific competencies and personality traits that enable sales of industrial services in general. However, these authors neither focus specifically on selling complex customer solutions, nor do they distinguish the different stages of the solutions process. Scholars therefore have called for more research on salespeople's roles, responsibilities and skills needed for successfully moving beyond product-centric business models to selling, developing, and deploying customer solutions (Blocker et al., 2012; De Jong et al., 2014; Evans et al., 2012; Plouffe et al., 2008; Williams & Plouffe, 2007).

As noted earlier, customers increasingly expect suppliers to deliver value, not just products. In the context of customer solutions, this implies that the role of a salesperson expected by a customer goes well beyond ensuring a smooth purchasing experience; it additionally calls for ensuring that his/her supplier's solution delivers the desired value, i.e., solves the customer's problem/issue satisfactorily. Thus, it is critical for a salesperson to be involved throughout the process of creating a customer solution. It is unclear, however, as to the specific roles and responsibilities that a salesperson should assume across the four solution stages, especially with respect to customer- and supplier-perceived uncertainties in the solution process. Therefore, in the next section, we explore in detail how solution salespersons can contribute to reducing uncertainties and achieving success in each of the main stages of the solution process. This examination clarifies the role a solution salesperson should play in the solution process.

3. The role of solutions salespeople

As boundary spanners, salespeople manage the interface between suppliers and customers (Johnson et al., 2001). They are ultimately responsible for translating a supplier's general value proposition to customers' particular business situations (Bonney & Williams, 2009; Storbacka, Polsa, & Saaksjarvi, 2011; Terho, Haas, Eggert, & Ulaga, 2012; Töytäri & Risto, 2015). In contrast to the role of many product salespeople, the role of a solution salesperson does not end after a solution sale is complete; rather, the salesperson is involved throughout the subsequent process of solution design, deployment, and beyond (Panagopoulous, Rapp, & Ogilvie, 2017).

In this section, we first draw on extant knowledge in the fields of organizational buying behavior and Marketing – with an emphasis on industrial marketing and project marketing – as a starting point for systematically investigating the nature of uncertainty relevant to

solutions. We identify prominent types of uncertainties discussed in extant literature. Next, we draw on these and the distinctive nature of a solution to develop a parsimonious but comprehensive set of three uncertainties that are particularly relevant to solutions: (1) need uncertainty, (2) process uncertainty and (3) outcome uncertainty.

Importantly, we highlight that these three uncertainties are present among *both* customers *and* suppliers across the four stages of the solution delivery process (requirements definition, customization and integration, deployment, post-deployment support). Moreover, the dominant issues in each of the three uncertainties change over the four stages. We consider each type of uncertainty in turn, and discuss changes in their specific nature as a solution moves from one stage to the next.

In course of our discussion of each type of uncertainty, we delineate the role of a salesperson in reducing it over the four stages. The salesperson can reduce certain uncertainties by providing pertinent information to the customers/suppliers. Reducing other uncertainties may call for a salesperson to encourage the customer/supplier to be adaptive, i.e., modify the solution design and/or its work processes to optimize the solution outcome. Formally, in the context of this research, adaptiveness refers to the extent to which a customer (or supplier) adjusts its expectations and behaviors vis-a-vis a solution in response to emerging challenges and opportunities as the solution progresses from conception to deployment and beyond. Interestingly, adaptive behavior involves a trade-off—while it may result in a more effective solution, it may hurt short-term performance metrics. This makes the salesperson's job more challenging.

3.1. Uncertainty in the organizational buying and marketing literatures

The literature in business-to-business marketing and organizational buying behavior has long acknowledged uncertainty in industrial buyer-seller relationships. Johnston and Lewin (1996) review the three most influential models of organizational buying behavior (Robinson, Faris, & Wind, 1967; Sheth 1973; Webster & Wind 1972). They conclude that much of the variation in organizational buying behavior is related to the level of perceived risk associated with a particular purchase. Johnston and Lewin (1996) view perceived risk as a function of the importance of a purchase, complexity of the purchase, level of uncertainty about the outcome, and the time pressure surrounding the purchase.

One of the most influential and enduring model of organizational buying behavior is the buy-grid framework developed by Robinson et al. (1967). This model distinguishes between three fundamental purchasing situations, each associated with a different level of uncertainty. These purchasing situations are new task purchase (high uncertainty), modified re-buy (medium uncertainty) and straight re-buy (low uncertainty). Industrial marketing scholars have further investigated specific types of uncertainty. For example, Hakansson, Johanson, and Wootz (1976) suggest that customer-perceived uncertainty varies along three dimensions—need uncertainty, market uncertainty and transaction uncertainty. *Need uncertainty* refers to difficulties encountered by organizational buyers in precisely specifying their functional requirements, order quantities, and delivery timing. *Market uncertainty* refers both to the level of heterogeneity in a given supply market (i.e., uncertainty related to differences between alternative suppliers) and to the level of dynamism (i.e., the extent to which these differences change over time). Finally, *transaction uncertainty* refers to the physical, legal, or logistical issues encountered by customers when sourcing goods or services.

Specific sub-areas within the business-to-business marketing discipline also refer to uncertainty in inter-organizational buyer-seller relationships. For example, research on project marketing alludes to uncertainty arising from the *discontinuity* of relationships between customers and contractors, *uniqueness* of parties, resources and interactions, as well as overall *complexity* encountered (Cova & Ghauri,

1996; Crespín-Mazet & Ghauri, 2007; Mandjak & Verež, 1998). Project marketing shares many similarities with customer solutions (Cova & Salle, 2007; Cova & Salle, 2008). The project marketing literature discusses various types of uncertainties (see Barlow & Jashapara, 1998; Cova, Ghauri, & Salle, 2002; Smyth, 2000; Turner & Simister, 2001). From a customer's perspective, these uncertainties relate to project specifications, the nature of transactions between project parties, and a supplier's ability to successfully execute a project (Cova et al., 2002; Smyth, 2000). Turner and Simister (2001) discuss uncertainties about a project's product and the process to deliver it, and their influences on terms of contract between buyers and suppliers.

In sum, the literature points to various uncertainties that may be pertinent to solutions. There is a need to categorize these into a *parsimonious* but comprehensive set of uncertainties, and delineate how specific uncertainties *change* over the course of a solution's sale, development, deployment and beyond. This is useful for developing stronger theory pertaining to uncertainties, conditions that perpetuate them and actions that can reduce them. In addition, the delineation of a parsimonious set of uncertainties and their evolution over time provides a useful way for salespeople to focus their efforts across the stages of a solution.

3.2. Uncertainty in the solution process

The various uncertainties discussed in the literature described earlier may be abstracted as primarily pertaining to a customer's specific need, and how well the customer and supplier will work to co-create a solution. Importantly, these uncertainties reside among customers of solutions *as well as* suppliers of solutions. Interestingly, even after the delivery of a solution, there may be uncertainty about how best to assess the solution's performance, and whether an alternative solution using different technologies might have produced better results. This suggests that the uncertainties experienced by a customer and supplier primarily revolve around customer needs, the process of co-creating a solution, and its performance outcome. We refer to these as *need uncertainty*, *process uncertainty*, and *outcome uncertainty* respectively. We discuss each in turn in the next sub-section (see Fig. 1).

It is useful to bear in mind that because the solution selling process does not always move linearly from one stage to the next, a salesperson must iterate between the four stages of the process in order to ensure a win-win for the customer and supplier. This complex and iterative nature of the solution process, and the uncertainties affecting its various stages require solution salespeople to be flexible and have strong problem solving abilities relative to salespeople selling stand-alone goods or services.

3.2.1. Need uncertainty and salesperson role

Following Hakansson et al. (1976), we define *need uncertainty* as the extent to which employees of a customer or supplier feel unsure about

the needs/requirements of the customer. Need uncertainty is expected to be the highest at the first stage, the requirements definition stage (hereafter, RD). In this stage “customers frequently are not fully cognizant of their business needs and cannot easily articulate them to a supplier” (Tuli et al., 2007). For this reason, salespeople are often confronted with ill-defined customer requirements (Murtha, Bharadwaj, & Van den Bulte, 2009; Ulaga & Loveland, 2014).

For example, customers may be uncertain whether certain performance outcomes are technically feasible, and the magnitude of costs involved in attaining different performance levels. They may even be uncertain as to what outcomes to prioritize. For example, different individuals within a customer organization may want to prioritize different performance dimensions (e.g., % uptime of an IT system, or ongoing maintenance cost, or ease of use). Similarly, there may be uncertainty regarding the specifics of a solution's components that would be required to attain desired end-results (e.g., the exact number of earthmoving machines of a certain model to move a specified amount of iron ore). Moreover, customers may be unaware of next-best alternatives, and uncertain about the costs and benefits of alternative solutions (e.g., whether a wind-based power generating system would be more suitable than a thermal system).

Thus, a critical task of a solution salesperson at the RD stage is to reduce these uncertainties, and help determine whether it would be in the interests of the supplier and customer to proceed with the solution development. This often involves her/his facilitating a dialog between relevant employees of the customer and those of the supplier. Because of the complexity of the number of stakeholders involved, there may be uncertainty within a supplier as to which business functions and personnel within a customer's organization may/should be involved in the solution process.

Thus, a salesperson's role involves identifying appropriate personnel in a customer's organization as well as the supplier organization. It requires interfacing with many different functions in the customer and supplier organization (Plouffe & Barclay, 2007; Üstüner & Godes, 2006; Töllner, Blut, & Holzmüller, 2011). For example, salespeople of Hilti, the construction tool solutions supplier, exchange information with a customer's general manager, finance manager, job site manager, and tool crib manager when selling a tool fleet management solution. On the supplier side, a tire fleet-management solution supplier's salespersons interface with its internal pricing experts, inside salespeople, actuaries, and the legal department. In addition to facilitating exchanges between select customer- and supplier personnel, a salesperson may draw on internal and external experts to reduce uncertainty about how specific combinations of solution components would work together and impact customers (Blocker et al., 2012; La Rocca & Snehota, 2014; Weitz & Bradford, 1999).

Finally, a salesperson's responsibility also includes identifying instances in which there is a poor fit between a customer's needs and the supplier's ability and/or willingness to meet it. In such cases, it may be

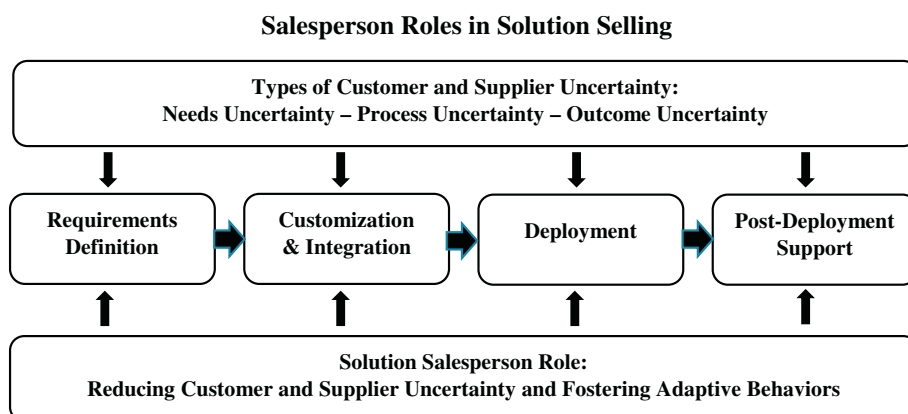


Fig. 1. Salesperson roles in solution selling.

preferable to terminate discussions at the RD stage rather than risk customer disappointment and drain of supplier resources later in the process.

After customer requirements are largely defined, the focus shifts to Customization and Integration (hereafter, CI), and following that to Deployment (hereafter, D). During these stages, there may be some level of uncertainty on part of both customer and supplier as to whether the requirements defined in the first stage were accurate enough, especially for effective deployment and support of a solution. In addition, because the solution process often is a long one, there may be some level of uncertainty as to whether the customer requirements may have changed since the original assessment, and whether mid-course adjustments may be called for. As several scholars note, a solution customer's needs may evolve substantially over time (Friend & Malshe, 2016; Macdonald et al., 2016). As such, both parties may need to make adjustments as they move through the solution co-creation process.

This suggests that the role of a salesperson in the CI and D stages shifts to one of assuring customers that their requirements were defined accurately. At the same time, the role requires the salesperson to be attentive to actual shifts in the customer's requirements. When these are detected, it is the salesperson's responsibility to encourage the supplier as well as the customer to adapt to the change by modifying the solution design and/or modifying the customer's work processes and/or performance expectations. If left unaddressed, the solution is unlikely to deliver the expected performance, leading to unfavorable consequences for both customer and supplier.

After a solution is deployed, it proceeds to the final stage, the Post-Deployment Stage (hereafter, PDS). In this stage, a customer and supplier possibly may wonder whether the customer's requirements were assessed and defined correctly, and whether a different solution might have better met customer requirements. Again, the salesperson's role in this stage entails assuring customers of the soundness of the requirements definition, and the appropriateness of the solution for meeting the customer's needs.

3.2.2. Process uncertainty and salesperson role

Process uncertainty refers to the extent to which employees of a customer or supplier feel unsure about each other's interest or ability to co-create a solution. In the first stage (RD), a supplier may be uncertain about a customer's motivation for discussing and obtaining information on a solution. For example, the supplier may wonder whether the customer has a real need, or is claiming to have a need as a ploy to obtain valuable information from the supplier or a discounted price for a bundle of goods and services. Similarly, a customer may be uncertain whether a supplier has a genuine interest in developing a truly customized solution for the customer (versus passing off standard goods and services as custom developed). This uncertainty is especially likely when multiple business units within a supplier are involved, and the customer does not represent a high priority for all business units.

A customer and supplier are also likely to be uncertain about each other's ability to co-create a solution. A customer may wonder whether each of the supplier's business units responsible for portions of the solution has the requisite financial, technical, and human resources. Similarly, a supplier may be uncertain whether a customer's user departments will be willing and able to provide the information needed to build and deliver an effective solution, and/or adapt their work processes if so needed by the solution, and/or learn to make the best use of the solution in order to achieve the desired performance.

The discussion above suggests that a critical role of the salesperson at the RD stage is a thorough assessment of the interest and ability of the individuals working for the customer and supplier, and ensuring they are high before moving further. Relatedly, it entails providing data and information (e.g., case studies and references) to assure a customer of the supplier's interest and ability to provide a solution for the customer's needs. For example, it is customary in the Information Technology (IT) industry for suppliers to provide clients with

information on resource slack at the supplier firm (e.g., number of people on the 'bench'). This information helps reduce uncertainty by assuring the customer that the supplier has the necessary bandwidth to execute a contract without delays. The role also entails assuring business units within the supplier that the cooperation they would need from the customer would be forthcoming.

As solution development commences in the CI stage and moves on to the D stage, suppliers and customers engage (or do not engage) in co-creation behaviors, thus reducing prior uncertainties about those behaviors. Therefore, the salesperson's role in these stages shifts from one of providing assurances to ensuring that the prior uncertainties of the customer and supplier are resolved in a satisfactory way. In large part, it entails acting as a cheerleader and a "knowledge broker" (Verbeke, Dietz, & Verwaal, 2011). It entails encouraging business units within the supplier to adapt their products to each other's designs in a timely manner. This is especially critical for business units that stand to generate relatively small revenues from deploying the solution (and therefore may not accord the customer a high priority). In addition, it entails providing the supplier business units with information about the customer's attitudes, preferences, norms and values to enable the supplier undertake effective on-site deployment and post-deployment support of the solution.

Similarly, on the other side of the dyad, the salesperson's role entails encouraging the customer to provide the information needed about its operations and internal politics (see Tuli et al., 2007). In addition, changes made to a solution's design may call for the customer to adapt its work processes (e.g., upgrade the skill level of its employees, undertake more frequent maintenance). This may be tricky if the adaptation required is greater than what was agreed upon by the customer and supplier at the outset. As Ulaga and Reinartz (2011) note, however, insufficient adaptation in this critical stage often results in a steep decline in solution performance.

In the PDS stage, the nature of uncertainty changes. The customer may wonder whether the supplier will provide the promised support to ensure the solution is effective, and make needed changes in its products/services as new issues/problems surface. Similarly, the supplier may wonder whether the customer will do its part to minimize the support it needs, and will make adjustments at its end to ensure the solution delivers the desired performance/end-results. Furthermore, the customer as well as the supplier may wonder whether they made the right choice to work with each other to begin with.

Thus, in this stage the role of the salesperson shifts to one of ensuring that the customer as well as the supplier provide each other the needed ongoing support, and encouraging them to adapt their respective processes to ensure the solution's effectiveness. In addition, it entails evaluating the process up to that point, and the very choice to work with each other, and documenting/sharing lessons learned to guide future decisions regarding solutions.

3.2.3. Outcome uncertainty and salesperson role

Outcome uncertainty refers to the extent to which employees of a customer or supplier are unsure about issues related to the performance (end-results) sought to be realized from a solution. In the first stage (RD), the customer (and to an extent the supplier) may be uncertain about whether the proposed solution's components will work together as intended, and deliver the desired performance. In particular, they may be uncertain about the economic viability of the solution if it is a major input into, or a part of, a product or service that the customer intends to sell to its customers. Thus, a salesperson's role with regard to a solution's outcome entails assuring a customer that the solution's components will work with each other well to deliver the desired outcome. While some level of these customer uncertainties may remain in the CI and D stages, they largely get resolved (whether favorably or unfavorably) once the solution moves into the PDS stage.

On its part, the supplier may be uncertain whether the customer will use appropriate measures/metrics and benchmarks to assess the

solution's performance. For example, how many tons of iron ore should be moved per day by an earth-moving solution in order for it to qualify as a “good” solution? This uncertainty is likely to prevail throughout the solution process, but becomes particularly salient in the PDS stage. Thus, a salesperson's role entails developing clarity around the performance metric/benchmark that will be used to measure a solution's performance early in the process (RD stage), and ensuring it does not deviate from the metric/benchmark over the next two stages (CI, D). In the PDS stage, the salesperson's role involves ensuring that the deployed solution's performance is actually measured by the customer using the agreed-upon metric/benchmark.

In the event that the performance is below what was expected, the salesperson's role requires encouraging the supplier business units to adjust their solution components (goods as well as post-deployment support). The salesperson's role at this stage is to work to optimize the solution for the customer, and in certain instances, for the customer's customers/end-users. Thus, it may require bringing supplier resources to the customer to help it better understand how it should use the solution, how to resolve issues that arise in course of the use, and even how to market its offerings to end-users. At the same time, it may require the salesperson to encourage the customer to adjust its work processes (e.g., hire higher caliber employees or train staff) to attain the desired performance, and/or change how it goes to market to its customers/end-users.

A prominent uncertainty in the PDS stage, especially for the customer, concerns whether the solution's performance will stay the same, improve or worsen in the future. A notable aspect of this customer uncertainty is whether the salesperson will continue to be accessible and committed to achieving agreed-upon solution outcomes in the future. As such, the salesperson's role entails assuring the customer of the supplier's intention to stay engaged, and ensuring that the supplier remains committed to delivering the performance outcomes wanted by the customer.

4. Discussion

In response to increasing customer interest in sourcing end-to-end solutions, many suppliers are focusing on providing solutions to their customers. Despite this, there remains a lack of clarity as to the role of a solutions salesperson. Our research addresses this issue, and offers a comprehensive, yet succinct and actionable view of a salesperson's roles and responsibilities in the customer solution provision process.

4.1. Research contributions

We identify three overarching types of uncertainties among customers and suppliers: (1) need uncertainty, (2) process uncertainty and (3) outcome uncertainty. Each of these types of uncertainties is present across the four stages of a solution process (requirements definition, customization and integration, deployment, and post-deployment support). We explore how the nature these uncertainties changes as a solution evolves from one stage to the next. Based on this, we delineate a solution salesperson's role as one of reducing uncertainties across the process by providing pertinent information to key stakeholders within the customer- and supplier organizations, and encouraging adaptive behavior of the parties involved.

Our research provides important insights into *how* corporate solution growth strategies may be implemented at the sales function level. We respond to sales researchers' calls for a more fine-grained understanding of salespersons' roles, responsibilities and skills required when transitioning from product-centric to solution-centric sales (Blocker et al., 2012; De Jong et al., 2014; Evans et al., 2012; Plouffe et al., 2008; Williams & Plouffe, 2007). Extending literature in organizational buying behavior, industrial marketing and project marketing, we provide a new perspective on customer- and supplier-perceived uncertainty in the specific context of customer solutions. The typology of

uncertainties developed in this research provides guidance for better delineating solution salespersons' roles and responsibilities.

4.2. Implications for practice

Our research provides a number of important insights for managerial practice from a top management perspective, from a sales management perspective, and from an individual salesperson's perspective. From a C-suite perspective, our research underscores that companies seeking growth through customer solutions must be cognizant of the implications of such a strategic initiative, and the level of transformation required. As our research shows, small incremental adjustments to the sales function will not suffice as the new types of uncertainties identified in solution sales differ fundamentally from those prominent in more traditional sales contexts. These differences translate into new questions that must be addressed at the strategic level and cannot be left to sales management alone. For example, should a firm implement a separate sales organization dedicated to solutions, or should it draw on salespeople in its existing product-centered sales organizations for selling solutions? Who should lead solution sales inside an organization, and what type of leader should be responsible for them? Is corporate management prepared to overhaul sales structures and sales incentive systems to set up solution sales for long-term success?

From a sales management perspective, a better understanding of the specifics of solution sales and the delineation of solution salespersons' roles and responsibilities is critical for identifying, recruiting, leading and motivating solution salespeople. We offer interesting insights for identifying and recruiting solution sales people. In many business markets, suppliers primarily focus on technical expertise when hiring trained engineers into solution sales functions. For example, Darr (2006) finds that the number of sales engineers in industrial sales forces doubled over a decade. Our analyses suggest that solution salespeople need sophisticated interpersonal skills because the co-creation of a solution requires a salesperson to orchestrate interactions among key stakeholders (in the supplier- and customer organizations) to reduce uncertainties involved in a solution process. Moreover, a solutions salesperson must have the skillset to persuade employees of a customer as well as his/her own firm to be adaptive, a challenge when adaptive behavior adversely affects their short-term performance metrics. Our delineation of a solution salesperson's role is also likely to be useful to suppliers for setting clear role expectations for their salespeople. This clarity in role expectations can help better direct solution salespeople, assess their performance, and make compensation decisions in line with the nature and demands of solution sales.

From the individual solution salesperson's perspective, our research brings into focus the actions that the salesperson must take in order to be successful. These actions go well beyond pitching an existing set of products to a customer, and encompass facilitating the entire solution co-creation process to deliver desired end-results to customers. The variety of actions described in this paper is of direct relevance to salespersons involved in creating solutions for customers.

4.3. Limitations and future research directions

As is the case with any research, our article is subject to several limitations, some of which offer interesting avenues for further research. Given the conceptual nature of our article, **a natural next step would be an empirical examination of the phenomenon. First, empirical research could document the dynamics of different types of uncertainties across the four phases of the solution process. For example, do certain uncertainties decline progressively across the four stages? Or is it the case that some uncertainties are high at the beginning of a stage and decline towards the end of that stage?**

Second, there is a need to better understand how a supplier organization can enable and support a solutions salesperson. These practices are likely to go beyond the regular “recruitment and sales training” to

which salespeople are exposed, and the sales tools they are provided (e.g., case histories, simulation programs). These are likely to include supplier organization structure changes, appointment of senior executives leading the solution sales organization, and performance evaluation practices (e.g., a solutions salesperson providing input into a participating business unit's contribution to a solution). For example, firms likely need to adapt traditional quota and bonus plans to the solution-selling context in order to better reflect the intricacies of the atypical role of a solution salesperson discussed in this article. The question of how to adapt quota and bonus plans represents a promising avenue for future research.

Third, researchers could expand the breadth and depth of variables investigated. For example, there is a need to drill deeper into the specific skills and traits of individuals who have the ability to orchestrate supplier- and customer individuals and business units as they work jointly to solve a customer problem. While we expect such salespeople to have excellent interpersonal skills and adequate technical competencies, there is a need to delineate these skillsets in more specific terms. The overarching role of a salesperson as the facilitator of uncertainty reduction and fosterer of adaptive behavior may possibly be viewed as entailing a number of sub-roles such as knowledge broker, deal-maker and so on. These sub-roles are likely to vary across the four stages of a solution. It would be useful to identify and document these sub-roles by stages.

Moreover, in this research we have focused on the role of a salesperson as someone who brings together a supplier and a customer. In many instances, a supplier may have to rely on one or more third parties to create a complete solution for a customer. In these cases, a salesperson would need to orchestrate a larger number of players to reduce their respective uncertainties, and foster their adaptive behaviors. It would be of interest to consider the nature of issues that arise as the number of entities involved in the solution process grows beyond two. For example, one issue that often arises in practice is the attribution of a potential failure to one or another entity or entities. How are these addressed, and what may be effective ways of addressing these issues? What should be the role of a solutions salesperson in addressing these issues?

Fourth, our research is geared towards the solution salesperson as the focal boundary spanner in solution sales. However, scholars have acknowledged the growing importance of selling teams in complex sales contexts (Moon & Armstrong, 1994; Rapp, Ahearne, Mathieu, & Rapp, 2010; Schmitz, 2013; Schmitz, Lee, & Lilien, 2014). Relatedly, firms increasingly rely on inside salespeople in sales organizations (Boyle, 1996; Gessner & Scott, 2009). Marshall and Vredenburg (1991) recognize that inside salespeople are increasingly engaging in some of the sales related activities previously done by outside salespeople. Lawrence and Hubbard (2008) suggest that inside salespeople can effectively build rapport with customers. Thus, as Rapp, Beitelspacher, Schillewaert, and Baker (2012) note, there is likely to be a blurring of the traditional roles between inside and outside salespeople in coming years. Against this backdrop, future research could explore in greater detail how solution sales affect the composition of and interactions in solution sales teams, with a specific emphasis on the relationship between inside sales and outside solution salespeople.

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