Personal Selling and Sales Management: A Relationship Marketing Perspective

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The authors examine how the practice of personal selling and sales management is changing as a result of the increased attention on long-term, buyer-seller relationships and identify some implications of these changes. Changes in the traditional personal selling and sales management activities are needed to support the emergence of the partnering role for salespeople. For salespeople in the partnering role, the personal selling shifts from a focus on influencing buyer behavior to managing the conflict inherent in buyer-seller relationships. The emphasis on building relationships rather than making short-term sales and the use of sales teams dictates changes in the way firms select, train, evaluate, and compensate salespeople and members of sales teams. In this article, the authors have suggested some issues concerning the emerging partnering role for salespeople that deserve the attention of scholars interested in personal selling and sales management research.

Firms are focusing considerable attention on building sustainable, competitive advantages by developing and maintaining close, cooperative relationships with a limited set of suppliers, customers, and channel members. Through these relationships, firms create value by differentiating their offering and/or lowering their costs (Berling 1993; Han, Wilson, and Dant 1993; Kalwani and Narayandas 1995; Krapfel, Salmond, and Spekman 1991).

The attractiveness of this approach for building competitive advantage has led many marketing scholars to suggest that relationship marketing—the focus of marketing activities on establishing, developing, and maintaining cooperative, long-term relationships—is the new marketing paradigm (Gummesson 1998; Hunt and Morgan 1994; Kotler 1991; McKenna 1991; Parvatiyar and Sheth 1994; Webster 1992).

The term *relationship marketing* is applied to a number of different marketing activities ranging from consumer frequency marketing programs to selling activities directed toward building partnerships with key business-to-business customers. This article explores the implications of the latter aspect of relationship marketing for personal selling and sales force management practice and research.

Salespeople play a key role in the formation of long-term buyer-seller relationships. As the primary link between the buying and selling firms, they have considerable influence on the buyer's perceptions of the seller's reliability and the value of the seller's services and consequently the buyer's interest in continuing the relationship (Biong and Selnes 1996). Buyers often have greater loyalty to salespeople than they have to the firms employing the salespeople (Anderson and Robertson 1995; Heide and John 1988; Macintosh and Locksin 1997).

The objective of this article is to examine how the practice of personal selling and sales management is changing as a result of the increased attention on long-term, buyer-seller relationships and to identify some implications of these changes. The article begins with a comparison of the different roles salespeople play in implementing their

TABLE 1
Salesperson Roles

Era/role	Production	Sales	Marketing	Partnering
Sales force objective	Making sales	Making sales	Satisfying customer needs	Building relationships
Sales force orientation	Short-term seller needs	Short-term seller needs	Short-term customer and buyer needs	Long-term customer and seller needs
Critical tasks of salespeople	Taking orders, delivering goods	Convincing buyers to buy products	Matching available offerings to buyer needs	Creating new alternatives by matching buyer needs with seller capabilities
Activities of salespeople	Making sales calls and informing customers about the firm's offering	Influencing customers using a hard-sell approach	Influencing customers by practicing adaptive selling	Building and maintaining customer relationships Organizing and leading a sales team Managing conflict
Role of salesperson	Provider	Persuader	Problem solver	Value creator
Focus of sales management (selection, training, motivation, evaluation, and compensation)	Individual salespeople Emphasis on efficient resource allocation and motivating salespeople to work harder	Individual salespeople Emphasis on efficient resource allocation and motivating salespeople to work harder	Individual salespeople Emphasis on selection and training to improve ability and motivating salespeople to work smarter	Sales teams and leaders of sales teams Emphasis on the selection and motivation of teams and developing leadership and conflict management skills in account managers

SOURCE: Based on data from Wotruba (1991) and Weitz, Castleberry, and Tanner (1998).

firm's marketing strategy. This comparison highlights the differences in personal selling and sales management in an era of relational versus transactional exchanges.[1] On the basis of these differences, we suggest some unresolved issues confronting salespeople and their managers in this new environment—issues that could benefit from additional research such as the nature of customer-salesperson interactions; the organization of the selling effort; and the design, motivation, and compensation of sales teams.[2]

CHANGING NATURE OF PERSONAL SELLING AND SALES MANAGEMENT

Wotruba (1991) suggests the nature of personal selling, like marketing (Kotler 1998), has evolved through the four eras—production, sales, marketing, and partnering—depicted in Table 1. In each of these eras, the role of salespeople differs, and thus salespeople in these roles engage in different activities and need different sets of knowledge, skills, and abilities to be effective. The nature of sales management also changes in response to the changing nature of personal selling.

While each of these selling roles may have dominated buyer-seller exchanges in these eras, all of the roles were represented in each era. Thus, in the 1990s, selling and sales management in some situations is more consistent with the nature of selling in the production, sales, or marketing era than in the partnering era. In fact, these other prototypical selling roles may dominate buyer-seller relationships in the 1990s even though the 1990s are identified with the emergence and growing importance of the partnering role. In our discussion of the evolution of personal selling, we will emphasize the different roles that have emerged rather than the nature of personal selling in different eras.

We also recognize that sellers have a portfolio of relationships with their customers (Lambe and Spekman 1997). Some of these relationships are based on transactional exchanges associated with the production and sales roles, and others are based on relational exchanges associated with the partnering role for salespeople. This article centers on the partnering role for salespeople due to the growing importance of relational exchanges and limited research examining the partnering role of salespeople. While transactional exchanges may dominate the portfolio

of most sellers, the relational exchanges provide the greatest opportunity for developing strategic advantage and realizing extranormal profits from exchange relationships.

Production Role

Salespeople often have a production role when competition is limited and demand is greater than supply. In this role, the salespeople are concerned about satisfying the short-term needs of their firms. Their primary activities are informing customers about the availability of products and services and taking orders. Effective performance of this role emphasizes effort rather than ability. Thus, the management of salespeople in this role involves effectively allocating effort across products and territories and motivating and rewarding individual salespeople to work hard—to increase the number of sales calls rather than improve the abilities of salespeople through selection and training. Decision support systems for territory design (e.g., Zoltners and Sinha 1983) and call planning (e.g., Lodish 1971) and research on factors affecting the motivation and effort of salespeople (e.g., Churchill, Ford, and Walker 1974; Coughlin and Sen 1989) provide insights into improving the effectiveness of salespeople in this role.

Sales Role

The sales role is to stimulate, rather than satisfy, demand for products. To persuade customers that they need a supplier's product, salespeople in this role focus on achieving short-term results for their companies by using aggressive selling techniques to persuade customers to buy products.

Research related to the effectiveness in this role has concentrated on identifying personality traits such as aggressiveness related to salesperson performance (cf. Weitz 1981) and effective techniques for overcoming objections and closing sales. The sales force management research, mentioned previously, that supports the production role also supports the sales role.

Marketing Role

The implementation of the marketing concept emphasizes the marketing role for salespeople. Salespeople in this role consider both the needs of their customers and their firms in developing sales strategies. While this role is labeled "Problem Solver" in Table 1, the range of alternatives considered in solving the customer's problem typically is limited to the selling firm's present product and service offerings. Even though customer needs are considered in making sales presentations, the salesperson's primary objective is still making the sale, not increasing the customer's profitability.

Research on improving the effectiveness of salespeople in the marketing role has largely focused on developing a customer orientation in salespeople (e.g., Saxe and Weitz 1982; Siguaw, Brown, and Wilding 1994) and encouraging salespeople to practice adaptive selling (e.g., Boormon, Goolsby, and Ramsey 1998; Spiro and Weitz 1990). The sales management research supporting this role has examined selection and training methods to improve the abilities and motivating salespeople to acquire the skills and knowledge to work smarter (cf. Sujan, Weitz, and Kumar 1994).

Partnering Role

As indicated in Table 1, partnering-oriented salespeople are value creators. They work with their customers and their companies to develop solutions that enhance the profits of both firms. Thus, salespeople in this role develop and maintain relational exchanges—exchanges in which the buyer and seller devote their attention to "increasing the pie" rather than "dividing the pie." Increasing the profits of both the buyer and seller typically involves the partnering firms making risky, idiosyncratic investments. Since these investments are unique to the relationship, they are difficult for competitors to duplicate and thus have the potential for building a competitive advantage for the buyer-seller dyad over competing dyads (Weitz and Jap 1995).

The objective of sales people in the partnering role is to develop long-term relationships with customers (Cravens 1995). These relationships are similar to a marriage since they involve commitments by both parties to work together in a mutually beneficial manner (Kanter 1994). The parties focus on long-term outcomes for the relationship—expanding the pie—rather than short-term outcomes for a specific party—splitting the pie.

The partnering role, like the marketing role, requires salespeople to understand customer needs and to convince the customers that their firms' products and services can satisfy those needs. In addition, salespeople in the partnering role need to build trust and commitment in both their firm and the buying firm so that both parties will freely exchange information to explore innovative solutions to problems and make the risky investment to build competitive advantage.

Three major differences between the partnering role and the other roles are (1) the focus of interpersonal communications—managing conflict versus influencing purchase decisions, (2) the salesperson's objective—building and maintaining the relationship with the customer versus maximizing short-term sales, and (3) the unit of analysis—the sales team versus the individual salesperson. Conflict is inherent in buyer-seller relationships due to the different goals of the two parties. In the sales and marketing roles, salespeople attempt to resolve this conflict by

influencing the buyer to make decisions consistent with the seller's goals. However, in the partnering role, attention shifts from the benefits accruing to an individual firm to the benefits accruing to the relationship—the buyer-seller dyad. Salespeople in the partnering role manage conflict to strengthen the relationship and provide benefits to both parties rather than influence customers to accept solutions advantageous to the seller. Wall and Callister (1995), in a review of the conflict management literature, emphasize the importance of conflict management for relationship building:

> Conflict management should not, as it does now, attempt only to maximize the parties' outcomes; it should also address the relationship. . . . Increasing the payoffs to each [party] is admittedly of value. Yet enhancement of their relationship would probably have a significantly greater impact on their joint utility. (P. 547)

The second aspect of the partnering role is the shift from a focus on the seller's short-term profits and sales to the relationship between the buyer and seller. In the partnering era, the salesperson's objective is building value from the relationship to provide long-term benefits to both the buyer and seller. This relationship-building objective has important consequences for the approaches used to organize, to select, to evaluate, and to compensate salespeople and sales teams.

The third unique aspect of the partnering role is the shift in the unit of analysis from the individual salesperson to the selling team. Developing and exploiting these partnerships typically requires the participation of a number of people in the selling and buying firms. While the buying-center concept has a rich tradition in the marketing literature, the increasing emphasis on buyer-seller partnerships has led to the concept of a selling center or team that interfaces with the member of the buying center across functions and management levels (Cespedes 1994; Deeter-Schmelz and Ramsey 1995; Hutt, Johnson, and Ronchetto 1985; Moon and Gupta 1997). These cross-functional selling teams are necessary because an individual salesperson does not possess the knowledge or intrafirm influence to propose and implement a program that has the potential for building a competitive advantage for the buyer-seller dyad. Thus, in the partnering role, salespeople assigned to customers become relationship managers responsible for managing the activities of teams rather than simply managing their personal activities (Brooksbank 1995; Ford 1980; O'Neal 1989; Webster 1992). The sales management implications of the trend toward sales teams are discussed later in this article.

In this section, we have illustrated the difference between the emerging partnering role for salespeople and the more traditional production, sales, and marketing roles. In the next sections, we discuss the implications of these differences for personal selling and sales management research.

PERSONAL SELLING IN THE PARTNERING ERA—THE IMPORTANCE OF CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

We propose that managing conflict rather than influencing customers will be the key interpersonal activity of salespeople in a partnering role. These partnering-oriented salespeople will have to effectively manage intrafirm and interfirm conflict (Dabholkar, Johnson, and Cathey 1994). They will need to resolve conflict in the selling team as they coordinate the activities of people from different functional areas with different mind-sets and goals as well as conflicts between the buying and selling teams.

A number of definitions of conflict have been proposed in the literature (cf. Wall and Callister 1995). These definitions involve the perception or actual behavior of one party preventing another party from achieving its objective. We define conflict as the behaviors or feelings that one or both of the parties have when the other party has the potential to or actually obstructs, interferes with, or makes less effective a party's behaviors associated with reaching their goals in a relationship. Conflict management is the behaviors parties engage in when confronted with conflict.

In the marketing literature, much of the research on conflict has focused on factors causing conflict, with conflict typically being viewed as having a negative effective on relationships. This research has been directed toward uncovering the behaviors causing conflict, rather than behavior that resolves conflict (for exceptions, see Dant and Schul 1992; Ganesan 1993). For example, a number of studies have found that the use of coercive bases of social power increases conflict in a channel management context (e.g., Lusch 1976).

However, many researchers emphasize that conflict, when effectively managed, can have a positive effect on relationships and relationship outcomes. Some of the potential benefits to arise from conflict are (1) stimulating interest in exploring new approaches, (2) providing an opportunity to air problems and explore potential solutions, (3) expanding the understanding of issues, (4) clarifying differences in assumptions and perspectives, (5) motivating parties in a relationship to adapt and grow, (6) mobilizing the resources of parties in a relationship, (7) revitalizing existing relationship norms and contributing to the emergence of new norms, and (8) building commitment to the relationship (Amason 1996; Brown 1983; Deutsch 1973; Pondy 1967; Stern, El-Ansary, and Coughlan 1996).

Since effective conflict management in buyer-seller relationships can minimize the negative effects of conflict

and increase the benefits the parties derive from the relationship, two research-critical questions are the following:

Research Question 1: What are the different approaches for managing conflict?
Research Question 2: What are the conditions under which each of the approaches are most effective?

In the following section, we will provide some thoughts on each of these questions.

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT APPROACHES IN BUYER-SELLER RELATIONSHIPS

Conflict management has a rich tradition in the management and social psychology literature. A number of different taxonomies have been suggested in the literature to describe the approaches for managing conflict (Blake and Mouton 1964; Hall 1969; Pruitt 1983; Rahim 1986; Thomas 1976). Although much of this research examines interpersonal conflict, the literature represents a useful starting point for investigating interorganizational conflict management. In this section we describe Thomas's taxonomy and suggest how situational characteristics may moderate the effectiveness of these conflict approaches.
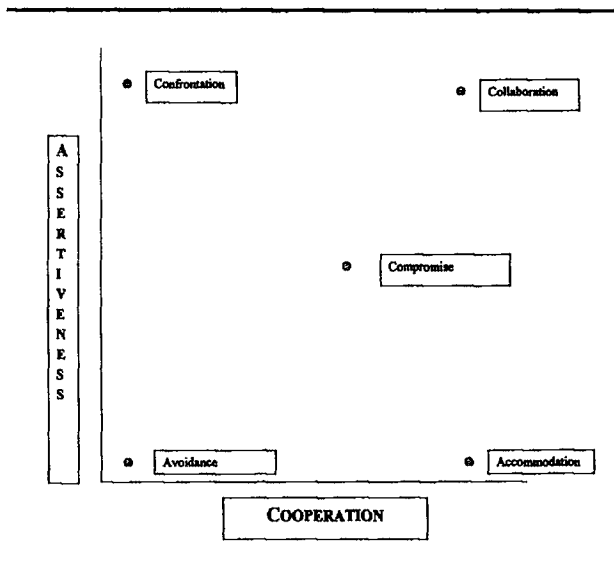
Taxonomy of Conflict Management Approaches

Most of these taxonomies array the alternative approaches along two dimensions, with one dimension indicating the degree to which a party is concerned about its self-interest and the other dimension indicating the degree to which the party is concerned about the interests of the other party. To illustrate these taxonomies, we briefly review the five conflict management approaches or styles developed by Thomas (1976, 1979, 1994) since it is the most commonly used taxonomy in empirical research on conflict management.

Thomas's five conflict management approaches. In Figure 1, Thomas's taxonomy of conflict management approaches—avoidance, accommodation, confrontation, compromise, and collaboration—are arrayed on the two dimensions of assertiveness and cooperation. Assertiveness is associated with a concern for one's own outcomes, while cooperation is associated with a concern for the other party's outcomes.

The *avoidance approach* is defined as behaviors that ignore or fail to consider the conflict between two parties. This approach is low on assertiveness and cooperation. Behaviors in which the seller recognizes conflicts and gives in to the concerns or viewpoints of the buyer define the *accommodative* conflict management approach. This approach is low on assertiveness and high on cooperation.

FIGURE 1
Thomas's Five Conflict Management Approaches

The *confrontation* conflict management approach is defined by behaviors emphasizing the perspective of the seller to the exclusion of the buyer's perspective. This approach is high on assertiveness and low on cooperation.

The remaining two approaches incorporate concern for both self and other. The *compromise* conflict management approach is defined by behaviors related to the buyer and seller reaching an agreement by making concessions to one another, while the *collaboration* conflict management approach involves behaviors related to the buyer and seller reaching an agreement by exchanging information and working together to explore integrative solutions. Thus, the compromise approach involves discussions about how to split the pie—a win-lose situation, while the collaboration investigates opportunities for expanding the pie—a win-win situation.

Conflict management and relationship building. Research suggests that buyer-seller relationships, similar to interpersonal and interorganization relationships, sequence through a series of stages (Altman and Taylor 1973: Dwyer, Schurr, and Oh 1987; Ring and Van de Ven 1994; Thibaut and Kelley 1959). As the parties progress through the stages, they go through a trial-and-error process that eventually builds mutual commitment or leads to a dissolution. The trial-and-error process involves the parties testing each other by making small, low-risk investments in the relationship and gauging the other party's responses. When the responses signal a commitment to the relationship, the investments of both parties escalate to the point where the high level of idiosyncratic investments results in a high level of mutual trust and commitment (An-

TABLE 2
Description of Conflict Management Approaches

	Approach				
Characteristic	Avoidance	Accommodation	Confrontation	Compromise	Collaboration
Assertiveness	Low	Low	High	Medium	High
Cooperation	Low	High	Low	Medium	High
Nature of communication	No-way	One-way	One-way	Two-way	Two-way
Amount of information provided about perspectives and goals	Low	Low	High	Medium	High
Amount of sensitive information exchanged	Low	Low	Medium	Medium	High
Quality of signal concerning commitment to relationship	Low	Medium	Low	Medium	High

derson and Weitz 1992; Gundlach, Achrol, and Mentzer 1995).

Table 2 summarizes the characteristics of these conflict management approaches in terms of two critical aspects for managing relationships through this sequence of stages: (1) signaling commitment and (2) exchanging of information. The avoidance approach involves minimal communication and exchange of information between buyers and sellers. The use of this approach can have a positive effect on relationships by minimizing tensions arising from disagreements about unimportant issues. However, the avoidance approach can result in a lack of clarity and direction, which increases the level of conflict and has a negative effect on the relationship.

Limited information exchange also is associated with the accommodation approach; however, this approach does signal a willingness to consider the needs of the buyer and make concessions to build commitment to the relationship. On the other hand, the confrontation management approach provides information to the buyer about the seller's needs but does not signal a commitment to the relationship.

The compromise and collaboration approaches provide for exchanging information and signaling commitment, but they differ in terms of level. Salespeople engaging in a compromise approach exchange information about their goals and then make concessions to find an intermediate position acceptable to both the buyer and the seller. When salespeople use collaboration, they provide a stronger signal of commitment by exchanging sensitive information to creatively identify mutually beneficial alternatives. This approach can be dysfunctional if the buyer uses the sensitive information provided by the seller opportunistically (Pruitt 1983; Thomas 1976). In addition, the intensity and sensitivity of information exchange and the problem solving when using the collaboration approach require a considerable investment in time and human resources. The

returns justifying this investment may not be realized in uncommitted relationships.

Situational Moderators

The difference between conflict management approaches in terms of signaling commitment and exchanging information suggests that the effectiveness of the conflict management approaches is moderated by the nature of the buyer-seller relationship and the conflict between the parties. In this section, two potential moderating variables are discussed: (1) the importance of the issue generating the conflict and (2) the degree to which the buyer and seller are committed to the relationship. The proposed nature of the moderating relationship for these two constructs is summarized in Table 3.

Importance of issue. When the issue stimulating the conflict is not very important to the seller, the salespeople can make a concession to the buyer, signaling an interest in developing the relationship, with limited costs or risk. However, when the issue is very important to the seller, the negative consequences of ignoring the conflict may outweigh the positive benefits of signaling commitment to the relationship. Thus, we propose that the use of avoidance and accommodation approaches will have a positive effect when the issues are of low importance to the seller and a negative effect when the issues are of high importance. The effectiveness of a compromise approach on relationship quality is similar to avoidance for low-importance issues, but for high-importance issues resolving the disagreement by compromising has less of a negative effect than simply acquiescing to the buyer.

The use of the confrontation approach may increase the chances of sellers realizing their preferred outcome. However, the use of this approach also signals a lack of interest in the buyer's concerns and an unwillingness to make concessions. When the issues are not very important to the

TABLE 3
Situational Moderator of Conflict Management Effectiveness

Moderator	Moderating Effect of Conflict Management Approach on Relationship Quality				
	Avoidance	Accommodation	Confrontation	Compromise	Collaboration
Importance of issue to the seller					
Low importance	+	+	−	+	−
High importance	−	−	+	0	++
Commitment to relationship					
Low commitment	−	+	−	+	− −
High commitment	−	−	+	+	++

seller, the negative consequences of signaling a lack of interest in developing the relationship may outweigh the positive benefits of the seller achieving its preferred outcome. However, if the issue is important to the seller, providing information about its needs and increasing the probability of satisfying those needs by using a confrontation approach may result in significantly greater benefits for the seller. This suggests that the use of a confrontation approach will have a positive effect when the issues are of high importance and a negative effect when the issues are of low importance.

Since the use of collaboration approaches involves the expenditure of considerable time and effort, the benefits may not outweigh the costs of dealing with conflicts involving issues of low importance. Thus, we expect that a collaboration approach will have a negative effect on relationship quality when the issues are of low importance and a positive effect when the issues are of high importance.

Commitment to relationship. In this section, we discuss the differential impact of the conflict management approaches when buyer and seller are either mutually committed or uncommitted to the relationship. Avoidance may be useful on an incidental basis in buyer-seller conflict situations to prevent escalation of disagreements about minor issues. However, the regular use of this approach frustrates the ability of both parties to satisfy their needs. Thus, the avoidance conflict management style is likely to have detrimental effects on relationship quality, regardless of the level of mutual commitment.

In relationships characterized by low levels of mutual commitment, the concessions offered by the seller using an accommodation approach signal an interest in building the relationship and encourage the buyer to reciprocate, leading to the escalation of trust and satisfaction. However, this willingness to give in to the other party without consideration for one's own position is unlikely to be a useful long-term conflict approach in a mutually committed relationship. The consistent use of an accommodating approach does not provide the buyer with information

about the seller's needs and thus diminishing the opportunity for developing integrative solutions. Thus, we propose that an accommodating conflict management approach has a positive effect on relationship quality when the buyer and seller are not committed, but a negative effect when they are committed to the relationship.

When sellers use a confrontation approach for managing conflict, they demonstrate a concern for their individual outcomes over joint outcomes and thus jeopardize the development of the relationship. Thus, Table 3 suggests that the use of a confrontation approach has a negative effect on relationship quality in uncommitted relationships. However, in committed relationships, the buyer recognizes that the sellers are focusing on the relationship rather than an individual outcome. Hence, the confrontational approach has a positive effect because it communicates the needs of the seller to the buyer.

The critical difference in the effectiveness of the compromise and collaboration approaches is the amount and type of information exchanged. Since a compromise approach involves the exchange of nonproprietary information to reach a mutually satisfactory resolution, we propose that the use of a compromise conflict management style is positively related to relationship quality regardless of the channel members' level of commitment.

The effects of a collaborative conflict management style on relationship quality may differ, depending on the level of the mutual commitment. When buyer and seller are mutually committed to the relationship, they are motivated to maintain the relationship's existence in the long run and strive for mutual benefit. The members are motivated to resist jeopardizing the relationship by opportunistic use of proprietary information learned about the other channel member. Therefore, the use of a collaborative style increases relationship quality in committed relationships because the benefits of identifying novel solutions outweigh the risks of opportunistic use of proprietary information.

In uncommitted relationships, the buyer and seller are concerned with their outcomes rather than building the

relationship. They are more likely to act opportunistically toward the other party to gain a short-term advantage. We suggest that the use of a collaborative approach may have detrimental effects on relationship quality in uncommitted relationships because the sharing of candid information could minimize one party's position at the expense of the other.

Summary

In this section, we have reviewed one of several taxonomies that can be used to describe the approaches salespeople can take in management conflicts with buyers (and conflict within their sales teams). We suggest some potential constructs that might moderate the effect of these conflict management approaches on relationship quality. The objective of this discussion is to provide some ideas for addressing the questions we posed at the beginning of this discussion about the importance of conflict management in the partnering role: (1) What are the different approaches for managing conflict? and (2) Under what conditions are each of the approaches most effective? Given the limited research addressing these questions in the context of buyer-seller relationships, it is hoped that this discussion will stimulate research to identify the approaches used by salespeople to manage conflict, the impact of these approaches on relationship quality, and the boundary conditions for these relationships.

SALES MANAGEMENT IN THE PARTNERING ERA—THE IMPLICATIONS OF RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT AND TEAM SELLING

There is very little research on the management of salespeople in a partnering role. Research on the management of national account managers (NAMs) and key account managers (KAMs) may shed some light, since many NAMs and KAMs are responsible for building relationships with key customers rather than simply being high-quality salespeople (Lambe and Spekman 1997). However, this research has largely been directed toward identifying the degree to which firms used NAMs and KAMs, the types of firms using them, and conditions under which their use is appropriate (Weilbaker and Weeks 1997).

This section examines the implications of the partnering role on the management of salespeople with a partnering role. The discussion of these issues is organized around the traditional sales management issues of organization, selection and training, evaluation, and compensation.

Organization—Customer Centered and Sales Teams

To minimize costs (travel time and expenses), salespeople are typically organized geographically with the responsibility for selling all of their firms' products to all customers in a specific territory. Some firms have refined the basic geographic organization by creating sales forces specialized by product type, industry, or activity (such as inside and field, or new customer and account maintenance).

Firms emphasizing a partnering role for salespeople organize their sales force by customers. For example, Proctor & Gamble (P&G) has shifted from several sales forces organized by product categories to teams of salespeople and specialists in logistics, market research, and finance and accounting, who are assigned to a specific customer responsible for all of P&G's business relationships with the customer. The team members are permanently assigned to the team and are often located in or near the customer's headquarters. IBM also has reorganized from an industry- to a customer-focused sales force; however, the IBM teams are more ad hoc with the relationship manager, calling upon specialists within the company when they are needed. Thus, the specialists team members have a dual responsibility to the customer teams and their functional units in IBM. While the research on sales force organization and specialization is limited (Mahajan and Radas 1998; Rangaswamy and Mahajan 1997; Rao and Turner 1984), this customer-centered organization seems to be appropriate for the partnering era since it focuses salespeople's attention on the customer relationship rather than the products and services sold by the firm. However, the implications of using teams composed of permanently assigned members versus members with dual responsibilities deserves research attention.

The partnering role also has stimulated another organizational change—the use of sales teams. Some issues related to the use of sales teams deserving research attention are the following:

- Under what conditions does the use of teams increase sales force productivity?
- Who should be the members of a sales team?
- How should the teams be managed?

Use of sales teams. A growing number of companies are adopting a team approach for selling their product and services. The nature of these teams ranges from cross-functional teams selling airplanes to airlines to pharmaceutical companies organizing their salespeople in a district into a team and using the team's performance as a factor in determining the compensation of individual salespeople.

Research needs to be directed toward determining when sales teams are appropriate—when they increase the productivity of the sales force—and when they are not appropriate. While the use of sales teams has the potential to increase sales by improving the offerings provided to customers, sales teams also increase costs. In addition to the increased time and effort of the greater number of people involved in the buyer-seller relationship, there are costs

associated with coordinating the activities of the sales team members.

The nature of the task is an important factor affecting the benefit-cost trade-off of sales teams. The research on group productivity has identified a number of different tasks performed by groups (cf. McGrath and Altman 1966). For example, golf teams undertake an additive task, while soccer teams participate in an interdependent task. The performance of additive tasks is simply the sum of the output of each of the group members, while the performance on interdependent tasks is determined by the degree to which group members work together and contribute their unique abilities to accomplish a goal.

We propose that as the degree of interdependency in the sales task increases, the performance of sales teams compared to individual salespeople increases. Thus, the formation of cross-functional sales teams to sell airplanes will be more productive than the formation of a team composed of salespeople responsible for their own accounts in a district. For strictly additives with no interdependency, the formation of sales teams and the use of team incentives might actually decrease sales productivity. Highly productive salespeople on sales teams performing additive tasks might be demotivated because the team incentives do not reward them adequately for their individual contributions.

Sales team composition and management. To accomplish the interdependent tasks associated with the partnering role, sales teams need to be composed of people from different functional areas in the firm possessing diverse knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs). This diversity on sales teams increases the probability of developing creative, win-win solutions and realizing the support from different functional areas for implementing the solutions. However, this diversity also increases the potential for decreasing the team's productivity. Team members from different functional areas and backgrounds have different goals and mind-sets, which can lead to miscommunication and conflict within the team (Dougherty 1992). These countervailing forces may account for the mixed results that have been reported on the effectiveness of cross-functional, new product development teams (Ancona and Caldwell 1992; Dougherty 1992).

Research on cross-functional new product development teams suggests that the problems caused by team diversity can be reduced by type of people assigned to the team and the behaviors of the relationship manager—the team leader (cf. Stringfellow 1998). The communication and conflict problems associated with diversity are reduced when team members have some overlap with each other in terms of KSAs. Specifically, the productivity of cross-functional sales teams is increased when the team members have some experience in other functional areas such as the salespeople working for a time in engineering or team members from finance having significant contact

with the firm's customers. This shared knowledge results in a greater understanding of the different perspectives represented on the team and facilitates communication among team members.

The leadership style of relationship managers can also shift the team diversity, benefit-cost trade-off. Transformational leadership involves providing inspiration for the team, serving as a role model for appropriate team behaviors, and fostering acceptance of team goals (Bass 1985; Podsakopf, MacKenzie, and Bommer 1993). Research on cross-functional teams has found that transformational leadership increases team performance (Crnkovisch and Hesterly 1996).

Finally, relationship managers can increase productivity by effectively managing the inherent conflict in cross-functional sales teams. Research in a simulated environment suggests that the use of a collaboration conflict management approach improves task performance, team creativity, and satisfaction with team performance, while the compromise approach reduces task performance and the use of an avoidance approach reduces satisfaction (Bradford, Stringfellow, and Weitz 1998).

Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities Needed to Perform the Partnering Role

The critical input into the selection and training of relationship managers is identifying the KSAs required to effectively perform the partnering role (see Wotruba 1995).

Knowledge. Salespeople as relationship managers need to have a sophisticated knowledge of the buying firm—its strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats, and strategies for developing competitive advantage. This knowledge is needed to identify opportunities and approaches for creating value. It addition, relationship managers need a detailed knowledge of their firm's capabilities and resources and the people within their company that can be accessed to address particular issues.

While customer and company knowledge is advocated for the training of salespeople in marketing roles, relationship managers need a higher level of knowledge. The relationship managers need more strategic than tactical knowledge. Knowledge of the benefits offered by the company's products, services, and the customer's present applications is adequate for performing the marketing role. The effectiveness in the partnering role is based on knowledge of what the seller can do and what the buyer will want to do in the future.

The relationship manager's knowledge acquisition probably comes from considerable on-the-job learning experiences rather than from formal or informal training. Thus, ideal candidates for relationship managers would have worked in various functional areas of the firm and

had considerable experience with the buying firm to which they will be assigned and the buying firm's industry (its competitors). While traditional salespeople might have good customer knowledge, other employees in the selling firm, such as product managers, may have superior industry and company knowledge and thus be good candidates for relationship manager positions.

Skills and abilities. Some of the skills and ability used by relationship managers are creative problem solving, innovativeness, interacting with people in different functional areas and levels in the buying and selling organizations, conflict management, building trust (being reliable, empathetic, and ethical) with people in both organizations, planning and project management, and working on and leading teams. Many of these skills and abilities differ from those needed by traditional salespeople and are certainly antithetical to the stereotypical view of salespeople as "loners." Some of the skills required for the partnering role are similar to the attributes of entrepreneurs (Morris, Avila, and Teeple 1990), while others are similar to the attributes of brand managers. Relationship managers, like brand managers, often must gain the support of their firms' employees without having the authority to direct the employees' activities.

Research in social psychology on relational competency may provide insights into the unique skills and abilities needed for effective relationship management. Relational competency is defined as "characteristics of the individual that facilitate the acquisition, development, and maintenance of mutually satisfying [interpersonal] relationships" (Hansson, Jones, and Carpenter 1984). Measures of relational competency assess two dimensions of personality: (1) initiation and (2) enhancement. Initiation includes skills related to initiating and controlling the relationship—skills that are typically associated with the sales and marketing roles—and enhancement involves enhancing and maintaining the relationship—skills more associated with the partnering role (Carpenter 1993).

The previous discussion suggests that the KSAs required by relationship managers differ from those needed by traditional salespeople. Hence, we need to develop new approaches for selecting and developing relationship managers.

Assessing Performance of Partnering Role

Research on performance evaluation makes a distinction between output measures such as sales and gross margin and input measures such as number of calls and number of proposals submitted (Anderson and Oliver 1987). For salespeople in the production role, both sales (output measure) and numbers of calls (input measure) are useful measures for performance evaluation because

there is a direct relationship between inputs and outputs—salespeople who make more calls get more orders. Sales are also a useful measure for evaluating performance of the salespeople production role because their objective is simply to make sales. The objective of salespeople in a partnering role is more complex. The goal of the salespeople in this role is to build value in the relationship rather than just support their firms' short-term objectives.

In light of this relationship-oriented objective, many firms with salespeople in partnering roles are complementing the traditional output measures of sales effectiveness such as sales, sales to quota, and gross margin with measures of customer satisfaction and even using these satisfaction measures as part of the incentive compensation (Lambert, Sharma, and Levy 1997). Typically, these measures are assessed through questions answered by the customers' employees about their satisfaction with their relationship and their firms' relationship with the supplier.[3] However, a number of scholars question the usefulness of satisfaction as a measure of relationship quality (Gale 1997; Higgins 1997; Sharma 1997).

Some of the distinct but related constructs that researchers have considered in their conceptualization of relationship quality are trust, commitment, satisfaction, ethical conduct, customer orientation, minimal opportunism, willingness to invest, expectations of continuity, share of customer, and growth in customer value (Crosby, Evans, and Cowles 1990; Dorsch, Swanson, and Kelley 1998; Dwyer et al. 1987; Han et al. 1993; Peppers and Rogers 1997).

Table 4 suggests a framework for developing a multidimensional output measure of relationship quality. We propose that a measure of relationship quality needs to include both attitudinal and behavioral measures of the present relationship and the expectations for the relationship in the future. Satisfaction is an inappropriate output measure of relationship quality because it assesses only the present attitude toward the relationship and thus is not a good predictor of the degree to which the parties will work together to build value in the relationship—the goal of a partnering relationship (Jones and Sasser 1995).

The behavioral measures in the framework indicate what a buyer is doing now and plans to do in the future, while the attitudinal measures provide some insight into why the present and future behaviors are and will be undertaken. The inclusion of both attitudinal and behavioral measures is consistent with the view that both of these components are needed to assess brand loyalty—a construct indicating the quality of the relationship between a brand and a consumer (Dick and Basu 1994; Jacoby and Kyner 1978).

The present measures assess the current state of the relationship, while the future measures provide an indication of the potential for growing value in the relationship. The indicators of the future state of the relationship

TABLE 4
Components of a Relationship Quality Measure

	Attitudes	Behaviors
Present status	Satisfaction	Share of customer Share of market
Signals of future status	Commitment Trust	Transaction-specific investments

provide a crucial insight into the stability and potential growth of the relationship. There is a growing consensus in the channels literature that commitment and trust are central constructs in relational exchanges. They are critical to the parties making investment in a relationship to grow value (Morgan and Hunt 1994). Idiosyncratic investments are a strong behavioral signal that the buyer is committed to the relationship (Anderson and Weitz 1992).

In conclusion, we propose that a multidimensional output measure is needed to assess the performance of salespeople and sales teams in a partnering role. Given the difficulty in collecting the data to develop this multidimensional output measure and the problems in determining the contribution of individual team members, firms with salespeople may need to place more emphasis on input measures to assess the performance of relationship managers and members of a sales team. These input measures might range from the quality of proposals made to the customer to the degree to which a person engages in team-building behaviors.

Rewarding Salespeople and Sales Teams in the Partnering Role

In this section, we discuss two issues concerning the policies and procedures used to reward salespeople and sales teams in partnering roles: (1) compensation of sales teams and team members and (2) policies concerning promotions with respect to relationship managers.

Compensation. As mentioned previously, the use of sales teams has increased as firms focus more attention on developing long-term, partnering relationships with customers. Some questions related to the motivation and compensation of sales teams are the following:

- What type of incentives are most appropriate for maximizing the productivity of sales teams?
- If team performance incentives are used, how should this incentive compensation be allocated to individual team members?

Most of the sales compensation research in marketing centers on developing the appropriate compensation

scheme for individual salespeople under the assumption that effort (an input) cannot be assessed; only sales (an output) can be observed (cf. Coughlin and Sen 1989). While little marketing research has considered schemes for compensating teams, research in economics (Holmstrom 1982; McAfee 1991), social psychology (Karau and Williams 1993), and management (Comer 1995; Kidwell and Bennett 1993) provides some useful insights.

Social loafing, the decline in member effort when on a team, is a major problem affecting team productivity. Social loafing is a form of free riding—team members think they will receive the rewards accruing to the team even though they withhold their contribution because they believe other members of the team will compensate for their lack of effort. Research has found that social loafing is reduced when each team member is assigned a specific task, there is no redundancy in tasks, and when the activities and output of each team member can be accurately assessed. However, these conditions are not present in the tasks typically assigned to teams—tasks requiring team members to work together.

The solution to this problem in the economics research is to provide an all-or-nothing incentive, a bonus, to the team if it realizes a goal. Under this incentive, social loafing is reduced because the team members recognize they will get a reward only if the goal is realized and thus they have no incentive to loaf. Rather than relying on just incentives, the management literature has suggested approaches for building team cohesiveness to motivate the participation of all team members.

Another issue that arises is the distribution of the team incentive, the bonus, among the team members. Should each team member get an equal share of the bonus or should the bonus be distributed on the basis of effort and/or performance of individual team members? If the bonus is not divided equally among the members, who should make the allocation decision? Distributing the bonus on the basis of effort and/or performance might reduce the potential productivity loss due to social loafing but might also reduce motivation if the distribution is not considered to be fair. In terms of the process for making the distribution decision, some researchers have suggested that team members are in the best position to assess effort

and performance of team members and they should collectively make the decision. However, this process can introduce non-performance-based social and political issues into the decision.

Promotions. Promotions are often used to motivate and compensate salespeople. Two problems arise in using promotions as an incentive in firms with salespeople in a partnering role. First, the KSAs of traditional salespeople differ from those of relationship managers. Thus, salespeople who perform well in the traditional roles might not be effective when promoted to a relationship management position. Second, the relationship manager plays an important role in developing the customer's trust and commitment. Therefore, it is important for the seller to maintain continuity between the relationship manager and the buying company. Firms need to develop ways of recognizing and rewarding effective relationship managers without promoting them to larger accounts or higher level sales management positions.

CONCLUSION

Changes in the traditional personal selling and sales management activities are needed to support the emergence of the partnering role for salespeople. For salespeople in the partnering role, the personal selling shifts from a focus on influencing buyer behavior to managing the conflict inherent in buyer-seller relationships. The emphasis on building relationships rather than making short-term sales and the use of sales teams dictates changes in the way firms select, train, evaluate, and compensate salespeople and members of sales teams. In this article, we have suggested some issues concerning the emerging partnering role for salespeople that deserve the attention of scholars interested in personal selling and sales management research.

NOTES

1. Transactional or discrete exchanges are defined as exchanges that involve simply a change in ownership, independent of past history or potential future interactions. Thus, idiosyncratic investments in the relationships or attitudes toward the parties in the relationship such as trust and commitment play no role in transactional exchanges. On the other hand, relational exchanges are made in the context of exchanges and outcomes that have occurred in the past and the expectations that exchanges between the parties will occur in the future. Thus, a specific relational exchange is one element in a sequence of exchanges between the parties. It is recognized that there is a continuum of exchanges ranging from purely discrete exchanges such as buying wheat on a commodity exchange to exchanges between parties involving long-term, highly committed relationships (cf. Heide 1994; Macneil 1980). For ease of exposition, we use the term *transactional exchange* to describe exchanges at the discrete end of the spectrum and *relational exchanges* to represent exchanges at the other end of the spectrum.

2. In this article, we explore the implications of the more complex role of salespeople as they become relationship managers. This emerging role for salespeople is a response to changes in the business environment. However, other forces are contracting the role of salespeople in implementing a firm's strategy. For example, the development of new communication technologies has diminished and even eliminated the role of salespeople in some business transactions (R. Anderson 1996; Rackham 1997). Thus, it appears that the business environment in the new millennium will expand the role of some salespeople and reduce the role of others.

3. Customers could also be asked about their satisfaction with their relationship with the salesperson, their satisfaction with the firm's products and services, and the performance of the salesperson. These assessments are useful diagnostics, but the critical assessment in the partnering era is the quality of the relationship of the buying and selling firm. However, Lambert, Sharma, and Levy (1997) report that the assessments of the firms are significantly correlated with assessments of the salespeople representing the firm.

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