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Increasing business-to-business buyer word-of-mouth and share-of-purchase

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to examine the satisfaction-loyalty framework on word-of-mouth communications (WOMC) and share-of-purchases in situations where business-to-business (b-t-b) buyers have a relationship with both the salesperson and the selling firm.

Design/methodology/approach – This study uses an online panel to examine respondents with b-t-b purchasing authority for their given firm. Lisrel 8.52 was used to examine the proposed structural model.

Findings – This study finds that satisfaction, loyalty and WOMC with regards to the salesperson directly impacts satisfaction, loyalty and WOMC with the selling firm, respectively. Also, the study finds that certain levels of buyer satisfaction and loyalty impact post purchase behavior and spending.

Research limitations/implications – Several contributions emerge from the proposed model to advance relationships within b-t-b markets by examining methods in which salespeople can directly influence their company's financial outcome in the form of increased customer spending; examining methods for increasing buyers' WOMC; expanding the current body of knowledge examining the buyer-selling firm relationship as two unique, but related, relationships; and further revealing the dichotomy between consumer markets and b-t-b markets.

Originality/value – This research authenticates the need to examine satisfaction, loyalty and WOMC from a multi-level perspective in b-t-b environments. Further, the understanding of share-of-purchases is advanced.

Keywords Satisfaction, Loyalty, Business-to-business, Share-of-purchases, Word-of-mouth communication

Paper type Research paper

An executive summary for managers and executive readers can be found at the end of this issue.

Introduction

Business executives and marketers have long recognized the benefits associated with increasing buyers' word-of-mouth communications (further referred to as WOMC) and share-of-purchases (also called share-of-wallet, further referred to as SOP; Buttle, 1998; Keiningham *et al.*, 2005). Given that the fundamental objective of any profit-sharing company is profit-making, understanding factors that directly influence buyer spending and WOMC continue to garner much interest from practitioners and researchers. Although WOMC and SOP have both acted as interesting lines of inquiry for the past decade, much of our understanding can be attributed to retailing scholars (Reynolds and Beatty, 1999; Reynolds and Arnold, 2000).

Two of the most comprehensive studies on SOP and WOMC have been the Reynolds and Beatty (1999) and Reynolds and Arnold (2000) studies. Both studies

systematically integrate satisfaction and loyalty as antecedents of customers' WOMC and SOP at multiple relational levels. Although the business-to-business (further referred to as b-t-b) literature has examined multi-level buyer-seller relationships (Belonax *et al.*, 2007; Bradford and Weitz, 2009; Johnson *et al.*, 2001; Palmatier *et al.*, 2007), it is in an infancy state. Concurrent to emerging b-t-b literature (Palmatier *et al.*, 2007; Rutherford *et al.*, 2006, 2008), Reynolds and Beatty (1999) and Reynolds and Arnold (2000) attest to the buyer's association with the salesperson and the selling firm as being two separate facets with intermingled relationships. While this notion of multi-level relationships has been well-received in retailing, empirical attempts at examining SOP and WOMC in the b-t-b literature have been primarily conceptualized at one relationship level, typically the firm level (Keiningham *et al.*, 2003; Money, 2004). The problem with testing SOP and WOMC strictly from the firm level is the tendency for managers to overlook the important role salespeople play as the firm's boundary spanning agent. Salespeople as boundary spanners are instrumental to their firms' success because they represent the entity that directly interacts and manages the company's relationships between customers, suppliers and internal co-workers. As in any b-t-b encounter, the lengthiness, complexity and high spending power of consumers (Cooke, 1986; Coviello and Brodie, 2001;

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Narayandas, 2005) ought to warrant constant monitoring of the buying behavior, especially, as it relates to increasing WOMC and SOP.

Based on these insights, the current study examines how satisfaction and loyalty impact WOMC and SOP within a b-t-b procurement context. Specifically, two research questions emerge:

RQ1. Do the interrelations between the b-t-b salesperson and firm as it relates to satisfaction, loyalty and WOMC hold based on the existing retail literature?

RQ2. How do individual aspects of the buyer's relationships with the salesperson and selling firm impact the buyer's WOMC and SOP within a b-t-b context?

Conceptual framework and hypotheses development

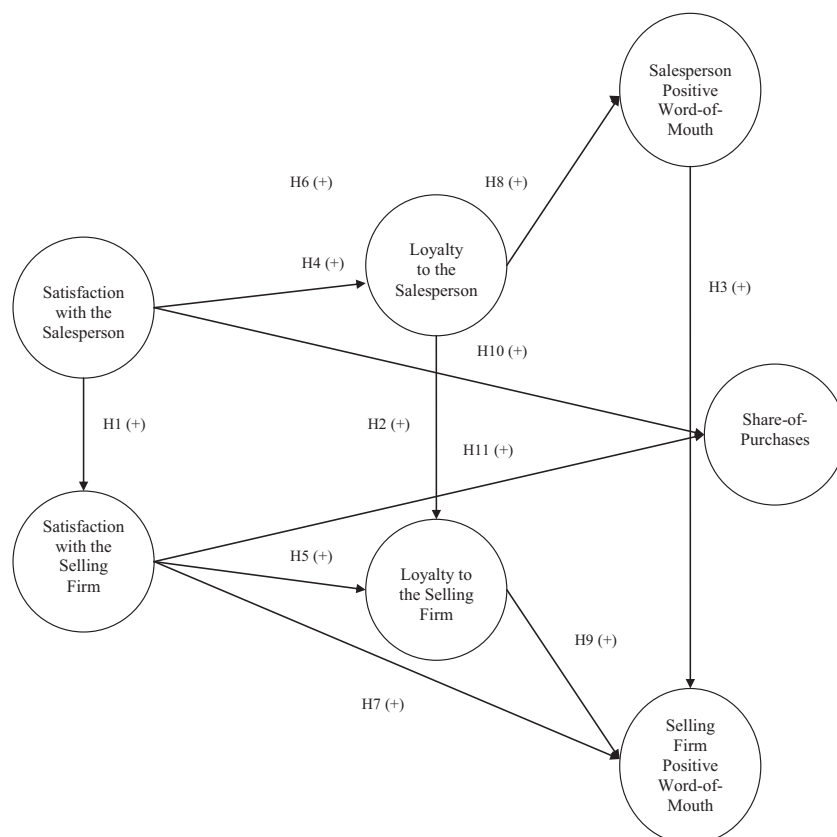
Figure 1 depicts a buyer engaged in a dual relationship with a salesperson and a selling firm. First, the study begins by examining buyer satisfaction, loyalty and WOMC regarding the salesperson in relation to buyer satisfaction, loyalty and word-of-mouth about the selling firm (*H1-H3*). Following this, the expectation that increases in buyer satisfaction will lead to increases in loyalty with the salesperson (*H4*), as well as the firm (*H5*) will demonstrate the satisfaction–loyalty linkage in a multi-level b-t-b setting. Buyer satisfaction with the salesperson will then be examined as a predictor of WOMC concerning the salesperson (*H6*), while satisfaction

with the selling firm and WOMC about the selling firm will be expected to yield a positive relationship (*H7*). With respect to buyers loyalty to a salesperson and selling firm, this study hypothesizes that WOMC at each level will materialize based on prior relationships formed and maintained over time (*H8* and *H9*). The model then conceptualizes satisfaction with the salesperson and satisfaction with the selling firm as motivators for increased SOP (*H10* and *H11*).

Social exchange theory in buyer–seller relationships

The basic assumption of the social exchange theory is that individuals form and retain social relationships with the anticipation that doing so will result in some kind of satisfactory intrinsic or extrinsic profit (Blau, 1968). The mutual recognition that economic and social outcomes are supposed to flow both ways in an exchange relationship lays the foundation for understanding interactions in a b-t-b context (Lambe *et al.*, 2001). Here, both parties must be able to convey the short-/long-term rewards associated with interacting and conducting business with each other. Exchanges are then considered favorable when benefits offered exceed any rewards likely to be garnered from engaging in a different relationship. This accentuates the importance of achieving satisfaction in social exchanges involving salespeople and the selling firm (Thibaut and Kelley, 1959). As a result, the centrality of satisfaction is used in this study to explain why buyers from different major industries in the USA agree to remain in business relationships and reciprocate their intent to continue the partnership by

Figure 1 The hypothesized model



increasing SOP, WOMC and loyalty. Although satisfaction is used in this study as the building block for relationship exchange in b-t-b settings, other contemporary sources, such as Belonax *et al.* (2007), have pointed to trust and expertise as components of supplier and salesperson credibility to be direct indicators for several outcomes in b-t-b relationships. Despite support for the influence of trust and expertise in multi-level b-t-b research, previous empirical studies have generally considered buyer satisfaction to be the critical foundation for any underlying outcome, including trust (Geyskens *et al.*, 1999; Zhao and Smith, 2006), during buyer–seller relationships. With the buyer–supplier relationship becoming more of a focal point for building long-term partnership, scholars such as Gounaris (2005) and Chu *et al.* (2012) have used the social exchange theory, on the basis of generalized reciprocity, to be the key theoretical motivation and social mechanism for relationship attachments between supplier firm and organizational buyers. Therefore, this study relies on the tenets of the social exchange theory in developing the buyer's relationship with both the salesperson and selling firm when satisfaction is established early on in the exchange process.

Development of the hypotheses

Selling firm satisfaction is defined as the overall acceptance of all facets of the working relationship with the partnering firm, whereas salesperson satisfaction refers to the affective appraisal of the functioning relationship with the firm's representative (Gaski and Nevin, 1985). Researchers have, in the past, noted that although a buyer's relationship with the salesperson and selling firm are independent of one another, they co-mingle to the point of exerting a cross-over effect (Belonax *et al.*, 2007). For example, Belonax *et al.* (2007) argued that buyer perception of trust and expertise for salespeople was different from their perceived level of supplier trust and expertise. Bradford and Weitz (2009) noted that even with conflict management approaches, the salesperson tactic impacts the quality of the buyer–supplier relationship. In the case of buyer satisfaction, studies involving a variety of consumer samples attest to how selling firm satisfaction is, in part, derived from the customer's level of satisfaction with the salesperson (Goff *et al.*, 1997; Reynolds and Beatty, 1999; Swan and Oliver, 1989).

Central to the social exchange theory is the fact that in established business relationships, wherein satisfaction plays a much larger role in dictating long-term deals (Anaza and Rutherford, 2011; Lam *et al.*, 2004), the level of salesperson satisfaction will increase firm satisfaction. Anaza and Rutherford (2011) found this to be case in a multisource procurement setting where a buyer's level of satisfaction with a salesperson positively impacted the buyer's level of satisfaction with the supplying firm. Unlike the Anaza and Rutherford's (2011) paper, the buyer's purchasing preference for multiple suppliers is not observed as the focal point of this study's interest. As such, the following is made:

- H1. Buyer's satisfaction with the salesperson is positively associated with the buyer's satisfaction with the selling firm.

Similar to research studies linking buyers satisfaction with the salesperson to buyers satisfaction with the selling firm, a

number of scholars have argued that salesperson loyalty positively affects selling firm loyalty (Beatty *et al.*, 1996; Macintosh and Lockshin, 1997; Palmatier *et al.*, 2007; Reynolds and Beatty, 1999; Reynolds and Arnold, 2000). With the exception of the Palmatier *et al.* (2007) study, retail researchers have dominated the examination of loyalty at more than one relationship level. A primary reason why buyers in b-t-b markets rarely focus on their relationship with the selling firm or consider salesperson loyalty to be identical to firm loyalty is because they typically have more interaction with the salesperson than other firm employees (Johnson *et al.*, 2001). However, the synonymous classification of salespeople with their selling firm is not restricted to buyers loyalty or satisfaction, but includes constructs like actual and perceived commitment (Anaza and Rutherford, 2011; Johnson *et al.*, 2001).

Given that loyalty has been delineated into two levels – the individual and firm level, we define salesperson loyalty “as the commitment and intention to continue dealing with the particular sales associate” (Reynolds and Arnold, 2000, p. 92), while selling firm loyalty refers to the buyer's behavioral intention to remain committed to a selling firm by engaging in behaviors deemed at continuing the relationship (Sirdeshmukh *et al.*, 2002). Arguments presented in retail settings suggest that the transfer of loyalty from the sales associate to the company develops due to an individual's initial attachment with a tangible representation of the firm, hence, the sales associate. The buyer's allegiance to the sales associate transfers onto the store as a sign of commitment to the salesperson (Reynolds and Arnold, 2000). Scholars such as Palmatier *et al.* (2007) have been able to show in a b-t-b context that buyers' loyalty to the salesperson and buyers' loyalty to the selling firm are, indeed, separate independent constructs with reinforcing linkages. Thus, in line with their thought process, the following is proposed:

- H2. Buyer's loyalty to the salesperson is positively associated with the buyer's loyalty to the selling firm.

WOMC has been found to be a very important concept for pre- and post-relational encounters. Characterized as the propelling force for successful product diffusion, WOMC is considered to be one of the major motivators for purchasing behavior and decision-making (Buttle, 1998). There are relatively few studies on WOMC in the context of b-t-b relationships. Even more limited in the b-t-b literature is the examination of buyer's WOMC at multiple relationship levels involving communication about the salesperson and the firm. As such, buyers' WOMC about a salesperson is defined as the buyer's favorable recommendation to other buyers about his or her overall encounter with the salesperson (Reynolds and Arnold, 2000), while buyers' WOMC concerning the selling firm is characterized as the buyer's favorable recommendation to other buyers about the company (Swan and Oliver, 1989).

In many ways the parallels between the buyer–salesperson and buyer–selling firm relationship highlights that not only are cross-over effects possible with attitudinal concepts, but given the buyer's positive or negative experience with a salesperson, post-purchasing behaviors are inevitable. Few instances of this have been posited in the literature with regards to WOMC at multi-levels. For example, Beatty *et al.* (1996) asserted that customers are prone to form opinions and engage in informal

discussions about their experiences with both their salespeople and the selling firm (Reynolds and Beatty, 1999). The work of Reynolds and Beatty (1999) was also instrumental in supporting the notion that buyers' WOMC regarding the salesperson should to some degree impact the buyer's WOMC about the firm. Again while this appears to hold true in retail, this is yet to be tested in a b-t-b context. Therefore, the following is proposed:

- H3. Buyer's positive word-of-mouth concerning the salesperson is positively associated with the buyer's positive word-of-mouth about the selling firm.

Linking satisfaction to loyalty

Researchers and practitioners alike widely embrace that buyer satisfaction positively predicts buyer loyalty (Anderson and Sullivan, 1993; Cater and Cater, 2009; Ganesan, 1994; Rust and Zahorik, 1993). Studies have specifically found that a satisfied customer is highly motivated to repatronize a preferred product again in spite of failures on the selling firm's part (Lam *et al.*, 2004; Rust and Zahorik, 1993). In addition, it can be argued that the relationship between satisfaction and loyalty is largely sustained based on the efforts of the individual salesperson (Reynolds and Beatty, 1999; Reynolds and Arnold, 2000). However, much of the research in the b-t-b literature appears to examine the linkage between satisfaction and loyalty from the firm level ignoring the fact that interactions often stem and are attributed to the salesperson (Homburg *et al.*, 2003; Lam *et al.*, 2004).

Reynolds and Arnold (2000) illustrate that customer satisfaction at the individual level positively affects customer loyalty at the interpersonal level purely as a result of the salesperson's behavior without any consideration to their place of employment. In describing this link from the selling firm or store perspective, other scholars have found that buyer satisfaction with the firm positively influences loyalty at the firm level (Homburg *et al.*, 2003; Macintosh and Lockshin, 1997; Reynolds and Beatty, 1999). In line with previous studies in the business-to-consumer literature (Macintosh and Lockshin, 1997; Reynolds and Beatty, 1999), the present study argues that when a buyer's expectation of his or her sales personnel is met, the buyer is more likely to repatronize the same salesperson. In the same manner, customers who are satisfied with the selling firm will remain loyal to the selling firm. Based on this, the following are hypothesized:

- H4. Buyer's satisfaction with the salesperson is positively associated with the buyer's loyalty to the salesperson.
- H5. Buyer's satisfaction with the selling firm is positively associated with the buyer's loyalty to the selling firm.

The marketing literature finds that satisfaction influences referral marketing in that satisfied customers engage in positive word-of-mouth (Anderson, 1998; Reynolds and Beatty, 1999; Swan and Oliver, 1989). For instance, Swan and Oliver (1989) found that increases in customer satisfaction leads to greater positive WOMC. These findings implied that the performance of a product above or below customer expectation invoked either positive or negative post-purchasing communication. In a 2007 article involving

two empirical studies conducted in both a business-to-consumer and b-t-b German energy market (Wangenheim and Bayon (2007) found that customer satisfaction had a positive impact on WOMC. Their findings attest to the linkage between satisfaction and WOMC from only the selling firm perspective. Research from the retail context established a similar relationship based on the buyer's encounter with the salesperson (Reynolds and Beatty, 1999). They found that customer satisfaction with a sales associate drove customers to engage in some form of discussion concerning the salesperson. However, within the same study, Reynolds and Beatty (1999) failed to find support for the relationship linking company satisfaction to company WOMC. In spite of the mixed findings, the following hypotheses are offered:

- H6. Buyer's satisfaction with the salesperson is positively associated with the buyer's positive word-of-mouth concerning the salesperson.
- H7. Buyer's satisfaction with the selling firm is positively associated with the buyer's positive word-of-mouth concerning the selling firm.

Buyer loyalty is another variable widely believed to motivate WOMC (Lacey and Morgan, 2009); nonetheless, support for this relationship has primarily been established within a consumer goods context (Srinivasan *et al.*, 2002; Reynolds and Arnold, 2000). In an e-tail consumer context, Srinivasan *et al.* (2002) empirically demonstrated how customer e-loyalty positively affected customer WOMC. Even in an offline retail environment, researchers find that customers who are loyal to both the salesperson and firm tend to engage in WOMC about the sales associate and firm (Reynolds and Arnold, 2000). Based on all these prevailing arguments, the following are hypothesized:

- H8. Buyer's loyalty to the salesperson is positively associated with the buyer's positive word-of-mouth concerning the salesperson.
- H9. Buyer's loyalty to the selling firm is positively associated with the buyer's positive word-of-mouth concerning the selling firm.

Keiningham *et al.* (2003) defined SOP "as the percentage of the volume of total business conducted with the firm by a client organization within a 12-month period" (p. 39). Other researchers such as Cooil *et al.* (2007) have described SOP as the share of a customer's spending or share of customer's wallet received by a firm over a fixed period of time. Commonly evaluated when suppliers obtain large shares of their buyer's business (Barry *et al.*, 2008), SOP as an antecedent of firm revenue undoubtedly benefits a company's financial performance (Cooil *et al.*, 2007; Keiningham *et al.*, 2005), thereby, making it an area of high practical relevance to b-t-b firms.

A number of studies in various industries including financial, banking, grocery and upscale fashion stores support the rationale that customer satisfaction positively affects SOP (Baumann *et al.*, 2005; Cooil *et al.*, 2007; Keiningham *et al.*, 2003; 2005; Magi, 2003; Reynolds and Beatty, 1999; Silvestro and Cross, 2000). Although these studies find that a firm's

ability to satisfy external customers significantly increases customers' share of spending, this linkage in a b-t-b context as tested by Keiningham *et al.* (2003, 2005) have neglected the interpersonal relationship that takes place between the buyers and sales representative. When the buyer's interaction with the firm and the salesperson are viewed as separate entities, research focusing on these individual relationships as they relate to SOP may provide new insights to overall b-t-b buyer-seller relationships. Based on this, the current study examines the influence of multi-level satisfaction on SOP.

H10. Buyer's satisfaction with the salesperson is positively associated with the buyer's share-of-purchases.

H11. Buyer's satisfaction with the selling firm is positively associated with the buyer's share-of-purchases.

Methodology

Sample

This study uses an online panel to examine respondents with b-t-b purchasing authority for their given firm. The participants in this study were buyers from various industries including manufacturing, office supplies, electronics, retail, construction, medical supplies, information technology, food/restaurant/hospitality, shipping, finance, furniture, auto/aviation/marine and others. Consistent with Bradford and Weitz (2009) study, individuals with purchasing power from multiple industries were surveyed to increase the generalizability of the study's findings and reduce the bias from studying one firm or industry. Given the complexity of the buyer-seller relationship, the buyers who were surveyed, in this study, were not restricted to one particular type of sourcing process; instead the participants stated that they procured from either single or multiple business sources, and often dealt with consultative and new business salespeople according to Moncrief *et al.* (2006) taxonomy. Of the 635 potential respondents that visited the online site where the questionnaire was posted, 509 agreed to start the questionnaire. Given that b-t-b purchasing can occur online, over the phone or face-to-face, it was critical for the purchasing agents to have face-to-face contact with a salesperson. Of the 509 potential respondents, 175 primarily purchased through none-face-to-face interactions and were filtered out of the study. In total, 334 respondents started the questionnaire, of which, 229 completed the questionnaire. After listwise deletion, 177 respondents remained. The effective usable response rate was just under 28 per cent.

Descriptive statistics

The average respondent was 47 years old and made just under \$59,000 per year. Fifty-five per cent of the respondents were females, while 45 per cent were males. The average length of the respondent's relationship with the salesperson was 4.9 years with a median of 3. The average length of the respondent's relationship with the selling firm was about 7.5 years with a median of 5. Respondents procured products/services from a variety of industries. In total, 11 industries were categorized and one other category was included. The largest industries identified were manufacturing and production equipment buyers. On an annual basis, the middle

quartiles of respondents procured between \$60,000 and \$1,500,000 in products/services from their selected selling firm. The median value of buyer's procurement from their selected selling firm was \$250,000. See Table I for a profile of the respondents and providers business.

Results

Measures

Table II shows the correlation matrix along with reliabilities, means and SDs of each construct. Satisfaction with the salesperson and selling firm were measured using four and three items based on 7-point scales, respectively. Both scales were adapted from Dwyer and Oh (1987). Satisfaction with the salesperson produced an alpha of 0.94 and 0.96 with the selling firm. Loyalty to the salesperson, loyalty to the selling firm, salesperson positive WOMC, selling firm positive WOMC and SOP were based on research by Reynolds and Beatty (1999). Both loyalty constructs contained three items based on 7-point scales. The salesperson construct produced an alpha of 0.85 and the selling firm construct produced an alpha of 0.79. Both WOMC constructs were measured using single items. SOP was measured using two items. The first item read, "please estimate your firm's average yearly purchases from the selling firm". This was divided by the second item that read "please estimate your firm's average total yearly purchases of products and services in this product category". The resulting decimal was then multiplied by 100 to determine the per cent of the buyer's business held by the seller.

Confirmatory factor analysis

The measurement model contained 16 items and was analyzed using LISREL 8.52. According to Hu and Bentler (1999), results from the measurement models showed adequate fit. The model had a chi-square of 205 with 86 degrees of freedom (SRMR = 0.064, CFI = 0.98, RMSEA = 0.089). All items had significant loadings and demonstrated convergent and discriminant validity.

Structural model

The fit indices provided satisfactory model fit according to Hair *et al.* (2010). As indicated in Table III, the proposed model displayed a chi-square of 234 with 96 degrees of freedom (SRMR = 0.069, CFI = 0.97, RMSEA = 0.092).

Hypothesis one examined the linkage between buyer's satisfaction with the salesperson and buyer's satisfaction with the selling firm, the results provide a positive and significant relationship ($\gamma_{11} = 0.70, 12.57, p < 0.05$) the first value is the parameter estimate and the second is the t-value). Hypothesis two examines the linkage between buyer's loyalty to the salesperson and buyer's loyalty to the selling firm. Findings support a significant and positively relationship ($\beta_{32} = 0.49, 7.63, p < 0.05$). The association between buyer positive WOMC concerning the salesperson and buyer positive WOMC concerning the selling firm was positive and significant ($\beta_{54} = 0.70, 8.12, p < 0.05$). Results provide support for *H1*, *H2* and *H3*.

Hypotheses four and five investigated the effects of buyer satisfaction on buyer loyalty. The results indicated that buyer satisfaction with the salesperson positively influenced the

Table I Respondent, provider and relationship profile

Respondents profile	Average age (years)	47
	Average annual income	\$58,900
	Gender	45 per cent males 55 per cent females
<i>Selected firms used in procurement profile</i>	Frequency	Per cent of respondents
Manufacturing/production equipment	29	16.4
Office supplies/office service/printing	26	14.7
Electronic	18	10.2
Retail products	12	6.8
Food/restaurant/hospitality	12	6.8
Construction/drilling/home components	11	6.2
Medical/healthcare	11	6.2
Auto/aviation/marine	9	5.1
IT services	7	4.0
Lab/science	7	4.0
Shipping/shipping supplies	7	4.0
Other (< 3 per cent of the sample)	28	15.8
Financial services		
Furniture		
Gears/lubrications		
Janitorial supplying firms		
MRO		
Relationship profile	Length of relationship with salesperson	
	Mean	4 years 9 months
	Median	3 years
	Length of relationship with selling firm	
	Mean	7 years 6 months
	Median	5 years
	Annual dollar amount procured in the relationship	
	Inter quartiles	\$60,000-\$1,500,000
	Median	\$250,000

buyer's loyalty to the salesperson ($\gamma_{21} = 0.80$, 11.28, $p < 0.05$). Findings also revealed that the buyer's satisfaction with the selling firm impacts buyer loyalty to the selling firm ($\beta_{31} = 0.24$, 3.24, $p < 0.05$). Result support *H4* and *H5*.

In hypothesis six, buyer satisfaction with the salesperson was examined as an antecedent to buyer positive WOMC concerning the salesperson. Findings failed to produce support for the linkage ($p > 0.05$). Hypothesis seven examined the linkage between satisfaction with the selling firm and buyer positive WOMC concerning the selling firm. The hypothesis was supported ($\beta_{51} = 0.32$, 3.20, $p < 0.05$). Overall, support is found for *H7*, but not *H6*.

Hypothesis eight explored the linkage between buyer loyalty to the salesperson and buyer positive WOMC concerning the salesperson. A significant and positive relationship was found ($\beta_{42} = 0.43$, 3.34, $p < 0.05$). Contrary to the proposed relationship in hypothesis nine, buyer loyalty to the selling firm did not influence the buyer's positive WOMC about the selling firm ($p > 0.05$). Overall, support was found for *H8*, but not for *H9*.

Two hypotheses examined the relationship between buyer satisfaction and SOP. Evidence revealed an insignificant relationship between buyer satisfaction with the salesperson and SOP ($p > 0.05$). However, findings support a relationship

Table II Correlations, reliabilities, means and SDs

Variables	(X1)	(X2)	(X3)	(X4)	(X5)	(X6)	(X7)	Means	SD
Satisfaction with the selling firm (X1)	0.94							5.96	1.10
Satisfaction with the salesperson (X2)	0.721**	0.96						5.88	1.26
Loyalty to the selling firm (X3)	0.534**	0.515**	0.79					5.57	1.18
Loyalty to the salesperson (X4)	0.512**	0.721**	0.662**	0.85				5.38	1.36
Selling firm word-of-mouth (X5)	0.490**	0.433**	0.416**	0.411**	—			4.88	1.68
Salesperson word-of-mouth (X6)	0.336**	0.392**	0.294**	0.410**	0.635**	—		4.51	1.74
Share-of-purchases (X7)	0.110*	−0.026	0.088	0.133**	0.082	0.012	—	70.71	32.23

Notes: * indicates a significant correlation at 0.05; reliabilities are on the diagonal ** indicates a significant correlation at 0.01

Table III Summaries of the results

Hypotheses	Parameter estimate	t-value	Support
H1. Satisfaction with the salesperson → satisfaction with the selling firm	0.70	12.57	Supported
H2. Loyalty to the salesperson → loyalty to the selling firm	0.49	7.63	Supported
H3. Salesperson positive word-of-mouth → selling firm positive word-of-mouth	0.70	8.12	Supported
H4. Satisfaction with the salesperson → loyalty to the salesperson	0.80	11.28	Supported
H5. Satisfaction with the selling firm → loyalty to the selling firm	0.24	3.24	Supported
H6. Satisfaction with the salesperson → salesperson positive word-of-mouth	–	–	Not supported
H7. Satisfaction with the selling firm → selling firm positive word-of-mouth	0.32	3.20	Supported
H8. Loyalty to the salesperson → salesperson positive word-of-mouth	0.43	3.34	Supported
H9. Loyalty to the selling firm → selling firm positive word-of-mouth	–	–	Not supported
H10. Satisfaction with the salesperson → share-of-purchases	–	–	Not supported
H11. Satisfaction with the selling firm → share-of-purchases	7.29	2.16	Supported

Model	χ^2	dof	NFI	RMSEA	CFI	SRMR
Measurement model	205	86	0.96	0.089	0.98	0.064
Proposed model	234	96	0.96	0.092	0.97	0.069

Squared multiple correlations	
Satisfaction with selling firm	0.56
Loyalty to the salesperson	0.51
Loyalty to the selling firm	0.50
Salesperson positive word-of-mouth	0.27
Selling firm positive word-of-mouth	0.84
Share-of-purchases	0.03

between buyer satisfaction with the selling firm and SOP ($\beta_{61} = 7.29, 2.16, p < 0.05$). Based on the results, support was found for *H11*, but not for *H10*.

Discussion and managerial implications

Research question one

Research question one addresses whether interrelations between the b-t-b salesperson and firm hold based on the existing literature. The current analysis provides support for the relationships holding in multiple industries in b-t-b markets. Consistent with previous multi-level research, this study finds that satisfaction, loyalty and WOMC with regards to the salesperson directly impacts satisfaction, loyalty and WOMC with the selling firm, respectively.

Research question two

Research question two addresses how individual aspects of the buyer's relationship with both the salesperson and selling firm impact buyer's WOMC and SOP within a b-t-b context. The results encourage the examination of WOMC from multiple relational dimensions as is typically conducted in business-to-consumer contexts (Reynolds and Beatty, 1999). It appears from this study that differences exist between retail and b-t-b markets as to what factors influence a buyer's WOMC. For instance, in a retail setting, Reynolds and Beatty (1999) found that salesperson-owned satisfaction acts as an antecedent of salesperson WOMC. Contrary to this, the present model failed to discover a similar relationship within a b-t-b context.

The present study demonstrates that b-t-b buyer satisfaction with the selling firm encourages increased buyer post-purchasing communication concerning the firm's performance. However, this does not appear to be the case within a retail context as seen

in the Reynolds and Beatty (1999) study. Based on these findings, managers are cautioned to reframe from applying satisfaction strategies used to encourage WOMC in retail store settings to business markets. Examining the squared multiple correlations further highlights more differences between both markets. While the Reynolds and Beatty (1999) study was only able to explain 0.12 of the variance in both WOMC constructs, the present study produced a squared multiple correlation of 0.84 in WOMC for the selling firm and 0.27 in WOMC for the salesperson.

As part of a way to increase WOMC, Anderson (1998) stated that "it is widely held that loyal, satisfied customers will engage in word-of-mouth favorable to the firm" (p. 6). Parallel to his claim, the study found that satisfied customers engaged in word-of-mouth about the firm, however, contrary to his statement loyalty did not influence WOMC concerning the selling firm. Another important issue emanating from the results is the lack of support for the association between buyers' satisfaction with the salesperson and buyers' positive WOMC regarding the salesperson. Although, conflicting results emerge from the findings, the examined model highlights the presence of a "cross-over" effect between the buyer's WOMC concerning the salesperson and the WOMC regarding the selling firm. Considering that a positive relationship was found between salesperson-owned loyalty and positive WOMC concerning the salesperson, this indicates that when a buyer recommends the salesperson to other interested buyers, the buyer is indirectly recommending the selling firm. Thus, a mediating effect may be the reason for the insignificant relationship between buyers' loyalty to the selling firm and buyers' WOMC concerning the selling firm.

The study hypothesized and found that buyer satisfaction with the selling firm affect volume of purchases from the buying firm. The resulting statistics reveal that organizational relationships established between a firm and its customers play a greater role in encouraging customer spending in b-t-b markets than the relationship established between a salesperson and the buyer. This finding is contrary to results from a retail context that shows satisfaction with the salesperson and the firm both encouraging customers spending (Reynolds and Beatty, 1999).

Given that purchases within b-t-b markets are not as frequent as purchases in retail settings (Lilien, 1987; Narayandas, 2005), the study's results reiterate the necessity for suppliers to maintain customer satisfaction as a direct means of maintaining constant revenue generation, increased market share and customer lifetime value (Rauyruen and Miller, 2007). This finding demonstrates the importance of selling firms to meet or surpass customer expectations by paying close attention to all aspects of the buying firm's history including product quality, delivery, price, discounts, product options, product availability, quantity and product guarantees/warranties. In terms of the non-significant relationship between salesperson satisfaction and SOP, the lack of support may have resulted from the indirect effect that satisfaction with the salesperson had on SOP via satisfaction with the selling firm. Thus, the "spill-over" effect linking buyer's satisfaction with the salesperson to buyer's satisfaction with the selling firm strengthens buyer spending. However, it is important to note that the correlation between buyer's satisfaction with the salesperson and SOP is not significant.

The findings are, particularly, informative for salespeople because it demonstrates the need for them to maintain lasting partnerships with buyers (Newell *et al.*, 2011), even in the face of unsatisfactory encounters. The effective management of buyer-seller relationships through the formation of personal connections as a route to increase perceptions of buyer satisfaction is central to maintaining high-quality buyer-supplier relationship that ultimately increases firm revenue. Selling firms can assist salespeople in developing a better aptitude when it comes to executing consultative task responsibilities, such as correctly identifying buyer product specification and monitoring buying activities (Newell *et al.*, 2011). While Huang *et al.* (2011) caution against forming social ties at all level of the organizational structure since it weakens supplier performance in Chinese retailer-supplier context; we advocate that salespeople be in the habit of cultivating interpersonal ties with referent buyers across industries in the USA. This study's ability to investigate buyers from different industries does not only help minimize the influence of single industry bias, but also suggests that our results, especially, as it relates to increasing WOMC and SOP are significant across establishment types and business size. This is interesting if we consider that the impact of satisfaction on WOMC is just as critical in the shipping, manufacturing or construction industry.

Limitations and future research

While the current study extends the existing body of knowledge in the marketing literature by examining the given model within a b-t-b context, several limitations are present that generate avenues for future research. First, the sample has

177 respondents. Although this sample is sufficient enough to find large effects, this sample is slightly below the 200 recommended to run a structural equation model (Hair *et al.*, 2010). Future research may want to examine the given model using a larger sample size.

A second limitation rests with the SOP scale. Even though the SOP scale was based on the Reynolds and Beatty (1999) and Reynolds and Arnold (2000) studies, the current study's ability to predict the construct was low. Nevertheless, looking at the Reynolds and Beatty's (1999) study, their ability to predict share-of-wallet was also quite low at 0.16. To further compound the issue of accessing SOP, the Reynolds and Beatty (1999) study examines only one firm unlike the current study's examination of multiple firms. Findings from this study along with the Reynolds and Beatty (1999) study suggest that additional research is needed to understand predictors of SOP. Furthermore, the SOP scale was created using two items, as such future scale development of the construct may yield beneficial results.

Both WOMC with the salesperson and selling firm were measured using single items like the Reynolds and Beatty (1999) study. To compound the measurement issue, Reynolds and Arnold (2000) combines both WOMC for the salesperson and selling firm into one construct. Additional research could examine the impact of measuring WOMC from both the salesperson and selling firm's viewpoint or a single combined viewpoint. With a better understanding of the measurement of WOMC, firms could better determine how to create higher levels of buyer's WOMC. Like the SOP scale, the WOM scales could use additional scale development.

A third potential limitation of this study is the sampling frame. Unlike studies by Reynolds and Beatty (1999) and Reynolds and Arnold (2000) which examined a small highly contextual segment of the retail market, this study examined a general b-t-b sampling frame without limiting contextual factors based on differences within b-t-b industries. This opens up the opportunity for further research on b-t-b contextual factors that may impact the examined model.

Conclusions

The aim of this study was to develop and test a model that predicts customer's WOMC and SOP using buyers engaged in b-t-b procurement. Like emerging research that examines the buyer's relationship with the salesperson and selling firm as different relationships, this study explores the buyer-seller relationship as containing multiple dimensions. While the study finds support for 8 of the 11 linkages, this study highlights similarities and differences between retail and b-t-b relationships. While this study is able to predict both buyers' WOMC and SOP, this study highlights concerns that surround the measurement of the constructs. Overall, this study provides a strong reference point to continue to develop and expand the literature examining:

- difference between the buyer's relationship with the salesperson and selling firm;
- buyer's WOMC (referrals); and
- methods to increase the buyer's SOP.

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Appendix

Table A1 scale items

Satisfaction with the selling firm (three items)

In general, I am very satisfied with my firm's relationship with the selling firm

Overall, the selling firm is a good company to do business with

All in all, the selling firm is very fair with my firm

Satisfaction with the salesperson (four items)

In general, I am very satisfied with my firm's relationship with my salesperson

My salesperson provides my firm with a satisfactory level of service

Overall, my salesperson is an asset to my company

All in all, my salesperson deals fairly with my company

Loyalty to the selling firm (three items)

My firm is very loyal to the selling firm

My firm is very committed to the selling firm

My firm does not consider itself a loyal selling firm customer (R)

Loyalty to the salesperson (three items)

My firm is very loyal to my salesperson

My firm is very committed to my salesperson

My firm does not consider itself very loyal to my salesperson (R)

Selling firm word-of-mouth (one item)

About how often do you recommend the selling firm?

Salesperson word-of-mouth (one item)

About how often do you tell others about your relationship with your salesperson?

Share-of-purchases (two items)

Please estimate your firm's average total yearly purchases of products and services in this product category

Please estimate your firm's average yearly purchases from the selling firm

Note: (R) Indicates a reverse coded item

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